

MARIE R

MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS IN FACT AND FICTION

by

ANTONIA FRASER

WHEN I was working for many years on the life of Mary Queen of Scots, I used to have one frequent reaction in the hermetic life of Mary and me into which I tried to shut myself: if I was a novelist and had invented this story and put it before the public, every single reviewer would castigate me for invention—a melodramatic story which could never possibly have happened in real life. For let us take for a moment the main elements in the story of Mary Queen of Scots—a baby girl who becomes queen at five days old, marriage to the Dauphin of France at fifteen, Queen of France at sixteen, and then tragically widowed, all before her eighteenth birthday.

Mary's brief six-year personal rule in Scotland included battles with her cousin Queen Elizabeth which in themselves would constitute enough drama for one play, then marriage for love to the handsome but alas vicious Lord Darnley, then the butchery of her secretary Riccio in front of her eyes when she was seven months pregnant. Under a year later Darnley first has his house blown up and there dies by strangling in one of the most celebrated murder mysteries of history, that of Kirk o'Field. A few weeks later Mary marries the chief suspect, Bothwell, a few weeks after that, enforced abdication, and imprisonment on the lonely island of Lochleven including probably the miscarriage of twins by Bothwell. A wonderfully romantic escape to temporary liberty through the agency of one young man of her jailer's family who fell in love with her and an orphan boy to whom she had been kind is followed by defeat, then flight to England and then—at last—a sort of dreadful rest period, her captivity of nearly nineteen years in a series of English prisons. Last of all, there is the execution scene, surely the most poignant single scene in British history!

And all this, let me remind you, is *fact*—these events which actually happened to one woman. When it comes to fiction, one might say with justice, follow that! But the fascinating thing about the topic of Mary Queen of Scots, is that one might almost say it is an industry. In the Collection Bliss in the Bibliotheque in Paris, there are about 20,000 books listed in the catalogue on the subject of Mary, collected by an American lady who had a passion for the subject. They range from the historical attacks of George Buchanan to the poetic play of Swinburne, from the diatribes of John Knox to the highly coloured popular historical novels of Jean Plaidy. In short, the history of the histories of Mary Queen of Scots is another subject in itself.

There are, roughly speaking, three main bodies of *historical* judgment about Mary's character and actions, ever since her execution in 1587. The first group see her as a Scarlet Woman, often *the* Scarlet Woman, an adulteress with Bothwell, worse still a murderess of her husband Darnley. The second group feel with equal vehemence that Mary was innocent of these

crimes, and in her final superb ending a Martyr Queen or at any rate a Catholic Martyr. The third group of historians see the real importance of her life as the Dynastic issue, the struggle with her cousin Elizabeth, in terms of European power politics, England, Scotland, France and Spain at the time. All these schools of thought have been present in historical studies from Mary's death down to the present day. The Mary of the novels, plays, etc., is a far more unanimous creation. Universally, this Mary is a *femme fatale*. Now there is nothing wrong with being a *femme fatale*, but it has occurred to me in studying the many fictional forms of her life, that simply to concentrate on that element in Mary's character is to miss a great deal of interest. The successful fictional forms, the outstanding ones, have always managed to go beyond this. Pre-eminent among these is Schiller's play, on which the libretto of Donizetti's opera is founded. Schiller, like many writers, begins by being fascinated by the contrast of Mary with Elizabeth her cousin, where one is represented as being a woman all heart, and one all head. It is a contrast which also absorbed Robert Bolt in our own day in his highly successful play "Vivat Vivat Regina". The rather unoriginal and unexciting recent Hollywood film starring Vanessa Redgrave and Glenda Jackson also picked on the same point: Mary is emotional, romantic, ruled by passion, whereas Elizabeth is masterful, loves, but never ever lets her love get totally out of control.

But Schiller goes beyond this. Therefore by implication Donizetti's opera does too. It is true the most famous scene of all, the crisis of the action, is the confrontation of the two Queens in the forest. Is it, I wonder, necessary even now to stress that this confrontation never took place? That Elizabeth and Mary never actually met in real life? Yes, I fear it is—for one thing every new film keeps the legend going, and I remember after the aforesaid film first appeared, shortly after my own book, several people commented to me wisely: "You see, you were wrong. They did meet. The film says so". Now I love this scene of Schiller's, and I love it also in Donizetti's version, in Tom Hammond's English translation. But I think it is the regality of Mary which succeeds in the character study, not the Bolt-like contrast of femininity and cool. It is the brilliance and triumph of Schiller in realising that a woman trained to be a queen from birth would never have tolerated Elizabeth's insulting treatment of her captive for very long. When Mary's veneer of self-abasement finally gives way she slaps Elizabeth with her glove crying out—in Italian *vil bastarda*, here "Shameful daughter of a harlot". Now the point of this is not that the confrontation was historically accurate but that Schiller had understood the exact historical contrast between the two ladies.

If you had been alive in their age, you would not have indulged yourself in murmuring such platitudes as "one is all heart and the other is all head". But you would have been extremely aware that whereas Mary Queen of Scots was the daughter of a Scottish king, the great-grand-daughter of an English king—Henry VII, with the rest of her blood French and equally grand, the situation over the ancestry of Elizabeth was markedly different. Was it not Henry's desire to marry Elizabeth's mother Anne which had provoked the Reformation crisis? Since Henry's first wife Katherine of Aragon was still alive at the time of Elizabeth's birth, by strict Catholic standards Elizabeth was a *vil bastarda*, the harlot whose shameful daughter she was being of course Anne Boleyn. Now this emphasis on Elizabeth's birth wasn't mere muck-raking: it was the supposed bastardy of Elizabeth which gave Mary her claim to the English throne, not only to be Elizabeth's heiress, but actually to supplant her.

Nothing in the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary ever caused so much what we should now call "aggravation" as this claim made on Mary's behalf by her father-in-law, the king of France, when she was merely fifteen years old. Because it truly struck at Elizabeth's international position. In this sense I find Schiller, and therefore Donizetti by implication, express a truth about Mary's historical character, not only in the dignity of her bearing and the sympathy expressed for her plight, but also in this famous fictional confrontation, which is not possessed by some other simpler fictional forms.

The very first play about Mary incidentally was written as long ago as 1589, and by a Jesuit priest. I don't expect the last play will ever be written or the last film will ever be made. To be honest, when one is considering the whole range of fiction woven round her character and story I myself have a great weakness for the absurder versions, where there are no concessions made at all. The thirties Hollywood film, "Mary of Scotland", starring the young—very young Katherine Hepburn with Robert Taylor, and incidentally directed by the young, very young John Ford, is something not to be missed by connoisseurs. Of course you can't take it seriously on any level at all, but Katherine Hepburn does look very beautiful indeed and so does Robert Taylor for that matter. There is, of course, a confrontation when the two queens lunge at one another in slightly slow motion, rather like royal Tweedledum and royal Tweedledee, and Mary goes to the scaffold, my favourite touch, hearing the noise of the bagpipes, which in this film where Bothwell figures heavily as the hero might be fairly described as "his tune". It's based on Maxwell Anderson's play of the same name, a play actually written in blank verse which contains some spirited lines as well as some highly pathetic ones, where Elizabeth addresses Mary as "my dear" in the great row: "Your letters, my dear. Your letters to Bothwell prove it . . . ." Which is anachronistic in the wrong way.

What about Bothwell? Naturally he doesn't figure in the Schiller based versions, which is why he doesn't come into the opera. Although the action has been brought back into 1571 at the beginning of this new English version, instead of 1586 where Schiller had it, keeping the classical unity, even 1571 is four years after Mary's last parting from Bothwell. So the romantic lead is played by Elizabeth's lover Leicester. In one sense historically it's quite wrong—that love affair never took place. But it has a certain piquancy in that Elizabeth, many years before the captivity, did offer Leicester as Mary's bridegroom, her own nominee, at the time when Mary actually selected Darnley. However, far from taking the line of the opera—far from the world only Leicester's love can solace her in her woe—Mary in fact furiously rejected Leicester. Her grounds were that he was of tainted birth because his father had been executed, and he was Elizabeth's own lover anyway!

Returning to Bothwell, he has always made up in the historical novels and films what he has sometimes lost in the plays. Margaret Irwin's "The Gay Galliard" was probably a seminal book for many of us, with its judicious mixture of rich historical description, and sex. I say sex, because it *is* almost certainly historically true that Bothwell ravished Mary after having abducted her, in order to make quite sure that she would marry him for political reasons. The only doubt being whether Mary pretended to be ravished also for political reasons. In Margaret Irwin's skilful hands, the ravishing loses nothing of either point of view: Mary is ravished, but she does enjoy it, rather like another great survivor Cunigonde in Voltaire's "Candide". Margaret Irwin's picture of the rough, manly, extremely passionate Bothwell, who takes what he wants, whether it be Border Castles or women, is probably nearer

the truth than the conventional picture of Mary as a pure Victorian heroine. Mary, as I have said, was predominantly a queen first, a woman second. Bothwell, on the other hand, probably was a pretty rough character, and he was certainly attractive to women as we know from contemporary accounts and hints. What I think might surprise some readers of heavily romantic fiction on the subject is that when the Scots were rough in those days, they were rough indeed, and it would have been no courtly gallant with a Scots accent that Mary found, but someone more equipped to either play in or watch a Scottish football match.

But there is another genre of fiction about Mary which also intrigues me, and is in a way more inventive—those who have tried to add to history instead of slightly twisting it. In the nineteenth century Charlotte M. Yonge wrote a novel I much admire called "Unknown History" which supposes that Mary instead of miscarrying twins on Lochleven, actually gave birth to a daughter who was spirited away to France and brought up there. There were rumours to that effect in seventeenth century memoirs, which although without foundation in my view, Charlotte M. Yonge developed. I think if I *was* going to write a historical novel or play about Mary, I would prefer to tread a newer path of invention than the same old round of the invented confrontation between the two Queens. The relationship or rather non-relationship between Mary and her son James VI and I has never as far as I know been fictionally explored. Yet it presents fascinating possibilities as well as the eternal theme of mother and son.

Consider the facts: Mary never saw her son after he was eleven months old, but continued to write to him. While he forgot her—or rather never knew her—she thought of him as her dear son, still perhaps in her mind, the little baby she had last known. Then you come to the 1580's, Mary, a prisoner, really imagines James will help to free her and restore her to Scotland, and at the very last can never accept that James has no loyalty to her, because he has been brought up to have none. Her letters, when she discovers he has betrayed her are both angry and heart-rending, as she begins to discover she has been living in a dream world. In the end James even tacitly accepts her execution, yet he could have probably saved her by objecting to Elizabeth and making it clear the Anglo-Scottish alliance would be broken. For my money a novel or play based on secret confrontations between mother and son, James smuggled into England, Mary smuggled into Scotland or Border country—it doesn't matter, that's what fiction's for, invention—contrast between the old regime and the mother, the son and the hard new ideas, would be very dramatic.

As in fact I am not going to write it, as I said at the beginning, finding the real history of Mary Queen of Scots sufficiently dramatic in itself, I can only make a present of this idea to any writer who still prefers, unlike me, Mary Queen of Scots in fiction rather than fact.



