

Mary Queen of Scots

A.Fraser

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Some stories out of real life are like fairy-tales. Invariably they tend, at least if they stem from a distant part, to be about royalty. After all Kings and Queens are the stuff out of which so many fairy-tales are spun. The Old Greek had their gods, we have our royalty. Part of the allure is of course blood. You cannot become King on your own power, at least not in hereditary monarchies, you have to follow a tradition that transcends mere power-play. Legitimacies of kings and queens are settled by an algorithm of descent. It may seem primitive to the modern political mind, but it has its advantages in the absence of other criteria. It is nevertheless but a human convention and can occasionally be sidestepped and setting up new lines of descents. History abounds in examples of such ruptures. It is not so surprising that this legitimacy by descent leads to the notion of being king by divine assent, and thus the notion that a king is only accountable to God not to men. But, compared to some modern examples, accountable to something at least.

The dramatic story of Mary starts almost at her birth. She is turned into a queen only a few days later when her father James V dies. On the side of her father she is a Stuart, while her mother is French, stemming from the rich and powerful Guise family. As a child she is taken to France where she grows up in great comfort and luxury being after all a queen of a sovereign country. As a childhood friend she has the French crown prince Francis a few years younger than her. A very good match and they are already wedded as teenagers. It is not clear that Francis has even entered puberty in spite of his age. Maybe a case of testicles not descending properly. Her life is enchanted. She is surrounded by admirers and supported by powerful relatives - the Guises, and her in-laws are of course the King and Queen of France, Henry III and Catherine of Medici respectively. Quick-witted, beautiful and charming, towering also physically over most of her contemporaries, males included. The world is really her oyster. French will of course be her mother tongue, some Scots she may remember from her early childhood, English she will learn much later. And even more significantly she will be brought up as a Catholic and remain a Catholic literally to her death. Then her father-in-law meets with an accident at a jousting event. He is badly hurt and but will linger on for a few more weeks until he dies. The effect is that Mary now is elevated to becoming Queen of France as well, and her young husband King of Scotland. And if this would not be enough they are also encouraged to display the arms of England, as Elizabeth is seen as a bastard and intruder by the Catholic Guise family. In other words she now is at her zenith.

But her sickly consort is soon taken ill and dies. Presumably from a chronic ear-infection which spread to the brain. She is reduced to a dowager Queen while still a teenager. It is of course a lowering of her fortune, especially Catherine of Medici no longer takes as active an interest as to her fortunes, being so focused on the well-being of her own children. There are of course suitors, eminent as far as power-politics goes, such as the Spanish Don Carlos, but as lovers material, disastrous, Don Carlos being more or less

a certified idiot. In the end she decides to leave France and resume her Queenship over Scotland, her mother Marie, the regent having died in the interim.

Her distant relative - Elizabeth, the Queen of England, refuses her safe conduct through her land, and instead she goes by sea. A relatively speedy and uneventful journey, which would, as it turned out, take her away for ever from her land of upbringing. Arriving in Scotland she is at sea as well, largely dependent on the counsel of her elder half-brother Moray, who as it will turn out has his own agenda. Scotland has had a recent troubled history of early demises of Kings and consequently extended regencies of minors. This has made for an independent nobility, with powerful clans engaged in vendettas against each other, alliances shifting steadily. Although a magnificent symbol for the Scottish monarchy, she is as noted before quite lost as to the primitive subtleties of feuding families. After all nothing in her protective upbringing has prepared her for the crudities of life in a distant barbaric outlier of the civilized world. Clearly it is of utmost importance that she gets married. This is of course not so easy, not because of a lack of suitable suitors, but because they need to meet the approval of not only the indigenous nobility but also Queen Elizabeth herself. One of the suitors is another man younger than herself, in fact a cousin by name of Darnley, who also on his own has pretensions to the Scottish crown. A tall man of impeccable physical charms, four years her junior. The Queen falls in love and marries him. Marriages built solely on carnal desire often come to a premature grief. This being no exception. The young man is spoilt and conceited and entirely devoted to pleasures, some of which he shares with the young queen such as hawking and hunting, others not such as dallying with lewd women, which results in his being stricken by syphilis. He is vain, and although the infatuated queen showers him with honors and makes him the king, she wisely withholds the ultimate accolade - the kingship matrimonial, which he resents. He intrigues against her and there is actual a physical assault in the very heat of the court. One of her courtiers, an imported Italian is furiously stabbed to death in front of her. The life of the Queen herself seems to have been in danger as well. By playing on the weakest link in the plot, namely her husband, she is able to induce him to escape with her. In this moment of crisis Bothwell, one of the nobles, shows himself loyal and by his force of arms help her ride out the storm. Darnley becomes more and more of a liability and a plot is made to rid her of him. Whether the queen herself is privy to the plot is another matter. Fraser believes not, but in her own life time Mary was never able to clear herself of the blemish of association to the guilty. The plot both succeeds and not. The plan was to have the king consort killed in a blaze in the small house in Edinburgh to which he had retired in convalescence. But he smells foul play before the bomb goes off and tried to escape only to be apprehended and strangled, his un mutilated body being discovered by the site of the total destruction afterwards. Out of this ill-fated union an heir, the future James I and VI is sprung. The whole thing is of course a scandal. Bothwell is implicated but has himself declared innocent by the Scottish Parliament. He enlists some of his peers to support his quest for the Queens suit and shortly thereafter abducts her and marries her after having effected a quick divorce from his present wife. It is not entirely clear that the queen entered into the matrimony fully voluntarily. As Fraser puts it *But in the course of gratifications of his ambition, rape was not the sort of duty from which Bothwell was likely to shirk.* On the other hand Mary thought of him as a very loyal friend and she was

also under the impression that a large part of the Scottish nobility supported the union for political reasons. Besides Bothwell, if not handsome in the conventional way, certainly had a lot of character and sex-appeal. The marriage, whether voluntary or not, was not a wise move. The support Bothwell had acquired for the match among his peers, predictably did not weather the inherent fickleness of the Scottish nobility in all their dealings. Popular feeling for the queen plummeted with her association with the assumed assassin of her husband. There was a show of force, but the combined forces of the Queen and her consort, although numerically superior, were led incompetently, maybe even treacherously, and the Queen gave herself up to Scottish captivity while Bothwell fled. And so ended the brief reign of the Queen on Scottish soil. Her son was pronounced king, while her half-brother usurped the regency, thereby having little incentive to have his half-sister restored. In spite of her intelligence and legendary feminine charm, deprived of any loyal and powerful support, the petty feuding of her aristocratic subjects, turn out to be too much for her refined capabilities. The subsequent fate of Bothwell deserves mention. He withdrew to the west up to his Orkney estates, from there he went eastwards shipwrecked on the Norwegian coast. His standing in Denmark was not the best, the relatives of his jilted paramour - Anna Trondensen, demanded satisfaction, and the Danish king saw him as a possibly useful bargaining piece and threw him into jail. His captivity was heartless and cruel, even by medieval standards. Supposedly he was chained to a pillar only half his height in complete isolation in a dungeon of a Danish castle - Dragsholm. Food was intermittently thrown to him by his jailers, and he eventually succumbed in a state of insanity, his hair overgrown his body covered in filth. Whatever he had done in his life it hardly justified his end, the author comments ruefully.

Now followed a period of Scottish incarceration of the Queen. For the sake of security she was placed in a castle in the middle of a lake - Lochleven. Instantly upon arrival she became the center of intrigue charming the son of her jailer. It may not be so surprising that after some period of time she was able to escape her involuntary confinement. She was now at large again, and made a very fateful decision. Rather than take off for France, where she enjoyed the undisputed status of a dowager queen, and hence above the fray of power politics, which had been her downfall in her supposedly native Scotland; as well as being in the possession of a lot of land which would provide her with a comfortable income for the rest of her life she headed for England. Had she taken the obvious route she would have stepped out of her brief appearance on the stage of history and settled in pleasant obscurity. In retrospect it would have been the choice of preference for the private individual but of course not for the public. Unwittingly she chose a species of immortality of sorts.

Her relations with her distant cousin Elizabeth were never smooth but rather troubled. Mary held her in sentimental high regard, frequently addressed her as her dear sister, exchanged portraits with her, and constantly asked for a personal meeting. In fact while Mary was still acting Queen in Scotland preparations for a Rendez-Vous were being made, but had to be cancelled at the last moment because of more pressing business. Elizabeth on her side had a more detached view of the relationship, no doubt making less hay out of their common ancestry, on the contrary seeing that as a threat. Had the Scottish Queen not displayed the English Arms as well during her status as a French one? Mary was

pressing for the official acknowledgement of Elizabeth that she was her rightful heiress would Elizabeth fail to leave issue. The English Queen had on her part counterproposals, which the Scottish one was perpetually tardy in accepting. One cannot otherwise than suspect that sentimentality on the part of Mary took upper hand to a rational deliberation in her fateful decision, because fateful would it turn out to be, resulting in a seventeen long imprisonment ending with her decapitation at the age of forty-four. Her captivity, at a series of different residencies were until the last few years rather lax. Most of them held under the auspices of the Lord Shrewsbury, who like so many male contemporaries, was not immune to her considerable charm. He allowed her a large retinue of servants, as befitted a proper queen, as well as opportunity to ride and hunt and in short enjoy outside exercise which had always been so important to the young queen, whose health had never been robust. He even allowed her regular visits to the nearby Buxton where she could take waters and mingle with the local population currying if not favors at least good-will by a habit of giving generous alms. Those liberties greatly annoyed the English Queen.

Now the first bone of contention was the tainted status of Mary due to the plot against her husband and her association even marriage with the assassin himself, should be resolved by an English court appointed by Elizabeth. Would this come out favorably Mary would be restored to her Scottish throne. Mary balked at this idea, would she as the head of a foreign and sovereign be subjected to an English court? Eventually she submitted. Trumped up evidence in the shape of forged letters (the so called casket letters) were produced on the instigation of her half-brother who at all costs wanted to stay in power. In the end no verdict was given, and it was considered not proved that Mary had had an intimate relationship with Bothwell before the death of her husband. Moray, who had concluded a treaty with Elizabeth and assured of her support to his freedom up north and Mary back to captivity, the legal basis on which remained shaky at best. Soon thereafter Moray was assassinated, and as a reader you cannot help but applaud, but Elizabeth found another ally in Scotland, namely the young James who was coming of age. Mary had tender sentimental feelings towards her issue, whom she had not seen since he was an infant. Those were not reciprocated. James had indeed grown up in a household hostile to his mother, and was besides more than anything else desirous of setting up a deal with Elizabeth as her heir on the English throne. Successful negotiations on that matter were pursued. Concomitantly an act was brought through parliament to the effect that if any plot against the English Queen benefitting the Scottish, she would automatically be responsible for it, regardless if she was ignorant or not of it. This set up the possibility of arranging a trap. This was done by infiltrators and spies who completely controlled her means of communication with the outside world, a bait was produced in the form of a certain fool by name of Babbington and Mary swallowed it lock stock and barrel. At the right moment the whole thing was exploded.

During her last years of captivity conditions worsened for the queen. Shrewsbury had been considered too lenient by Elizabeth, there were even rumors to the effect that he had had relations with his charge. Instead he was replaced by Paulet who was totally immune to her charms and considered her as evil incarnate. Her staff was reduced, her freedom of movement seriously curtailed, even her money was taken from her by her assiduous jailer. She was finally taken to Fotheringhay to await her trial. That took place during two days.

She of course at first refused to have anything to do with the court, after all she was a sovereign queen and not to be subjected to the rules and regulations of another country. Her very captivity was illegal, she had entered England voluntarily by the promise of a safe exile by the Elizabeth, she had not been captured in war. Nevertheless she had no choice than to come forth and insist on her innocence. She was given no counsel, no secretary, no aid, but, according to Fraser, based supposedly on contemporary documentation, she conducted her defense brilliantly bringing forth all the pertinent points. She had also indeed changed from the young carefree woman who allowed herself to be abducted to a much more mature and philosophically inclined one. In fact as Fraser brings it all out one cannot but marvel at her resourcefulness and power of expression, testifying to a highly intelligent woman. However, her political savvy, which had never been that remarkable anyway, had been even further reduced by her long isolation and her loss of contact. In the final months of her life, even arguing with her archenemy Paulet provided her welcome intellectual diversion. And her final desperation, to become free at all costs, even if that would entail the death of her cousin, made her so easily fall into the trap laid out for her. As Fraser argues, it can be said that her acquiescing to the death of her kinswoman can even be morally excused on the basis of her desperate situation. But of course it was to no avail, the conclusion of the court were already foregone, and no matter what, with the recent enactment of the parliament, the case of her knowing of the plot or not was moot.

However, execution did not follow upon the verdict. Why was that? Elizabeth was dithering. On one hand it was not clear what the political ramifications would be of this? How would her son James react, what about France and more to the point Spain. (And indeed the year after the execution of Mary the Spanish Armada arrived, foundering in a storm and proving to be the beginning of the end of Spain as a major power.) About James she did not have to worry, the one act he could have done to stall and maybe prevent the execution of his mother he did not avail himself of, so anxious was he not to jeopardize his future as a King of England. Then there were other considerations, after all executing a queen was a momentous thing which could set a dangerous precedent. And perhaps one should not fully discount purely sentimental motives. Although they had never met personally, their lives had been intimately intertwined for the past twenty years, and many a letter had been exchanged between them. And finally, just as Mary, Elizabeth had strong compunctions about shedding blood. Or at least Fraser makes a point of it. Whether accurate or just a case of a woman writer extolling the feminine virtues of female heads of state, it is hard to tell, but one certainly would like it to be the case. Or simply the indecision as to whether take the final responsibility. In fact she would prefer the queen to die from natural causes and given the present state of health of the queen that might happen in the near future anyway. She even had it sounded out whether Paulet would simply kill this captive, at the suggestion of which he recoiled in horror. Thus the state before the final execution dragged on for months. Finally she arranged the necessary paper, submitted by an impatient parliament (as a collective it is much easier to take responsibility than as an individual), to be signed by ruse, simply by having it appear in a pile of routine matters. After that she affixed a seal and gave it to her secretary Davison. He, more or less triumphantly brought it to Fotheringhay and the proceedings could go ahead. Now the final dramatic scene is being enacted, and the details of the act

of execution are put down in great detail. We literally follow the queen not only minute by minute, but at the very end second by second, as she carefully lays her head on the block after having disrobed. The first attempt by the henchman using an axe usually for the purpose of chopping wood, miscarries and resulted in a big gash at the back of her head, the second attempt severed her head from her body, save for some sinews that had to be sawed off. As her head was lifted up by the auburn hair, it fell to the floor and revealed that the hair was in fact just a wig, and that her actual hair was grey and chopped short. And so her life ended. Her body lying inert on the floor, while her lips supposedly moved for another quarter of an hour on her detached head.

Elizabeth was distraught by the news and exclaimed that it was not really her will and promptly threw her secretary Davison in jail. She is later to have expressed, according to reports, that she never mourned her father, nor her two siblings Edward and Mary as much as she did her distant cousin. I guess there is a large measure of a bad conscience here. Mary was hailed by the Catholics as a martyr and was considered ripe for canonization. The Scottish Queen although privately staying loyal to her faith, did in fact display for the age a rather tolerant attitude towards religion, and in particular accepted in good faith the protestantism of Scotland. As we have already noted, the Spanish tried to invade England, a year later, and in fact, any successful liberation of the Queen would have assumed a foreign invasion it had been argued¹. James finally showed some filial affection by having the embalmed remains of his mother, who had been buried in the cathedral of St Peterborough in an excessively heavy led coffin, removed to Westminster Abbey where she now enjoys a large and imposing grave². James became as we all know King James I of England in 1603 upon the death of Elizabeth, and by swallowing the English throne, England swallowed Scotland as a matter of fact, and has *de facto* been an integral part of England ever since³. The Stewart line came to an end by Queen Anne, but their direct descendants actually included their eventual Hanoverian successors, so Fraser is motivated to speculate that the ill health of Mary was due to the very same Porphyria that effected the mad king George III⁴. This is indeed a fanciful extrapolation, anyway Mary never suffered from bouts of insanity, but maybe she would have, had she been allowed to live longer. Anyway she is supposed to have inherited it from her father James V. But now we are really entering the realm of fiction.

To what extent is history fiction? In order to write history we need to interpolate from the fragmentary documentation. In the spirit of Collingwood, to do so, is to try and reconstruct the thoughts of the historical actors. This is what makes history interesting and intelligible. Fraser does a good job at this, trying to get under the skin of her characters.

¹ The logistics is not clear. By the very attempt of a foreign invasion would not the captive been either killed or moved to a secret place? Thus any attempt at liberation would have been done in secrecy before any outward signs, and if so, would the invasion have been needed in the first place?

² And as was discovered during an investigation in the middle of the 19th century, together with the remains of a whole slew of prematurely dead Stuart infants.

³ *de jure* as well by the formal union set up in 1707

⁴ For the curious Mary was great⁵ grandmother of George III. More specifically. Mary 1542-1587, James I 1566-1625, Elizabeth (the Winter Queen) 1596-1662, Sophia (Electress of Hanover) 1630-1714, George I 1660-1727, George II 1683-1760, Frederic 1707-1751, George III 1738-1820

To truly understand the actions of the past we need to infer the motives behind them, and this is the real challenge for the author. She has to get a sympathetic understanding of Mary's character as well as understanding the power politics of the time. This might be possible for the subtle French court, but what about the crude machinations of the Scottish nobles, more like mafia families than political factions? Mary herself was, as we have noted, more or less lost. The next step in historical biography is the fictional biography. The life and tribulations of Mary would lend themselves beautifully to a fictional treatment, and in our day and age a film or even better a television series. Fiction having the advantage over documented history to have a smoother course and no random lacunae in the record. With fiction you can have regular dialogues as well as close up of actions. No fictional treatment might improve on the accounts of her last moments on earth, but much more in her life would benefit from a more intimate, if not factual treatment. How was it to lie hidden in the boat that brought her into at least temporary freedom away from Lochleven? That escape certainly could benefit from fictional embellishment. I know of no childrens stories that retell her fate, and as to fiction I only know of the play by Schiller - *Maria Stuart*, which focuses on her last weeks and invents an encounter with Elizabeth herself, an event as we know never took place. Schiller⁵ also makes much of the dithering of Elizabeth and her regrets at having had the execution taking place. He even makes it sound as if the Babington plot was a forgery from the start, when in fact Mary's involvement in it was undeniable if passive.

February 8-9, 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

⁵ Reviewed in volume VIII b