



Elizabeth and Mary: Cousins, Rivals, Queens

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The political and religious conflicts between Queen Elizabeth I and the doomed Mary, Queen of Scots, have for centuries captured our imagination and inspired memorable dramas played out on stage, screen, and in opera. But few books have brought to life more vividly the exquisite texture of two women's rivalry, spurred on by the ambitions and machinations of the forceful men who surrounded them. The drama has terrific resonance even now as women continue to struggle in their bid for executive power.

Against the backdrop of sixteenth-century England, Scotland, and France, Dunn paints portraits of a pair of protagonists whose formidable strengths were placed in relentless opposition. Protestant Elizabeth, the bastard daughter of Anne Boleyn, whose legitimacy had to be vouchsafed by legal means, glowed with executive ability and a visionary energy as bright as her red hair. Mary, the Catholic successor whom England's rivals wished to see on the throne, was charming, feminine, and deeply persuasive. That two such women, queens in their own right, should have been contemporaries and neighbours sets in motion a joint biography of rare spark and page-turning power.

Elizabeth and Mary: Cousins, Rivals, Queens Details

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Naomi says

This book was excellent. I read one review where a reader complained that Dunn repeats herself too often, reiterating points as if you aren't going to retain them otherwise. That's one reason I loved this book! The reinforcement kept the important stuff fresh in my memory and left me feeling, by the end, I could probably give an impromptu lecture on characters of Mary and Elizabeth.

As for the impressions I personally came away with: Mary was an unfortunate product of the French court that taught her that rule was hers by right. She honed the art of charm but never wisdom. Between her chronic self-indulgence and her (likely) manic depressive cycles, she made a life-long series of decisions that sealed her fate. I have a difficult time with the enduring myth of her Catholic martyrdom; her behavior throughout her life was characterized far more by self-indulgence than faith. I felt as though her role as martyr was a last-ditch effort to improve her legacy. (Dunn seems to present it this way.)

Elizabeth, by contrast, became queen by a chain of uncanny events and never took rule for granted. She was discerning and so careful in her decision-making that indecision (contrasted with Mary's trademark rashness) was a weakness. Her eventual decision to behead Mary can hardly be called a decision at all, as you will see if you read, and even though Mary was skilled at flattery and deference to Elizabeth in their early acquaintance, I got the impression that Elizabeth had more genuine feelings for and loyalty to Mary -- something she couldn't afford to entertain.

I don't want to take the time to chronicle the numerous and critical mistakes that marked Mary's reign, but I will list three decisions I believe hurt Elizabeth's chances of solidifying a trustworthy relationship with Mary: her refusal to ever meet Mary face-to-face, her stall tactics over selecting a possible husband for Mary, and her refusal to grant Mary the asylum she sought when she fled Scotland. Her decision on these matters were complicated by the volatile political and religious situation at the time, and my opinion is an amateur one, but there it is.

Overall, these historical females were brought to life for me in a very personal way, and I am anxious to read more historical books, especially written by Jane Dunn.

[update: I have reconsidered my opinion that Mary's devotion to Catholicism was more an act in the end. I have been reading a bio on her mother, Mary of Guise, and the Catholic faith was a major part of her heritage. The Guises were very devoted Catholics, and Mary Stuart's grandfather Claud was a war hero in defending the faith. No doubt, the stories she was told growing up about her family's history would have reinforced the faith she was brought up in.]

Katy says

While the subject matter is not new or groundbreaking (the amount of well-written, important biographies on both monarchs could fill a bookshelf) it is the format of Dunn's book which sets it apart and makes it an excellent addition to any Tudor library. Dunn weaves the stories of both queens, who never met face to face. The result is a fascinating portrait of two very different women who held so much power in their lily-white

hands.

"In my end is my beginning." *Mary, Queen of Scots*

Roman Clodia says

I enjoyed reading this book but am uneasy about it being pitched as historical biography since so much of it is conjecture on the side of Dunn. The very qualities that make it so readable are also the qualities that make it vulnerable as 'history': the idea of getting inside the heads of these characters and understanding their thoughts, feeling and emotions is, for me, absolutely fine in a novel but dubious in something purporting to be factual when there is no, or very little, evidence. While I absolutely agree that all history is interpretive, this goes a little too far.

I also thought it was heavily biased towards Elizabeth, and the patterning of the two women was too polarised: Elizabeth the cool, intellectual virgin and Mary the fascinating but over-emotional, over-sexed and spoilt femme fatale. Dunn's reading of the politics between the two queens is itself overly emotional, rather naively, in my opinion, accepting Elizabeth's supposed reluctance to have Mary executed and her post-event grief as genuine - when scholars in the field have offered far more Machiavellian readings than that, especially from a woman who Dunn herself portrays as putting rationality over emotion.

That aside, this is undoubtedly an enjoyable read, and the novelty of a dual biography of the two women gives it its own niche in an over-crowded Tudor/Elizabethan book marketplace. I would just add a historical reality check, or at least a caveat about keeping in mind alternative readings and interpretations of the evidence.

Michaela Wood says

I read a historical fiction on this relationship after reading this work (I will not mention the fiction) and I have to say, people tend to romanticize Mary (she is highly "romanticizable"). I find this book gives detailed, scholarly information about the probability of why each woman made the decisions she did, while always including alternative theory, including the basis for its rejection. I've read a few of these books, and I can say this one is the best. Lots of valuable information and insight. Brava

Jeni Enjaian says

I do not understand how this book has such a high rating. It simply is not that good. In fact, one of the few positive things I have to say about it is that the narrator was fantastic, my favorite female narrator, Donada Peters.

The other (slightly) positive thing I have to say about the book is that Ms. Dunn's premise set out in the introduction is admirable. She claims that this will be a dual biography focused on the events that shaped each woman's characters and "interactions" in a roughly chronological format. It's too bad that she doesn't even come close to supporting her premise.

This narrative is all over the places both in time and setting not to mention characterization. She starts off by describing Elizabeth's coronation but then abruptly back tracks to chronicle Anne Boleyn's rise and fall from

power. (That's just one especially egregious example.) A simile that occurred to me while reading is that Dunn is like a hummingbird that flits from flower to flower never drinking deeply. While some histories must skim the surface (college textbooks for example) most do not. In my opinion, Dunn's historiography is abysmal

She also repeats frequently. She uses some of Elizabeth's more famous quotes two even three times to illustrate the same points. This is yet another example of her poor historiographical skills.

Apart from a few events in Mary's life, the only thing that I learned from this book is that the two women never actually met. That astounds me. It also compels me to find a decent biography of Mary, Queen of Scots.

I highly recommend that all people stay far away from this book, especially if one is an amateur or professional historian or lover of history.

David says

This biography / history was perhaps a little dry, but if you're interested in this era of British history, you'll find it fascinating. Elizabeth I of England and Mary Queen of Scots were cousins and contemporaries, and as female rulers in the 16th century, historical anomalies. The book is not intended to be a dual biography, but rather a comparative analysis of the reign of the two queens and the times they lived in. But we learn much about both women. Elizabeth is portrayed as an intellectual leader, her sense of duty all-important (even more than love and marriage). Mary is portrayed as charismatic and emotional, lacking discipline over her desires and passions. Her ambition for the English throne was unquenchable, leading eventually to imprisonment and execution. I gained insights into the conflicts of the time related to religion (Catholic vs. Anglican) and the issues of royal succession.

BJ Rose says

I thoroughly enjoyed this well-researched study of two queens of the same generation, ruling in neighboring monarchies on the same island - a rare occurrence in the world of the 16th century that held that the natural order of things required a male ruler. But instead of making them kindred spirits and supportive of each other, this rarity instead made them life-long rivals, and eventually led to the imprisonment and execution of one of them.

Mary Stuart was queen from birth, and thus was surrounded by excessive flattery and praise. She grew up in false security, and since she was never challenged, she was basically unaware of her own capabilities. And her youth, and the political manipulations by others, worked against her.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, was in danger for much of her youth - with Henry VIII for a father, and his penchant for divorcing, imprisoning, executing his wives, their children were often in jeopardy. The lessons she learned from her childhood were that her fate lay largely in her own hands and in how she conducted herself.

At the very beginning of this book, the author tells us that Elizabeth believed in self-discipline and sacrifice, while Mary valued pleasure over duty. In the course of the following 400 pages, she presented historical facts and details that proved this again and again. For all her charisma - and it was apparently quite awesome

- Mary's self-centeredness led to grief time after time, with tragic results.

Jessica says

This is a great biography of two great women of British history, but it is not a truly fair biography. It has an Elizabethan slant. The author clearly leans in the favour of Elizabeth in her telling of the story. She can be rather derogatory of Mary sometimes and while she does present the facts, she mostly puts a negative spin on the things that Mary does that Elizabeth and England did not agree with. This again is a nice biography that compares the two queens side by side, but it does clearly lean in favour of Elizabeth.

Erica says

Fascinating biography on the parallel lives of two queens whose lives were intricately intertwined yet they never once met face to face. Fascinating point of view in terms of two powerful women who were opposites in many ways yet both very strong in their own right. Definitely recommend for Tudor history buffs.

Dani says

Fascinating book. Much information on the two queens. I knew a lot about Elizabeth so a lot was familiar, but I knew a lot less about Mary. It was very interesting to see how Elizabeth tries so hard to do good for Mary With little reward. Mary gives her such a hard time and then the others would have been happy for Mary to die later give Elizabeth such trouble when she is pushed beyond reason with Mary. I thought the amount of documenting of that time period to be amazing and interesting how much we know so many years later.

That said the reason I did not give this book 5 stars is that the book is repetitive, she continuously repeats what she has already told you at the beginning of each chapter also she is a hard read. Worth it - yes, but it was not a book you will finish in an afternoon.

Rebecca Hill says

I read this book in three days! It was hard to put down once I got started and became hooked. Jane Dunn goes beneath the initial layers of these women to reveal just what made these girls tick, what they were really made of and what kept them going. Both were deeply religious, and one grew up with every benefit befitting her station, while Elizabeth was the underdog at first. Mary was used to using her charm to get what she wanted and when her short reign as Queen of France was over, she was ready and hungry for bigger and better things to come. When Elizabeth came to the throne, she knew the entire world was watching her, just waiting for her to make one mistake, in order to prove that men were really the only ones fit for running a kingdom. Elizabeth however, confounded them all. She ruled with a fair hand, and although she had to make decisions that were not only unpopular with her subjects but uneasy for herself to make. She wrestled quite often over the smallest decisions she had to make, wanting to make sure that it was in everyone's best interest as much as she could. Elizabeth truly loved her subjects as just more than those who put money in her

coffers. She really wanted the best for them, while Mary wanted everything handed to her, no matter who had to suffer for it. Mary was a spoiled human being, who while granted good graces and charm, somehow never managed to learn from the mistakes that she made. It would have been interesting to see what sort of queen she would have made if she had become more cautious of those around her, and surrounded herself with those who had the best interest of her kingdom at heart, and not their own subservient wants.

A great read and an unbiased view of these two dynamic ladies, one of whom proved the entire world wrong in that women were not fit to lead. I highly recommend reading this book!

Kristel Boe says

Wow. I wish this book was 400 pages longer, I didn't want to stop reading! All of the reality show dramas of present day have NOTHING on the sensational lives of both Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary. A fascinating topic, well written by Jane Dunn.

Hillary says

i tried so hard to like this book but i just could not get into the book . i did not like the writing style of this writer . she was all over the place with the storyline about the 2 queens in the book . i have not read any other of the books she has written . and i didnt think that i will that is why i give this book 2 stars . i hated giving this book 2 stars but i had no choice in the matter . so i will be reading decked by carol higgins clark .`

Sonia Gomes says

Both queens were descendants of Henry VII and as such rivals for the English throne. They were kinswomen, but could not have been more different.

Mary the Queen of Scots, queen at birth, the much protected daughter of Mary de Guise, the pawn of her Guise uncles, the pampered and cosseted future Dauphine of Henry II, and playmate to the Dauphin.

Elizabeth should have been the direct heir of Henry VIII, but she never knew if she was the heir or bastard, it all depended on whether her father Henry was in a good mood. Throughout her life, Elizabeth was insecure, sometimes feared for her life. She was slighted, tormented by the fate of her mother Ann Boleyn.

The two queens could not have had a more different upbringing.

Sadly for Mary her life at the Court of France was her undoing, her ruination. She never learnt how to shoulder responsibility, how to plan, how to exercise control, all the makings of a queen. But did anybody expect her to rule? No of course not, that would be the task of her powerful uncles the de Guises.

Elizabeth however with no one to pamper her, no one to cosset her, did what she could in her very limited and constrained life, she studied, she learnt new languages, she learnt to plan but most all she learnt to be calm, exercise extreme self discipline and control to the point of eschewing all personal desires.

That was one of the reasons she never married, for she believed she was the Virgin Queen married to England and her subjects believed in her implicitly, that was one of the reasons her Kingdom had such peace and prosperity. On the other hand Elizabeth was ruthless, any claim to the throne was dealt with severity, so many noblemen with very tenuous claims to the throne were imprisoned in the Tower for years.

After the death of her first husband King Francis II, Mary returned to Scotland but she was unhappy there, it was cold and the noblemen did not much care for the frivolity of the French Court, that was when everything

started disintegrating for Mary.

Although Elizabeth promised to meet Mary she just vacillated, to some extent these delays and the impressions one had of the other from the various emissaries exacerbated the gulf between them. Mary was beautiful, extremely charming, everybody loved her but she was terribly lonely and lacking Elizabeth's fortitude believed that to govern her country Scotland, she needed a husband to help her or do it himself, much like her uncles would have done.

This is when Elizabeth failed Mary completely, she just refused to grant her permission to marry, Mary getting more and more desperate, lacking the strength and fortitude, ended up with two disastrous marriages and her subsequent flight to England seeking asylum. This plunged Elizabeth into a precarious position if not an extremely dangerous one.

Could she have saved Mary? Maybe, but most possibly not. There were so many extenuating circumstances; her councillors were of the opinion that Mary should be beheaded immediately to save England. And so it was done

Jaylia3 says

Powerful and ambitious cousin queens at a time when kings ruled Europe, I found this dual biography of Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots deeply and doubly interesting. By depicting both personal histories the context of each queen's life is contrasted and enriched, and Jane Dunn's thoughtful, vivid writing captures the ethos of their world, the distinctness of their temperaments, personalities and skills, and the subtleties in their conflicted relationship.

Charming, headstrong, and persuasive, Mary became Queen of Scotland at birth and was raised as the pampered future bride of the Dauphin in the French court of Henry II and Catherine De Medici. Insightful, wary, and skilled in the art of negotiation, Elizabeth was very young when she lost her mother Anne Boleyn, and the taint of illegitimacy threatened her freedom, life and reign.

Both Elizabeth and Mary were descendants of Henry VII and their rival claims to the English throne made them adversaries, but as kinswomen and fellow queens on an island outpost of a continent governed by men they had a natural bond and connection that each felt. Elizabeth & Mary takes the queens from birth until Elizabeth's 1588 defeat of the Spanish Armada the year after Mary's beheading and fifteen years before Elizabeth's death. It's a fascinating, stirring, and poignant story that's well told in this book.
