

2003

And Then There Was One: How the Ruling Styles of Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots Affected the Outcomes of Their Reigns

Anushia Sivendran
Gettysburg College
Class of 2003

Follow this and additional works at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ghj>

 Part of the [European History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Sivendran, Anushia (2003) "And Then There Was One: How the Ruling Styles of Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots Affected the Outcomes of Their Reigns," *The Gettysburg Historical Journal*: Vol. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ghj/vol2/iss1/7>

This open access article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

And Then There Was One: How the Ruling Styles of Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots Affected the Outcomes of Their Reigns

Abstract

In the mid-1500s, England was reeling from its first experience under the rule of a female queen. Mary Tudor had proved to be a ruthless Catholic, a monarch who took every opportunity to persecute Protestants, yet in all other realms of politics, was ineffective. Near the end of her reign, England was torn by religious strife and suffered from a huge government debt.¹ England was not to be alleviated of female rule even after Mary died in 1558, as she named her half-sister Elizabeth to succeed her. Not long after, Mary Stuart, the daughter of a French princess, and the heir-apparent to the Scottish throne ascended to the French throne upon marrying the young Dauphin.² Now, it seemed, the fate of two key players, England and Scotland, lay in the hands of queens. The fate of these women's monarchies rested not only on how they presented themselves as formidable rulers, but on the reign of the other, as well. Both brought significant strengths to the table, as well as some detrimental weaknesses. The outcome of their reigns would be determined by whether or not the effectiveness of their ruling styles challenged the very nature of the misogynistic society over which they governed. In the end, only one queen, Elizabeth I, would remain standing, showing that her style of rule clearly outweighed that of Mary's.

Keywords

Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots, England, Scotland

And Then There Was One: How the Ruling Styles of Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots Affected the Outcomes of Their Reigns

Anushia Sivendran

In the mid-1500s, England was reeling from its first experience under the rule of a female queen. Mary Tudor had proved to be a ruthless Catholic, a monarch who took every opportunity to persecute Protestants, yet in all other realms of politics, was ineffective. Near the end of her reign, England was torn by religious strife and suffered from a huge government debt.¹ England was not to be alleviated of female rule even after Mary died in 1558, as she named her half-sister Elizabeth to succeed her. Not long after, Mary Stuart, the daughter of a French princess, and the heir-apparent to the Scottish throne ascended to the French throne upon marrying the young Dauphin.² Now, it seemed, the fate of two key players, England and Scotland, lay in the hands of queens. The fate of these women's monarchies rested not only on how they presented themselves as formidable rulers, but on the reign of the other, as well. Both brought significant strengths to the table, as well as some detrimental weaknesses. The outcome of their reigns would be determined by whether or not the effectiveness of their ruling styles challenged the very nature of the misogynistic society over which they governed. In the end, only one queen, Elizabeth I, would remain standing, showing that her style of rule clearly outweighed that of Mary's.

¹John Knox and Robert M. Healy, "Waiting for Deborah: John Knox and Four Ruling Queens," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25 (2) 1994: 381.

²Madeleine Bingham, *Mary, Queen of Scots* (New Jersey: A.S. Barnes and Co., Inc., 1969), 57.

In order to determine the effectiveness of the reigns of both Elizabeth and Mary, one must first examine the prevalent thought of the day concerning the duties and expectations for women. The role of women was primarily that of a wife and mother. In all endeavors, she was to answer to both her husband, and any other male figure. She could rarely be vocal or give advice to men.³ Because of this, it may be inferred that since women were expected to hold a subservient role to that of men, it would be difficult for a queen to be deemed legitimate by her male subjects.

Not only were Europeans uncertain as to how to regard a female monarch, but kings themselves also had strong feelings on the matter. Henry VIII married six times in order to ensure himself a male heir, believing that women were unfit to rule over any man, let alone an entire country. Though he eventually reinstated both Elizabeth and her half-sister Mary to the Line of Succession,⁴ he no doubt believed that Edward would live long enough to produce a male heir himself.

Commenting on the reigns of Mary Tudor in England, Marie de Guise in Scotland, and Catherine de Medici in France, John Knox published his “First Blast of the Trumpet” which condemned rule by women.⁵ Knox was provoked to write this argumentative document while living in England under Mary, a Catholic monarch presiding over a large faction of Protestant subjects. Knox prayed for her conversion and for her to be lenient towards his fellow Protestants, but when he realized that Mary was set in her ways, he published his “First Blast” which detailed the religious reasons as to why females should never be in such a position of power. In effect, Knox echoed the

³ Constance Jordan, “Women’s Rule in Sixteenth Century British Political Thought,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 40 (3) 1987: 421-423.

⁴ Peter Brimacombe, *All the Queen’s Men* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000) 35-37.

⁵ Knox, 376-381.

beliefs of many others, when he remarked that female monarchs went directly against the order of nature, and of God. He believed that the reason that there were queens on the thrones of Europe in the first place, was because it was “evidence of God’s vengeance and retribution for national sins.”⁶ Knox believed that instituting female monarchs was a punishment for the religious unrest between Catholics and Protestants.⁷

The argument against ruling queens was deeply rooted in these religious principles. Two particular reasons that were always cited spoke about the very unnaturalness of women in power. God’s commands had made it a virtue for women to serve man. Also, God’s punishment of Eve had put women in subjection to man. A woman, therefore, had no natural right to rule any realm, even when the royal line of succession included no male heir.⁸ In the words of Calvin, “government by a woman [was] a deviation from the original and proper order of nature, and therefore among the punishments humanity incurred for the original sin.”⁹

Amidst great turmoil and religious upheaval, Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, the Protestant answer to a period marked by persecution. As she ascended the throne, she realized that her subjects did not unanimously accept her as queen. Many from the Catholic faction put their lot in with Mary Stuart, who had a blood connection to Henry VIII through his sister.¹⁰ To those among this group, this meant that Mary had a more legitimate claim to the throne, since it was actually proven that she was a true relative of the former king. Because of Henry VIII’s matrimonial history, and the fact that he divorced his first wife in order to marry Elizabeth’s mother, Elizabeth was still

⁶ Ibid., 372.

⁷ Ibid., 376.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 372.

illegitimate in the eyes of Catholic Europe. The Pope and other heads of state, on the other hand, supported Mary.¹¹ Mary Tudor's succession had been provided for under the terms of the Third Act of Succession of Henry VIII, which stated that she and her heirs were to inherit the throne after Edward and before Elizabeth. This Act, however, did not recognize the legitimacy of either woman, both of whom Henry had declared bastards in the Second Act of Succession.¹²

From the start, Elizabeth played the role of both king and queen of her country. In deciding how to rule her people, Elizabeth looked no further than the example that her father had set. She ruled in the only way she really knew how – as a man. On the fields of Tilbury after the Spanish Armada, Elizabeth spoke to the soldiers, saying that “I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king.”¹³ This embodied the image that she hoped to project as both the mother and the ruler of her people.

On her plate of techniques, the greatest portion was reserved for manipulation. Elizabeth was a keen manipulator, always pitting her advisors against one another without seemingly doing so. When Elizabeth was in her mid-twenties, rumor arose that she and Robert Dudley were planning on marrying. Instead of dispelling any rumors, she used this situation to her advantage. Knowing full well that the people were outraged by the possibility of the marriage, she used it in an attempt to close the marriage debate once and for all. She pledged marriage proposal against marriage proposal, both British and

¹⁰ Brimcombe, 45.

¹¹ Knox, 381.

¹² Jordan, 424.

¹³ Wallace MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993) 45.

foreign, so that she could prolong the Council's quest for a suitor.¹⁴ Clearly, it was evident that she was in control of the situation, as the Council continued to find another suitor, and she countered with yet another reason as to why she could not marry.

In great contrast to the circumstances arising Elizabeth's rise to power, Mary Stuart was primed for monarchy from the start. Equally as distinct, however, is that before she began her rule at Queen of Scotland, she played the role of the consort of a monarch. Married at a young age to Francois I, the Dauphin of France, she began her life as queen-apparent very early on. After Francois died, Mary returned to Scotland to begin her reign.¹⁵

From the beginning of her reign as Queen of Scotland, Mary let it be known that she had cast her eyes on the British throne. She believed that she was the legitimate heir to the throne, and she was determined to be Queen of England, at any cost. She quickly went into action, parrying support for her cause among Catholics in England and the rest of Europe. Her ambition was voracious, and throughout her reign, she would stop at almost nothing to get what she wanted.¹⁶

Though to her public the weaknesses of women in the position of power were undeniably evident, Elizabeth brought a great many strengths to her role as queen. She quickly came to realize that in order to stay on the throne, she needed the support and love of her people, because this is truly where power could be found. With her red-gold hair and majestic presence, she heavily reminded her subjects of her father, and she used this to her advantage early in her reign, by associating with him, noting whenever

¹⁴ MacCaffrey, 74.

¹⁵ Knox, 382.

¹⁶ MacCaffrey, 83.

possible that she was most certainly “her father’s daughter” in an attempt to solidify her legitimacy.¹⁷

In order to set herself apart from the vices and frivolity that women were surmised to take part in, Elizabeth chose to portray herself as a Virgin Queen.¹⁸ In doing so, she gave her people an alternative to worshipping the Virgin Mary, since worship of any female figure, along with female saints, had been stricken out of Protestant doctrine. Elizabeth used the image of the Virgin Mary throughout her reign, molding it to fit her needs. Over time, associations with the Virgin were used in various states, such as the “virtuous Queen, chaste goddess, mighty imperial monarch, and the all-powerful being at one with the cosmos.”¹⁹ Various other depictions of Elizabeth as a celestial being rose from this, such as Gloriana, Diana, Cynthia, Pandora, Belpheobe, Astraea, and Oriana.²⁰ What set her apart from these heavenly beings, however, is that she remarkably never lost her human touch, her link with the people.

Elizabeth chose to actively involve herself in politics and was equally manipulative here as she was elsewhere. Fluent in French, Italian, Latin, Greek and German, she artfully conversed with visiting ambassadors, and was known for being witty and learned.²¹ In the words of her childhood tutor, Ascham, Elizabeth’s “mind [had] no womanly weakness, her perseverance...[was] equal to that of any man...”²² Elizabeth used her mind to her advantage, showing fellow heads-of-state that she was on

¹⁷ Sir Robert Naunton, *Fragmenta Regalia* (Washington, Folger Books, 1985), 67.

¹⁸ Daniel Fischlin, “Political Allegory, Absolutist Ideology and the ‘Rainbow Portrait’ of Queen Elizabeth I,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 50 (1) 1997: 189-192.

¹⁹ Susan Watkins, *In Public and Private: Elizabeth in Her Own World* (New York, Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1998), 56.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Naunton, 189.

²² Jordan, 47.

the same level as any man, if not higher. Her vast knowledge enabled her to be an effective diplomat, as she knew the histories of most of the countries she dealt with.

Queen Elizabeth took great pains to dance around the art of courtship in an effort to delay marriage as long as possible. This is evident in the sheer number of her favorites, as she called them, including Pickering, Dudley, Hatton, Herbert, de Vere, Devereux, and Raleigh, to name a few.²³ To possess Elizabeth meant the world, the power, and the glory that went along with her, which created a very seductive version of the queen. She had as many suitors both domestic and foreign, but she strongly believed that her true power as a female monarch rested in being a virgin, unmarried queen.²⁴ In living her life in such a manner, however, she had no hope of producing an heir, something her country desperately needed. In an attempt to humor her people, and perhaps even to strength foreign relations, Elizabeth continued to entertain thoughts of marriage with those foreigners such as the Archduke Charles, and Alencon. Although neither of these negotiations ended in an eventual marriage, they served their purposes in strengthening foreign relations.

The strongest theoretical cases for woman's rule were actually developed as defenses of Mary, such as Leslie's "Defense of the Honor of Mary, Queen of Scots," in which he states that men and woman were included among the brethren, those who may be chosen to be monarchs.²⁵ For her part, Mary defended herself through her actions as queen. Her insatiable ambition, coupled with her various other strengths as a ruler, made her a force to contend with.

²³ Watkins, 323.

²⁴ Ibid., 325.

²⁵ Jordan, 442.

Mary liked being in the limelight, and being noticed by those around her. The debate over her second marriage, therefore, came as a great gift to her. Suitors from around Europe were being pushed by various leaders, such as Henry, Lord Darnley, and even Robert Dudley, by Queen Elizabeth herself. Lord Darnley was at the top of the list, since, being English-born, he would strengthen her legitimacy to that throne. Elizabeth hoped that she would choose Dudley, so that Mary would be tied to her apron strings and would be easily manipulated. Mary, however, was determined to choose someone who would strength her own position and assist her in obtaining her rights to the succession, so she chose Henry, Lord Darnley.²⁶

In the religious realm, Mary proved to be very tolerant of her Protestant subjects, while remaining Catholic herself. She recognized that while her people could not be changed easily, neither could she. Throughout her reign, and especially during her imprisonment, Mary invoked the image of the Virgin Mary as the “sorrowing mother” and applied it to herself. In a letter written to Elizabeth was she was imprisoned in England, she mentions the upbringing of her son, and says that if she cannot see him, then to at least take care of his future for her.²⁷ By creating this image, Mary portrayed the alternative to Elizabeth’s embodiment of Mary as the Virgin Mother. Mary was not only a mother (which Elizabeth was not), but she was one who suffered and was a martyr for her cause, placing everything in God’s hands.

Though Elizabeth clearly had a great number of strengths, she had a number of weaknesses as well. Since she typically dealt with men in positions of power, she was unsure as to how to deal with other women. With Mary, she attempted to use the

²⁶ MacCaffrey, 87.

²⁷ Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *The Trial of Mary Queen of Scots* (New York, Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999), 78.

manipulation tactics that had worked so well with the men around her, but found that they did not work. Also, she was so used to her subjects and councilors flattering her, and admirers pursuing *her*, that when Mary became the center of a marriage debate, she was at a loss as to how to act. Mary posed a threat to Elizabeth's position, and put her on the defensive, while Elizabeth was typically a queen who worked on the offensive.²⁸

Since Elizabeth had no real intention of marrying, she was in one sense, putting the future of England in jeopardy. She threatened to lose her much-needed Protestant support if she would not produce a Protestant heir and secure the British throne as a Protestant one. Catholics, seeing this opportunity, turned to Mary when they saw that a Protestant future was an uncertain one.²⁹

On the opposite end of the spectrum there was Mary, the coquettish youngster who, to her critics, embodied sexual lust. Wyngfield, one such critic, wrote an account of Mary's execution, showing her as being a flirtatious being, even until the end. Even her dress, "dressing of lawn edged with bone lace...a pair of beads...gown of black satin...shoes of Spanish leather"³⁰ invoked an image of a woman who is set to impress. Wyngfield states that she made quite coquettish comments even when her maids were disrobing her, saying that "she never had such grooms before her to make her unready, nor ever did put off her clothes before such company."³¹ Granted, Wyngfield was known as an outspoken admirer of Elizabeth and renowned critic of Mary, but nonetheless, he represents a large faction of people who believed that Mary portrayed every ill virtue of the female species.

²⁸ MacCaffrey, 87.

²⁹ MacCaffrey, 111.

³⁰ Lewis, 115.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

To many, Mary was an obvious example of why society did not believe women were fit to rule. She was a weak political manipulator, despite her grand ambitious plans for the future. In marrying at such an early age, she thrust into the light the question of her inferiority. If she must be subordinate to her husband who had no real claim to the throne, many believed this undermined any ability she may have had to lead. Although her first husband died at a young age, her second marriage to Henry Darnley ended scandalously when he was found murdered. It appeared that along with the Earl of Bothwell, Mary had played an equally important role in her husband's murder. What made this even more incriminating was her whirlwind romance and marriage with the Earl, and act of personal and political self-destruction.

The relationship between these two women who had never met was put to an extreme test when Mary secretly sailed out of Scotland and placed herself at the mercy of Elizabeth, seeking refuge from her assailants and enemies, her own Scottish subjects. Through her position of weakness, Mary showed her strength by appealing to Elizabeth's past promises of support, and as a fellow queen said that she was victim of rebellion and came seeking aid.³² In this case however, Mary had placed too much worth on her skill, and her enemies quickly outmaneuvered her, laying a trap from which she could not escape.

After being imprisoned in England, Mary was brought to trial on the account that she was conspiring against Elizabeth. Mary did not believe, that as a Queen, she should have to go before the court and tried as a mere subject. She distinctly stated that she wished no harm to come to the Queen, and she did not understand why she had been kept

³² MacCaffrey, 105.

imprisoned all these years.³³ Though Elizabeth herself was not present at the trial, 36 peers, judges, and members of her Privy Council represented her. Mary was denied council in the proceedings, and was forced to defend herself. She rose to the occasion, even though she was unfamiliar with the laws of the land, the language, and was allowed only to make brief statements on her behalf. The situation was clearly weighed against her, as the judges were also the prosecutors. She faithfully denied any wrongdoing; although evidence was presented that showed she had been conspiring to overthrow the queen while she was imprisoned. At the end of the trial, the judges found her to be guilty of this very crime, and advised the queen to execute her.³⁴ Mary's fate now lay in the hands of Elizabeth, who had a difficult task ahead of her – to decide what was better for England, to keep Mary alive, or end her life.

The existence of Mary raised the question concerning England's place in Europe. If the Catholic factions under Elizabeth in England were to have their way and anoint her as their monarch, this would bring forth the issue as to whether or not a queen who had ties to both France and Scotland was fit to rule in England. Going one step further, as Jayne Lewis does, her ascension to the throne could undermine England's growing influence in the European sphere if it was deemed that Scotland was a superior country, and not an inferior nation, as was the belief of the time.³⁵

The largest threat Mary brought with her against Elizabeth, along with her tie to the British throne, was her insatiable ambition. Even as a teen, Mary had claimed England's crown as rightfully hers. From anyone else this may have seemed a harmless threat. But Mary was much more than a Scottish-born queen. She was also a Catholic

³³ Lewis, 95.

³⁴ Ibid. 94-96.

icon. Her ascension to England's throne would mean a Catholic country. The shadow that Mary cast over Elizabeth's reign was one of stark contrast, and one that many of Elizabeth's subjects sought to embrace. As Lewis remarks, "To imagine Mary was to imagine England's shadow self – Catholic rather than Protestant...and intimately bound to the Valois sector."³⁶

Although the count was very much against Mary, in Elizabeth's eyes, there were some very real reasons for keeping her alive that could benefit Elizabeth's rule. By not putting Mary to her death, Elizabeth could keep from alienating her Catholic subjects even more so than she already did, simply by being a Protestant monarch. Elizabeth also feared that both Scotland and France would retaliate and seek revenge for the death of their Queen. Equally important, Elizabeth had realized that Mary's life basically guaranteed that Phillip of Spain would not bring it upon himself to invade England. Perhaps even the largest factor for not killing off the Queen of Scots was because Elizabeth merely did not want the blood of another monarch, particularly a fellow female one, on her hands.³⁷

All of these reasons, the ones for keeping Mary Stuart alive, and the ones against her, made Elizabeth's decision very difficult, indeed. In her speeches to Parliament, we see Elizabeth debating this very problem out loud, using pointedly ambiguous language. She talks about the "answer answerless"³⁸ and how there are many "who would give their lives to save a princess"³⁹ but at the same time, we can see that she acknowledges that she

³⁵ Ibid., 11.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ William Edward Collins, *Queen Elizabeth's Defense of Her Proceedings in Church and State* (London, The Sidney Press, 1958) 211.

³⁸ Ibid., 220.

³⁹ Ibid., 222.

must execute Mary, as she alludes to her own safety, and the safety of her people. In the end, Elizabeth makes the decision to execute her fellow monarch, a decision that greatly affected both her reign, and obviously, that of Mary Stuart.

Reviewing the reigns of these two women shows that Elizabeth had a larger number of accomplishments to her name. Along with the defeat of the Spanish Armada and the religious tolerance that, on the whole, prevailed, Elizabeth also opened up exploration to the west, bringing riches and wealth to the growing British Empire. She turned England from a nation of troubles, to one on the brink of prosperity. She laid down the framework for the British Empire that flourished even centuries later as a dominant world power.

Mary, Queen of Scots, on the other hand, had great potential, but potential does not always get the job done. Her reign was short-lived, her ambition too great, and her weaknesses too strong to outweigh her strengths. Her Catholic legacy made it no further than her own reign, as her son was raised Protestant and ruled England in such a manner.⁴⁰ She was a worthy opponent of Elizabeth, nonetheless, as proven by the anxiety she caused her fellow queen. But this does not alter the fact that she was manipulated far more than she manipulated.

There is a reason why the era during which these two women lived is now referred to as the Elizabeth Era. It is because the mark that Queen Elizabeth I left on history is an indelible one, while Mary, Queen of Scots will more often be seen as a chapter in her book. In this age where women were deemed as unfit to rule, Elizabeth proved many of the stereotypes placed on her to be false. Unlike Mary, she ruled without

⁴⁰ Bingham, 89.

a husband, without a male heir, and yet in the end, she was the only one of the two to remain standing, victoriously.