

Enlightened Princesses: Caroline, Augusta, Charlotte,
and the Shaping of the Modern World

February 2–April 30, 2017

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CAROLINE OF ANSBACH



Caroline of Ansbach (1683–1737) was the daughter of Johann Friedrich, Margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach (1668–1694), and his second wife, Eleanore of Saxe-Eisenach (1662–1696). Orphaned by the age of eleven, she was brought up by guardians, Friedrich III, Elector of Brandenburg, first King in Prussia from 1701, and his wife Sophie Charlotte of Hanover. Caroline joined Sophie Charlotte's household at Lützenburg, the palace located a short distance from Berlin. It was there that she was introduced to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, George Frideric Handel, Pierre Bayle, John Toland, and other members of the lively intellectual circle encouraged by the electress. In 1705, Caroline was married to George Augustus, Electoral Prince of Hanover.

At the Hanoverian Court, Caroline found a mentor in her husband's grandmother, the Dowager Electress Sophia, who encouraged her intellectual and literary interests. Another exciting challenge was to prepare for royal service: the Act of Settlement of 1701 had established Sophia and her heirs as successor to Queen Anne and the British crown. Caroline took English lessons and developed an interest in politics, welcoming any opportunity to converse with visitors from London. Sophia, however, would be thwarted in her ambition to become queen. She died just a few weeks before Queen Anne's death in 1714. The throne passed to Sophia's son, George Louis, Elector of Hanover. George Augustus and Caroline, newly created Prince and Princess of Wales, followed George I to London. One of Caroline's first contributions to the smooth integration of the new regime would be to provide a strong female presence at court. Her position as wife to the heir to the throne was unambiguous, and she was mother of a clutch of healthy children.

In 1727, George II succeeded his father. Caroline enjoyed only ten years as queen consort; she died at the age of fifty-four, in 1737. During her years in London she worked strenuously to support her husband, to celebrate and promote the Hanoverian dynasty, and build up the confidence of her new compatriots in the regime. Her guardians had ensured she was aware of her dynastic capital as a Hohenzollern princess. She provided support and good advice, and clearly discussed politics with her husband, who trusted her judgment. During his absences in Hanover, he left her as regent entrusted with domestic matters. She pushed constantly against traditional assumptions that could have circumscribed her ambition—which opened opportunities for her successors to explore.

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AUGUSTA OF SAXE-GOTHA



Augusta of Saxe-Gotha (1719-1772) was the wife of Frederick, Prince of Wales, the eldest son of George II and Caroline. She was the thirteenth child of Friederich II, Duke of Saxe-Gotha, and his wife, Magdalena of Anhalt-Zerbst. Saxe-Gotha was a tiny principality, and Augusta's marriage prospects had seemed inauspicious. However, George was under pressure to find a bride for his rebellious son, who had arrived in London from Hanover in 1728, estranged from his parents after many years of separation. His reversionary interest in his father's position had created an immediate tension; he was swiftly courted by the political opposition. Augusta impressed the king with her affability, good sense, and Saxon connections. Sir Robert Walpole noticed, shrewdly, that despite her youth and naivety there was evidence that "spoke strongly in favor of brains, that had had but seventeen years to ripen."

Augusta proved to be an ideal consort; her very innocence brought her sympathy from George II, Caroline, and the court, and she would become a good mother to a lively brood of children. As part of a charm-offensive to rally the political opposition, they would accompany their parents as they visited manufactories, attended the theater, and popular entertainments. This provided a wholesome image for this next generation of the royal family.

Augusta would never become a queen consort; Frederick Prince of Wales died unexpectedly in 1751. However, as mother of the future king, who had yet to reach his majority, there was still potentially a role for her, as long as her son remained within her household. Destroying evidence of her involvement in opposition politics, she threw herself on the mercy of the king. George II declared her the "best of women," and named her princess dowager, and regent, albeit with the support of a council, in the event of his death before George, her eldest son, had reached the age of eighteen. Augusta's covert appointment of John Stuart, third Earl of Bute, as tutor to her son, at this time, would eventually demolish the confidence and trust others had in her abilities and good judgment. She died of cancer at the age of fifty-three in 1772.

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CHARLOTTE OF MECKLENBURG-STRELITZ



Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz (1744–1818) married George III in 1761, after the king succeeded his grandfather, George II, in 1760. She was born in Mirow, in the duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, the second daughter of Duke Charles Louis and his wife, Elizabeth of Saxe-Hildburghausen. She enjoyed a well-rounded education that included art and music lessons and early acquired a taste for serious reading, of theology in particular. She studied Latin and learned to speak French and Italian. From 1760, until her marriage, she was a secular canoness at the imperial abbey of Hervoden, and as a younger daughter of a minor branch of an ancient family, she may have imagined she would remain unmarried and become abbess. However, her destiny proved very different; she was chosen from a short list of candidates to be the bride of the King of England – she was young and healthy, of good character, of princely rank, and Protestant.

Charlotte was fortunate in her marriage. An arranged match, it proved a perfect fit, and she enjoyed a happy life with her husband, who loved her dearly. They shared many interests: art, science, music, and theater, as well as a deep religious faith. Like her immediate predecessors, Charlotte was able to bear children without difficulty, swiftly fulfilling one of her principal functions to secure an heir for the dynasty. Charlotte appeared to have been her husband's confidante in affairs of state. In London, her support for the regime was managed subtly through the Drawing Room, over which she presided, and in the dispensing of court appointments in a society where most politicians were, or sought to be, courtiers, and knew there was advantage to be accrued from their wives' success in this arena. By these means she was able to support publically her husband's dealings with his ministers, both positively and negatively. Charlotte, who like Caroline of Ansbach, was Electress of Hanover, seemed more inclined to exercise her political influence within the European arena, maintaining a lively correspondence with members of her extended family in Mecklenburg-Strelitz.

In October 1788, George III had his first mental and physiological collapse. The episode was acutely distressing for Charlotte and brought her an unasked-for prominence in political affairs. The terms of the government's Regency Bill in 1789, in seeking to prevent Prince George, the ambitious eldest son of George III and Charlotte, from consolidating a party around him, placed restrictions on the regent's power and allowed Charlotte control of the king's person and household. This was interpreted by the political opposition as evidence of Charlotte's avarice, and following her energetic public support for her husband during his periods of remission from illness, Edmund Burke would claim that "the power and dominance of the Queen" was finally being exercised.

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The king's illness recurred in 1801 and 1804, and after 1811 he was so mentally unstable he was confined, in seclusion, to his own apartment at Windsor Castle. The Regency Bill of 1811 restated Charlotte's charge of the king's person and household, assisted by a council. She used her agency over the next years to maintain continuity of procedure and personnel so that, should her husband recover, he swiftly would be able to resume his duties. She supported her son by ensuring that the mechanisms of court at St. James's Palace were faithfully maintained and provided him with sound advice about managing the public response to the breakup of his own marriage. Charlotte died in 1818 and was buried at Windsor, where her husband continued to reside. He outlived her by two years.

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