FLANDERS LITERATURE

Leopold I

The First King of Europe

Gita Deneckere

An extract

Original title Leopold I. De eerste koning van Europa
Publisher De Bezige Bij, 2012
Translation Dutch into English
Translator Rosalind Buck

Introduction

I first met Leopold about twenty years ago. For my doctoral thesis, I was researching into popular protest in Belgian social history and how it was heeded in the political arena. My quest for the *vox populi* took me to the Royal Palace in Brussels. The royal archives are installed on the second floor of a side wing. When I recently arrived there to conduct my final research for this book, I had to get around a police barrier due to a union demonstration. The Royal Palace is situated in the neutral zone established in 1891 to keep the people at a safe distance from the heart of power during demonstrations. In a democracy, the heart of power is in fact an empty place, as the people are sovereign. The relationship between monarch and people therefore assumes fascinating forms.

The Royal Palace Archive is a surprisingly open, transparent institution. What took place behind the scenes for contemporaries, up until the accession of King Boudewijn in 1951, is freely accessible to us, historians and any other interested civilians. You can consult documents from the bygone days of Leopold without any restrictions whatsoever. The Royal Palace Archive is at the same time a department of Belgium's General State Archive and a department of the king's cabinet and includes the private archives of members of the royal family. The location, a side wing of the Royal Palace, and the amiable and slightly sphinx-like personality of the archivist both play a role in the special feeling that still, after all these years, creeps over me when I look at the dusty bundles of letters bearing the graceful signature of 'my' Leopold. Archivist Gustaaf Janssens, a specialist in the Spanish Netherlands in the sixteenth century, is a confirmed democrat and extremely helpful in digging out the treasures hidden in his archive. It was he who introduced me to Leopold twenty years ago in that rather unprepossessing reading room with just two small, round windows on each side of the building. Too high to be able to catch a glimpse of the palace courtyard or of the present king, should he happen to be taking a stroll.

Without much ceremony, Leopold came straight up to me and shook my hand. Since then he has never lost his hold on me, even though, in the meantime, I have done and written many things that did not involve him. Perhaps this book is my way of saying farewell. He appealed to me immediately across the years. By way of introduction, the archivist had shown me Leopold's letters to Queen Victoria, or at least copies, which Queen Elizabeth II had presented to King Boudewijn during a state visit in May 1966. The letters are bound in forty-three leather volumes; according to the tally of the Royal Archives in Windsor they constitute 8,999 pages written in Leopold's beautiful, even hand, which became a little shaky towards the end of his life. I may well have been the first person to read all these letters in their entirety since Lord Esher and Arthur Christopher

Benson. In 1907, they published *The Letters of Queen Victoria 1837 - 1861*, a selection of Victoria's correspondence authorised by the British royal family, in three heavy tomes. The exchange of letters between Victoria and her 'dearest Uncle Leopold' is a substantial part of the selection and provides the continuity in the correspondence from her ascension to the throne until the death of her beloved husband Albert in 1861. Nevertheless, of the entire collection of letters back and forth between them only an estimated tenth has been published.[1] The relationship between Leopold and his powerful niece was thus filtered by the Victorian view of two scholars in the first decade of the twentieth century. They wanted to make their queen as British and independent as possible. Her assertiveness in response to Leopold's political 'intrusion' was exaggerated, while the far-reaching influence of the Coburg connection on the British monarchy was kept out of the picture as far as possible. The connection was treated as personal and familial and not in the least political: 'her connection with Germany always remained a personal and family matter, not a political one'. Benson & Esher placed Queen Victoria in the genealogy of the Hanovers, whom she herself had emotionally renounced. Her father Edward, Duke of Kent, died when she was eight months old. Her mother, Victoire, Leopold's sister, was a Saxe-Coburg. Victoria was married to a Saxe-Coburg, her first cousin, and even spoke German with him. For her, Leopold was her real father and Coburg her second home. Until Jean-Marc Vallée's recent period costume film *The Young Victoria* (2009) a negative picture of 'dear Uncle' was presented, an image that goes back to Bloomsbury biographer Lytton Strachey (1921), whose book is still in print and is the most quoted of all Victoria biographies – and there are a lot of them.

Leopold's letters to Victoria can almost be read as a diary. They sometimes wrote to one another three times a week, about anything and everything: the weather, their children and grandchildren, politics in their respective countries, Europe and the world, major and minor events, futilities and trials and tribulations, famine, uprisings and disasters, the French Revolution, democracy and dictatorship, their people and their ministers, impressions and opinions in the short and long term, anger, joy and sorrow, moods, memories and passions. It was the openheartedness that immediately struck me, the highly direct formulation of the most intimate thoughts and feelings by monarchs with an enormously epistolary culture and a love of writing. The incredible output of letters was typical of the nineteenth century. According to a highly conservative estimate - which does not, for example, include her letters to female correspondents – Victoria produced an average of 2,500 words a day. If all her letters and diaries were put together, her collected works would span at least 700 volumes, at the rate of one book a month.[2] Leopold was certainly not surpassed by Victoria in his production. In a letter to his daughter Charlotte towards the end of his life, Leopold lamented the fact that he was half dead from writing, which made his brief letter to her 'doubly meritorious'. At the centre of international politics, he found the correspondence coming from all sides slightly curious, but also extremely wearing.[3] His correspondence network throughout Europe was gigantic and, for a historian used to working within national borders, almost boundless. A journey through all the European capitals and all the way to Moscow and Constantinople would be insufficient to bring home all his letters. After all, he also maintained intense relations with minor monarchs, with their thrones in Coburg, in Trieste, Corfu or Meran. Leopold wrote as we would use email today, often just notes, but also well-thought-out epistles to justify his own behaviour and carefully considered advice to others. The banality of his outpourings sometimes conceals a disarming spirit: 'We have had fogs almost every day and should have been justified in getting the spleen'.[4] Leopold was more subtle in

1 Ward 2004, 234.

2 St Aubyn 1991, 340.

3 Leopold to Charlotte, 25 March 1859 (AKP, Archive of Empress Charlotte of Mexico, 15).

4 Leopold to Victoria, 18 November 1853 (AKP, Leopold-Victoria, VI/2).

communicating his deepest feelings, however. When, after the conflict concerning recognition of the Belgian borders in 1838, he felt like an old piece of furniture put aside by Victoria, he refrained from complaining. After all, 'if affection was once on the decline , reproaches only diminished it faster'. So he said nothing. In a life as full of grief and disappointments as his, the loss of Victoria's affection would have been one of the most severe.[5] In Leopold's letters, the division between politics and personal life, between reason and sentiment, between sense and emotion is often difficult to make. That is not what one would normally expect of a man in his position. That intrigued me.

The letters, or '*Ein Journal der ganzen Vergangenheit*'

There is, in fact, no historical source or even any other type of ego document as precious as the intimate letter.[6] Official documents and missives are, by definition, dry, boring and formal. They contain no life, no subjectivity. Autobiographies and memoirs do, but they are tidied up after the event with a view to the (self) image the author wishes to convey. They are filtered by how the (life) story ends and sieved by memory. Recollections are distorted and painful and shameful events omitted or glossed over. Leopold personally attached a great deal of importance to memoirs, in the way of *historia magistra vitae*', history as life's teacher. Unfortunately, in his view, history was seldom written by those who really were the 'chief movers' of events. English history, for example, was compiled on the basis of 'ostensible events and those results known to the generality of the people' . That was far less instructive than the authenticated memoirs of some of the most important men and those who had actually lived through what happened and recorded it at the time. French history was far richer from that point of view. The condition was, naturally, that the memoirs should be written 'honestly' and not purposely fabricated, as too often happened, particularly in Paris...[7] Leopold did not write his own memoirs. After Albert's death in 1862 he did, though, comply with Victoria's request to record his 'Reminiscences' of Coburg. They constitute a (concise) retrospective rationalisation, with a lot of gaps and the odd mistake.[8]

Leopold kept a diary, but with what frequency or continuity is unclear. It is also unclear as to whether anything of it remains. He simply refers to it occasionally in his letters to Victoria. So far, no trace has been found of the diary itself in the Royal Palace Archive. He may well have destroyed it just before his death. Leopold's mother, Augusta, also wrote in her diary with an iron self-discipline. She saw it as work, an obligation she imposed upon herself. Her little study was a place for contemplation. When she travelled, her writing materials were her principal luggage. The extensive diary, which is kept in Windsor, reflects the romanticism at the interface between the old regime and the still difficult to comprehend new era. The acceleration of history at the end of the eighteenth century and the revolutionary break between past and present made the diary a highly popular genre at that point in time.[9] Augusta wanted to capture the moment in a chronological series of snapshots. In April 1854 Leopold gave his mother's diary to Victoria. He thought she would be particularly interested; her grandmother's noble spirit was clearly visible, even if his sister had scratched out most of the names 'truly with a sort of insanity'. It seems to be an obsession of the British royal family's, as Victoria's 122 diaries, kept between 1831 and 1901, were largely mutilated by her youngest daughter Beatrice, who high-handedly transcribed the contents and destroyed the originals. Leopold, by his own admission, was so cautious with his own diary entries that it would not even have mattered had the diary itself fallen into other hands. He recorded just

5 Leopold to Victoria, June 1838, no date given (AKP, Leopold-Victoria, un-numbered bundle of letters 1837-1838).
6 Aerts, De Jong & Te Velde 2002; Baggerman & Dekker 2004; Servais & van Ypersele 2007.
7 Leopold to Victoria, 18 October 1834; 18 November 1836 (Benson & Esher 1907, 48-49; 67-68).
8 Grey 1867.
9 Hartog 2003.

enough to recall everything he would later want to remember. In 1860, that was the difficult period between 1839 and 1840. In the summer before his death, Leopold re-read his diary between 1811 and 1816 and found it a curious and interesting document: 'how so much we were anxious about is now far away and how have near things turned out'. He asked Victoria to let him see his 'beloved mother's journal' again when she had the opportunity. A month later he insisted she send him the diary. 'I wish to see it much'. He died before it happened.[10]

A diary that is kept up regularly generally contains reflections at the end of the day. The author remains the master of his story and can retouch the events described in retrospect without anyone peering over his shoulder. There is no dialogue; the outpourings address only the self and an imaginary third party. Diaries and memoirs record things for posterity. The finality of the writing is in its registration, the retention of present and past. Letters do not have the same preserving function as a diary or memoirs. Basing your research on letters you can literally catch history in the act. The relational character of an intimate correspondence makes it all the more exciting for the historian peering into the lives of the dead later on. In a letter, the 'now' is enacted in the contact established between two people, even if there is a time lapse between the writing of the letter and the recipient's answer. A rejoinder is always possible; the letter invites a response. Letter-writers are more occupied with their relationship than with themselves or their memory. The dialectic of the letter is expressive and tactical: in formulating what I am thinking and feeling I am taking into account what the other person would like to hear. Writing a letter is tempting the other party to at least answer. A letter-writer in love often even has nothing at all to say. He wants the beloved to hold his letter and bury her nose in it: The letter sustains and, at the same time, constitutes a trace of the longing and desire. These *fragments d'un discours amoureux* give the historian the unsolicited and slightly voyeuristic privilege of becoming party to an affectionate relationship.[11]

Leopold wrote reams of letters from a young age. He inherited the art of writing from his mother. From 1804, when he was fourteen, he maintained a lively correspondence with his sister Sophie, who was twelve years older. In this early period, his *sorella* was his primary confidante and bosom friend. He wrote to her even more often than to his mother, who was highly envious of the intimate correspondence between her eldest daughter and youngest son. The letters came to light again on Sophie's death in 1835 and were later published. In his own words, Leopold's letters to Sophie were almost *'ein Journal der ganzen Vergangenheit'*, a journal of the entire past.[12] That description also applies to the voluminous correspondence Leopold maintained throughout his life, not least with women. Even though piles of letters have been lost, destroyed or not yet traced and made public, it is possible to follow that *'Vergangenheit'* almost day to day on the basis of Leopold's intimate letters alone. Any claim to representativity is idle in view of the letter-writer's tremendous productivity. It was not my aim to make a statistical content analysis of his vocabulary. The body of writing I studied, with the complete collection of letters to Victoria as the red thread, is in any event large and – above all – rich enough to provide empathic insight into Leopold's personality and relationships via the *einfühlende* approach. Nevertheless, a character study was not my chief objective. I am first and foremost a historian and then a biographer. For me, the biography is a stepping stone to history, a doorway to the past, which is made so fascinating by Leopold as a highly involved witness and leading figure of his time. His life history is interwoven with European history from Napoleon to Bismarck. His letters really elucidate that 'entire past': a total history, to

10 Leopold to Victoria, 14, 21 April 1854; 17 February 1860; 8 July, 7 August 1865 (AKP, Leopold-Victoria, VI/3; VIII/2; X/2); Bachmann 2005; Ward 2004, 13-14.
11 Barthes 2002, 57-59.
12 Leopold to Sophie, 2 November 1817; Leopold to Mensdorff, 26 November 1836 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 105, 295).

which the personal, emotional and subjective component adds an extra dimension and meaning. 'The heart,' he wrote to Victoria, 'is an important and a good guide in important affairs, it must be aided by a sound understanding, but it attaches people more than the greatest wisdom'. 'In all great matters on this globe', the heart was even often better council than the head. All people who had been 'truly great' possessed not only genius but also warm feelings. Except, naturally, for certain military conquerors. For them, having to be 'a little hard', emotions were simply a nuisance.[13] Leopold was no warmonger. Although the way he showed off his military medals might lead one to think otherwise, he shuddered at the thought of war and violence. His remarkable rise in Europe is attributable less to his military achievements than the politics of the heart, a web of love intrigues and marital connections that was largely woven with the help of letters.

Leopold was a contemporary and compatriot of Goethe; the *Sehnsucht* is omnipresent in his letters. It is therefore such a pity that his letters to his first big love, Charlotte of Wales, the crown princess of Great Britain, were not kept or have at least not been found. Unlike those from her to him, in which the fiery passion in their relationship can still be felt almost two hundred years on. Charlotte did not fall for Leopold immediately, even though he was the handsomest prince in Europe according to Napoleon. But when she did, first with her mind and then falling head of heels in love, she opened not only her heart but also the door to the world stage. Following her tragic death in 1817, her - largely fictitious - 'memoirs' were immediately published. Their romantic idyll was exposed in the smallest detail. Leopold complained about the 'brazen public curiosity' infringing his personal memories. Do the dead have no right to privacy? According to Dutch publicist Elsbeth Etty, they do not. She condemns the political biographies where, out of a sense of prudishness, the protagonist's private affairs are dealt with extremely reticently. In her view, the ideal biography should penetrate through to the personal life of the biography's subject to be able to reveal his entire personality, including the darker sides.[14] That means the biographer must blushingly read even love letters 'for your eyes only'. Whether a reputation is ruined posthumously depends on the biographer's tact. 'We owe respect to the living, but we owe nothing other to the dead than the truth', the famous Shelley biographer Richard Holmes quotes from Voltaire's *Traité sur la Tolérance* from 1762.[15] Insight into the intimacy of the main characters can sometimes lead to a form of reinstatement. Louise of Orleans, Leopold's second wife, is often portrayed as the pious victim of a marriage of convenience and royal infidelity. Leopold's letters prove otherwise. They constitute the pearl in the crown of the Goffinet Archive, a once lost treasure chest of historical documents that was rediscovered in the 1990s in a bricked up cellar. In 1997, I had the chance to work on the first publication on this archive and was struck by the ardour of Leopold's feelings for his wife.[16] His letters to Louise do not, perhaps, demonstrate the same passion as that for Charlotte, but they are invariably affectively charged. Personal outpourings that read like love-making with the mind. In his loving relationship with Louise, too, Leopold bared his romantic soul and senses. In June 1837, just before Victoria became queen, Louise was with her parents in France while he, to his great annoyance, had to stay in Brussels. One lovely evening, the king was strolling in the moonlight, watching the elves and fairies darting around the park and listening to the mysterious sounds of a summer's night. At least, that was the fairytale world he evoked in a letter to his wife.[17]

In the intimacy of his exchange of letters with Victoria, Louise, Charlotte and other members of his extensive familiar network, Leopold's political ideas are also exposed. This

13 Leopold to Victoria, 12 November 1858 (AKP, Leopold-Victoria, VIII/1).

14 Etty 2007, 97-107.

15 Holmes 1997, 19-20.

16 Deneckere 1997b, 129-135.

17 Leopold to Louise, 19 June 1837 (AKP, Archive of Queen Louise).

correspondence certainly provides a view of not only his private personality, but also of the background to political events and social developments not intended for publication at the time. The personal political opinions of a constitutional monarch are screened from the public by the shield of ministerial responsibility anyway. Moreover, Leopold often formulated his political views in the inimitable style of his confidential correspondence. He was counting on the fact that his letters would never become public, not even in the semi-public sphere of diplomacy. Uncle had to assure himself that *none* of their letters was ever opened by the Foreign Office. This explains the remarkable frankness and open-heartedness of the letters. To guarantee discretion, he worked with a network of private couriers set up in 1841 by the Rothschilds, which linked all the major financial hubs in Europe. As soon as Victoria became queen, he provided her with a safe communication line, in the knowledge that all letters sent by the normal postal service would sneakily be opened and read. 'That should not be *always* the case with ours'. It was, after all, also a wile of diplomatic letter-writers to pass on messages through leaks and so not compromising themselves by making an official announcement. If Victoria did not want her feelings transpired, she used a special messenger. Leopold did the same, for example, to tell her of his delight with her plans to marry Albert. It was unusual for him to still be writing at ten in the evening, but he could not let the courier go without a letter. After all, for days he had been 'deprived of expending his heart' due to the discretion Victoria wished to be maintained. He maintained his silence in his letters through the ordinary messenger. Leopold also played the go-between and sent on all her letters to Albert in Coburg, 'with great pleasure, in all secrecy and safety'. Victoria was fairly confident that her letters to Brussels and Paris were safe. Those to Germany 'with *real* consequence' she always sent through Rothschild – perfectly *safe* and very quick.[18]

The open-heartedness of the correspondence with Victoria also has to do with the fact that it was a relationship between 'equals', even though Victoria was almost thirty years younger and Leopold treated in a very fatherly fashion. As soon as she came to the throne in 1837, they communicated like a king and queen, discussing their task as constitutional monarch. That, in itself, is extremely interesting. The relationship between a king and his ministers or other politicians is, after all, more of a power relationship. The *colloque singulier* engenders a kind of awe of whatever the king says. It is even necessary for royal authority that it is kept confidential. The crown must not be exposed. What the king actually has thought and done behind the shield of ministerial responsibility can only be revealed once the archives are opened. Likewise, a king's confidential archive contains highly explosive material should it be made public at the time. The historian exposes the crown once it can no longer do any harm. It is hard to believe, for example, that Leopold could have maintained his own position as Belgian constitutional monarch so well if his endless lashing out at the 'absurd', 'stupid', 'crazy' constitution at the time had become public.[19] I therefore follow the German historian Johannes Paulmann when he pleads for a revaluation of the dynastic ties as a political communication channel between European monarchs. It is a goldmine for historians. Not so much because of the personal relationships as such, as the character studies of kings and the indication of mutual sympathies and antipathies are of only an extremely limited historical significance. A broader view is needed to see how the personal, dynastic and international relationships were interwoven. How did those relationships work in practice? What form did they take and how were they cultivated? The dynastic link was no camouflage for the realities of power politics; it actually paved the way for the exchanges of political ideas between monarchs. Less dissimulation was needed between kings. They had less need of keeping up appearances with one another. Their personal correspondence contains more

18 Leopold to Victoria, 9 October 1837; 12 March, 25 August, 9 November 1839 (AKP, Leopold-Victoria, I/2); Victoria to Leopold, 15 July 1839; 6 June 1841 (Benson & Esher 1907, 224; 365); Ferguson 1998a, 233-236.
19 Stengers 1992, 14-15.

reliable information than formal diplomatic letters, as it expressed what monarchs 'really, truly' felt.[20] Leopold used that personal, direct diplomacy as a conscious strategy. It earned him his reputation as an arbiter for Europe, but it also elicited the criticism that he saw foreign policy as his private terrain.

For my biography, Leopold's innumerable personal letters from his early youth at the beginning of the nineteenth century to his death in 1865 form the stepping stone to the bigger story of the forgotten king of Europe, a history of the *werdegang* of an era, in fact. By resolutely choosing the actor's perspective, it is possible to do full justice to the merits of the intimate letters as ego documents full of sentiment. Until now, in the Leopold biographies they have generally been treated as carriers of factual information. My history seen through Leopold's eyes is aimed at using the letters to carry the reader back into history. Where I quote Leopold literally, I have sometimes adopted the language of the letter. Leopold was a polyglot and wrote in English, French and German, sometimes all in the same letter or even the same sentence. His own words give the reader the feeling of occasionally hearing his voice. You can see him writing, read his thoughts and accompany him in his story. For the sake of readability I have attempted to translate and paraphrase his epistles as far as possible. A chain of quotes would not have 'worked'. Naturally, I have had to read between the lines, too. Transformations have happened between Leopold's letters and my biography. This is what Holmes describes as 'dreamwork'. After the biographer's deskwork and fieldwork comes the writing: the dreamwork where everything is combined in a kind of alchemic process where, in retrospect, one cannot exactly remember how it came about.[21]

Leopold's involvement in the story enables us to make contact with a distant past. The historian as an observer, cautious, distanced and objective, is not capable of bringing the dead past back to life. It was my ambition to do so, with the help of poignant details and excerpts from letters that are verifiable in the sources through the elaborate footnotes.[22] I am also deeply convinced that historians should tell more stories if they are to avoid losing contact with an interested reading public. The sometimes exaggerated scientification of history writing has the tendency to neutralise history. Just as Leopold touched me when I read him, I want to touch my reader. The biography as a handshake, in Richard Holmes' definition: 'a handshake across time, across the loneliness of being human, over death itself.[23]

The historian and the subject of history

Holmes also uses the word 'embrace', but I have never felt any urge to embrace Leopold. He evokes aversion, not least in his manner of self-glorification and pedantry. 'If you don't blow your own trumpet no one will do it for you' seems to have been Leopold's motto. He repeatedly claimed 'in all modesty' that Belgium and the Belgians owed their entire existence to him. Charles Rogier, top minister since the creation of Belgium, reposted on the day of Leopold's funeral in a private conversation that it was the Belgian people, not the monarch, that had succeeded in maintaining its position. Leopold's often quoted statement '*Je tiens la Belgique dans ma main*' was therefore a slight overstatement. The king had helped the people: '*voilà la vérité*'. Or was it the truth as seen by an early revolutionary idealising the Belgian people? The Belgian historian Jean Stengers, an eminent expert on the history of the monarchy, also admits that Leopold was indisputably at the heart of

20 Paulmann 1999, 157-181; Paulmann 2001, 163-168.
21 Interview with Richard Holmes, NRC-Handelsblad, 14 November 1997; E. Defoort, 'Droomwerk van Holmes', Standaard der Letteren, 23 July 1998; Renders 2008, 39.
22 Van den Braembussche 1989.
23 Holmes 1997, 14.

power for a large part of his reign.[24] The truth is generally somewhere in the middle. From a narrative point of view, too, it was impossible to put Leopold systematically in his place by allowing a potentially endless string of contemporaries to comment on his kingship. Using the actor's perspective as a narrative technique does not, however, mean that I as the author identify with my protagonist or invite my reader to do so. His truth is not the only truth.

The critical distance between historian and history remains and was not so difficult to retain with a character such as Leopold I. I did not fall in love with him; on the contrary. The first king of the Belgians no longer lives in the collective memory. If being forgotten is the worst that can happen to the dead, then this book is a small monument to him. It was not necessary to erect a pedestal. His era already did that for him. The best I could do was to resurrect the fact, as with the scandals that cast a slur on his reputation. It was not my aim to knock Leopold from his throne. He occupied it as king. The myth is part of the man and vice versa. It is the little things in his letters that make him human. It is the dialectic between the function and the man, between the symbol and its embodiment that make the biography of a monarch so fascinating. Based on this biography you could probably find as many arguments for as against constitutional monarchy in Belgium. My book is neither an indictment nor a plea. '*Robespierristes, anti-robespierristes, nous vous crions grâce: par pitié, dites-nous, simplement, quel fut Robespierre*', begs Marc Bloch in his *Apologie pour l'histoire*.[25]. I have tried to understand Leopold, a great man of a rank and standing that are completely outdated, with a debatable function, political views that are at odds with mine and a belief in providence that I have had to learn to take seriously. It required some empathy and a mountain of background reading. Leopold gave me far more in-depth insight into the history of Europe from the French Revolution onwards than I have ever gained (or taught myself) at school or university. By treading in his footsteps I have been able to rediscover the intricacies of many episodes that have been reduced to bare facts, names and dates in history books. That is the kind of historical truth I want to convey with this book.

An intimate biography, a transnational history and the bigger picture

Traditional biographies of monarchs focus on the cult of the royal personage. The individual figure of the monarch is lifted from the social, cultural and political history of his or her time or presented as exemplary. In both cases, the broader historical context is omitted from the picture. In my view, the history of kingship is the epitome of social history, as a lively British historiographical tradition also demonstrates. Why has the modern era failed to free itself from such an anachronistic institution as the royal family? Instead, modern times have seen a (re)discovery of monarchical traditions in a success story that retains its appeal.[26] While I was writing this introduction London was in the grip of a new episode of monarchical mass hysteria concerning Prince William and Kate Middleton, culminating in the wedding on 29 April 2011. The worldwide promotion of the Royal Wedding Walk along Will-and-Kate hot spots and posh shops showed the scale on which the royal fairytale is still alive and kicking to this day. Thirty years ago, as a teenager on a school trip to Yorkshire I witnessed exactly the same phenomenon, with other characters, other gimmicks and memorabilia on the mantelpiece, another wedding dress and, in particular, fewer possibilities to mediatise the event. But the same engagement ring and the same landau as for Edward VII! No other political institution exhibits the same continuity or continues to amass such popular credit as

24 Stengers 1992, 13.
25 Bloch 1974, 119.
26 Cannadine 1983, 101-164.

the monarchy, despite the scandals the British royal family has been plagued with in recent years. No other political institution is as well-known and loved by the people.

Nevertheless, the French Revolution in 1789 crowned the people as sovereign. The king and queen of France were reduced to their human proportions and even animalised to bring about the fall of the monarchy. Based on the Freudian concept of the family romance, the American historian Lynn Hunt showed how the scandalous rumours concerning the sexuality of the royal couple Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette were circulated in obscene pamphlets, facilitating the guillotining of the naked bearers of kingship. In his biography of Marie-Antoinette, Stefan Zweig, in fact, did the opposite. He showed how a mediocre girl was elevated by the big history of the French revolution and thus immortalised.[27] That paradox can be related to Kantorowicz' influential theory concerning 'The King's Two Bodies', a concept from mediaeval political theology. The king comprises two bodies, the body politic and the body natural: a sublime, immaterial and unearthly body on one side and an earthly, transitory body on the other.[28] In the wake of the French Revolution, the link between the body politic and the divine was broken. The king was no longer there by divine right, but reigned by grace of the people. The body politic secularised, but the interaction between the king's two bodies, the symbol and the bearer, remains fundamental for the concept of modern monarchy and the development of constitutional monarchy.

The restoration of the monarchy in Europe after Napoleon is linked with the conservative conviction that the monarchy was a useful bulwark against the possible recurrence of the revolution and the spread of liberalism and nationalism on the continent. Even in Great Britain, which had had no revolution, there was a revival of royalism. There, too, innumerable scandals had undermined the royal family and the aristocracy at the end of the eighteenth century, as in France. British historian Anna Clark associated that with the growing influence of public opinion and the growing power of the middle class. Scandals did not trivialise power, but politicised the private. Scandals concerning the decadence and extravagance of monarchs and aristocrats played on the relationship between politics and morality. The hard work, sobriety, chastity and piety of the middle class contrasted sharply with the laziness, licentiousness, lasciviousness, corruption and immorality of the upper class.[29] That was the context for the remystification of the monarchy, in which Leopold and Victoria were to play a central role. Public opinion was the scourge of the British royal family; it had to be re-conquered with a charm offensive that appealed to the new middle-class values. The monarchy retrieved its raison d'être by depicting the ideal of family happiness. The Victorian monarchy was a middle-class monarchy with domesticity and decency as the main pillars: 'The virtues of Queen Victoria have sunk deep into the popular heart,' wrote the leading theoretician of the British constitutional monarchy, the liberal journalist Walter Bagehot in 1867. He made the distinction between the 'stately' or theatrical aspect of politics ('that which is mystic in its claims, that which is occult in its mode of action, that which is brilliant to the eye') and the 'efficient' aspects such as party politics and the constitution, which did not appeal to the popular imagination. The constitutional monarchy had to retain the mystery in its theatrical aspects and was, at the same time, more dependent than ever on the 'approval' of the people.[30]

27 Hunt 1992; Zweig 1932.
28 Kantorowicz 1997.
29 Clark 2004.
30 Bagehot 2009 [1867]; Deploige &Deneckere 2006.

The classic division of the private and the political realm is impossible to maintain in this context. My biography of Leopold is therefore far more a social history of the European monarchy at a tumultuous juncture in time than a political biography of a head of state whose private life appears occasionally in the margins. In general terms, there are two traditions in biographies of monarchs: the political biography and the lighter work. The former tradition is that of the serious political biography where the *petite histoire* is filtered out as far as possible. For Leopold I, that tradition began a few years after his death with the national historian Théodore Juste (1868) and it was continued by Louis de Lichtervelde (1929), Carlo Bronne (1942 and 1943), Aloïs Simon (1963) and Piet Vermeir (1965). They discuss Leopold primarily as king of the Belgians in a national context. In his brilliant overview of the power and influence of the kings in Belgium since 1831 Jean Stengers also deliberately chooses to leave out the private lives of the monarchs. He does so not because it would be improper to talk about them – *'les convenances peuvent être fatales à la vérité de l'histoire*' – but on the grounds of what he defines as the king's political and social influence. In Bagehot's terminology, that boils down to the 'efficient' aspects of royal politics. The magic appeal to the population of the royal family romance does not figure in Stengers' work. He even writes, literally, that the queens and mistresses of the Belgian royal family can be scrapped from history from a political point of view.[31] They do feature in the second tradition written by (primarily) women authors, where the focus is actually on the women in Leopold's life and less on classic political history: Charlotte of Wales, Victoria, Louise of Orleans, Arcadie Claret. Examples in this genre are Joanna Richardson (1961), Mia Kerckvoorde (1988), Henriette Claessens (2002), James Chambers (2007) and Reinout Goddyn (2007).

My biography begins with Leopold's intimate correspondence with the women in his life, but cannot be classified in one or the other of the two traditions. It was more interesting for the structure of my book to link politics and gender and to see how Leopold and Victoria played on public opinion with the politics of the heart. Victoria was the first 'media monarch' to deploy the mass press and visual culture in her propaganda to win the hearts of the people.[32] Her correspondence with Leopold shows the tremendous importance monarchs attached to achieving 'recognition' by the people through creating affectionate loyalty. At that time, in the absence of universal suffrage and opinion polls, the enthusiastic crowds in the streets were the primary gauge of popularity. The self-fashioning of the monarchy in public places has therefore become a major theme in this book.[33]

In their intense exchange of letters, Leopold and Victoria posthumously shape the separation of the public and private domains. After all, the publication of their intimate correspondence by Benson & Esher in 1907 provided the following generation with a glimpse of royal emotions. That glimpse was intended primarily for consumption by a British public. After all, the female monarch was British and the British monarch a woman. For their part, Belgian political biographers and historians make only sporadic use of Leopold's extensive correspondence with Victoria. The personal feelings of the male monarch were subordinate to his political ratio and that political ratio has, so far, been the central theme in the 'more serious' Leopold biographies.

In the autumn of 1817, when he turned twenty-seven, Leopold had to bury his first wife and child and, with them, 'everything definite in my existence', so he wrote more than a quarter of a century later to Victoria. On a lovely evening in 1834, he and Louise buried an equally beautiful little boy - their first born. Leopold was 'really saturated with grief' and overwhelmed with

31 Stengers 1992, 7, 16.
32 Plunkett 2003, 1-11.
33 Büschel 2006; Wortman 2006.

recollections of the most mournful description. He occasionally considered 'some little suicide,' but time would take that task into its own hands quickly enough. His awareness of mortality was tremendous. 'Dans ce dream which we call life', he wrote to Louise, 'events followed one another in a striking manner and while we are still musing on the images that rapidly pass before our eyes, we ourselves are already disappearing!'[34] The personal dramas in Leopold's life are an important guide to understanding his actions, but I have been careful not to psychologise. His letters provide plenty of material to allow him to speak for himself, King Leopold as a subject in all his rationality and sensibility. In my view, presenting his own discourse in the story provides more insight into his psyche than shallow interpretations that are often mere projections.[35]

There is no central focus on Belgian history in this book but naturally it is still intriguing to see how, in a short space of time, a melancholy prince of Saxe-Coburg succeeded in gaining the image of father of the homeland and making a fundamental contribution to the construction of Belgium. Symbolically, by incarnating the royal fiction, but also in reality, as numerous studies by Henri Haag, Aloïs Simon, Jean Stengers and Els Witte have demonstrated. Nevertheless, Leopold's previous history remains essential to understanding his demeanour as king of the Belgians. Significantly, so far it has been 'separate' studies that have investigated that pre-Belgian history in the most depth. Camille Buffin (1914), Ernst Gerhart von Fürstenheim in two extensive articles (1982, 1988) and Gilbert Kirschen (1988) in a book that was prevented from having a sequel due to the author's premature death. The fact that Leopold's previous history in Coburg and London can apparently be neatly separated from his Belgian story can be attributed to the national frame in which both biography and historiography have been trapped since the nineteenth century. Leopold was already in his forties when he crossed the channel to Belgium. He had a whole life behind him, but accepting the Belgian throne a year after the 1830 Revolution was in no sense a cut-off point from his previous history. My book is therefore an attempt at breaking free from the national context of the various biographical and historiographical traditions and weaving the German, Russian, British, Swiss, Greek, Belgian, French, Austrian and Mexican threads into a transnational history.[36]

His life story provides all the arguments for doing so. The big break in history for Leopold was to come in the year of his birth: 1790. Not in 1789, with the storming of the Bastille and the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*, but in 1790, when the Jacobins assumed power from the more moderate groups. Throughout his life, Leopold was terrified of a repetition of the French Revolution, leading to despotism and war. All the danger to social order and harmony came from France. Since 1789 the French had been the cause of 'the greatest changes which ever took place in Europe'. 'No one can wish to rouse the National spirit of the French,' he wrote to Victoria in 1838, it was dormant 'like Sleeping Beauty' and 'may remain so'.[37] I have not found any explicit references in Leopold's correspondence to the writings of Edmund Burke, although he was well read and, for example, praised Alexis de Tocqueville to Victoria.

He fabricated his own version of conservative ideals and put them into practice. His intellectual observations were not separate from or above political reality, but constituted an integral part of them.[38] For decades, Leopold maintained a confidential and amicable correspondence with Clemens von Metternich, the central figure in the Congress of Vienna and

34 Leopold to Victoria, 8 February 1844; 12 April 1845 (AKP, Leopold-Victoria, II/3; III/2); Leopold to Louise, 3 January 1844 (AKP, Queen Louise's Archive).
35 Certeau 1987; Dane en Renders 2007.
36 Deacon, Russell & Woollacott, 2010.
37 Leopold to Victoria, 30 November 1838 (AKP, Leopold-Victoria, I/1).
38 Burke 1790, recently republished in Dutch: Burke 1989.

the figurehead of conservatism in Europe. For Leopold I, the European scene was not a question of 'foreign politics'. Europe and European peace took precedence for him in every national link, be it German, British or Belgian. '*Mein Wünsch für Europa ist den Frieden [My wish for Europe is peace]*' he wrote to Metternich in 1854.[39] That meant keeping France and any revolutionary tendencies at bay. War was equatable with anarchy and vice versa. Nineteenth-century monarchs acted on two stages: their own national stage and the international stage. Their target audience was, in both cases, primarily the domestic public. The emotional appeal of the crowned heads to the masses was a significant element in nation building, which in turn helped 'nationalise' the monarchy. At the same time, good dynastic links between the monarchs were displayed on the international stage. Victoria, for example, received heads of state at Buckingham Palace in her Belgian Suite, in which some of the sumptuous rooms were named after Leopold (and where Will & Kate spent their wedding night). The double act had a parallel objective: Domestically, the monarchs encouraged national sentiment and patriotism to make the people as emotionally loyal to them as possible, while peace was kept internationally as a pillar of the established order. From that point of view, for Leopold there was no contradiction between propagating national sentiment and the idea of the European Concert. Leopold saw himself as an ambassador for peace in Europe and therefore a guardian of order and calm. He drew his strength from that self image: 'In a career such as mine, these days one does not personally experience much joy, but influencing the fate of millions is, after all, great work. The good one does can have a lasting effect'. The king wanted to do good for mankind, maintain peace and ensure prosperity.[40]

Leopold's discrete, personal diplomacy as a mediator between monarchs – with the Entente Cordiale between England and France as his first achievement – was initially elucidated by the Austrian diplomat Egon Corti (1922) and five years later elaborated upon for a Belgian public (Corti & Buffin 1927). The longer they continued, however, the more the love intrigues and marriage politics of the Coburg family became a bone of contention in the modern Europe of the nations. From the very beginning, the influence of 'Coburg' or the 'parvenu German invaders' had been a problem for public opinion in Great Britain. The historiography that focuses on Leopold's European politics therefore bathes in an ambience of sensation and conspiracy: Theo Aronson (1968), Dulcie M. Ashdown (1981), Paul Beliën (2005) and Richard Sotnick (2008). It was only recently that the national view was broadened and the shared European heritage of the 'Coburg Clan' could be re-evaluated in publications by Olivier Defrance (2004), Franz Bosbach & John Davis (2007) and Karina Urbach (2008). Nevertheless, it was first and foremost Johannes Paulmann's book that showed me the importance of friendly relations between monarchs, with Leopold as an ambassador for peace between the great powers in Europe after 1815.[41]

The structure of the book

Just as Marie-Antoinette was '*eine mittlere Character*', a mediocre personage, when she left for Versailles in 1770, so was Leopold of Saksen-Coburg-Saalfeld only a penniless prince from a miniscule dukedom when he appeared at the Congress of Vienna in 1814. 'History, the demiurge, can construct a profoundly moving drama even though there is nothing heroic about its leading personalities,' wrote Stefan Zweig. Without the French Revolution and its consequences for Germany, Leopold would undoubtedly have led a nondescript life as a modest minor nobleman in the provincial nest of Coburg, killing his time shooting birds and collecting flowers and copper engravings like his father. Not that the young prince did not hanker after anything higher. He

39 Leopold to Metternich, 11 December 1854 (Prague State Archive, Acta Clementina/Leopold I).
40 Leopold to Ferdinand-Philippe, Duke of Orleans, 7 August 1836 (AKP, Archive of King Leopold I).
41 Paulmann 2000, 137, 139, 258-259.

wanted to do good and make himself useful, filled with a protestant sense of obligation. He had to be asked, though. His mother certainly passed on her own ambition, but Leopold was too sensitive to aim for a hero's role of his own volition. He did not have the temperament for it; a peaceful, happy family life and the aristocratic habits of his time could certainly have seduced him, too. History gave him a gentle push, lifting him out of Coburg and the mediocrity of his existence. Without the revolutionary ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity, the social consequences of which he actively combated all his life, Leopold would never have become who he was. Without Napoleon bringing death and destruction to Germany, he would not have set himself up as the cornerstone of European peace. Without Charlotte's death he would have been prince consort of the most powerful country in the world and Victoria would never have been born. Without the Belgian Revolution, he would never have been chosen as king of the Belgians. Without his hubris, the loss of grip on history would never have been so tragic. The tension between man and his fate found an ideal plaything in Leopold. For historians, in particular, his constant melancholy musings on the subject provide a lavish source to work with.

My book can be read at three levels. First of all there is Leopold's personal story and how the muse of history steered this prince into the dramatic nineteenth century, forcing him to hold his own on battlefields and in salons. Secondly, there is the history of Belgium and Europe, which we can view and better understand through his eyes. And thirdly, at a deeper level, there is plenty of matter for metahistorical reflection. Leopold's conservative ideas, which I do not share, prompt one to ponder on history and progress, authority and leadership, freedom and equality, democracy and dictatorship, war and peace. They span the gap between today's neo-conservatism and the fear of democracy in the era of the French Revolution and Napoleon. It gives food for thought about the greatest myth of modern times, the people. It is not that simple to compile the biography of a figure who played on various fields. The set-up of the various chapters is chronological, but the book includes flash-forwards and flashbacks, repetitions, shifts and overlaps that are part of life itself, storylines that converge and a queen who sadly dies of grief in various chapters.

Chapter 1. *A Prince's Life in the Time of Napoleon*, or how the prince is born in 1790 in Coburg with time against him. How he is given a protestant upbringing by impoverished but enlightened parents. How, at the age of five, he becomes a captain in the Russian army and intimate with the court of the tsars. How Coburg is plundered by the French armies and Leopold makes an impression in Paris. How he takes part in the campaigns against Napoleon and is initiated into Freemasonry.

Chapter 2. *Peace in Europe*, or how Napoleon is defeated and the future of Europe is decided at the Congress of Vienna. How upcoming liberalism and the small nations are disregarded by dancing diplomats. How Leopold puts up a good fight and mentally sides with the Holy Alliance against progress. How public opinion curbs the sexual liberty of monarchs and aristocrats.

Chapter 3. *Prince Charming of Great Britain*, or how the handsomest prince in Europe seduces the British crown princess. How Leopold personally experiences the pressure of public opinion. How Charlotte is the hope of the British nation, a real people's princess. How a fairytale wedding becomes the secret of the modern monarchy. Fate strikes.

Chapter 4. *A Greek Royal Tragedy*, or how the muse of history seeks a new star. How romanticism and power politics are difficult to reconcile. How Leopold finds himself between the devil and the deep blue sea and hesitates to make the best of a bad job.

Chapter 5. *King of the Belgians*, or how the Belgian Revolution wants to establish a constitutional monarchy and elects a hereditary king. How the parallel diplomacy in London becomes acquainted with an eager but cautious prince. How a foreign monarch crosses the channel by grace of public favour and makes his Joyous Entry on Belgian soil. How a Belgian by adoption takes the constitutional oath.

Chapter 6. *A Fatherland in Europe*, or how Leopold concludes a marriage with France. How the Belgian dynasty is founded and the link with Belgian territory is established. How Leopold has to defend that territory and is enraged when it is amputated. How the patriotism of the Belgians fails to tip the balance of power in Europe.

Chapter 7. *Making Victoria Queen*, or how Uncle Leopold makes the icon of her time great. How he lectures European monarchs in political economy and even sketches a suitable policy for Portugal. How Victoria becomes queen and has trouble with the gender of power.

Chapter 8. *The House of Saxe-Coburg*, or how Coburg sends forth its sons and Victoria asks for Albert's hand in marriage. How Leopold's dream castle is built as a happy domestic home. How he uses the family ties to promote international relations. How the king fails to practice what he preaches and generates a sex scandal. How private life becomes political and threatens the dynasty when the queen is dying.

Chapter 9. *The Constitutional Monarchy*, or how Leopold places the crown above party politics. How he not only rules but also reigns. How he reviles the representative institutions, the press and elections. How he remains faithful to the constitution, nonetheless, and attempts to turn it to his advantage. How he chooses the 'real' country rather than the 'legal' country and builds the Belgian nation.

Chapter 10. *The 1848 Revolution as a Fracture Surface*, or how Belgium remains standing like a rock in the revolutionary waves. How Leopold pats himself on the back and reconciles himself with the constitutional monarchy as a dam against revolution. How the revolution in France ends up as a dictatorship and how British public opinion puts paid to Albert as a secret ruler.

Chapter 11. *The Lost Cause of the Holy Alliance*, or how the wave of revolution surges throughout Central Europe. How liberalism and nationalism undermine the Order of Vienna. How Leopold vainly attempts to reanimate the Holy Alliance. How a new kind of leader has emerged in France and how time cannot be turned back by old crocodiles.

Chapter 12. *The End of Peace in Europe*, or how the Crimean War changes the face of Europe. How Leopold mounts a personal charm offensive against Napoleon III and sees Victoria's growing hunger for war. How the centre of Europe shifts to Paris. How Austria is the big loser. How Italy and Germany become nations and international tensions mount.

Chapter 13. *Belgium Between Unity and Division*, or how after a quarter of a century Leopold feels at one with his people. How national unity is a temporary illusion and political division is inherent to a democracy. How Leopold gets fed up with government crises and throws in the towel.

Chapter 14. *Hope for the Fatherland's Future*, or how Leopold treats his children after Louise's death. How his sons are lazy and how smart he considers his daughter to be. How the Duke of Brabant is married off to Habsburg and travels a lot. How Charlotte is the true heir to the throne. How the muse of history stages a final *coup de théâtre* in Mexico.

Epilogue, or how the king dies.

Chapter 3

Prince Charming of Great Britain

In the light of the dramatic divorce of his parents in 1826, it was no wonder that, as Queen Victoria's prince consort, Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha should become a model husband, an example of morality and fidelity. As such, he was treading in the footsteps of his uncle Leopold. Even before the birth of his nephew and niece, Leopold was to make a break with the sexual morals of his time, in a country that was the first to accept such a move, Great Britain.

Despite his flair for networking, at the Congress of Vienna Leopold still felt like a hanger-on in the tsar's entourage. The ambitious prince was aiming higher. In June 1814 - again in the wake of the tsar – he travelled to England to court Charlotte, Princess of Wales and heir to the throne. It was premeditated: his correspondence in the spring of 1814 is already full of Charlotte. In Paris, he also talked to Ernst about the 'project', which was a political move on the part of Tsar Alexander. What did fate have in store? Shortly before, on 30 March 1814, the British crown princess's engagement to Willem, the hereditary prince of Orange, had been announced. Willem had studied at Oxford and fought against the French. The alliance was cooked up by Castlereagh, who wanted to put the House of Orange on the throne in the reinforced United Kingdom of the Netherlands, which was intended to act as a buffer against France. Willem I was so pleased that he announced his son's forthcoming marriage when he ascended the throne. It was a rare moment of joy for him, which overruled his caution. An unfortunate moment, too, as matters were far from settled. Charlotte was not particularly taken with 'Slender Billy', but she initially gave in to pressure from her father, who realised the importance of the link with the Netherlands.

The wedding plans disturbed the European balance of power that had been achieved at the Congress of Vienna after Napoleon's capitulation. Russia, in particular, did everything within its power to thwart this political liaison. The tsar's secret weapon was 'the handsomest prince in Europe,' Leopold of Saksen-Coburg-Saalfeld. It did not take much to persuade Leopold to follow Alexander to London. His role as the romantic hero in a political game did worry him, though. He saw the trip as '*eine Bataille*', that could well get him into deep trouble. Nonetheless, it would be a pity to miss out on the chance to see beautiful England. Leopold was afraid of drowning, both literally and figuratively, but did not dismiss the idea of marrying there. '*Das wäre curios*' (That would be curious), he wrote to his sister just before leaving.[42]

Minor star in London

The tsar was received with great enthusiasm in London. He had arrived in Dover incognito, together with Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia, to the great disappointment of the crowds awaiting him at every stopping place, who could only cheer the minor deities in his retinue. Leopold did

42 Leopold to Sophie, 31 May 1814 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 101–103); Fürstenheim, 1982

take part in the triumphant entry, in a yellow coach he had borrowed from his brother-in-law Mensdorff-Pouilly. The splendid Hotel Pulteney, where the tsar was staying, was besieged daily by thousands of people blocking the traffic in Piccadilly. Ladies bought tickets to see the tsar descend the steps of the hotel at close quarters. George, the unpopular prince regent, did not even dare to visit him for fear of being booed by the same crowd.

London was literally out of its senses during the festivities for Napoleon's vanquishers. The Battle of Trafalgar was re-enacted with miniature ships on the Serpentine in Hyde Park. The Castle of Discord transformed in the middle of a firework display and an amazed crowd into a Temple of Concord. There was a seven-storey Chinese pagoda, military parades and fireworks and, above all, a lot of balls, where the tsar, incidentally, did not show his best side. His carryings-on in London soon enhanced his reputation as a womaniser. 'Each succeeding day dispersed the halo of glory with which fancy had exalted the magnanimous Alexander', wrote Lady Shelley in her diary. 'Reality and a nearer approach proves him to be a foolish, good-natured, dancing Dandy. Although he has more good qualities than bad, he is but a weak, vain coxcomb'. London's high society was therefore relieved to see the Russians leave again, even though no progress worthy of mention had been made in the peace negotiations.[43]

Leopold stayed a little longer. As far as Alexander was concerned, he could stay as long as he pleased. And yes, 'extraordinary things' had happened to give the prince hope that his plan to win Charlotte might well succeed. Due to her father's opposition, he considered his chances slim, but he would stay in London until all hope had fled and so could not reproach himself later for not having stayed longer. We see him plagued by continual doubts as to the object of his journey and of his desires. In London he was still a minor star, hardly noticeable in the midst of the bright lights of high society.[44] In his blackest moods, for the poor prince partying London was, above all, even more expensive than Paris. The Russian ambassador had found him rather mediocre lodgings. As soon as the tsar left he looked for something better. He had to be worthy of the British crown princess's hand! Now, Leopold had to pay for his more comfortable apartment in Stratford Place himself and complained about the price.[45]

Charlotte, Princess of Wales and heir to the throne, was born on 7 January 1796. She was the daughter of the later King George IV, who had become regent in 1811 after his father – mad king George – had finally been declared insane. The prince regent had to wait until 1820 to ascend the throne and, in the meantime, undermined the British royal family with his debauchery and extravagance. Wellington once called him 'the worst man he ever fell in with his whole life, the most selfish, the most false, the most ill-natured, the most entirely without one redeeming quality'. Taxpayers' money was being squandered left, right and centre, and everyone knew what on: brothels, palaces, gambling dens, horse racing and banqueting. With his pink wig and the corset round his corpulent belly, overdressed and oversexed, the prince of pleasure was a rewarding subject for cartoonists and, later, Blackadder. Today, the regency period is associated with not only low morals and high fashion, however, but also cultural blossoming, thanks to generous George's patronage.[46] Charlotte was the fruit of the forced marriage with his cousin Caroline von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel in 1795. They had married for the money. Not that Caroline was so rich: on the contrary, but George's reputation was so bad that only a new status as a settled, married man could persuade parliament to increase his annual income. In the 1780s, George was already

43 Shelley 1912, 157–158.

44 Brownlow 1867, 106–108.

45 Leopold to Ernst, 23 June 1814 (Bronne 1942, 58; Grey 1867, 386).

46 Hibbert 1973; David 1998.

spending 80,000 pounds a year more than his income of 62,000 pounds. In the early 1790s, his debts had mounted to more than 550,000 pounds. Furthermore, in 1785 the crown prince had actually already married the widow Maria Fitzherbert, a British catholic, without royal permission. The marriage was in contravention with the Royal Marriage Act, which stipulated that the heir to the throne must marry a foreign, protestant princess. The relationship with Fitzherbert lasted until 1811, the year George became prince regent. His marriage to Caroline was a disaster from the very beginning. On their wedding night, he fell out of bed blind drunk and she left him lying there. The flamboyant, forthright Caroline was certainly no pushover. But George had a physical aversion to her: he could not bear her body odour, in particular.[47]

Charlotte Augusta was not exactly brought up in a loving environment. Her parents, who lived as man and wife for three weeks at the most and made love exactly three times, split up shortly after she was born. They did nothing to keep up appearances, either. 'My mother was bad' Charlotte would later say, 'but she would not have become as bad as she was had my father not been infinitely worse'.[48]

Her 'bad' parents sadly neglected her upbringing. Charlotte was continually farmed out to governesses and grumpy aunts. Her father, who would naturally have preferred a son, hardly ever visited her. Her mother, who had become superfluous to the royal family after the actual separation, was allowed to see Charlotte less and less often. She was banished to Blackheath, two hours' ride from London, where she built herself a small court, a salon, receiving the trendy intellectuals and politicians of the time. It is highly unlikely that Caroline had no lovers. She adopted a boy from a poor family as a substitute for her daughter. The more badly George treated her, the more popularity Charlotte's mother enjoyed. Excluded from court life, she sought amusement in other circles. In 1806-1807 George accused her of infidelity and having a bastard child. He had a Delicate Investigation carried out into her goings-on. The government decided, however, that she was innocent and could remain a member of court, despite her 'disgraceful licentiousness'. She was not found to be a good enough mother to relax the restrictions on her contact with Charlotte, though. Caroline's position became untenable when George became regent in 1811. As he was ruling with the conservative Tories, the liberal Whigs now sided fully with Caroline; Henry Brougham was to protect her interests from then on.

By the age of eight, Charlotte had still not learned to read or write. Thanks to her grandfather George III, the crown princess finally received a decent education. As it was highly unlikely that she would now have a brother, he considered that her upbringing should not be that of a mere woman: as heir to the crown it should be of 'a more extended nature'. After much negotiation, it was decided that Charlotte should spend half the year at Windsor and the other half with her father at Warwick House. When George III was finally declared insane and her father gained power over not only England but her, too, it was her grandmother the old Queen Mother Charlotte who attempted to teach the sensible, but wild girl etiquette and discipline. The prince regent's aim was to cripple his daughter in her development as far as possible. As a child, Charlotte displayed a total lack of self-control. Her reactions were highly impulsive and fickle and she was boyishly rough in her fierceness. A small volcano, which could literally erupt. Stamping her feet in fury. Or laughing uncontrollably. Not exactly the manners for a princess.

Charlotte blushingly read Lord Byron's romantic poems and Jane Austen's *Sense & Sensibility* (1811). She realised all too well that she was not destined for passionate love. Especially

47 Plowden 2005; Fraser 1996.
48 Buffin 1914, 102.

when she heard what her father was arranging behind her back with that pale Dutch prince with his blond eyebrows who was as 'thin as a needle' and much smaller than she. She found him 'extremely ugly' with expressionless eyes. He had nice teeth, though. Although marriage meant escape from her fatherly yoke and official independence, it would not be to any old prince if Charlotte had anything to do with it. She did not have the right temperament for it, as the poor Prince of Orange was soon to discover. As the future Queen of Britain, Charlotte was certainly not going to live in the boring Netherlands. She wondered if people actually had any fun there. A marriage of convenience, only seeing her husband a few times a year, suited her fine, but she threatened to break off the engagement if there was no clause in the marriage contract stipulating that she could stay in England. She was supported in that respect by Whig lawyers. In June 1814, just before the arrival of the foreign heads of state in London, Charlotte's demand was complied with.

Nothing appeared to stand in the way of the wedding. But the daily meetings between the engaged couple soured their relationship. Charlotte's father did not allow her to appear at the receptions or in the salons, while Willem had a high old time, going home half-drunk every evening. He made no move to instigate any change in his fiancée's trapped situation. Less than two weeks after his arrival Charlotte had had enough. The last straw was a meeting with the Whig lawyer Henry Brougham who brought it to her attention that she could lose her right to the throne if she left the country. She was the only one keeping her mother in England and if Caroline were to follow her abroad there would be an automatic divorce from George, who could then enter into a second marriage, with implications for his succession. This reasoning is said to have had a magic effect on 'the young one'. She decided she and her mother should stay in England and support and protect each other. After a row with Willem in the royal menagerie, Charlotte told him in no uncertain terms in a goodbye letter that she considered their engagement 'totally and for ever at an end'. To the great consternation of her father and the diplomats, for whom the marriage could not be too soon. It seems Willem preferred to admit defeat than to try and win back his rebellious princess. He was more worried about his father's reaction than the actual break itself. He also failed to inform his father as she had asked. All he did was go on partying.[49]

So Leopold had good cause to remain in London. He hardly managed to see Charlotte, though. He took tea with her one morning at Warwick House, but after that courtesy the crown princess did nothing to encourage him to come back. On the contrary, she did not like it at all when he attempted to attract her attention in the park by waving and parading up and down on his horse. The second time, he saw her in the Pulteney Hotel on the last day the tsar was there. He granted Leopold an audience while Charlotte was visiting his sister Catharina. In the meantime, the tsar's youngest sister had finally rejected Leopold's brother Ernst and was soon to be engaged to none other than... the Prince of Orange. In the midst of this web of love intrigues, Charlotte and Leopold bumped into each other - not by chance, naturally. She deigned to take his arm on the steps of the hotel so he could lead her to her coach. Supposedly, she then said that Leopold had been most impolite not to visit her. She hoped he would be more polite in the future. Wishful thinking on Leopold's part in a long, coaxing letter to her father to abate his wrath?

After that, Leopold was, in any event, only permitted to approach his princess through her best friend Mercer Elphinstone. Her father was suspicious of Leopold from the first, due to his privileged relationship with the tsar. At the slightest advance to his daughter so soon after the break with the prince of his choice, Coburg fell entirely from grace. George had - quite rightly – interpreted his visit to Warwick House as courtship. Leopold was only too aware that the prince

49 Aspinall 1949, 63–126; Goddyn 2007, 17–48, 63–72; Fraser 1996, 242–244; David 1998, 350–351; Plowden 2005, 161–223.

regent was able to penetrate 'dans le tissu de toutes ses relations les plus intimes' ('to the very fibre of all his most intimate relationships'), so his long letter denying that he wished to court Charlotte was rather transparent. Leopold assured George that any proposal would be misplaced and that he had no such purpose in mind, being 'quiet and not extravagant'. He had behaved as a gentleman, as usual. Not a word had been spoken of any possible arrangement in the future; he had not for a moment considered any such thing... The Coburg prince then also literally begged his Royal Highness to forgive him before he went home. His supplication went down well with George. Moreover, Leopold's version of the facts was confirmed by Miss Knight, Charlotte's lady's companion. The prince was now entirely convinced that Leopold was an honourable young man and that he should never have suspected him of wanting to ask for Charlotte's hand. The Coburg prince was even permitted to open the last ball of the season with Charlotte's Aunt Mary.[50]

What Leopold did not know was that in the meantime Charlotte had had a brief fling with Prince Friedrich of Prussia, who was also in victorious London. George had confused Leopold with the Prussian prince. He was the reason why George decided to punish his daughter. Her ladies-in-waiting were dismissed and Charlotte was locked up in Cranbourne Lodge in Windsor Great Park, where she was allowed to see no-one but the old queen. She escaped from her exile in the middle of the night in a hackney carriage, in high spirits, seeking refuge with her mother Caroline. That made George even angrier, with both her and her mother. According to Brougham, Caroline's adviser, however, there were no legal grounds for not making her return to her father. The regent had absolute authority over Charlotte until the age of twenty-one. She had to obey him. The crown princess was a prisoner. She was barely allowed to say goodbye to Caroline who, to the regent's delight, left for the continent. The Whigs had advised Caroline to decline the government's sly offer to raise her income to 35,000 pounds a year. That way the repudiated princess whom the regent excluded from parties and ceremonies would score all the better in public opinion and discredit the government. But Caroline refused to dance to Brougham's tune. She was fed up with the humiliation and decided to give it up as a bad job. That was a heavy blow for Charlotte. She felt left in the lurch by someone who had no motherly feelings and thought only of herself. Apparently, George toasted to Caroline's damnation, as she would never return to England. After wandering through Tunis and Jerusalem, Caroline settled in Italy, where her relationship with a certain Bartolemeo Pergami, a courier who became her gentleman in waiting and lover, sparked rumours that quickly reached England. Her husband sent a secret investigation committee to the village beside Lake Como, where Caroline and her *major domus* were cohabiting in a large villa and the princess was housing Pergami's entire family. Over the course of the years, the spies provided the prince regent with a file of damning evidence, the 'green bag', which was to play a central role in the Queen Caroline Affair of 1820.[51]

The handsome prince from Coburg found himself in a royal drama unlike anything in British history. All the elements of a popular melodrama were in place at a time when politics in England was playacting, performing for a none-too docile audience. Melodrama was, in fact, a more powerful weapon than satire, which generates distance and evokes laughter, creating a safety valve for political tensions. With melodrama, the audience's identification with the *dramatis personae* is far greater and the feelings of empathy and anger whipped up are stronger and therefore politically more dangerous. The prince regent was clearly playing the role of the bad guy, Caroline the heart-rendingly estranged wife and Charlotte the disowned, incarcerated daughter. By locking his daughter up in Cranbourne Lodge, George was behaving as a tyrannical father and the way he

50 Leopold to Prince George of Wales, 10 July 1814 (Aspinall 1938, 58; Grey 1867, 384); Miss Knight's memorandum, 12 July 1814 (Aspinall 1949, 126–127; Goddyn 2007, 76–80).
51 Fraser 1996, 242–251; Robins 2006.

treated her was compared with the way he treated the people. Public opinion could not comprehend why Charlotte should be deprived of the life befitting a crown princess. Or why she was allowed to see her mother so seldom. The royal family's private life was scrutinised by the press, providing strong identification models in a turbulent time. Every public appearance by the prince regent caused as much jeering as it did cheering, in the street or at the opera. In a world of eccentric royals with mistresses, bastards and morganatic marriages, the pure love that was to blossom between Charlotte and Leopold was a breath of fresh air. The couple entirely fulfilled the general longing for an ordinary homely monarchy. The domestication of the crown princess should be seen in relation to the imaginary functions of the royal family and the broader social-political changes from the end of the eighteenth century onwards.

'The childish love of princes'

The childish love of princes was, in Great Britain, certainly no 'ancient' or lasting phenomenon. When he ascended the throne in 1760, George was far from popular and his predecessors had not paid any attention to their public image; they made no investment in popularity or were too weak to affirm their own grandeur. The public self-presentation and reputation of the British monarchy changed with George III. When he celebrated his silver jubilee on 25 October 1809, London was all royalism and loyalism. After his mental breakdown a year later, he was portrayed as a blind King Lear with wild white hair, the patriarchal and divine protector of the nation. We have to see that in the context of the growing struggle towards radicalism and reform in Great Britain, where the established powers not only continued to control the industrial revolution and the growing social tensions, but also emerged all the stronger from the wars against revolutionary, Napoleonic France. On the other hand, there was the loss of America after the colonies' war of independence. It elicited a conservative reaction, in which the revival of the monarchy was a significant component. The fact that that resurrection was not just staged from above but also enjoyed broad popular support can be seen by the growing frequency, appeal and commercialisation of royal celebrations.

The sentimental identification with the royal family began to play a prominent role, especially amongst the female population, and was to form an increasingly significant element in the paradoxical relationship between the monarch and the growth of the public sphere.[52] King George himself had not played any real political role since the 1780s, but he performed a symbolic function that should not be underestimated. His advanced age and mental incompetence actually protected him from the criticism he suffered at the beginning of his reign. The further his health declined and his influence waned the more his popularity grew. The reduction of his actual political power made it far easier for the public to make the distinction between the monarch and his ministers. George was therefore able to incarnate the symbolic figure of kingship - the monarch as a father figure – and defy the revolutionary storm blowing from France like a rock in the waves. In the context of the Napoleonic wars, honouring the monarch was equatable with honouring the freedom of the British nation as opposed to the military despotism in France.

But just how sustainable was that increased identification of the monarch with the nation? George III's popularity was fed by the unpopularity of his many heirs. To Wellington, George's sons were the 'damnedest millstones about the neck of any government that can be imagined'. Their libertine lifestyle was outrageous. The prince regent himself took the biscuit with his illegal marriage, two permanent mistresses and various other passing affairs. He attached a great deal of importance to monarchic pomp and circumstance. George imitated the monarchs on the continent by building up an enormous art collection and initiating grand-scale architectural projects in

52 Colley 1984, 94–129; Colley 1994, 195–236.

Windsor and Brighton. His extravagance cost pots of money in a time when, in the eyes of the people, war and the Continental Blockade should have encouraged austerity. On the other hand, the sporadic glamour George III exhibited was refreshing in a country where the evangelical revival in the middle classes was accompanied by the promotion of the new family values of simplicity and thrift.[53] George III and his spouse Charlotte Sophia appealed to those sectors with the image of homeliness they portrayed. The virtuousness and responsibility, economy and respectability of the father of the nation were compared with his son's aristocratic ways. The queen actively contributed to the new image of the royal family's domestic happiness. She bore fifteen children and was known for her charity. It was Charlotte who gave her name to the home-made apple cake, originally a cheap pudding for the poor.

Her granddaughter and namesake was to become even more the public's darling. When, in the summer of 1804, it reached the ears of the press that the eight-year-old Charlotte was being raised by her grandparents in Windsor, public opinion was highly sympathetic with regard to the little crown princess's unenviable fate. What was to become of her? She was the child of a broken marriage and eccentric parents and the subject of arguments within the royal family; it was not just her own happiness at stake but that of the entire British nation.

The conservative philanthropist and evangelical writer Hannah More took up her pen for what was to be an ambitious project: an educational advice book in two volumes, in the genre of Machiavelli, Erasmus and Rabelais and Catharine Macaulay's more recent *Letters on Education* (1790). Just as for Catharina II, however, her big example was *Télémaque* (1699), with which Fénelon had invited the wrath of Louis XIV. Unlike Fénelon, though, in England More could express her opinion freely. As a woman in a public domain overruled by men, however, she decided to publish her *Hints Towards Forming the Character of a Young Princess* (1805) anonymously. Along with the likes of Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah More was one of the major British female intellectuals at the end of the eighteenth century. Although certainly no feminist, she lead the moral reform movement that was aimed primarily at the morals of the aristocracy, but which also appealed to the new middle classes. After her conversion, she withdrew from the fashionable world to preach the 'true religion of the heart' as a blue stocking. Like Montesquieu she opposed the 'petticoat influence' of scheming female nobility in court. She propagated a new ideal model of feminine influence in the seclusion of the family and private life. More was part of a phalanx of conservative women supporting the British government in the fight against radicalism and the spread of the French Revolution to England.[54] In a time when Napoleon Bonaparte had crowned himself emperor on the other side of the channel, the upbringing of Princess Charlotte, who would one day, be responsible for 'the happiness of millions', was an issue that concerned every English patriot. The *Hints* included all kinds of useful (reading) recommendations for 'the patriot Princess herself'. The history of the illustrious female monarchs of England, from Elizabeth to Mary II, was promoted as *historia magistra vitae*, history as life's teacher. After all, those role models were the ultimate proof that a queen's private virtues benefited her country publicly. More also wrote some exceedingly interesting chapters on 'the true arts of popularity', 'the importance of the royal example in promoting loyalty' and 'the habits of domestic life'. The Bishop of Exeter, who was appointed as Charlotte's tutor, read to her from the book for up to two hours a day, to her immense boredom. 'I'm not quite good enough for that yet', she sighed crossly. She was, indeed, not

53 Davidoff and Hall 1987.

54 Stott 2004; Davidoff & Hall 1987, 149–192.

developing such manners as the authoress of the *Hints* would have liked, let alone becoming a 'maker of manners', an example to the nation.[55]

Nevertheless, as she grew up, Charlotte became the icon of the hope of Great Britain, especially when she reached marriageable age and was indisposed to bend to her father's will. The peace of 1814-1815 did not bring the wealth and prosperity England had envisaged. Failed harvests, rising prices and the crippling of industry were blamed on the government. The relationship between 'the people' and the prince regent deteriorated as time drew on. When Leopold was in London with Alexander in the spring of 1814, he was able to experience the 'king's two bodies' effect for himself: The enthusiasm for the tsar in Piccadilly contrasted sharply with the scorn for the prince regent. Clearly, it not the authority of the monarch that was the issue, but the person who failed to personify that authority in the desired manner. The liberal Whigs let no opportunity slip to put the prince regent in a bad light and promote the crown princess as the saviour of the nation. Charlotte constituted a real counterpoint. From the moment of her birth she had been at the centre of sentimental public interest. Now, the arguments with her father only increased her following and her love life elevated her popularity to new heights. The disgraceful sex lives of George and his brothers made the people long for a romantic marriage, an example of love and virtue. It was not only the middle classes that swooned over Jane Austin's novels where, in the happy ending, the heroine chose love above money. In aristocratic circles, too - where marriage had traditionally been more of an economic transaction than anything else - girls were increasingly jilting their prospective husbands if they failed to feel the affection associated with love. Charlotte provided an excellent role model. The discussion in parliament following her break-up with the Prince of Orange made her the public darling, because she let her heart speak and was truly 'British' in refusing to follow him to the Netherlands. The fact that she had a will of her own and now refused be pushed around by her father any longer received universal approval.

Charlotte was increasingly identified with the Britannia figure and seen as the epitome of Englishness: lively, extravert, independent and - above all - free and easy in her ways, unlike her father. She broke with the traditional hierarchy and flouted social conventions. The great publicity her private life enjoyed – her parents' relationship, her rejection of the Prince of Orange, the way she and her mother were treated by her father – brought her down to the level of ordinary people. On one hand, her feelings and experiences were popularised and, on the other, that familiarity elevated the feelings and experiences of ordinary people to royal heights. That two-way identification eliminated the distinction between high and low. Charlotte's humanity made her mythical. In other words, before her death her myth was anything but a question of sacralisation, it was more one of domestication.

Sense and Sensibility in the British court

Charlotte's fairytale marriage to Leopold fulfilled many people's wishes. Let us go back to Cranbourne Lodge, where Prince Regent George had locked up his daughter after her affair with Friedrich of Prussia, a charmer who had worked his way through numerous mistresses throughout Europe and had been in love just once, with the Napoleonic beauty Juliette Récamier. The months passed and Charlotte heard nothing from her lover. The longer she waited and pined, the more the Prince of Saxe-Coburg began to occupy her thoughts as a suitor, firstly as second choice. If Friedrich disappointed her, then she would promptly accept the 'P. of SC' (Prince of Saxe-Coburg) rather than any of the other princes she had met. With him, there was a reasonable chance of being less unhappy than if she remained alone. The fact that she was entirely infatuated with one person,

55 Charlotte to Mercer Elphinstone, 16 November 1812 (Aspinall 1949, 38); Stott 2004, 263–266.

Friedrich, and at the same time thought and talked about another seem be 'highly unnatural' in a novel, but that was the way it was for her.

By the end of December 1814, Charlotte had had enough of waiting and made her choice. She dismissed Friedrich from her thoughts. Not that she was in the least enamoured with Leopold, but he had made a good impression on both her and the prince regent. She would therefore prefer to marry him. According to romantic tradition, Leopold would have done better to try his luck with her personally, instead of directly approaching the prince regent at an awkward moment. Charlotte looked into the Coburg family in depth, in an attempt to discover Leopold's intentions. By January 1815 she was resolved: 'I made up my own mind to marry'. It was a personal decision and a choice she therefore preferred to any imposed liaison. No-one was less eager than she; she could not pretend to cherish the least of feelings for this prince, but she believed on the basis of what she had heard about him that he could make her reasonably happy. Moreover, she had already seen and spoken to him and had been pleasantly surprised. In any event, she could not be any more miserable or worse off than she was in her place of exile. In their high position, royals did not marry like other people, but they still had the privilege of accepting or refusing and of choosing someone. Leopold was not involved in any political affairs on the continent and was 'a man of no party' in England. Charlotte did not make a snap decision; she had had ten months to quietly think things over. She gave 'The Leo' leave to cross the Channel without an official invitation.[56]

Charlotte asked one of her uncles, the Duke of York, to convey her feelings and sentiments to Leopold, who was still at the Congress of Vienna, but to keep things strictly confidential for the time being. When rumours reached her ears that he was having an affair with Duchess Koháry all communication had to be delayed until they were confirmed or negated. Charlotte could not countenance lowering herself in such a way. She had no cause for concern, however. It was Leopold's brother Ferdinand who was to wed the immensely rich Hungarian magnate's daughter Antonia Koháry a year later.[57] In April 1815 the chosen prince began to put out his own feelers towards *'l'isle heureuse'*. Through Mercer he let Charlotte know that he still pinned his fondest hopes on her as long as she herself did not destroy them. If she proved not to care for him, he would rather throw himself into the heat of battle. A glorious death in war might then bring an end to his unhappiness. His motto was 'courage and constancy', which would stand him in good stead on the field of death and glory. In the letters he sent her through Mercer, Leopold worked cautiously, but quite boldly, to convince Charlotte of the honour of his intentions. He denied being driven my ambition. The lustre of power could never have seduced him the way Charlotte's personality had captured him. He saw the merging of their two characters and the peace of mind that would generate as the one true key to happiness. The respect Leopold enjoyed was, in his own words, attributable to his integrity, which had protected him from the immorality rife on the continent. Mercer considered his motto extremely well chosen and encouraged him, to the point of trying for the hand of the crown princess.[58]

Charlotte began to secretly write letters to Leopold herself, sending him her portrait and a lock of her hair to assure him of her feelings.[59] She had now really and truly set her sights on him and him alone, heart and soul. Friedrich had been but a passing fancy. Her patience was put to the test, however. It was not until October 1815 that she finally received his long-awaited reply, with a

56 Charlotte to Mercer Elphinstone, 4, 8, 11, 15 November 1814; 22 December 1814; 20 January, 2, 3 February, 19, 30 March 1815; Charlotte to the Duke of York, 1 April 1815 (Aspinall 1949, 162–197).
57 Charlotte to the Duke of York, 1, 2 April 1815; Charlotte to Mercer, 9 April 1815 (Aspinall 1949, 197–198).
58 Leopold to Mercer, 28 April 1815, 2 June 1815, 4 July 1815; Mercer to Leopold, July 1815 (Goddyn 2007, 96–100).
59 Letters from Charlotte to Leopold, March 1816 (AKP, Archive of King Leopold I; Aspinall 1949, 199–218; Goddyn 2007, 103–111).

miniature portrait and a proposal. She was overjoyed and made no effort to hide the fact. 'You are opening up a whole new life for me, new ideas, new hope,' she wrote jubilantly, 'Am I confessing too much if I tell you that you alone rule my soul?' Leopold had no need to fear any rival; her father could not force her into marrying someone she did not love. She would refuse any further proposals of marriage. 'Your coming is what I so long for'. She had ceaselessly scoured all the newspapers to see whether his name was among those crossing the channel. She was hugely disappointed when he was once mistakenly listed. Her friend had travelled to Dover specially. 'My joy, my intoxication on seeing you again has turned in a moment into bitter regret'. Leopold had simply postponed his voyage 'by an age'. She was afraid he had learned of her indiscretion with Friedrich. 'I am but a mortal, I am far from perfect. I have been incautious and reckless. I hope you will forgive me and all my faults are forgotten'. '*Voici Prince, j'accepte avec extase le coeur, la Main que Vous m'offré*' (Charlotte wrote in broken French as Leopold couldn't read English well enough at that time). She was ready to make her sacred and solemn promise never to marry anyone but him.[60]

Wary of the prince regent, Leopold remained cautious and bided his time. That was to prompt George to dub him *Marquis Peu-à-Peu.* He was irritated by Leopold's exaggerated affability and ponderousness, but came round in time. The handsome, gifted Saxe-Coburg, who was poor as a church mouse and meant nothing politically, would treat his daughter well. In the meantime, the Prince of Orange had become engaged to Anna Pavlovna anyway. Charlotte assured her father that no engagement could be more durable than hers, even though Leopold's protracted absence annoyed her. It did prove his sincerity, that was true, and the fact that they would be extremely complementary to one another. She could therefore not be cross that he proceeded so slowly.[61] The sceptic prince himself, though, was far from certain that his future lay in England. Heaven would decide his fate. He had always felt it wrong to set too much store by coincidental circumstances. Leopold confided his worrying nightmares to his sister. In one, he was in the company of the devil and death, in a hall decorated with bones and skulls. All kinds of terrible creatures were juggling with the bones and other symbols of the vanitas. Filled with a terrible fear, Leopold fled to an old, old house, where even worse phantoms awaited. He had to pass two cages full of snakes that were trying to bite him.[62] He wrote that he was not superstitious, but he was now wearing the cherished portrait of Charlotte next to his heart, which beat only for her. It filled him with 'extreme joy'.

The correspondence between Leopold and Charlotte from 1814 to 1816 was facilitated by Uncle York, but also by Uncle Edward, the Duke of Kent. He acted as a go-between and was seen by Leopold as the primary promoter of their relationship. Without him, their courtship would have been impossible, with his dearly beloved being treated as a kind of prisoner by her father. Although rumours abounded of a forthcoming engagement, it was not until mid-February 1816 that Leopold crossed to England again. He had not responded to Charlotte's advances, but had waited for the official invitation from the prince regent. To top it all, the journey from Coburg, where a heavy cold had confined him to bed, had been difficult. Charlotte could not understand why he was taking so long and became highly concerned. The *traversée* in the *contrairste aller winden* had turned Leopold's stomach. Once he arrived in Brighton, however, matters were swiftly arranged without any official engagement. Baron Hardenbroek, Leopold's aide-de-camp, wrote that the lovers saw and recognised each other, and plighted their troth, at least he hoped so. The prince regent and the old Queen Charlotte were present at the first meeting. The prince and princess were dying to

60 Charlotte to Leopold, 26 July 1815; 26 October 1815 (AKP, Archive of King Leopold I; Aspinall 1949, 217–218; Goddyn 2007, 103–111).

61 David 1998, 361.

62 Leopold to Sophie, 2 November 1815 (Buffin 1914, 122–124).

embrace one another, but etiquette forbad that. They withdrew to a window seat, where they whispered each other '*les plus belles choses du monde*'. Princess Charlotte was a tall woman, '*bien faite*', with a lovely skin, pretty eyes and mouth, a charming smile, quite lively and extremely forthright and sincere. She spoke good French, with an English accent, and was extremely bold. Leopold was suffering badly from toothache, however, and later had the culprit pulled[63].

The royal family was quite taken with Leopold. He was seen as the ideal match for Charlotte. Even George was now finally convinced that he had everything to make her happy. Leopold had demonstrated his unfeigned attachment to her by letter. The princess herself assured him that her future happiness depending solely on her father's consent. With what he knew of Leopold's principles, the favourable reports that had reached him concerning his conduct before he came to England, rather than the 'amiability of his private character' he did not hesitate to agree obligingly and wholeheartedly to the marriage that promised so much happiness for his daughter. After all, he 'most naturally' held her wellbeing dear.[64]

On 24 February 1816 the prince regent conferred Leopold with the Royal Guelphic Order, the highest honour of the House of Hanover. A month later, he was given 'the style Royal Highness' and later that year admitted to the Order of the Garter. Minister Castlereagh informed him of the conditions of the marriage contract: An annual income of 60,000 pounds, 10,000 of which was intended for Princess Charlotte's Privy Purse. That was an exorbitant amount, in any event far more than the prince had ever seen in the whole of his insignificant dukedom. If Charlotte were to die first, then Leopold would retain his income of 50,000 pounds a year. During the preparations for the wedding, Leopold was not to appear in London. He withdrew to Brighton, to bathe in the sea, but also to avoid 'the curious stares of all the inhabitants of Albion'.[65]

In Brighton Leopold prepared himself for the life of a complete English gentleman. He learned English and studied the history of England, read Shakespeare, Pope, Milton and Byron in the original language. Parliament granted him British nationality and he was made a field marshal in the British army. After his naturalisation, it seemed logical for him to be admitted to the British aristocracy and therefore the House of Lords. There were a number of heavy political objections, however, and Leopold politely refused the title he was offered of Duke of Kendal on the commendable advice of his fiancée. He asked Minister of Foreign Affairs Castlereagh for his personal advice when public rumour reached his ears. Leopold did not like the name Kendal at all and the historic pedigree and reputation that went with it were far too insignificant for him. As knighthoods depended solely on the prince regent, George would surely not grant him a title he did not want, but he was wary of making a *fausse démarche*. He therefore cautiously enquired of Castlereagh whether Lancaster might be an option[66]. Apparently it was not, so Leopold dropped the idea. He wished no rank or position other than that of being at Charlotte's side. That was a prudent decision; as Duchess of the un-noteworthy Kendal, Charlotte would have to give up her title of princess, causing additional problems for the succession to the throne. In her view, the people would not have been at all pleased if Leopold had accepted Kendal. As the crown princess's

63 Leopold to Augusta, 18, 22 February 1816; Hardenbroek to Augusta, 20 February 1816; Hardenbroek to Mensdorff-Pouilly, 26 March 1816 (RA, VIC/MAIN/M45/1-4

64 George to Leopold, spring 1816 (BBL, Liverpool Papers, 38262).

65 Bulletin to Mensdorff-Pouilly, 26 February 1816 (ARA, III, 195A and B); Charlotte to Mercer, 1 March 1816 (Aspinall 1949, 226).

66 Leopold to Castlereagh, 25 April 1816. RA, VIC/MAIN/M45/36)

spouse, he should not have a rank or status lower than the dukes of royal blood. Moreover, his British aristocratic title would inevitably have involved him in politics.[67]

Pending the wedding, Leopold moved into the princely Brighton Pavilion, where Christian von Stockmar from Coburg joined him, becoming his much-loved personal physician and therapist. Leopold had made Stockmar's acquaintance as a gifted dancer at the Ehrenburg castle. In February 1814 he had seen him at work as an army medical officer when his regiment moved from Mainz to France. Stockmar tended the poorly equipped Coburg soldiers during the Rhine Campaign against Napoleon.[68] He was an astute, honest man with a quick mind, critical and with a good sense of humour, without any reservations and sometimes extremely high spirited. Stockmar suffered from mood swings and hypochondria. He had a weak constitution, which sometimes got him down. Those in his intimate circle saw his melancholy predictions as a form of *maladie imaginaire*. According to an old friend, it was actually a good thing that he was often ill, otherwise his high spirits would have been difficult to bear. Stockmar was though, as befits a doctor, more concerned for others than for himself. The 'others' he cared for were all amongst the very highest echelon of society. He was the confident of monarchs, but gained an independent reputation in those circles. He opposed the self-importance and dogmatism of those statesmen who attempted to resist the national and liberal developments after 1815, considering it to be 'the natural course of things'. For the '*liebenswürdige*', kindly Leopold he quickly became more of a friend than a courtier. Getting to know each other for the first time in Brighton in March and April 1816 they carried on long conversations that surpassed the medical relationship.[69] Leopold was quite open with him regarding both his private affairs and political events. Like Leopold, Stockmar was a freemason and was to become the link in the affiliation between the Swiss Loge L'Espérance – of which, probably on Leopold's recommendation, he became an honorary member – and the United Grand Lodge of England in 1819. Incidentally, in February 1816 Leopold received a friendly letter from his 'Swiss brothers', congratulating him on his high position in the court of '*le plus bel empire de l'Univers*'.[70]

The first real meeting between Leopold and Charlotte was a success. She found him extremely charming and went to bed happier than ever before. In late February 1816 the party spent a number of blissful days and evenings in Brighton, full of long conversations and planning for the future. It was immediately evident that, in accordance with the rules of fairytales and legends, they were made for one another. This was to be far more than a marriage of convenience. Charlotte was entirely convinced that Leopold would do all in his power to make her happy. All he said was 'so very charming & so right & so everything in short she could have wished'. Leopold did not want to have 'a single thought or wish concealed from each other', so that 'the most perfect good understanding' would subsist between them. He intended 'to have her a great deal & for very long'. He would never behave towards her as a cruel tyrant, as her father had done. If there was a party he could go and she could not, he would decline them, 'preferring to stay with her & not leave her alone'. Charlotte found him very much talented, with 'a 1000 resources' - music, singing, drawing, agriculture, farming & botany and Italian: 'everything she could wish & desire collected together in one'. It was something new to her to know she was loved and to be treated with so much tenderness, delicacy and consideration.[71]

67 Huish 1818, 230–234.
68 Bachmann 2006, 60–62.
69 Stockmar 1872, 17.
70 Van Win 2006, 14, 25–26, 33–34.
71 Charlotte to Mercer, 26 February, 1 March 1816 (Aspinall 1949, 224–227).

From now on, Charlotte would write to her most beloved, most tender and dearest 'Leopoldo' almost every day.[72] It was her most cherished occupation, the only thing that pleased her now they were so far apart (yet forever close). Reams of epistles and sweet nothings from a young woman who not only longed for release from the tyranny of her jealous father, but who truly fell head-over-heels in love and wanted to love passionately. She was eager for her conduct to demonstrate the tenderness, fidelity, integrity and passion with which she could love. After all, nothing was more enchanting than the mutual exchange of the feelings of the heart. That tenderness had a healing power that could cure so many ills. Receiving a letter every morning drove away all pain and cares, like a balm for life, a dove of peace.

The lovers kept each other's love letters like relics. Charlotte re-read Leopold's with an inexpressible enthusiasm when she was alone in her room. They say men do not like writing and it was rare for men to show their emotions in such a way, but she had no reason to complain on that score. Nevertheless, she begged Leopold not to make a duty of their correspondence. He need not write every day if he had no time or inclination. Quantity did not matter. She would not love him more or less. It had to be on the spur of the moment or from the heart, all those little trifles – a ring, the first violets, a lock of hair, a miniature portrait. She numbered all her letters and hoped none would be lost or read by anyone else, as they were *for his eyes only*. She herself was so bursting to write that she occasionally felt the inclination to share the content with her friend Mercer, who must 'for God in Heaven's sake' never let on that she had read the letters. He would probably be extremely cross.[73] Sometimes, Charlotte had difficulty putting her strong emotions into words. When he was with her, her eyes would say it all clearly enough. There were no softer or purer tears than those that welled up in response to his love and tenderness for her. Her tears spoke the language of the heart. She therefore cherished them caught them in a bottle, keeping a close count of all the crystal droplets that fell from her eyes. There was not a word, a regard that she would ever forget.

Charlotte was flattered and rather pleased when she read in his letters that Leopold was bored without her. That he wanted her at his side. That he missed their conversations. She wanted to read him the Arabian fairytale about the flying carpet. Anyone who sat on it could go where he wished and, at the same time, make himself invisible except to the person he wanted to appear to. A friend gave her a ring engraved with the date on which they would see each other again as my 'day of happiness' and she wanted to give him exactly such a ring. Even once she was his for ever she swore to him that it would not make her love him less. She wanted nothing but to love him, always, no matter what mood he was in. Every day and every moment Leopold made her indebted for the smallest things that no-one else would have thought of. Like all lovers, she was certain nobody had ever loved as they loved and would always love. Two bodies, one soul: that would be their motto. *Addio mio caro & adorato Leopoldo sempre vostre devouéé & bien tendrement attachée promise Charlotte.*

On 10 March 1816 Charlotte's father gave his official consent to the marriage that was being entered into 'for love, not political considerations', something that happened all too rarely in royal circles. The prince regent also addressed an announcement to his own court, which in view of the many tokens of 'affectionate attachment' could be nothing other than enthusiastic about the marriage.[74] A few days later parliament agreed unanimously to the wedding and the allowance. In the meantime, preparations were being made. The lovebirds exchanged their finger sizes for the

72 Letters from Charlotte (AKP, Archive of King Leopold I; Goddyn 2007, 121–124).
73 Charlotte to Mercer, 13 March 1816 (Aspinall 1949, 230).
74 The prince regent at his 'House', s.d. (BLL, Liverpool Papers, 38366).

rings. As Leo wanted a big house in the country where he could farm and hunt, a permanent home was sought for them in the vicinity of London (cost price 69,000 pounds), a household was assembled and gifts, furniture, jewels and precious fabrics were bought (budget: a further 60,000 pounds). In Brighton, Leopold made notes on the budget and asked for more details. He felt it rather a shame she was not to be given her own country estate. It would keep them all the more often in town as a 'rented' country house was like visiting someone else's home and having a small garden of one's own gave far more pleasure than a large manor they would one day have to leave. The item for horse breeding he considered rather low, but he was not yet able to specify the exact amount he needed for his private expenditure, as that depended on the total budget. The 6,000 pounds planned for additional costs for the residence was, in his eyes, far too much for the lease on an ordinary country house. If savings could be made anywhere they would certainly do so, to use for the furnishing, tableware, linen... C.[oburg] certainly did not want to get into debt, according to Charlotte. She herself insisted on 'no extravagance, waste, debts'.[75] On the trip to England, Leopold had already been approached in Frankfurt by the Rothschild brothers, who naturally quite accurately judged his creditworthiness. Carl Rothschild found him a 'good man' and offered him seven hundred pounds against gold and a letter of credit. The prince wanted to buy jewels for Charlotte. In London, Nathan Rothschild was soon entrusted with Leopold's private mail to Germany. A large loan would be discussed immediately after the wedding.[76]

There was 'not a living soul who did not go into ecstasies' at Charlotte's choice. Everyone liked him, particularly the old Queen Charlotte, who even graciously gave him her hand to kiss. His manners and appearance made an astonishing impression on everyone. '*Coburg joue bien ses cartes avec tout le monde*', wrote Charlotte, and he had all it needed to gain popularity. Leo liked the idea of 'showing himself to the English people' with her. He appeared to be 'vastly fond' of his family, which was 'exceedingly united'. He was rather charmed that their marriage was so popular.[77] Public opinion was, indeed, well disposed towards the foreign prince who was adopting English habits. The announcement of their forthcoming marriage prompted satire on the contrast in status and wealth between the penniless German prince and the heir to the throne of the mightiest country in the world. Leopold was portrayed as a solider of fortune, a down-and-out with a dukedom of 800 square metres, who had won the lot of his life with his 60,000-pound princess. In certain Whig circles, where Charlotte was held in high esteem, his nickname was Humbug. An anonymous leaflet was published, entitled, 'The Contrast! or the Ci-devant German Captain in Good Quarters'. It was a parody of the change in Leopold's standard of living, going from eating a plate of sauerkraut in a tatty room with worn-out boots to dining in luxury with Charlotte in a British general's uniform was, indeed, a big step up for the Coburg prince.[78]

Despite the satire on the Coburg fortune seeker, his marriage to the crown princess was extraordinarily well received in England, to the great joy of the couple, to whom that popularity – for him as well as her – was most important. They had a mission: to set a good example for the people, of morality, of good behaviour, of a happy family life without scandal. After all, the British royal family and the excesses of the 'prince of pleasure' left much to be desired in that quarter. Even though Charlotte and Leopold's engagement was also the result of a political arrangement, their relationship turned out to correspond with the new middle class ideals. It was soon a public secret that Charlotte worshipped her prince. She prided herself on the fact that she had freely chosen him herself and that she had made a good choice. 'A Princess, never, I believe, set out in life

75 Liverpool to Leopold, 18 March 1816; Leopold t Liverpool, 24 March 1816 (BBL, Liverpool Papers, 38573, 38564); Charlotte to Mercer, 17, 23 March 1816 (Aspinall 1949, 232, 235).
76 Ferguson 1998a, 156.
77 Charlotte to Mercer, 26 February, 1 March 1816 (Aspinall 1949, 224–227).
78 Hunt 2003, 253–256; David 1998, 362.

(or married) with such prospects of happiness, real domestic ones like other people..'. Their marriage became terribly popular, for the very reason that it was true love. All hopes were pinned on the royal couple. More than fifteen hundred couples postponed their weddings to be able to marry on the same day as Princess Charlotte and Prince Leopold. It was Charlotte's ambition to be 'loved, respected and admired by everyone'. She wanted Leopold to be on equally good terms with all politicians and be at odds with nobody. By really doing good, one was always rewarded in the fullness of time. It was impossible to please everyone, but with his character and spirit Leopold could only follow the one, wise code of conduct.

It took far too long to set the wedding date for Charlotte's liking and in her eyes it was needlessly postponed, while Leopold catered to the whims of his future father-in-law. He was not blind to the prince regent's faults, though, and told her that they would go their own way, *petit à petit*. They clearly had different temperaments. He called her vivacious; she called him serious and self-controlled. Charlotte hoped that he would not always remain so compliant and would act a little more like the master of his own fate. Pleasing both George and her was impossible, like two constantly repelling magnets. According to Charlotte, Leopold was terribly afraid of angering the prince regent, which of course made her cross. When she then blamed him for 'the chagrins and the chicaneries' the prince regent caused her, he was most unhappy.[79] The forced separation from her *carissime* Leopoldo began to weigh more heavily, but only fanned the flames of her longing for him. It was not until mid-April 1816 that Charlotte could tell him everything that was on her mind *viva voce*, but his brief clandestine visit to Cranbourne Lodge was worth more to her than a thousand letters. She had never felt so filled with hope, joy and happiness.

This emphasises the fact that Charlotte and Leopold had only seen each other in the flesh for a few days before they were married. Since the prince of Saxe-Coburg had first set foot on land in Dover, for example, they had only been able to spend the evenings of the last week before the great day together, she with a chaperone. They continued writing to each other every day. The day of his official entrance in London, Leopold's time was taken up with protocolary obligations. Charlotte expected no more than a few lines from his dear hand, to compensate for the fact that she would have to do without him for a whole day. True to form, she herself had written him a long letter, *piu sempre*.

The private fairytale wedding

The wedding took place on 2 May 1816. Jane Austen turned down an offer from the prince regent's librarian to write a historical novel on the house of Saxe-Coburg for the event. Although she was well aware that such a book would generate more in the way of 'profit or popularity' than her homely lives in the countryside, she felt unable to write such a romance. 'No – I must keep to my own style and go on in my own way'.[80]

Thousands of people flocked to catch a glimpse of the future queen's wedding dress. Nevertheless, there was none of the pomp and circumstance of later royal weddings in Great Britain. The ceremony took place in the evening, as was the custom. Moreover, the envious regent had organised a private wedding for his daughter. The eager crowds had to content themselves with a view of the fairytale princess as she road through the park in her coach. Leopold, who had had the greatest of difficulty in escaping the crowds outside his lodgings, arrived half an hour later than the bride, in his new British general's uniform. There was no-one from his family present in

79 Charlotte to Mercer, 26 February, 1 March 1816 (Aspinall 1949, 224-225).
80 Jane Austen to James Stanier Clarke, 1 April 1816 (Samuelian 2004, 411, Appendix A).

the Great Crimson Room at Carlton House. The bride's mother, who was living in Italy at the time, was not there, either. The government had not deemed it necessary to even inform her of the wedding. Caroline was not too sorry, but Charlotte herself thought it a great pity. The rest of the royal family was there, though, as were the ministers, foreign guests and friends of her father's. Her father himself was dead drunk. The ceremony took twenty-five minutes. Everyone was moved by the powerful way in which Charlotte spoke her vow to honour and obey. The prince regent warned Leopold that Charlotte would rule him with a high hand if he offered no resistance. The London gutter press speculated on the wedding ceremony of the German 'pauper prince' and the untameable crown princess. All kinds of rumours did the rounds. [81]

After the solemnisation of the marriage by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the bride and groom left immediately for their honeymoon at Oatlands, the Duchess of York's residence, a few miles from London. The princess was overjoyed when she saw the magnificent park where the duchess had a small zoo and felt she was in paradise on earth amongst the ostriches, antelopes, kangaroos and cockatoos. Charlotte would have loved to travel to Coburg that summer and stay a few weeks on the continent. To please her own country, though, she postponed the trip to the next year. One never knew what might happen in the meantime, Charlotte wrote ominously. 'All this is in futurity and in the book of fate'. But she felt it would be a great pity not to visit the continent at least once in her life. Leopold, who would have liked nothing better than to introduce her to his family, estimated that it would be unwise for her to leave England in the first year after being granted such a generous income. And she had but one wish: to do what was good and what would be appreciated by the country.[82]

To Charlotte, 'Leo' was and remained 'the perfection of a lover', an extremely pleasant companion, even though she still felt a little awkward in his company. That shyness would soon disappear, though. She taught him to speak better English, with surprisingly rapid results. The small household that had travelled with them included Dr Stockmar. He found Charlotte handsomer than he had expected, with most peculiar manners, laughing a great deal and talking still more: 'a singular princess, but a most interesting creature'. With her restless nature, she did not immediately make a positive impression, but the better he got to know her the more he liked her. Once the happy couple had settled in at Claremont, 'the most beautiful house & place possible', in a wonderful location on a hill in the rolling countryside 24 kilometres to the south of London, near Esher in Surrey, Stockmar witnessed the rare marital bliss that prevailed. 'My master is the best of all husbands in all the five quarters of the globe; and his wife bears him an amount of love, the greatness of which can only be compared with the English national debt', he noted in his diary.[83] Claremont was the nation's wedding present to the young couple, an Italian classicistic stately home, architecturally unremarkable, surrounded by a huge English park with mature trees and ponds. Leopold could cultivate flowers and plants to his hearts desire, as he had learned from his father in Coburg. Count Lieven, the Russian ambassador in London, sent him seeds from exotic flowers, which were of great value to an experienced botanist such as he. He looked up their names with great pleasure and eagerness. At dusk, he often went out – initially without success - to shoot rabbits, hares, pheasants, partridges and occasionally a squirrel. He spent sixteen wonderful months honeymooning with his princess, walking, reading, studying, horse riding, playing whist and music, often with them both sitting on the same seat. They were together all the time, almost entirely removed from 'the *canaille* of the bigger world', growing closer and closer. Leopold fell more and more in love with his wife. It had not been easy going, he wrote to his good friend

81 Fürstenheim 1982, 1988, 55-56.
82 Charlotte to Mercer, 17 March 1816 (Aspinall 1949, 231–232, 237).
83 Diary entry Stockmar, 5 May 1816 (Stockmar 1872, 44); Charlotte to Mercer, 4 May 1816 (Aspinall 1949, 242).

Schiferli, but it had become 'such a happy union', 'that must so rarely be found in private lives,' that heaven had clearly had a hand in the affair. They felt their mutual affection had grown gradually. The increasingly intimate familiarity with each other's character would ensure permanent domestic wellbeing.[84] Their marital bliss was a haven of calm amidst growing social and political tensions. In Charlotte's view, at a time when there was so much unrest in the country, it was not only wise but essential to set a good example of morality. Their harmonious life at Claremont was private, contrasting sharply with the flamboyance of the vain regent at Carlton House. It was Leopold who insisted on privacy. He even succeeded in tempering Charlotte's love for the masses. When she attended the local church, people came from near and far, dressed in their Sunday best, to go royalty spotting and sit as close to them as possible. The parishioners were put out that their humble church was packed with London ladies. At Leopold's friendly request, Charlotte agreed to worship in the private chapel at Claremont from then on. The royal couple also preferred to keep their distance from society life in London. Although Charlotte was the darling of the Whigs, Leopold wanted nothing to do with politics and especially the parties. His father-in-law and the old queen interfered in all kinds of domestic affairs, but he courteously and respectfully refused to do so.

According to the malicious Mercer, the private pleasures of the countryside could not continue to beguile the lovebirds. But, with all the receptions and parties held at Claremont, her concern that boredom would set in because the couple saw nobody was unfounded. Grand Duke Nicholas, the later tsar, stayed with them and, as a disciplined military man, declared that he would even be prepared to sleep in a barn on a bundle of straw. For Leopold's 26th birthday, on 16 December 1816, they threw a big party with a ball and dinner for their servants the next day. Charlotte had never seen people having such fun and eating, drinking and dancing so much. There was a huge crowd of people - their estate was not exactly small – and everyone who could get away had come to Oatlands. On Christmas Day, the Duchess of York, their friendly neighbour, held a fête and fair for everyone. Charlotte was in seventh heaven at the sight of the happy faces of the children and their parents. Everyone, big and small, took part in the events in and around the house. The duchess liked doing good deeds and pleasing everybody by giving out clothes to the needy and poor of the town every year, at her own expense. The crown princess had always longed to be present and now, with her new marital status, she was at last actually able to attend.[85] The private parties were an element in Leopold's political networking strategy. In January 1817, for example, he was sorry that Castlereagh was prevented from being among the '*petit nombre des élus*' he invited to celebrate Charlotte's birthday. Once parliament was back in session, they would have even fewer opportunities to see each other. He therefore begged the minister to pay them a visit 'in their calm and peaceful home' beforehand[86]. Charlotte was proud of being married to Leopold and started signing her letters, 'Charlotte, Princess of Saxe-Coburg'. Her posthumous 'memoirs' published by Robert Huish in 1818 also bear the title *Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales & Saxe-Coburg*. For her, it was a way of symbolically breaking with the House of Hanover and establishing a new dynasty. Leopold's family became her family, despite the difference in status. High state form and etiquette meant far less to her than to his family. When there were 'Royal Highnesses and knows God what else' present Sophie, for example, sometimes forgot the family feeling and was strictly reprimanded by her new sister-in-law, who felt bound to her body and soul.

84 Hardenbroek to Lieven, 28 October 1816 (BLL, Lieven Papers, 47279); Leopold to Mensdorff-Pouilly, 9 September 1816; 21 November 1816 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 129); Leopold to Schiferli, 13 January 1817 (Fürstenheim 1988, 59); Charlotte to Mercer, 26 August 1816 (Aspinall 1949, 244–245).

85 Charlotte to Mercer, 26 December 1816 (Aspinall 1949, 246).

86 Leopold to Castlereagh, 5 January 1817. RA, VIC/MAIN/M45/30

It would have been nice enough to knit a bonnet for the baby Sophie was expecting, her fifth child, but Charlotte did not indulge in needlework and wanted to go and buy bonnets in Paris. Leopold considered it more practical to send his sister money so she could choose for herself and transferred the sum of thirty pounds via Rothschild. The thrifty prince joked that he was afraid that with that amount she would get drunk on the three spirits - rum, brandy and Dutch liqueur - as she had described in one of her books. In her time, Sophie was famous for her storytelling and drawing talents. Leopold was not always nice to his eldest sister. With his strange sense of humour, he told the curious Charlotte the 'highly remarkable fact' that Sophie shaved every Saturday, because of her heavy black beard. Charlotte loved receiving post from Sophie. She got Leopold to read her letters out loud while she listened with great interest and amusement.[87]

Leopold himself became more serious due to his marital status at the side of the British crown princess. He described his political situation as extremely delicate. To remain unimpeachable and beyond reproach in a country where publicity allowed no secrets, each step he took had to be well considered. Despite their sober lifestyle, there had already been thirty caricatures of Charlotte and him published. The goodwill the royal couple enjoyed in the satirical press did not stop publication by parliament of their domestic expenses from causing criticism. In a time of food scarcity and a rising cost of living, the amount evoked associations with the sums the prince regent was splashing out at the expense of the public purse.[88] Leopold found the caricatures unpleasant, but they were something you simply became accustomed to and he did not let them bother him, or so he claimed. The exaggerated attention British newspapers and chroniclers devoted to the royal couple's life at Claremont irritated him terribly, though.

On the continent, they would scarcely be able to imagine how it was, he wrote to Sophie: public opinion interfered with everything in England. The entire political system was permeated with party spirit. No aristocratic or middle class family could do anything out of the ordinary without it getting into the papers and them being heaped with praise or criticism. Royal figures could not expect any exemption from public attention. One newspaper had published the fact that, as a colonel in Princess Charlotte's Dragoon Guards, he earned twelve pounds a day. Leopold had the journalist hauled over the carpet, as it was untrue. He did not want to be suspected of lining his own pockets. The prince was in the public eye and, moreover, now a member of a royal family whose members all hated each other. He found that very difficult to begin with. He wanted to appease, but it was not easy to reconcile so many interests and opinions without coming under fire himself... '*Il y a de quoi être un peu pensif*', he assured his sister. What is more, the world was crying out for a Prince Charming while he wanted to devote himself exclusively to his dear wife. Being highly reserved himself, he hated indiscretion: Nothing was worse for big enterprises and important leaders than indiscretion. In England, everyone was immediately quoted and he did not want his words repeated and distorted. It could lead to innumerable misunderstandings. Leopold had a number of relatives who behaved themselves in such an unbelievable manner in that respect that he adopted an even more reserved attitude. He had not become indifferent, however, he reassured his eldest sister.[89]

Leopold was highly sensitive to not only popularity and publicity but also any sign of revolutionary insurgency in England. He saw the domain of Holzkirchen, which he had obtained from Austria at the end of 1816, as a refuge in the event that Charlotte and he - God forbid - should

87 Charlotte to Sophie, 7 February 1817 (Buffin 1914, 150–151); Leopold to Sophie, 17, 31 July, 22 December 1817 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 151, 159, 169).
88 Hunt 2003, 259–260.
89 Leopold to Mensdorff, 21 November 1816; Leopold to Sophie, 19 March 1817 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 131; 147); Hone 1816, 1817.

have to flee for a revolution. The effects of the French Revolution had been felt as far as Coburg. Leopold was not relying on England remaining free of revolution, even though he assured his brother-in-law that the nation loved the couple best of all the royal family. With their behaviour, resolutions and principles, it would stay that way. During the hunger winter of 1816, on the occasion of Leopold's birthday, the popular couple had bread, meat and flannel skirts distributed to all needy households in Esher.[90] It did not look as if a revolution would break out, but Leopold felt you could never be sure. When the prince regent's coach was stoned, he launched a campaign for buying British products. Charlotte and Leopold bought a thousand pounds' worth of silk from Spitalfield to decorate their house. In March 1817, a hunger march was organised from Manchester to London, where a petition was to be handed to the 'illustrious, gracious, good or rather shall I say big fat man', the prince regent. On the basis of the Magna Carta, the radical leaders condemned his royal income in a time when textile workers were starving to death. The peaceful March of the Blanketeers was broken up by the yeomanry – a voluntary cavalry of minor landowners. On the grounds of the Riot Act, hundreds of workers were wrongfully arrested. Although Charlotte and Leopold were treated '*mit vieler Liebe v. Volk*' during this episode of social unrest, it could not be denied that the country was going through a time of heavy crisis.[91]

The fortunate Leopold was preparing himself for his role as prince consort, not only by studying the parliamentary system, but primarily by organising his life around the future of his princess, that 'glorious little woman'. He would be her discreet counsellor and mainstay so that she could play her role as queen in a dignified and confident manner. Naturally, he also imagined himself performing on the great stage of European politics. Stockmar described Leopold as a 'glorious master, a manly prince and a princely man'. If it was up to Charlotte, however, he would not become 'the queen's husband'; she would spare him that humiliation or her name was not Charlotte. She was nothing more than 'king of her caprices' and could only reign over England if he ruled them both.

The royal couple presented a paradox to British public opinion. In the caricatures, it was Charlotte who wore the breeches in the household. On one hand, the prince consort's poor status was a source of critical sarcasm, as a marriage between a poor man and a rich woman reversed the patriarchal order, but on the other hand the people longed for a queen. The public seemed less concerned about her subjection to his masculine authority than about the influence of a foreigner on their queen.

Their private correspondence shows how Charlotte 'feminised'. She was determined to become a good, obedient wife. She immediately agreed to transfer her saddles, horses, stable boys and riding master to Leopold, as he did not really like the idea of ladies riding horses. He considered it too wild a sport. Charlotte's love for Leopold tempered her lack of self control. She proved capable of affection and devotion. That touched him all the more because she had such a dominant personality. He described her as a 'wounded deer' and saw through her 'masculine' manners – loud voice, firm handshake, toughness – as a mask to hide her vulnerability. Leopold could mould Charlotte like Pygmalion. 'Once I rest in your hands, it is up to you to make of me what you will', she had already announced before they even knew each other properly. Her heart had always been open to 'soft speech and reason', but so far, unfortunately, she been disappointed in that respect. Leopold did not really tame the extremely lively, impulsive Charlotte as much as temper her fiery nature. He could calm her down by letting her blow off steam, '*doucement, chérie, doucement...*'. At the sound of his 'enchanting voice' she became calm and regained her self-

90 Plowden 2005, 200–201.

91 Leopold to Mensdorff-Pouilly, 9 November 1816; Leopold to Sophie, 15 February 1817 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 125; 135–137).

composure. He gained a strong influence on her by remaining quiet and patient. According to Lord Melbourne, Queen Victoria's advisor, that was the only way a man could gain power over a woman.[92] Later, Leopold was to correct the image of Charlotte as rough and imperious. He assured Victoria that she was the master of her emotions. She was highly strung, that ran in the family. She could be furious, but felt guilty immediately afterwards. He had never seen anyone so willing to accept to criticism, or who so honestly and openheartedly admitted that she had acted wrongly. They say women always change their minds, to avoid giving the impression of conceding. Big-hearted souls such as Charlotte did not do that; they bravely fought their own fight, but were prepared to be proved wrong. There was something extremely generous and royal about Charlotte. That alone prevented her from being vulgar or ungainly. Moreover, she was so eager to please Leopold that she often said, 'One way or another, if that is what you want that is what I will do'. He always responded by saying that he never wanted anything for himself, only what was best for her. It was certainly not so that she commanded the household. On the contrary; she almost exaggerated her submissiveness to make it clear that she considered him her lord and master. He, too, felt he was far more the master of the house than was generally the case in private life.

Charlotte had a slight tendency to be jealous, which sometimes made her cross. Even Lady Marlborough, whom Leopold had had a lot to do with in 1814, became the object of her jealously. He found that childish, but the coquettish, easy-virtued woman who was twelve or fifteen years her senior, continued to bother her. The most difficult thing for Leopold was to teach Charlotte manners. She was brusque and impetuous as a result of the inner struggle between shyness and assertiveness. But she was quick on the uptake and Leopold found her judgement extremely accurate in general. She had read a lot and remembered what she had read. Her determination to marry him had been the turning point in the future of the Coburg family. Leopold himself, without boasting, could pride himself on having the demeanour of 'the best society of Europe', with which he had socialised from a young age in Paris and Vienna. He was of the gilded youth, or to use a French expression, '*de la fleur des pois*'. He had savoir vivre, manners, style. That was why he had such good judgement. Charlotte had difficulty with his critical eye and often grumbled that he saw so many faults in her. Nevertheless, the fact that she had changed so much in the space of a year spoke volumes. It was also reflected in the marked satisfaction of the highly critical regent. To understand why manners were rather singular in England, one naturally had to bear in mind the fact that for more than ten years of Napoleon the country had been completely cut off from the rest of the world...[93]

Her specifically 'womanly' relationship with Leopold thwarted attempts by public opinion at turning Charlotte into a new Queen Elizabeth, with 'the heart and stomach of a king'. Before her marriage, Charlotte was attributed with masculine traits, but she herself deliberately changed that when she met him. The crown princess was not a Virgin Queen, either. After two miscarriages, in the spring of 1817 she was pregnant again. There was a great deal of social unrest in that period and the country regained hope of better times and a male heir to the throne. People bet such ridiculous sums on the sex of the child that the stock exchange calculated that a little princess would raise interest rates by 2.5 percent and a little prince by 6 percent. According to Leopold, though, whether it turned out to be 'a boy, a girl or a hermaphrodite', the proud parents would adore the baby.[94] They wanted to have the christening immediately after the birth instead of waiting a month as was the custom in the British royal family. After all, they lived in the middle of the country. If the baby

92 Charlotte to Leopold, 12 March 1816 (AKP, Charlotte–Leopold; Goddyn 2007, 163) Esher 1912, II, 103: Fürstenheim1988, 60-61.

93 Leopold to Victoria, 22 May 1840 (AKP, Leopold–Victoria, I/4; Benson & Esher 1907, 280–282); Leopold to Victoria, 21 May 1845 (Benson & Esher 1907, II, 45).

94 Leopold to Sophie, 19 March 1817 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 145); Stockmar, 26 August 1817.

suddenly became ill there was only the old vicar of Esher to christen him. According to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London, who would both be present when Charlotte gave birth at Claremont, an immediate baptism was contrary to liturgy. In Great Britain, the public was far more sensitive about religion than anything else. The baby was due in mid-November and when that month came around Leopold, whose mind was not at rest on the matter, sighed that November has already arrived '*comme si de rien était*'. With the approaching 'event' in sight, they no longer felt they should invite people to their home, even those they would have liked to see most. Nevertheless, Charlotte was doing well and was bravely looking forward to the 'critical moment'. It looked as if everything would go smoothly.[95]

Charlotte's doctor was not Stockmar. As a foreigner, well aware of the national pride in England, he declined any share in her care; it would not bring him any honour, he thought despondently, but possibly plenty of blame. When complications arose, however, Stockmar was at a loss. Dr Richard Croft, in whom Charlotte and Leopold had every confidence, was clearly doing the wrong thing. During the princess's pregnancy, he prescribed a strict diet, bed rest and bloodlettings at the drop of a hat. Although Stockmar could see it was seriously weakening her, he could never have anticipated such a terrible turn of events.

The labour was slow to get going, with irregular contractions, and lasted more than forty-eight hours. Croft insisted that it should be a natural birth. A fruit fell from the tree far more easily when it was ripe. Nature, or God, should be left to do his work. Things were as they were. He therefore considered it unnecessary to use the forceps. On 5 November 1817, at around nine in the evening, finally, the princess was delivered of 'a fine large dead boy'. Suffocated in the womb. Charlotte was not initially informed of the death of her son and was so exhausted that the terrible news hardly registered on her. Five hours later she was dead. Stockmar was called by the other doctors around midnight. The princess was in a state of great suffering and disquiet from spasms in the chest and difficulty in breathing. '*Stocky! Stocky! They have made me tipsy*'. The doctors had given her laudanum and liqueur and laid hot compresses on her belly. A few months later, Dr Croft committed suicide. His name went down in medical history linked to this 'Triple Obstetric Tragedy' that prompted so many questions. Mother-in-law Augusta sought medical advice from Dr Schiferli in Bern: Had the absurd bloodletting not delayed the birth? Should forceps not have been used to remove the baby - which was still alive an hour before the birth - from the young mother, sparing her fifty-seven hours of hard work? Even Napoleon in Saint Helena wondered why the people had not stoned the doctors. An ordinary woman was treated better than a princess! The doctors should have acted more boldly and let an experienced midwife or the old Queen Charlotte assist at the birth. Women at least knew when things were going wrong. And where was Prince Leopold? Surely a man should be with his wife while she was giving birth. To encourage and calm her. Just as Napoleon had done at Marie-Louise's forceps delivery...[96]

Leopold, who had not moved from her side for three days, was not there when Charlotte died. Stockmar found him resigned to the death of his child, but he did not appear to take in the seriousness of the princess's condition. When, with a heavy heart, his personal physician brought him the news that Charlotte was no more, Leopold refused to believe it; he thought it must be a dream. In the room where she died, he knelt beside the bed and kissed her cold hands. He begged Stockmar never to leave him in the lurch: 'I am now quite desolate. Promise me always to stay with

95 Leopold to Liverpool, 21 October 1817; Liverpool to Leopold, 23 October 1817 (BLL, Liverpool Papers, 38190, 32268); Leopold to Lieven, 30 October 1817 (BLL, Lieven Papers, 47279); Leopold to Sophie, 2 November 1817 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 163).

96 Augusta to Schiferli, 23 November 1817 (Alville 1942, 103); O'Meara 1823, II, 31.

me'. The friendship pact sealed at Charlotte's deathbed was indeed unbreakable. Stockmar became Leopold's private secretary and, more than ever, his help and stay. The doctor slept in his room and if the prince awoke he would sit talking at his bedside until he fell asleep again. Leopold wrote to his mother that Charlotte had inherited her not very strong health and oversensitive nerves from her father who, as a profligate and an extremely heavy drinker, could not expect healthy children.[97]

The prince's sorrow rocked the whole nation. *The Times* reported that even the poorest of the poor were wearing a strip of black cloth around their arms. People were walking the streets in tears and all the churches were full. The bodies of Charlotte and the child were embalmed, a custom of the British court. The burial did not take place until a fortnight later. Prince Regent George could not bear to attend. At two in the morning of 19 November 1817 the funeral procession from Claremont reached Windsor. Everyone sympathised with the despair of the poor prince widower, who had stayed up all night praying by the body, which was lying in state. He could hardly control his sobbing during the funeral and secretly hoped he would not survive the ordeal. In the morning, there was a mass and in the evening the deceased were laid to rest in the crypt of St George's Chapel. Leopold collapsed during the ceremony and had to be supported by the Duke of York.[98]

Lord Byron heard of Charlotte's death on the Bridge of Sighs in Venice. She is mourned extensively in the fourth canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818). Byron did not forget Leopold in his elegy, either.

The fair-haired Daughter of the Isles is laid,

The love of millions! How we did entrust

Futurity to her!

Thou, too, lonely lord,

And desolate consort—vainly wert thou wed!

The husband of a year! the father of the dead!

The prince went into deep mourning. As long as his grief found no expression, Stockmar was much alarmed for his health. But frequent tears and moaning gradually relieved his body. Comforting letters dissolved his 'unbending grief' into tears. The doctor, who had noticed symptoms of typhus in Leopold just after the death, treated him 'morally and physically', with tolerable success, as he knew him well and was aware that he could not abide the usual remedies. Life seemed already to have lost all worth for him and he was convinced that no feeling of happiness could ever again enter his heart. In Stockmar's opinion, Leopold should mourn in England and make Claremont into a place of remembrance, rather than returning to Coburg. Although it was difficult for the prince to continue believing in the future, his intellectual interests could provide him with the distraction necessary to prevent him from drowning in sorrow.

In a letter to his sister, Leopold sighed that he would like permission from God to relinquish life and be reunited with Charlotte. 'Patience, patience, even with a broken heart you

97 Leopold to Augusta, November 1817 (RA, M45/24; Fürstenheim 1988, 163).
98 Huish 1818, 577 onwards; Fürstenheim 1988, 68-69.

cannot oppose God'. What mortal had lost more true happiness than he? He was born for domestic happiness and had so longed for children. He lived to make his family happy, not for the glamour that leant importance and influence to the great. When visitors left their Elysium, even when they were good friends and acquaintances, he had thanked God. Leopold had wanted to be quietly happy with 'his mouse', that was all. What love, calm and happiness flowed from his breast when they went home in the evening and she sleepily laid her head on his heart. Then he said to himself: Your trusty arm encompasses your Everything, your joy and your fortune. Charlotte was a very beautiful woman, but it was above all her noble heart and her infinitely delightful characteristics that he loved and grew to love more each day. It was the guarantee for his fidelity; the terrors of age and illness could not destroy their love. Nothing could break the bond between their souls, nothing. He hoped that life would not seduce him now and make him unworthy of being reunited with her one day. With her he had reached the highest level of happiness humanly possible. His conscience dictated that he should magnify his glory with the lustre of virtue. He promised God. His heart was solely occupied with the wellbeing of his angel. He who could bear such sweet happiness should also endure the boundless grief with patience, accepting the unfathomable. Virtue was the only way to lead him to the hereafter he so longed for. If only he were there already...

Leopold was pale, thin and listless, but he had enough presence of mind to make provisions for his family in his will before the funeral. He would not have been able to rest had he not done so, despite the effort it took. As long as his heart was still beating, he would provide for his dear ones. The ties of love bound him to life. He had lost his Everything: the blooming, noble woman and the beautiful little boy awaited him in their cold grave.

Leopold was as neurotic in his mourning as he was lyrical about death and virtue. He did not want the hat and coat Charlotte had worn on their last walk to be moved. After all, she had hung them on the hallstand herself. Her watch was to stay exactly where she had laid it. Even after a stay in the good sea air in Came, near Dorchester, Leopold could not shake the fetishes of his lost happiness. The weather conditions were terrible in January 1818. Due to the heavy mist on the beach he could not go for walks, which he badly needed for his health. It made him all the more melancholy. In his *Reminiscences* we wrote that he never recovered the feeling of happiness that had blessed his short married life.[99]

Charlotte's dramatic death threw Great Britain into deep mourning. Charlotte had been the hope of the nation in a time when the British royal family was under heavy fire. Her unexpected death in childbirth enhanced the popular myth around her person, in which Leopold was also allotted an important place. He had been the rock among the waves, the help and stay of his lively princess. The personal and the political, the domestic and the national, monarch and people were inextricably interwoven. There was no clear distinction between Charlotte's private status as a pregnant woman and her political status as the forthcoming queen who had raised such high hopes. The story of the first 'People's Princess' and her mourning spouse so roused collective sentiment that it became a significant stabilising factor in a country where public opinion was more strongly developed than elsewhere.

Although some concern for the political consequences of her death was certainly not ungrounded, it proved to have a calming effect and the deeply divided British nation was, so to speak, united in mourning. 'Those who weep not for kings shall weep for thee', wrote Byron. The

99 Leopold to Sophie, 22 December 1817 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 169–171); Hardenbroek to Lieven, 14 January 1818 (BLL, Lieven Papers, 47279; Stockmar 1872, 103–106; Grey 1867, 389).

commodification of the dead princess was certainly not a new phenomenon in Great Britain,[100] but it now assumed unprecedented proportions. Fetish objects were manufactured and reams of chocolate box poems were published. Charlotte was incorporated into the private rituals of the people as a public icon. There were souvenirs on sale in various sizes and at various prices: portraits of the princess, but also for example, for 25 shillings, 'a correct representation of the funeral procession', or 'an EXACT COPY' of the princess's hymn book, 'found, after her sad death, under the cushion of her pew'. Or a memorial medallion with the silhouette of Charlotte on one side and a tomb with a cypress and/or willow and a weeping Leopold and/or Britannia on the other. The romantic poets – Byron and Shelley – appropriated Charlotte's myth and wrote about her, while less artistic deities, such as Felicia Hemans, also contributed to the flourishing memorial culture. Hannah More, who had been with Charlotte from birth, so to speak, later wrote that the sorrow on her passing was as individual as it was universal. Everyone in Britain felt as if he (or she) were the only one grieving.[101] The press, and the provincial press in particular, took the initiative of announcing a national day of mourning and special church services were held for her, as far as Scotland. Houses and buildings were swathed in black, shops closed for a fortnight and poets bemoaned her death in chorus.

The princess was almost sanctified in a religiously charged debate in which she appeared to bring salvation. Her death was an atonement for the sins of the nation: 'Instead of the joyous hymn, *Unto us a child is born*... we must listen to the funeral song at her burial'. The identification with the royal family drama was literal: 'It was as if every family in Great Britain had lost a beloved child'. Years later, Leopold recalled how it was said that George had never been in such good spirits as on the loss of his daughter. 'She was more popular than himself – that was, since her marriage, her only crime'.[102] Money was collected at all levels of society to erect a monument to the dead princess. No donation higher than a guinea was accepted. Nevertheless, the sum of more than 12,000 pounds was collected. It would be hard to find better proof of the wholesale mourning. Matthew Wyatt's marble statue of the immortal Charlotte ascending to heaven can still be seen in St George's Chapel at Windsor.

In *An Address to the English People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte*, Percy Bysshe Shelley linked the grieving for Charlotte with the execution of three leaders of the Pentrich Rebellion, which had taken place at roughly the same time as her death. Shelley's pamphlet was a sharp criticism of the violation of the rights of the English people, with Charlotte finally rising from the dead as Liberty. Social support for the radicals striving for universal suffrage and the reform of parliament grew perceptibly. The climax came on 16 August 1819, when a peaceful mass meeting of sixty to a hundred thousand workers in Manchester was brutally dispersed by the panicking local authorities. Eleven were killed and four hundred wounded in the Peterloo Massacre, including women and children. The prince regent caused further indignation by publicly thanking the yeomanry for their action. The government of a country with a relatively peaceful history was only capable of meeting social unrest with repression. Fear of the masses promoted a reinforcement of law and order by means of the prohibition of seditious meetings and censorship of the press. It was the last time a government was able to violate the right of freedom of speech in England. In February 1820, the Cato Street Conspiracy, a wild plan to assassinate the entire government, demonstrated how the established order was under fire in Great Britain, with the prince regent in the front line.

100 Sharpe 2006, 108–111.

101 The Works of Hannah More 1830, VI, xiii.

102 Leopold to Victoria, 18 January 1839 (Benson & Esher 1907, 182; Behrendt 1997; Fritz 1982, 291–316).

‘The Queen Caroline Affair’[103]

It was not, however, social injustice but the grotesque Queen Caroline Affair that raised so much dust for six months in 1820-1821, reflecting the complexity of the relationship between the monarch and the British people. It was the apotheosis of the royal drama that had been touching people’s emotions for some time and it reached its height when George finally became king of England. His succession was no longer assured, due to Charlotte’s death. In January 1820, George III was buried as Father of his People. He had been kept out of the publicity for the last ten years of his life and his funeral at Windsor was organised as a private event. Thirty thousand people turned up, though, and shops closed in England, Scotland and Wales.

The prince regent, who had had to wait nine years for the throne, did not under any circumstances want his lawful wedded wife Caroline at his side as queen. He therefore boldly scrubbed her from the coronation liturgy. Having left for the continent in 1814 after rowing with George, in June 1820 Caroline was given a standing ovation when she returned to London to claim her rights as Queen Consort. ‘The Queen Forever, the King in the River’ was one of the popular slogans, but the aristocracy, the clergy, the ministers and all those embodying authority shared in the growing criticism. Even Wellington, the hero of Waterloo, was booed in his capacity of minister of the crown. The established order was shaking at its foundations.

George deployed strict measures against Caroline and started legal proceedings in the House of Lords reminiscent of a grand opera. He attempted, on the basis of proof his spies had collected in Italy - the aforementioned ‘green bag’ – to undermine his spouse as an ‘adulterous queen’. His aim was to deprive her of her title, prerogatives, privileges and immunity and have their marriage annulled. The coronation was postponed for a year. With the highly unusual proceedings in the House of Lords, George avoided a normal divorce suit, which would have given Caroline the opportunity to retaliate. His debauched lifestyle provided plenty of material. She was not legally allowed do so before parliament, but the case was politicised from the word go, and how. Although he was actually an extremely sensible man, according to Lord Melbourne, the later leader of the government, George’s strategy was completely mad. If he had simply let Caroline go her own way, nothing would have happened. But in persecuting her he was, in fact, acting as if he was really in love with her. Evidently, he had never been properly advised when it came to Queen Caroline. Caroline sought and found allies amongst the radicals and the Whigs in her campaign to use public opinion to discredit her degenerate husband. She was tremendously successful. The prince regent had never been popular. The people did not actually care what Caroline did: after all, he was the one who had ‘started it’. Caroline was being persecuted by a husband who, himself, was so immoral that he could not even appear before an ecclesiastical court. It was he who had rejected her. It was he who had neglected and mistreated her. It was he who had denied her access to her lamented daughter. It was he who had spied on her in her place of exile. It was he who had thrown her to the dogs as a wife. It was he who was now acting the deceived husband to get rid of her.

The ‘tribunal’ of public opinion was expressly pro-Caroline. Wherever she appeared, she was received with cheering and expressions of support. This became the biggest demonstration of the early nineteenth century in England by ‘the people’ and was a striking mixture of radicalism and royalism. All over Great Britain, both in the capital and in the provinces, Caroline – at first sight anything but cut out for a role as a radical heroine – found fervent support. ‘Her cause let loose for a time every tongue and pen in England’, wrote the radical leader William Cobbett. Melbourne, who was also the young Queen Victoria’s tutor, told his pupil years later that he had

103 Clark 1990, 47–68; Fulcher 1995, 481–502; Hunt 1991, 697–722; Clark 2004, 177–207; Robins 2006.

never seen anything like it in his life. Not just the middle classes, but the workers and the riff-raff of the streets were right behind her. Hundreds of artisans and companies, friendly societies, freemasons' lodges and charitable institutions throughout the country sent petitions, declarations of support and gifts and joined in innumerable marches and demonstrations. Caroline appeared on the balcony of her new residence, Brandenburg House, to give radical speeches and wave to the crowds that had come to show their support. The 'people' also demonstrated in less disciplined actions that evoked associations with charivaris. The radical movement took advantage of the combination of immorality and corruption that George and his shoddy ministers embodied to propagate reform of the political system and ensure that his coronation would be the last. The intention was that parliament would be democratised through reform of the voting system. Any attack on the queen was portrayed as an attack on the people. The affair became a parable for political injustice in general. Caroline was queen of the 'working and productive class', the icon of the struggle against the decadent upper classes.

Caroline also received support from the Whigs in the House of Lords. Despite the damning evidence against her, a brilliant defence was concocted by Henry Brougham, who had already aided her in the past. In his plea, he used the popular mistrust of the Italian witnesses, whose '*Non mi ricordo*' appeared to eliminate any doubt of Caroline's innocence. The widely publicised royal family saga also hit sore spots for the public at large, such as the fact that the recently deceased George III had always shown great affection for his daughter-in-law and the letter in which George had personally given Caroline permission to lead her own life. The Bill of Pains and Penalties against Caroline finally won such a small majority that the government withdrew it from fear of a defeat in the House of Commons and the fury of the people. While the man in the street was overjoyed with Caroline's acquittal and spontaneously throwing big parties, in Saint Paul's Cathedral a thanksgiving ceremony was taking place, demonstrating a rare (and extremely brief) concord between moderates and radicals, the middle classes and the working class.

The Queen Caroline Affair did not, however, lead to a republican revolution. The queen had been rescued and her honour restored, but so had social order. The curtain fell on the proceedings like a theatrical performance. The cultural weight of royalism had leant radical agitation a great deal of legitimacy but it was, at the same time, its great weakness. Despite all the criticism of the king, the Queen Caroline Affair remained encapsulated in a royal discourse that was able to move the non-politicised masses in the queen's camp against the king. Caroline's supporters attacked George IV and his bad ministers in a longing for the restoration of a benevolent king as the father of his people. Never before had the radical reformers enjoyed such social support. Through Caroline they prompted a political debate that was more popular than the eighteenth-century philosophical discussion of constitutional rights and freedoms and democracy in theory. Their new political language linked criticism of the royal family with recognisable elements of a family drama. Cobbett and other radical writers used the topology of popular literature, satire and theatre to convey their message in a language the largely illiterate public could understand. But as soon as it was all over, the public went home sated, still savouring the melodramatic plot and the spicy revelations. The trivialisation of politics that had initially had a mobilising effect ultimately had a depoliticising effect. Caroline's political potential was disarmed by the aesthetics of melodrama.[104]

Charlotte's memory was prominently present in the Queen Caroline Affair. The fact that George had not informed his lawful spouse of the death of her own daughter in 1817 had already caused a great deal of bad blood. Whig leader Henry Brougham ironically remarked that it was

104 Laqueur 1982, 417–466.

evidently more important to inform the Pope of Charlotte's death than her own mother. George had instructed Leopold to inform his mother-in-law, but, in his grief, the prince had failed to do so immediately. Caroline had, indeed, had to hear the sorrowful news from a courier on his way to the Pope in Rome, 'the historic friend and ally of England since Henry VIII'. Here, Brougham was making a thinly disguised reference to the fact that the break between Rome and the Anglican Church obviously did not stand in the way of sending a messenger.

It was a deep emotional shock for the frivolous Caroline. Just as the deep mourning of Charlotte's death surpassed the personal tragedy, the demonstrations of 1820 were about so much more than the royal divorce alone. It was, above all, an expression of the growing power of public opinion that the monarchy seriously needed to heed. The volume of newspaper articles, petitions, cartoons and other propaganda distributed with regard to Caroline was gigantic in a country where the restriction of the freedom of the press was unable to quell public indignation. More caricatures appeared between 1820 and 1821 than in the five subsequent years put together.[105]

The identification with Caroline had prompted public discussion of the new middle class ideals concerning marriage and family at lower levels of society. The regent's sexual morals were dragged through the mud as a symbol of aristocratic libertinism. It was one of the first public moments where the old model of marriage and sexuality was rejected in favour of the new model of 'Victorian' morals. Just as Charlotte and Leopold became bearers of the new familial values that restored the appeal of the royal family, the radical reformers also attacked George IV's decadence and extravagance and pushed Caroline to the fore as an icon of purity, virtue and fidelity. The image of the injured and discourteously treated queen camouflaged the reality of her lifestyle. Caroline, in fact, replaced her daughter, who had incarnated happily married life far more than she. The late Charlotte had been the queen the middle class longed for; Caroline stood for the ambiguity of the transition from the old aristocratic morals to middle class morals. Whereas Charlotte, as the people's princess, had embodied the hope of the nation, in 1820 expectations shifted to her mother, the 'good queen', who was receptive to the people while the king was accused of standoffishness. Queen Caroline was a folk heroine, straightforward, warm-hearted and anything but pretentious. To the great consternation of the aristocratic ladies of London and her lawyers she rode around in an open coach. People were even allowed to touch her. She received petitions personally and was not above granting her supporters an audience. It was the blend of aristocratic glamour and her down-to-earth familiarity that made her popular in a period when the middle class secured access to political circles. Moreover, it was not only new family values and standards that played a role, but also resistance to the intrusion of personal life into politics that was second nature to the aristocracy. The radicals wanted a public sphere run by reasonable, sober-minded individuals, averse to self interest and (power) lust. And so, paradoxically enough, the Queen Caroline Affair – before which personal issues had never been so politicised – promoted the mental division between the public and the private domains.[106]

In his *Reminiscences*, Leopold cannot help allocating himself an important role in the whole affair. He had initially suggested playing a mediating role, even before the trial commenced. That idea was stubbornly turned down by Lord Liverpool. When passions flared higher it became difficult to exert any pacifying influence. He then remained quietly at Claremont, where the intrigues of the city had not yet penetrated. Leopold felt he was in an awkward position between the king and queen. He considered visiting his seriously ill mother to stay out of the painful conflict. It would have pleased George, who was still fairly favourably inclined towards him since

105 George 1959, 187–207.
106 Wahrman 1993, 396–432.

Charlotte's death. Nevertheless Leopold could not bring himself to abandon Charlotte's mother to her fate. He decided not to come between them until the proceedings had been completed so whatever he did could have no influence on the body of evidence. The opportunist prince found that the most honest and unbiased attitude. After the proceedings, he visited his mother-in-law, whom he had not met before, at Brandenburg House. She received him in a friendly and good-natured fashion, but looked strange and said odd things.

The country was in a state of incredible agitation, according to Leopold, and his visit was a big boost for the queen. As the widower of the beloved Charlotte, the public show of affection from his side was naturally grist to her mill. In her memoirs the uncrowned queen remarked on how curious the public was to know what attitude her son-in-law would adopt towards his late wife's grieving mother. Whatever his private feelings, it was agreed that Leopold would lose credit with the king for his visit. If Charlotte had still lingered, then perhaps she would have appeared as an angel of reconciliation and extended an olive branch to her unfortunate parents. But the tears of the childless mother and the lonely widower were unable to bring back her sanctified spirit. Deeply moved, they could only tell each other how much they had loved her while she was still alive. For the public, Leopold represented the protective chivalry ordinary men could only dream of. That, too, tallied with the new middle class gender roles that had come to the fore in the Queen Caroline Affair: men took a stand for the discourteously treated queen and were glad to be able to defend her chivalrously against the aristocratic morals and habits that had corrupted her. Leopold certainly scored in public opinion with his visit. Whether the Lords and the ministers let themselves be influenced by his visit in their 'acquittal' of Caroline, as he and other witnesses suggest, is another question. The king, at any rate, was furious. He would never forgive Leopold and never wanted to see his son-in-law again. To his mother, Leopold declared that 'his emotions' had drawn him to the lady's side.[107]

Finally, the government again tried bribing Caroline into relinquishing her title and privileges and staying out of George's life forever. This time with success. When she heard that the House of Commons was raising her allowance to 50,000 pounds, she took the bait, even though she had previously said she would accept nothing if she was not to be recognised as the king's wife at the coronation ceremony. She took the money and promptly lost her credibility and political power. Whigs and radicals dropped her like a hot brick. Her appeal to the people was over. But Caroline did not accept defeat and the affair culminated in political street theatre of the highest order. When she turned up uninvited at George's official coronation on 19 July 1821 to physically claim her place as queen, she was denied access to Westminster Abbey on his orders.

The coronation was the epitome of pseudo-mediaeval pomp and circumstance and an unexpected success for the king's public relations, albeit for a limited elite. The ceremony in the abbey took five hours. A great banquet followed in Westminster Hall, costing approximately ten million British pounds at today's prices, prepared in twenty-three kitchens. The new king's clothes outshone everyone else's and demonstrated his inimitable taste for flamboyance. Leopold was there, too. He saw how the king's mistress, or 'vice-queen', Lady Conyngham was wearing on her head the sapphire that the poor prince had had to return after Charlotte's death because it was a crown jewel. It shone so that it 'must have poked Leopold's eyes out when the sun shone on it'. According to (female) commentators, though, it was he who stole the majestical show with his

107 Grey 1867, 390–391; Huish 1821, II, 611–612; Leopold to Augusta, November 1820 (RA MA25/45); Leopold to Johann of Austria, 28 November 1820 (Corti & Buffin 1927, 54–58); Fürstenheim 1988, 83.

stately appearance in his outfit as Knight of the Garter, complete with garter below the knee. Incidentally, he was treated as a full member of the royal family during the coronation ceremony.

For Caroline, that was the last tragicomic public appearance, this time earning her only the disapproval of public opinion. Against her better judgement, she had let herself be played off by public opinion against her immoral husband as an icon of purity and after her triumph at the proceedings her star swiftly set. Her acceptance of the bribe of 50,000 pounds had done nothing for her plausibility as a victim. Initially depicted in cartoons as ostensible innocence, views changed in the course of 1821 in favour of the new king. The accusations of infidelity became material for the caricaturists after the event. Caroline was transformed from a saint into a whore. It was the only solution. No one had ultimately believed she was innocent. If the new morality was to triumph, then she had to believe in it, too. Wellington is accredited with the following choice statement, which perfectly sums up the dilemma: 'Well gentlemen, since you will have it so, God Save the Queen, and may all your wives be like her!' Guilty or innocent, Queen Caroline's behaviour did not call for imitation by her subjects. Now she had played her role and justice had been restored, there was no reason to set such a dubious figure as she on a pedestal. A month later, the reviled queen died of cancer, though some sources claim she was murdered. Politicians had the epitaph she had requested removed from her coffin: 'Deposited, Caroline of Brunswick, the Injured Queen of England'. Her funeral procession prompted new riots. The mortal remains of Queen Caroline were later taken to Braunschweig. The uproar at Caroline's funeral can be seen as the last flickering of radicalism, until the early 1830s when the Reform Movement gained a voice in the political arena. In 1832, the Reform Act was passed in England, seriously curbing the influence of the monarch and the House of Lords and giving the middle class political wings.

The new heir to the throne

'*Wunderliches Schicksal*', wrote Leopold in 1833. That such a beautiful little boy should die together with his mother as the result of bad medical care, with the additional consequence of him finding himself in Belgium. 'The Lord works in mysterious ways'.[108] History would, indeed, have been quite different if Charlotte had not died so young. Belgium's future would have taken an entirely different turn. At Charlotte's side, Leopold would have gained the status of Prince Consort that was later to fall to his nephew Albert, Ernst's son, at the side of Queen Victoria, through Leopold's matchmaking. Victoria would not even have been born, let alone become the longest reigning queen ever. After all, if Charlotte's death had not led to problems for the succession in Great Britain Victoria's parents would never have married. After the tragedy, George's brothers were put under pressure to provide legitimate heirs. They were all over fifty and childless, at least officially. Like the prince regent, they had quite a reputation when it came to money and women. Edward, the Duke of Kent, was the only one of George III's sons who could boast a military career. He had also been governor of Canada and Gibraltar. His friendly relationship with Robert Owen, the father of the cooperative movement, was a thorn in the royal family's side, though. The duke had a very reasonable income, but had fled his creditors and settled in Brussels, where he learned the tragic news of the death of the heir to the throne with his French mistress.

As for George in his time, marriage was a way out of financial problems for Edward. Leopold had already engineered a meeting between his youngest sister Victoire and the Duke of Kent in 1816. Victoire had lost her much older husband, Prince Emich Carl of Leiningen, in 1814. Since then, the thirty-two-year-old widow had been managing their estate in Amorbach alone, bringing up her two young children, Carl and Feodora, who were ten and seven when their father

108 Leopold to Sophie, 23 December 1833 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 257).

died. Edward visited Amorbach in the autumn of that year, but Victoire did not yet respond to his advances. Leopold, at that moment the most popular widower the British nation had ever known, urged his sister to respond encouragingly to a renewed proposal in a new, matrimonially interesting context. The composure with which Victoire said yes this time to a man she hardly new and had only seen once worried their mother Augusta. If it was God's will that they should enter into this bond, then He would have to protect her, too. Leopold's terrible, unexpected loss had shaken Augusta's belief. She felt as if she were walking on the edge of a crater into which her loved ones were falling and disappearing.[109] At the end of March 1818, the prince regent approved the marriage that Leopold insisted was 'their own, free choice'. It was a great comfort to him while he attempted to resign himself to his own fate. It was the only thing he could do, as it demanded superhuman strength to combat a fate such as his. The sea air at Came had done him good, but his mood was highly erratic[110].

Edward and Victoire married in May 1818 with a Lutheran ceremony and a big party at Schloss Ehrenburg in Coburg, then six weeks later an Anglican ceremony in England. They spent their honeymoon at Claremont, by kind permission of Leopold, six months after Charlotte's death. Their marriage was certainly more harmonious than that of Charlotte's parents. Initially, they lived in Germany for financial reasons, but when Victoire was seven months pregnant they moved by horse and cart to London, where they were accommodated in rooms at Kensington Palace. Expectations that the British parliament would pay the duke's debts and grant apanage were not fulfilled. Although they did not even have the money for the journey and the regent did everything to thwart the plan, Edward was determined that his only child should be born 'on the soil of Old England'. After all, a soothsayer in Gibraltar had foretold years before that she would become queen.

On 24 May 1819, Victoria was born, 'plump as a partridge' in Stockmar's eyes. Contrary to aristocratic customs, the princess was brought into the world by a midwife. The memory of Charlotte's disastrous delivery had not yet faded. Grandmother Augusta of Saxe-Coburg was delighted. 'The English like Queens', she assured her daughter. Charlotte's niece would undoubtedly be cherished by the English. 'Again a Charlotte - destined, perhaps, to play a great part one day, if a brother is not born to take it out of her hands'.[111] The Duchess of Kent could not bear to have her darling at anyone else's breast. She decided to feed Victoria herself, which was rare in such circles at the time. That way, she also avoided quickly becoming pregnant again, further limiting the chances of a male successor to the throne. The proud father showed off the future queen of England to his friends as well.

Writer Hannah More sent a copy of the *Hints Towards the Forming of the Character of a Young Princess* she had written for Charlotte to Victoire: it seemed her hopes of a virtuous female monarch were finally to be fulfilled. For his part, the prince regent was anything but pleased with his godchild. First he had attempted to prevent her from being born in England. Then he made a fuss during the christening, which he instructed was to be a strictly private and extremely modest affair. George did not say a word to his brother and was absent from the dinner that followed. Apart from him, only the two parents were present, a cousin, the Duke of Gloucester, the Duchess of York and the melancholy Prince Leopold. The prince regent disagreed with the names the parents wanted to give the princess and threw the ceremony into confusion, as no-one knew beforehand which names would be accepted. 'Alexandrina', he announced on the spot before the astonished

109 Bachmann 2006, 315.

110 (Leopold to Castlereagh, 28 March 1818. RA, VIC/MAIN/M45/37)

111 Augusta to Victoire, June 1819 (Grey 1867, 12–13).

company. Victoria, her mother's name, could not come before Alexandrina, a reference to the tsar. But his name, Georgina, could likewise not be given as a second name after that of the tsar. Victoria was therefore actually christened Alexandrina Victoria. This is why she was often called 'Drina' in the first years of her life. Both names sounded strange to the ears of the English, though, who were used to Elizabeth and Charlotte. The name of his own daughter or his own mother was out of the question for George, though.

Edward died of pneumonia eight months after Victoria's birth, a curious twist of fate. He had never been sick before in his life. No-one at the time cared about the fate of the new pretender to the throne and her mother. While Edward lay dying, Leopold was hunting in Berkshire. He hastened through the bitter cold and mist to Sidmouth, in Devonshire, where his sister and her family had been spending the winter, a trip he would not forget in a hurry. More than twenty years later, he recalled the desperation of Victoire, who hardly spoke English and lacked the means to travel to London. Leopold took them back to Kensington Palace and assumed care of 'the poor little baby', as there was no chance of George supporting Edward's widow. He would have preferred to see her return to Germany as soon as possible, taking her daughter with her. Leopold could therefore quite justifiably claim sole credit for Victoria being able to stay in England. He had no idea what would have become of her and her mother otherwise.[112] It was not until 1825 that the British parliament granted the Duchess of Kent an adequate allowance. In the meantime, Leopold was pleased to assume the role of father and prepare his little niece for the throne. In her girlhood diary, Victoria referred to him as *Il mio secondo padre*, or rather *solo padre*. With his own generous allowance, supporting them financially was no problem. George felt likewise. Leopold therefore gave his sister an extra 3,000 pounds a year in addition to her widow's allowance, intended for Victoria's upbringing and seaside holidays. Surrounded by only women at home, staying with her uncle in Claremont was what she liked best and she always cried when it was time to go home.

Her sharp-witted and ambitious uncle had a great influence on Victoria. The bond between the two would remain extremely close until Leopold's death in 1865. Thousands of letters, at least two a week, bear witness to the fact. Her first letter to 'My dearest Uncle' is dated 25 November 1828 – the nine-year-old princess wished Leopold, who was in Italy, 'many happy returns of your birthday'. She hoped to see him again soon, as she loved him so much. 'Your affectionate Niece'. In a postscript she told him she was very cross for him not having written to her since he left. Leopold begged her forgiveness. He suggested she follow him on the map; it would also be an excellent opportunity to improve her geographical knowledge. He had travelled from London to Paris via Brighton through Dieppe and Eu, then on via Mayence to Gotha and Coburg. In Berlin and Postdam he had inspected the troops with the King of Prussia. In Dresden he had met the king of Saxony, after which he travelled via Weimar back to Coburg, where they were disappointed to see him leave for Naples. In Italy, he had seen Verona, Modena, Rimini, Canziano, Terni, Rome, Albano and Mola di Gaëla. Unfortunately, he had had little time to himself, so no time to write to her, either[113].

A listless widower of standing

As a deeply sorrowful national hero, after Charlotte's death Leopold could not possibly leave England. Puny Coburg was no option for a prince who had become accustomed to life in London. Moreover, he was extremely sensitive about what the press wrote about him. *John Bull*, the sharply

112 Leopold to Victoria, 22 January 1841 (Benson & Esher 1907, I, 324).
113 Leopold to Victoria, 25 November 1828 (Benson & Esher 1907, 41), Leopold to Victoria, 15 December 1828. RA, VIC/MAIN/Y61/3.

satirical Conservative paper, would not tolerate him staying too long on the continent. Stockmar advised him to ensure his *point d'appui* in Great Britain. He was now to stay with Leopold for years at a time. They dined and talked together almost every evening. When Victoria became queen when she was barely of age, Leopold instructed Stocky to take on the role of her private secretary, albeit unofficially. He retained that position until he went back to live in Coburg at the age of seventy in 1857. Writing about his 'later career' as confidant and mentor to high-ranking persons, he himself said his savoir faire was due to the psychological and physiological knowledge he had gained through his medical studies.[114]

With his ample allowance of 50,000 pounds, in his London years Leopold lived as a prince of standing. Marlborough House, next to St James's Palace, now became his London residence. He had the enormous building repainted and refurbished, with thick carpets and beautiful new furniture. The Rothschilds, too, were devastated by Charlotte's death. 'The moral of the story,' Salomon wrote to Nathan, was that money and honour meant nothing. Man should give up his pride and stop kidding himself. He was just mud and dust. Another bank might well have been tempted to terminate Leopold's privileged treatment, but Salomon insisted on the contrary. As far as the British press was concerned, the Prince of Coburg could stay in London and remain an important person. They should even show more friendliness towards a man who was going through such difficult times. Nathan therefore provided the unfortunate prince with a life insurance. The continuing friendship with 'your Coburg' proved an extremely wise strategy, beneficial to both parties. Between 1837 and 1842 the Frankfurt branch of the House of Rothschild lent 3.5 million guilders to the Saxe-Coburgs. That was only one element, however, in a growing entanglement of the Rothschild and Coburg politics. The spectacular rise of the Coburgs on various thrones in Europe was unfailingly supported by the Rothschilds.[115]

At the Claremont estate, there was a forester's cottage with gothic gables that dated back to the time of Queen Elizabeth and the sulphur spring that had once been in use still had a gothic border. As Claremont was crown property, Leopold decided to increase his personal possessions. He bought a number of very large estates, including three or four farms, a tree nursery and a big oak wood near Leatherhead. In Leopold's eyes, a man had to have something he could call 'his own'. His mother Augusta felt that something really beautiful could be made of the 'romantic isolation' of his properties. The prince did, indeed, attempt to fight his mourning depression by managing his estates and farms. His 'rural pastimes' were the only thing that actually interested him at all. He got up at eight. If the weather was good, he went hunting between nine thirty and noon, generally alone, with his dog Perdrix as his only companion. He only killed to provide for his own modest table. The prince needed exercise; otherwise he was unable to sleep. In the evening he generally dined with Hardenbroek and Stockmar. Then wrote letters in his study until ten o'clock and got Stocky to read to him before retiring.[116]

Leopold considered his life to be not particularly pleasant, but he would be content if there were somewhere a creature who was dear to him. Two years after Charlotte's death Leopold began to long for a woman again. When his brother-in-law wished him a happy twenty-ninth birthday, he did not beat about the bush: At his age, the senses were not inclined to follow the philosophy of the mind. But in his situation it was, naturally, extremely difficult to do anything on that score. On the other hand, complete abstinence exposed him 'surprisingly strongly' to temptation. In time, it would become unbearable, but he was afraid to take any steps. Who knew what the consequences

114 Stockmar 1872, 6; Leopold to Johann of Austria, 6 April 1819 (Corti en Buffin 1927, 52).
115 Ferguson 1998a, 156–157.
116 Furstenheim 1988, 80-1.

might be? He had to urge his sister to discretion. She was inclined to confide in anyone at all in a spontaneous fit of peak. She did not think about the fact that family affairs found their way into the press and could be used against him.[117]

Leopold may have been a desirable widower, but he was gaining the reputation of being boring and ponderous, 'borne down by the weight of his rank'. The young widowed prince would not survive in England, noted court chronicler Charles Greville in his later famous diary. Everyone was polite to him as a result of the attention he had received in Charlotte's time, attention that had not yet waned. Leopold was doing no harm, but he was not 'a man of wit and letters' either.[118] Princess Lieven described him in her letters to Metternich as a deadly boring and slightly touched know-all. His sister Victoire found him wearingly irritating, slow on the uptake, indecisive and exasperatingly absent-minded. Charlotte's death had made him morose, sombre and gloomy. He had become awkward with women and so tedious that his mistresses all quickly left him. The courtesan Lady Ellenborough, who had seduced him with two red rosebuds from her corsage, was glad of the chance to escape into the arms of Felix of Schwarzenberg, then a prince in the service of the Austrian Embassy, who was to become minister of foreign affairs in 1848. Leopold had lost the art of loving. He may have retained his sexual appetite, but his feelings were dead and his capacity for loving exhausted.

The years from Charlotte's death at the end of 1817 until the 1820s, between his thirtieth and fortieth birthdays, were certainly not the most active in Leopold's life. In her diary and letters, mother Augusta often expressed her annoyance at his sombreness and apathy. Leopold's 'malaise' bothered her more than she could say. 'Good God, what does he actually want?' It was a heavy cross to bear that this healthy man was always bored, wherever he was.[119] Leopold travelled around Europe, studying the political morals and customs. 'I have travelled far over the world', he wrote to the ten-year-old Victoria, 'and shall be able to give you some curious information about various matters'.[120] He lost himself in malacology, the study of shells, which says something about the way he spent his time.

In mid-August 1818, the inconsolable and much aged prince considered it time to visit his roots. When he boarded ship in Dover he was surprised and touched by the crowds that came to wave him off. He travelled via Calais and Lyon to Geneva and Chamonix, then spent the entire month of September with Julie at Elfenau. His doctors had prescribed a change of air in the mountains. Leopold hardly said a word, Julie read his silence and attempted to distract him by showing him the rare flowers he had sent and were now blooming beautifully in her gardens on the banks of the Aar. Leopold remained distanced and apathetic. He was immensely grateful to his sister and Rudolf von Schiferli for their firm friendship and caring during that initial difficult period. In the meantime, he was promoting his own and Julie's interests with the Rothschilds. He made a detour via Lake Lucerne to meet up with Wilhelm of Prussia and planned a meeting with Tsar Alexander. Relations with the Russian court had been put on a back burner since his marriage in England.

It was not until 6 October 1818 that the young widower arrived in Coburg. Augusta was greatly shocked to see the change in her darling son. Time would heal the wounds, but he would bear the scars to the grave. Although it was possible to see how much he suffered, Leopold was not so depressed as to neglect to think about the future. In early December, without telling his mother

117 Leopold to Mensdorff-Pouilly, 3 January 1820; Leopold to Sophie, 1 August 1824 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 175, 175; 180-181).

118 The Greville Memoirs 1899, I, 23.

119 Augusta's diary (RA, VIC/MAIN/M26-31).

120 Leopold to Victoria, 20 April 1829 (Benson & Esher 1907, I, 42).

beforehand, he took 'Julchen' to Münnerstadt, where they met the tsar and obtained the promise that Anna Feodorovna need have no concerns. Back in Coburg, the confrontation with Ernst, his six-month-old nephew, was a heavy blow for him. He went hunting with his brother in Thüringen Woods and gave good advice to his vivacious sister-in-law Louise, who was showing the first signs of disinterest in her husband. It is to that period that the rumour can be traced that Leopold might be the father of Albert, who was born at the end of August 1819. Leopold also had many interesting conversations with Ferdinand, his other brother, in Coburg. His marriage had made Ferdinand a man of means, with a great deal of influence at the Viennese court.

In March 1819 Leopold and his mother visited Amorbach, where his pregnant sister Victoire was then still living with Edward Duke of Kent. On the way back, he stayed with the King of Bavaria in Munich and with the King of Württemberg in Stuttgart before making his way to Paris through Bern and Besançon. He spent a week with Louis XVIII, who had tears in his eyes when he spoke of Charlotte. On his mourning trip Leopold visited not only his family, in other words, but a whole string of crowned heads as well, reinforcing his political network on the continent. His almost nine-month absence had done nothing do diminish his popularity, however. That much was clear at the end of May 1819, when he was met by crowds of people in Dover and the next day the press made much of the fact that he still looked extremely affected.

On his return to beautiful, forlorn Claremont Leopold experienced existential distress, which shook his precarious self-control. Charlotte's room, which had remained untouched since her death, confronted him all the more with his loss. To him, a new year was a concealed enemy to be fought. He no longer had any zest for life, despite attempts to interest himself in all kinds of things and to escape the superficial pleasures of the London society surrounding him.[121] During the summer, Leopold took an extensive trip around the North of England and Scotland. Sir Walter Scott, who had just published *Ivanhoe*, received him at Abbotsford House. As were Albert and Victoria later, he was enchanted by the wild beauty of the Highlands and the colourfulness of the 'strong, but poor people'. On his trip, Leopold was impressed by the social evils in Great Britain. He observed that 'real need and unemployment' lay at the root of the social unrest. Demagogs exploited that in their own interest, but the government's policy of meeting violence with violence could not produce lasting results in his view. Positive measures were needed to alleviate the 'unnatural situation'. His father-in-law was not amused by Leopold's trip. The prince lost credit in governmental circles, but he remained popular with the middle classes and the people, not least because of his demonstrations of social sympathy.[122]

In July 1821, after the coronation of George IV, whose fury he was unable to abate, Leopold travelled to Coburg via Paris. He followed his sixty-four-year-old mother, who had had a slight heart attack, to Italy, 'the land of her imagination' to spend the winter there. The fact that he failed to appease the king largely explains his urge to travel. While travelling, he could act more freely with women than in England, where he constantly felt under scrutiny by the press. Leopold celebrated his thirty-first birthday in Genoa with his mother, his sister Julie and Rudolf Schiferli. The beauty of the city moved him and he was delighted with his apartment by the sea. According to Augusta it was a wonderful '*célébration*': A breakfast of hot chocolate, potatoes and sausages, followed by riding '*magnifiquement*' in three rented carriages to Villa Durazzo, a seventeenth-century villa with a view of the Santa Margherita Ligure. She sat writing in the shade of a big olive tree while the others climbed the hill to see the villa. And that on 16 December! After the

121 Leopold to Liverpool, 29 June 1818 (BBL, Liverpool Papers, 38190); Leopold to Schiferli, 1 November 1818, 25 July 1819 (Alville 1942, 103–105); Augusta's diary, 6 October, 5 December 1818 (RA, M30); Fürstenheim 1988, 74-77.
122 Grey 1867, 390; Leopold to Johann, 11 January 1820 (Fürstenheim 1988, 78).

promenade there was a delicious lunch at Julie's. Finally, they took tea with Lady Linsey, Count Palavicini and his wife and Vilette Obrist, the gossipmonger, who was indispensible at a tea party. 'Pold' revived in the 'lush Mediterranean countryside' and the unspoiled, informal summer green in an English landscape park, the ancient olive trees, laurels, pines, oaks and cypresses, water gardens with little bridges... The botanical garden at Villa Grimaldi exceeded all his expectations. He had never seen such a huge rosemary bush as the one in the rocky ruins of St. Kloster, which was 'quite a flower factory'. He visited villas and palaces, admired the art and the sea view but – to his mother's great consternation – left Genoa to travel on to Rome and Naples before New Year's Eve. The little family '*Kreiss*' had made her so happy.[123] In Naples Leopold spoke Italian with King Ferdinand of The Two Sicilies and met with the cream of European aristocracy. Augusta suspected he had a lover there. In any event, he stayed longer than planned. Life there was so cheap and it was 'exceptionally beautiful: Nature has such a shine and sparkle, as if it were continually sporting its best attire'. Moreover, Leopold was able to enjoy himself picking up archaeological finds and shells and fossils for his collection.[124]

Leopold remained on the continent for a total of seventeen months, again promoting all kinds of financial and familial interests in Vienna, Frankfurt and Paris. On his return to England in January 1823, however, there was no crowd of journalists waiting for him on the quay. The prince was no longer a public figure and therefore less in the spotlight. He was not disappointed and even dared to fall in love a little with Lady Emmeline Manners, the daughter of the Duke of Rutland, who was barely eighteen years old. With her impulsiveness and independence, she reminded him a great deal of Charlotte and he felt strongly attracted to her. His love was reciprocated. Her parents thought he would propose, especially when he paid them a visit on 6 November, the anniversary of Charlotte's death. Leopold was not considering marriage, however; he did not have it in him and he told them he was financially not in a position to re-marry and start a family. After all, his allowance and the right to Claremont ceased on his death. Emmeline was terribly disappointed, but she gained from the experience and later on, as a mother of three, she was to publish numerous collections of poems and travel stories, some featuring her adventures in the Orient, as one of the first British women to travel to the East.[125]

During the summer of 1825, Augusta made the crossing to England. She travelled via Mainz, where the Mensdorff family had moved after the 'son-in-law of her heart' had been made an army officer there. Julie and Dr Schiferli were there, too. She went to the spa resort of Wiesbaden, which was to become one of Leopold's favourite destinations when he was king of the Belgians. In comparison with Augusta's first visit, the town had become unbelievably more beautiful, with new houses and a truly wonderful ballroom. She could feel the boredom at the balls where too many ladies sat on long rows of chairs waiting for one of the handful of men to ask them to dance. 'Delicious promenades' had also been laid out. Augusta saw 'people of every class' strolling there, more Frankfurt and Mainz residents than resort visitors. Including the entire Rothschild family, 'whose money ruled the world in the strictest sense of the word'. Via Aken, Augusta travelled in the company of her grandson Carl of Leiningen to Liège – 'a beautiful big city' – and from there to Sint-Truiden, Tienen and Louvain to Brussels. The villages were neat and tidy, but not picturesque; one was hardly aware of how flat the land was it was so covered with buildings and woods. Brussels was one of the cities most worth seeing, in Augusta's eyes, with the Royal Palace and the Grande Place as the highlights. The Dutch royal family was in Laken, so they could only see the castle and gardens from a distance. Above all, she was taken with the 'sweetest' house with a garden and wood

123 Augusta to Ernst, 8, 21, 23, 24 December 1821, Augusta's travel diary, 29 December 1821, 5 April 1824 (Bachmann 2006, 169–173, 175, 283).

124 Leopold to Johann, 15 May 1822 (Fürstenheim 1988, 88-89)

125 Fürstenheim 1988, 94; 104-105.

that Willem I had given his son Frederik as a wedding present - Augusta was probably referring to the little castle in Tervuren.

In Brabant the Dutch neatness came to an end and Rijsel looked really French. Up until Saint-Omer the surroundings remained pretty but thereafter the villages and woods were more poor and bare. From Mount Kassel Augusta had a 'truly indescribable' view of an endless hinterland. She could clearly recognise Dunkirk, Ostend, Bruges and Calais. From Ardres to Calais it was a trek through dune sands, cold and windy. She slept in the best room at Hotel Dessin, where Leopold was to spend the night six years later during his journey to Belgium. His aide-de-camp Sir Henry Seton came to fetch Augusta. The North Sea failed to provide any view of the Mediterranean Sea: It was ebb tide and all she could see was a damp beach and, in the distance, the roaring sea. When she returned three months later, Augusta found the Netherlands too boring. Actually, after England the Netherlands were not worth seeing. The countryside and art were far more beautiful in England.[126]

Augusta was received with a canon salute in the port of Dover, where William the Conqueror had built his dark castle on the chalk cliffs. She was in England! As soon as you set foot on land, you could see how different it was: the architecture, the way of living and the manners of the people. Everything was different to this experienced traveller who had been just about all over Europe. During the trip to Canterbury in an open coach, the surroundings became even more beautiful. She would have liked to pack up the most insignificant of country cottages and take them with her. During her first – and last – visit to England Augusta stayed for ten days in Kensington Palace with Victoire, whom she had not seen in seven years. The rest of the time – almost two months – she stayed at Claremont with Leopold. 'Little Victoria' was often there, too. Her grandmother described her as a trifle shy with red cheeks: a pretty, strong, really English child who looked a lot like her noble father and was already as friendly as he. Claremont was an 'Elysium' in Augusta's eyes, too. The very first evening she took Leopold into the park, to cool off. There, she experienced a magical dusk. Everything was so calm, so quiet, only the trees rustling in the evening air and a big pond glistening in the silvery light of the moon. She was staying in Charlotte's dressing room and was unable to sleep for the painful memories and the tears welling up in her eyes. During her stay at Claremont Augusta often saw Charlotte, who had 'now slept for almost nine years', before her in the first 'flush of her brief happy marriage', 'she, the pride, the hope of the country!' She wept over her all morning. Augusta realised with regret that she would not be seeing the beautiful park again herself. She would never forget Leopold's love and care in making things to her liking at his charming Claremont.

The park at Claremont was so big that Augusta, who liked to walk there every day, often lost her way. The beauty of the ancient trees, which grew fuller and more perfectly in the humid maritime climate than on the continent, entranced her. Only in a country where they burned coal did the trees retain their own beauty in such a way. Some stands of trees dated from the time when Claremont was still part of the royal forest of Hampton Court, when Henry VIII lived there and met Anne Boleyn. It was only an hour's ride. Claremont was even more beautiful in autumn than in summer. But the grandiose Kensington Gardens in London, where Victoire lived with Victoria, exceeded Augusta's expectations. They had three large suites and a big dining room, with the loveliest view of a vast lawn with a water garden where you could easily imagine people from the time of William III walking. The king had had the wonderful woods and lanes laid out a hundred years previously, while Hyde Park and St. James's Park were still big barren pastures. On 12 August 1825, *The Morning Chronicle* reported on Augusta's tour of Royal London: through Hyde Park and

126 Augusta's travel diary, 26 June 1825, 22–26 July 1825, 30 September 1825 (Bachmann 2006, 328, 333–335).

over Constitution Hill past Buckingham Palace, which George IV had had built to live in, and Marlborough House, Leopold's London residence, along Pall Mall, the magnificent Regent Street full of palaces stretching out endlessly into the blue. Marlborough House was a splendid palace, rather dark, with the State Rooms on the ground floor, which was extremely comfortable. Big rooms, with carmine red furniture and a lot of damask, beautiful paintings, perfectly suited to large gatherings. A black marble, extremely sombre staircase led to the first floor, where Leopold lived. His rooms looked out over St James's Park, the Thames and Westminster Abbey.

Granddaughter Victoria sometimes had to ride with Augusta in the open coach, which the '*schönes Kind*' did not like at all. Her grandmother so loved to see the sweet girl riding up so seriously on her little donkey. She was an 'unusually amiable child, so sensible and so courteously friendly'. Victoria later attributed the astuteness in the female line of her family to 'Grandmamma'.

The family celebrated Victoire's thirty-ninth birthday on 17 August with a boat trip on the Thames. Augusta was able to view London's bustling historic city centre from the water. The yacht, which belonged to the Admiralty, sailed under the royal flag and also had Prince Leopold, the Duchess of Kent, Carl and Feodora on board. More than the obligatory sights, it was the high chimneys of breweries and factories that caught Augusta's attention; they looked like little towers with their black smoke hanging like a cloud over the flow. After London Bridge, there were ships aplenty sailing from the gigantic city to every part of the world. The Thames became wider and wider and the banks began to resemble the quays of a great sea port. It was only when they reached Greenwich's West-India Docks that Augusta fully realised that a new era had dawned. At that moment, the warehouses held 148,562 crates of sugar, 70,000 baskets of cane sugar, 435,038 crates of loose cocoa and spices, 35,158 crates of Madeira wine, 14,820 logs of mahogany and 21,663 logs of coloured woods – an equivalent of 15 to 17 million pounds sterling. And that was without counting the East-India dock in the city and the docks for Europe. 'What an immeasurable wealth this giant metropolis holds!' she sighed, marvelling at the working of the enormous locks. All these 'gigantic mechanical works of art' must give the English a high opinion of themselves and their nation, thought Augusta. She was well aware that industrialisation and modernisation had their price. St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster rose like shadows from the grey fog that 'eternally shrouded' the London sunset. The further the sun set, the more fiery the fog became, seemingly setting the city aflame. The London smog weighed on her chest.

Augusta was glad to be back in the fresh air of Claremont. After all, the Londoners' building frenzy was swiftly changing the natural landscape that had made her so lyrical. At Waterloo Bridge she remembered what Casanova had said about being willing travel to England just to see that bridge. London was the city of superlatives: the gothic beauty of Westminster Abbey, the famous and frightening Tower (which they was allowed to enter as a great exception), the wonderfully empty St. Paul's without any embellishment, the steam boats and the three-masters, the stagecoaches drawn by four horses in which as many as eighteen passengers were packed together as if in a moving house, the busy traffic in the hive of the City... Augusta associated the quietness of the city with a higher form of decency... The English did not shout as loudly in the street as Italians or Germans. Even the English children behaved in a more civilised manner and were less noisy than the shrieking German children. In short, 'England was the most beautiful, most cultivated country in the world'.[127]

Augusta observed the way Leopold filled his days at Claremont and Marlborough House with the aristocratic pleasures of tea parties, dining, walking, listening to music, opera, theatre and

127 Augusta's travel diary, 28 July 1825 (Bachmann 2006, 319–322, 335).

coach rides. His intimate circle of friends included Sir Robert Gardiner, Lord George Canning, Christopher and Dorothea Lieven, Count Esterházy, members of the royal family and the *beau monde*. Marie Amélie of Bourbon-Sicily, the wife of Louis-Philippe, his good friend and later mother-in-law, whom he regularly visited in Paris or Neuilly, wrote with sympathy in her diary that Leopold was condemned to 'inactivity, which was so contrary to his capabilities and remarkable intelligence'.[128] In any event, he was self-deprecating when he wrote to her after a visit to Neuilly that she was now rid of the 'bore' that he was in person, but would not be spared the lesser evil of far too long a letter. He could never return to his 'dear, beautiful and sad' Claremont without emotion. What a contrast with the joyful company in France, where he had so enjoyed the many voices. Here, everything was silence and loneliness. His good old dog had come to meet him at the foot of the hill and his faithful eyes had expressed the sadness of not being able to say how glad he was that his master was back. His two other companions were a rare parrot that kept entirely silent and a friendly, talking counterpart, which made an incredible effort to whistle '*Der Freischütz*'. It was bitterly cold outside, so Leopold's chief occupation was tending the hearth. Nonetheless, he assured Marie Amélie that he had endeavoured not to be lazy since his return to England. The prince was dreading having to go back to London the next day for the Drawing Room, the royal morning reception, which promised to be a terrible ordeal. He was expected to appear as a Knight of the Garter. He could already feel his poor shoulders suffering: apart from his incredibly heavy embroidered suit, he was obliged to wear the order's three chains. Someone practised might be able to walk around like that, but he would have to remain standing for four or five hours.[129]

Later, after taking the oath in Belgium, Leopold himself was to describe the decade after Charlotte's death as torture. The fact that he was cut off from all activity, in particular, was difficult for him. As king of the Belgians, despite all the unpleasantness he experienced, he even put on weight, as 'all things considered' he was 'doing something useful'.[130]

In 1820, he was able to buy Niederfüllbach Castle, five kilometres to the south of Coburg. When he became king of the Belgians, Niederfüllbach became crown property and it would remain so until 1907, when Leopold II incorporated it into the Niederfüllbacher Stiftung, a private foundation where he also parked his income from the Congo out of sight of the Belgian parliament.

As a young widower, father Leopold often spent the summer in Niederfüllbach. In 1828 he courted the young Berlin opera diva Karoline Bauer, who also came from Coburg. There are indications that she became his wife. The memorial plaque in the castle gardens erected in his honour mentions a marriage, although no act or other document has survived to support the fact. According to some sources, it was pocketed by Stockmar, who was Karoline's cousin. It was best not to publicise the marriage between a prince and an opera singer, for more than financial reasons alone. If there was any marriage, then it was a morganatic or left-handed marriage, in which the wife and any children of the union did not share in the rights associated with the husband's aristocratic standing. Leopold supposedly granted Karoline Bauer the title of Countess of Montgomery.

He first met the talented, lively Karoline in September 1828 in Potsdam, where he was the guest of King Friedrich Wilhelm III. To entertain the prince, the Prussian court put on a musical comedy, in which Karoline appeared as a Hottentot. He could not keep his opera glasses off her. The physical likeness to Charlotte was so 'miraculous' that Leopold thought he had rediscovered

128 Augusta's travel diary, late July – August 1825 (Bachmann 2006, 336); Journal de Marie Amélie 1943, III, 4.
129 Leopold to Marie Amélie, 21 April 1828 (AKP, Cabinet Leopold II, Supplement, XIIIb).
130 Leopold to Sophie, 20 April 1833 (Puraye & Lang 1973, 239).

the love of his life. Leopold may well have been the model for Georges Rodenbach's widower who, in Bruges-la-Morte (1892), feels he has gained new life by meeting a dancer who, on closer acquaintance, is not at all like his late wife. Karoline let herself be seduced by his dark looks and subtle half-smile. In her seventeen-years-younger eyes, he seemed like a pedantic professor, a dry old bachelor, with his painfully pomaded pitch-black hair, his tired pale face and his slow way of talking. Bauer's memory, which she only put to paper at the age of seventy, is clearly coloured her by the rather unflattering photographs of an older Leopold. In 1828 Leopold was only thirty-eight, while in her memoirs she makes a fifty-year-old of him. In any event, portraits and witnesses of his early period as king of the Belgians give a more flourishing image, even if it was because he then felt far more active and useful than when he was killing time in Potsdam. Karoline wanted to rescue the sorrowful, heavily-tested man from his 'gilded isolation'. She felt deep sympathy and wanted to cheer him up, make him happy. Reluctantly, she gave up her theatre and opera career to follow him expectantly to England, together with her mother. The decision to leave Berlin and the stage for a future in solitude was hard for her. It was his melancholy eyes that convinced her and the promise of a discrete morganatic marriage. Nonetheless, Stockmar warned her about those eyes and about the uncertainty of her position in England. Leopold was still the mourning widower of the crown princess. Anything that harmed that image could cost him not only his standing, but also his allowance. Stockmar, however, hoped that with the help of the young bloom the prince would regain his lust for life.[131]

A 'perfect paradise' awaited Karoline in London, in the form of a sweet little cottage in Regent's Park, complete with flower garden and billiard room. The romantic prince kept her waiting, though. Eight months had passed since he had visited her in Coburg, but that long time had not fanned the flames of longing; on the contrary. The spark had already died for Leopold. He did not embrace the astonished Karoline when he saw her again, or even shake hands. The only friendly thing he said was that her cheeks had tanned so nicely in the spring sunshine. He was never to address her as '*du*'. In the weeks that followed, he paid her a daily formal visit. 'Lina' then had to play the piano and read aloud, while he endlessly occupied himself quite seriously with 'drizzling'. It was all the rage at the time, the favourite pastime of society women, with the émigrés flown over from France where it was called *parfilage*, a fashion that had begun at the court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. Leopold, too, amused himself with pulling the gold and silver threads out of epaulettes and braiding to then pulverise them in his elegant turtle skin drizzling box. Gentlemen could do ladies no greater pleasure than to give them a couple of golden tassels from their uniform. The product of drizzling was sold once it amounted to enough gold for a ring or a medallion, enough silver for a terrine. Karoline was scornful of the fact that in the year they were in England His Highness had drizzled enough together for a stately silver soup terrine, which he ceremoniously handed to his niece Princess Victoria of Kent for her ninth birthday on 24 May 1830.

Bauer's memoirs mention an improvised wedding ceremony without a priest, in July 1829. The flames of the romance flared again briefly, with them singing duets and played billiards together. They toasted with champagne to a happy reunion in Paris the coming autumn. The prince arrived late, though, and - for the sake of discretion - booked rooms in another hotel. He moaned endlessly about his health, even though he had just returned from the spa resort of Karlsbad.

Back in England at the end of 1829, the Bauers were accommodated at Longwood House, a desolate villa close to Claremont. Leopold soon fell back into his old habits. The ceaseless grinding

131 Karoline Bauer to Stockmar, January 1829 (von Wangenheim 1996, 76–77); Bauer 2005 [1884], II, 298.

of the drizzling box now became utterly intolerable. As time went on, Karoline sank into depression and could not deny that she had forgotten how to smile. She felt like a state prisoner, ashamed of her not exactly respectable, concealed status and peeved about the wonderful years of her young life she had sacrificed to keep a loveless hypochondriac company. By June 1830 it had become too much for her. She burst into a temper and left, going back to the opera stage, back to real life. As an old diva she wrote her memoirs, which were published after her death in 1878 in three volumes, full of poignant, humorous observations, but quite bitter where Leopold was concerned. According to Lord Ponsonby, private secretary to Queen Victoria at the time, Bauer was lying. Nevertheless, he had to admit that the striking descriptions of Leopold accurately represented the old man with his wig. The publication did not fundamentally damage the Belgian monarchy, although the French edition of *Verschlossene Herzengeschichte* caused a scandal. The story of the morganatic marriage was dismissed as the trivial imaginings of a frustrated actress and not worth mentioning.[132]

Was the monotonous droning of the drizzling box the metaphor for the boredom and lethargy Leopold fell prey to after Charlotte's death? Looking back fifty years later, writing her memoirs Karoline Bauer must have still stifled a yawn. In 1819 Leopold had told his good friend Archduke Johann of Austria that he would not let the pain get him down. He wanted to look to the future and gain courage, find the strength to bear the suffering of the world. That energy and the conviction that it was his duty to do good on earth kept him going. His hopes of devoting himself to a noble cause had not yet been dashed, so he would keep going and make himself useful. Ten years on, he was far from succeeding. In late November 1830 he went to London to relieve the tedium for a few days, as his evenings were so sad all alone at Claremont.[133] Was it his failure that made Leopold so gloomy? The only project he could cling to was his 'dearest love' Victoria and perhaps the vague hope of being able to rule as regent before she ascended the throne. Until his name began to be mentioned more expressly in connection with the kingship of Greece. That would finally activate him and give him the noble political destiny he felt he deserved. Leopold's eagerness resulted in major blunders in the diplomatic game, however. He accepted the Greek throne, only to renounce it again three months later, before even setting foot on Greek soil. That was what Karoline Bauer posthumously blamed Prince Leopold and her cousin Stockmar for: the fact that Leopold was reaching for the Greek throne with one hand and, with the other, taking her to England with him as his secret lover. After all, she had been unaware of the negotiations already underway when she gave her last performance in Potsdam and sacrificed her career and reputation for the pedantic Leopold. When she finally congratulated him on his forthcoming status as king of Greece during one of his boring visits, she could hardly conceal her indignation at his response. He calmly stated that he hoped the mild climate would be better for his health than the eternal mists of England. Breathing the soft air and strolling through the myrtle and the orange woods was a most agreeable prospect. Leopold waxed lyrical about the blue and white striped tents he told her he had already ordered. He could see himself lying there with beautiful Greek women singing sweet folk songs and performing fantastic dances. Karoline would rather have heard a lie, some explanation, an apology, some show of regret at the forthcoming parting. But the 'fossilised egoist with his shrivelled up heart' showed no sign of attachment to her or concern for her future. On the contrary, with the same composure as he had talked about the royal tents, he did a rundown of all the European princesses, calmly selecting a queen for himself. Not only did Karoline feel personally deeply injured and humiliated; her judgement of Leopold's attitude in the Greek affair was also politically damning. In her eyes, his longing for the sparkling king's crown and the *dolce far niente* beneath silken tents in the soft air reconfirmed the prince's weakness. And so the flamboyant

132 Bauer 1880–1881; Kuhn 2002, 50.

133 Leopold to Johann of Austria, 4 February 1819 (Corti & Buffin 1927, 50); Leopold to Augusta, 29 November 1830 (Kirschen 1988, 177).

actress who had sacrificed herself for him body and soul a year before left *Marquis Peu-à-Peu* who, after much procrastination, finally turned down the Greek throne a month later.