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Mary Stuart

Friedrich Schiller · *1800 · Joseph Charles Mellish translation (1801), revised*

Mary, Queen of Scots, has been a prisoner at Fotheringay Castle for nearly nineteen years. She has been tried by English peers and condemned for plotting against Elizabeth, and the play opens with the sentence waiting for the English queen's signature. Schiller's tragedy covers the last three days of Mary's life and the political torment of the queen who sends her to the block.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a queen choose justice when politics demands a death, and what does a monarch lose by the act of killing a rival?

Schiller makes both queens human. Mary is proud, passionate, and guilty of past wrongs, and she faces death with dignity. Elizabeth is clever and afraid, and she hides her act behind an ambiguous word to her secretary. The meeting of the two queens, which never happened in history, is the center of the play and makes the sentence certain. Elizabeth wins and is left alone.

KEY CHARACTERS

Mary Stuart
The imprisoned Queen of Scots.

Elizabeth
The Queen of England.

the Earl of Leicester
Elizabeth's favorite, who is torn.

Lord Burleigh
The lord treasurer, who wants Mary's death.

the Earl of Shrewsbury
A counselor who pleads for mercy.

Mortimer
A young convert to Catholicism.

Sir Amias Paulet
Mary's gaoler.

Grades 10–12

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01

Fotheringay

ACT I

Paulet takes away Mary's papers. Mortimer, a convert to Catholicism, reveals that he is plotting her rescue and brings a letter from Leicester.

- Mary's long imprisonment is shown in small cruelties.
- Mortimer is a young fanatic.
- Leicester's letter is a hope.

02

Elizabeth's Court

ACT II

At court, Burleigh and Shrewsbury argue over Mary's death sentence. Elizabeth hesitates and Leicester arranges a meeting between the queens.

- Burleigh wants the sentence carried out.
- Shrewsbury pleads for mercy.
- Elizabeth wants to avoid the blame.

03

The Meeting in the Park

ACT III

Mary kneels to Elizabeth, is mocked, and in a burst of anger calls her a bastard. The meeting makes the sentence certain.

- The meeting is Schiller's invention.
- Mary's humility turns to rage.
- Elizabeth leaves with her mind made up.

04

The Warrant

ACT IV

An assassin's attempt on Elizabeth and a failed rescue plot give the pretext. Elizabeth signs and gives the warrant to Davison with an ambiguous word.

- The assassination attempt alarms the court.
- The warrant is signed in secret.
- Davison is left to bear the blame.

05

Mary's Last Day

ACT V

Mary confesses, receives communion, forgives her enemies, and dies. Elizabeth disowns the act and is left alone.

- Mary's farewell to her servants is moving.
- The communion is a quiet moment.
- Elizabeth's isolation is the last note.

Rival Queens | Justice | Faith | Guilt

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The meeting of the queens is not historical. Ask why Schiller invented it.
2. Both queens act under pressure. See how Schiller makes each sympathetic.
3. Elizabeth's ambiguous order is a key moment.
4. Mary's last scene is an act of faith. Notice how it contrasts with Elizabeth.

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