

LIVES OF ROYAL WOMEN



QUEEN CHARLOTTE

FAMILY, DUTY, SCANDAL

NATALEE GARRETT

QUEEN CHARLOTTE

This biography provides a well-rounded analysis of Queen Charlotte by considering her own perspectives on queenship and her role in Britain. It explores her relationships within the royal family and the court, how she was perceived in the British public sphere and in the press during her reign as queen consort, and the impact of the ‘madness’ of her husband, King George III.

This book provides readers with a comprehensive, nuanced, and sensitive analysis of Queen Charlotte’s life and legacy. Charlotte embodied many of the features of queenship and womanhood that were valued in this period, such as charity and familial duty, but she also struggled with her husband’s persistent insanity, political scandals, and issues with her many children. The book provides students and general readers with an exploration of this fascinating queen, who reigned as consort for an impressive 57 years, but who has been eclipsed by the legacies of her husband and her son. It also contributes to queenship studies by enhancing our understanding of how issues such as charity, political interference, and familial

scandals impacted on the position of queen consort. This biography incorporates new sources and perspectives from both Britain and Germany, including material unearthed through the Georgian Papers Programme, as well as material culture and visual culture. It explores themes of print culture, Charlotte's friendships, identity, and royal philanthropy.

Queen Charlotte is essential reading for students of eighteenth-century Britain and its Empire and the history of queenship, women, gender studies, and popular culture more broadly.

Natalee Garrett is a Lecturer at the Open University, focusing on the history of public opinion, the press, and social elites in eighteenth-century Europe. Her recent publications include: 'Royalty, Celebrity, and the Press in Georgian Britain, 1770–1820', *Royal Studies Journal*, 9, no. 2 (2022): 99–115 and "“Albion’s Queen by All Admir’d”: Reassessing the Public Reputation of Queen Charlotte, 1761–1818", *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 45, no. 3 (2022): 351–370.

Lives of Royal Women

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Queen Charlotte

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Natalee Garrett



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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|
| BL | British Library |
| BM | British Museum |
| NRS | National Records of Scotland |
| RA | Royal Archives |
| RCT | Royal Collection Trust |
| WSHC | Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre |

INTRODUCTION

‘The Queen [...] has kept the crown upon his head.’¹ These words were written by an acquaintance of Queen Charlotte, praising her for the determination she showed in supporting her husband, George III, during his first bout of serious mental illness in 1788–1789. Like many queen consorts, Queen Charlotte’s significance in the history of the British monarchy and in the broader history of Great Britain has not been fully appreciated. However, the important role of queen consorts in supporting their spouse and in turn, supporting the monarchy itself, is being freshly explored and appreciated as a result of ongoing research in queenship studies and royal studies.²

Queen Charlotte remains the longest-reigning queen consort in the history of the English/British monarchy, yet she is perhaps best known as the wife of the “Mad King” George III (r.1760–1820), and as the mother of the extravagant Prince Regent, who later reigned as George IV (r.1820–1830). In this book, Queen Charlotte is placed centre stage as an integral and significant influence on the character of the monarchy not only during her lifetime, but

2 Queen Charlotte

long after. The book aims to provide a fresh assessment of Queen Charlotte as queen consort and makes the case that her contributions to the British monarchy have not been given due consideration. Charlotte's experience as queen consort was coloured by the shifting nature of British society, culture, and politics at the junction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the reign of George III, the monarchy's role was gradually changing as the power of Parliament increased. This rebalance of political power meant that the royal family, led by George and Charlotte, had to adapt and find ways to strengthen the monarchy's position in British society.

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815), which led to the downfall of several European monarchies, impressed upon the British royal family the precariousness of their position and the need to appeal to the elusive “public” who followed their lives with interest through newspapers, print and pamphlets. The late Georgian period provides fruitful ground for considering the role of the press in forming the public image of the monarchy; as the volume of newspapers increased dramatically, bolder discussions of the royal family emerged. As the most famous woman in the realm, Charlotte was observed, praised, critiqued, and caricatured by an evolving press culture. Thus, the question of Queen Charlotte's “public” image is a key theme in this book, acknowledging that this aspect of Charlotte's life is just as important as the personal details.

The shifting political status of the British monarchy and the rise of the press in the late eighteenth century mean that Charlotte's experience as queen consort provides an important lens for considering the position of monarchies in Europe at the dawn of the “modern” era and the role that queen consorts played in the survival of monarchy as an institution. Charlotte's granddaughter, Queen

Victoria (r.1837–1901), has been widely credited with mastering the art of projecting a regal, yet intimate image of the royal family which fed into middle-class values of domestic harmony and strengthened the British populace's emotional ties to the monarchy.³ While Victoria's approach to monarchical image seemed a stark contrast to those of her libertine uncles and predecessors, George IV and William IV (r.1830–1837), this book will show that she and Prince Albert built directly on the work done by George III and Queen Charlotte, who used their large family, acts of patronage, and press culture to create an image of the monarchy as a benevolent source of Christian morality and values. In essence, George III and Queen Charlotte played an integral part in assimilating the monarchy into a predominantly cultural role which would remove the supposition of the crown meddling in politics, thus ensuring the monarchy's longevity as the power of the Parliament and "popular" politics increased.

The terms chosen for the subtitle of this work "family, duty, scandal", reflect three core aspects of the life and experiences of Queen Charlotte. These terms also echo the experiences of many queen consorts in European history, from the medieval period to the modern. As Elena Woodacre has suggested, global queenship can be explored through three broad areas of inquiry: "family", "rule", and "image".⁴ While these areas may be applied to study both queens who ruled as sovereigns (queens regnant) and those who were married to the sovereign (queen consorts), it is the position of the queen consort which was Charlotte's experience. The term "family" has multiple meanings when applied to queen consorts: they entered a new family through marriage while retaining ties to their birth family and, in time, it was expected that they and their spouse would form another family by having children. Queen consorts had also to fulfil certain roles and duties, such

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as producing heirs, strengthening the monarchy's power, and most of all, supporting their spouse. Lastly, queen consorts, as with queen regnants, were expected to project an image of benevolence, piety, and other feminine virtues which would permit them to be esteemed as icons for not only queenly but womanly behaviour. This last area, of the queen's "image", dovetails with the notion of "scandal" and the extent to which the queen, and the wider royal family, could be scrutinised by their subjects. "Image" has also played a large role in the public reception and memory of queen consorts, influencing the extent to which they are explored in academic and non-academic works. Queen Charlotte's contemporary, Marie-Antoinette of France, underlines the fact that controversial or tragic queens are most likely to be remembered in the popular imagination.

Though not as widely studied as Marie-Antoinette, Queen Charlotte has attracted some attention from biographers and historians. The first biographies of Queen Charlotte appeared immediately after her death, indicating a contemporary interest in her life story and pointing to the enduring interest in biographies of famous individuals.⁵ From the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, Queen Charlotte appears to have largely slipped from the attention of academics and the public. Interest in Queen Charlotte was resurrected in 1975, with a detailed and sensitive biography by Royal Library assistant, Olwen Hedley.⁶ Since then, the Georgian Papers Programme, a collaboration between the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle and King's College London, has unearthed and digitised hundreds of Charlotte's letters to her husband, her children, and members of the royal household; these letters form the backbone of this book's primary source base and provide an extensive insight into Charlotte's life. Looking beyond the royal family, Charlotte's correspondence with friends and courtiers can be found in archives across

the United Kingdom. These are invaluable resources for exploring Charlotte's wider social network, and this book examines many letters which have not been referenced or discussed elsewhere. It is only in the past 20 years that Queen Charlotte has received focused academic attention, with a range of articles and chapters on her intellectual and cultural pursuits written by Clarissa Campbell Orr and Mascha Hansen. Campbell Orr and Hansen's works have emphasised the breadth and possibility for scholarly inquiry within Queen Charlotte's life, ranging from her passion for botany, her connections to a Northern European political and social world, and her experiences of loneliness as a queen in a foreign land.⁷ In the field of art history, Heidi Strobel has explored Queen Charlotte's considerable contributions to the Georgian art world and her support of female artists, in particular.⁸

Queen Charlotte, like other queen consorts, has benefited from the development of queenship studies, which is linked to both court studies and royal studies. As Clarissa Campbell Orr has pointed out, women's history has largely focussed on the experiences of "ordinary" working-class or middle-class women, yet 'much is to be gained for women's history and feminist history by looking at women at the social apex'.⁹ Charlotte's experiences of marriage and motherhood are valuable pieces in reconstructing the experiences of women in the eighteenth century, as are the ways in which she was depicted in contemporary discourse, where expectations of women were made explicit. Indeed, queens were often expected to embody appropriate ideals of female behaviour and were frequently held up as paragons of their gender. Queenship studies has thrived particularly in medieval history, where a need to read against the grain in the face of limited source material has encouraged a large body of scholarship that is still growing.¹⁰ In the early modern

era, queenship studies has focussed most on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with well-known queens like Elizabeth I receiving much attention.¹¹ Less attention has been paid to queens of the eighteenth century, with the notable exceptions of Marie-Antoinette of France and Catherine the Great of Russia.¹² Queen Charlotte lived across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when monarchy and forms of government in Britain and beyond were evolving. Thus, Charlotte's experience as queen consort is indicative of the shifting nature of monarchy in Europe and the need for royal families to adapt to new ideas on government as well as new forms of popular culture which could both threaten and support the royal image. Studies on queenship have examined a range of topics in relation to queen consorts and queen regnants, including finances and patronage, political position, marriage, and producing children. Each of these topics gives an insight into what it meant to be a queen consort in medieval and early modern Europe, while also providing a useful study in how the role's duties and expectations could change over time. Queen Charlotte's position, at the crossroads of the early modern and modern periods of history, invites consideration of how queenship studies might move beyond the restraints of prescribed historical time periods to consider how much or how little the role of the queen consort has developed in the British Isles across many centuries and many eras.

Although the later eighteenth century has not been a particularly fruitful area of inquiry in queenship studies to date, Queen Charlotte's reign, crossing the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, provides new ways of exploring the importance of "image" to the position of the queen consort. Charlotte lived at a time when the press in Britain was gaining rapid pace as one of the nation's greatest cultural influences and as a vehicle

for displaying, promoting, and undermining the royal image. Queen Charlotte, like many queens before her, tried to shape her public image through portraiture and other forms of “display”, and she was in many ways, very successful in this.¹³ The expansion of the press, however, allowed for greater public discussion of the royal family and exposition of scandals which, in previous eras, may have gone relatively unnoticed by the general populace. Queen Charlotte’s own correspondence reveals her awareness of the public scrutiny of her and her family, as she remarked to her eldest son: ‘We owe something to the public in whose power we always are.’¹⁴ The realities of the French Revolution, though not solely influenced by the negative image of Marie-Antoinette, nonetheless emphasised to Queen Charlotte and her contemporaries the power of public opinion and its potential threat to the traditional power of the institution of monarchy. As a result of the published, public discourse on Queen Charlotte, historians have a rich body of material which depicts the queen beyond the scope of the image she wished to self-fashion. Much of this material is respectful, yet nonetheless invasive, providing newspaper readers with information on the royal family’s comings and goings, the clothing they wore, and the people they met. Other material was far less respectful and often communicated and exacerbated royal scandal to an urban populace hungry for gossip about the elites of society.¹⁵ Although Charlotte, in keeping with the tradition of queen consorts, aimed to portray herself as moral, maternal, and non-political, public discourse frequently undermined this effort, creating a double image of the queen: the official image, sanctioned by Charlotte and the monarchy, and an “unofficial” image, crafted by writers and satirical artists. Though some of these sources have been considered in previous works on Charlotte, in this book, newspaper

articles and satirical prints form an important corpus of primary material which demonstrate the power of public opinion and its effects on the monarchy. This subversive, “unofficial” image, though experienced by previous queen consorts, was disseminated more widely in Charlotte’s lifetime and, as explorations of her obituaries will show, it had a decided impact on her public reputation. Beyond the glare of media attention and the symbolic queenly image lay the “real” Charlotte; though the question of “image” is prominent in this book, the experiences of the woman behind that regal image must also be considered to give a full picture of her life.

One of the most personal elements of Queen Charlotte’s experience as queen consort was her adaptation to a new home and a new culture. In this, Charlotte was not alone: the movement of women and of ideas and cultures from one monarchical state to another through the bonds of matrimony is a recurrent theme of queenship studies, which emphasises the political dimensions of marriage as well as the personal displacement of the young women destined to be queens.¹⁶ Until the twentieth century, almost all British queen consorts were foreign-born princesses, with some notable exceptions including Henry VIII’s four English wives: Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Katherine Howard, and Catherine Parr. In the eighteenth century, two reigning kings were also foreign-born: George I and George II were both born in the Electorate of Hanover in the Holy Roman Empire. Queen Charlotte’s husband, George III, was the son of two German-born parents, but he himself was born in England and utilised this to argue that he was a true, British patriot king. Important as this pro-British image was, George III nonetheless selected a bride from the Germanic states, Princess Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, who had to adjust to a new country and a new culture, as well as a new crown. This

relocation not only invites consideration of how foreign-born queens adapted to their new homes, but also how they contributed to and shaped the court and the kingdom they married into.¹⁷ This theme also emphasises the fact that British court studies and queenship studies cannot exist in a bubble; they are intricately linked with Europe, through the queen consorts themselves and the ideas and cultures they brought with them to the British Isles. This is an aspect of Queen Charlotte as consort which is explored in this book; her continuing relationships with her siblings, her interest in the affairs of her homeland, and the extent to which her Germanic upbringing influenced her behaviour and her image as queen consort. In this area, Charlotte's correspondence with her elder brother, Charles, is especially valuable. Charlotte's letters to her brother survive in the Landeshauptiv Archive in Hanover, with copies available in the British Library.¹⁸ Though these sources have been underused by previous scholars, possibly due to issues of access, the letters provide a clear insight into Charlotte's political and personal interests, as well as her continuing devotion to her family in Strelitz.

In addition to academic publications, Queen Charlotte has also received attention in the area of royal heritage. In the past 20 years, Charlotte has featured prominently in three exhibitions at royal palaces in Britain: *Style and Society: Dressing the Georgians* (Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, 2023), *Enlightened Princesses* (Kensington Palace, 2017), and *George III and Queen Charlotte: Patronage, Collecting and Court Taste* (Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, 2004). Each of these exhibitions came with an accompanying catalogue, each replete with scholarly essays on topics ranging from courtly performances to developments in technology, and the role of royal portraiture in setting standards of fashion.¹⁹ These exhibitions and catalogues emphasise

the role of heritage in forming understandings of royal individuals, especially queen consorts, who may have exerted more influence in the realm of culture than in the world of politics, which tended to be exclusionary towards them. As each of these exhibitions demonstrated, Queen Charlotte and other female members of the Hanoverian royal family played an important role in shaping the cultural image of the monarchy, in their own time and in later periods.

Popular history, directed at non-academic readers, has also provided some fruitful inquiries into Queen Charlotte and her family in recent years. In the twenty-first century, Charlotte has featured in group biographies by Flora Fraser and Janice Hadlow, each of which focussed on facets of the complex family dynamics of the Hanoverian dynasty and, to varying degrees, Queen Charlotte's position in those complex dynamics.²⁰ More recently, the popularity of the Netflix television series *Bridgerton* (2020–present) and its spin-off *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* (2023–present) have stoked public interest in Queen Charlotte and will no doubt inspire more popular history publications and biographies of her in the coming years.²¹

Despite this respectable list of publications, both academic and non-academic, Charlotte remains a relatively unexplored figure in the wider study of Georgian society and culture. Like many consorts, she has been overshadowed by her husband and the two sons who ascended to the throne: George IV and William IV. George III in particular has attracted significant attention from academics and the public alike, largely due to his debilitating mental illness, which has received varying perspectives over the past 200 years.²² George III is also well known in the public imagination of the United States of America as “the last king of America” who did so much to oppose the birth of their nation's independence.²³ George and Charlotte's eldest

son, the Prince Regent who became George IV, has also received ample attention in academic and non-academic publications; his scandalous and contentious marriage to his cousin, Caroline of Brunswick, coupled with his fondness for courtly extravagance and extraordinary art and architecture have all contributed to his reputation, as has the present-day popularity of the Regency period in literature and television.²⁴ William IV, in contrast, has not enjoyed quite as much scholarly or public attention as his father, his elder brother, or his niece, Queen Victoria. His short reign of seven years did, however, coincide with the Reform Act of 1832, and he has been written about by John Van Der Kiste and Philip Ziegler.²⁵

Though ruling sovereigns have tended to dominate academic and non-academic works on monarchy, queen consorts like Queen Charlotte have benefited from a recent turn towards the idea of “corporate monarchy” in court studies and royal studies, a concept which emphasises the importance of looking at all members of the royal family, not just the reigning monarch.²⁶ The concept of “corporate monarchy” is valuable for considering the exercise of royal power as a work of collaboration between the sovereign and his or her consort, children, courtiers, and favourites. The monarchy under George III certainly showed signs of being a “corporate monarchy”, and as this book shall argue, it was the collaboration between George III and Queen Charlotte which had a lasting impact on the character and purpose of the monarchy in Britain, and on late-Georgian society as whole. From the moment of her marriage in 1761 until her death in 1818, Queen Charlotte was the most famous and most visible woman in British society. She certainly had competitors in the form of actresses like Sarah Siddons, in aristocratic style-setters like Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, and in her own daughter-in-law, Princess Caroline of Wales. Yet despite their fame and the

many column inches dedicated to them in the newspapers, none of these women could compete with Charlotte in the realms of cultural, social, and political influence. Thus, any study of late-Georgian society must consider the woman sitting at society's apex. As this book will show, a study of Queen Charlotte reveals avenues for exploration on a variety of themes in the period including elite childrearing, female intellectual networks, the rise of the press, scientific advancement, and patronage of the arts and manufactures in Britain.

This book, though an account of Queen Charlotte's life, aims to move beyond the linear, narrative structure of a traditional biography and towards a more analytical view of her not only as an individual but as a queen consort. To this end, the book has been structured thematically, rather than chronologically. This approach allows for a more thorough examination of Charlotte's life, but it also necessitates some overlap of content. For example, George III's illness cast a long shadow not only on his marriage with Charlotte, but also on her relationships with her children and on her status as queen consort. Thus, discussions of George III's mental illness appear across several chapters. There is also overlap between the themes chosen, particularly in terms of Charlotte's political role. Chapter 5 provides an exploration of Charlotte's interventions in politics, both real and imagined, but it must be acknowledged that her position as queen consort meant that every aspect of her life was infused with politics: her betrothal to George III had political dimensions and even her position as a royal mother was coloured by politics, both in the need for an heir to the throne and in the ways in which the royal children were raised.

Chapter 1 explores Charlotte's upbringing in Mecklenburg-Strelitz and considers how her childhood and her education influenced her in later life. The chapter's

purpose in detailing and examining Charlotte's family and her upbringing is to emphasise her Germanic and European identity, as well as considering the typicality of her education for elite girls in eighteenth-century Europe. The details of the betrothal between Charlotte and George III are also explored in the chapter, as part of a wider consideration on the complex processes of brokering royal marriages in the period and of the credentials expected of a prospective queen consort.

Chapter 2 examines Charlotte's new life in Britain, analysing the early development of her public image as queen, and the traditions of the marital and coronation ceremonies which formally introduced her to the British public. How the British public and press responded to Charlotte, and how these responses echoed contemporary expectations of "good" queens, is also analysed here. The chapter explores the duality of the public/private aspects of Charlotte's new life, by also considering her personal relationships with the British royal family and with members of her household as queen consort. This section on the queen's household considers how the barriers of precedence and social hierarchy influenced Charlotte's opportunities to cultivate genuine and meaningful friendships in Britain, as well as the extent to which Charlotte's household appointments allowed her to participate in a form of wider elite, intellectual sociability. The chapter also touches on a key issue that recurred in Charlotte's tenure as queen consort: the issue of money and the careful balance of spending in the queen's household which is preserved in account books kept assiduously by her Lord Chamberlains. A consideration of Charlotte's dedicated correspondence with her siblings demonstrates how, while adjusting to the role of a British queen, Charlotte maintained her identity as a German princess, eager to remain connected to her family and her homeland through letters.

Chapter 3 explores Charlotte's relationship with George III throughout their long marriage of 57 years, analysing their companionship and shared interests while also considering the significant impact of the king's mental illness on their marital harmony. By necessity, a queen consort's relationship with her husband forms a significant part of her identity, both in public and private. The chapter begins by exploring the "idyllic" first years of the royal marriage and how this was communicated in public discourse, while also considering the less-positive aspects of the marriage, such as George III's domineering nature and its effect on Charlotte. The toll of the king's mental illness on the royal marriage is considered, with George III's repeated illnesses in the early 1800s doing irreparable damage to what had formerly been a largely positive and companionate marriage, much aligned with emerging middle-class ideals of the ideal husband–wife relationship. Throughout, the chapter emphasises how Charlotte's relationship with George was always coloured by her sense of duty towards him as both her husband and her sovereign.

Chapter 4 turns attention towards, arguably, the most important role of the queen consort: producing heirs. The chapter analyses Charlotte's relationships with her children from their infancy to adulthood and attempts to situate Charlotte's mode of parenting in a wider discussion on elite child-rearing and educational reform in eighteenth-century Europe. Although Charlotte showed sincere interest in being involved in her children's upbringing, court etiquette and the rigours of royal life often prevented her being as present as she would have liked, necessitating a reliance on carefully chosen attendants and governesses. The chapter aims to give a fair consideration to Charlotte's relationships with all of her children, though it must be acknowledged that remaining source material limits the extent to which her relationships with most of her adult

sons can be assessed. While her sons lived their own lives in Britain and beyond, most of her daughters remained with their parents until their thirties, in what was referred to as “the Nunnery”. This closeness encouraged positive mother–daughter relationships in some cases, and negative relationships in others. The chapter also explores Charlotte’s role as matriarch in later life. This section of the chapter explores Charlotte’s position as family-peacemaker, as well as her relationships with her daughters-in-law and with her granddaughter, Princess Charlotte of Wales. In keeping with a focus on “image” in the book, this chapter also explores how Charlotte’s position as queen consort overlaid a carefully cultivated image of “mother of the nation”, particularly when her children were in their infancy.

Although Charlotte assiduously cultivated a non-political self-image, she was necessarily drawn into the politics of the realm on several occasions as a result of her position as queen consort. Chapter 5 therefore explores the political dimension of the role of the queen consort and examples of Charlotte’s involvement in politics within Britain and Europe. The chapter demonstrates how George III’s repeated illnesses led to Charlotte’s position becoming more overtly political, as she was forced to step into a bigger public role to support her ailing husband. Additionally, the chapter explores how Charlotte’s public reputation shifted as a result of political scandals in the 1780s, including the highly publicised trial of Warren Hastings, former Governor of Bengal, and the Regency Crisis, the latter of which saw her pitted against her eldest son in the political arena. The chapter also emphasises that, while Charlotte aimed to portray an apolitical public image, she was nonetheless very interested in political events in Britain and Europe, as evidenced by her personal correspondence.

Chapter 6 examines patronage, one of the most studied aspects of the role of the queen consort in queenship studies of the medieval and early modern periods. The chapter explores the wide range of Charlotte's patronage, which encompassed the arts, sciences, and manufacturing. The chapter also examines the significance of Charlotte's charitable endeavours and how this fit into the emergence of "public" charities in the period. An assessment of Charlotte's expansive patronage and the publicity it received demonstrates how the British monarchy publicly aligned itself with ideals of charity and morality. As part of its consideration of Charlotte's charitable interests, the chapter also explores her faith and how it shaped her personal life, for example, how she turned to religion in times of struggle such as the king's illness, and how her religious upbringing influenced her approach to charity. Charlotte's faith and morality became a key facet of her identity as queen consort, both inviting praise and condemnation from contemporary commentators.

Chapter 7 focusses on the circumstances of Charlotte's death, including the responses of her family, friends, and attendants. The chapter also analyses contemporary reactions to Charlotte's death to explore the diversity of her public image in popular memory and how this image shifted throughout her life. Moving into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the chapter explores Charlotte's posthumous reputation in both academic and public history, and in popular culture.

Finally, the book concludes with an analysis of Charlotte's contributions to the British monarchy within her own lifetime and afterwards, emphasising the significance of the queen consort as a force to shape the monarchy and as a key figure for understanding British society in the Georgian era.

This book is a biography of Queen Charlotte as an individual, but it also works to situate her within wider studies of queenship and the role of queen consorts at the crossroads of early modern and modern Europe. By analysing the intricacies of her personal life, her public persona, and her contributions to the British monarchy, this biography aims to provide the most comprehensive and analytical portrait of Queen Charlotte to date.

Notes

- 1 ‘Memoirs of the Years 1788–89 by Elizabeth, Countess Harcourt’, Edward William Harcourt (ed.), *The Harcourt Papers (11 vols. Oxford: J. Parker & Co., 1880)*, vol. 4, 166.
- 2 Elena Woodacre and Cathleen Sarti, ‘What Is Royal Studies?’, *Royal Studies Journal* 2 (2015): 13–20.
- 3 Dror Wahrman, ‘“Middle-Class” Domesticity Goes Public: Gender, Class, and Politics from Queen Caroline to Queen Victoria’, *The Journal of British Studies* 32, no. 4 (October 1993): 396–432.
- 4 Elena Woodacre, *Queens and Queenship* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2021), 9.
- 5 For example: John Watkins, *Memoirs of Her Most Excellent Majesty Sophia-Charlotte, Queen of Great Britain, from Authentic Documents* (London: H. Colburn, 1819); Walley Chamberlain Oulton, *Authentic and impartial memoirs of Her Late Majesty, Charlotte, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland...* (London: J. Robins and Co., Albion Press, 1819).
- 6 Olwen Hedley, *Queen Charlotte* (London: John Murray, 1975).
- 7 Clarissa Campbell Orr, ‘Queen Charlotte as Patron: Some Intellectual and Social Contexts’, *The Court Historian* 6, no. 3 (2001): 183–212; Campbell Orr, ‘Queen Charlotte “Scientific Queen”’ in *Queenship in Britain, 1660–1837: Royal Patronage, Court Culture and Dynastic Politics*, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 236–66; Mascha Hansen, ‘Breakfast at Frogmore and Feathers in Portman Square: Women’s Property and Elite Sociability’, *Études Anglaises* 74, no. 3 (2021): 300–16; Mascha Hansen, ‘My Solitary and Retired Life: Queen Charlotte’s Solitude(s)’, in *The Routledge*

- History of Loneliness*, ed. Katie Barclay, Elaine Chalus, and Deborah Simonton (London: Routledge, 2023), 61–74.
- 8 Heidi Strobel, *The Artistic Matronage of Queen Charlotte (1744–1818): How a Queen Promoted Both Art and Female Artists in English Society* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011).
 - 9 Clarissa Campbell Orr, ‘Introduction’, in *Queenship in Britain*, ed. Campbell Orr, 8.
 - 10 On the challenges of medieval queenship studies, see Theresa Earenfight, ‘Highly Visible, Often Obscured: The Difficulty of Seeing Queens and Noble Women’, *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 44.1 (2008): 86–90.
 - 11 For a recent example, see: Carole Levin, *The Reign and Life of Queen Elizabeth I: Politics, Culture, and Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).
 - 12 For example, Dena Goodman, *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); Carolyn Harris, *Queenship and Revolution in Early Modern Europe: Henrietta Maria and Marie Antoinette* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
 - 13 Woodacre, *Queens and Queenship*, 96.
 - 14 RA GEO/MAIN/36528–9. Queen Charlotte to Prince of Wales, 12 June 1802.
 - 15 Natalee Garrett, ‘Royalty, Celebrity, and the Press in Georgian Britain, 1770–1820’, *Royal Studies Journal* 9, no. 2 (2022): 99–115.
 - 16 See Mascha Hansen ‘Social Mobility and Personal Displacement: Queen Charlotte between England and Germany’, in *1650–1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Kevin Cope, vol 23, 191–212. 2016.
 - 17 Campbell Orr, ‘Introduction’, 8.
 - 18 The British Library copies are referenced in this book. BL MS FACS *950–955, Charlotte, Queen Consort of George III, Letters to members of her family, chiefly to her brother Charles, afterwards Grand Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, six volumes.
 - 19 Anna Reynolds, ed. *Style & Society: Dressing the Georgians* (London: Royal Collection Trust, 2023); Joanna Marschner, ed. *Enlightened Princesses: Caroline, Augusta, Charlotte, and the Shaping of the Modern World* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2017); Jane Roberts, ed.

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 - 21 *Bridgerton*, created by Chris Van Dusen, Shondaland (2020–present), Netflix, www.netflix.com; *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*, created by Shonda Rhimes, Shondaland (2023–present), Netflix, www.netflix.com.
 - 22 The latest biography is by Andrew Roberts, *George III: The Life and Reign of Britain's Most Misunderstood Monarch* (London: Allen Lane, 2021).
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 - 25 John Van der Kiste, *William IV: The Last Hanoverian King of Britain* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2022); Philip Ziegler, *King William IV* (London: Collins, 1971).
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1

PRINCESS OF MECKLENBURG-STRELITZ

Introduction

On hearing of King George III's intention to marry a Princess of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, the Bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu remarked with concern:

The sight of our brilliant Court, the salutations of our navy on her arrival, the opulent appearance of our towns, and the greatness of our capital city will astonish her. I hope her mind is more proportioned to her lot in marriage than such a situation is to her present circumstances.¹

This superior English attitude towards Charlotte's homeland was repeated by others such as writer Horace Walpole, who on the announcement of the forthcoming marriage commented drolly: 'The handkerchief has been tossed a vast way; it is to a Charlotte, Princess of Mecklenburg. Lord Harcourt is to be at her father's court – if he can find it – on the 1st of August.'² As Mascha Hansen has argued, the British view appeared

to suggest that Charlotte's removal from her childhood home was positive, permitting her to escape a narrow and provincial upbringing.³ Yet an exploration of Charlotte's childhood shows that the princess from Mecklenburg-Strelitz was afforded a solid education, as good as that of her predecessor, Queen Caroline. Additionally, while the Strelitz family's simple way of life may have drawn amusement and scorn from those acquainted with the British court, this humble yet royal upbringing made Charlotte extremely suitable for the reserved and prudent behaviours of her future husband, who was no lover of ostentation and glamour.

Charlotte spent 57 years of her life in Britain and her identity was consumed by her position as queen consort of Great Britain, yet her early life in Mecklenburg-Strelitz was formative to her character and conduct as queen. Thus, although source material from Charlotte's childhood is limited, no biography of her could or should overlook the significance of her upbringing to her later life as queen consort. From her academic education to her religious upbringing and the tenure of her family life, Charlotte's childhood in Strelitz shaped her character and, in so doing, ultimately shaped the character of the British monarchy in the late eighteenth century and beyond. Queenship studies have consistently emphasised the extent to which a queen consort's education and upbringing influenced her ability to contribute to the court culture of her marital kingdom.⁴ Charlotte's upbringing was therefore a cause for discussion among British elites, who viewed education and a certain degree of polish as vital to the formation of a suitable queen consort.

In addition to exploring Charlotte's family history and her upbringing, the chapter examines the protracted process of the royal betrothal between Charlotte and George III in 1761. The betrothal marks Charlotte's introduction

to British society and to the expectations attendant on a future queen consort. Queenship scholars such as Veronica Baker-Smith have emphasised the ceremonies of betrothal and marriage as a form of “dynastic politics” which occasioned careful consideration among royal families to determine the most suitable bride or groom.⁵ George III’s parents, Frederick, Prince of Wales, and Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha had a dynastic marriage, as did George III’s grandparents, George II and Queen Caroline. The political considerations behind these nuptials did not preclude love or affection, nor did they inherently mean that the couple had no choice in the matter; Queen Caroline famously turned down a prestigious marriage proposal from Archduke Charles of Austria, later Holy Roman Emperor, after deciding that she could not give up her Lutheran Protestant faith.⁶ A study of the betrothal process of George III and Queen Charlotte allows space to explore the considerations and requirements expected for a suitable marriage of a reigning British sovereign, who was nonetheless guided by various social and political issues when choosing his bride.

The House of Mecklenburg-Strelitz

The future Queen Charlotte was born on 19 May 1744 at Mirow Castle and christened Sophia Charlotta.⁷ Her father, Duke Charles Louis Frederick, was the younger half-brother of the reigning Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz. Her mother, Duchess Elisabeth Albertine, was a Princess of Saxe-Hildburghausen by birth.

At the time of Charlotte’s birth, the Duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz was a relatively young duchy, located in Northern Germany. The territory of Mecklenburg had been divided into the Duchies of Mecklenburg-Schwerin and Mecklenburg-Güstrow in 1520. When the male line of

Mecklenburg-Güstrow died out in 1695, there commenced a five-year long dispute between the last duke's son-in-law and his nephew, the Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, who wished to see the whole Mecklenburg territory united under his rule. The Treaty of Hamburg in 1701 acted as a compromise and founded the Strelitz branch of the Mecklenburg dynasty.⁸ The duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz occupied the eastern portion of the historic Mecklenburg territory, bordering Swedish Pomerania in the north and Brandenburg in the south.⁹

Mecklenburg-Strelitz was a state of the Holy Roman Empire, a vast polity in Central Europe consisting of territories including Imperial cities and secular principalities whose rulers recognised the Holy Roman Emperor as their overlord. The reigning Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz was thus also a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire. In the eighteenth century, the emperor was elected by the nine Prince-Electors, which included the Elector of Brunswick-Lüneburg (better known as Hanover) and the Elector of Saxony. From the mid fifteenth century, the title of emperor was inherited by successive scions of the Habsburg dynasty.¹⁰ There was great variety among the Imperial states in terms of wealth, prestige, and development: in the eighteenth century, Mecklenburg-Strelitz had a large population of serfs and was one of the least developed of the Germanic states, which likely contributed to British commentators expressing concern about their future queen's suitability for a cosmopolitan life in London.¹¹

After a fire destroyed the ducal palace of Strelitz in 1712, the duke decided to rebuild in a new location, named Neustrelitz. A small town grew up around this palace, and there were around 400 residents in 1761.¹² Charlotte's grandfather, the former reigning Duke Adolph Frederick II, had three wives, and Charlotte's father was son of the third wife. Charlotte's paternal grandmother was

Christiane Aemilie Anthonie, a Princess of Schwarzburg-Sonderhausen, who chose to reside at Mirow when her husband died, just three months after the birth of their son. Charles was raised by his mother and his aunt at the modest castle of Mirow. As the years passed without a male heir for the reigning duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, Charles's prospects increased as he retained his position as heir to the title.

In 1735, Charles married Elisabeth Albertine of Saxe-Hildburghausen, who was 21 years old. Saxe-Hildburghausen was an Imperial Estate of the Holy Roman Empire and the family was a branch of the House of Saxe-Gotha, the house of George III's mother, Princess Augusta. Elisabeth Albertine was a daughter of Duke Ernest Frederick of Saxe-Hildburghausen and Duchess Sophia Albertine; Elisabeth was primarily raised by her mother, as her father was a soldier and often away from home on military campaigns. Determined to live luxuriously, he led the duchy into financial ruin, and when he died in 1724, his wife took over as regent for several years, reducing taxes and debt in the territory.¹³ As Fredericke Drinkuth has emphasised, Elisabeth Albertine was from ancient noble stock, but she was not a particularly wealthy or advantageous match for Charles.¹⁴ It seems likely that the pair, who had known each other for many years, married for affection rather than social or financial advancement. This was a stark contrast to the arranged, political marriages of George III's parents and grandparents.

After marrying, the couple lived at Mirow with Charles's mother, but in 1740, a new castle known as the Lower Castle was built at Mirow for them. Little information remains on the Lower Castle as it stood in 1740, but it was likely a simple construction, only one floor high. The humble manner of living at Mirow was mocked by the Crown Prince of Prussia, later known as Frederick the Great, who

lived nearby at Rheinsburg Palace between 1736 and 1740. After visiting Mirow in 1736, he remarked: ‘never in my life should I have taken this for a palace’ and dubbed the family the ‘Miroquois’.¹⁵ Prince Frederick was even more perturbed by Duke Charles’s promise to visit Rheinsberg. When this visit occurred, Frederick recounted that Charles was a keen dancer, but that he was nonetheless viewed as a provincial oddity by the courtiers.¹⁶ Frederick noted with amusement that Charles was vain of appearance, not wanting to get his coat dirty while shooting; though this may have been due to a lack of means to purchase new, extravagant clothing at Mirow, rather than vanity. For the heir to the crown of Prussia, concerns over maintaining fine clothing must have seemed trivial and indicative of the provinciality of the ‘Miroquois’.

Despite the snobbery of their Prussian neighbour, the marriage of Duke Charles and Duchess Elisabeth Albertine appears to have been a happy one. In December 1735, the couple welcomed their first child, a daughter, Christiane Sophie Albertine. Nine more children followed; of the ten children, six survived to adulthood: four sons and two daughters. Sophia Charlotta was the youngest daughter, while George Augustus, born in 1748, was the baby of the family.

In his 1913 biography of Charlotte, Friederich Winkel characterises the princess’s childhood as filled with boat trips on the neighbouring lakes and days spent playing in a nearby beech forest. As Mascha Hansen has pointed out, this idyllic, “fairytale” rendering of Charlotte’s upbringing was possibly overexaggerated by Charlotte’s early biographers; some even claimed that Charlotte and her sister would call on the pastor’s wife without notice and attempt to help her in the kitchen.¹⁷ While these stories may or may not be based in fact, a letter from Charlotte’s eldest brother to the local pastor in 1753 sheds some light on the

issue. In the letter, Prince Adolphus refers to Charlotte as 'his little sister Lotchen', a diminutive of 'Charlotte'. The use of this pet name suggests that Charlotte and her siblings had a casual upbringing, where her brother could refer to her by a nickname when corresponding with someone outside the family.¹⁸ Though limited, these accounts paint an idyllic view of a relaxed upbringing where the children at Mirow were largely free to play without the restrictions of behaviour observed at most courts in Europe.

This idyllic childhood was altered in 1752 when Duke Charles died. Princess Charlotte was only eight years old at the time and had recently mourned the passing of her beloved paternal grandmother, Christiane, the previous year. In his will, Duke Charles gave guardianship of the children and the estate to his wife. As his children were heirs to the Duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, the head of the Schwerin branch contested the guardianship. Not one to be cowed, Elisabeth Albertine appealed to the Holy Roman Emperor Francis I and Empress Maria-Theresa for assistance. Elisabeth Albertine also made use of her husband's connection to another powerful player in German politics: as a child, Duke Charles had been a ward of George I, who was both King of Great Britain and Elector of Hanover.¹⁹ Elisabeth Albertine looked to his successor, George II, for support alongside the Habsburgs, and they upheld her rights to guardianship per her husband's wishes. Already in 1752, there existed strong ties between the House of Hanover and the House of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, and in time, those ties would prove even more advantageous to the family from Mirow.

Elisabeth Albertine had won a great victory, but her test was not over. When the reigning Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz died in December 1752, Charlotte's eldest brother acceded to the title, becoming Duke Adolphus Frederick IV of Mecklenburg-Strelitz. With the prospect of an underage

duke reigning at Neustrelitz, Duke Christian-Ludwig II of Mecklenburg-Schwerin saw his chance to unite all of Mecklenburg and invaded the territory of Strelitz, placing troops in Neustrelitz town. With the support of the Strelitz nobility, Elisabeth Albertine defeated the military coup and took over custodial power of the government on behalf of her son until he reached his majority and finished his education in 1761.²⁰ The young Princess Charlotte witnessed her mother stepping up to take the reins of power in a time of crisis; this lesson in fortitude and determination was something which evidently made a great impression on Charlotte, who repeatedly displayed her own ability to weather storms during her tenure as queen consort.

Education and Upbringing

In his 1775 *Dictionary of the English Language*, Samuel Johnson defined education as the ‘formation of manners in youth; the manner of breeding youth; nurture’.²¹ Meanwhile, Irish writer Jonathan Swift drolly remarked in *An Essay on Modern Education* that ‘education is always the worse, in proportion to the wealth and grandeur of the parents’.²² In eighteenth-century Europe, access to education was determined by social status and gender. Charity schools taught rudimentary education to the lower sort, while the nobility and wealthy middling sort typically employed tutors for their children, often at great expense. For the nobility, education was not based solely on academic merit, but rather it was seen as a means to provide children with suitable life skills and ‘appropriate behavioural qualities’.²³ For girls of noble and royal stock, education in needlework, musical skill and dancing were considered as vital as reading and writing. Hannah More, one of the leading educational reformers of the eighteenth