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

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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 in-
terprets Mary’s “demented” behavior during the Bothwell episode with-
out painting her as the easily manipulated victim of the more powerful
political forces swirling about her. She writes, “Cynics, of whom the pres-
ent author is one, think the worst: that Mary and her loyalists had con-
cluded 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 Both-
well’s unwilling victim, arguing that Mary was not only raped by Both-
well, but also abducted and held as his captive until their marriage. Be-
tween 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 understand-
able in a woman whose previous marriages provided little sensual ful-
fillment. 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 follow-
ing 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 ei-
ther 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 reflec-
tion. Muhlstein’s inquiry illustrates that Elizabeth, like her cousin, often
kept her most intimate feelings guarded, even from her closest associ-
ates. In presenting the lives of these two queens, the disparity is in un-
packing the chaos of Mary’s marriages while Elizabeth’s deft maneuvers
around marriage form a less elusive pattern. Where the motivations be-
hind Mary’s actions are ambiguous, Muhlstein more easily traces Eliza-
beth’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.

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