

Summer 2009

## Review of *Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart: The Perils of Marriage* by Anka Muhlstein

Carole Levin

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, [clevin2@unl.edu](mailto:clevin2@unl.edu)

Amber Harris Leichner

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, [leichner2@unl.edu](mailto:leichner2@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

Levin, Carole and Leichner, Amber Harris, "Review of *Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart: The Perils of Marriage* by Anka Muhlstein" (2009).  
*Faculty Publications, Department of History*. 62.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/62>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published in *The Historian* 71:2 (Summer 2009), pp. 427–429; doi 10.1111/j.1540-6563.2009.00240\_65.x Copyright © 2009 Phi Alpha Theta History Honor Society, published by John Wiley & Sons. Used by permission.

#### BOOK REVIEW

*Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart: The Perils of Marriage.* By Anka Muhlstein. Translated by John Brownjohn. (London, England: Haus Publishing, 2007). 408 pp. \$26.95.

The author of this study is not the first biographer to bring Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart together, but her study of these queens applies a specific lens to the enterprise: the negotiation and influence of marriage on their lives and reigns. Beginning with the question of how marriage “affected queens regnant in the age of absolute monarchies,” Anka Muhlstein proceeds to explore how marriage affected Elizabeth and Mary from their earliest years as young princesses through the constant pressures to find appropriate husbands amidst political and religious rivalries (1). Elizabeth never married, and Muhlstein’s central argument is that Elizabeth’s ability to navigate her long reign as an unmarried queen is a result, in large part, of her witnessing the mistakes and misfortunes of the marriages surrounding her, particularly those of her cousin Mary, who was betrothed in the cradle and married no less than three times.

A major task for any biographer of Mary Stuart is to unpack the disastrous three-month period following the murder of Mary’s second husband, the roundly unpopular Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley. Mary could not avoid being implicated in Darnley’s murder, but the extent to which Mary was an agent in what has become known as the “Bothwell Plot” is more difficult to unravel. Muhlstein explains the difficulty in picking up a unifying strand of evidence in the discordant events surrounding Darnley’s murder and Mary’s marriage to James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell: “We reconstruct; we reflect on psychological data that are merely hypotheses because the incessant upheavals that occurred in the relations

between the various actors give rise to a troublesome discontinuity that thwarts all our efforts to discern some method in their doings" (139).

Ultimately, Muhlstein situates herself in familiar territory. Like other recent biographers of Mary Stuart, such as Jenny Wormald, Muhlstein interprets Mary's "demented" behavior during the Bothwell episode without painting her as the easily manipulated victim of the more powerful political forces swirling about her. She writes, "Cynics, of whom the present author is one, think the worst: that Mary and her loyalists had concluded a pact" (134). On the question of Mary's guilt, Muhlstein suggests Mary's complicity in both Darnley's assassination and her marriage to Bothwell. In contrast, Retha M. Warnicke casts Mary more clearly as Bothwell's unwilling victim, arguing that Mary was not only raped by Bothwell, but also abducted and held as his captive until their marriage. Between Muhlstein and Wormald on one hand and Warnicke on the other is Susan Doran, who doubts Mary colluded in the abduction, although she concedes that the rape is much more difficult to prove.

Despite the fact that Muhlstein refuses to romanticize Mary, she does not treat her unsympathetically. Muhlstein posits that Mary's ardor for Bothwell may have been born out of an awakened desire understandable in a woman whose previous marriages provided little sensual fulfillment. Mary is ultimately most sympathetic in moments of extreme crisis, paradoxically, when she seems most able to rise to the level of majesty. Such an example is found in the moments immediately following the assassination of David Riccio, when Mary's "[s]peed, daring and a vigour remarkable for a woman in her [pregnant] condition had won the day" (125).

Muhlstein is careful to avoid easy dichotomies by refusing to cast either queen as antagonist, although early in the text Elizabeth emerges as the more traditional heroine, partly because her character is given more time to develop through the reigns of her father as well as her younger brother, Edward, and older sister, Mary. By nature of her long life and reign, Elizabeth's narrative stretches for three chapters beyond Mary's execution. Because of this framework, Elizabeth gets the last word, so to speak, in Muhlstein's text.

If Elizabeth is this book's heroine, she earns the title through reflection. Muhlstein's inquiry illustrates that Elizabeth, like her cousin, often kept her most intimate feelings guarded, even from her closest associates. In presenting the lives of these two queens, the disparity is in unpacking the chaos of Mary's marriages while Elizabeth's deft maneuvers around marriage form a less elusive pattern. Where the motivations behind Mary's actions are ambiguous, Muhlstein more easily traces Elizabeth's actions (or inaction) back to her observance of the real dangers in-

flicted by matrimony. What is clear is that neither queen could be easily intimidated by the question of marriage. Muhlstein's book is engaging and well written and should appeal to a wide audience.

Amber Harris Leichner and Carole Levin  
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*