

Notes on Friedrich Schiller's *Mary Stuart*.

Introduction.

Mary Stuart was first performed in 1800 and the real life historical figure it is based on, Mary Queen Of Scots, was executed in 1587 so it's a 200 year old play based on 400 year old historical events. Schiller was not only interested in the character of Mary but also in the questions her detention and execution raised about: "legitimacy and power, the exercise of freedom, and the relationship between morality and politics."¹ The issues Schiller explores in the play are still relevant today; internment without trial, religious fundamentalism, a divided Europe and a Government's search for legitimacy to act against a terrorist threat.

Friedrich Schiller.



Friedrich Schiller (1759 – 1805)

Schiller was born in Marbach, Germany, and trained first as an army officer, then in law and medicine. He was a contemporary of the poet and dramatist Goethe and the philosopher Immanuel Kant and, like them, he wrote poetry, plays, and philosophical and political essays. Schiller was also a contemporary of Beethoven and he wrote the poem *Ode To Joy* which Beethoven used in his Ninth Symphony.

Schiller the Romantic.

The late 17th/early 18th century Age Of Enlightenment had been an age of reason, science and logic; the late 18th/early 19th century Romantic movement was a reaction against the Enlightenment which Romantics like Schiller felt reduced life to mechanics. They sought to re-establish the value of subjective, personal and emotional experience; as the English Romantic poet, Keats, wrote "*Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.*"²

As a Romantic, Schiller was drawn to characters who follow their heart and act from instinct or passion, often to their detriment, rather than rationally seeking their own best interests. Mary Stuart's chaotic personal life and disastrous political career was irresistible and allowed him to set the rational Elizabeth I against the romantic Mary in a fictional meeting at Fotheringay Castle.

¹ Lesley Sharpe *Schiller: Drama, Thought And Politics* (1991).

² *Ode On A Grecian Urn*

Schiller the dramatist.

*"The theatre is the common channel through which the light of wisdom streams down."*³

We've become used to the idea of theatre as escapist entertainment but for Schiller the stage was a place to think and talk about the world around him. Schiller's art and politics are inextricable; like other 18th century republicans he welcomed the American and French Revolutions but, like many others, he was shocked by the way in which what began as a liberation movement in France deteriorated into state-sponsored terror. It is no coincidence that the French Revolution ended with Napoleon Bonaparte seizing power in 1799 the year before *Mary Stuart* was first performed in 1800; the struggle to reconcile personal morality with political expediency is a recurring theme in *Mary Stuart* and remains relevant today.

Schiller was hugely popular and influential in his day but his reputation declined in the 19th century when he was criticised as a "*master of rhetoric [whose] characters are uniformly the poet's mouthpiece*".⁴ But while the structure of *Mary Stuart* is dialectic, with set piece arguments within Elizabeth's court and between Elizabeth and Mary, Schiller is also interested in why people think and act the way they do. *Mary Stuart* is more than just a vehicle for Schiller's politics; every character in the play has personal and emotional reasons to hold their view and their conflict is as dramatic as it is ideological. In 1834 Donizetti, that most Romantic of Italian composers, wrote an opera, *Maria Stuarda*, based on Schiller's play and you don't get much more personal and emotional than that.

The real Mary Stuart, or Mary Queen Of Scots.



Mary Stuart (1542 – 1587)

Mary was the daughter of James V of Scotland. He died six days after her birth and she became Queen Of Scotland. She was sent to France at the age of six where she married Francis, the Dauphin of France, when she was sixteen which made her briefly queen of both Scotland and France. Francis died soon after their marriage without

³ Friedrich Schiller *Theatre Considered As A Moral Institution* (1784)

⁴ John Guthrie *Schiller The Dramatist: A Study Of Gesture In The Plays* (2009)

giving her a child and she returned to Scotland where she married her cousin Darnley. The marriage to Francis was a political alliance but Darnley was a love match and she had a son by him.

The marriage to Darnley soured and while she tried to arrange a divorce he was assassinated and her next husband, Bothwell, was implicated in his murder. Bothwell was cleared but Mary's reputation in Scotland was tarnished and she fled to England where her cousin Elizabeth I had her arrested. Mary remained under house arrest for nineteen years until a tribunal found her guilty of treason and she was executed at Fotheringay Castle, aged forty-four.

The real Elizabeth I.



Elizabeth I (1533 – 1603)

Elizabeth was the youngest daughter of Henry VIII by his second wife, Anne Boleyn. After her mother was executed Elizabeth was declared illegitimate by the Catholic Church who never recognised Henry's divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. After Henry's death the succession passed through all three of his children in the space of ten years alternating between Protestant and Catholic rule at every change.

His son Edward was the first to succeed him, aged nine, but he died of an illness aged only fifteen. Edward tried to maintain a Protestant succession by nominating Lady Jane Grey as his heir but she lasted only nine days on the throne and was replaced by Henry's eldest daughter, Mary Tudor. Mary returned England to Catholic rule and executed many leading Protestants; in a curious parallel with her later treatment of Mary Stuart, Elizabeth was imprisoned by Mary Tudor to prevent her leading a Protestant rebellion against her just as Elizabeth would imprison Mary Stuart to avoid the risk of a Catholic uprising against her.

When Mary Tudor died Elizabeth succeeded her and reigned for forty-four years. She was succeeded by Mary Stuart's son, James, who united England and Scotland to become James VI of Scotland and James I of England.

Schiller's *Mary Stuart*.

The play covers the last few days of Mary's life and the action moves between Fotheringay Castle in Northamptonshire where Mary was kept under house arrest and the court of Elizabeth in London. Most of the characters in the play are based on real historical figures and the action is historically accurate apart from the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth which Mary asked for but which Elizabeth never agreed to.

Schiller's portrait of Elizabeth and Mary was a deliberate revision to the conventional view of the Virgin Queen presiding over a golden age of English culture and Bothwell's Scottish whore who deserved everything she got. As a German republican Schiller rejects the idealised Gloriana of English popular history and instead he shows Elizabeth as an unscrupulous, if indecisive, political fixer and Mary as a victim of circumstance.

The new translation.



You can download the script from here:

http://www.crescent-theatre.co.uk/downloads/mary_stuart.pdf

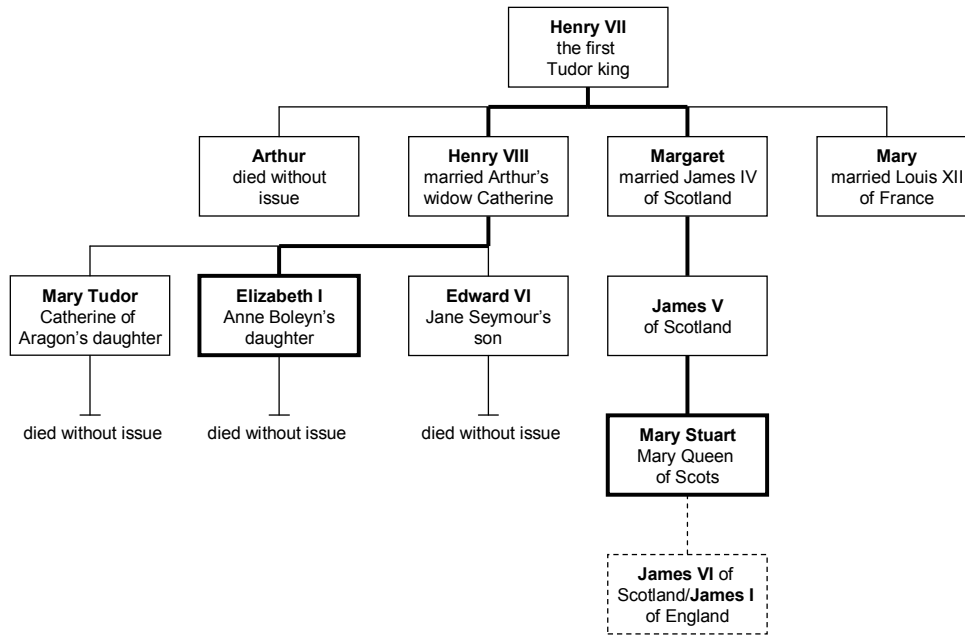
We are making changes in rehearsal so the final version will vary from the working script but it will give you some idea of the play. I have updated the language but the dramatic structure remains as Schiller wrote it; a fairly long exposition at the start to set the scene and then a series of increasingly complicated plots, double-crosses and deception ending in chaos, confusion and death!

Andrew Cowie, October 2010

MARY STUART by FRIEDRICH SCHILLER
6-13 NOVEMBER 2010
THE RON BARBER STUDIO, THE CRESCENT THEATRE,
BIRMINGHAM B13 9PT

www.crescent-theatre.co.uk

THE TUDOR SUCCESSION
Mary Queen of Scots' and Elizabeth the First's
respective claims to the English crown.



Mary and Elizabeth were both descended from Henry VII, the first Tudor king, which gave them both a claim to the English throne. The English royal succession is based on the principle of primogeniture which means that the succession goes to the first born male heir before reverting to the female line if there are no surviving males. Henry VII's succession therefore went first to Arthur, who died before he could ascend the throne, and then to Henry. By the same principle, Henry's VIII's succession went first to Edward, his son by his third wife, Jane Seymour, and then to his daughters. The competing claims of Mary and Elizabeth therefore only arose because Henry VIII had no surviving sons after Edward died. The supporters of the two queens' claims to the throne divided along religious lines:

The Protestant case for Elizabeth's claim to the throne: After nearly twenty years of marriage to Catherine of Aragon and only a single surviving daughter to show for it, Henry petitioned the Pope to annul the marriage on the grounds that, as Catherine was his brother Arthur's widow, the marriage was incestuous and his daughter by her, Mary, illegitimate. The annulment made Anne Boleyn his first wife and Elizabeth his legitimate heir after the death of his son Edward.

The Catholic case for Mary's claim to the throne: The Catholic Church refused to endorse the annulment of Henry's marriage to Catherine; in their view Mary Tudor was his sole heir and both Elizabeth and Edward were illegitimate. Consequently, once Mary Tudor died Henry VIII's line was extinct and Henry VII's succession switched to his next surviving daughter, Margaret, and through her to Mary Stuart.