



***Captive Queen: The Decrypted History
of Mary, Queen of Scots***

By Jade Scott

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Mary accepted her fate and had tried her best to ensure her memorialization. We know this from her letters” (240). This assertion summarises Jade Scott’s engagingly-written analysis and insightful re-evaluation of Mary, Queen of Scots’ final decades of life, imprisoned in England as a threat to Elizabeth I’s regime. Throughout her time in England (1568–1587), Mary used her letters to create a contemporary portrayal of herself (24). With Lasry, Biermann, and Tomokiyo’s relatively recent decoding of the letters, it is hard to argue with Scott’s premise for *Captive Queen*: that it is time for Mary’s letters to reveal “a new look at Mary’s captivity, at the plots and schemes for her freedom, and [to] ask ourselves: how far was she really willing to go for her liberty?” (31). The answer, Scott finds, is quite far. Using these letters—and perhaps most significantly, using the newly decoded ones—Scott proves Mary’s agency in her own life, weaving the complex events of her final decades into a captivating narrative of a queen’s desire for her lost throne, her relationships with those around her, and her overarching pursuit of liberty.

At its heart, *Captive Queen* centres its narrative both around the way in which Mary’s letters either corroborate or challenge previous interpretations of these years and how the materiality of these letters is often as significant as their content. For example, where some have judged Mary for playing an active and knowing role in the death of Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, Scott instead uses Mary’s letters as proof of her ignorance—and therefore innocence—in the matter and of her attempts to care for her husband (90–95). In the same way that Mary’s letters portray her as a dutiful wife, Scott demonstrates their representation, too, of a powerful queen. After the murder of her private secretary David Rizzio, Mary’s anger at Elizabeth’s harbouring of the conspirators is evident in the physical letter Mary sent to England; where she usually wrote to Elizabeth in her own hand, this time Mary dictated the content and entrusted the writing to others, corresponding this time in Scots instead of French (66). Scott’s examination of letterlocking and the different ways in which Mary ‘sealed’ her letters also reflects the importance of security and the complicated diplomatic relationships at the time, bringing together at once the established study of epistolary sources and the newer study of the physical manipulation of writing

materials. This re-evaluation of the form and content of Mary's letters reinforces the queen's agency while more clearly demonstrating the extent to which security, secrecy, and intelligence played a significant role throughout her life in England.

Some readers may find that minor inconsistencies draw their attention slightly away from the excellent retelling of Mary's imprisonment. For instance, at various points in the main body of the work and the chronology provided at the end, Scott is inconsistent in her naming conventions, switching from French to English names. For example, she refers to Henri, duke of Guise and King Henri II of France, but uses English names for King Francis II and Francis, duke of Guise, rather than the French *François*. Further, while other monarchs are given their regnal numbers, Mary I of England is consistently referred to as Mary Tudor, even for events during her years as queen. More substantially, though the preface discusses at length the newly decoded letters, there is perhaps too little emphasis put on them throughout the analysis. In a few instances, Scott explicitly notes that her evidence comes from these recently researched letters (171, 173, 183, 187, for example), but their inclusion is rather too brief given the importance placed on them at the beginning of the work. Despite this brevity, Scott effectively draws together a vast array of other letters to provide an insightful look into the final years of Mary, Queen of Scots, from her own perspective.

In all, Scott's *Captive Queen* is an engaging re-examination of Mary's time in England both for an academic and a general audience. The opening paragraphs of each chapter draw the reader in by creating a fictionalised imagining of the events detailed therein and the chapters' content reads easily, urging the reader further into the narrative and its findings. The use of individual cipher symbols for chapter headings and section markers is also a clever way to engage the reader with the intrigue of ciphered text. Not only does it quietly draw attention to the code itself, it subtly introduces the important figures of different chapters. Scott's use of the latest research, including recent biographies of James VI, discussions of the politicalness of Mary's embroidery, and the transition in England from Elizabeth I to James VI—now also James I—further solidifies this book as one which offers a modern and needed re-definition of the later life of Mary, Queen of Scots. This reviewer's desire for even greater examination and analysis of new documentary evidence is a testament to the accessibility of *Captive Queen's* narrative and the engaging way in which its author provides nuance to familiar events. In short, Scott's epistolary examination is an essential read for anyone wanting to understand fully the final years of Mary's queenship

and the role which her correspondence, insights, and self-identity played in her time as a captive queen.

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