Express Yourself? Henrietta Maria and the Political Value of Emotional Display for the Early Modern Queen

Wednesday 8 February, 12.45pm
RHLT1

Henrietta Maria, the French-born queen consort to Charles I of England, experienced a life of dramatic extremes. Born into the Bourbon dynasty, she was raised with all the trappings of courtly magnificence, and scored a coup with the diplomatic triumph of her marriage. But exactly those qualities that made her appealing to this historic dynastic union were those that unsettled both the English court and England at large: her French heritage and her Catholic piety. The events that unfolded are well charted: the initial tension with her husband, the expulsion of her servants, the loss of her first child, the many subsequent successful births and a new halcyon period of marital bliss, the tensions that developed into the civil wars, the ignominious period in exile and the dramatic and triumphant restoration of her eldest son Charles II. Historians, myself included, have thoroughly navigated these events, considering them in their political, religious and material contexts.

However Henrietta Maria’s emotional response to these events has not been systematically and critically examined. These expressions were recorded in letters by the queen herself, eyewitness accounts and rumours, as well as materialised in ceremonial dress and visualised in portraiture. Whether authentically experienced or not, these emotional expressions were central to claims for her royal status, dynastic importance, financial security and political strategy. Moreover, these emotions were strategically displayed, carefully calibrated to conform to conventions of appropriate behaviour for queens and to maximise benefits that were both personal and dynastic, political and financial.

Erin Griffey is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Auckland, where she has taught since 2002. She is a specialist in visual and material culture at the early modern court, with research interests also including Rembrandt, Titian, portraiture, sexuality and concepts of beauty. She has published extensively on Queen Henrietta Maria, including a recent monograph with Yale University Press, On Display: Henrietta Maria and the Materials of Magnificence at the Stuart Court (2016) and an edited volume published with Ashgate, Henrietta Maria: Piety, Politics and Patronage (2008). She has published articles in the British Art Journal, the Burlington, Connaissance des Arts, Dutch Crossing, History Workshop Journal, the Journal of the History of Collections and Studi di Memofonte and contributed to several edited volumes. She is currently co-writing a book on the Stuart royal bedchamber with Olivia Fryman and editing a volume of essays, Fashioning Women at Court 1500-1700: Sartorial Politics. She is also part of the research team working on the Palmhout Shipwreck, a seventeenth-century shipwreck recently discovered off the Dutch island of Texel, which includes an array of luxury textiles and metal objects.