



*Henrietta Maria:  
The Betrayed Queen*

**Dominic Pearce**  
Stroud: Amberley, 2015

**Review by: Andrea Zuvich**

*Henrietta Maria: The Betrayed Queen*. By Dominic Pearce. Stroud: Amberley, 2015. ISBN 978-1-4456-4547-6. 352 pp. £20.

**H**enrietta Maria, the controversial uncrowned queen consort of the equally provocative Charles I of England, Scotland, and Ireland, continues to have a reputation for shrewish obstinacy and religious bigotry, with little—if any—attention given to the more positive qualities of her character. The premise behind Dominic Pearce’s biography is that historians have betrayed the queen, because she has been largely ignored and/or disrespected. Pearce shows Henrietta Maria as a fully-fleshed person: her weaknesses and strengths are equally stated. The text is followed by a list of Henrietta Maria’s descendants, notes, a bibliography, acknowledgements, and an index.

The 2010s have seen a positive trend in biographies seeking to re-examine the Stuart monarchs of the seventeenth century, notably Mark Kishlansky’s *Charles I: An Abbreviated Life* (2014), and *White King: Charles I – Traitor, Murderer, Martyr* by Leanda de Lisle (2018). Such critical re-evaluations have led to studies that are more balanced and more aware of the complexities of the figures of the seventeenth-century Stuart dynasty than the prejudices of Whig historians have previously allowed. Pearce’s book is no exception and, while it competently adds to the scholarship of the Caroline period, it perhaps can be argued that it does not add a great deal more than what has already been written in other relatively recent works on or featuring Henrietta Maria, such as Alison Plowden’s *Henrietta Maria: Charles I’s Indomitable Queen* (2001), or Katie Whitaker’s *A Royal Passion: The Turbulent Marriage of King Charles I of England and Henrietta Maria of France* (2010). Nevertheless, it is Pearce’s emphasis upon Henrietta Maria’s childhood and upbringing in Catholic France that deserves attention, and is what sets it apart from previous works, for it puts Henrietta Maria in her rightful context: as a French Catholic princess, daughter, sister, and later aunt of French kings.

Indeed, Part One of Pearce’s six-part biography is dedicated to the wider picture of the Bourbons and Stuarts. Readers are transported—not merely to Henrietta Maria’s birth in 1609 and childhood—but earlier, to the sumptuous marriage celebrations in 1600 of her royal parents, Henri IV of France and Marie de Medicis. The assassination of Henrietta Maria’s father in May of 1610; the removal of Henrietta’s elder sister, Elisabeth, who left France to marry Philip IV of Spain, whilst her brother Louis XIII married the Spanish princess, Anne of Austria, in 1615; and Charles and the Duke of Buckingham’s adventurous journey to Spain in 1623, are among the peripheral, yet important, historical events that impacted the young princess. It is in the vivid descriptions of such historical occasions that Pearce is at his strongest.

All of the major secondary figures, such as Elisabeth of Valois, Elizabeth Stuart, and Frederick V of the Palatinate, among others, are prominently featured; somewhat surprisingly, the Flemish Baroque artist Rubens is also mentioned often throughout the book, as he was involved in several royal courts throughout Europe. When Charles's attempts to woo the Spanish Infanta came to nothing, he decided to marry Henrietta Maria. The union, which had begun for political gain, eventually became a love match.

The six chapters that comprise Part Two focus on the stormy beginning of the marriage between Charles and Henrietta Maria. Pearce emphasises the royal couple's shared love and admiration for art. Henrietta Maria's participation in masques—that entertainment so beloved of the Stuart monarchs—drew severe criticism from some circles, most notoriously from William Prynne in his *Histriomastix* of 1632 in which he referred to women who acted in plays as “notorious whores.” For this, he “was sentenced to have both ears cut off, to a fine of £5,000, and to life imprisonment” (122).

Eight chapters are devoted to the Civil Wars, which include Henrietta Maria's courageous leading of the army from York, “taking with her ... three thousand infantry, thirty companies of cavalry, six cannon and two mortars” (226). Henrietta Maria's sheer boldness in such dangerous times makes for striking reading: Pearce states that “sailing out of Falmouth, she ran into more parliamentary cannon ... she instructed the captain to set fire to his store of gunpowder so that she—and everyone else on board—would die in the explosion, rather than yield to Parliament” (300). Earlier, in 1643, the Commons had voted to impeach Henrietta Maria for treason, citing her “refusal to be crowned in 1626” (225). Upon learning that her husband was beheaded in 1649, she “went into a state of shock. She could not speak and could not move” (254).

The subject of numerous political pamphlets and a popular target of anti-Catholic rhetoric in her time, Henrietta Maria's Catholicism was unquestionably an important aspect of her identity and the reason behind many of her decisions, and it is no surprise that Pearce devotes time towards this topic. Her foreignness combined with her religion put her immediately at odds with some in the country. Her own beliefs aside, Pearce states, “oddly enough, Henrietta Maria had friends who were Puritan” (141). Occasionally, her religious convictions trumped her familial devotion, as was the case with the rupture between her youngest son, Henry, Duke of Gloucester, and herself. The young prince, having been a prisoner of Parliament for several years, had become a staunch Protestant: a fact that troubled Henrietta Maria greatly.

The final section of the book focuses on the last years of Henrietta Maria's life: a time that was bittersweet, for while the Restoration brought her son back from exile, she was also saddened by even more bereavement.

Smallpox claimed the lives of two of her children in quick succession: the aforementioned Henry, in September of 1660, and her eldest daughter, Mary, in December of that same year. Throughout the book, Pearce tackles and dismisses several of the most common rumours about Henrietta: for example, the rumour that she had a sexual relationship with her long-time favourite, Harry Jermyn (292).

In short, Dominic Pearce's biography is a vibrant and engrossing read, written in an erudite yet accessible manner that will enable readers both inside and outside the academic community to take a fresh look at this often-maligned queen.

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