A QUEEN LOSES HER HEAD



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Antoine Springael (1871-1928), a Belgian artist, created this impression of Mary, Queen of Scots saying goodbye to those closest to her. The oil-on-canvas measures 105 x 155 cm (41.34 x 61.02 inches) and is part of a private collection. It is entitled "Before the Execution."

<u>Mary</u> was arrested and charged with <u>plotting</u> to kill Queen Elizabeth. Since Parliament had just passed a law making such actions punishable by death, Mary would <u>stand trial</u> as a traitor. If convicted, she would face execution.

She was <u>brought</u> to the now-destroyed British <u>castle</u> where she stood trial without representation. Even <u>a queen</u> was subject to the ancient tradition of "no lawyer allowed" when the charge was treason.

If Mary had a lawyer, however, the entire <u>proceeding</u> would have been questioned. At issue, among other things: What gave Elizabeth, and her court, the right to charge the sovereign of another country with high treason against the British queen? Under what authority did Elizabeth, and her court, have the right to deny another sovereign the right to counsel?

No doubt Mary's <u>abdication</u>, in favor of her son, lessened her status since she was no longer ruler of Scotland, but she was still the daughter, and mother, of a king. With what authority did Elizabeth and her court disregard Mary's legal protections? And - a barrister may have asked - why didn't Elizabeth try Mary herself? She was the only person whose position was remotely equal to Mary's.

The trial began on October 12, 1586 with <u>a letter</u> from Elizabeth to Mary. Here is the <u>translation</u>, from the French original:

You have in various ways and manners attempted to take my life and to bring my kingdom to destruction by bloodshed. I have never proceeded so harshly against you, but have, on the contrary, protected and maintained you like myself. These treasons will be proved to you and all made manifest. Yet it is my will, that you answer the nobles and peers of the kingdom as if I were myself present. I therefore require, charge, and command that you make answer for I have been well informed of your arrogance.

Act plainly without reserve, and you will sooner be able to obtain favour of me.

Elizabeth

Had a lawyer been allowed to speak for Mary, he would have stressed her extraordinary circumstances. Although a Queen herself, and the rightful heir to the throne of England, she had been under <a href="https://example.com/house-arrest-com/hous

Defending herself, Mary expressed her disgust with the proceedings in general and with the conduct of the trial in particular.

I do not recognize the laws of England nor do I understand them, as I have often asserted. I am alone without counsel or anyone to speak on my behalf. My papers and notes have been taken from me, so that I am destitute of all aid, taken at a disadvantage. (Quoted in The Trial of Mary Queen of Scots: A Brief History with Documents, by Jayne Elizabeth Lewis)

Her trial lasted ten days. By October 25th, the foregone conclusion was known to all. Mary was guilty of treason. Whether she continued to believe the trial was illegal was of little consequence now.

All that remained was for Elizabeth to pass sentence. Under pressure from Walsingham, and others, Elizabeth finally signed her cousin's <u>death warrant</u> on February 1, 1587. Historians tell us it was one of the most difficult things she ever did.

Mary wrote to her cousin, but nothing would change the inevitable. <u>Execution</u> was set for the morning of February 8, but Mary did not learn about it until after dinner on the 7th.

The doomed Queen was not allowed to speak with her priest. She was offered the services of a Protestant minister, which she declined.

During the evening hours, she distributed her remaining possessions to her servants and wrote a Will. She also wrote a <u>letter</u> to her brother-in-law, Henry III, King of France. It was the <u>last letter</u> she ever <u>wrote</u>. (Follow the links to see the actual three-page letter written in French and its <u>English translation</u>).

By 2 a.m. on the morning of February 8, Mary had finished all her final chores. She had put things in order. She was prepared to die. On her bed, fully dressed, she made no effort to sleep.

Between 8 and 9 a.m., she dressed for the last time. <u>She wore</u> a black satin dress, trimmed with velvet. Over her beautiful auburn hair she wore a white veil which touched the ground. Her petticoat was the red of a Catholic martyr. She had a crucifix and prayer book with her. Two rosaries were around her waist.

Since her execution was to be a <u>public spectacle</u>, she had to ascend a stage where - in front of everyone - she would be stripped to her petticoat. For an account of what happened at the execution, we look to the <u>report of an eyewitness</u>, Robert Wynkfielde.

...All this time they were pulling off her apparel, she never changed her countenance, but with smiling cheer she uttered these words, 'that she never had such grooms to make her unready, and that she never put off her clothes before such a company.'

Once dressed for execution, she told her female servants goodbye. Embracing them, and speaking in French, she told them not to cry for her. She also told them to "rejoice and not weep" since her troubles would soon be over. After she said her farewells to the male servants, she asked them to pray for her until "the last hour."

Now she was ready to die. Robert Wynkfielde observed:

This done, one of the women have a Corpus Christi cloth lapped up three-corner-ways, kissing it, put it over the Queen of Scots' face, and pinned it to the caule of her head.

Blindfolded with the cloth, speaking a psalm in Latin and

...groping for the block, she laid down her head, putting her chin over the block with both her hands, which, holding there still, had been cut off had they not been espied. Then lying upon the block most quietly, and stretching out her arms cried, In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum, ["Into your hands, oh God, I commend my spirit"] three or four times.

Mary had only seconds to live. The executioner, whom she had already forgiven, raised his axe. Perhaps because he was killing a queen, his aim was off. Even her execution did not go well for Mary. As the eyewitness records it:

Then she, lying very still upon the block, one of the executioners holding her slightly with one of his hands, she endured two strokes of the other executioner with an axe, she making very small noise or none at all, and not stirring any part of her from the place where she lay: and so the executioner cut off her head, saving one little gristle, which being cut assunder, he lift up her head to the view of all assembled and bade God save the Queen [that is, Elizabeth].

It took three strokes of the axe to cut off Mary's head. But, to the horror of all in the room, her body began to

move once her head was gone. Unknown to the executioners, Mary's little dog had hidden itself under her petticoat. The movement was not Mary but her dog who refused to eat once he was taken from his mistress.

All the clothes that Mary, Queen of Scots had worn to her execution were burned. Elizabeth and her courtiers wanted nothing to remain. No relics would be permitted.

Mary's heart and organs were removed from her body and buried in an unknown place at <u>Fotheringhay Castle</u>. Her body was embalmed and placed in a leaden coffin. It remained unburied for months until July 30, 1587 when it was taken to Peterborough Cathedral.

Walsingham had fulfilled the job he set out for himself. Mary, Queen of Scots was dead. But the deed would not go unchallenged. The Pope urged Philip II, Elizabeth's one-time suitor and brother-in-law, to prepare his fleet for a trip to Britain.

The Queen, meanwhile, had turned her interests elsewhere. She enjoyed listening to the tales of an explorer named Walter Raleigh.

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Media Stream



Mary, Queen of Scots - Accused of Treason

Image online, courtesy <u>Scottish Monarchs - Kings and Queens</u>. It is also on the cover of Michel Duchein's book <u>Marie Stuart: La femme at le mythe</u>.

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Fotheringhay Castle - Location in Northhamptonshire

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Fotheringhay Castle

This castle reconstruction is by Julian Rowe; image online, courtesy <u>Richard III.net</u> View this asset at: http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Fotheringhay-Castle



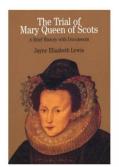
Mary, Queen of Scots - Self-represented at Trial

Image online, courtesy nobility.org

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The Trial of Mary Queen of Scots by Jayne Elizabeth Lewis

Book-cover image online, courtesy Amazon.

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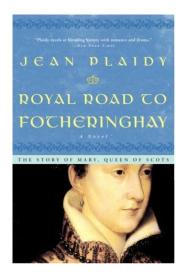


Death Warrant - Mary, Queen of Scots

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Royal Road to Fotheringhay by Jean Plaidy

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Peterborough Cathedral - First Burial, Mary Queen of Scots

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Last Letter of Mary Queen of Scots - Page 2

Image of second page of Mary's last letter, described above.

Image online, courtesy National Library of Scotland.

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<u>Last Letter of Mary Queen of Scots - Page 3</u>

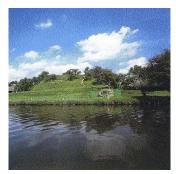
Image of page three of Mary's last letter, described above.

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Burial Site - Heart of Mary, Queen of Scots

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Mary's Execution Attire

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Execution Scene - Mary, Queen of Scots

Image, described above, online courtesy Education Scotland.

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Mary, Queen of Scots - Trial and Execution

Clip from "A History of Britain," a 15-episode BBC documentary series written and presented by Columbia University's Professor Simon Schama.

The clip about Mary, Queen of Scots is from episode 7, entitled "The Body of the Queen." It was originally broadcast on November 8, 2000. It is online, courtesy the BBC. Copyright, BBC, all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the program.

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Mary, Queen of Scots - Beheading at Fotheringhay

Clip from <u>Elizabeth R</u>, starring Glenda Jackson as Elizabeth I, online courtesy BBC. Copyright, BBC, all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the program.

Original broadcast, 1971. DVD released, October 16, 2001.

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