

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ELIZABETH I
AND MARY QUEEN OF SCOTLAND IN LETTERS

The only source of communication at that time were letters, they remain to this day historians' most insightful and informative sources and evidences of the quarter century-long rivalry between the two queens, as they show how Mary and Elizabeth's relationship changed over time. They reveal fascinating insights into the two cousins and rivals' personalities, and above all else, their fundamentally different approaches to their positions as two queens, living on the same isle with a claim to the same throne. The manner of writing reflects the profoundly different and evolving approaches these two women employed in communicating to each other over time and in seeking to control the circumstances in which they found themselves.

We can find several shifts in their relationships. The first shift was based on the first Mary and Elizabeth's confrontation. After the death of Mary's first husband, she returned to Scotland with the same claim to the English throne, as these two queens shared a common ancestor: Mary's father's mother was Margaret Tudor, she was a daughter to Henry VII, and Mary Queen of Scots was the grand-grand-daughter to Henry VII. Elizabeth I was grand-daughter to Henry VII, and her father was the youngest son of Henry VII. Mary 'claimed' the English crown based on the fact that she was catholic and since the Catholic Church did not recognize Henry VIII's divorce, Elizabeth was considered illegitimate. Mary's rights alarmed Elizabeth. Mary responded with her first known letter to the English ambassador: *I trust the wind will be so favorable that I shall not need to come on the coast of England; for if I do, The Queen your mistress shall have me in her hands to do her will of me.* By the early 1560's we can see the second shift. Both queens were now writing in "affectionate" terms to each other. Mary seems to be the more emotional partner in their letters. Elizabeth speaks plainly to Mary as her equal, as a fellow Queen and a relation in blood, on an emotional level. She signed herself *a dear sister and faithful friend.* Her unusual emotional words, full of solidarity for Mary, contain heartfelt advice to defend her honor and distance herself from Bothwell, the man who killed Mary's second husband. Elizabeth wrote a letter, warning Mary that her actions had threatened the future of her reign.

By marrying the man suspected of murder, Mary showed a fatal indifference to public opinion. The third shift took place after the collapse of Mary's reign. The captured Mary was led through the streets of Edinburgh. Elizabeth sent a letter and talked of sending an army to relieve Mary. In fact, besides offering written encouragement to Mary, she did nothing. Mary was imprisoned on Elizabeth's orders in Lock Leven Castle. Mary wrote a flurry of letters to Elizabeth, but Elizabeth responded coolly. 1568 marks yet another major shift in writing style and tone: Elizabeth's refusal to visit Mary. These letters, extremely unconventional in their phrasing, betrayed how out of touch Mary was with the political reality of her situation and how far she had gone in disregard of her duty as a sovereign and the mother of the future monarch.