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Elizabeth I (1533–1603), queen of England and Ireland

by Patrick Collinson

**The question of marriage, 1558–1581**

The chorus of admiring approval for Gloriana and the Virgin Queen has often obscured the serious problem posed by Elizabeth's sex. It was not only Knox who believed a female ruler to be, if not an unnatural monstrosity, an unusual and in principle undesirable exception to the regular rule governing human affairs. Apart from any other considerations, it was not clear that a woman could exercise the oldest function of a monarch, leading her forces into battle. Nor could she, in any station or walk of life, ordinarily exercise the kind of authority associated with the mental powers of a man. Women, especially widows, might manage households, but they were excluded from all public offices. Privileged women might learn languages, but they could not study the law. On one occasion Cecil was upset when a messenger discussed with the queen an ambassadorial dispatch, it ‘being too much for a woman's knowledge’ (Haigh, Elizabeth I, 9). Elizabeth was regularly visited with unsolicited male advice, often represented as the will of God, which on Pauline principles only men were authorized to interpret.  
  
It was universally assumed that Elizabeth would marry, and for two reasons, the less pressing of which was that she should have the support of a male consort. The major and compelling reason was to secure an orderly and, if possible, male succession to the throne. So the question of her marriage, a dynastic question which had been put in many circumstances and with different suitors in mind ever since her infancy, took on a new urgency once she became queen. On 2 February 1559 a select committee of the Commons, which included all the privy councillors in the house, presented the queen with a formal request that she should marry. Elizabeth took almost a week to respond with the first of her many answers, answerless. She first declared her disposition to remain in the same ‘trade of life’ in which she had lived hitherto; then professed to take the petition ‘in good parte’, because it placed no limit on her choice; promised that if she were to marry it would not be prejudicial to the realm, and even envisaged a time when it would ‘not remayne destitute of an heire that may be a fitt governor’; but concluded with the prophecy that it would ‘in the end’ be sufficient that a marble stone should declare ‘that a Queene, having raigned such a tyme, lived and dyed a virgin’ (Hartley, 1.44–5). Despite those memorable words, the speech had more openness to the possibility of marriage than a different version provided by Camden, in which she is supposed to have chided the Commons for forgetting that she was already married to her kingdom, with a little dumbshow involving her coronation ring.  
  
Elizabeth had no lack of suitors, including Philip II, Erik XIV of Sweden, and the archdukes Ferdinand and Charles of Austria. The more the merrier, since each proposal was an endorsement of her legitimacy. Erik was the most persistent suitor, and the most generous. A series of Swedish missions between summer 1559 and autumn 1562 came laden with ‘massy bullion’ and stables worth of piebald horses (Nichols, 1.79–82, 87, 104–5). Initial interest in Erik was a counterfoil to the more plausible candidature of the emperor Ferdinand's sons, Ferdinand and Charles. Charles, who symbolized an anti-French, Habsburg alliance, proved to have staying power, but religion was an almost insuperable bar, and it was one which was exploited for all that it was worth by the man whom Elizabeth would probably have chosen to marry if all things had been equal, Dudley. What kept Erik's hopes alive into 1562 was hostility to Dudley and his ambition; and it does seem that what kept all international suits at the level of diplomatic games was Elizabeth's genuine love for this man who was destined to be the longest running of her favourites, if never her spouse.  
  
Elizabeth's ‘affair’ with Dudley is the stuff of which legends are made, and have been, by Sir Walter Scott and many others. Dudley was a married man, otherwise things might have been both less and more complicated. The couple were of an age, and Dudley claimed to have known Elizabeth ‘familierement’ from before she was eight (Doran, Monarchy and Matrimony, 40). While Dudley's wife, Amy, *née* Robsart, was still alive, courtiers exchanged scandalous gossip about his relationship with the queen.  
  
Even as rumours spread, on 8 September 1560 at Cumnor Place, Oxfordshire, Amy Dudley was found dead in unusual and even suspicious circumstances. Was it suicide or murder? Modern science has found a plausible, if not conclusive, medical explanation. With Amy dead, many assumed that Elizabeth would marry her favourite. How far Dudley's chances of marrying Elizabeth were realistic depends in part upon the reading of some very complicated diplomatic transactions, relating to whether England would opt to participate in the third assembly of the Council of Trent, whether Philip could be persuaded to favour Dudley's suit as the price for a return of England to the Catholic fold, whether proposals along these lines were made to the Spanish ambassador, Alvaro de la Quadra, bishop of Aquila, and, if so, whether they were made with sincerity. While there is no historical consensus on this matter, it appears most likely that Elizabeth's and Dudley's diplomatic games with the ambassador were just that, games. For Elizabeth was unlikely to tear up her religious settlement, while Dudley later claimed, with apparent sincerity, to have been consistent in his protestantism, ‘ever from my cradle brought up in it’ (Collinson, Godly People, 95). As for Cecil, it should not be assumed that he was motivated by simple hostility to Dudley.  
  
It is more than likely that in the months after Amy Dudley's death, Elizabeth decided that marriage with Dudley was not on. This would mean that, unlike Mary, queen of Scots, in 1565, her head and political instincts came to rule her heart. However, Dudley continued to apply what might be termed cultural pressure. Sir Thomas Smith's ‘Dialogue on the queen's marriage’, which circulated in manuscript, John Philip's The Play of Patient Grissell, and, above all, Gorboduc, the Senecan tragedy written by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton and performed in the Inner Temple at Christmas 1561, and subsequently at court, all implicitly advocated the Dudley match.  
  
When parliament next met in January 1563, it was in the shadow of Elizabeth's close encounter with death through smallpox in October 1562. Marriage and the succession were therefore at the top of the agenda for both houses, while the dean of St Paul's Cathedral, Alexander Nowell, one of the queen's favourite divines, preached a sermon to parliament which could hardly have been more direct. If her parents had been of her mind, not to marry, where would she have been then? The Lords petitioned her to marry ‘where it shall please you, with whom it shall please yow, and assone as it shall please you’ (Hartley, 1.59). The Commons placed more emphasis on the need to limit the succession. More answers answerless. Elizabeth told parliament that so far as her marriage was concerned ‘a silent thoght may serve’, but that the idea that she would never marry was a ‘heresie’ they should put out of their minds (ibid., 114). Yet, that she would never marry Dudley was probably not a heresy. When she made him Baron Denbigh on 28 September 1564 and earl of Leicester on the 29th, it was to make him acceptable as a husband for Mary, a plan which misfired when the Scottish queen married her cousin Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley, on 29 July 1565. Thereafter Leicester remained in the wings with little prospect of gaining the prize himself. The elaborate allegories enacted in Elizabeth's presence at Leicester's castle at Kenilworth in 1575 were aimed as much at securing his release from a kind of courtly bondage (so that he could himself marry and secure an heir) as to press an ever more unattainable suit.  
  
The Habsburg matrimonial project was now revived. It is perhaps surprising that Cecil was so much and for so long in favour of this marriage, since it was clear that the archduke Charles was not likely to change his religion, and it could only have happened on the basis of an interpretation of the religion of England which would have been unacceptable to all but the most conservative of protestants. Despite this, Elizabeth clearly signalled to Vienna in May 1565 her intention to marry, with the implication that her choice would be the archduke. When parliament met again, in September 1566, key figures were poised to assure those now inclined to press for a resolution of the succession problem that she intended to marry. At this point Elizabeth came dangerously close to committing herself to marriage in order to stave off public debate about the succession; but she had an escape route, which was to dissolve (rather than prorogue) parliament, and when Cecil and others inserted a clause in a draft of the preamble to the subsidy bill referring to the promise to marry and acknowledging the legitimacy of public concern about the succession, her indignant reaction led to its prompt removal.  
  
When Thomas Radcliffe, third earl of Sussex, was dispatched to Vienna to resume serious negotiations, his task was to persuade Maximilian II that the religion of England was not Calvinist but consistent with the Lutheranism of the Augsburg confession (since 1555 legal in the empire), so that there would be no need for Charles to insist on the practice of his own religion, something on which, however, Vienna did insist. In order to keep the negotiations alive, Sussex went beyond his remit on these critical matters. In England both a divided privy council and Elizabeth were forced to admit that even the limited, private practice of Catholicism would be unacceptable to the protestant public. Mary's deposition on 24 July 1567 was an event still fresh in everyone's memory. In December 1567 Elizabeth called the whole thing off. It proved too divisive and politically hazardous, and its subtext was open hostility between Sussex and Leicester, an overture to the major political crisis of 1569.  
  
The two French marriage projects of the 1570s, to Henri, duc d'Anjou, from 1570 to 1571 and to his brother François, duc d'Alençon (himself duc d'Anjou from 1582), between 1572 and 1578, were repeat performances, insofar as both matches appeared to be diplomatically advantageous, and both were torpedoed by the same religious factor. There were, however, other impediments, including traditional anti-French sentiment, and the disparity in age between Elizabeth and the French princes. Despite these difficulties, the queen may have been in earnest in her dealings with Henri of Anjou and his mother, Catherine de' Medici, and domestically the first Anjou marriage negotiation was not an especially divisive issue. However, the later episodes in François of Alençon and Anjou's long-running suit were another matter. England in the late 1570s confronted a number of dangers, variously assessed by those in charge of its affairs. In January 1576 it was said that ‘hire Majestie is troubled with these causes, which maketh hire verie malincolie; and simeth greatlie to be oute of quiate’ (Lodge, 2.136). France was either the old enemy or the only ‘stay’ against the new enemy, Spain, its support to be secured either by marriage or a ‘league’. However, England was vulnerable because of the situation in Scotland and Ireland and Anjou was unreliable, especially because of his intervention in the Dutch revolt. The Elizabethan regime was divided about whether or not to intervene in the Low Countries. Elizabeth pulled back from the brink of military intervention, the preferred policy of the would-be warlord, Leicester, and of Sir Francis Walsingham, principal secretary. Marriage to Anjou, or talk of marriage, would at least buy time.  
  
Yet there was more to this affair than diplomacy. To the surprise and alarm of many, when Anjou sent his servant Jean de Simier, baron de Saint-Marc, to act the ardent lover in his place, the 45-year-old Elizabeth seemed to be swept off her feet. Through much of 1579, court, privy council, and country were divided by the Anjou match. In May 1578 Gilbert Talbot, Lord Talbot, told his father, George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury, that odds of three to one were offered against the marriage. Now the odds shortened. Protestant opinion was outraged. For the hot protestant Nicholas Faunt, Walsingham's secretary and clerk of the signet, writing in March 1582, the marriage would be ‘but treason’ (Birch, 1.20). Leicester and his friends were opposed, and not only from self-interest, for the earl was one of those who expressed what sounds like genuine concern about the medical implications of Elizabeth marrying at her age, and suspected politically motivated manipulation of her emotions. Lord Burghley (Cecil) wrote a hundred sheets of memoranda on the subject, for and against the marriage, which are preserved among the Hatfield manuscripts, and gave a speech on 6 October 1579 opposing it. However, the evidence is ambivalent and at times he seems to have supported Sussex, the principal proponent of the marriage. His judgement was perhaps swayed by the belief that England's diplomatic needs could not be secured without a marriage, the fact that this was the very last (risky) chance to secure an heir of the queen's body, and his conviction that the Anjou marriage would serve as a prophylactic against Mary, queen of Scots.  
  
In the backlash of Elizabeth's indignant reaction to Leicester's marriage to Lettice Devereux, *née* Knollys, dowager countess of Essex, on 21 September 1578, Anjou visited the English court in person, the only one of the queen's foreign suitors to do so. He found Elizabeth either romantically interested or acting her part well. She called him her frog. Soon the proposed marriage was boldly denounced by the lawyer John Stubbe in The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf whereinto England is Like to be Swallowed (1579). In what looked like a conspiracy, the book was widely disseminated. The queen suspected that greater persons than Stubbe were behind this, but historians have found in him a striking example of the existence of a public sphere in Elizabethan England, occupied and articulated by middle-ranking lawyers and politicians. Both Stubbe and the man who organized the distribution, William Page, a client of Francis Russell, second earl of Bedford, had their right hands struck off by the public hangman, which Camden recorded as a deeply unpopular sentence. Less publicly, the marriage was opposed by Sir Philip Sidney in an open letter and, obliquely, in Edmund Spenser's The Shepheardes Calender and in his more overt beast fable, Mother Hubberd's Tale (not published until 1591).  
  
By October 1579 the conciliar argument against the marriage prevailed and Elizabeth knew that if she were to proceed it would be without the support of her privy council. In the last resort it was, after all, her decision, and for her privy councillors to say as much was not entirely a cop-out. This was effectively checkmate, although the project had an afterlife which finally petered out in the summer of 1581—as late as May 1582 Elizabeth still addressed Anjou as ‘my dearest’ (Collected Works, 237, 245, 249, 251, 253). A marriage treaty was concluded which everyone knew would never be implemented, not even when Anjou made a second and more public visit to England. As the biological clock ticked out of time, that was the end of matrimonial diplomacy. If time had been bought, reputations had been damaged, not least Elizabeth's own, and harm done, especially to Scottish policy. Walsingham wrote in 1578: ‘no one thing hath procured her so much hatred as these wooing matters, as that it is conceived she dallieth therein’ (Read, Walsingham, 2.6).  
  
It was in the context of the Anjou courtship, and as an expression of opposition to it, that the persona of the Virgin Queen was invented, or at least perfected. On the royal progress into East Anglia in 1578, plays and masques devised by Thomas Churchyard were performed at Norwich which celebrated Elizabeth's admirable virginity, with appropriate reference to Diana and the Virgin Mary. A year later Spenser deployed similar allegorical imagery in The Shepheardes Calender, and a series of portraits rubbed the same point home with the symbol of a sieve held in the queen's hand, which identified her with the vestal virgin Tuccia, who had employed a sieve full of water to prove her chastity.  
  
As with her religion, Elizabeth's emotional and sexual history is hard to disentangle from diplomacy and artifice. Was she really a virgin? Many of her subjects doubted it. Nor was the gossip confined to the alehouse and the lower orders. In an utterly scandalous letter, perhaps written in 1584, Mary, queen of Scots, enjoying the enforced hospitality of the earl and countess of Shrewsbury at Sheffield, chose to make mischief by sharing with Elizabeth what she had heard from the countess, Elizabeth Talbot: how someone to whom Elizabeth had promised herself in matrimony often slept with her (possibly Leicester); that she would never marry Anjou, since she would never forgo her freedom to make love with her favourites, including Sir Christopher Hatton. Mary, of course, believed none of this but thought that Elizabeth ought to be told. It is perhaps more intriguing still that Elizabeth's godson, Sir John Harington, chose to present her with an epigram ‘Of King David’, which drew a moral from David's adultery with Bathsheba. This is not evidence that Elizabeth was a nymphomaniac but an indication of what some people were prepared to believe. However, was it significant that when she faced death in the autumn of 1562, she settled the unusually generous legacy of £500 on the groom of the privy chamber, John Tamworth, keeper of the privy purse, who perhaps knew more than others what might have been going on, and named Dudley as protector of the realm? The only evidence for this comes from the often unreliable de Quadra, who affirmed that ‘nothing improper had ever passed between them’ (Hume, 1.263).

**The succession**

Historians and biographers have praised Elizabeth for choosing celibacy but, leaving aside the question of how far that choice was simply hers, as long as she remained single and without heirs of her own body she gambled with the succession on the stake of her own life. As a speaker in the Commons put it in 1567: ‘if God should take her Majestie, the succession being not established, I know not what shall become of my self, my wife, my children, landes, goodes, friendes or cuntrie’ (Hartley, 1.138). In 1572, when the point at issue was the execution of Mary, queen of Scots, another MP demanded: ‘since the Queene in respect of her owne safety is not to bee induced hereunto, let us make petition shee will doe it in respect of our safety’ (ibid., 376). This was also an exclusion crisis, since to limit the succession was to exclude Mary. The pitting of the interests of subject and monarch against one another was debilitating from the royal perspective and enabling for the wider political nation.  
  
In the absence of an heir of her body, Elizabeth's successor ought to have been the next heir presumptive, but a confused legal situation meant that the identity of such an heir could not be presumed and was likely to be contested, unless the situation could be clarified by further legislation, a course of action against which the queen consistently set her face. Henry's third and final Succession Act of 1544 provided for an orderly succession through Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth. In case none of these should have lawful issue, Henry was empowered to further limit the succession by letters patent or his will.  
  
Henry's last will, of 30 December 1546, made the next heir his niece [Frances Grey, née Brandon (1517–1559)](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/65987/?back=,8636), elder daughter of his younger sister, [Mary (1496–1533)](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18251/?back=,8636), widow of Louis XII of France. Frances married Henry Grey, duke of Suffolk. If she had no children, her sister Eleanor (1519–1547), who was married to Henry Clifford, second earl of Cumberland, would be heir. In fact Frances had three daughters: Jane (1537–1554) [*see* [Dudley, Lady Jane](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8154/?back=,8636)], who was proclaimed queen, deposed, and executed; Katherine (1540?–1568) [*see* [Seymour, Katherine](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25157/?back=,8636)]; and Mary. Henry's will by its silence on the matter excluded the Stewart descendants of his elder sister, [Margaret (1489–1541), dowager queen of Scotland](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18052/?back=,8636), whose title passed down to [Mary, queen of Scots](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18248/?back=,8636) (Margaret's granddaughter and Elizabeth's first cousin once removed), and to the family of Margaret's second marriage, including Darnley, who had the advantage of English birth and whose marriage to Mary made of the senior and junior Stewart lines one flesh.  
  
With Elizabeth's accession, and for as long as she remained childless, Katherine Grey had an apparent statutory right to succeed, since Henry's will was annexed to the Succession Act. Mary Stewart had the stronger hereditary claim. However, not only Henry's will but the common law with respect to aliens was prejudicial to her position in the order of succession, which was complicated further by Henri II's refusal to acknowledge Elizabeth's legitimacy, claiming for Mary the title and arms of England, by her marriage to François II from 1558 to 1560, and, most of all and increasingly in the perception of English protestants, by the fact that she was a Catholic.  
  
The contest was originally between the hereditary claim of the Catholic and foreign Mary and the statutory claim of the protestant native, Katherine. Katherine's chances of being recognized by Elizabeth as her successor were probably never very good, and they were blown away when, in August 1561, it was found that she was pregnant, having secretly married Edward Seymour, first earl of Hertford. The couple were sent to the Tower on 5 September 1561. Mary returned to Scotland on 19 August 1561 and began to press her claim through Sir William Maitland of Lethington. Maitland failed to extract from Elizabeth recognition of the queen of Scots as her heir presumptive but she made no secret of her preference for Mary. As for the other claimants: ‘Alas! What power or force have any of them, poor souls?’ (Levine, 32). Elizabeth's refusal to name a successor, another of her *semper eadem*s, was in her own interest, since as the ‘second person’ in her sister's reign she more than anyone had experience of the double threat which that posed. It was not seen to be in the interest of her people.  
  
So some people resorted to propaganda and agitation, both direct and indirect. Gorboduc (January 1562) contrived to be about the not entirely compatible claims of Dudley to marry the queen and of Katherine Grey to succeed her. Parliament met a year later, and the Commons in its petition that Elizabeth both marry and limit the succession made no secret of its opposition to the Marian claim, if only on religious grounds, and asked the queen either to publish the terms of Henry's will if it provided the ‘certainty’ required, or to provide that certainty if it did not (Hartley, 1.90–93). The outlook was in fact so uncertain, and the queen so seriously ill with smallpox, that Cecil devised an extraordinary, stopgap solution to the problem, in the form of arrangements for a legalized interregnum. This constitutionally radical scheme effectively distinguished between the queen's natural body and her body politic, which could, if only temporarily, be detached from the physical life and person of the monarch and vested in a public, conciliar body. Elizabeth's own solution, a plan which was radical in a different and thoroughly inscrutable way, and dead in the water almost from the outset, was to arrange a marriage between Dudley and Mary which might sugar the pill of the Scottish succession.  
  
Now a long-running pamphlet war began, Katherine's claims versus Mary's claims, in which John Hales, MP for Lancaster in 1563, fired the first shot, in a tract intended perhaps in its original form to sway parliament. Robert Beale and Sir Nicholas Bacon, lord keeper of the great seal and Cecil's brother-in-law, were involved. Elizabeth suspected a widespread conspiracy and steps were taken to indict Hales for presumptuously initiating a debate on ‘the right, title, limitation, and succession of the Imperial Crown of England’ (Levine, 72). Responses from the other side included a treatise by the eminent Catholic jurist Edmund Plowden and the Defence of Mary (1569) by John Leslie, bishop of Ross. These arguments hinged on whether the succession could be settled by inheritance or by statute but more potent, politically, was the growing prejudice against Mary, and not just because of her religion. Katherine's party was winning the war of words but her death on 27 January 1568 and the lack of a suitably convincing alternative snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.  
  
Meanwhile dramatic events in Scotland blasted Mary's reputation in the eyes of the world: the murder of Darnley, her marriage to one of his murderers in a Calvinist wedding ceremony, rebellion, defeat, and enforced abdication in favour of the infant [James VI (1566–1625)](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14592/?back=,8636). Elizabeth offered Mary frank advice, following ‘the abominable murder of your mad husband and my killed cousin’. Four months later she wrote:

How could a worse choice be made for your honour than in such haste to marry such a subject [James Hepburn, fourth earl of Bothwell], who … public fame hath charged with the murder of your late husband? … This you see plainly, what we think of the marriage.

Three years later she wrote: ‘Well I will overpass your hard accidents that followed for lack of following of my counsels’ (Collected Works, 116, 118, 123).  
  
Only when Mary escaped from captivity to take refuge in England on 16 May 1568 did she manage to persuade many Catholics of her innocence and orthodoxy. By the end of 1568, again a captive, Mary represented the alternative to the protestant ascendancy in England. Consequently, the political forces of that ascendancy were now to be concentrated on her exclusion from the succession by fair means or foul. However, protestants had no plausible candidate of their own and were stuck with a mere negation. The problem of the succession was placed on uneasy hold, for at no time, before or after Mary's execution on 8 February 1587, would Elizabeth allow it to be publicly discussed, whether in parliament or anywhere else.