

# H-Net Reviews

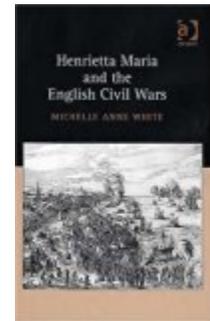
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michelle A. White. *Henrietta Maria And the English Civil Wars*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006. xiv + 224 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-3942-8.

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Commissioned by Brian G.H. Ditcham



## “Generalissima of all the traitours in Scotland, England and Ireland”?[1]

Much ink has been spilled concerning just how much influence the much-maligned Queen Henrietta Maria had over her husband, King Charles I, in the years leading up to and during what Michelle Anne White chooses to term the “English Civil Wars” (surprising, since her study of the queen is far more broadly based in terms of her relationships with other European powers).

From the start, the queen was regarded with suspicion, especially by those of a more Puritan and parliamentary sympathy, for the triple crimes of being, in descending order of importance, Catholic, foreign, and female. She was subjected to attack in the pamphlets, scandal sheets, and newspapers of the day, making it refreshing to see a writer who is willing to return to these primary sources and add to the recent scholarship on this important material. It is also pleasant to see another volume being added to the recent revival in the much-understudied topic of royalism which one hopes will move us away from the “wrong but romantic” view that has bedeviled the study of the wars of the three kingdoms for so long.[2]

Henrietta Maria was perceived as a failure by her early biographers, and later represented as a dominant, overbearing figure, totally in control of her husband’s thinking and political actions. Neither of these views is anything like true and more recent thinking tends to the idea that while the queen was influential, especially in her “court within a court” where Catholic thinking predominated, she never entirely controlled her husband’s

thought and action. In other words, his many errors were largely of his own making. While it is easy to overestimate the queen’s importance in the affairs which led to the civil wars, it is equally important not to underestimate this forceful and able woman.

The author chooses to concentrate roughly on the period from 1637 to 1649 because, as she states, it is an under-researched and important period, spanning from the birth of Princess Anne to the execution of Charles I. White makes the point that what is important is not so much what influence the queen wielded over her husband, but what influence she was perceived as wielding: what was it that people believed about their queen and her access to power, whatever the truth may have been? The queen was plainly capable of eliciting great admiration and love as well as deep detestation.

In chapters 1 and 2 the author undertakes an examination of the young Henrietta Maria from her arrival in England in 1625 as an immature and devout fifteen-year-old to 1635, a period which spans much of Charles’s disastrous personal rule (1629-40). Her arrival with a French household and a legion of Catholic clergy can have done nothing for her popularity or for the suspicions held about her husband’s intentions towards the Anglican Church. For all Charles’s faults, he was well aware of the potential political disaster this might cause and dismissed the French entourage within a year. The death of Charles’s favorite, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, proved a turning point and the relationship be-

tween Charles and Henrietta Maria turned from a political marriage into a genuine love match, with the all-important heirs following in quick succession. The death of the disapproving Lord Treasurer Weston made space for the queen to take center stage, although her refusal to undergo a Protestant coronation, her tendency to gather an “alternative” Catholic court around her and to display her Catholicism in overt ways, combined with her tendency to trespass outside accepted feminine boundaries by such actions as appearing in masks had already made her formidable enemies.

Chapter 3 explores the queen at the height of her power, the self-titled “she generalissima” often displaying greater military acumen and more understanding of the need for practical lines of supply than ever her husband did. The queen’s travels in Holland and France in an effort to gain arms, men, and money for her husband’s cause are impressive, as is her willingness to put herself in harm’s way when it came to delivering these armaments; indeed, the cover illustration for the book shows the famous occasion when the queen brought her ships in at Bridlington under fire in a (largely unsuccessful) effort to resupply Charles’s armies. The sight of a queen having to pawn her jewelry (not to mention the crown jewels) in an effort to raise funds to continue the fight is not an edifying one but one cannot help admiring what the author describes as “her breezy energy and single-minded determination” (p. 61). Her military advice to Charles, contained in a flood of letters (in which she more than once threatens that she will enter a convent if he doesn’t get a grip) is often germane to the issues facing the armies in the field, but is as often ignored. Henrietta plainly loathed the dashing young Prince Rupert, master of the king’s horse, rightly thinking him too rash for his own (and her husband’s) good. However, although the matériel the queen was able to supply was never enough, she did provide a courageous figurehead around which at least some royalist support felt able to rally.

Chapter 4 examines how the press of the day (and it is often overlooked that the wars of the three kingdoms were the first to receive the attention of anything like a modern press and propaganda organization) perceived the queen, how they attacked or supported her, and how they justified or condemned her actions. Press vitriol was every bit as unpleasant as in our own day (perhaps more so, as the middle of a civil war is an unlikely time for the courts or the censors to be taking an interest in reportage) and the queen suffered as much from character assassination and invasive and false reporting as any contemporary “personality” does. As the author boldly states,

recent research into the reportage (including this book), propaganda, and oral sources of this period must once and for all strike down Jurgen Habermas’s contention that a “public sphere” only emerged in the eighteenth century (p. 120).

Chapter 5 examines the queen’s reunion with her husband at Oxford. This was a time when things seemed to be going well for the royalist cause—the indecisive battle of Edgehill was followed in quick succession by royalist victories at Adwalton Moor, Lansdown, and Roundway Down and, finally, with the arrival of the queen’s new supplies and men, the capture of Bristol. The queen advised her husband to march on London, but Charles took Prince Rupert’s advice to capture Gloucester first—perhaps a good example of why we should never assume that Henrietta controlled her husband’s military thinking. The Gloucester campaign was a disaster. The queen left Oxford on April 17, 1644 and the two were never to meet again. Disaster began to follow upon disaster; the capture of the “Dunkirk ship” containing the so-called popish picture (allegedly intended as a present from the king to the pope to demonstrate his allegiance to Rome but in truth, nothing of the sort) was a propaganda coup for the parliamentary cause.

Worse was to follow. Chapter 6 examines the defeat of the royalist cause and the queen’s exile in France. Although the disaster at Marston Moor in 1644 was followed by final major royalist victory at Lostwithiel and a bloody draw at second Newbury in the same year, the king’s cause went down to irreparable defeat at Naseby in 1645. This battle of “all for all” (p. 163) was not only a military disaster, but led to the capture of the entire royalist artillery and baggage train. The baggage wagons contained the “king’s cabinet” and his most personal and secret correspondence. It also contained the key to all the king’s cyphers. The disaster this represented to the royalist cause cannot be underestimated. Parliament published much of the contents in the infamous pamphlet, “The king’s cabinet opened.” The couple’s letters proved (or seemed to prove) that the queen ruled the king and this led to what the author describes as “an early modern media blitz” (p. 167). It was a gift to that first recognizably modern journalist, Marchamont Nedham, and he made full use of the opportunity. The “King’s Cabinet” affair led to a collapse in any remaining confidence in Charles’s ability to rule effectively and it was all downhill from this point. Perhaps Henrietta Maria is seen at her most human on receiving, in exile in France, on February 9, 1649, the news of her husband’s execution: “At first she was reduced to complete silence, and sat motionless and

mute for some time. When her childhood friend, Madam de Vendôme, fell to Henrietta's knees and implored her to say something, the distraught queen finally burst into tears" (p. 188).

The author concludes with the view that the queen certainly had influence with (if not over) her husband (and this is an important distinction) and that she certainly had influence with those close to Charles, the likes of Henry Jermyn, George Goring, William Davenant, and Henry Rich. She was a brave and selfless campaigner for her husband's cause, sacrificing both her health and her wealth on his behalf.

It is, perhaps, a sad comment that Henrietta Maria, whose remains were scattered in the sack of the French royal mausoleum at the abbey of St. Denis during another revolution, is now memorialized with a simple plaque which refers to her not as the "she generalis-

sima" or even "Reine d'Angleterre, Ecosse, Irlande et de la France" (the claim had not been rescinded in the queen's day) but simply as "Henriette Marie, Princesse de France." This surely belittles this remarkable and tenacious woman.

Michelle Anne White has added a fascinating study to the growing literature on the subject of the royalist cause in the British isles and beyond during the civil wars and it is to be hoped that she and others will follow up the various topics she recognizes as worthy of further research in their own right.

#### Notes

[1]. Anon., *Mercurius Britannicus*, September 1-8, 1645.

[2]. W. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and All That* (London: Methuen, 1930), 71.

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