

The Women of the Court

Helen McCrory plays Barbara Villiers (Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland, Countess of Castlemaine: b.1641 d.1709)



“Barbara Villiers has an unabashed hedonism that makes her magnetic,” says Helen McCrory, who plays Charles’s manipulative and scheming mistress.

“She was described as ‘a magnificent creature’ and ‘an uncrowned queen’. Here was a really unusual woman who was a political animal as much as she was a sexual animal. This is, I think, the secret of her power; she was a tough cookie and she was a clever woman,” says McCrory, the daughter of a diplomat and a physiotherapist, who is best known for her roles in *Anna Karenina* and *North Square*.

For all Barbara’s faults, McCrory believes she truly loved the King. “She loved him as a friend, a lover, but mainly as a king. She would have believed in the divine right of kings: this was the representative of

God on Earth. It must have been absolutely entrancing, at the age of 19, to meet Charles in exile.

“She was terribly loyal and Charles, having seen his father betrayed and killed, considered loyalty very important to him as a king.

“They were so naughty together,” says Helen, a twinkle in her velvet brown eyes. “When they were supposed to be in chapel, they’d walk out, down to St James’s Park, with her in the carriage and him walking, waving to people. He’d buy her diamonds; she’d gamble with him – £2,000 in a throw in a night. They were wild together. She was great company and he was great company.



Charles II, though, was not a man to stay faithful to one woman; the Duke of Buckingham is said to have referred to him as “the father of his people – a good many of them”.

Barbara and the other royal mistresses, including Nell Gwynn, bore several children by Charles – a situation that she accepted.

“I think Barbara always knew that she was the subject of a sovereign and therefore would never ask for any kind of equality because she realised that wasn’t appropriate,” says McCrory. “She was grateful to be mistress of the bedchamber and to be given various titles as well as St James’s Park and Green Park. She was given an enormous amount of wealth.”

Barbara was married to Roger Palmer, whom the King created Earl of Castlemaine. “She says in the drama, ‘Why bow to a fool of a husband, when I can be a mistress and have the world at my feet’. That’s what Charles gave her – the world. So I think she would have tolerated anything.”

McCrory reveals, though, that Barbara was riven with jealousy.

“She was very jealous, and rightly so, because she realised that if the King had another woman in his favour, there was nothing to go back to if it all went wrong. If he didn’t acknowledge the children, they weren’t going to be supported, so it was an economic necessity as well,” she observes.

Barbara, described by McCrory as “totally selfish, self-centred and deceitful, lustful, greedy, malicious and jealous”, is unlikely to be top of a poll of viewers’ favourites when the series airs in November.

“But it’s something you don’t think about really because all you’ve got to do is portray the character as fully as you possibly can.”

McCrory’s future roles include starring with Samantha Morton and Daniel Craig in Roger Michell’s *Enduring Love*, and there are possible projects in the offing in London and New York.

“I fell in love with New York when I went there and I’d like to go and live there for a year,” she reveals.

“It’s the time to do it as well, now, rather than when you have kids and responsibilities and you can’t bugger off for a year should you so feel like it.”

It’s an independent attitude that Barbara Villiers would have applauded.

Shirley Henderson plays Catharine of Braganza (Catharine of Braganza, Queen Consort of Charles II: b.1638 d.1705)



Shirley Henderson, one of Scotland's brightest and most prolific talents, gives a mesmerising performance as Catharine of Braganza, the long-suffering wife of Charles II, who endured the humiliation of her husband's affairs and the heartache of her own childlessness.

"When Catharine first arrives at the King's Court from Portugal, she's quite feisty and determined to let her presence be known, but she's also out of her depth," explains Henderson. "Catharine was very young and very innocent when she got married. She managed to maintain her dignity in the face of her husband's infidelities because she had her religion. But I also think that when Charles gave her attention, it was marvellous.

"That was the thing about Charles, women kept falling for him: he was one of those guys who could make you feel wonderful even if he was with other people. He obviously had that gift."

Criticised by joyless puritans as "that great enemy of chastity and marriage", Charles's long list of illicit royal affairs symbolised the promiscuous Court which flourished around the restored Monarch. Yet the Catholic Queen remained faithful and uncomplaining and, despite her religion, was a popular and respected figure.

"Charles was in a constant battle with his love for her," claims Henderson. "He was torn with all these other things which were on offer, but yet he was drawn to this devout, young woman; there was something about her which he couldn't resist.

"By all accounts they had fun together, he enjoyed her company very much and he also liked her Portuguese accent and teased her about it. They did get on really well but he had such a high sex drive, he needed so many other women in his life. She just was not enough for him."

Charles made no secret of his 13 illegitimate children, and his disappointment that his wife could not produce an heir to the throne.

“Catharine had several miscarriages during her period with Charles, which was devastating for them both,” says the 37-year-old star. “Those emotional scenes were so well written in the script – just enough to let you know how they were feeling at that sad point in their lives.

“It’s impossible to imagine the life of a Queen whose sole purpose would have been to produce an heir; she would have felt useless – how does one fill the gap? She must have been a very lonely woman.”

One of Catharine’s many rivals for the King’s affection was the notorious Lady Barbara Castlemaine, a woman who matched Charles’s insatiable appetite for sex, and who was able to bear him children.

“Barbara seemed happy to flaunt herself because she was like a baby factory – that must have broken Catharine’s heart. There is a scene where Catharine is watching Barbara’s children in the nursery, which is so sad.

“I think Rufus [Sewell] pulled it off fantastically. He is a very charismatic person anyway but, when I was working with him, I couldn’t keep my eyes off him. He’s got a larger-than-life personality which is just perfect for playing Charles. He was also very tactile and has a very gentle side to him as well.

“Rufus is just a lovely man and I have great admiration for his acting.”

Marking a return to television since her unforgettable performance as Marie Melmotte in BBC One’s award-winning *The Way We Live Now*, Henderson’s natural skill for mastering accents made her the perfect choice for the Portuguese Queen.

“Of course I couldn’t speak a word of Portuguese before taking the part. What I had to do is get up to scratch with the dialogue that had been written in the script. I didn’t learn it overnight, it took two to three weeks for me to grasp the language,” says Henderson modestly. “I managed to get it to the

point where I was not thinking about it. I loved doing it, but I won’t be doing a course in Portuguese!”

Her physical transformation into the Queen was a long process, she explains: “The bat-style wig she wears when she first arrives at Charles’s Court had to be finely crimped and it took up to two hours initially. Some of the costumes took three-quarters of an hour to get into because I had to be sewn into them. The clothes were very heavy and, by the end of the day, my body was very tired. My body shape changed – the tops of my legs and arms were a bit swollen, but not badly. It happens all the time when I do this type of work.”

Henderson was Spud’s girlfriend Gail in *Trainspotting*, Bridget’s friend Jude in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Shirley in Shane Meadows’s *Once Upon A Time In The Midlands* and Moaning Myrtle, the sorrowful spectre of the girls’ toilets in *Harry Potter And The Chamber Of Secrets*. She recently completed filming Juliet McKoen’s psychological thriller *Frozen*, which is due for cinematic release later this year.

**Alice Patten plays Lady Frances Stewart
(Lady Frances Teresa Stewart, Duchess of
Richmond and Lennox: b. 1648 d. 1702)**



Celebrated diarist Samuel Pepys wrote of Frances Stewart's striking looks: "But it was the finest sight to me ... that ever I did see in all my life ... Miss Stewart ... is now the greatest beauty I ever saw, I think, in my life."

Known at Court as "La Belle Stewart", history would come to know Frances as the symbol for Britannia, the woman whose portrait would be immortalised, together with helmet and trident, on British coinage for three centuries, until 1971 when the decimal system was introduced.

Frances Stewart, the beautiful young virgin who captured Charles's heart, but who consistently refused his sexual advances, is played by Alice Patten, the youngest daughter of Chris Patten, the last British Governor of Hong Kong.

"Lady Frances Stewart is famously known as 'the one that got away,'" says Patten with a smile. "She's

good and honest, she values her virtue and is quite an anomaly in the Court. She doesn't care about power or status; what she really cares about is love.

"I think she is a bit of a tease and enjoys the flirtation and attention from the King, but she has no intention of becoming one of his mistresses, unless he can really love and respect her, and do the honourable thing by her. He is, of course, not prepared to do that, so ultimately she has to say 'no'.

"Helen McCrory's character, Barbara Villiers, and I do a performance for the men in Barbara's quarters behind a shadow screen where both women pretend to strip off their clothes, which is all seen in silhouette. It looks beautiful, and was fun to do.

"There is another scene where I lay face down on a bed and Barbara pulls back the sheet to reveal my naked body to the King, but you only get to see my back."



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As the Monarch's desire for Lady Frances grew, she decided to take drastic action. Risking the King's wrath, she eloped with the Duke of Richmond. However, Charles eventually forgave her and made her husband ambassador to Denmark.

"Lady Frances was a lot stronger and braver than people give her credit for. She turned down the King, and she somehow also managed not to allow herself to be manipulated by Barbara, which was quite impressive."

In 2001, a theatrical agent spotted Patten, then a Cambridge language graduate, at the Edinburgh Festival. "A group of us at University had written a play entitled *Memoirs Of A Dead Man*, about the life of a Russian writer, which we performed at the Festival. I got an agent after she saw me in the play. But I put my acting on hold until I finished my degree last summer. After four years in University, I wanted to get out into the world.

"My parents were genuinely excited when I took up acting, and I think quite pleased that I'd actually gone on to University, and now have something to fall back on," says the youngest Patten. "They get a bit worried about me sometimes, but they are very supportive."

The talented actress made her debut last year as Eugenie in the acclaimed theatre production of Nicholas Wright's *Vincent In Brixton*. This was followed by appearances in *The Forsyte Saga* and *Where The Heart Is*. Next year she will be seen in BBC One's *Jonathan Creek*.

Emma Pierson plays Nell Gwynn (Nell Gwynn: b.1650 d.1687)



“Pretty, witty Nell” is perhaps the best-known and most fondly remembered mistress of Charles II. The orange-seller became one of the country’s leading comic actresses, performing at The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

“The great thing about this project is that it’s like the new generation of costume drama,” says Emma Pierson. “It’s not about getting too wrapped up in historical facts. The episodes are a feast for the eyes, and the costumes were amazing. I wish I could have taken the bust and waistline I was given home with me, but without the scaffolding and the pain that it took to get there!” laughs Pierson.

The bubbly 22-year-old with a passion for photography had been away in Los Angeles for two months when she received the call confirming she’d won the part of Nell Gwynn. “I arrived on set in the Czech Republic, very brown, with a white bikini line to do the very first scene – my first nude scene! There I was, standing in a thong at 6.30am in the make-up truck being spray-painted white from

head to toe in order to cover up my tan. It will remain one of the most random moments of my life!

“With the body paint, I felt as if I had on a suit, so I wasn’t worried about it at all. Everyone involved made a big effort to make me feel comfortable,” continues Pierson. “However, it’s not something I’m going to have printed in my contract that I have to get my boobs out for my next job!

“The scene actually looks very, very beautiful; we were recreating the famous painting by Peter Lely of Venus that Nell posed for. I’ve told my parents and they were fantastic about it. It’s always going to be weird because you don’t expect to be put in a situation where you are going to see your daughter topless. They’re very supportive of my career and are very proud of me.”

Nell’s wit is famous, and her name for her rival, Louise de K roualle [M lanie Thierry], who had a slight cast in one eye, was Squintabella. She also



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referred to her as “The Weeping Willow”, since Louise would often use tears to prise some gift or favour from the King.

Both nicknames incensed Louise, but amused Charles. “It was great fun playing alongside the beautiful Mélanie, who plays Louise. In those days, the men duelled with swords, but the women duelled with words, and Nell Gwynn would have been an Olympic champion! She was fantastic – very witty. She would never let anybody take her down; she was so unapologetic, which is why people loved her.

“I think because Charles had so many mistresses, between them he found different things he enjoyed. Barbara is the sexual side of the woman, Lady Frances is the young virgin that every man is chasing, the Queen is religious and loyal, and Nell has honesty. So I think Charles collected different essences not contained within one woman – in each one he got what he needed.”

The Plymouth-born actress will be seen next year in BBC One’s *The Legend Of The Tamworth Two*. Her television credits include *Beast*, *Time Gentlemen Please*, *I Saw You* and *Bedtime*, while her film credits are *Virtual Sexuality*, *Guest House Paradiso* and *The Engagement*.

Mélanie Thierry plays Louise de Kéroualle (Louise Renée de Penancoet de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth and Aubigny: b.1649 d.1734)



Beautiful French actress Mélanie Thierry makes her British television debut as Louise de Kéroualle, thought to be a French spy and a calculating mistress of Charles II.

The daughter of an aristocratic French family, Louise entered the French Court aged 16, as maid of honour to Charles's beloved sister, Minette, who married King Louis XIV's brother. On Minette's death, the French King sent Louise to England to woo Charles and become his mistress, in order to exert influence over him and possibly to send information back to France.

"My character behaves like a spoilt child, she is very clumsy and very naïve," says the 22-year-old actress. "She knows how to get what she wants by using tears but, later, following the birth of her son,

she develops a sense of humour and is able to laugh at herself."

The former model, who starred alongside Tim Roth in the Italian movie *The Legend Of The Pianist On The Ocean*, initially thought that the language barrier would be a problem.

"I did not speak English at all before filming," confesses Mélanie. "Producer Kate Harwood immediately arranged for me to get some help with my English. It would have been impossible otherwise. I used Shakespeare to help me learn the musicality of the English language. I knew Shakespeare's work, but only in French, so I had to learn it in English. I felt it would be a good way to improve my vocabulary and diction.



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“On set, I spoke to Emma Pierson all day long; our chats were very deep and meaningful and I understood everything. But now, two months since filming ended, I find I am beginning to lose my English because there is no need for me to constantly use it now that I am back in France.”

Mélanie was only 13 years old when she started her career, acting in commercials. She modelled for two years between the ages of 15 and 17, but soon tired of it – “It became so boring”. It was then that she was cast in the Italian movie alongside Roth.

But working on *Charles II* presented new challenges for Mélanie. “I was quite afraid and anxious on [the *Charles II*] set, initially because I had to think about my words, the rhythm of the English language and my acting. I was a bit shy, and Rufus helped me a lot, he became very protective of me. I was so impressed by him when I met him – he is so charismatic!”