



Maria Stuart

FRIEDRICH SCHILLER

TRANSLATED BY FLORA KIMMICH

INTRODUCTION BY ROGER PAULIN



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Introduction Roger Paulin © 2020



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Introduction

Roger Paulin

The story of Mary Queen of Scots as a dramatic subject had been on Schiller's mind since as early as 1783.¹ It featured again on the so-called 'Big List of Dramas' that he started around 1797, as number four (Wallenstein is number two).² This marks Schiller's return to dramatic production after years of history-writing and philosophical study. By early 1799 he was writing to Goethe that he was studying the sources on the history of Scotland, and in the summer of the same year he was able to sketch to the same correspondent the outline of the play that would be completed a year later (1800) and performed in Weimar that summer:

I am starting, as I map things out, to convince myself ever more of the truly tragic quality of my material, and that means specifically that I can see the catastrophe straight away in the first scene, and as the action seems to move further away from there, it is being led ever closer and closer to it. There is no lack of Aristotle's fear, and there will be pity as well. My Mary will not produce a gentle aura, that is not my intention, I want to keep her as a physical being, and tragic pity will be much more of a general deep emotion than personal or individual sympathy. She feels and arouses no tenderness, it is her fate to undergo violent passions and to incite them. Only her nurse has any tenderness for her.³

In this quotation at least, Schiller expresses a greater interest in the tragic potential of this subject than in its intrinsic merits as a historical source.

1 All German references and quotations are taken from *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Gerhard Fricke, Herbert Göpfert and Herbert Stubenrauch, 5 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1960), here IV, 1258.

2 *Ibid.*, III, 919.

3 *Ibid.*, II, 1259.

We notice him using the Aristotelian requirements of pity and fear but extending these to a general tragic pity ('das Pathetische'), a term taken from his own recent theoretical writings. He is tracing the action both in terms of character (no gratuitous tenderness or compassion) and the construction of the plot (the tragic outcome embedded in the very first scene).

How far Schiller was acquainted with earlier dramatic representations of Mary Queen of Scots (mainly so-called martyr tragedies)⁴ is not known, nor is it the point. He would however, from his reading of Greek, French, English (and German) tragedy, have been aware that the exemplary confrontation of innocence (martyr) with vice or injustice (tyrant) had considerable dramatic potential. The martyr queen divesting herself of her worldly possessions in Act Five owes something to that tradition, but the meeting of the two queens (and the clash of the principles for which they stand), surely the most spectacular and audacious device in the whole play, may also ultimately come from that source. What is clear is that Schiller is constructing a drama around a moral issue with an eye to its effect on the emotions of the beholder.

Schiller, as said, had been studying the historical sources, but *Maria Stuart*, unlike *Wallenstein*, is not in any real sense a historical drama. The historical background may be real, but it needs invented situations and characters (such as Mortimer) to sustain it. Historical accuracy is extended beyond itself to charge past happenings with new significant meaning, a sixteenth-century event made to exemplify and be subordinated to questions of human guilt and moral freedom. Where *Wallenstein's* decisions (or their lack) are linked to historical forces and their outcome, the issues in *Maria Stuart* revolve around decisions already taken (the queen has already been sentenced to death) and their implications. We see, rather, how these political decisions bring about a moral regeneration, a reaching out for transcendence, freedom from guilt, the achievement of the state of sublimity.

These are abstract notions that form the basis of Schiller's theoretical writings in the 1790s. A philosophical reading of the play would therefore see the heroine achieving moral sublimity, freed from worldly trammels, released from passion, her senses and the world of the spirit

4 Elisabeth Frenzel, *Stoffe der Weltliteratur. Ein Lexikon dichtungsgeschichtlicher Längsschnitte*, Kröners Taschenburch 300 (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1963), 411-414.

in harmony, what Schiller calls a 'schöne Seele' ('beautiful soul'). The spectator is involved in these processes by witnessing and being caught up in the higher reconciliation of these principles. But no moral or aesthetic principle alone makes for effective drama, and a one-sided concentration on these aspects alone may give only a limited insight into the subtleties of the text.

For this is first and foremost a play about real and concrete issues, the interplay of politics and sexual jealousy, and it is out of these factors that the moral issues arise, not the other way round. The action, tight, taut, and enclosed (except for that meeting of the queens in Act Three), brings out the questions of Realpolitik in which both heroine and anti-heroine alike are caught up. Mary is physically imprisoned in the confines of Fotheringhay, the place both of suffering and regeneration, while Elizabeth is morally and physically immured in the court, the 'slippery ground' of intrigue and duplicity. While not strictly classical in the French style (there is no unity of place), the play is written mainly in a blank verse suited to the close confrontations and the interplay of repartee that are conditional on both moral and political argument and the clash of principles. This enables words and notions that are related in sense to be thrown back at each other in rhetorical encounters, such as those to do with right, justice and the law. The recapitulation to a confidant (Mary and Hanna Kennedy in Act One) has elements of traditional closet drama. Set monologues are given mainly to Elizabeth, to demonstrate, among other things, her irresolution, how she needs to weigh up arguments and moral issues and their shifting options.

In such terms, one could reduce the action to 'might versus right', Mary the victim, Elizabeth the oppressor. But the issues are not so clear cut.

True, Mary is a queen in her own right, not subject to foreign jurisdiction; she is of legitimate birth (the granddaughter of Henry VII), a Catholic, unlawfully imprisoned and about to fall victim to trumped-up charges. This is the basis of her energetic and disdainful self-defence before Burleigh⁵ and especially before Elizabeth. She is however also complicit in murder and assassination plots, and she is linked by ties of blood and religion to England's enemies. She is

5 Schiller's spelling.

also and crucially—in the terms of the play—perceived as a ‘Helen’, an ‘Ate’, Helen, who in Marlowe’s famous words, ‘burnt the topless towers of Ilium’, brought fire and destruction to Troy, while Ate is the goddess of discord. Thus we notice how the images of fire and heat and conflagration run through the play, almost literally in the case of the hothead Mortimer and his inflammatory advances. In those terms Mary is at all times potentially dangerous: even from the confines of her prison an erotic attraction radiates. Mortimer, Leicester and even Elizabeth feel these flames emanating from Fotheringhay and must react to them in their own fashion. This must be set against the genuine pity we sense for her fate: Paulet and Shrewsbury, as upholders of the moral law, are moved by it. Mary is also aware of her own sins and failings. Her long catalogue of crimes confided to Hanna Kennedy is testimony enough. On the one hand, she admits that she deserves death as an atonement for past wrongdoing. Yet she is also a political presence, a queen, familiar with statecraft and prepared—against the odds—to uphold her rights, witness her tussle with Burleigh and the defense of her status in front of Elizabeth. Thus she places her hopes—against all hope—in the broken reed of Leicester.

Elizabeth, by contrast, is (in Mary’s eyes at least) illegitimate and knows that Mary has as much right to the throne as she—and can turn men’s heads as well. She is a Protestant, a ‘virgin queen’. Rightly or wrongly, she represents order in the state and she is prepared to use her considerable political skills to uphold it. She has few scruples, and her creatures (Burleigh especially) have even fewer. She must uphold the rule of order, however it is achieved. She must surrender personal inclinations, such as marriage, to the reasons of state in which, as said, she is imprisoned. But the execution order is not issued solely for reasons of political expediency. Mary threatens her womanhood; she feels the erotic charge of her rival.

One could therefore say that the worst of both queens is reflected in Leicester, playing as he does a double game with both and eventually losing both; morally compromised, ruthless if need be (as in the arrest of Mortimer), but then again not ruthless enough. His departure for France that delivers the punchline of the play is an admission that Elizabeth has triumphed, but also that Mary too has conquered beyond the grave. For he has gone over to the other side: Mary has not died in vain.

Thus the two queens are made to interact, but not in the sense of absolute right versus absolute wrong. There would be no dramatic action were Mary's confession of guilt in Act One the moral climax of the play. False hopes, pride, a glimmer of ambition, all of these mark Mary's 'descent' from Act One to the confrontation with Elizabeth, which she 'wins' rhetorically (leaving Elizabeth speechless) but loses morally. But what are we to make of her 'transfiguration' in Act Five? Does it convince? Has Schiller not deliberately contrasted her with Elizabeth's duplicity and the cravenness of her creatures? Are we not more convinced by the sheer tragedy of Mary's fate and her calm dignity than by words like 'angel', 'sacrifice' or 'freedom', the vocabulary of the 'beautiful soul' and its attainment of sublimity? For even this has its limits: her last address to Leicester is not without its tone of regal imperiousness and self-justification—and it has its effect.

Elizabeth, whose movements are mainly characterised by vacillation, impatience, changes of mood, nevertheless recovers her composure at the end. The German word 'Fassung' ('standing calm') in the final stage direction, with its overtones of stoical demeanor, suggests a resigned acceptance of things as they are. Unlike Mary's verbal ascent into the realms of spiritual freedom in her last words to Melvil, Elizabeth 'stands' firmly on the ground of reality, in kingship, the right to rule. She has nothing beyond that. She must accept the world as it is; Mary claims to have transcended it.

This is a play which must be seen and heard on the stage. It gains its effect from the structure of the verse, which keeps high emotions and political machinations in place. Only two characters—Mary herself and Mortimer—briefly abandon blank verse as they are carried away by their emotions. It is also a play that has its fair share of stunts, spectacles and coups de théâtre: the court scenes, the meeting of the queens, of course, Mortimer's arrest and stage suicide, the eucharist on stage (which shocked Schiller's contemporaries), Mary's symbolic change from black to white costume, and the panoply of her execution. Schiller loves punchlines and one-liners ('Kings are the slaves of their station' and the like), sententious statements of general import. The very last line of the play—'He is at sea and on his way to France'—seizes us for its daring—brazen—counterfactuality, but it rings true in terms of the action and the moral issues that it raises.

This play is now well established in English-language theatre repertory. Flora Kimmich's version, in verse, reminds us that Maria Stuart needs to be spoken, in original or translation, with constant regard to the cadences of the language, themselves a reflection of the characters who are ranged one against the other in tragic conflict.

Further reading:

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