Elizabeth I – The Marriage Problem

The popular image of Elizabeth I is as the Virgin Queen wedded to her kingdom. In 1555, Mary Tudor had proposed to marry her sister to the staunchly Catholic duke of Savoy. Elizabeth burst into tears, declaring that she had no wish for any husband. Other matches were proposed and rejected. But in this vulnerable period of her life there were obvious reasons for Elizabeth to bide her time and keep her options open. Elizabeth appreciated that she was in a very powerful position and that any potential husband would marry into a position of power. She could never be certain whether a future husband was marrying her for love or power.

When she became queen, speculation about a suitable match immediately intensified, and the available options became a matter of grave national concern. In Elizabethan England the proper role for a woman was that of a wife. Elizabeth also had to consider the dynastic and diplomatic implications of any marriage. If Elizabeth died childless, the Tudor line would come to an end. The nearest heir was Mary, Queen of Scots, granddaughter of Henry VIII's sister Margaret. Mary, a Catholic whose claim was supported by France and other powerful Catholic states, was regarded by Protestants as a nightmarish threat that could best be avoided if Elizabeth produced a Protestant heir.

The queen's marriage was critical not only for the question of succession but also for the tangled web of international diplomacy. England, isolated and militarily weak, was sorely in need of the major alliances that an advantageous marriage could forge. Important suitors eagerly came forward

- Philip II of Spain, who hoped to renew the link between Catholic Spain and England;
- Archduke Charles of Austria;
- Erik XIV, king of Sweden; (Protestant)
- Henry, Duke d'Anjou and later king of France;
- Françis, Duke d' Alençon;

It is unlikely that Elizabeth ever seriously intended to marry any of these aspirants to her hand, for the dangers always outweighed the possible benefits, but she skillfully played one off against another and kept the marriage negotiations going for months, even years, at one moment seeming on the brink of acceptance, at the next veering away toward vows of chastity. "She is a Princess," the French ambassador remarked, "who can act any part she pleases." Marrying a Frenchman would upset the Spanish and vice-versa. Marrying a Catholic would upset the Protestants and vice-versa.

Elizabeth was courted by English suitors as well. Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester was constantly in attendance on the queen, who displayed real affection toward him. When in September 1560 Leicester's wife, Amy Robsart, died in a suspicious fall, the favourite seemed poised to marry his royal mistress, so at least widespread rumours had it, but, though the queen's behaviour toward him continued to generate scandalous gossip, the decisive step was never taken. Elizabeth's resistance to a marriage she herself seemed to want may have been politically motivated, for Leicester had many enemies at court and an unsavory reputation.

But in October 1562 the queen nearly died of smallpox, and, faced with the real possibility of a contested succession and a civil war, even rival factions were likely to have supported the marriage. Again marriage to any English lord, risked the danger of creating jealousy among others.

Probably at the core of Elizabeth's decision to remain single was an unwillingness to compromise her power. Sir Robert Naunton recorded that the queen once said angrily to Leicester, when he tried to insist upon a favour, "I will have here but one mistress and no master." To her ministers she was steadfastly loyal, encouraging their frank counsel and weighing their advice, but she did not give ultimate authority even to the most trusted. Though she patiently received petitions and listened to anxious advice, she retained her power to make the final decision in all crucial affairs of state. Unsolicited advice could at times be dangerous: when in 1579 a pamphlet was published strongly denouncing the queen's proposed marriage to the Catholic Duke d'Alençon, its author John Stubbs and his publisher William Page were arrested and had their right hands chopped off.

Elizabeth's displays of infatuation, her apparent inclination to marry the suitor of the moment often convinced even close advisers, so that the level of intrigue and anxiety, always high in royal courts, often rose to a feverish pitch. Elizabeth seems to have enjoyed playing games with those around her. She was in charge, and was skilled at manipulating factions. This skill extended beyond marriage negotiations and became one of the hallmarks of her regime. A powerful nobleman would be led to believe that he possessed unique influence over the queen, only to discover that a hated rival had been led to a comparable belief. Apparent intimacies, public honours, the gift of land and monopolies, would give way to royal aloofness or, still worse, to royal anger. The queen's anger was particularly aroused by challenges to what she regarded as her prerogative. The courtly atmosphere of vivacity, wit, and romance would then suddenly chill, and the queen's behaviour, as her godson Sir John Harrington put it, "left no doubtings whose daughter she was." With suitors and courtiers, the queen hoped to turn her gender from a serious liability into a distinct advantage. Unlike her father, she was not motivated by self centeredness. To her the well- being of her country was more important than the continuing survival of the Tudor dynasty.