

Mary, Queen of Scots

Synopsis

Act I

It is Queen Elizabeth I's last day alive. Early in the morning, she dances alone as snow falls. Memories overwhelm her. The past comes into the present: two women in power, cousins, friends who never met, but became rivals and enemies. We follow her story.

In France, Mary Stewart marries the Dauphin, son of Catherine de Medici. They are presented at court. Death appears in the form of a jester, skipping through time and memory.

Mary grieves the death of her husband and asks Catherine for comfort but is brutally rejected.

Mary must now leave France. She is heartbroken. Four women in attendance, all named Mary, comfort her and travel with her to her new home in Scotland.

A new friend and adviser arrives. Rizzio, a musician and entertainer. He brings light to Mary's life. Together with the four Marys, they set sail across the northern sea.

The English court: powerful, strict, controlled. Men dance for Elizabeth. Henry Darnley stands out. Elizabeth favours him and plans for his future. She is left alone with her spymaster, Walsingham.

Elizabeth gives her orders to Walsingham. His spies appear – messengers, coders, plotters, listeners – he sends them out across the land carrying secret messages like birds of prey.

Meanwhile, Scotland celebrates its new Queen. Mary is joyful, loved, and full of promise. But Walsingham's spies are watching. Rizzio guards Mary closely as she dances with the court. Through the crowd, a man enters on his knees – it is Darnley.

Darnley is handsome, vain and proud. Mary is strong, dominant and powerful. They make a striking pair. Spies lurk in the shadows.

In England, Elizabeth walks her dog in her gardens. Walsingham follows. His spies deliver messages from Scotland.

Mary, Darnley, and Rizzio play a light, childish game. Mary leaves, and the game between the two men changes from playful to urgent. An affair begins.

Time moves on. Mary is pregnant. The affair is discovered. Elizabeth knows everything. A reckoning is coming.

The lords, led by Darnley, have grown to hate Rizzio, who has long stood between them and Mary. They burst in. Violence follows. Rizzio is murdered.

Act II

After Rizzio's murder, Mary is broken. Darnley, drunk, tries to control her. He accuses her of infidelity and says the child is not his. Mary fights back. She transforms and Darnley is consumed. As he dies, her son is born. James.

Mary holds her baby. Elizabeth imagines having a child of her own.

In Scotland, the court turns on Mary. She is paraded through Edinburgh, accused of Darnley's murder. She escapes to England, where Elizabeth is sure to help. Elizabeth hears the news of Darnley's death.

Hundreds of letters pass between Elizabeth and Mary. They know each other well – cousins, rivals, each a danger to the other. Letters connect them yet keep them apart. When Mary reaches out for sanctuary, Elizabeth arrests her.

Elizabeth is now the sole Queen in power. But treachery and betrayal surround her.

The end approaches. Mary is imprisoned but still plotting. Now an adult, her son James pledges loyalty to Elizabeth. Walsingham sets his traps, and Mary's plots are uncovered; Elizabeth's reign is threatened. Coded letters are broken. Mary's guilt is proven. Elizabeth's hand is forced. Mary must die.

Elizabeth is old and unshaken – the Virgin Queen once more. Mary faces her end with courage and precision. Three blows of the axe and she is gone, but her end is also her beginning.