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Maria Clementina, the Unrealised Queen

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Bonnie Prince Charlie Entering the Ballroom at Holyroodhouse before 30 Apr 1892. Royal Collection Trust/ ©Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018



Princess Maria Clementina Sobieska (1702-1735), granddaughter of Jan Sobieski III, the famous King of Poland who defeated the Turks at the Battle of Vienna in 1683, was known in Jacobite circles from 1719 as 'our Queene'^[1]. Maria Clementina was one of the most well-connected young ladies in Europe at this time. She was also related to many royal houses on her mother's side, which made her a most desirable candidate for marriage for an exiled king^[2]. Among her prestigious relations were her first cousins Elizabeth Farnese, the Queen of Spain, King John V of Portugal, and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI. Her second cousins were Maria Theresa, Queen of Hungary, and Charles, Duke of Parma, later King of Naples and King Charles III of Spain, and her godfather was Pope Clement XI. When she became the wife of James Francis Edward Stuart she was considered Queen of Great Britain and Ireland not only by Jacobites, but also by contemporary popes and monarchs such as the kings of France, Spain, Sweden, and the tsar of Russia, to say nothing of a great many of the European nobility.

The sources relating to Maria Clementina in the Stuart Papers date from 1718 when she was almost 16 years old, and when James, then 30, decided it was time to find a bride. The letters to and from Clementina end 16 years later, at the time of her death in 1735. Histories of the exiled Stuarts seldom give much time to Clementina, except to describe her unhappy marriage, the birth of two children, her self-imposed exile, her extreme piety, often depicted as bigotry, and her untimely death, aged just 32. The most interesting and eventful period in her short life was in the lead up to, and during, her engagement to James III and VIII, which began in June 1718.

During the years 1717 and 1718 letters were sent secretly the length and breadth of Europe, between James, a select number of Jacobite supporters, and Clement XI, regarding his search for a wife. Charles Wogan (1698-1752?), an Irish soldier and devoted Jacobite, was in charge of touring the European courts to select a suitable bride^[3]. As an afterthought Wogan had attended the Ohlau court in Silesia and discovered the Polish princess, the youngest daughter of Prince James Sobieski. As a result 'Mrs Godfrey' (Clementina's codename) was discussed at length in the correspondence, Wogan observing that she was: '[T]he last of ye daughters who is the darling of the family by the advantage [s]he has over the others in point of sense, discretion, evenness of temper and a very becoming modesty'^[4]. The correspondence between James, John Erskine, Jacobite Duke of Mar, Wogan and other loyal Jacobites reveals the political importance and therefore danger of an alliance between the exiled British monarch and the well-connected Polish princess. Secrecy was paramount, especially once James' decision to wed Clementina had been made. The King's proposal of marriage was, however, made by James's emissary, James Murray of Stormont, and only became known to English ministers on the Continent due to his lack of discretion^[5]. The news was conveyed to George I, who subsequently threatened the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles VI, with a breakup of the Triple (soon to be Quadruple) Alliance if he did not prevent the marriage from taking place. And by the end of September 1718 Princess Maria Clementina and her mother, Princess Hedwig Elisabeth Sobieska, formerly the Countess Palatine of Neuburg, were en route to Rome from Silesia for the marriage. They had to traverse the Emperor's lands in order to get there, and were, despite their close familial relationship with

Charles, summarily stopped in Innsbruck and placed under house arrest. These events in the lead-up to Clementina becoming the exiled Stuart Queen feature prominently in the correspondence to be found in the Stuart Papers and have thus been recorded in contemporary memoirs and included in historical scholarship^[6].

Even though Maria Clementina was now imprisoned, the engaged couple corresponded frequently in secret. Letters of commitment, encouragement and reassurance were exchanged during the Princess' imprisonment, and she was clearly hopeful of her union with James: 'God grant that He may soon deliver us from our sufferings and contribute to your happiness as well as mine, that is what I wait with great impatience'^[7]. While the King was also reassuring in his correspondence with his bride, he manifested some impatience in his letters to Wogan:

'[A]ll I shall say is that every moment the Princess remains in the Emperors power, she plainly runs the risque of loosing her liberty intirely, the consequences of which are easily seen, so that I hope when you communicate this to her, she will not want any other motive to part without delay'

Meanwhile Wogan, who had been put in charge of the Princess's rescue, prepared her great escape^[8].

After months of planning and preparation, Wogan executed this successfully and brought the soon-to-be queen to Bologna. There, in early May 1719, Clementina was married 'de futuro', by proxy - James Murray of Stormont represented the absent James - to, 'Jacobi Tertii Regis Magnae Britanniae Francia et Hibernia'^[9]. Only after waiting patiently for four months in the Convent of Santa Cecilia Trastavere in Rome did Maria

Clementina finally meet, and officially marry, the King in the Cathedral of Montifascione, on September 3rd, 1719. James had just returned dejected from yet another failed attempt to reclaim his thrones. And so began their lives together as the exiled king and queen of Britain and Ireland under Pope Clement XI's protection in Rome^[10].

Fifteen months after their marriage, in 1721, Clementina gave birth to their first son, Prince Charles Edward. Just over four years later their second son, Prince Henry Benedict, was born. Royal births were usually attended by a group of nobility and court officials as witnesses of the fact. This prevented doubts that the birth had actually occurred, and attested the fact that an heir had been born to the reigning monarch. It was supposed to prevent scandal, such as that which arose with James' own birth, when propaganda directed against James II and VII and Queen Mary of Modena declared that the baby had been smuggled into the bed in a warming pan. Those invited by James to attend the births of his sons included at least ten cardinals and as many statesmen, plus numerous members of the Italian nobility^[11].

While the births of two sons should have been reason for joy for any monarch, all was not well with the royal couple in the Palazzo del Re. There were increasing difficulties in their marriage. James' refusal to allow Clementina's sister to visit, and the King's intimacy with his inner circle and their poor treatment of the Queen, caused her great distress.^[12] The central issues between the King and Queen, however, all revolved around the household. The tension became notably more heated in the lead up to, and after the birth of, Henry Benedict, in March 1725. James had decided to take Prince Charles out from the care of women - three years earlier than

was usual - and place him under the control of men. The transfer of Dorothy Sheldon, one of Maria Clementina's favourites, from being in charge of Prince Charles, to Prince Henry, caused great contention between the couple. To make matters worse, Mrs Sheldon was then dismissed by the King for being openly disrespectful towards him. The final straw came when the Queen was prohibited from spending time alone with Charles.^[13] At all times she was to be accompanied by Murray, now Jacobite Earl of Dunbar, who in September 1725 had been appointed the prince's governor by the King. This appointment, of which the Queen had not been apprised, created even greater conflict as Dunbar was a Protestant. Clementina abhorred the King's decision. On 31 October/11 November, in an argument with her husband, Clementina demanded that his favourite, John Hay of Cromlix (future Jacobite Earl of Inverness), Hay's wife Marjory and Dunbar (Marjory Hay's brother), all be dismissed and a Catholic be placed in charge of the Prince's education. The King refused. Four days later Clementina moved from the Palazzo del Re to the Convent of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere.^[14]

The marriage of James and Clementina, which had begun in an almost fairy-tale manner, had become fraught with tensions and difficulties.^[15] Prior to the appointment of a Protestant governor, one of Clementina's chief concerns was the presence of these three leading Protestants at court. They were very close to James, but disliked by the majority of Jacobites both there and on the Continent in general.^[16] According to Clementina's letters to her father (in the Sobieski collection), she was disregarded, mistreated and neglected by her husband because of this trio: '[T]hese people have no honour, no religion, and no

conscience.'^[17] She told her father that she had suffered in relative silence for six years in order to try and make her marriage work.

Over the matter of the Protestant governor, Clementina had the backing of the pope, Benedict XIII, who supported her stay in the convent until it was resolved.^[18] His support extended as far as reducing the papal pension to James by almost half, and directing the balance be sent for Clementina's use in the convent. The secondary issue that plagued their marriage was Clementina's demand for an independent household befitting a Stuart queen. Unmoved, James refused to grant this, on advice from his favourite trio^[19]. A few days after Clementina left for the convent James wrote to her of his dismay at her attitude:

'Your conduct towards me, the threats which have been made to me, and the public injury of your retreat into a convent, do not touch me so much as the evil and the shame to which you are exposing yourself by such a strange step... I have no resentment against you because I am at each moment more convinced that the malice and the subtlety our Enemies have imposed on your youth and the weakness of your sex. You must have been persuaded long ago that I want to be the Master in my affairs and in my family'^[20]

While the Stuart Papers do not contain a record of Clementina's reply, we know she did not heed her husband's plea and speculation was soon rife regarding Clementina's reasons for leaving her family for the convent. Just a few weeks after her withdrawal, the *Dublin Journal* reported several theories. Firstly, Clementina had departed 'on a religious Account'; secondly, 'others say she did it at the Instigation of a certain Cardinal'; and thirdly, 'most are of the Opinion,

that she did it out of a Regard to the Chevalier's ill State of health'.^[21] Anti-Jacobite polemic said it was owing to the King's affair with Lady Inverness, which appears to have been nothing more than gossip. By January 1726, however, the appointment of the Protestant Dunbar as governor was being taken in the newspapers as the key reason for the dispute.^[22]

Within the first few days after Clementina's departure from the Palazzo, James wrote to several significant members of his wife's family. His first letter was addressed to Prince James Sobieski, his-father-in-law, the day after her withdrawal.

'[T]he Queen left me yesterday, to retire to a Convent, without ever giving me reasons for this strange and public step... My dear Father, I pity her with all my Heart, and I am less sensible of the public and atrocious harm she has done me, than to the disgrace and wretchedness into which she has let herself be precipitated by our common Enemies'^[23].

On that same day, James wrote to Clementina's first cousin, Elizabeth Farnese, the Queen of Spain. To her he wrote of his pain and anxiety regarding, 'the strange and unbelievable resolution taken by the Queen my wife'^[24]. The next day James wrote to Clementina's uncle by marriage, Francesco Farnese, Duke of Parma, and another first cousin, Clement Auguste, Elector of Cologne. In these letters, he informed them that his wife had 'strangely' left him. He also ordered Inverness to write to various members of the Jacobite nobility to inform them of the, 'unlucky and unfortunate scene that has appeared here these days past'^[25].

This disagreement between the Royal couple was then worsened by the actions of the King. James wrote an account of the confrontation in order to vindicate his conduct in which he blamed the affair entirely on

Clementina. He then had copies made with two letters he had sent the Queen added, which were then despatched to various Jacobite supporters throughout the British Isles.^[26] Loyal adherents such as Philip Wharton, Duke of Wharton, and George Lockhart of Carnwath were ordered to pass on 'the account which the King designd to impart to his subjects, of that unlucky affair', and to justify his, 'Conduct in a publick Manner'.^[27] Inverness, by then Secretary of State, further informed Wharton on behalf of the King, that:

'[T]he King thinks it very necessary that his faithful Subjects everywhere should be informed that nothing has been wanting on his part to divert The Queen from so extraordinary a step, and in so far I think I cannot execute H.M.s commands better than by sending you the inclosed memoire, with copies of two letters the King wrote to The Queen at seasonable times before she retired.'^[28]

Wharton faithfully took the information he had been sent and duly passed it on to several prominent English Jacobites with the instruction that, '[F]or the satisfaction of the common people, I should advise that a narrative should be extracted and published from the facts with which I shall now acquaint you'^[29]. These documents - the memorial and the two letters - were then published in a pamphlet entitled, *The Memorial of the Chevalier de St. George, On the Occasion of Princess Sobieski's Retiring into a Nunnery: and Two Original Letters, Written by the Chevalier to the said Princess, to dissuade her from that Design* (1726).

This polemic was made to look as though it was a propaganda exposé by the British government, designed to discredit James. The Jacobites involved hoped, however, that publishing the pamphlet would in fact rebound in his favour.^[30] The anti-Jacobite touch can be seen in the introductory section and while the

precise details of who added the preface and published the pamphlet is unknown, it was nevertheless made use of by both Hanoverians and Jacobites alike.^[31] Articles in newspapers advertised the manifesto and wrote about the appearance of *The Memorial*, quoting from it and commenting on the royal quarrel. *The London Journal*, for example, opined that, 'The Commonest Reader will observe That the Religion of their Son's Governour is so far from being at all the Cause of this Event, that the Pretender Himself places it evidently to Another, both in this Memorial, and in his Letters to the Princess Herself.'^[32] Now public, the dispute between the King and Queen soon exacerbated the divisions among his supporters, and particularly between the Jacobites in France, Spain and Rome. It also tested many British Jacobites' confidence in James. The memorial, which James had intended to vindicate his conduct towards the Queen, proved instead to be a blow to his cause.^[33]

Clementina was not only aware of her husband's participation in the production of the pamphlet, she also foresaw its failure to achieve his goal. As she commented in one of her letters to her father, 'In England the government is so charmed with his manifesto that they printed it in 3 different editions'.^[34] *The Stuart Papers* contain only one letter written by Clementina in 1726 and it was addressed to James. Without mentioning the memorial, she urged him,

'to go through all the letters I have written to you before and after my withdrawal, and you will find out what are the reasons which have forced me to withdraw into a Convent; You will also remember, Sire, that I have told you these things from the mouth, and that I have sent them to you by more letters'^[35].

This directly contradicts what James had said in his letter to her father the day after she left,^[36] but regrettably Clementina did not reiterate her reasons in her letter, and the correspondence to which she refers appears not to have survived.

In May 1727, under considerable pressure from the pope and the kings of France and Spain, James finally agreed to his wife's terms. The Hays and Dunbar were to leave the court, which was received 'with universal applause', and the Queen was to be granted her own household, thus precipitating her return^[37]. It was almost two years after her withdrawal that Maria Clementina left Santa Cecilia and returned to her husband. Despite being officially reconciled to James, however, she remained distant from him. After their reunion, Clementina withdrew more and more from public life, preferring seclusion in her quarters. Her life at court became one of devotion, prayer and penance, as well as charitable works. She was later renowned for having spent her time with the poor and sick in Rome, serving them in the local hospital as opposed to socialising with the elite of Jacobite and Roman society^[38]. She correspondingly became very popular with the local people, and after her death was popularly considered a saint^[39].

The life of Maria Clementina we glimpse in the Stuart Papers is in many respects limited, as the majority of her letters were written to her husband. The first of these letters, both to and from Clementina, were written during their engagement while she was under house arrest. After their meeting and marriage, their correspondence understandably declined. Thus, during the first five years of marriage there were very few letters written both to and from Clementina, and there are no letters from her in 1725. Even so, in a long

postscript from James, written just days before she fled to the convent, we know that she had written to him, for he says that he is glad she decided to write. In 1726, while in the convent, she wrote only one letter, which was to James, and she received only five. She wrote one letter just before she was about to leave the convent in 1727 to her cousin, James Fitzjames, Duke of Liria, who had assisted in the reconciliation of the royal couple^[40]. The record for 1728 is relatively quiet, but her correspondence then increased rapidly in her final years. The Stuart Papers for the last six years of her life contain on average 28 letters per year from her, the majority of which were written to James.

Contained within the collection there are, too, eight letters written by Maria Clementina to her eldest son, Prince Charles, and three to her father, Prince James Sobieski. Except for one letter to her sister Charlotte, duchesse de Bouillon, and Charlotte's reply, no letters survive in the records to or from her mother or other sister, Maria Kazimiera, or her youngest son Prince Henry^[41]. Clementina's father did write to her on a few occasions over the 16 years of her marriage, but corresponded more frequently with James regarding her dowry and inheritance^[42]. Clementina's correspondence was predominantly written in French; however, a couple of the early letters written to her son Charles, her 'dear Carlusu', as she liked to call him, when he was just eight, are in English. 'I received with great satisfaction your letter and the more seeing in it the desire you have to please me'^[43]. Charles' letters to his mother, however, are not in the collection. Outside the family, Clementina corresponded with archbishops and cardinals, and at least one pope, her godfather Clement XI^[44], as well as members of the Jacobite and Italian nobility.

A detailed study of the life of the exiled Stuart queen has yet to be attempted. While Edward Corp's *The Stuarts in Italy* focuses primarily on James and the affairs at the exiled court, it also contains the most detailed account of Clementina's married life to date, using predominantly the Additional MSS collections in the British Library and the State Papers in British National Archives.. Peggy Miller's *A Wife for the Pretender*, gives a minute account of the engagement, capture and escape of the Polish Princess, using the Stuart Papers and other collections, such as the Lubomirski Papers (Wroclaw). Andrew Lang, who provides details of Charles Edward Stuart's mother's life in his biography of the Prince, also used the Stuart Papers.^[45]

The material in the Stuart Papers is without doubt a significant resource for further research into the life of the uncrowned queen, Maria Clementina. Her letters touch on a variety of issues surrounding elite women's roles in marriage, family life and the royal court. The correspondence is also a good example of eighteenth-century women's letters in general, and would benefit further research into the culture of correspondence and elite female letter-writers, particularly with respect to correspondence between husbands and wives. Themes of information, scheming and gossiping, as well as propaganda and the press, are most particularly revealed within the collection through the affair of the Queen's marital separation between 1725 and 1727^[46]. The Stuart Papers are thus an invaluable source for the life and times of this unfortunate and unrealised queen.

NOTES

^[1] Charles Wogan to the Duke of Mar, 6 March 1718. RA SP/Main/28/19.

^[2] Edward Corp, *The Jacobites at Urbino: An Exiled Court in Transition* (New York, 2009), p. 91.

^[3] James III to the Duke of Mar, 30 March 1718. RA SP/Main/29/74.

^[4] RA SP/Main/28/19.

^[5] RA SP/Main/37/88; RA SP/Main/39/144; Peggy Miller, *A Wife for the Pretender* (London, 1965), p. 39.

^[6] RA SP/Main/37/59; [Anon], *Female Fortitude Exemplify'd* (London, 1722); Sir John T. Gilbert, *Narratives of the Detention, Liberation and Marriage of Maria Clementina Sobieska Styled Queen of Great Britain & Ireland by Sir Charles Wogan and Others* (Dublin, 1894); Andrew Lang, *Prince Charles Edward Stuart. The Young Chevalier* (London, 1903); Miller, *Wife for the Pretender*.

^[7] RA SP/Main/41/62: Clementina to James, 4/15 January 1719; 'Dieu veuille que cela puisse nous délivrer bientôt, de nos souffrances et contribuer a votre bonheur comme au mien, c'est ce que j'attens avec beaucoup d'impatience.'

^[8] RA SP/Main/41/46, 83.

^[9] RA SP/Main/43/84.

^[10] Clement XI had ordered a payment to be made to the new queen; RA SP/Main/43/132.

^[11] RA SP/Main/50/138; RA SP/Main/80/120.

^[12] Aneta Markuszewska, 'And all this Because of "the Weakness of Your Sex": the Marital Vicissitudes of Maria Klementyna Sobieska Stuart, Wife of the Old Pretender to the English Throne', in Almut Bues (ed.), *Frictions and Failures. Cultural Encounters in Crisis* (Wiesbaden, 2017), pp. 168-170; Edward Corp, *The Stuarts in Italy 1719-1766. A Royal Court in Permanent Exile* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 165.

^[13] Markuszewska, 'the Marital Vicissitudes of Maria Klementyna Sobieska Stuart', p. 169.

^[14] Corp, *Stuarts in Italy*, p. 28.

^[15] Daniel Szechi, *The Jacobites. Britain and Europe 1688-1788* (Manchester, 1994), pp. 110-11; Corp, *Stuarts in Italy*, p. 28.

^[16] Corp, *Stuarts in Italy*, p. 123.

^[17] Markuszewska, 'the Marital Vicissitudes of Maria Klementyna Sobieska Stuart', p. 169. The Sobieski collection is held in the National Archive of Belarus, Minsk.

^[18] Corp, *Stuarts in Italy*, p. 28.

^[19] RA SP/Main/106/7; Corp, *Stuarts in Italy*, p. 165.

^[20] RA SP/Main/87/64: James to Clementina, 29 October/9 November 1725; 'Votre conduite en vers moi les menaces qui m'ont ete faites et tout rage publique de votre retraite dans un convent ne me touchent pas tant que le malheur et la honte aux quels vous allez vous exposer, par une si etrange demarche...je n'ai aucun ressentiment contre vous car je suis a chaque moment plus convaincu que la malice et la finesse de nos Ennemis en ont imposes a votre jeunesse et a la foi blesse de votre sexe, vous avez deue etre persuadee il y a long tems, que je veux etre le Maitre dans mes affaires et dans ma famille.' Original text. This quote is from the first letter published in 'The Memorial'.

^[21] [Anon], *Dublin Journal*, lxxix, 18 December 1725.

^[22] See for example: [Anon], *London Journal*, cccxxxviii, 15 January 1726.

^[23] RA SP/Main/87/81: James to Prince James Sobieski, 5/16 November 1725; 'La Reine m'a quittee hier, pour se retirer dans un Convent, sans m'avoir jamais donner des raisons pour une le etrange et publique demarche... Mon chere Pere, que Je la plains de tout Coeur, et que Je suis moins sensible a linjure atroce et publique qu'elle m'a faite, qu' au dishonneur et matheur dans lesquelles Elle s'est laifice precipiter par nos Enemis communs.'

^[24] RA SP/Main/87/82: James to Elizabeth Farnese, Queen of Spain, 5/16 November 1725; '... della strana et incredibile risoluzione pigliata dalla Regina mia moglie di ritirani in un convento'.

^[25] RA SP/Main/87/88, 89, 91.

^[26] Neil Guthrie, 'The Memorial of the Chevalier de St. George (1726): Ambiguity and Intrigue in the Jacobite Propaganda War', *The Review of English Studies*, 55 (2004) 560; RA SP/Main/87/64.

^[27] Frank McLynn, *Bonnie Prince Charlie: Prince Charles Edward Stuart* (London, 2003), pp. 12-14; Guthrie, 'The Memorial', pp. 556, 562, quoting George Lockhart of Carnwath: Anthony Aufrere (ed.), *The Lockhart Papers* (2 vols, London, 1817), ii. 260.

^[28] RA SP/Main/87/91

^[29] RA SP/Main/91/62, 63, 64.

^[30] Guthrie, 'The Memorial', p. 561.

^[31] Neil Guthrie gives a detailed argument regarding the evidence of the potential role of both the Jacobite court and Hanoverian government supporters in the publication of this pamphlet, and its ultimate purpose.

^[32] [Anon] *London Journal*, cccxxxix, 22 January 1726.

^[33] A detailed analysis of the pamphlet can be found in Neil Guthrie's article, 'The Memorial'.

^[34] Markuszewska, 'the Marital Vicissitudes of Maria Klementyna Sobieska Stuart', pp. 173-4.

^[35] RA SP/Main/97/53: Clementina to James, 7/18 September 1726; 'Je vous supplie de parcourir toutes les lettres que Je vous ai ecrite avant et apres ma retrait, et vous écrirez quels sont les motifs et les

raisons que m'ont forces ame retirer dans un Convento; Vous souviendrez aussi, sire, que Je vous les ai dit de bouche, et que Je vous les ai fait dire par plus lettres'.

^[36] RA SP/Main/87/81.

^[37] RA SP/Main/105/161, 106/40, 108/19; Corp, *Stuarts in Italy*, pp. 188-93.

^[38] RA SP/Main/107/114, 108/76, 114/116; Corp, *Stuarts in Italy*, pp. 220, 240.

^[39] RA SP/Main/177/75.

^[40] RA SP/Main/87/64, 97/53, 106/112.

^[41] RA SP/Main/146/122, 176/66.

^[42] RA SP/Main/63/139, 65/53.

^[43] RA SP/Main/127/112, 128/95.

^[44] RA SP/Main/41/112.

^[45] Andrew Lang, *Prince Charles Edward Stuart. The Young Chevalier* (London, 1903).

^[46] See for example: RA SP/Main/107/38, 68.

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