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Elizabeth and Mary: Cousins, Rivals, Queens (review)

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Elizabeth and Mary: Cousins, Rivals, Queens.

By Jane Dunn. Pp. xxxv, 538.

ISBN 0-00-653192-X.

Hammersmith: Harper Perennial Press. 2003. £8.99.

One of the review lines on the jacket of Jane Dunn's *Elizabeth and Mary: Cousins, Rivals, Queens*, states 'This mythic story will never die', which forms a fair assessment of the contents of this new entry into the realms of royal biography and 'popular history'. The more-than-five-hundred narrative pages are infused with drama, romance, emotion, jealousy, and intrigue, much of it derived from historical gossip, anecdotes, and legends from the lives of both women that have, through repetition, become firmly embedded in the popular conceptions of their lives and reigns. This book contains plenty of the mythos which non-scholarly readers crave, and which research students reluctantly give up at the insistence of pedantic tutors.

Dunn has woven her story to depict an inescapable intertwining of the two queens' lives from their births to the death of Mary and the defeat of the Spanish Armada, with a particular concentration on the period between the 1560s and the 1580s. Dunn weaves their stories together chapter by chapter as the two women move through major events in their lives and reigns, with the narrative line handed back and forth between them using well-placed final sentences for sections on one monarch that lob the metaphorical tennis ball of the narrative over to the other. Dunn creates for them a tightly strung relationship redolent of Friedrich Schiller's play that puts the two women face-to-face, an event that never took place, much to the chagrin of romantics and dramatists alike.

While keeping them wound together, it is Dunn's apparent intent to clarify their differences, with an eye to assessing the personality and character traits that allowed one woman to maintain her throne until her natural death but brought the other to a premature end on the executioner's block. For Dunn, their divergent fates are a product of their individual choices at crucial moments in their careers, and she gives great weight to the factors in their life histories, and to personal incidents, that predated those moments of decision, analyzing their actions and motivations with the relish of a modern psychologist seeking justification of the prisoner's actions before the jury. In particular, the emotional insecurity of Elizabeth I and the emotional instability of Mary Queen of Scots forms a recurring motif with which Dunn views the great moments of each woman's life.

Dunn's narrative mixes together general histories, biographies of the monarchs both modern and period, calendars of state papers, memoirs, and correspondence collections, ranging from the recent edited volume *Collected Works of Elizabeth I* to a Victorian edition of the venerable *Actes and Monuments of John Foxe*. The combination of straightforward documents and romanticized or discreetly edited memoirs and time-hallowed anecdotes is prefaced by the occasional caution, as when Dunn parenthetically comments that Foxe may have used 'poetic license' in his recital of a particular incident. However, as this comes toward the end of a long narrative of events in which Foxe's oft-questioned account is freely interspersed, it would be difficult for someone unfamiliar with the sources or the scholarship to recognize the occasions when hearsay or myth blends with history in the smoothly flowing text of Dunn's book.

Dunn also speaks with a confident voice when assessing the impact of events on the subsequent emotions and motivations of her long-dead characters, and in imagining the way in which a situation must surely have affected them in the longer-term, sometimes making the speculative sound like a matter of fact. In

her way, Dunn appears to be trying to create windows into men's, or women's, souls, a tempting preoccupation for any historical biographer. She is also entirely comfortable with speculative modern physiological and psychological assessments of her subjects' states of mind and body—for example arguing that Mary Stuart's shift of attitudes toward Elizabeth after her marriage to Darnley could have been the result of 'the potency of newly discovered sexual love' or 'the reckless energy of a manic-depressive mania'. Dunn also shows a tendency to overemphasize a point of analysis, as if fearful that her readers will fail to grasp the implications of her subjects' actions, or remember them in relation to later actions, as when she several times reiterates her observation that the Spanish either disliked or were confused by Elizabeth I in the early days of her rule.

The text itself is rich with comments culled from ambassadorial letters and memoirs, including the oft-told story of Melville's visit to Elizabeth I, at which time the English queen supposedly sought to dazzle him with her superior merits. The recounted speeches and conversations will surely give this book great appeal to readers, but could use a bit more cautionary flagging for scholarly purposes. For example, there is still a lively debate about how much of, or in what form, Elizabeth's 'Tilbury speech' was ever delivered by her, but Dunn simply repeats it, and in fact uses it as an example of Elizabeth's skill in oratory. Throughout the book, all of the more dramatic aspects are heightened—sexual awareness and tension, danger, stress, emotion, all ride at high levels, and people and situations are described in romanticized language. Mary I is a pitiful fanatic; the Earl of Leicester is described as 'lusty Lord Robert Dudley'; Mary Stuart falls into her half-brother's arms for comfort on his return to her court after the murder of David Rizzio, and her emotional outbursts are sometimes characterized as borderline madness. There is a constant undercurrent in the text of menace, sexuality, and anxiety highly reminiscent of the dark and dramatic tone taken by the writer and director for the Cate Blanchett film, *Elizabeth*.

As remarked at the beginning of this review, the mythic story will never die. Much of the 'history' of Elizabeth and Mary is replete with the small legends and stories that are beloved of non-specialists, and give greater human warmth to their subjects, whether or not we possess sufficient evidence to support their inclusion in historical scholarship. For the further interest of the general audience, this particular paperback edition features a special section at the back, with an author interview and biography, a summary of various reviews, and a brief examination of movies and plays dealing with Elizabeth and Mary's lives. Dunn's book is well-suited to a modern general reader who embraces the efforts of an author to give them supposed 'insight' into the mind of a character, and make an historically distant figure more human and approachable. At this Dunn is quite skilled, and this volume is likely to be greatly appreciated by people who seek human interest stories rather than those pursuing academic quests.

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Mary Queen of Scots and the Casket Letters.

By A.E. MacRobert. Pp. x, 235.

ISBN 1 86064 829 0.

London: I.B. Tauris Publishers. 2002. £29.50.

A.E. MacRobert's book represents the most recent instalment in the notoriously long-running debate about the Casket Letters and Sonnets, allegedly written by a murderous Mary Queen of Scots to her adulterous lover James