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Lucky George dodges the monster mums

By AMANDA FOREMAN

Prince George has the good fortune to be born into an era that places a premium on happy families, including royal ones. The days of arranged marriage, banishment to the nursery and dynastic juggling have long gone. Also out of the picture are the byzantine intrigues and relentless power plays that once consumed Europe's monarchies. Before the 20th century the stresses and demands placed on queens and empresses to produce the goods elicited a familiar pattern of dysfunctional responses. Among the most notable categories of royal mother were:

The ruthless one

Ruthlessness is a trait that transcends cultures and borders. Still, Catherine de Medici's reputation as a blackmailer, poisoner and instigator of mass murder puts her in a separate league from her peers. Widowed at a young age and left to rule a deeply divided France, Catherine decided that desperate times required desperate measures. She bullied and manipulated her three sons — Francis II, Charles IX and Henry III — ultimately severing their already tenuous grip on reality.

Nothing was off limits in her pursuit of power. Catherine is suspected of colluding in the murder of at least two of her children's lovers. She also tried to assassinate Henry of Navarre, husband of her daughter Margaret, just five days after the wedding, during the St Bartholomew's Day massacre in 1572. When Margaret showed signs of becoming uncontrollable,

Catherine egged her son Henry into ordering her decades-long imprisonment. A dedicated orgiast and cross-dresser, Henry proved incapable of ruling without his mother. His successor, Henry IV — the same Henry of Navarre that Catherine had tried to have murdered — later defended his former mother-in-law, saying she had always acted in the best interests of France: “I am surprised that she never did worse.”

The controlling one

With so few real outlets for their talents, many of the brighter royal mothers directed their thwarted energies on to their children — often with disastrous results. Some, like Sophie of Bavaria, didn't know when to stop. Not content with selecting the bride for her son Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria, Sophie decided that if a job was worth doing well, it could be done only by her. Sophie took over the royal nursery, denying her grandchildren a relationship with their mother.

Still, Sophie was an amateur in the controlling mother stakes compared with Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, whose willingness to sacrifice her children on the altar of dynastic diplomacy is unsurpassed. The mother of 13 surviving children, Maria Theresa asserted that her offspring were “born to obey, and must learn to so do in good time”. When she gave her son Joseph the choice of two equally dreadful brides, he responded: “I prefer not to marry either, but since you are holding a knife to my throat, I will take [Princess Maria Josepha of Bavaria] because, from what I hear, she at least has fine breasts.”

The selfish one

Treated as pawns and regarded as little more than brood mares, royal princesses had a hard life. A desire to look after No 1 can therefore be forgiven. George V complained of his mother, Queen Alexandra: “Mother dear is the most selfish person I have ever known.”

However, Caroline of Brunswick, George IV's wife, stands in a class of her own. There are many exculpating factors in Caroline's behaviour — not least the humiliations inflicted upon her by her husband, who installed his

mistress, Lady Jersey, as Caroline's chief lady-in-waiting. Nevertheless, Caroline's treatment of her daughter bordered on the psychopathic. When Princess Charlotte reached adolescence, Caroline thought it fun to arrange her first love affair. So she locked her 15-year-old daughter in a room with a hussar and told the pair to "amuse" themselves. Miraculously, nothing irreparable took place, although Caroline compounded the hurt to Charlotte by taking the hussar as her own lover.

The resentful one

Children often behave in ways that cause their mothers to resent them. Disappointed by her son Frederick's preference for his grandfather over his parents, Caroline of Ansbach, wife of George II, reportedly said: "My dear first-born is the greatest ass, and the greatest liar . . . and the greatest beast in the whole world, and I heartily wish he was out of it."

For Queen Victoria the resentment began in utero, making her the undisputed angry mother. She disliked being pregnant: "It is more like a rabbit or guinea-pig than anything else and really it is not very nice." She hated childbirth: "What suffering — what humiliation to the delicate feelings of a poor woman." She loathed breastfeeding and couldn't bear babies: "An ugly baby is a very nasty object — and the prettiest is frightful when undressed."

The future Edward VII was the chief target of Victoria's tyrannical maternal rage. "I never left her presence without a sigh of relief," he later confessed.