Mary Queen of Scotland

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Mary, Queen of Scots

'A King is History's slave. History, that is the unconscious general swarm life of mankind, uses every moment of the life of Kings, as a tool for its own purposes.'

Leo Tolstoy

Introduction

What is there about a sovereign that he will struggle and sweat blood until the very termination of his life to retain a crown which only promises to bring him more pain and sorrow? What can be said for such a person; that he is courageous, a megalomaniac, or simply well indoctrinated in the divine right of king theory? To gain even an inkling of insight into a sixteenth century royal character, one cannot think in a twentieth century, middle class frame of mind. One must place himself in an era where the words, democracy, freedom and constitution are as yet unused. The influences and the attitudes of monarchs were totally autocratic. If perchance one felt an aversion or hatred of his king as a human being, one still felt the utmost regard and reverence for his status and position as reigning monarch. Of course there were exceptions when royal subjects took matters into their own hands and closed their ears to the shouts of the divine rights of the king theory; unfortunately for Mary, Queen of Scotland, she was one such royal personage.

What was the driving force behind Mary, Queen of Scots that led her through the most trying of times, and still claimed her rights to the thrones of Scotland and England even as she stretched her neck over the executioner's block? Looking over Mary's life carefully, the answer unravels rather easily.
Mary's father was James V of Scotland. He was born to the match of James IV of Scotland and Margaret Tudor of England. She was the sister of Henry VIII and it from this relationship that Mary later makes her claim to the line of succession to the throne of England. Henry VIII constantly pressed for his nephew James to come to England to be educated. Possibly he saw the opportunity to join the two thrones of the island by keeping the Scottish heir in his custody. However, James grew up in Scotland and in due time was crowned as King. The kingdom he inherited was bankrupt from the rule of Margaret Tudor and her second husband, the earl of Angus. It was up to James to search the continent of Europe for a bride who would bring along a large dowry and a helpful alliance to Scotland. He finally persuaded the French King Francis I's daughter, Madeleine to marry him, but the frail, sixteen year old was dead soon after her arrival. The Scottish weather had proved too much for her.

Available once more, James looked once more to France and there closed the match with Mary of Guise. She had recently been widowed after the untimely death of the duc d'Orléans. At twenty-two, she was tall, healthy and intelligent. Her family was one of the most powerful in France. Even Henry VIII sought her hand in marriage upon the death of Jane Seymour; but Mary prudently replied that although her figure was big, her neck was small.

At any rate in 1538 the new Queen Mary began her royal life in Scotland. Mary's domestic life was all but pleasant as James kept up his outside flirtations and was remorseful at the lack of a legitimate heir from Mary. In May of 1540 she bore a child and in 1541 she had another. Her life seemed to be getting more
tranquil, when both children died within a week of each other. This put James V back into the precarious position of being without an heir. His troubles were compounded with the war with England and trouble with his powerfully, ambitious nobles. His wife was with child again, but even this could not cheer him and his mental health became unstable. He seemed to sense his own death and spoke of it often. So at the age of thirty, James V was dead, and his week old daughter was a queen.

What did the little Queen Mary inherit from James and Mary of Guise to make her the woman she became? From James, Mary inherited a tendency for physical and mental collapse at the most inopportune of times, his gaiety and high spirits that could dip so low and sour up again, and a flare for the dramatic. From Mary of Guise, she inherited her tall stature, her quick mind and her renowned courage and pluckishness. Unfortunately, she also inherited a divided kingdom of Scotland. Its subjects were beginning to feel the influences of the Reformation; and many were willing to join the newly-formed Church of England and make a break from Rome. The people were still trying to recover from the stunning defeat in battle at the hands of the English. Mary really had her life cut out for her from the first moment she breathed the frigid air of Scotland that winter.

The main questions, however, to be answered in 1542 were these: who was going to rule during her minority and who was this little prize going to marry? The arguments ensued and for five and a half years her destiny was discussed by all of Europe. Eventually Mary of Guise won out as the main regent, and virtually ruled Scotland until Mary came of age. As for Mary, there were
several young princes of Europe to be reckoned with as future bridegrooms. Henry VIII wanted Mary in England with him, and he fought vociferously for her. He saw a peaceful solution to the Scottish-English problem with a marriage between Mary and his son, the future Edward VI. But the traditional Scottish-French alliance won out and at last Mary’s fate was determined. It was decided that she would go to France and be educated at the court of Henry II and the infamous Catherine de Medicis. It was hoped at the time that there would be a marriage between the young French dauphin and Mary at the proper time.

So it was off to France Mary sailed, eluding the English ships waiting to abduct her, away from the dangerous and ever-changing politics of Scotland. Scottish life would soon be just memories to her as she easily adapted to the French ways of life. For thirteen years, Mary enjoyed the rapid, luxurious life of the French royal family. It can readily be said then that Mary, Queen of Scots was totally a product of French ideas and attitudes. If one knows anything of the vast difference between the gay, frivolous French court, and the rough, crude life of Scottish royalty, it is easy to sympathize with Mary later in life, as she tries to measure her Scottish nobles and subjects by a French yardstick. The French influence went very deeply into her character. One particularly, important influence which carried over through her entire life was her religious training in the Catholic faith by her uncle, the cardinal of Lorraine. He also encouraged her to be interested in Scotland and its affairs, and taught her many valuable lessons in state-
It is interesting to note that Mary was literally treated as a little queen by her future father-in-law, Henry II. He housed her in the royal nursery along with his growing brood of children. She shared all their travels and privileges. Education was taken very seriously at the Renaissance court, as Catherine de Medicis from Italy was a great patron of the arts. Even Mary's governess was French, and with each year that passed, Mary lost her Scottish ways and took on French ones.

Mary's character was developing too, and it could be seen as she entered adolescence that she was on the verge of hysteria often over different matters. In other cases, it can be seen that without strong support and advice, Mary seemed bewildered and confused. Whenever she got extremely upset or distressed, it appeared in physical symptoms. This trait, evidently inherited from her father, James V. By the time of her wedding to the dauphin, Mary was considered quite the beauty of her day, much to Queen Elizabeth's chagrin. She had golden red hair and was extremely tall for her day, perhaps 5'11". Her intelligence was great, her charm and natural grace definite assets, and her French education made her very sophisticated.

The young French heir, on the other hand, was a sickly, wretched creature, but he adored Mary. Perhaps it was her vitality that he admired, certainly she tried her best to please him. At any rate, their marriage proved more amiable than Mary's following unions. Her first months of marriage, as the new queen dauphiness were the most gay and happily carefree of her life. The poets of France praised her with reams of poetry, painters flocked to do her portrait, and ambassadors swarmed to her side.
Looking at Mary at this precious time in her life, could anyone imagine the sorrows that would befall her later. The young queen had the world at her feet, and she knew it.

At this time in England, Mary Tudor was on the English throne. She was considered the legitimate heir of Henry VIII, while her half-sister Elizabeth was considered the illegitimate daughter. Mary died, and the whole argument over Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon was the topic of the day. The answer to the question of was Anne Boleyn's daughter the rightful heir depended upon one's politics and religion. Henry II, being Catholic, did not recognize Elizabeth as legitimate, and thus she was not the rightful heir, in his eyes. But Henry's eyes did see fit to announce to the world that his daughter-in-law, the niece of Henry VIII, and legitimate grandchild of Margaret Tudor, was in fact the one to claim the throne of England. No one at the time could foresee the Pandora's box that Henry opened by claiming Mary's rights for her and his son. Years later, when she no longer is under the protection of France, Elizabeth would use these claims against Mary. Mary and Francis added the arms of England to those of Scotland and France to their shield, however. Elizabeth took the throne, but Mary never let go of the ambition of being formally named as Elizabeth's successor and heir. The idea of reigning over England was instilled in this impressionable girl's mind, and it never left as the years passed by.

The year 1559 promised to bring much gaiety and festivities to the French court, with weddings planned for two of Henry's daughters and his youngest sister. At a jousting tournament in honor of his daughter's wedding, Henry was lanced in the eye and the throat. Queen Mary of Scotland was now a Queen of France.
With Mary, Francis and Catherine at the head of the government, the Guise family was all-powerful. They were always ready with advice for the young couple, and gave Mary many lessons in intrigue and court politics that would be useful to her later on in Scotland.

In one area though sixteen year old Mary and fifteen year old Francis were on their own, so to speak, and that concerned the begetting of a child, and an heir to France. That longed for child would be a Valois-Guise product and many people in France had their futures staked on that baby. But Francis was physically immature, probably he never reached complete puberty before his death, and certainly the ever-watchful eyes of the court ambassadors knew this. As the Spanish ambassador so crudely, but amply put it, if the queen did conceive a child, 'it will certainly not be the King's.' Mary in her ardent desire to perform her queenly duty imagined herself with child several times during her short marriage. Most historians agree that most likely the marriage was never consumated in the full sense of the word. Mary was still a virgin when she left France, and had never known real physical, passionate love. This is just another influence in Mary's life, this longing to know real, adult love.

Mary's happy days in France ended abruptly when the sickly French King Francis died, eighteen months after his coronation. Mary was now just a dowager queen of France at the age of eighteen. Six months prior to this event, her mother had died. Mary had not really gotten over it when Francis passed on and she cried incessantly and was grief stricken.
Even now in her saddest hour Mary turned to her life long practice of poetry writing. Here is a translation of part of a poem she composed after Francis's death.

"Wherever I may be
In the woods or in the fields
Whatever the hour of day
Be it dawn or the eventide
My heart still feels it yet
The eternal regret....
As I sink into my sleep
The absent one is near
Alone upon my couch
I feel his beloved touch
In work or in repose
We are forever close...."
Perhaps Mary did love Francis with the passion of a Juliet for not a Romeo, but she loved that boy nevertheless, and felt his loss most deeply. During her time of mourning Catherine made sure that Mary realized her altered position at court. She had always been jealous of all the attentions Mary received and now saw her chance to be back in the limelight.

Through all of this, the question once again arose of whom should Mary take on as a second husband. Many names were on the compiled list, including that of Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, indeed her next husband. But all of this was unknown to Mary at the time, and she was a perfect widow for a time. However, she was not content with this new status she held and......: a delegation of Scottish nobles visited her and presented her with the idea of ruling Scotland in her own right, she pondered the offer. One must certainly commend Mary for her courageous decision. She could have stayed at the French court and bided her time on one of her inherited estates, waiting for her uncles to bring about another suitable match for her. But she chose to go back to
Scotland. Mary must have had a reckless gambling streak in her at times, because this was one decision she made on her own. She was certainly choosing an unknown way to follow.

Arriving in Scotland in 1561, Mary must have been overwhelmed at the stark differences between her beloved France, and this her native land. Her courage, beauty and her youth did not fail to impress the people of Scotland. Her devout attitudes toward the Catholic religion did not settle very well with them, however. The majority of her subjects were taken up with the Calvinist religion. Calvin taught that there was an infinite gulf between man and God. The new religion wanted to get as far away from Roman Catholicism and the Pope as possible, which explains their apprehensive feelings toward Queen Mary as they first gazed upon her. On Mary's part, one can understand her shock at the difference this new religion made in Scotland, compared to France. One of the Calvinist influences was the stripping of life's pleasures from the people; fun, parties, dancing, pretty clothing and frivolous enjoyments were abhored. What other ways of life had Mary ever known; can anyone fail to sense her bewilderment at her new country?

Of the dominant Protestant nobles, the two outstanding ones were Mary's half-brother, Lord James Stewart whom she later made earl of Maray; and William Maitland of Lethington, probably the most capable man in Scotland. Mary, who has already been seen as a woman who leans quite heavily on men for support, truly depended on these men during her early years as Queen of Scotland.

There was another powerful man in Scotland who literally became a pain in Mary's side throughout her reign. His name was John Knox, the Calvinist preacher. He was continually rude and obnoxious to Mary, on account of her difference in religion.
Perhaps one of the few pleasures in life left to the old man who followed Calvin's teachings so strictly, was his sworn hatred of Queen Mary. Mary tried very honestly to come to some sort of an understanding with Knox, as he represented her Protestant subjects to her. She met with him several times during those first years in France, but he was too much for the nineteen year old queen and reduced her to tears on more than one time. She failed to get her points concerning religion across to the stubborn Knox. Mary was constantly harassed by the Protestant faction. She, herself was tolerant toward them, and only wanted their promise that they would allow the Catholics the freedom to practice their religion. Continually Knox spoke down from his pulpit and declared that Mary was to blame for all or any misfortunes that happened in Scotland, from hail falling in winter, to the price of meal going up during a Highlanders famine.

Despite all her troubles the first four years of Mary's reign were comparatively peaceful and calm. For the sixteenth century this is certainly a feat to be admired. Much of the credit goes to Mary, as she was extremely wise in placing Maitland and Lord James in key positions. They lived up to her expectations and deserve much praise. Still there was the question of a king consort for Scotland and a husband for Mary. This was of importance to Queen Elizabeth as well. She knew that Mary's claim to succeed her, should she die childless, was a valid claim, and accepted by many people. Elizabeth, herself, had long ago pledged to remain married to the throne of England and no other, so it was futile to hope for a direct heir. But the Virgin Queen was crafty enough to realize that she had Mary in a spider's web over the problem of succession. Elizabeth had not officially
declared Mary to be her heir to the throne, and this Mary and her advisors knew and did not feel that she could accept a proposal from a suitor who did not meet Elizabeth's approval. Then too was the problem of religion; should he profess to be a Protestant of a Catholic?

Elizabeth finally sent the name of Lord Robert Dudley as her candidate for Mary's husband. He happened to be Queen Elizabeth's lover, and was tainted with the scandal of his wife's death, which probably occurred at his own hands. Mary flatly refused the character, much to Elizabeth's anger and disgust. She was not to be daunted in her schemes to ruin Mary's reign, and she came up with another name. There was in her court a young Scots nobleman called Darnley, whose father, the earl of Lennox, was in exile in England. He had a claim to both the thrones of England and Scotland. On first glance at the situation, it would seem that Elizabeth had gone mad to stage such a match; it could only be beneficial to Mary and her resounding claims. But Darnley was far from being a helpful element for Mary's ambitions. He was handsome, in a fine feminine way, and aristocratically inclined enough to pay homage to a Queen, but he was a weak, stupid, spoiled, and vain creature, with a vicious nature. Good Queen Bess, cunningly knew that in time he would reduce Scotland to chaos and civil strife.

Elizabeth's plot took hold the minute Mary accepted him at court. He was of tall stature, as she was, and coupled with his easy manner he could not help but win her over rapidly. After all Mary was in her prime of sixteenth century life, and by all accounts was still a virgin. She was experiencing her first real
attraction for a man. Darnley, fell ill with the measles, a very crafty thing for nature to do, because Mary insisted upon nursing him through his sickness. She also fell in love with what she thought Darnley was, a perfect king consort for her. Against all advice and pleadings from her court, Mary married the spineless Darnley in July of 1565. It was the beginning of the end for the reign of Queen Mary.

The prospect of this Catholic union for Mary alarmed the Scottish Protestant, and Moray feared it would bring an end to the Anglo-Scottish alliance he had worked so long for and attained. He attempted to arouse the people of Edinburgh, a strong Protestant town, against Mary and Darnley, but failed. Mary, meanwhile, enlisted the help of James Hepburn, earl of Bothwell, an experienced soldier, and a loyal crown supporter. With Mary and Bothwell leading the forces, Moray and his men were driven to England in the famous "Chase-About-Raid." They were exiled, but Queen Elizabeth quietly paid them off very generously.

Mary was ecstatic over her success at battle. She certainly did not keep her plan to gain the English throne a secret, as all of her newlyfound confidence went to her head. But Mary had problems, and one of the biggest was Darnley. He was arrogant, and even Mary became disenchanted with his nightly outings and his excessive drinking. The other situation that arose was that of the foreigner, Riccio.

David Riccio was Mary's Italian secretary to whom she showed many favors. This was her fatal mistake. Gossip ran rampant in
the court, and even Darnley accused them of adultery. Riccio caused much of the trouble himself; he was terribly haughty with the nobles. Darnley was drawn into a conspiracy to murder Riccio, and imprison Mary. The final enticement was to give Darnley the crown matrimonial. Darnley signed the contract, and Riccio was as good as dead.

The murder itself, in 1566, took place with Mary present, six months pregnant, at her palace at Holyrood. The murderers used 56 stab wounds to finish off the little Italian. Mary, herself, was physically unhurt, but the shock nearly brought on a miscarriage. Mary's spirits came to her rescue, and she charmed her husband into joining her in a daring escape to Dunbar. Her faithful Bothwell brought men to her aid, and she returned victoriously over her nobles. Trials were held, but only the servants who had assisted were executed.

Mary soon had other things to worry over than her unruly nobles. Prince James was born in June of 1566. Mary's excitement over her first born child did not dim her insatiable desire for a Stewart to rule the British Isles. She said to one of her nobles, "This is the son who shall first unite the two kingdoms of Scotland and England."

It was during this year of 1566 that many stories of the supposed love affair of Queen Mary and the earl of Bothwell began to spring up. It is true that Mary suffered greatly over her abhorrence of the sight of Darnley. He only served to remind her of bitter memories of treachery. She even discussed an annulment, or probably even divorce from Darnley with her nobles. This was like putting the bait on the hook. Her nobles detested
his arrogant attitudes toward them. Thus the plot to murder Darnley was hatched, with Bothwell in the starring role.

At the time of Darnley's murder he was housed in a house near Edinburgh known as Kirk o' Field with the smallpox. He and Mary had been getting along better of late, and she often stayed with him through the night, in the room below his, even though her own palace was quite near. However, on the evening of the murder Mary stayed at Holyrood, after bidding Darnley a good night. Bothwell and his men went to work and blew up the house, but Darnley apparently escaped the blast. He was found strangled to death outside the subsequent rubble. All fingers pointed in one direction, Bothwell's. Mary, for her part, at first felt that her life and that of James was in danger too, but it soon became apparent that the target had been Darnley and only Darnley. Mary realized that public opinion denounced Bothwell as the murderer and demanded an immediate investigation. There was a trial of sorts, but Bothwell strode away free, as there were no witnesses against him. The arrogant Bothwell then had the gall to claim to his fellow nobles and kinsmen that the queen had promised to reward him for his services by promising to marry him. He then demanded their signatures on a document giving their approval.

From this point onward to her incarceration and final death, historians still cannot come to any sort of a conclusion over Mary and Bothwell's relationship. Were they in fact the passionate lovers that legend leads us to believe? Were they simply two people in history who used each other to their own ends? Some authors believe Mary to be a blazen adulteress who carried on with Bothwell even before Darnley's death, obviously hinting that she was somehow involved in the sordid murder. Others protest her
complete innocence, that she was kidnaped by Bothwell, raped, and thus forced her to marry him. Some historians look upon Mary's marriage to her husband's murderer as an irrevocable admission that they were lovers all along, and that she was carrying Bothwell's child. Others believe that Mary was innocent of the murder itself, but during the shock of it all, she leaned heavily upon Bothwell and became infatuated with him, whether she knew he was guilty or not is yet another puzzle.

Looking at Mary from a frankly feminine point of view, this writer feels that Mary was at her wits end by the time she actually married Bothwell. Her nobles had risen against her, her subjects shouted that she was a whore underneath her window, her son's very inheritance was in jeopardy, not to mention her own life. Bothwell was the man of the hour, her strength and her comfort. He was a very ambitious man and knew his way with women. Surely by this time Mary was fed up with her infatuations with effeminate men such as her first two husbands. She needed Bothwell, not for the sensual reasons that many historians expound, but for purely political reasons, for until the very end Mary never forgot the political implication of any move.

A particular paragraph and subsequent footnote from an interesting source on Scotland provides a description of Mary.

"She was 'undersexed', athletic, something of a tomboy, and of absolute physical courage" Footnote: "It has been pointed out that any woman with a normal enjoyment of sex can keep a marriage going for six months; yet both of Mary's adult marriages were visibly on the rocks well within that time."

The point being that Mary most probably not Bothwell's lover. But of course that theory rather kills the romantic legend of
Bothwell and Mary, Queen of Scots. At any rate, most authors do agree that Bothwell, after his divorce still went on nightly visits with his ex-wife. This could be due to the fact that Mary was frigid, and simply did not care for the rough Bothwell.

In rebuttle to the idea that Mary was 'undersexed', the biographer Stefan Zweig told it this way in 1937:

"The effect on Mary Stuart was overwhelming. Something wholly new invaded her life like a thunder-clap. In taking possession of her body, Bothwell had also raped her soul... In this encounter with Bothwell, which left her amazed senses tingling with surprise, she came for the first time into close contact with the primitive male, and who trampled upon her femininity, her modesty, her pride, her sense of security; and, therewith, he caused a voluptuous uprush from a universe within herself hitherto unsuspected."

It is obvious that Zweig feels that Mary was deeply in love with Bothwell, and Bothwell, in turn, loved that which could bring him the most, more precisely, the crown of Scotland.

After Mary's third marriage, and her flight from the rebellious nobles into England, her life is just one plot after another. Nineteen years passed, and vengeance and intrigue were all that sustained her. Finally, Elizabeth could take no more, and after a trial for treason, Mary was executed in 1587.

Mary, Queen of Scots has become a legend, her story a romantic tale that has been the fruit of journalistic endeavors for centuries. At the beginning of this paper there was extended to the reader, the question of 'what makes a sovereign fight until the bitter end for that crown?' In Mary's case perhaps when one comes to an understanding of her early life in France, her tragic life in Scotland, and all the adventure of sixteenth century life one can see that she was merely following a path
that was chosen for her from her first breath. A quote from a biography on Mary states it well, and follows up with a comparison of Mary and Elizabeth.

"One cannot too often repeat that Mary was a sovereign queen, bred to be and determined to continue a sovereign, primarily of Scotland, ultimately, in herself or by her issue, of England as well. Elizabeth was better aware of this than some of her historians have been, and if anybody cares to defend Elizabeth in the matter of double-dealing, then sufficient defence would be to say that she recognized and realized Mary's ambition and realized Mary's determination.... Mary and Elizabeth were queens—queens of the Renaissance—and both held that a queen's part was to rule, and suspected that the welfare of her subjects might be one of the aims of government."

Mary, Queen of Scots, and one time Queen of France, was destined to become an enduring legend.
Footnotes


2 Fraser, p.7.

3 Fraser, p. 95.

4 Fraser, p. 108.


6 Linklater, p. 70.


9 Linklater, p. 50.
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