Mary, Queen of Scots

(1542–87). The life of Mary Stuart, more commonly called Mary, Queen of Scots, has been a favorite subject of dramatists and poets. She became the central figure in a complex political drama that resulted in her untimely death. She lived in the turbulent period of the Protestant Reformation, and she was a Roman Catholic.

Mary Stuart, the daughter of King James V of Scotland and the French princess Mary of Guise, was born on December 8, 1542. A few days after her birth, her father died, and she inherited the crown of Scotland. The infant queen was pledged to marry Prince Edward of England (later Edward VI), but the Scots rightly feared that Edward’s father, King Henry VIII, wanted to annex Scotland to England. They therefore preferred a French alliance, so Mary was betrothed instead to the dauphin (crown prince) Francis, heir to the French throne.

The child queen was sent to France. For 10 years she lived with her mother’s powerful relatives, the Guises, and acquired all the graces of the French court. “This small queen of Scots,” wrote her mother-in-law, Catherine de’ Medici, “has only to smile in order to turn all French heads.”

At age 15 Mary was married to the dauphin. In the same year (1558), her cousin Elizabeth I became queen of England. Catholic Europe regarded Mary Stuart as England’s rightful queen. The dauphin succeeded his father, Henry II, in 1559 as Francis II. The next year Francis died, leaving Mary a childless widow. She was then 18.

Reluctantly, Mary sailed back to her Scottish homeland to rule as queen. Her mother, who had acted as regent in her absence, had just died. French influence had declined as English influence under Elizabeth I had grown. The Protestant Reformation, for which John Knox and others had long labored, was now established in Scotland. From his pulpit Knox thundered denunciations of the Catholic queen.

Both English and Scottish statesmen were concerned with finding a husband for Mary. As the granddaughter of Henry VIII’s eldest sister, Mary was heiress to the crown of England if, as seemed likely, Queen Elizabeth should die unmarried and childless. To strengthen her claim, Mary married in 1565 handsome Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, who also had a claim to the English crown.

The marriage was a failure. Darnley was vain, weak, and eager for power. Darnley’s insolence and Mary’s Catholicism produced discord between Mary and her Protestant subjects. A group of her enemies at the court pointed out to Darnley the rapid advancement with which the queen favored her Italian secretary, David Rizzio. Darnley became party to their plot, and Rizzio was murdered in the queen’s presence at Holyrood Palace.

Mary pretended to pardon Rizzio’s murderers. After the birth of her son, James, in 1566, she even agreed to a formal reconciliation with Darnley, but this did not last. The next year she persuaded her husband, who was ill, to move from Glasgow to a lonely house called Kirk o’ Field just outside Edinburgh. One night the house was shattered by the explosion of barrels of gunpowder. The next morning Darnley’s strangled body was found in the garden.

The queen was suspected of having had a part in her husband’s murder. Knox intensified his campaign against her. The Scottish lords rose in revolt when, three months after Darnley’s death, Mary was married to the earl of Bothwell, who had been exposed as the leader of Darnley’s assassins. Mary’s forces were defeated at Carberry Hill near Edinburgh. The queen was forced to abdicate in favor of her infant son, James VI. Bothwell fled to Denmark.
For 11 months Mary was imprisoned in the island castle of Loch Leven. On May 2, 1568, she escaped by boat to the mainland, where her friends awaited her. An army rallied round her, only to be completely defeated at the village of Langside, south of Glasgow, by forces led by her half brother James, earl of Moray, who was serving as regent. Mary fled, and, according to her own account, she slept on the ground, hungry and cold, for three nights. Then she crossed the border into England and cast herself on the mercy of Queen Elizabeth. Elizabeth promptly had her taken into custody while a commission examined her guilt in regard to Darnley’s murder.

Letters found in a mysterious silver casket, supposedly written by Mary to Bothwell after his flight, were used against her to prove that she was aware of the plot to murder Darnley. The original letters, written in French, disappeared during Mary’s lifetime, and there has been much controversy over the English translation, which was made from copies.

For nearly 19 years Mary Stuart was Elizabeth’s prisoner. English Catholics formed plots to liberate her and place her on the throne of England. The Babington Plot of 1585—named after the ringleader, Anthony Babington—was the last and fatal link in a series of events that at length induced Elizabeth to bring Mary to trial in 1586. Mary conducted her own defense with courage and eloquence but was found guilty of complicity in a plot to assassinate Elizabeth. Elizabeth reluctantly signed Mary Stuart’s death warrant. On February 8, 1587, Mary, bearing herself like a queen, was beheaded in Fotheringhay Castle, Northamptonshire. When Elizabeth died 16 years later, Mary Stuart’s son, James VI of Scotland, became James I of England, the first of England’s Stuart line.

Cite

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