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Henrietta Howard: mistress, survivor, imperialist?

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, Henrietta Howard has been seen through the lens of her role as George II's mistress and a 'woman of reason' who was connected to the leading men of her day. More recently, Henrietta Howard has been reinterpreted as a minor feminist icon: a survivor, who overcame childhood tragedy, an abusive marriage, and the patriarchal system to become a leading cultural patron, living in comfort at the home she built, Marble Hill. This article seeks to situate Henrietta as a beneficiary of, and participant in, imperial activity and exchange. Today these two interpretations - Henrietta as 'survivor' and Henrietta as 'imperialist';- feel at odds with one another. Present-day attitudes mean that a feel-good, 'girlboss'; feminist narrative about Henrietta's life, does not sit easily with the fact that she benefitted from transatlantic slavery. However, I argue the two readings can be reconciled, creating a new interpretation, when we consider that it was through imperial activity that Georgian women such as Henrietta Howard were able to materially benefit, survive and even thrive.

Introduction: Henrietta Howard and Marble Hill

Henrietta Howard was born Henrietta Hobart in 1689. While her family were Norfolk gentry, she had a challenging childhood.[1] After her father died in a duel when she was eight, rising debts and the death of her mother four years later left Henrietta and her three sisters orphaned.[2] A marriage to Charles Howard in 1706, the youngest son of the wealthy Earl of Suffolk was designed to provide status and security.[3] However, Charles was 'ill-tempered obstinate, drunken, extravagant, brutal'.[4] His spending on gambling, drinking and sex workers left the couple destitute.[5] Henrietta saw a position at court for herself and her husband as a way out of her miserable situation and by 1714 Henrietta was Woman of the Bedchamber to Caroline, Princess of Wales. By 1718 she was the royal mistress to the future George II and received a large financial gift of stock, jewels, plate, and mahogany.[6] A year later, Henrietta began building Marble Hill, a Neo-Palladian villa, in Twickenham overlooking the River Thames. With the death of her husband and retirement from court, by 1734 Henrietta was able

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to make Marble Hill her main residence, where she lived until her death in 1767. There she created a space for an almost alternative court, made up of the leading cultural, intellectual and political figures of the day, from Alexander Pope to Jonathan Swift.

Traditionally, Henrietta Howard has been seen through the lens of her role as George II's mistress and as a 'woman of reason' who was connected to leading men of her day.[7] In the twenty-first century, Henrietta Howard has been reinterpreted as a survivor and a beneficiary of imperial exchange. This article looks at each of those changing interpretations- mistress, survivor, imperialist- and offers explanations for why the changes occurred. Using archival material and following recent scholarship on women's role in upholding empire in the Americas, it seeks to reconcile the two most prominent current readings of Henrietta Howard and argues that she was able to survive, and even thrive, due to her involvement in imperial activity. She was not a survivor who happened to also be involved in the rapidly expanding British Empire, she was a survivor *because* of the opportunities that a rapidly expanding empire offered. While Lucille Mair Mathurin defended her ground-breaking doctoral work 'A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655–1844' fifty years ago and there is now a flourishing field of scholarship on the role of women in the colonial Americas, the interaction between white women in the metropole and the British empire has been less well studied, particularly before the nineteenth century.[8] A notable exception is Hannah Young's work, particularly on absentee enslaver, Anna Eliza Brydges.[9] This article encourages scholars to recognise the role empire played in eighteenth-century women's ability not only to accumulate wealth, but also to self-fashion through material goods and play a role in domains that were male dominated, such as architectural patronage.

I do not believe it is possible in the twenty-first century to know the 'real' Henrietta Howard. Instead, as historians, the most we can do is use the surviving source material to add further detail to what we already know about her life, probe the existing interpretations of Howard and offer new ones. This article does not seek to draw a hierarchy of quality between 'historical' and 'heritage' (or 'popular') readings of Howard; they are considered equal, as interpretations of the past created by people using the source material available to them.[10] That material ranges from letters written by Henrietta and those close to her; contemporaries' recollections of Henrietta; portraits and material culture, including the grounds of Marble Hill; accounts, and inventories of Marble Hill at the time of Henrietta Howard's death. Analysed interpretations range from a biography of Howard and commissioned academic reports, to videos and signage at Marble Hill created by English Heritage.

I first encountered Henrietta Howard's story as part of my collaborative doctoral project with English Heritage, looking at the mahogany in three of their London villas: Kenwood, Chiswick and Marble Hill. Immediately I found myself drawn to Henrietta Howard's story, as a female architectural patron in a time when I assumed such activities were the preserve of men.[11] That Howard used mahogany, a tropical hardwood native to the Americas, for Marble Hill's staircase and the floorboards of the piano nobile made her more fascinating. Here was a woman who used a material that I associated with the height of eighteenth-century luxury, refinement, and empire not just for furniture but throughout the structure of her house. To me, Henrietta Howard seemed complex and powerful.

Consequently, I found it slightly jarring when on one of my first visits to Marble Hill, I noticed a sign which read 'Marble Hill House: home of King George II's mistress'.

Knowing what I did about Henrietta Howard's story and how complex and rich her life was, I was surprised to see a sign outside the house she had built, not mentioning her by name. She was only described in reference to her relationship to the King, as his mistress. While I understood the choice of words in terms of accessibility, it didn't feel like the appropriate focus (Figure 1).[12]

Figure 1. Photo of the old sign outside Marble Hill, London. This sign has been replaced as part of the Marble Hill Reviewed reinterpretation.

Henrietta Howard: mistress

Despite my misgivings, Henrietta was commonly interpreted as a mistress in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Prior to Borman's biography of Henrietta from 2007, there is relatively little written about her. A review of Henrietta Howard's Wikipedia page, a possible indicator of the overriding interpretation at the time, shows the page was created in 2006. She is discussed almost solely through her relationship to notable men of the time, for example she is described as 'a mistress of King George II of Great Britain' in the opening sentence and is then discussed in relation to her father, husband, Prince of Wales, her second husband and male friends, (Charles Mordaunt, Alexander Pope, Horace Walpole, and Jonathan Swift.) This presentation is not dissimilar to Julius Bryant's, advanced in 'Mrs Howard: A woman of reason' published for an exhibition of the same name held at Marble Hill in 1988. The introduction opens with 'England's royal mistresses are not renowned for their interest in the arts'.[13] Henrietta is positioned as a cultured and intelligent woman and 'far more than the mistress of George II' but a mistress nonetheless.[14]

Although reductive, it is accurate that Henrietta Howard was George's mistress, with the relationship beginning most likely in 1718.[15] Henrietta and her husband Charles had travelled to Hanover in 1714, to the court of the future George I, to find positions and some level of financial security. Contemporary sources suggest that the man who was to become George II was impressed with Henrietta's modesty, discretion, and willingness to listen to his long descriptions of the military campaigns he had fought in.[16] However, there is little evidence that it was more than a platonic relationship until several years after their first meeting. By this time, George I was King of England, Henrietta was Woman of the Bedchamber to Princess Caroline and the Prince and Princess of Wales were spending the summer at Richmond Lodge. During that summer, Caroline was pregnant with the couple's seventh child and was experiencing a difficult pregnancy. The expectation that English kings had mistresses appeared to weigh heavily on George and, as Prince of Wales, he had begun to search for his own.[17] Court diaries remarked how George spent 'three or four hours' from seven o'clock every evening alone in Henrietta's apartments. Although, according to Lord Hervey, memoirist and member of Henrietta's circle, many courtiers doubted that George 'entered into any commerce with her, that he might not innocently have had with his daughter', he later confirmed that the relationship was sexual.[18] Henrietta continued in her role as mistress when George became King George II in 1727 until 1734, when it was said that he had grown tired of her ageing and increasing deafness.[19]

Knowing what I did of Henrietta Howard's life, interpreting her primarily as a royal mistress doesn't necessarily fit with what we associate with that position: salaciousness, sex and seduction. There is an extensive literature relating to early modern European royal mistresses, particularly in France. While this literature rightly emphasises women's influence and contributions to the governance of the kingdom, in the popular imagination, a royal mistress, likely conjures up a figure similar to Nell Gwynn, the famous mistress of Charles II. 'pretty, witty Nell' was frequently depicted in paintings in various states of nudity.[20] In portraits by Simon Verelst, a hint of nipple was often shown escaping her dress (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Nell Gwyn by Simon Verelst, circa 1680 (National Portrait Gallery 2496).

The covers of books about other kings' mistresses commonly feature images associated with female sexuality. 'The King's Mistress: The true and Scandalous Story of the Woman Who Stole the Heart of George I' by Claudia Gold conforms to this stereotype. The title is on top of a soft focus cropped painting of a woman's upper body. At the neckline of her gold dress are several carnations and locks of curled hair rest on her shoulder.

At first glance, the only extensive biography of Henrietta Howard's life, written by Tracy Borman in 2007, appears to conform to this trope. Borman pairs the title 'King's Mistress, Queen's Servant: The Life and Times of Henrietta Howard' with Jervas's 1724 portrait of her. In it, Howard is pictured as seated, slightly reclining, in front of a dark background in which the Thames can just be seen. Henrietta Howard

Figure 3. Henrietta Howard by Charles Jervas 1724, English Heritage Photo Library.

holds the gaze of the viewer. While one hand rests, the other is raised to her face with her index finger pointing at her cheek. This pose is strongly reminiscent of a portrait of Pope and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, both of whom were noted intellects. To the informed the eighteenth-century viewer, this portrait was positioning Henrietta Howard as a woman of reason as her pose echoes the convention of a solitary man of letters brooding on a rocky hillside at sunset, as well as linking her, Pope and Wortley Montagu.[21] Yet those allusions are unlikely to be known by most modern viewers, who will likely find the pose suggestive and designed to be alluring. Consequently, the overall effect of choosing the Jervas portrait is to present Henrietta Howard through the prism of her sexuality (Figure 3).

However, a Good Reads review of the biography pithily sums up the tension inherent in Borman's presentation of Howard: 'While I can't argue that Henrietta Howard is a fascinating woman, I was a bit disappointed that a book about a Kings [*sic*] Mistress was so entirely lacking in sex and scandal.'[22] Despite the title of Borman's work, the overriding interpretation she created is not of Henrietta as a mistress, it is of Henrietta as a survivor.

Henrietta Howard: survivor

Recalling her time living with Charles Howard in cheap lodgings in Beak Street, Soho, Henrietta wrote:

> I there Suffer'd all that Poverty and ye whole train of miseries that attend it can suggest to any ones imagination, nor was this all, I was unpitied by him who had brought me into these calamities, I was dispised and abused by him tho' he often knew me under the pressure and Smart of hunger.[23]

Neighbours recalled Charles watching her carrying a grate from room to room, suggesting they were too poor to afford servants or even to heat more than one room at a time.[24] Henrietta wrote of 'dreadful Scenes … which I tremble even to repeat, and which humanity wou'd force ye most barbarous to commiserate.'[25] Borman in 'King's Mistress, Queen's Servant' describes that during this period, Charles Howard turned 'increasingly to violence' and that Henrietta 'now bore the full brunt of her husband's temper.'[26]

This was not how the teenage Henrietta Hobart had hoped her marriage to the youngest son of the noble Suffolk family would turn out. The two met at his family home, Gunnersbury House, where Henrietta had been invited to live by a relative after the death of her parents. Charles had been away serving with the military and returned to find the sixteen-year-old Henrietta, who came with a significant dowry, moderate income and inheritance from her great-grandfather upon marriage. English Heritage describe Henrietta's marrying him 'In the hope of finding some security' while Borman suggests it may have been motivated by the desire for security or that she was 'taken in by his charming and easy manners'.[27] Whatever the motivation, the pair were married on 2 March 1706 at St Benet Paul's Wharf, London.

The abuse began not long after the pair married and was not just physical, but also emotional. A significant element of the abuse related to Charles Howard's refusal to let Henrietta see her son, Henry, who she loved dearly. During their time at Beak Street, neighbours recalled how Henrietta doted on Henry, constantly attempting to shield him from their miserable situation.[28] When the couple travelled to Hanover, they did so without their young son. Charles later denied Henrietta any access to Henry when she chose to remain in the Prince and Princess's household instead of giving up her position to live with him in the King's household. Borman describes this separation from her son as 'a torment for Henrietta' especially as Charles was 'in all probability raising their son to despise this absent mother.'[29] The emotional abuse can also be seen in letters written at the time of the separation. In a letter where he demands that Henrietta return to live with him or else he would begin legal proceedings, Charles wrote 'The unparalell'd treatment of your behaviour to me, has twice endanger'd my ruine … forcecing me to those measures'.[30] The threat of legal action, emphasis on Henrietta's supposedly unreasonable behaviour and 'look what you made me do' rhetoric ('forcing me to those measures') all provide an insight into the abuse Henrietta survived.[31]

Throughout her biography of Henrietta Howard, Borman emphasises that her decision to move to the Hanoverian court and into the position of royal mistress was driven by desperation, reinforcing the Henrietta as survivor narrative. Borman includes a quotation from Horace Walpole emphasising this motivation 'nor do I suppose that love had any share in the sacrifice she made of her virtue. She had felt poverty, and was far from disliking power.'[32] Here we see Henrietta's decisions presented as a survival tactic. A life with Charles meant squalor, shame and abuse. Moreover, throughout her 16 years as a royal mistress, Borman shows the numerous slights and insults Henrietta was subject to, particularly from Caroline of Ansbach, George's wife. After becoming George's mistress, Caroline

insisted that Henrietta now be on bended knee when holding the basin she used to wash. Henrietta felt this was an act designed to humiliate her.[33]

The nature of the surviving archival material also suggests that Henrietta Howard saw herself as a survivor and attempted to fashion this as her image for posterity. Writing about her relationship with her husband, in 1716 Henrietta wrote that he governed her 'with Tyranny; with Cruelty, my life in Danger, them am I not free? … Self preservation is ye first law of Nature, are Married Women then ye only part of human nature yt must not follow it?'[34] While there was effectively no divorce in England prior to 1700, Henrietta was able to achieve an official separation from her abusive spouse.[35]

Despite her significance to eighteenth-century elite society, aside from Borman's biography, relatively little has been written about Henrietta Howard. What has been written often emphasises her position as a survivor. Boyington, in her survey of eighteenth-century female architectural patronage, presents Henrietta as the archetypal survivor and the house she built, Marble Hill, as central to her ability to 'escape the constraints' of the 'violent Charles Howard, later 9th Earl of Suffolk, who treated her appallingly'.[36] For Boyington, Marble Hill was 'Henrietta's declaration to the world that she was free and independent, able to express herself through architecture and art.'[37]

This presentation of Henrietta as overcoming adversity is continued by English Heritage. In collaboration with 'Dose of Nature', a charity established to promote the mental health benefits of engaging with the natural world, and 'Refuge', which provides specialist support for women and children experiencing domestic violence, Marble Hill hosted a series of workshops for women who were survivors of domestic abuse.[38] The resonance between the participants' lives and Henrietta Howard's was made explicit. Howard was positioned as a woman who had been 'trapped in an abusive marriage.'[39] In a 2021 video produced for International Women's Day Henrietta is described as a 'remarkable woman' who although 'born into a wealthy family' was orphaned as a child and 'wedded to a violent drunkard who soon got through all her money'.[40] Marble Hill is again positioned as a safe space where Howard found 'contentment' after she 'triumphed over adversity.'[41] Given that the video was created for International Women's Day, this narrative is unsurprising and in line with Borman's interpretation, one that clearly resonates with popular audiences and has power today.

The trend for Henrietta to be interpreted first and foremost as a survivor may be linked to the shifting nature of women's history as a discipline. As June Hannam shows, 'the writing of women's history has always been linked with contemporary feminist politics as well as changes in the discipline of history itself.'[42] Increasingly, women in the past are being presented through a 'girlboss' lens, particularly in popular forms of history.[43] Thought to have been coined by fashion entrepreneur Sophia Amoruso in her 2014 autobiography *#Girlboss*, the concept is often characterised by its individualism, and celebration of female wealth and power within a capitalist, patriarchal society. Boyce and Dove note that in the New York Times' Overlooked project, 'an online memorialising enterprise dedicated to providing "forgotten" celebrities (mostly women) with retrospective obituaries', figures such as Charlotte Bronte are 'reframed in terms of "Girlboss" feminism.'[44] Many of these interpretations of 'Henrietta as survivor' conform very closely to the attributes typically associated with the 'Girlboss': a celebration of Howard's wealth and power within the capitalist and patriarchal world of eighteenth-century England, an extraordinary woman rising to the top due to her own hard work and individual abilities.

Although the means that allowed Henrietta to build Marble Hill are often noted, the source of Henrietta Howard's wealth is much less frequently emphasised. Boyington credits the '£11,500 of stock in trust as well furnishings and jewellery in her own and her servants' rooms at Leicester House and Richmond' that Howard was gifted by the Prince, as well as her salary from her court role as enabling 'Henrietta to immediately set about planning and commissioning her grand Twickenham villa.'[45] This is similar to the level of detail provided by English Heritage on the webpage dedicated to Henrietta which reads 'The building of Marble Hill was almost certainly made possible after a large gift of stock, jewels, plate, mahogany and furniture to Henrietta from the Prince of Wales in 1723.'[46] In Henrietta Howard's Oxford Dictionary of National Biography entry, Kilburn provides slightly more detail, specifying that the stock was in the South Sea Company and that this 'financial settlement allowed Mrs Howard to express her interest in architecture and develop an identity separate from her husband and from the prince and princess of Wales.'[47] When Borman describes the gift from the Prince, she also lists 'stock worth £11,500' but doesn't mention that it is South Sea stock, despite discussing the Company earlier in the chapter. Here the South Sea Company is described as 'established by the Earl of Oxford to trade with South America, but also as an alternative source of government funds to the Whig-dominated Bank of England and East India Company.'[48] While not mentioning the prince's gift when discussing the Company, Borman does mention Henrietta's earlier investment. Henrietta is portrayed as having 'wagered some of her modest funds' and having been 'shrewed in her investment', for which she is congratulated by her friend Elizabeth Molesworth who took pleasure in 'hearing you have been successful in the southsea.'[49] None of these authors discuss the South Sea Company's links to the transatlantic slave trade.

Henrietta Howard: imperialist?

In 2020, English Heritage released a podcast 'When the bubble burst: The South Sea Company stock market crash'.[50] The podcast discusses the Company's spectacular rise and fall as well as its clear links to the transatlantic slave trade. When considering English Heritage's links to the South Sea Company, Senior Properties Historian, Andrew Hann, discusses several property owners who made investments, including Henrietta Howard.

The South Sea Company has often been said to be an incompetent trader of enslaved people and its initial opposition to taking on the assiento (the contract to provide the Spanish Empire in the Americas with enslaved people) is frequently emphasised.[51] However, Paul disputes this interpretation. Using shipping data, Paul shows that the company did approach the slave trade in earnest and achieved some financial success. Consequently, she argues that 'investors in the company were not complete fools' when they parted with their money.[52] The South Sea Company was contracted to import the equivalent of 4800 enslaved men annually.[53] Alongside this, the contract allowed the Company a limited amount of trade in other goods on the understanding that it would also smuggle contraband goods into Spanish American ports. Analysis of the Slave Trading Voyages database shows that the South Sea Company shipped just over 34,000 enslaved people with a mortality rate of approximately 15%, which was comparable to the average at this time.[54] Using this data, Paul concludes that the Company

should not be described as reluctant or incompetent and that investors were making a rational, if abhorrent, decision when buying stocks.

That Henrietta Howard and Marble Hill had a link to the slave trade is not new information. As part of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007, English Heritage commissioned research into the connection the properties in its care had to slavery. Further research was commissioned in 2008 focusing on four specific properties: Bolsover Castle, Brodsworth Hall, Marble Hill House and Northington Grange. The report by Laurence Brown examined the impact of slavery-generated wealth on the development of Marble Hill, concluding that the transatlantic slave trade was crucial to funding both the acquisition of the land and the building of Marble Hill. The report notes that 'Henrietta Howard invested in two companies that were significant participants in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.' Her investments in both the South Sea Company and the French Compagnie des Indies offered high returns.[55] Henrietta's personal investments enabled the land that Marble Hill was built on to be purchased. Outside of the gift from the Prince of Wales, using Henrietta Howard's banking records we know that she was a well-informed investor, who held shares in organisations such as the Royal African Company, East India Company and Mississippi Company.[56]

When visiting Marble Hill, links to enslavement are in the very fabric of the house. The staircase and the floorboards of the piano nobile are made from mahogany, a rarity in English country houses. There is ongoing debate as to the origin of the mahogany in the structure of Marble Hill. Traditionally, it has been asserted that the mahogany was felled by the prince's ships that were returning from the Bay of Honduras and therefore the mahogany, while very much linked to Britain's imperial activity in the region, may not have been felled by enslaved people.[57] However, furniture historian Adam Bowett has questioned whether this story is apocryphal as most mahogany imported to Britain in this period originated in Jamaica.[58] There is a possibility that the mahogany used in the structure of Marble Hill was left over from a large shipment from Jamaica of wood cut for Admiralty House.[59]

What is known for certain is that by the 1720s, enslaved Africans were involved in the felling of mahogany in the Caribbean and had been for decades. While sugar, coffee, cotton and rice are more commonly associated with the transatlantic commodities that relied on enslaved labour, mahogany was a small but significant part of this economy. In the eighteenth century, mahogany imported into Britain was felled either in Jamaica or, later, Belize, both of which were slave economies. As early as 1689, Major William Moore of Port Royal, Jamaica, died in possession of '200Ft Mahogany plank' which his probate inventory lists was sold.[60] Alongside Moore's ownership of mahogany was his ownership of multiple enslaved Black people including Trump, Mintus, Coinford, Colchester, Prinse, Elsye, 'Catalona and Pickaninne' and 'Flora a girle'. That same year former Jamaican merchant, Jonathan Dickinson, ordered a 'Few fine woods for ye Joyners & some Mahogany … in board or in plank' to be delivered to him in his new home of Philadelphia.[61] While Dickinson was a merchant in Port Royal, then Jamaica's chief port city, he owned several enslaved people who worked his Barton and Pepper estates in St Elizabeth, a parish on the south-west of Jamaica where many mahogany trees grew.[62] By the 1720s, partly stimulated by the removal of import duties in the Naval Stores Act of 1721, the amount of mahogany entering England rose significantly, suggesting a corresponding rise in felling by enslaved people.

Marble Hill today is furnished with many mahogany items, as it was by Henrietta Howard. In an inventory from 1767, the year of her death, there are a total of fifteen pieces of furniture which are named as being made of mahogany.[63] What is particularly notable is where these objects appear within the house. Drawing on Weatherill, the difference in which woods appear in 'public' versus 'private' spaces is highly revealing.[64] Using the concept of 'front stage' versus 'backstage' rooms we see Henrietta placing many mahogany pieces in front stage rooms, where she actively fostered her image for others to consume.

In the service areas of the house, which would not be accessible to guests, we see a higher prevalence of wood that was unnamed, which was cheaper and seen as more utilitarian. In the kitchen, was a 'Wooden pestle', 'A Wooden Chair' next to 'A Small Oak Table'. Similarly in the Stewards Room, there were 'Two Oak Tables' and 'A Wainscot Bureau'. Whereas in the rooms that were on display to guests, mahogany predominates with very little other wood referred to by name. In the hall alongside 'A Large Mahogany Square Table with two Leaves' are two small side tables, a further small round table and a card table- all made from mahogany. Alongside the card table was a backgammon table, which was likely made from mahogany, and eight chairs, suggesting that this room would be used to entertain guests.

The pantry gives a fascinating glimpse into this divide between public and private spaces and the corresponding choice of wood. While the two stools presumably would have been made of wood, this is not detailed, suggesting they were not of much value. Alongside the stools was 'A Deal Table'.[65] What is particularly interesting is that this room contains items that would come under the public gaze and would be used for entertaining guests, for example, the 'Iron Japan Cistern' and '2 Mahogany Trays' which would have likely been used to serve refreshments to guests. At the time of Marble Hill's construction, the cost of mahogany and wainscot oak were relatively similar. However, by the 1760s, mahogany had tripled in price and was significantly more expensive relative to woods such as oak and deal. Lancaster furniture maker, Robert Gillows, was paying 5–7d per foot for mahogany in the early 1740s but this had risen to 12d and more by 1760.[66] The adoption of mahogany furniture in the eighteenth century varied by region and social status, however, by the time of Henrietta Howard's death, mahogany had become a status symbol expected in elite homes and the wood had a corresponding price tag.[67]

These connections between the house's mahogany and the transatlantic slave trade are explored by English Heritage as part of the Marble Hill Revived project, which saw the house renovated and reopened in Spring 2022 with new interpretations. The interpretation next to the mahogany 'Great Stairs' mentions that the mahogany trade into England 'relied on the labour of enslaved people and … devastated tree populations.'[68] A section of Malika Booker's poem 'Songs of Mahogany' is also displayed alongside the stairs:

> Think genocide visited here and men laboured in the art of such a thing. Speak of Mahogany. … And think of bodies/ bodies/ blood/ black/ blessed/ bones/ back/ back broad/ borders/ broken branches/[69]

Marble Hill's connections to transatlantic slavery continue in the garden. The eighteenth century saw a fashion for shell grottos. Grottos, a form of cave, were popular in Ancient

Greece and Rome. During this era, natural caves were used for dining and entertainment, while artificial caves, often designed to honour the goddess Venus, were built into gardens of Roman villas.[70] It is this association with Venus, who was carried to shore by a scallop shell, that led to grottos often incorporating shellwork.[71] During the Renaissance, the fashion for building grottos, with their association with the ancient world, was revived in Italy. By the seventeenth century, grottos had become a feature in the gardens of English country homes. In 1630 a room connected to the garden at Woburn Abbey was turned into a grotto, complete with shells on the ceiling, walls and shellwork mosaics.[72] The early eighteenth century, spurred on by Henrietta's friend, Alexander Pope, saw a boom in grotto building. The grotto at Marble Hill was rediscovered in 1941 and excavated in 1984 and 2021, which revealed the remains of a brick barrel vault, lined with shells, the floor composed of radiating circles of pebbles and split flints. The original entrance took the form of a fantastical cavern mouth encrusted with corals, flints, vitrified stones and blue glass.

The sheer number of shells Henrietta Howard used in her grotto is clear from the archaeological remains and the archival record. Writing to Lord Pembroke in the summer of 1739, Henrietta remarked 'I am at this time head and ears in shells'.[73] While most of the shells have gone, their imprints remain, allowing for identification. Among those shells found were several native to the Caribbean, including conch shells. This shell had a particular resonance for me, given their extensive presence in Antigua, where my father's family are from. During this period there was fierce competition for 'exotic' and colourful shells, particularly from the Caribbean. In the mid-eighteenth-century grotto that Thomas Goldney built in Clifton, Bristol, shells from the Caribbean make up 70% of geographically identifiable species.[74] Goldney had extensive financial interests in the transatlantic slave trade, including shares in numerous ships and involvement in the iron trade with West Africa.[75]

While it isn't clear how Henrietta Howard accessed the Caribbean shells she used to line her grotto, it may have been through her connections to trading companies such as the South Sea Company. Contemporary print media gives us an insight into the shell trade as it operated in eighteenth-century London. Numerous adverts for shell sales, which were often auctions in coffee houses, were placed in newspapers. In a 1754 advert those interested in 'A Great Variety of the most curious Shells, lately brought from the West Indies … displayed in a handsome Mahogany Inlaid Box' are requested to inquire of Mrs Quyn. Many of the adverts which mentioned the West Indies also mentioned grottoes, suggesting a fashion for Caribbean shells in particular among grotto makers. Henrietta Howard's grotto appears as a further example of her self-fashioning through involvement in the transatlantic economy: from the financing of Marble Hill to its furnishing.

In the recent literature and discussion of Henrietta Howard, it is rare for these two interpretations- Henrietta as a beneficiary of the transatlantic economy and Henrietta as a survivor- to be discussed alongside each other, particularly prior to 2020.[76] The clearest example is the English Heritage South Sea podcast. Moreover, the new interpretation installed in Marble Hill isn't silent on its (and Henrietta's) links to empire and slavery. In the 'Introduction Room' is a video that runs for approximately 4 minutes and introduces visitors to Henrietta Howard and Marble Hill. Roughly 2 minutes 30 into the video, there is a reference to the funds used to build Marble Hill being derived from slavery and the

house's connections to global trade. Further detail is provided inside the room book for the 'Great Stairs & more' about the house's imperial links, Marble Hill's story is described as one that 'can take us from the banks of the river Thames to as far afield as the Caribbean and Americas.' Henrietta is presented as someone who 'Like many of her contemporaries … purchased items from around the world and held investments in companies which traded overseas.' This book notes that it was a gift from the Prince of Wales that made Henrietta 'financially secure enough to build Marble Hill' and that the South Sea Company was formed to 'transport enslaved Africans'.[77]

However, being inside a room book, this information is not prominently displayed and is unlikely to be seen by many visitors in comparison to much more visible interpretation elsewhere in the house. Its 'educational message [on links to transatlantic slavery] is lighter touch than I was expecting' wrote one journalist after visiting the house shortly after its reopening.[78] The overriding focus of the interpretation is Henrietta Howard as an eighteenth-century 'girlboss' with headings such as 'More Than a Mistress' and 'Survivor', which is much more in keeping with other English Heritage interpretation of Henrietta Howard, for example, the webpage and International Women's Day video.

Given the extensive backlash that heritage institutions, particularly the National Trust, have faced since 2020 when discussing their links to slavery and empire, perhaps not making Henrietta Howard's links prominent is understandable.[79] However, several of the works which present Howard as a survivor with no reference to her imperial connections predate 2020. Consequently, perhaps something else is at play here. Henrietta Howard's feel-good narrative is significantly tarnished by her association with the transatlantic slave trade. Yet rather than being diametrically opposed (triumphing over patriarchy- good, benefitting from empire- bad), these two interpretations can be reconciled.

Surviving and thriving through empire

In her landmark 1974 PhD thesis, 'A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655–1844', Jamaican historian Lucille Mathurin Mair broke entirely new ground by analysing the role of women in the British colony. Undertaking extensive archival work, Mair is said to have concluded that 'the white woman consumed, the coloured woman served and the black woman laboured'.[80] While this typology was developed in reference to the lives of Jamaican women, it speaks to Henrietta Howard and women of her social status in eighteenth-century Britain: white women in the country house consumed empire. They consumed the tea served in porcelain cups, imported by the East India Company, and sweetened by sugar grown by enslaved people in the Caribbean; they bought mahogany tea trays and tables for these tea drinking parties, they used shells from the Caribbean to decorate their grottos. Henrietta Howard was far from unique in her consumption of products of empire. By the early eighteenth century, Zacek argues that sugar had become 'central to the social rituals which allowed them [women] to see themselves'.[81] Products of empire were being used by women to self-fashion gentility.[82]

In the eighteenth century, we see women doing more than just consuming products of empire, we see them benefitting from empire in a range of other ways, from flows of wealth to providing opportunities for professional practice. Using the 'British and Irish Furniture Makers Online' Database, it becomes apparent that women didn't only consume mahogany furniture, they also made it. Elizabeth Bell was a cabinet maker

and operated a furniture business called 'The White Swan' by St Paul's Churchyard, London between 1740 and 1758. Elizabeth frequently labelled the pieces she made with her name and several pieces survive including a mahogany chest of drawers and a mahogany table for serving tea or playing cards.[83] While the number of female makers was relatively small, some women were high status suppliers. Katherine Naish, who operated in Mary-le-Strand London, was commissioned by the Royal family to provide 'eight mahogany back stools with compass fronts and tops at 15s each for Price William's House in Leicester Square'. The stools were supplied in 1759. Her work clearly impressed as that same year she assumed the position of 'Royal Joyner and Chair maker', a role she held for thirteen years. During that time, Katherine Naish provided King George II and Queen Charlotte with two thrones and footstools for their Coronation in Westminster Abbey on 22 September 1761.[84] To produce this level of furniture, it is likely Naish ran a 'large and proficient carvers' and gilders' workshop'.[85] Her surviving furniture reveals a high level of skill with a 'fluent handling of naturalistic forms' showing that she was much more than purely a consumer of mahogany.[86]

Scholarship, particularly that which ranges across the British Atlantic world rather than just the metropole, increasingly shows the opportunities that Britain's expanding empire offered women to survive patriarchy. Christine Walker's 'Jamaica Ladies' concludes that women in Jamaica were central, rather than peripheral, to upholding slavery in the colony, they 'perpetuated chattel slavery and reaped the profits of settler colonialism during the early modern era'.[87] There free women had a much higher chance of accumulating wealth and living with autonomy in comparison to women in Britain. Through probate inventories and parish records, Walker introduces us to Jamaican trader and entrepreneur, Elizabeth Roach, who died in 1733 owning an estate valued at £2,484, a quarter of that value was from the twenty-seven people she owned. Wealthier than the average West Indian colonist, Elizabeth lived a luxurious life, she travelled around the island in a chaise coach driven by one of her enslaved people. In her large house she 'slept on a luxurious featherbed' and 'kept her gowns and petticoats in a mahogany dresser, and served her guests with a full tea set.'[88] Elizabeth was not alone in her ownership of mahogany. Fellow female entrepreneur Anne Hassall owned 'chairs and the two dining tables carved out of prized Jamaican mahogany' which according to Walker, were 'material emblems' of 'professional success'.[89]

However, much of this wealth and relative autonomy was due to slaveholding. It was customary for women to inherit 'moveable property', which in Jamaica often included enslaved people. Misha Ewen argues that the feminist urge to recover women's histories and emphasise early modern women's achievements can lead historians to 'lose sight of at whose expense they progressed their families and businesses: enslaved Africans and First Nations people.'[90] Ewen offers the example of sisters Sara Kirke and Frances Hopkins, the largest seventeenth-century property owners in Ferryland, an English colony in Newfoundland, Canada. Their business activities centred around cod fishing, buffered them against several personal catastrophes and the turbulent political times of the British Civil Wars and allowed them to buy goods such as sugar tongs and highly decorated ceramics that 'displayed their feminine articulation of an imperial selfhood.'[91]

Applying these scholars' conclusions to Henrietta Howard, we start to see how that initially dichotomous survivor/imperialist relationship becomes less of a dichotomy and more of an explanatory, causal relationship. In his 2010 report 'The slavery

connections of Marble Hill House', Brown puts the investments Henrietta made in the South Sea Company and the French Compagnie des Indies within the context of 'seeking greater financial independence from both her husband and the royal household'.[92] This attribution of motive is significant to the positioning of Howard's investments as a route to greater freedom, through these slave trading companies. Henrietta Howard was able to survive, and later thrive, because of the benefits she accrued from empire. Without the financial rewards from South Sea Company stock, building Marble Hill, frequently presented as her sanctuary from male control and abuse, would likely not have been possible. Once living at Marble Hill, much of Howard's self-fashioning as a genteel woman was bolstered through her consumption of the products of empire.

However, the link between women's property ownership and empire is frequently skirted over or is left implicit, as opposed to being extensively analysed or theorised, even when that link is very clear. While 'Behind Closed Doors in Georgian England' mentions mahogany 39 times, slavery is only mentioned twice, solely in connection to abolition. A recent survey work on work and gender in early modern Europe featured chapters on Agricultre, Migration and War but no chapter on empire.[93] Amy Froide finds that 'women made up between a fourth and a third of investors' in the major companies of the Financial Revolution such as the Royal African Company and South Sea Company.[94] Froide concludes both that 'Women became public investors because this allowed them to maintain themselves and retain their gentility' and 'the capital of British women helped make London the capital of the world'.[95] However, Froid stops short of explicitly concluding that women benefitted materially from investing in the British Empire.

Analysis of the reasons behind these absences lay outside the scope of this article, existing scholarship points to some potential reasons. Could it be that imperial amnesia or the ubiquity of the empire in the eighteenth-century explains the absence?[96] Alternatively, as Boyce and Dove conclude are historians when trying to correct for women's exclusion overlooking aspects of the history that are seen as awkward?[97]

Conclusion: putting the empire back into women's involvement with the country house

In concluding, there is value in returning to the increasing 'girlbossification' of female figures from the past; since critiques levelled at the celebration of the girlboss in contemporary culture further elucidate how the at first dichotomous relationship between survivor and imperialist is in fact causal. Sociologist Frankie Mastrangelo posits that girlboss feminism is 'fundamentally a product of racial capitalism in how it defines social change through the narrow constraints of capital accumulation, and its associated preservation of hierarchies and inequalities.'[98] The 'Henrietta as survivor' interpretations and many studies of female property ownership in the eighteenth century can be characterised as defining social change (women's activity in a patriarchal society) through the narrow constraints of capital accumulation (owning property, self-fashioning, business ownership). By being silent on the inequalities (in this case transatlantic slavery and colonialism) that were fundamental for that capital accumulation, these interpretations ignore 'the outside history that is inside the history of the English.' As Stuart Hall reminded

us, 'There is no English history without that other history.' By side-lining women's material connection to empire- whether via their consumption of products such as mahogany for tea tables and Caribbean shells for garden grottos, investments in colonial and slave trading companies that helped to finance building projects, or wealth gained directly from ownership of plantations and enslaved people- we obscure information that is central to understanding how the British Empire functioned, how women in the metropole supported it and women's material lives more broadly.

This conclusion is not intended to minimise the seriousness of the violence and abuse Henrietta Howard survived, nor to argue that interpretations should not emphasise this aspect of her life story, which is clearly borne out by the archive and tragically resonates to this day. Moreover, the ability to thrive through material engagement with empire was clearly not available to all women who lived within it. A certain degree of pre-existing privilege, through social connections and capital, appears necessary. In the Caribbean, these prerequisites took on a particular form: proximity to whiteness and slaveholding. Further research is necessary to ascertain the extent to which this causal relationship between access to imperial wealth and female freedom applies to women, other than Henrietta Howard, living in the metropole. Henrietta Howard's life- and the differing interpretations of it- offers us an opportunity to move research about women and the country house (and women's property ownership more broadly) forward. To 'put the empire back in' allows us to begin to see these women as complex historical actors who were both survivors and imperialists at the same time.

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