
When Ladies Meet: The Media Myth of the Two Queens in One Isle

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Surrounding Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots are myths that continue to become the audience's reality through media. We may wonder about whether Elizabeth manipulated Mary's marriage to Darnley, and what she really said about the birth of Mary's child, the future King James, but the one myth that is the biggest lie of all is the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary! The facts of the lives of these two queens are well known, but when art manipulates life, we embrace it and accept it as reality.

Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth Tudor, Queen of England, only met in opera, theater, and film, but not in history. Alison Plowden, author of *Two Queens in One Isle*, wonders what would have happened if they did. However, if we look at opera, drama, and film, we can visualize their confrontation in a war of words. We can hear the operatic singing in Gaetano Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda*, see the Maxwell Anderson's play *Mary of Scotland* or observe the queens at opposite ends of the stage in Robert Bolt's *Vivat! Vivat Regina*, and finally view the two women in the films *Mary of Scotland* (1936) and *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1971).

OPERA

Queen Elizabeth in the nineteenth-century Italian opera was regarded as "jealous, willful, and easily overwrought," but Mary Stuart is perceived as dignified and pious (*Maria Stuarda* 22). The opera *Maria Stuarda* is based on Johan Friedrich von Schiller's play about Mary, Queen of Scots and was very popular in Italy because she was a Catholic Queen who was martyred. However, the musical composer, Gaetano Donizetti, alters history for the sake of intrigue. Although the Earl of Leicester, Robert Dudley, never met Mary Stuart and was the alleged lover of Elizabeth, in Donizetti's opera he loves the Scottish Queen and urges Elizabeth to meet her. When the ladies meet at a hunt near Fotheringhay Castle, where Mary is confined, she asks for pardon, but Elizabeth

calls her a liar, while proclaiming that her feeble prison suits her “in the dust and shame” (68). Elizabeth adds that Mary betrayed her marriage to Darnley, while Cecil, Leicester, and a Lady in Waiting accompany the queens in the singing of opera confrontation. The climax occurs when Mary calls Elizabeth “a vile bastard.” The English Queen condemns her to death and the chorus ends the second act with “the final shame of execution the Queen has decreed for you; yes, be silent, come, tremble every hope is gone” (75).

Gaetano Donizetti is best known for the opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*, but he wrote a trilogy that dealt with the Tudors; in addition to *Maria Stuarda*, there is *Anna Bolena*, his first international success, and *Roberto Devereux*, which reveals the tragedy of the Earl of Essex, the alleged, young lover in Elizabeth’s old age. *Maria Stuarda* was considered controversial, and during one of Donizetti’s rehearsals, Queen Maria Cristina of Naples fainted, so the King prohibited the performance. After having another opera abolished about Lady Jane Gray, Donizetti used the *Stuarda* score for another libretto. Eventually, the Austrian censors approved the phrase “vil bastarda” and it was performed at La Scala, but it was not successful and not performed again for 130 years.

An interesting anecdote where life imitates art occurred at a rehearsal at the San Carlo Opera House in Naples during the confrontation scene. After Mary calls Elizabeth a bastard, the other singer took the text literally and slugged her. The operatic Elizabeth then knocked her rival down and punched her as the other performers began to scream (18).

DRAMA and FILM

Other media that distorted the quarrel between the royal cousins are drama and film. Drama and film often connect because historical films of the twentieth century were usually based on plays. Moreover, historical figures were popular from the inception of film to the present. One of the earliest silent films was about Mary, Queen of Scots, when in 1895, Thomas Edison directed *The Execution of Mary Stuart*, which brought Elizabethan history to an audience. Viewers saw a half-minute of film showing Mary being led to the block, and then the guards chop off her head, which

bounces like a basketball (Mast 30). Nevertheless, there would be more serious and longer films in the twentieth century about Mary Stuart, the most famous being *Mary of Scotland* (1936) and *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1971).

The more recent film, *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1971), starred Vanessa Redgrave as Mary and Glenda Jackson as Elizabeth. Jackson had starred in the BBC television series *Elizabeth R* and was persuaded to repeat her role. However, the television series is more historically accurate than any of the films and never showed the two queens meeting.

The film was not the result of the television series, but its producer Hal Wallis was influenced by Antonio Fraser's best-selling biography and a drama that was playing in the West End of London at the time. The play was *Vivat! Vivat Regina* by Robert Bolt, the author of *A Man for All Seasons*. It was more political than previous versions of the Elizabeth and Mary rivalry and has the two ladies standing on either side of the stage, not meeting, while suggesting confrontation. After producing *Anne of a Thousand Days* (1969), Hal Wallis wanted to produce a film that would present Mary as an active protagonist, and he hired John Hale to write the screenplay (Wallis and Higham 169).

Besides the mythical meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, the film attempts to interpret why Mary married Lord Darnley and Elizabeth's reaction to the birth of James VI, their son, who would become James I of England, the first Stuart. As readers and viewers, we wonder why Elizabeth would suggest a husband for Mary after she returned to Scotland as a widow of the King of France, her first husband. Ironically, Elizabeth proposed Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, when it was a common belief that he was the Queen's alleged lover.

In the film, the Tudor Queen devises a Machiavellian scheme and bets Cecil that Mary will reject him and take Lord Darnley instead. Elizabeth can't lose because if Mary takes Dudley, he is loyal to Elizabeth, but if she takes Darnley, Elizabeth will still have Dudley. Mary's choice of Darnley will be foolish marriage, yet not an international threat (Neale 131). Mary Stuart marries Darnley, who has a claim to the British throne, but soon after the birth of their son, he is murdered, and both Mary and Bothwell, her next husband, are suspected.

When Mary gives birth to a son, the future James I of England, biographies and drama have Elizabeth utter that Mary delivered a son while she, Elizabeth, is of “barren stock.” Historian Neale refutes the claim as a myth, because it is based upon the memoirs of James Melville who wrote it when he was very old (141-2). Yet it finds its way into this film and the earlier *Mary of Scotland*, which was based on the Maxwell Anderson drama.

The most famous myth of all, the meeting of the two ladies, has Glenda Jackson, as Elizabeth, meeting Vanessa Redgrave as Mary, not once but twice. The two Queens meet in a forest, where Elizabeth, dressed in velvet with gold embroidered trim, says to Dudley that Mary has never learned discretion while now she has “the wolf by the ears.” Mary is on a white horse as she advances to Elizabeth; the Tudor queen declares with extended imagery and double meaning, “Well, let’s look at the animal.” Background music heralds their meeting of the ladies, who are in profile on horseback, and Elizabeth speaks first.

With innuendo and insincere outpourings from both ladies, Mary asks for Elizabeth’s help in putting down the Scottish rebels. Elizabeth manipulates and challenges Mary, and even though the Tudor Queen stands beneath Mary, who is on horseback, the Tudor overpowers the Stuart. They flatter each other saying, “fair sister and sweet cousin,” while they dismount and kiss both cheeks. Elizabeth promises supplies only after Mary is acquitted of Darnley’s murder, and questions, “Did you believe that I would send you back to Scotland?” After Elizabeth proclaims that Mary is not fit to rule, the Scottish Queen calls her a bastard, usurper, and barren.

This is similar to the opera when Mary sings the words, “vile bastard” to Elizabeth. Nevertheless, Glenda Jackson’s cold delivery differs from the opera, where the diva rants and raves in song, while condemning Mary to death. Another contrast from opera to film is that in the film, Dudley does not love Mary, but he does intervene when Mary tries to strike Elizabeth with a whip. Elizabeth declares that she must keep her prisoner till death “may it be soon.” As Mary gets back on her horse, Elizabeth has the last word. She coldly says that now that Mary has struck all her blows, she was the one who sent Darnley because she knew Mary to be “without

wisdom.” Now Mary is called an “infamous royal whore in the courts of Europe.”

The second and final confrontation takes place when the Queens are old. In a grey castle, Mary looks up at the small unadorned windows, while we hear a door slam as Elizabeth enters. Sumptuously dressed in a green coat with fur trim over a green velvet gown, Elizabeth enters, telling the imprisoned Mary, “Despite your efforts, I am not dead.” Elizabeth’s back is to the viewer as she stirs up a fire as Mary sits. The Tudor Queen declares that her government and people demand her trial, and Mary compares this to Henry VIII judging Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth checks her sardonic remark with, “no jokes to me about death.”

Mary, wearily, asks what she wants, and Elizabeth says she wants to spare her but she must beg forgiveness and a written apology to forgo a trial. The letter will be confidential and save her life, but Mary refuses and wishes for a trial. The camera cuts back and forth to each face. Elizabeth reveals the incriminating letters the self-destructive Mary has written. The film combines the history of the Casket Letters about the Darnley murder and the Babington Plot where Mary is alleged to have plotted Elizabeth’s death (Neale 203; 281).

Elizabeth evokes a last plea to ask Mary to think of her son, but the Scottish queen calls Elizabeth a devil. Mary adds that death is her destiny and, “your destiny, Elizabeth, is to kill me.” However, the Tudor Queen has the last word even though James will someday rule, by saying, “Madam, if your head matched your heart, I would be the one here!”

When we think of film Elizabeth’s, we can recall the voice of Glenda Jackson in this role or the televised film series, or Bette Davis fuming around the set, or Dame Flora Robson from the thirties, or even the first film Elizabeth, Sarah Bernhardt. In contrast, the actresses who played Mary were not commanding, even if there were well known. Even when the famous Katherine Hepburn played her in *Mary of Scotland* (1936), it was the role of Elizabeth that Ginger Rogers, Bette Davis, and even Katherine Hepburn desired. Despite their yearnings, the role went to Florence Eldridge, wife of Frederick March, who played Bothwell in the film.

Mary of Scotland, although a mediocre film, set the precedent of how actresses would portray Elizabeth until Cate Blanchett’s *Elizabeth* in 1998. Based on Anderson’s play, the film expands

Elizabeth's role, but is similar to the 1971 film in that the Tudor Queen does manipulate Mary's marriage and reacts distraughtly to the birth of James. As Queen Elizabeth I, the former Broadway actress, Florence Eldridge, can be coarse and cynical, yet she gives a performance of a hard-headed businesswoman whose family deserted her. There is nothing romantic but everything political about her. At times, we question whether she is hero or villain. The climatic meeting shows the full range of emotions of Elizabeth's ambition and survival.

Directed by John Ford, the climatic meeting takes place in a dreary castle. There were rumors that he was having an affair with Hepburn, but despite this relationship, they fought and bickered. Ford changed the ending from the play, which has Mary looking out of a window, when he stated, "Let's behead the dame after all" (MacBride 231).

In the castle, the black and white film has a long white candle, symbolic of one ruler and a raging fire in the fireplace, which suggests their enmity. Katherine Hepburn cries a lot as Mary, but is very stiff in the role even when she tells Florence Eldridge (Elizabeth) that it is more important to have love over rule. Queen Elizabeth responds by proclaiming her love of duty. Moreover, the Tudor Queen contrasts her life with Mary, who was born a queen. When Elizabeth says, "I started with nothing-not even a name," we sympathize with her. Eldridge's appearance sets the precedent as to what we expect Elizabeth I to resemble, which later developed into caricature in cinema.

As a sophisticated audience views *Mary of Scotland* today, we giggle at Hepburn's monologue about her love for Bothwell and how it is much more important for a woman to love a man than a throne. Her narrative of "What I did for Love" does not arouse sympathy, but instead comedy. However, the film offers a deeper dimension of Elizabeth, because even though she is about to execute her cousin, it is difficult to feel compassion for Mary. Finally, we wonder what would have happened in history "when ladies meet!"

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