

## **THE SUCCESSION AND FOREIGN POLICY**

**Simon Adams looks at the close connections between Elizabeth's ascendancy, her religion and her ensuing, relationships with the states of Europe.**

**'She is a very prudent and accomplished princess, who has been well educated, she plays all sorts of instruments and speaks several languages (even Latin) extremely well. Good-natured and quick spirited, she is a woman who loves justice greatly and does not impose on her subjects. She was good-looking in her youth, but she is also tight-fisted to the point of avarice, easily angered and above all very jealous of her sovereignty.'**

THIS ASSESSMENT OF Elizabeth I was made in the introductory discourse to his collected papers by Guillaume de d'Aubespine, Baron de Châteauneuf, ambassador from Henry III of France between 1585 and 1590. Given that Châteauneuf's embassy had involved him in the diplomatic nightmare of the trial and execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, it was a remarkably charitable description. But it was not untypical of the respect and even admiration in which Elizabeth was held by French ambassadors to her court.

Thanks to the agreement to exchange resident ambassadors that Henry VIII and Francis I made in the Treaty of London of October 1518, the French crown maintained the only permanent embassy of Elizabeth's reign. Unfortunately, accidents of archival survival have left large gaps in the French ambassadorial correspondence and only a small amount has been published. By contrast the Spanish ambassadorial correspondence of the reign was published in full over a century ago, first in Spanish and then in English. The Spanish embassy was a stormy one, suspended between 1572 and 1578 and permanently terminated in 1584. With the exception of his second ambassador, Diego Guzman de Silva (1564-68), who struck up a rapport with Elizabeth, Philip II's envoys regarded her with suspicion and eagerly reported hostile gossip and rumour. It was largely from them that the historian James Anthony Froude (1818-94) derived the negative portrait of Elizabeth -- mean, wilful, self-indulgent and irresponsible -- that he drew in his twelve volume History of England from the Fall of Cardinal Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada (1856-70). Froude believed Elizabeth's reign to have been the heroic age of English history, but it was a heroic age in spite of her.

Froude's Elizabeth inspired a debate that has continued to the present day. Was she -- as Wallace MacCaffrey put it some years ago -- merely 'Elizabeth the fortunate'? The denigration of the Queen has accorded greater stature to her ministers, especially William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and Sir Francis Walsingham -- though this poses the question whether she deserves at least some credit for being a good judge of character. Part of the problem is that the views and reactions of Elizabeth's councillors are well known, thanks to the extensive survival of their correspondence and

memoranda. Elizabeth's own role in the making of policy -- except for explosions of temper -- has too often been lost.

Elizabeth did have a coherent foreign policy of her own, a policy shaped by the unusual conditions of her reign. These were less to do with her sex, a much-exaggerated issue, than her questionable legitimacy and the coincidence that the leading members of the wider Tudor royal family were Scots. Relations within the royal family, whether among immediate siblings or all those with a claim to the throne, are the key to the politics of the monarchies of late-medieval and early-modern Europe. Rivalries within the royal family lay at the heart of English politics between the reigns of Edward III (1327-77) and Henry VII (1485-1509), not least the Wars of the Roses. This was also the case in France and Scotland in the second half of the sixteenth century. The Habsburgs provide the exception: with only a few lapses, they were almost the model of family loyalty.

The Wars of the Roses effectively destroyed the male members of the House of Lancaster (the descendants of John of Gaunt) and Henry VII and Henry VIII completed the process. By Edward VI's death in 1553 all the main claimants to the English crown were women, and such men as had a claim owed it to a female descent. This was the case with Henry VII himself, and moreover his mother (Lady Margaret Beaufort) was descended from John of Gaunt's illegitimate family.

In Elizabeth's case the taint of illegitimacy was compounded. This was due to the circumstances of her mother's fall as much as the 'divorce' of Catherine of Aragon. It has been argued that she was actually illegitimate on five counts. If Anne Boleyn was as promiscuous as was charged, then Henry VIII's paternity was in doubt, the source of the later snide comment that Elizabeth looked like Mark Smeaton, the musician executed as one of Anne's lovers.

Illegitimacy was used to justify the removal of Elizabeth and Mary from the succession in Edward VI's settlement of the crown on Lady Jane Grey in 1553. This was of major significance. If the events of 1553 united Mary and Elizabeth in common defence of their rights as heirs to Henry VIII, they also brought the Queen of Scots to the fore as a rival to both. The basis of Mary Stuart's claim from this point on was that she was the one descendent of Henry VII untainted by either illegitimacy or heresy. Yet in two important respects Mary Stuart and Elizabeth also shared common interests. As an heir of Henry VII, Mary could not challenge the legitimacy of the Tudor line as a whole. If Gaunt's wider descendants were taken into account, then, as several contemporary commentators noted, Philip of Spain had a strong claim as descendant of the legitimate daughters of Gaunt's second marriage. Secondly, as a woman Mary could not query Elizabeth's right to the crown on grounds of sex. In fact, Catholics never repudiated Elizabeth on sexual grounds.

The events of 1553 made Elizabeth's place in the succession an international issue. The extent of her involvement with the French embassy prior to Wyatt's Rebellion of 1554, if any, remains unclear, but thereafter the French claimed to be her friends. A decade later the French ambassador recalled Elizabeth approaching him about fleeing to France in the spring of 1557, and warning her against it as she might forfeit her place in the succession as a result. On the other hand, it was to Philip that she owed her release from Woodstock in the spring of 1555. But Elizabeth deliberately

concealed her appeals to Philip and refused on the eve of her accession to acknowledge any debt of gratitude to him, the source of considerable resentment in Spanish circles at the time and later.

Elizabeth's ability to turn to France on her accession was hampered by Mary Stuart's position as Dauphine and, after July 1559, Queen of France. Until her death in 1587, Mary was the pole around which Elizabeth's foreign policy revolved. The threat of Mary's rival claim to the throne was the decisive motive for Elizabeth's interventions in Scotland in 1560 and in France in 1562, the latter based on the argument advanced by Sir William Cecil that a Guise victory in France in 1562 would be the first stage in a plan to install Mary in England. In 1560 Elizabeth scored a crucial success in the creation of an Anglophile government in Scotland and in Mary's apparent renunciation of her rival claim in the treaty of Edinburgh. However, this was countered by Mary's refusal to ratify the treaty and then her return to Scotland in 1561 following the death of Francis II in December 1560.

If Mary's return to Britain threatened to destabilise the status quo, it also created an opportunity for the two to reach a personal agreement. As Elizabeth admitted to William Maitland of Lethington in September 1561, 'sche [Mary] is of the blude of Ingland, my cousing and nixt kynnswoman, so that nature must bind me to luif hir dewlie'. Such an agreement was the aim of the famous meeting proposed for the summer of 1562, which Elizabeth had first offered in the previous summer in exchange for ratification. The reasons for its postponement were many, but Elizabeth's interest in it was genuine, and it was to resurface on several occasions in the next few years. On the surface a stalemate was reached in 1561 over Elizabeth's insistence on ratification of the treaty of Edinburgh as a gesture of good faith, and Mary's offer of exchanging renunciation of her rival claim for recognition as heir apparent. Elizabeth's manoeuvring room was limited, apart from threats to marry. If, as must be accepted, she had no serious intention of marrying, then the further succession would not be of her body. There is no evidence that she ever regarded anyone other than Mary as her successor. Except for a few tactical gestures she never showed any sympathy for the rival claim of Lady Katherine Grey, nor did she treat her cousins on her mother's side (the Careys and the Knollys), though close to her, as of royal rank.

However, the will of Henry VIII, which passed over the Stuarts in favour of the Grey line, presented major difficulties, not least because Elizabeth had fully accepted it as genuine when she appealed to the surviving executors to protect her when she was imprisoned in 1554. It was to circumvent these difficulties that Elizabeth tried to prevent the succession being debated in Parliament in 1563 and 1566 and at the same time suggested a way in which Mary could be integrated more fully into the English royal family. This was to make a friendly second marriage, and in particular to marry the Earl of Leicester and reside with him in the English court. This proposal has been so often derided as absurd or insulting that the logic of 'domesticating' Mary has been overlooked. The same applies to Elizabeth's later proposals that the young James VI should be brought up and educated in England, not simply to prevent him being transported elsewhere (which was certainly a serious worry) but to integrate him as well.

The furthest concession Elizabeth appears to have made to Mary was to offer a new settlement that would have circumvented the treaty of Edinburgh in the months following James VI's birth in June 1566. However, this scheme disappeared in the crisis that followed the murder of Lord Darnley in February 1567. The events surrounding Mary's marriage to the Earl of Bothwell created a new and to some extent irremediable dimension: the final mutual alienation between Mary and the Scottish Protestant leadership symbolised by her demission or abdication in July 1567. It was this alienation that made her escape in 1568 so dangerous, for it threatened an all out war between them. If Mary suffered an immediate defeat that forced her flight to England, her vehemently expressed determination to obtain revenge on her enemies remained. The so-called first trial of 1568 was essentially about the legality of the demission. This resulted in another stalemate, but its consequences, the schemes for Mary's conditional restoration to Scotland pursued by various parties in England in 1569 and 1570, foundered on Scottish refusals to cooperate.

Mary's 'captivity' might have made possible her eventual integration in England, had it not been for the exposure of the 'Ridolfi Plot' in 1571. The revelation of Mary's understanding with Philip II and their plans for Elizabeth's deposition marked the next stage in Elizabeth's foreign relations. Not only did this erect a further barrier to Mary's succeeding Elizabeth (as was reflected in 1572, in the pressure for her execution), it also provided Elizabeth with a justification for supporting the Dutch Revolt, for it was only from the Netherlands that an invasion (the Enterprise of England) could be mounted successfully.

Elizabeth's alienation from Philip also inspired a reconciliation with France that effectively lasted for the rest of her reign. This, however, was not a straightforward process. If it began with the various marriage proposals of 1571-72, it came near to being wrecked by the massacre of St. Bartholomew's Eve of August 1572. St Bartholomew's accounts for the hesitant and cautious foreign policy Elizabeth pursued between 1572 and 1576 and the dismay that greeted the accession of Henry III in the summer of 1574. Thanks to his strongly Catholic reputation, Henry was also suspected of harbouring ambitions to free and marry the Queen of Scots, and it was with some relief that the English learned of his marriage to Louise de Vaudémont early in 1575. Elizabeth's suspicion of Henry in turn justified her assistance to various French rebels in the winter of 1575-76 in a campaign that forced the King to grant substantial concessions to the Huguenots in the treaty of Beaulieu.

Elizabeth's hesitation over the Netherlands was overcome by the arrival of Don Juan of Austria as the new Governor General in late 1576, accompanied by rumours of his ambitions for the Enterprise of England, at the same time as the Spanish administration in Brussels collapsed. Elizabeth responded to Don Juan by committing herself to the States General of the Netherlands both swiftly and (initially) effectively. But in 1577 she found herself in a similar (if more demanding) position to the one she faced in 1560-61, for now she had the status quo in both France and the Netherlands, not just Scotland, to maintain. The key to her complex diplomacy over the next ten years was her early appreciation that Henry III, however much he may have resented the concessions of Beaulieu, would not overturn them completely. She now turned her attention to persuading or forcing Philip II to accept a similar compromise over the Netherlands.

Elizabeth's ability to control the Netherlands situation was challenged by the intervention of Henry III's brother, the Duke of Anjou, in the early 1578. She countered by reviving the earlier marriage discussions, against the advice of the majority of her own Council. The spectacle of a woman in her mid-forties being courted by a man of homosexual reputation half her age has attracted various interpretations. Elizabeth herself was fully aware of its dangerously ridiculous side, and she was no less aware of the bitter hatred between Anjou and Henry III. Throughout the ensuing negotiations she made no secret of the fact that what she really wanted was an alliance with Henry III. What she could not control was the decision of William of Orange in the winter of 1579-80 (partly on the strength of the marriage negotiations) to break with Spain and offer the lordship of the Netherlands to Anjou.

The curiously feline relationship between Elizabeth and Henry III, in which she tried to use Anjou to manoeuvre his brother into action, dominated the period between 1580 and 1585. In the end Elizabeth's search for co-operation with France suffered a major check when, following Anjou's death in June 1584, Henry III rejected intervening in the Netherlands jointly with her. At the same time (October 1584) her own Council agreed that in view of its potential role in the Enterprise of England she could not allow Philip II to regain the Netherlands, whatever Henry III did. This reasoning lay behind her unilateral intervention in 1585, the alternative she had struggled to avoid since 1578.

Her position was transformed a year later when the discovery of the Babington Plot forced a final decision over the Queen of Scots. Without Mary the Enterprise of England became highly problematic, despite the open preparation of the Spanish Armada. In the will she made in 1577, Mary had left her rights to England to Philip II if James VI remained a heretic. She informed the Spaniards of her decision in 1586 (if not earlier); the English (and through them James) were aware of it before her execution. If the Armada was successful, Philip now intended to place his daughter the Infanta Isabella on the English throne, a decision justified by their Lancastrian descent, Mary's gift and right of conquest, as he was not prepared to spend Spanish blood and treasure on behalf of James VI.

It was only when finally freed from Mary that Elizabeth could define herself, and it is in the months after Mary's execution that we begin to see the formulation of a new foreign policy. Elizabeth's first initiative in the spring of 1587 was to see for a final time if the Enterprise could be prevented by a compromise settlement over the Netherlands, a negotiation brought to an end by the Armada's arrival in the summer of 1588. More significant were the beginnings of a new relationship with James VI and Henry, King of Navarre. For a number of reasons, particularly the execution of the Anglophile regent, the Earl of Morton in 1581, Elizabeth had previously disliked and distrusted James. She now had the opportunity to form a new relationship in defence of his claim to the succession, against both the Infanta and the surviving English claimants. Navarre was heir to the childless Henry III under the Salic Law, but bitterly opposed on account of his religion. This -- it was now appreciated in England -- was something that Henry III was trying to circumvent. In 1589 the two kings allied and following Henry III's assassination in July, Navarre succeeded him as Henry IV.

The new foreign policy was saluted by Lord Burghley with the often-quoted observation in 1589: 'the state of the world is marvellous changed when we true Englishmen have cause ... to wish success to a French king and a king of Scots'. Throughout the 1590s, even if the war with Spain was not as successful as was occasionally hoped, defeat was not an issue. If apparently alone in the first decades of her reign, in the last Elizabeth was the centrepiece of Europe's first grand alliance. Henry IV may have converted and then made a separate peace with Philip II in 1598, but he remained an ally, and Elizabeth strengthened her moral stature by not abandoning the Dutch. At the same time, although the rebellion in Ireland appeared to have got out of control in 1598 and came to dominate Elizabeth's last years, it never became an English Netherlands.

Her foreign policy during the 1590s has a curiously maternal side, best seen in her extensive correspondence with Henry and James, heavily laden with good wishes and advice. The year 1587 also saw a third surrogate son enter her life, Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, who was only six months older than James VI. If there was an ironic aspect to Elizabeth taking Mary's place as James's mother, this was also the case with Essex, for her stormy relations with his mother (her cousin, Lettice Knollys, who had married the Earl of Leicester) has some similarities to her relations with Mary.

However, Elizabeth, James and Henry formed a triumvirate of monarchs, to which Essex, as her creature, could not aspire. His ambitions for equal stature, as seen in the private alliance he sought to build with both kings, was not something she could tolerate, for all her apparent indulgence. It is an interesting reflection of their relations that it was in circles around Essex that some of the most disparaging comments about female rule can be found. Essex's execution in 1601, which she found as agonising as those of the Duke of Norfolk and the Queen of Scots, was a necessary demonstration of her authority.

Elizabeth retained her remarkably good health (apart from her poor teeth) until the rapid decline of her final months. Her international stature in her last years is reflected in the description the French ambassador André Hurault, sieur de Maisse, left in the journal of his embassy in December 1597-January 1598:

She is a haughty woman, falling easily into rebuke, and above all when any speak of the king [Henry IV] whom she considers for a long time to have been greatly beholding to her. In her own nature she is very avaricious, and when some expense is necessary her councillors must deceive her before embarking her on it little by little. She thinks highly of herself and has little regard for her servants and Council, being of the opinion she is far wiser than they. On their part they have given her a high opinion of her wisdom and prudence. She thinks also that this is due to her age, saying quite freely that she was intended for affairs of state, even from her cradle; she told me so herself.

In a final irony, similar compliments came from Spain, where Philip II's last years were embittered by disparaging comparisons. In 1601 Philip's former minister, the Count of Portalegre, observed to a colleague:

These last twenty-one years that the queen of England has spent in the service of the world will be the most outstanding known of in history.

### FOR FURTHER READING

Patrick Collinson (ed.) *The Short Oxford History of the British Isles: The Sixteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2001); John Morrill (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of Tudor and Stuart Britain* (OUP, paperback, 2000); Wallace MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth I* (Arnold, 1993); Stephen Alford, *The Early Elizabethan Polity* (Cambridge University Press, 1998)



*This allegory of the Tudor succession was painted c.1590-95 by an unknown artist and is based on an earlier work of around 1572 that Elizabeth had made for Walsingham. Significantly, it depicts Henry's Protestant heirs, Edward and Elizabeth to the fore, while the Catholic Mary and Philip are less prominent.*



*Elizabeth I's divine right is emphasised in this genealogical chart tracing her ancestry back to Adam.*



*A French manuscript poem in praise of Elizabeth, by Georges de la Motthe. He presented it to her in 1586.*





*Mary, Queen of Scots (miniature). Elizabeth was persistently hampered by Mary's rival claim to the English throne.*



*A detail from Marcus Gheeraerts' engraving of 1576 evoking a Garter procession at Windsor. A number of foreign monarchs are identified in the line-up, including the Kings of France and Spain and the Emperor Maximilian II. The Queen concludes the procession. **History Today***



*The St Bartholomew's Day Massacre of Huguenots in Paris in 1572, and its repercussions for Protestants in France, had a major impact on Elizabeth's European dealings.*



*In this satirical Flemish painting c.1583, the Netherlands is represented as a cow, which Elizabeth is feeding, Philip II is attempting to ride and William of Orange is leading by the horns. Dislike of the Duke of Anjou, the Netherlands' unpopular French ally, is reflected by his positioning at the cow's rear end.*



*Mary, Queen of Scots' execution in 1587 (fight, by an unknown artist) liberated Elizabeth in matters of foreign policy.*



*The 'Armada' portrait (c.1588) celebrates Elizabethan victory over the Spanish threat and wider imperial triumphs symbolised by the Queen's hand resting on the globe.*



*Elizabeth's key foreign affairs specialist, Ambassador to France from 1570-73, and Principal Secretary thereafter: Sir Francis Walsingham.*



*The Walsingham Bowl was possibly a gift from Elizabeth to that family. Oriental porcelain was rarely seen in England at this time and it was thus highly prized.*

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