**Why Elizabeth I Never Married**

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Observers and historians, from Elizabeth I’s reign until the present time, have discussed and debated why the Queen never married. The claim in her first parliamentary speech about preferring the single state was not extraordinary. Her sister Mary Tudor made the same disclaimer before instructing her privy councillors to negotiate a marriage treaty with the advisors of Philip, future king of Spain. In this patriarchal society, people expected husbands to take charge of their wives’ property and business. It is not surprising, therefore, that Sir James Melville, the Scottish ambassador, should have observed in 1564 that Elizabeth remained unmarried because she wanted to be both king and queen. Later Catholic polemicists gave contradictory reports concerning her sexual experiences and attributes. Some alleged she had numerous illegitimate children with Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, and others asserted she was biologically unable to bear children. Modern historians have suggested she possessed a psychological fear of marriage, recalling the execution of her mother and step-mother as well as the death of Jane Seymour in childbirth. Still others believe she would have married if only her councillors could have agreed to support a suitor’s candidacy.

Political issues surely had more impact on her decision to remain single than alleged psychological fears. Furthermore, it is difficult to believe, given what is known about her character and personality, that, had she married, Elizabeth would have ceded her sovereign rights to her husband. Recent investigators of Mary Tudor’s reign have argued that she did not relinquish to Philip her royal powers. To test the theory that fears about political unrest and insurrection played major roles in her unwillingness to marry, it will be instructive to examine public responses to the marriages of Lady Jane Grey, Mary Tudor, and Mary Stewart.

**Lady Jane Gray**

In June 1553, when Edward VI was seriously ill, he drafted a ‘Device’ to change the line of succession as outlined in the will of his father Henry VIII. According to the will of his father, in the event of Edward’s death without legitimate heirs, his successors were to be his half-sister Mary, and her legitimate offspring; then his half-sister Elizabeth, and her legitimate offspring; and finally the two daughters and their legitimate heirs of Henry VIII’s sister, Mary, the French queen and wife of Charles Brandon, duke of Suffolk. In 1553, the French queen’s elder daughter Frances, wife of Henry Grey, duke of Suffolk, was the next claimant after Mary and Elizabeth.

How influential John Dudley, duke of Northumberland, was in Edward’s decision to change this order is still under debate. The final version of the ‘Device’ was not entirely in the ailing king’s hand, but he seems to have approved of naming his cousin Lady Jane Grey, the Protestant daughter of the duke and duchess of Suffolk, as his successor rather than his half-sister Mary, a noted Catholic. As a parliamentary statute had authorised Henry’s will, Edward’s executive decree was illegal. It has been alleged that Northumberland played a major role in effecting this change because in May he had matched his son, Guildford, with Jane. Presumably this marriage would have permitted the duke to gain Protestant support for his retention of royal power, first governing for Jane and then passing that authority on to his son, her husband, and her legitimate children, transforming the Tudor dynasty into the Dudley dynasty.

Questions have been asked about whether Northumberland had this longrange royal plan in mind because he was ill prepared to implement the ‘Device’s’ measures when Edward died on 6 July 1553. No one doubts, however, that the duke was entirely responsible for persuading the royal council to honour and endorse Edward’s wishes. Even so, Northumberland had made little or no enforcement preparations. He neither had custody of Mary and Elizabeth Tudor nor a well-armed force ready to uphold Jane’s accession.

In early July, Mary was at Kenninghall, her major residence in Suffolk, where a nucleus of armed gentry and their followers were rallying to her cause. A combination of support for Mary and also of significant disdain for Northumberland’s ambitions seems to have motivated some of the local opposition to Edward’s ‘Device’. Meanwhile in London, where Jane was proclaimed queen, the council, which approved her accession, began to retreat from its unanimous stance. In response to Mary’s gathering of troops in East Anglia, Northumberland moved east to meet her challenge on 14 July. Yet within days, his men began deserting and in London, on the 19th, the council proclaimed her queen.

It cannot be assumed that had Northumberland been less hated, or more beloved, Jane could have retained her royal position. Still, it is noteworthy that in East Anglia, where Robert Kett’s followers had camped at various sites, protesting at enclosures and expressing antagonism toward the greater gentry back in 1549, it was the earl of Warwick, the future Northumberland, who commanded the army that suppressed the encampments, killing some 2,000 insurgents. In addition, some contemporaries blamed Warwick for having encouraged the animosity between Edward Seymour, duke of Somerset and lord protector of the king, and his brother, Thomas, Lord Seymour of Sudeley, the husband of Katherine Parr, that had resulted in Lord Seymour’s execution earlier in 1549. Many observers were astounded by this fratricide. Three years later, Northumberland also arranged the execution of Somerset, who was to be praised by John Foxe in his popular *Book of Martyrs* as the ‘good duke’. Northumberland did not, therefore, enjoy undivided Protestant support. The son of Edmund Dudley, executed in 1510 as a traitor, the duke’s lineage and reputation must have caused some to submit publicly to Mary earlier than they might otherwise have done. It was not a mere choice between Jane and Mary. Jane had the additional disadvantage of a Dudley husband and in-laws.

**Mary I**

Less than one year after her accession, Mary Tudor, herself, faced a rebellion when her subjects learned about her decision to marry Philip. Plotters planned a fourfold rising in Kent, Hertfordshsire, the West Country and Leicestershire. The leaders, including the duke of Suffolk and Sir Thomas Wyatt the younger, expressed outrage at Mary’s decision to wed a Spaniard and proposed to replace her as queen with her half-sister Elizabeth. In January 1554, after the signing of the marriage treaty, only the Wyatt rising actually posed a threat to Mary, who possessed no army to interpose between London and Kent where Wyatt gathered 2,000 to 3,000 followers. In early February, he reached Southwark, but finding his way blocked at London Bridge, he led his forces up river and crossed the Thames at Kingston. They advanced on London while the courageous queen remained at Whitehall, but after a skirmish, the insurrection was over. Ninety men, including Wyatt, were executed.

Scattered protests continued against the marriage. In 1556, Henry Dudley, a cousin of Northumberland who had fled to France, plotted to invade England because of his hatred of the Spanish connection. Like Wyatt, he planed to replace Mary with Elizabeth. Ultimately, although he did not commit any overt act of treason, some of his fellow conspirators were rounded up and executed. He remained in exile until 1563 when he returned to England and gained a post in the household of Leicester. By 1568, he had died greatly in debt.

Meanwhile, in 1557, Thomas Stafford, who could trace his ancestry to Edward III through his father, Henry, Lord Stafford, as well as his mother, Ursula, a descendant of George, duke of Clarence, demanded the title of lord protector and invaded England, planning to oust Mary from power. After seizing Scarborough Castle, he and 25 followers were captured, tried, and executed.

**Mary Stewart**

The first queen regnant in Britain was not Mary Tudor, of course, but Mary Stewart, who as an infant succeeded her father in 1542. She did not, however, begin her personal rule until 1561. Three years earlier in France, where she had resided since she was five years old, she married the kingdom’s future monarch, Francis II. Scottish reformers known as the Lords of the Congregation, resisting French governance of their realm, used the marriage to rally many of their countrymen to their cause. Fearing Scotland would become a mere appendage of France, they led a successful revolt against Mary’s mother, Mary of Guise, the regent, who was forced to flee to the safety of Edinburgh Castle. After her death in 1560, the Lords took control of the Scottish government and negotiated the withdrawal of both English and French forces. That same year Francis II died, leaving Mary with the option of remaining in France or negotiating her return home with the Protestants, including her illegitimate half-brother, James Stewart, future earl of Moray.

Having agreed to accept the Protestant establishment as long as she could worship as a Catholic at court, she sailed to Scotland in 1561. Four years later, after other matchmaking efforts had failed, she wed Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley, because, like her, as a grandchild of Margaret Tudor, he had a strong claim to the English throne. As long as she remained childless, however, her successor to the Scottish throne was actually a member of one of two competing families, who could trace their ancestry back to James II. Darnley belonged to the junior line that challenged the senior Hamilton line for first place, alleging that the father of its patriarch, James Hamilton, duke of Châtelherault, was not legally married to his mother. Shortly after Mary had wed Darnley, who was addressed as King Henry, the Hamiltons joined with Moray in an unsuccessful rising against her rule.

When they married, Henry believed mistakenly that his royal title would give him the power to rule as well as to reign but his wife would not relinquish her authority to him. He subsequently designed a plot to seize control of Scotland. In early 1566 at Holyrood Palace when Mary was six months pregnant, he allowed some armed men, led by James Douglas, fourth earl of Morton, to enter her supper chamber where they killed her French secretary, David Riccio, and held her hostage. Rumours had falsely claimed she and Riccio were lovers. Somehow, she managed to persuade Henry, who had planned to rule Scotland while holding her in captivity, that he was in as much danger as she, and he helped her escape. In June, she gave birth to their son, James, and Elizabeth, queen of England since 1558, agreed to serve as his godmother.

Less than one year later, several of Mary’s aggrieved subjects succeeded in assassinating her husband. One of the leading assassins was James Hepburn, fourth earl of Bothwell, who was tried and acquitted of the murder in April 1567. Shortly thereafter, he abducted Mary and forced her to marry him. This third marriage, like the previous two, led to a Scottish rebellion against her rule, her subjects indicating an unwillingness to permit Bothwell, ennobled as the duke of Orkney, to control her and her kingdom. Armed conspirators captured her, forced her to abdicate, and crowned her son as king. Meanwhile, Orkney fled abroad and ultimately died in a Danish fortress. After a year of captivity, Mary escaped, but when her army met defeat on the battlefield, she fled to England, remaining a prisoner there until her death in 1587.

**Examples to Avoid?**

Every British queen regnant who married soon discovered that her husband and his family complicated her life politically. No marriage went unchallenged. While Mary Tudor kept her throne despite her unpopular Spanish husband, Mary Stewart defeated only one of the three conspiracies against her rule. Furthermore, her marriage provided an opportunity for her husband also to conspire against her. Is it any wonder then, that when faced with councillors who could not come to a consensus about a husband for her, Elizabeth declined to marry?

Elizabeth was either aware of, or a victim of, every plot against her female relatives. Northumberland had used Jane Grey’s marriage to his son to attempt to prevent the succession of her and her half-sister Mary. Elizabeth’s own life had been in danger during Mary Tudor’s rule because of the plotters’ aim to enthrone her. In 1561, after her accession, Elizabeth sent an ambassador to the recently widowed Mary Stewart with the message that it was her marriage to the French king that caused the rebellion against her rule in Scotland. In 1565 Moray, then in exile in England, persuaded Elizabeth to meet with him although he had challenged his half-sister’s choice of Darnley as her husband. Later, in 1567, Elizabeth wrote Mary Stewart letters, expressing outrage at Riccio’s murder and at her wedding to Bothwell. From 1568, her Scottish cousin was, of course, an English prisoner.

**Robert Dudley?**

Early in her reign, many observers, especially diplomats, related that Elizabeth was greatly attracted to Robert Dudley, a son of Northumberland and her master of the horse. Rumours spread she would marry him if his wife, Amy Robsart, died. In September 1560, Amy did die under mysterious circumstances. At a country home, without her husband present, she fell down a staircase, breaking her neck. Investigations did not implicate Dudley and historians have usually doubted that he conspired against her. Because of this controversy but also because of the unpopularity of the Dudley family, it is usually assumed that some time that winter Elizabeth decided she could not marry him.

Nevertheless, though in 1564 Elizabeth did offer Dudley as a possible husband to Mary Stewart and ennobled him as the earl of Leicester to make his candidacy more attractive, many both in England and elsewhere still believed they were lovers. Reports continued to allege she gave birth to his children when the court went on its summer progresses. In 1575, for example, rumours claimed he was seeking a husband for their illegitimate daughter. That summer, Elizabeth journeyed to Kenilworth, where he entertained her lavishly with hunting parties as well as dramatic interludes, which extolled marriage over chastity. He also gave her gifts, labeled ‘tokens of true love’. The four large individual portraits of Elizabeth and Leicester, which he commissioned, were unique in their large scale images of their subjects and communicated his close relationship with her. In one she was wearing a doublet he gave her, and the four portraits faced the same direction rather than towards each other, following the convention of Renaissance marriage portraiture.

Her subjects generally expected her to wed a foreigner of high rank who would enhance her royal status rather than her position as his wife elevating his status. Moreover, many of her councillors feared Leicester would greatly influence her decisions about power and patronage, in the process privileging his kin and affinity. When he finally concluded she would never marry him, he wed in 1578 Lettice Knollys, a cousin of the queen, as she was a descendant of Mary Boleyn. The new countess of Leicester was also a widow of Walter Devereux, first earl of Essex. Elizabeth never forgave her cousin for marrying Leicester, made private disparaging remarks about her to her son, Robert, second earl of Essex, and agreed reluctantly to receive her at court only once after Leicester’s death in 1588.

**A Foreign Match?**

Meanwhile, some of her councillors hoped she would wed a foreign prince. The problem was that the most eligible princes who could bring prestige to her as a husband were all Catholics. She turned down her sister’s widowed husband Philip II in 1559. Other, lesser royal figures proposed marriage, but the two families gaining her attention were members of the Austrian Habsburg and the French Valois dynasties.

From 1563 to 1567, some of her councillors, notably William Cecil, supported the candidacy of Charles, archduke of Austria, a younger son of Ferdinand I, Holy Roman Emperor. During this courtship and later those of the French princes, Elizabeth maintained she could never become the wife of someone she had not seen. Perhaps she recalled her father’s dislike of and divorce from Anne of Cleves, whom he agreed to marry without having met her. Yet it was beneath Charles’s dignity, his agents claimed, to journey to England without a prior commitment of the betrothal. During the negotiations, the most hotly debated issue was his religion. He insisted on the right to worship at court as a Catholic while she refused to accept having mass celebrated at court. When it was clear neither would relent, the matchmaking ceased.

To counter the Habsburg negotiations, in 1565 Catherine de Medici offered her 14-year-old son, Charles IX, to Elizabeth – who was more than twice his age. She declined the suit but in 1570-71 did consider marrying his brother Henry, duke of Anjou, who was 18 years younger than she. Again, the question of his free exercise of religion, among other issues, prevented their reaching an agreement. By October 1571, the negotiations were over, and three years later he became king of France.

In August 1579, Queen Catherine’s youngest son, Francis, duke of Alençon (later Anjou), arrived in England, unafraid of the disparagement to his honour that his journey there without a firm marriage commitment from the queen might generate. He was also willing to make important concessions about the exercise of his religion. Many disliked the possible marriage partly because he was a foreigner but also because of his religion. John Stubbes even published a book against it, entitled *The discoverie of a Gaping Gulf whereunto England is like to be swallowed*. Elizabeth demanded and obtained the legal punishment for this libellous publication: the loping off of his right hand. Subsequently, her privy council declined to support the union.

When Alençon returned in 1581, still hoping for the match, Elizabeth gave him a ring, told the French ambassador they would wed, and then announced to a gathering of courtiers that she would marry him. Historians have questioned the reasons for her behaviour. Perhaps she had entered into the negotiations seriously but knew that her officials, while urging her to marry, were reluctant to reach a positive consensus on Alençon’s suit. By proclaiming she would marry him, it is likely that she hoped to and did gauge the negative reaction of privy councilor and other courtiers. Once again, the negotiations halted, and Alençon departed for the Netherlands. By this time, Elizabeth was in her late forties, causing fears that she was incapable of becoming pregnant or even of surviving childbirth.

**Conclusion**

Mary Tudor had succeeded in putting down all challenges to her authority. Elizabeth surely could have done so as well but, perhaps, hesitated to take the chance, concerned that the sometimes bitter divisions among her councillors and courtiers would spill over into the countryside. Besides her subjects’ possible dislike of her husband, there was the added problem of the consequences of opening the royal bedchamber to a man, who for all practical purposes, would not be well known to her. Mary Stewart, in particular, had faced difficult marital problems with Darnley with whom she had been in close contact for only a few months. All these political and social issues surely were considerations of concern to Elizabeth. We will never be able to state definitely why she remained single, but the above dangers seem more relevant than possible psychological problems or even the desire to be both queen and king.

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Issues to Debate

* What were the potential advantages and disadvantages of marriage for Elizabeth I?
* Did precendents suggests that marriage would be viable for her?
* Whom did Elizabeth come closest to marrying?

Further reading:

* Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (Routledge, 1996)
* Mortimer Levine, *Tudor Dynastic Problems, 1460-1571* (George Allen and Unwin, 1973)
* David Loades, *Two Tudor Conspiracies* (Cambridge University Press, 1965)
* Retha Warnicke, *Mary Queen of Scots* (Routledge, 2006)