

The Other Queen

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Extract

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*1568, Autumn, Chatsworth House,
Derbyshire: Bess*

Every woman should marry for her own advantage since her husband will represent her, as visible as her front door, for the rest of his life. If she chooses a wastrel she will be avoided by all her neighbours as a poor woman; catch a duke and she will be Your Grace, and everyone will be her friend. She can be pious, she can be learned, she can be witty and wise and beautiful; but if she is married to a fool she will be ‘that poor Mrs Fool’ until the day he dies.

And I have good reason to respect my own opinion in the matter of husbands having had three of them, and each one, God bless him, served as stepping stone to the next until I got my fourth, my earl, and I am now ‘my lady Countess of Shrewsbury’: a rise greater than that of any woman I know. I am where I am today by making the most of myself, and getting the best price for what I could bring to market. I am a self-made woman – self-made, self-polished and self-sold – and proud of it.

Indeed, no woman in England has done better than me. For though we have a queen on the throne, she is only there by the skill of her mother, and the febleness of her father’s other stock, and not through any great gifts of her own. If you kept a Tudor for a breeder you would eat him for meat in your second winter. They are poor weak beasts, and this Tudor queen must make up her mind to wed, bed and breed, or the country will be ruined.

If she does not give us a bonny Protestant boy then she will abandon us to disaster, for her heir is another woman: a young woman, a vain woman, a sinful woman, an idolatrous Papist woman, God forgive her errors, and save us from the destruction she will bring us. Some days you hear one story of Mary Queen of Scots, some days another. What you will never, never hear, even if you listen a hundred times, even when the story is told by her adoring admirers, is the story of a woman who consults her own interest, thinks for herself, and marries for her best advantage. But since in this life a woman is a piece of property, she does well to consider her improvement, her sale at the best price and her future ownership. What else? Shall she let herself tumble down?

A pity that such a foolish young woman should be foisted on me and my household, even for a short stay, while Her Majesty Elizabeth the Queen decides what is to be done with this most awkward guest. But no house in the kingdom can be trusted to entertain and – yes – secure her like mine. No husband in England could be trusted with such a Salome dancing on his terrace but mine. Only my household is run with such discipline that we can accommodate a queen of royal blood in the style that she commands and with the safety that she must have. Only my newly wedded husband is so dotingly fond of me that he is safe under the same roof as such a temptress.

No-one knows of this arrangement yet; it has been decided in secret by my good friend Secretary William Cecil and by me. As soon as this hopeless queen arrived in rags at Whitehaven, driven from Scotland by her rebellious lords, Cecil sent me a short note by an unknown messenger to ask if I would house her, and I sent him a one-word reply: yes. Yes indeed! I am honoured by Cecil's faith in me. From such trust comes great challenges, and from great challenges come great rewards. This new world of Elizabeth's is for those who can see their chances and take them. I foresee honours and riches if we can host this royal cousin and keep her close. Cecil

can rely on me. I shall guard her and befriend her, I shall house and feed her, I shall treat her royally and honourably and keep her safe as a little bird in the nest till the moment of his choosing, when I will hand her over intact to his hangman.



1568, Autumn, Hampton Court: George

I am nobody's agent. I am no bought opinion. I am no hired blade. I am neither Cecil's spy nor executioner. I wish to God that I were not here in London, on this bad business, but home at Chatsworth House with my darling innocent wife Bess, in the simple country and far away from the conspiracies and perils of court. I can't say that I am happy. I can't say that I like this. But I will do my duty – God knows that I always do my duty.

'You have been summoned for nothing but to order the death of Mary Queen of Scots,' Thomas Howard hisses in my ear as he catches up with me in a gallery at Hampton Court. They have closed the shutters for cleaning and the place is shadowy in the early-evening dusk. The portraits on the walls seem to show pale-faced listeners leaning forward to hear as Howard takes my arm to warn me of dangers that I already fear.

'We are to throw suspicion on her. Nothing else. Don't deceive yourself. Cecil decided that this queen was a threat to the kingdom, from the moment of her birth. She may think that she has escaped her enemies in Scotland to sanctuary in England; but she has just exchanged one danger for another. Cecil has decided that she must die. This is his third attempt to convict her. We are to be his hangmen, without opinions of our own.'

I look down at Howard; he is a small man, well-dressed and neat

with a well-trimmed black beard and bright dark eyes. Today he is almost dancing with fury at the queen's minister. We all resent Cecil, all us old lords; but it rubs Howard worse than any other. He is the queen's cousin, the head of the Howard family, he is the Duke of Norfolk, he would expect to be her chief advisor – but she depends on Cecil and always has done.

'I have been appointed by the queen herself to inquire into the conduct of her cousin the Queen of Scots. I am no hangman,' I say with quiet dignity. A man goes past, and hesitates as if to listen to our conversation.

Howard shakes his dark head at my naivety. 'Elizabeth may want the Queen of Scots' name cleared. But William Cecil is not notorious for his soft heart. He wants the Protestant faith to rule Scotland as England, and the Catholic queen to lie in jail, or in her coffin. Either suits him equally well. He will never agree that she is guilty of nothing and must be restored to her throne.'

I cannot argue against Howard's irritable righteousness. I know that he is speaking only the truth. But he is speaking it too loud and too clear for my liking. Anyone could be behind the tapestry screens, and though the stranger has strolled on, he must have heard some of this.

'Hush,' I say and draw him to a seat so that we can whisper. At once we look like conspirators, but the whole court looks like conspirators or spies these days. 'What can we do?' I ask him quietly. 'Cecil has called this inquiry to hear the evidence against the Scots queen, to judge whether she should be restored to her throne, whether she is fit to rule. What can we do to make sure that she is treated justly?'

'We have to save her,' Howard says firmly. 'We have to declare her innocent of murdering her husband, and we have to restore her to her throne in Scotland. We have to accept her claim to be Elizabeth's heir. She must be confirmed as heir to the throne of England when . . .' He breaks off. Not even Howard dares mention the death of his cousin the queen. 'When the time comes. Only the confirmed

inheritance of Mary Stuart will give us the safety of knowing our next monarch. We have a right to know the heir. We have to fight her cause as if it were our own.'

He sees my hesitation. A couple of men go by and look curiously at the two of us. I feel conspicuous and get to my feet.

'Walk with me,' Howard says. 'And listen. We have to fight her cause as if it were our own because it *is* our own. Say that we let Cecil imprison her, or trump up a charge of murder and accuse her. What do you think happens then?'

I wait.

'What if next he decides that *I* am a danger to the kingdom? What then? What if after me, he names you?'

I try to laugh. 'He is hardly likely to accuse you, or me. We are the greatest men in England. I am the greatest landowner north of the Trent and you are the queen's own cousin and a duke.'

'Yes. And that is why we are in danger. We are his rivals for power. He will destroy anyone who challenges him. Today the Queen of Scots faces his tribunal. Tomorrow it could be me, or any that have dared to challenge him: Percy, Dacre, Sussex, Arundel, Dudley, the Northern lords, you. He has to be stopped,' Howard says, his voice a low rumble in my ear. 'Wouldn't you stop him if you could?'

'It can't be done,' I say cautiously. 'The queen is free to choose her own advisors, and she trusts him like no other. He has been at her side since she was a young princess. What could we accuse him of?'

'Stealing Spanish gold! Pushing them to the brink of war! Making an enemy of France! Driving half the country towards treason with his constant suspicion and spying on people who want nothing more than to worship in the old way! Look at the court! Have you ever been at court before and felt yourself so fearful? It is filled with spies and plots.'

I nod. It is undeniable. Cecil's fear of Papists and his hatred of foreigners stalk England.

‘This last idiocy of his is the worst,’ Howard says furiously. ‘That a ship should take refuge from bad weather in our port and be seized! He makes us a nation of pirates and the seas unsafe for our shipping.’

I can’t disagree. The Spanish treasure ship was blown into Plymouth expecting sanctuary, and Cecil, the son of a poor man, could not resist the gold it carried. He stole the gold – simple as that. And now the Spanish are threatening a blockade of trade, even war, if we do not pay it back. We are utterly in the wrong, all because Cecil is utterly in the wrong; but he has the ear of the Queen of England.

Howard masters his irritation with some difficulty. ‘Please God we never see the day when you come to me and say I was right to fear him and we should have defended ourselves, but now it is too late and one of our own is on trial for some trumped-up charge. Please God he does not pick us off one by one and we too trusting to defend ourselves.’ He pauses. ‘His is a rule of terror. He makes us afraid of imaginary enemies so we don’t guard ourselves against him and against our government. We are so busy watching for foreigners that we forget to watch our friends. Anyway, you keep your counsel and I’ll keep mine. I’ll say no more against Cecil for now. You will keep this close? Not a word?’

The look he gives me persuades me, more than any argument. If the only duke in England, cousin to the queen herself, should fear his own words being reported to a man who should be little more than a royal servant, it proves that the servant has become over-mighty. We are all growing afraid of Cecil’s knowledge, of Cecil’s network of intelligencers, of Cecil’s growing silent power.

‘This is between the two of us,’ I say quietly. I glance around to see that no-one is in earshot. It is amazing to me that I, England’s greatest earl, and Howard, England’s only duke, should fear eavesdroppers. But so it is. This is what England has become in this tenth year of Elizabeth’s reign: a place where a man is afraid of his own shadow. And in these last ten years, my England seems to have filled with shadows.



1568, Winter, Bolton Castle: Mary

I refuse, I utterly refuse to wear anything but my own gowns. My beautiful gowns, my furs, my fine lace collars, my velvets, my petticoats of cloth of gold were all left behind in Holyroodhouse, dusted with scented powder and hung in muslin bags in the wardrobe rooms. I wore armour when I rode out with Bothwell to teach my rebel lords a lesson, but it turned out I was neither teacher nor queen, for they beat me, arrested me and hunted Bothwell down for an outlaw. They imprisoned me and I would have died in Lochleven Castle if I had not escaped by my own wits. Now, in England, they think I am brought so low as to wear hand-me-downs. They think I am sufficiently humbled to be glad of Elizabeth's cast-off gowns.

They must be mad if they think that they can treat me as an ordinary woman. I am no ordinary woman. I am half divine. I have a place of my own, a unique place, between the angels and nobles. In heaven are God, Our Lady and Her Son, and below them, like courtiers, the angels in their various degrees. On earth, as in heaven, there are the king, the queen and princes; below them are nobles, gentry, working people and paupers. At the very lowest, just above the beasts, are poor women: women without homes, husbands, or fortune.

And I? I am two things at once: the second highest being in the world, a queen; and the very lowest: a woman without home, husband, or fortune. I am a queen three times over because I was

born Queen of Scotland, daughter to King James V of Scotland, I was married to the Dauphin of France and inherited the French crown with him, and I am, in my own right, the only true and legitimate heir to the throne of England, being the great-grandniece to King Henry VIII of England, though his bastard daughter, Elizabeth, has usurped my place.

But, *voilà!* At the same time I am the lowest of all things, a poor woman without a husband to give her a name or protection, because my husband the King of France lived for no more than a year after our coronation, my kingdom of Scotland has mounted an evil rebellion against me and forced me out, and my claim to the throne of England is denied by the shameless red-haired bastard Elizabeth who sits in my place. I, who should be the greatest woman in Europe, am reduced so low that it is only her support that saved my life when the Scots rebels held me and threatened my execution, and it is her charity that houses me in England now.

I am only twenty-six years old and I have lived three lifetimes already! I deserve the highest place in the world and yet I occupy the lowest. But still I am a queen, I am a queen three times over. I was born Queen of Scotland, I was crowned Queen of France, and I am heir to the crown of England. Is it likely I will wear anything but ermine?

I tell my ladies-in-waiting, Mary Seton and Agnes Livingstone, that they can tell my hosts, Lord and Lady Scrope of Bolton Castle, that all my gowns, my favourite goods and my personal furniture must be brought from Scotland at once and that I will wear nothing but my own beautiful clothes. I tell them that I will go in rags rather than wear anything but a queen's wardrobe. I will crouch on the floorboards if I cannot sit on a throne under a cloth of estate.

It is a small victory for me as they hurry to obey me, and the great wagons come down the road from Edinburgh bringing my gowns, my bureaux, my linen, my silver, and my furniture; but I fear I have lost my jewels. The best of them, including my precious

black pearls, have gone missing from my jewel chests. They are the finest pearls in Europe, a triple rope of matched rare black pearls, everyone knows they are mine. Who could be so wicked as to profit from my loss? Who would have the effrontery to wear a queen's pearls robbed from her ransacked treasury? Who would sink so low as to want them, knowing they had been stolen from me when I was fighting for my life?

My half-brother must have broken into my treasure room and stolen them. My false brother, who swore to be faithful, has betrayed me; my husband Bothwell, who swore he would win, is defeated. My son James, my most precious son, my baby, my only heir, whom I swore to protect, is in the hands of my enemies. We are all forsworn, we are all betrayers, we are all betrayed. And I – in one brilliant leap for freedom – am somehow caught again.

I had thought that my cousin Elizabeth would understand at once that if my people rise against me in Scotland, then she is in danger in England. What difference? *Rien du tout!* In both countries we rule a troublesome people divided in the matter of religion, speaking the same language, longing for the certainties of a king but unable to find anyone but a queen to take the throne. I thought she would grasp that we queens have to stick together, that if the people pull me down and call me a whore then what is to stop them abusing her? But she is slow, oh God! She is so slow! She is as sluggish as a stupid man, and I cannot abide slowness and stupidity. While I demand safe conduct to France – for my French family will restore me to my throne in Scotland at once – she havers and dithers and calls for an inquiry and sends for lawyers and advisors and judges and they all convene in Westminster Palace.

To judge what, for God's sake? To inquire into what? For what is there to know? *Exactement!* Nothing! They say that when my husband, the fool Darnley, killed David Rizzio, I swore vengeance and persuaded my next lover the Earl of Bothwell to blow him out

of his bed with gunpowder and then to strangle him as he ran naked through the garden.

Madness! As if I should ever allow an assault on one of royal blood, even for my own vengeance. My husband must be as inviolable as myself. A royal person is sacred as a god. As if anyone with half a wit would commission such a ridiculous plot. Only an idiot would blow up a whole house to kill a man when he could easily smother him with a quiet pillow in his sottish sleep! As if Bothwell, the cleverest and wickedest man in Scotland, would use half a dozen men and barrels of gunpowder, when a dark night and a sharp knife would do the deed.

Finally, and worst of all, they say that I rewarded this incompetent assassination by running off with the assassin, the Earl of Bothwell, conceiving children in adulterous lust, marrying him for love, and declaring war against my own people for sheer wickedness.

I am innocent of this, and of the murder. That is the simple truth and those who cannot believe it have made up their minds to hate me already for my wealth, for my beauty, for my religion, or because I was born to greatness. The accusations are nothing but vile slander, *calomnie vile*. But it is sheer folly to repeat it word for word, as Elizabeth's inquiry intends to do. Utter idiocy to give it the credence of an official inquiry. If you dare to say that Elizabeth is unchaste with Robert Dudley or any other of the half-dozen men who have been named with her through her scandalous years, starting with her own stepfather Thomas Seymour when she was a girl, then you are dragged before a justice of the peace and your tongue is slit by the blacksmith. And this is right and proper. A queen's reputation must be untouched by comment. A queen must seem to be perfect.

But if you say that *I* am unchaste – a fellow queen, anointed just as she is, and with royal blood on both sides that she lacks – then you can repeat this in Westminster Palace before whoever cares to come by to listen, and call it evidence.

Why would she be such a fool as to encourage gossip about a queen? Can she not see that when she allows them to slander me she damages not just me, but my estate, which is exactly the same as her own? Disrespect to me will wipe the shine off her. We should both defend our state.

I am a queen, different rules apply for queens. I have had to endure events as a woman that I would never even name as a queen. I would not stoop to acknowledge them. Yes, I have been kidnapped, I have been imprisoned, I have been raped – but I will never, never complain of it. As a queen my person must be inviolate, my body is always holy, my presence is sacred. Shall I lose that powerful magic for the benefit of moaning on about my injuries? Shall I trade majesty itself for the pleasure of a word of sympathy? Would I prefer to command, or do I long to whimper about my wrongs? Shall I order men, or shall I weep at the fireside with other injured women?

Of course. The answer to this is simple. *Bien sûr*. No-one must ever pity me. They can love me or hate me or fear me. But I shall never let anyone pity me. Of course, when they ask me, did Bothwell abuse you? I will answer nothing, not at all, never a word. A queen does not complain that she has been ill-treated. A queen denies that such a thing could happen. I cannot be robbed of myself, I cannot mislay my own divinity. I may be abused but I will always deny it. Whether I am seated on a throne or wearing rags, I am still a queen. I am no commoner who has to hope for the right to wear velvet or live out his life in homespun. I am above all degree of ordinary men and women. I am ordained, I am chosen by God. How can they be so dense as not to see it? I could be the worst woman in the world and I would still be queen. I could romp with a dozen Italian secretaries, a regiment of Bothwells, and write them all love poems, and I would still be queen. They can force me to sign a dozen abdications and lock me in prison forever but I will still be queen and anyone who sits on my throne will be a usurper. *Je suis la reine*. I am queen till death. It is not an office, it is not an occupation, it is

an inheritance of blood. I am queen while the blood flows through my veins. So I know. So everyone knows. So even they know, in their faithless hearts, the fools.

If they want rid of me there is only one way; but they will never dare to take it. If they want rid of me they will have to sin against the order of heaven. They will have to defy the God-given chain of being. If they want rid of me they will have to behead me.

Think of that!

The only way I cease to be Dowager Queen of France, Queen of Scotland, and the only true heir to the throne of England is when I am dead. They will have to kill me if they want to deny me my throne. And I wager my title, my fortune and my life that they will never dare to do that. To lay violent hands on me would be the same as throwing down an angel, a sin like crucifying the Christ again. For I am no ordinary woman, I am a sanctified queen, I am seated above every mortal; only the angels are my superiors. Mortals cannot kill such a being as me. I am anointed with holy oil, I am chosen by God. I am untouchable. They can fear me and they can hate me, they can even deny me. But they cannot kill me. Thank God, I am at least safe in this. I will always be safe in this.