

Podcast The lost letters of Britain's last warrior Queen: Henrietta Maria

Sixteen warships hunted Henrietta Maria through a stormy north-sea. In February 1643, forty years after Elizabeth I's golden age, England was at war with itself. Charles I was fighting parliament and their navy wanted to capture his queen. The bad weather cloaked her disembarkment on the Yorkshire coast – but Henrietta Maria was not yet safe.

At five a.m parliament's navy entered Bridlington Bay and fired on the cottage where she slept. 'The balls were whistling upon me', she told Charles. She grabbed her clothes, and dashed with her ladies to the shelter of a ditch, clutching her dog, Mitte. The shot, 'singing around us in fine style', killed a sergeant twenty paces away. His body lay 'torn and mangled with their great shot' as they lay in the ditch, 'the balls passing over our heads and sometimes covering us with dust'. It was two hours before the tide turned and the ships were forced back out to sea.

No other spoilt princess of Europe had to face such dangers. But Henrietta Maria was every inch a daughter of the warrior, Henri IV of France – and not just in courage. She also 'had infinite wit and a brilliant mind' a French courtier recalled. Yet this is not how history remembers her. Henrietta Maria's reputation is lost in the eye of a storm of sexist tropes.

I am the historian Leanda de Lisle, uncovering the Tudors and Stuarts behind the myths

Women were judged creatures of emotion, not reason, and it often seems she has never been allowed to grow up from her childhood to the mature political operator she became. It is also women who, in ancient Greek and Christian myth, brought evil into the world. Ugliness is symbolic of sin, and she is described even when young, with her appearance as a sick woman in middle age, while simultaneously being cast as a

seductive Eve to Charles's Adam, leading the king astray.

The voice of a very different Henrietta Maria emerges in never before published letters kept hidden in the closed archives of Belvoir castle. It is the voice of a living woman, as she grows from a distressed child bride to a warrior queen.

When Henrietta Maria arrived in England in 1625 she was the first French princess of marry an English King since Margaret of Anjou in 1445. Like Margaret she was only fifteen, but like Margaret she was also seen as a child of the enemy. In 1445 England was losing the Hundred Years War with France; in 1625 the England's Protestant co-religionists were being defeated in Europe by Counter Reformation forces.

England's new Catholic queen was a 'lovely creature', with 'large, black eyes.', her 'teeth pretty' and 'big mouth..nicely made'. But tensions between England and France were reflected in quarrels with her young husband. Charles's mentor, his father's favourite, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, exacerbated their differences. In 1626 Charles replaced many of Henrietta Maria's closest friends and ladies in waiting with Buckingham's female relations, and a woman reputed to be Buckingham's mistress: Lucy, Countess of Carlisle. It was said that Buckingham wanted to place Lucy as Charles's mistress too.

In an early letter from the closed Belvoir archive, written to the banished head of her ecclesiastical retinue, Henrietta Maria expresses herself with all the drama a young teenager can muster. Watched over constantly, she complains she has had to hide to write to him, 'like a prisoner who cannot talk to anyone, neither to describe my misfortunes, nor to call upon God to pity a poor, tyrannized princess to do something to alleviate her suffering'. Miserably, she announces 'I am the most afflicted person on earth'. She begs him to talk to her mother 'and reveal to her my woes'. 'I say Adieu to you' she continues, 'and to my friend St George, to the Countess of Tillieres, and all the women and girls who [I know] have not forgotten me. I have not forgotten them either'. She fears her heart will break, 'Is there any remedy for my

suffering, which is killing me? Goodbye bitterness. Goodbye to those from whose actions I will die if God does not have pity on me'.

Henrietta Maria told Charles she would have nothing to do with Lucy Carlisle. But within a few months, Lucy had become the queen's great favourite. Henrietta Maria's mother, Marie de Medici, had ruled France as regent, and, even at sixteen, Henrietta Maria was a political animal. She had made Charles's would-be royal mistress an ally, and was using the influential Lucy in a pro French diplomatic strategy.

Although the story of Charles's reign has traditionally been given a very masculine focus, the women around Charles were as powerful and fascinating as any at the Tudor courts.

As Henrietta Maria matured into a young woman, so her relationship with Charles also improved. Then, in the summer of 1628, came the assassination of the widely hated Buckingham. Letters to Marie de Medici about gardens, pictures, clothes and matters of diplomacy, now turned to her personal account of the fatal attack.

Buckingham was 'killed with a knife', she told her mother, his only words were 'I am dead', and his unrepentant murderer was saying repeatedly that he 'has done well'.

With Buckingham gone, the king and queen grew still closer, and in 1630 their son, the future Charles II, was born. Charles's letter to his mother in law reveals him sitting with his newly delivered wife, who is telling him she wants to add a few words, to show her mother she is recovering well. He passes her his note and what follows is the very shaky handwriting of the exhausted queen, 'Your most humble and most obedient daughter and servant, Henriette Marie'

Puritans came to see the deep love of the royal couple as a threat. They disliked the ceremonial style of Protestantism that Charles preferred over their stripped down Calvinism, and they blamed the influence of the queen. 'Ordinary women can, in the night time, persuade their husbands to give them new gowns' so might not the queen,

they asked, ‘ by her night discourses, incline the king to Popery?’ This was quite untrue. Charles was a passionate Protestant. But it served to tarnish him.

When Charles’s religious reforms triggered rebellion in Presbyterian Scotland, the rebels’ allies in England used Henrietta Maria’s Catholic faith as a means of further tarring the king. She was trolled from the pulpits as a ‘Popish brat of France’ and as hatred against Catholics fanned to new heights, so mobs were sent to attack her house. In February 1641 she wrote a letter to the French Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, terrified that she faced her ‘ruin on earth’. Buckingham had warned her years before that, ‘there had been queens in England who had lost their heads’. Now her letter prepared the ground for her possible flight to Paris.

The following October a Catholic rebellion broke out in Ireland. The massacres of Protestant settlers were used by Charles’s enemies to recruit to their cause, with fake news spinning further atrocity stories and pointing the finger of blame at the queen. In February 1642, on the eve of the civil war, Henrietta Maria left for Holland with her daughter Mary, the new bride of William of Orange.

Charles was said to have been the only English monarch ever crowned in white. To his enemies, he was now the ‘White King’ of ancient prophecy, a doomed tyrant. To his supporters the white robes would instead become a symbol of his innocence. Today the popular image of Charles is just as extreme. It is of a weak and failed king. The real Charles was resilient and courageous: he would prove a tough enemy to beat in the conflict ahead: with Henrietta’s Maria help.

The Queen was not in Holland simply to save her own skin, but to act as Charles’s chief diplomat and party leader in Europe, as well as his arms buyer. It was a formidable task, and in the Dutch republic she faced anti-royalist prejudice. When she tried to sell royal jewels obstacles were put in her way. In one letter she warned Charles, ‘Dear Heart...can you send me a warrant under your hand, which gives me full power to deal with my jewellery, since the merchants say a woman cannot sell

jewellery during the lifetime of her husband'. Once they were sold she was confident she could 'buy gunpowder, arms and cannon here'.

Charles responded quickly and as she began using the money to buy arms, she also deployed her political skills to undermine parliament's efforts to gain European support for their cause. In a further letter Henrietta Maria informs the French foreign Minister, that 'The English rebels, under the name of Parliament' had sent an agent to Holland, claiming that 'the king and I' wanted to re-establish Catholicism in England: 'I hear they have also sent an agent to France on the same pretext of religion. Whoever he is I hope he will not be heard nor received, since he comes from rebels against God and against their king'.

There was no profound ethnic or religious hatred amongst the people of England and Wales. The numbers of Catholics were too few. The English civil war a war between Protestants over the nature the Church of England, and where the balance of power between king and parliament should lie. But Charles's enemies had not given up their narrative of Counter Reformation threat, with Henrietta Maria supposedly paving the way for a Catholic takeover.

The real threat was only to the rebels, and from the success of her diplomacy. In a later letter to the French minister, Henrietta Maria thanked him for 'the services you give me'. What kind of services is indicated months later when she expresses her gratitude for his stopping of a shipment of 'arms prepared for the rebels'.

The queen returned to England in February 1643 with men, money and arms. After her dangerous landing in Yorkshire she spent months raising royalist moral in the north, eating in sight of the soldiers, and recruiting men. The royalists had gained superiority in Yorkshire by late June when Charles called for her to join him in his war-time capital at Oxford.

Parliament sent cavalry to intercept the queen and her men, but she escaped again, and still en-route to meet Charles, the 'generalissima' (as she joking called herself) captured Burton on Trent in a 'bloody' and 'desperate' battle.

After the war turned against Charles in 1644 Henrietta Maria returned to France, and despite being seriously ill, she continued to raise money and arms. The defeat of the king at Naseby in Northamptonshire in 1645, proved, however, to be a decisive propaganda, as well as military, victory for his enemies. His correspondence was captured and thirty-seven letters between Charles and the queen were carefully chosen and edited to 'prove' that he was the mere vassal of a foreign, Catholic wife. These letters were published under the title the King's Cabinet Opened along with a commentary depicting Henrietta Maria as a trans-gender perversion of nature. It pointed to shocking examples of her mannishness, such as when 'you see she marcheth at the head of an army and calls herself the generalissima'! 'This' one parliamentary journalist wrote, 'is the Dear Heart which hath cost him almost three Kingdoms' and the true 'wearer of the breeches'.

The maxim 'cherchez la femme' (seek out the woman), already held true in England when looking for where to cast the blame for failures in male leadership. Margaret of Anjou had ridden with armies in defense of her mentally ill husband, Henry VI, during the Wars of the Roses. After he died he was judged a saint, while she was blamed for the wars and condemned by Shakespeare as a 'she wolf of France'.

After Charles's kingdoms were lost, and he was executed, he too was judged a saint. The title of Charles the Martyr is largely forgotten. Yet Henrietta Maria remains the caricature of parliamentary propaganda: the victim of our continued and unacknowledged sexual prejudices. Her real fault, as, Charles acknowledged, was merely 'that she is my wife'.

If you are interested in reading more about Charles I, and the continuation of the Tudor story under the Stuarts, you might enjoy my new biography *White King*:

Charles I, Traitor, Murderer, Martyr. It is now published in the United States, and will be released in the UK on 11 January 2018. And do feel free to ask me any questions via my website, facebook or twitter