

OF HONOUR AND INNOCENCE: ROYAL CORRESPONDENCE AND THE EXECUTION OF MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS¹

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This article considers the diplomatic tension caused by the discovery of Mary Queen of Scots' involvement in the Babington Plot and how it was negotiated in the correspondence of Queen Elizabeth of England and King James VI of Scotland. Rhetorical strategies of honour and innocence were utilised within these letters to create narratives that sought to balance the needs of both monarchs and their kingdoms. While the correspondence did not prevent the suspension of relations between the kingdoms following Mary's execution, they did play a vital role in restoring it shortly before the coming of the Spanish Armada in 1588.

The discovery of Mary Stuart's involvement in the Babington Plot, and her resultant trial and execution was the defining concern of Anglo-Scottish diplomacy for roughly two years. Throughout this period the fate of Mary was debated and discussed not only by ambassadors in London, but also personally by Queen Elizabeth I of England and King James VI of Scotland who sought a way to resolve the problem in a mutually satisfactory manner through their correspondence. This article will focus upon the letters exchanged between the two monarchs over a two-year period. Through doing so it will explore the rhetorical tropes of honour and innocence that featured prominently within the letters at this time as each monarch sought to establish narratives within which their actions could be understood and accepted, or at the very least not easily rejected. While the correspondence between the two monarchs was significant to the Anglo-Scottish alliance established in 1586, it was also vulnerable, as its virtual suspension following Mary's execution demonstrated. However, it was also the royal correspondence that restored the fractured diplomatic relationship shortly before the coming of the Spanish Armada in 1588, an event which reminded both parties of the necessity of the Protestant Anglo-Scottish alliance for mutual defence from their continental Catholic opponents.

¹ This article is adapted from a chapter of the author's thesis *The Correspondence of Elizabeth I and James VI in the context of Anglo-Scottish Relations, 1572-1603*, (University of Adelaide: Master of Philosophy Thesis, 2015).

During the sixteenth century the main means of communication besides face-to-face conversation was the exchange of correspondence. The exchange of letters was no simple process, with custom and protocol influencing all aspects of the correspondence, such as the spacing of the elements within the letters, the rhetorical framing of the composition, the colour of the seal, the reception of the letter and the importance of continuing an exchange once commenced.² Gary Schneider has argued 'The basic logic of letter writing - that is, the timely reciprocity of exchange - presupposed that correspondents strove to maintain stable social intercourse and communicative continuity.'³ It is for this reason the continuing flow or the halting of an established correspondence could be highly significant, as shall be explored below. The specific correspondence exchange that forms the focus of this article, that between Elizabeth I of England and James VI of Scotland, presents another element that needs to be outlined, that is the difficulty of transporting letters between the two royal courts during the second half of the sixteenth century. The two main methods of transporting royal letters were through the hands of diplomats and private messengers, or through the postal service. Either method was slow, with the postal service between London and Edinburgh taking on average one week, but could be significantly slower and was often unreliable.⁴ Even with the difficulties of transportation, the correspondence between Elizabeth and James was significant. From its commencement in 1572 until Elizabeth's death in 1603, two hundred and sixty letters have survived with fifty-five per cent of these being written by the monarchs' own hand.⁵ The royal correspondence between Elizabeth and James spanned almost thirty-one years, and formed an important element in Anglo-Scottish diplomacy that requires close consideration.

The letters of Elizabeth and James have long been known but only in the past twenty years been given scholarly attention.⁶ The rhetoric of the letters was first analysed by Janel Mueller in her article considering the role of the correspondence in regards to James' place in the succession and early modern letter writing practices.⁷ While Mueller's work was significant in considering

² James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512-1635* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 10-11.

³ Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 84.

⁴ Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity*, 82; Rayne Allinson, 'The Letters of Queen Elizabeth I and King James VI: Kingship, Kinship and the Politics of Counsel' (MA Thesis, 2006: University of Melbourne), 31-2; Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England*, 142-143.

⁵ Allinson, 'The Letters of Queen Elizabeth I and King James VI', 19.

⁶ Grant G. Simpson, 'The Personal Letters of James VI', in *The Reign of James VI*, eds. Julian Goodare and Michael Lynch (Phantassie: Tuckwell Press, 2000), 143-144.

⁷ Janel Mueller, "'To My Very Good Brother the King of Scots": Elizabeth I's Correspondence

the correspondence in its own right, it is the work of Rayne Allinson that more fully explores the exchange between the two strong-willed monarchs and the importance of the correspondence to their kingdoms' relationship.⁸ The correspondence again featured in a chapter by Susan Doran where she reintegrated the correspondence into the wider Anglo-Scottish diplomatic exchange, rather than placing it outside the other channels of diplomacy.⁹ The work by Mueller, Allinson and Doran form the foundation of this present study, one which seeks to consider the personal correspondence between Elizabeth and James during a highly fraught time of their relationship, the trial and execution of Mary Queen of Scots. Through close reading of the letters exchanged during this two-year period the rhetoric utilised by these two highly educated monarchs will be analysed to explore their use of established frameworks, or their adaption of such frameworks to suit the unorthodox situation which had occurred. The two elements that featured prominently were those of monarchical honour and Elizabeth's adaption of modesty rhetoric to present her innocence following Mary's execution.

The situation of Mary Stuart had been a long-running problem for Elizabeth and her council. Following her forced abdication of the Scottish throne, Mary fled to England in 1568. She had expected to receive support in reclaiming her crown, but this was not viable in the complex political environment of the time. Instead she was provided with the privileges accorded to exiled monarchs and guests of the English crown.¹⁰ Her conditions worsened, and her freedoms were further curtailed following her participation in a number of plots against Elizabeth's crown and life. However, Elizabeth refused to countenance Mary's execution without absolute evidence of her personal involvement. In 1586 Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's Principal Secretary, detected traces of a fresh plot being constructed by Anthony Babington and the French ambassador. He established a manner for those involved to communicate in apparent secrecy,

with James VI and the Question of the Succession', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 115, no. 5, (2000): 1063-1071.

⁸ Allinson, 'The Letters of Queen Elizabeth I and King James VI'; Rayne Allinson, 'These Latter Days of the World': The Correspondence of Elizabeth I and King James VI, 1590-1603', *Early Modern Literary Studies* Special Issue 16 (2007); Rayne Allinson, 'Conversations on Kingship: The Letters of Queen Elizabeth I and King James VI', in *The Rituals and Rhetoric of Queenship: Medieval to Early Modern*, eds. Liz Oakley-Brown and Louise J. Wilkinson (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009); Rayne Allinson, *A Monarchy of Letters: Royal Correspondence and English Diplomacy in the Reign of Elizabeth I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁹ Susan Doran, 'Loving and Affectionate Cousins? The Relationship between Elizabeth I and James VI of Scotland 1586-1603', in *Tudor England and its Neighbours*, eds. Susan Doran and Glenn Richardson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 203-234.

¹⁰ John Guy, *My Heart is My Own: The Life of Mary Queen of Scots* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), 437.

yet one he could observe without their knowledge.¹¹ After an exchange of letters on the subject Mary gave her approval for the proposed plot and its intention to kill Elizabeth in a letter dated 17 July 1586 composed for her by her secretary.¹² With this letter Mary revealed her intentions and provided the evidence against her which had previously been lacking, initiating one of the more fraught episodes of Anglo-Scottish relations during Elizabeth's reign.

In an autograph letter from Elizabeth to James dated 4 October 1586 the first traces of the discovered plot against Elizabeth were introduced into the correspondence.¹³ Elizabeth did not discuss the plot in detail, nor did she name anyone involved. This in itself is not unusual with Elizabeth's letters to James, as she often left individuals unnamed and referred to them indirectly. The practice of leaving certain specific details out of letters was not uncommon and was used during the early modern period to ensure the security of information.¹⁴ The messengers entrusted to transport the letter to its recipient would usually fill in the resultant missing information orally.¹⁵ Thus, Elizabeth commented on the most recent plot against her in an indirect manner, writing:

And do render you many loving thanks for the joy you took of my narrow escape from the chaws of death, to which I might have easily fallen but that the hand of the Highest saved me from that snare.¹⁶

Her letter continued to place the origin of the plot on the actions and the encouragement of the Jesuits who appear to have encouraged the murder of Protestant monarchs. In her letter Elizabeth appeared shaken, or at least keen to utilise this as an opportunity for diplomatic advantage, as she concluded by urging James to move against any Jesuit or their supporters in Scotland for the defence of himself as well as herself. She wrote: 'For God's love, regard your surety above all persuasions, and account him no subject that entertains them! Make no edicts for scorn, but to be observed. Let them be rebels...'.¹⁷ The full exposure of the plot's details was quick, and it soon became apparent

¹¹ Penry Williams, *The Later Tudors: England 1547-1603*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995), 313.

¹² Guy, *My Heart is My Own*, 483.

¹³ 'Elizabeth to James', 4 October 1586, in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 286-7

¹⁴ Jonathan Gibson, 'Letters', in *A New Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, Vol. 2, ed. Michael Hattaway (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 457.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 457.

¹⁶ 'Elizabeth to James', 4 October 1586, in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Marcus, Mueller and Rose, 286.

¹⁷ 'Elizabeth to James', 4 October 1586, in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Marcus, Mueller and Rose, 287.

that Mary Stuart was the unnamed conspirator. The period between the trial of Mary during October 1586 and her execution in February 1587 was a time of intense diplomatic exchange through royal correspondence and diplomatic personnel, and it severely tested the monarchs' alliance.

The direction and volume of the correspondence between Elizabeth and James reveals which of the monarchs found Mary and the Babington Plot to be more diplomatically significant. For the period covered by this article, Mary dominated Elizabeth's letters. Elizabeth wrote four letters to James concerning Mary before her execution on the 8 February 1587 and following the execution she would write another dated 14 February.¹⁸ James, in comparison, wrote only two letters to Elizabeth before Mary's death, dated 16 December 1586 and 26 January 1587.¹⁹ Another letter dated either late February or early March followed Mary's execution.²⁰ The pattern of James' letters on this subject warrants some scrutiny as he did not send any personal correspondence to Elizabeth while Mary's trial proceeded and did not write until following the pronouncement of her guilt. The frequency of James' letters increased as the news from England indicated even more strongly that his mother's life was in danger and that there was a real prospect of her execution. Elizabeth wrote more consistently regarding Mary's trial and situation, taking the initiative in their personal correspondence. Her letters are dated 4 October 1586, 15 October 1586, January 1587 and 1 February 1587.²¹ This is most likely because she was aware that Mary would be unlikely to survive her involvement in this latest plot and was concerned about the diplomatic fallout should Mary be executed. From the exchange of letters, it is possible to conclude that Elizabeth thought that this matter warranted a significant element of personal diplomacy in addition to the more public usage of diplomats than was the case with James.

¹⁸ 'Elizabeth to James', 14 February 1587, in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Marcus, Mueller and Rose, 296-7.

¹⁹ 'James to Elizabeth', 16 December 1586, in *Letters of King James VI & I*, ed. G.P.V. Akrigg, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 79-80; 'James to Elizabeth', 26 January 1587, in *Letters of King James VI & I*, ed. Akrigg, 81-3.

²⁰ 'James to Elizabeth', Late February 1587, in *Letters of King James VI & I*, ed. Akrigg, 84-5.

²¹ 'Elizabeth to James', 4 October 1586, in *Letters of Queen Elizabeth and King James VI of Scotland: Some of them printed from originals in the possession of the Rev. Edward Ryder, and others from a MS which formerly belonged to Sir Peter Thompson, KT.*, ed. John Bruce, Camden Society, Vol. 46, (London: J.B. Nichols and Sons, 1849), 37-9; 'Elizabeth to James', 15 October 1586, in *Queen Elizabeth I: Selected Works*, ed. Steven W. May, (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 175-8; 'Elizabeth to James', January 1587, in *The Letters of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. G.B. Harrison, (London: Cassell, 1935), 184-5.; 'Elizabeth to James', 1 February 1587, in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Marcus, Mueller and Rose, 294-6.

James' response to Mary being discovered as a conspirator against Elizabeth, and then being placed on trial, was initially reserved. James wrote in December 1586 in placating tones that suggested sympathy for Elizabeth's position, saying: 'I know well enough how hardly ye are pressed by the objecting the peril of your own life unto you, and therefore I never blamed yourself directly of these proceedings'.²² His words seemed to indicate that while he had a personal interest in the unfolding events he would not hold the outcome against Elizabeth. He also wanted to ensure that his claim to the English succession went unaltered as a result of his mother's actions. It appeared at this point that James felt that the diplomatic discussions on the topic could be managed adequately through other means of diplomacy such as his representatives already present in London.

James' position became more definite in his correspondence with Elizabeth as it became clearer that Mary's execution was the most probable outcome of events. His letter written on the 26 January 1587 was different from his previous letter in tone and content. This letter argued strongly in defence of Mary's life and stated that her execution would 'peril my reputation amongst [my subjects]'.²³ The approaching execution had stirred up Scottish politics to such a point that it was untenable for James simply to observe or lightly object to Mary's execution, and he was then required to petition Elizabeth strongly for his mother's life.²⁴ Indeed he continued to argue his case, elaborating on his difficulty by writing:

What thing, madame, can greatlier touch me in honour that [am] a king and son than that my nearest neighbour, being in straitest [friend] ship with me, shall rigorously put to death a free and sovereign prince and my natural mother, alike in estate and sex to her that so uses her, albeit subject I grant to a harder fortune, and touching her nearly in proximity to blood.²⁵

James' appeal was based primarily upon honour, and he supported this by referring to the divine right of kings. These were two ideologies that the monarchs shared, that of royal honour and of the divine right of a monarch to rule, and in calling on these shared beliefs he placed the strength of his appeal for Mary's life. James also called upon their ties of kinship, though his use of

²² 'James to Elizabeth', 16 December 1586, in *Letters of King James VI & I*, ed. Akrigg, 79-80.

²³ 'James to Elizabeth', 26 January 1587, in *Letters of King James VI & I*, ed. Akrigg, 81-3.

²⁴ Susan Doran, 'Revenge her Foul and Most Unnatural Murder? The Impact of Mary Stuart's Execution on Anglo-Scottish Relations', *History* 85, (2000): 592-3; Pauline Croft, *King James*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 22.

²⁵ 'James to Elizabeth', 26 January 1587, in *Letters of King James VI & I*, ed. Akrigg, 81-3.

kinship rhetoric was strictly conventional for royal letters.²⁶ The ties of kinship between Elizabeth and James included their shared status as monarchs, their blood relation and Elizabeth's role as his godmother.²⁷ However, James' appeal was unsuccessful and several days after the letter's composition, Mary was executed.

In the letter discussed above the idea of royal honour is an important element. In itself 'honor is the good opinion of people who matter to us, and who matter because we regard them as a society of equals who have the power to judge our behaviour.'²⁸ During the early modern period concepts of honour were gender specific and were constructed differently for each gender.²⁹ Women, including female monarchs, maintained their honour and received praise for demonstrations of piety, chastity and modesty.³⁰ Elizabeth, as explored below, used the associations of modesty and the rhetorical frameworks of it in expressing innocence following Mary's execution. Elite men would preserve their honour through strength in battle and keeping their word.³¹ The concepts of honour and personal dignity were of significance to both Elizabeth and James. Elizabeth had referred to a monarch's honour code as being 'the law of kingly love.'³² James used the mutually held importance of royal honour in his appeal for his mother's life as he sought to recast the issue into one of honour in place of political necessity.

Mary Stuart was executed on the 8 February 1587 and Elizabeth reacted furiously when she learned of it, as while she had signed the warrant, she had not ordered for it to be issued. William Davison, the junior Secretary of State, who had been entrusted with the signed warrant was sent to the Tower. He remained incarcerated there for eighteen months.³³ Most of the Privy Council fell into disgrace for four months.³⁴ William Cecil, Lord Burghley and her most trusted councillor, was not spared from her displeasure, and as a result he was not received at court for four weeks. His return to court did not mean that the

²⁶ Mueller, "'To My Very Good Brother the King of Scots'", 1068.

²⁷ Allinson, 'The Letters of Queen Elizabeth I and King James VI', 66-7.

²⁸ James Bowman, *Honor: A History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), 4.

²⁹ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 48; Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1994), 76.

³⁰ Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 25; Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King*, 76.

³¹ Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King*, 76.

³² Allinson, 'The Letters of Queen Elizabeth I and King James VI', 57; Allinson, 'Conversations on Kingship', 143.

³³ Williams, *The Later Tudors*, 315.

³⁴ John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 336.

situation returned to normal and Elizabeth maintained her hostility towards him for four months following the execution, as she did with her other Privy Councillors.³⁵

Historians, with little agreement, have debated the sincerity of Elizabeth's reaction to Mary's execution and generally two opposing views have been expressed. R.B. Wernham argues that, while there was possibly some genuine grief involved, many of Elizabeth's actions were intended for diplomatic show.³⁶ Wallace T. MacCaffrey concurs, though argues firmly that the majority of Elizabeth's actions in the wake of the execution were concerned with face-saving gestures.³⁷ The strength of her response to Mary's execution, however, indicates otherwise and that it was not a show put on for the benefit of her diplomatic relations. As Penry Williams argued:

While there was probably an element of calculation at times, particularly in the treatment of Davison, it is unlikely that her rage and grief were merely a performance staged to impress James and other monarchs. Burghley, who knew her well, was deeply frightened by her anger.³⁸

Williams' position is similar to G.R. Elton who stated that Elizabeth expressed genuine sorrow and anger following Mary's execution.³⁹ John Guy is more circumspect, merely arguing that Elizabeth had not intended for the signed warrant to be used.⁴⁰ Elizabeth's reaction to the execution of Mary may indicate genuine distress at the event and likely combined with anger at the execution occurring without her complete approval. However, her personal feelings did not remove the diplomatic necessity of publicly demonstrating her position as the risks to England's diplomatic relationships from the execution had been a significant part of Elizabeth's hesitation in signing the warrant and had been ignored by her councillors in its dispatch. Elizabeth's domestic expression of anger towards her councillors for the dispatching of the execution warrant was not on its own a sufficient expression of horror and innocence for her diplomatic relationships, especially regarding Scotland. She was well aware of the impact Mary's death would have on Anglo-Scottish relations and she

³⁵ R.B. Wernham, *Before the Armada: The Growth of English Foreign Policy 1485-1588* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), 382; Conyers Read, *Lord Burghley and Queen Elizabeth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 371-379.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 382.

³⁷ Wallace T. MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth and the Making of Policy, 1572-1588* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 424-5.

³⁸ Williams, *The Later Tudors*, 315.

³⁹ G.R. Elton, *England Under the Tudors*, 3rd edn. (London: Routledge, 1991), 368-370.

⁴⁰ Guy, *Tudor England*, 336; Guy, *My Heart is My Own*, 496.

sought to halt it through a personal expression of innocence to James through their correspondence.

On 14 February Elizabeth composed a letter to James in which she appeared disturbed by Mary's execution and the possible consequences of the event. This autograph letter is short, roughly half the length of her usual missives, but contains highly emotional language and a deep protestation of innocence in the entire matter. She wrote: 'I beseech you that – as God and many more know – how innocent I am in this case, so you will believe me that if I had bid aught I would have bid by it'.⁴¹ This protestation was strong and she was clear that she would have stood by her order if she had intended it. Today it is difficult to untangle the threads of what did occur between her signing of the warrant and its dispatch, and impossible to know an individual's intent or honesty from the remnants of a correspondence that occurred over four hundred years ago. In many respects it falls to individual judgement of the evidence that survives. It is also clear that whatever her emotional response to this event was, it was necessary for Elizabeth to proclaim her innocence in the matter for diplomatic purposes.

Innocence was a trope of Elizabeth and James' correspondence, and formed an aspect of eleven letters that I have analysed. In most cases it was James who wrote of his innocence in reply to direct questions from Elizabeth or in response to rumours of his actions. This could indicate that Elizabeth was the dominant partner in the correspondence. Additionally, it implies that in the case of Mary's execution their usual roles had been reversed, at least temporarily, resulting in Elizabeth assuming James' position of the lesser partner of the correspondence, petitioning for her innocence to be acknowledged. It appears that proclaiming innocence made it difficult for the recipient of the letter to contradict the statement being made without solid evidence as it would have called into question kingly honour and the authority of the royal word, discussed above as central to both monarchs' ideologies of kingship.

Elizabeth's expression of innocence could have been founded upon the rhetorical trope of modesty utilised frequently in women's writing during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After her ascension Elizabeth generally spoke and acted confidently as a monarch in place of the more traditional

⁴¹ 'Elizabeth to James', 14 February 1587, in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Marcus, Mueller and Rose, 296-7.

deferential modesty of a queen. However, she was also familiar with the rhetoric of modesty as demonstrated by her effective use of it in a speech she gave at Oxford University in 1566.⁴² In this speech she said:

Those who do bad things hate the light, and therefore, because I am aware that I myself am about to manage badly my opportunity in your presence, I think that a time of shadows will be fittest for me ... For a long time, truly, a great doubt has held me: Should I be silent or should I speak? If indeed I should speak, I would make evident to you how uncultivated I am in letters; however, if I remain silent my incapacity may appear to be contempt.⁴³

Elizabeth's use of rhetoric cannot be completely taken at face value as she was highly educated and capable, but she was also aware of when it was culturally proper for her to make such demonstrations. Traditionally, women were expected to be obedient to their husbands or fathers, chaste in behaviour and silent.⁴⁴ In such environments it could also be problematic for a woman to display rhetorical skill.⁴⁵ The expectations of behaviour for women in general were also applicable to female monarchs and they received praise for displaying appropriately feminine virtues, virtues that often conflicted with the requirements of a reigning monarch.⁴⁶ Patricia Pender has argued that the utilisation of modesty rhetoric was employed by women to manage the cultural restrictions placed on women writers, an application that Elizabeth would have been aware of. Pender writes: 'Early modern women often circumvented the charges of impropriety or indecency entailed in assuming the mantle of authorship by denying that they were authors at all.'⁴⁷ While denial of authorship was not the exact purpose of Elizabeth in her letter to James it could have served as a rhetorical foundation for her to express innocence in the execution of Mary.

⁴² Patricia Pender, *Early Modern Women's Writing and the Rhetoric of Modesty* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1-2; Teague, 'Elizabeth I', 524.

⁴³ 'Speech of Elizabeth I', quoted in Pender, *Early Modern Women's Writing and the Rhetoric of Modesty*, 1-2.

⁴⁴ Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King*, 136.

⁴⁵ Linda S. Shenk, 'Queen Solomon: An International Elizabeth I in 1569', in *Queens & Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. by Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 106.

⁴⁶ Sarah Duncan, 'Most godly heart fraught with al mercie': Queens' Mercy during the Reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I', in *Queens & Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, eds. Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 33.

⁴⁷ Pender, *Early Modern Women's Writing and the Rhetoric of Modesty*, 3.

Elizabeth was fully aware of the rhetoric of modesty when she composed her letter to James in February 1586, as demonstrated in her speech at Oxford. Thus, modesty rhetoric was likely utilised as the framework for her rhetoric of innocence she expressed in her letter to James. In so adapting modesty rhetoric, it formed a deviation from the traditional rhetorical framework of modesty. It was not uncommon for Tudor women to deviate from traditional rhetorical models and adopt more individualistic approaches.⁴⁸ It also highlighted Elizabeth's anxiety over the issue as deviation could indicate uncertainty on the part of the writer while following rhetorical norms conveyed reassurance and stability.⁴⁹ Elizabeth was distressed by the execution of Mary as the disgrace of most of her council would attest. She wished to convey her innocence in the matter to James and the associations and conventions of modesty rhetoric were beneficial. Elizabeth needed her interpretation of the events of Mary's execution to be accepted by foreign powers such as Scotland and France.⁵⁰ To resolve the issue Elizabeth sought to use her dissatisfaction with Mary's execution to express her innocence. Whether her innocence was real or not will never be known but the very fact that she expressed it so strongly following Mary's execution prompts one to conclude that her diplomacy with James required her to do so.

For almost one year following the execution of Mary the correspondence between Elizabeth and James slowed to a practically non-existent trickle compared to the previous exchange. During the two years before Mary's execution there were on average more than ten letters exchanged between the monarchs. However, between the execution and August 1588 James composed only one letter to Elizabeth. This letter gives the impression of strained emotions, where his words stick rigidly to the diplomatic protocols and phrasing. But the formality could also have been his way of satisfying the demands of his people as there were indications that he was privately relieved that Mary was dead.⁵¹ James wrote that he:

dare not wrong you so far as not to judge honourably of your unspotted part therein. So, on the other side, I wish that your honourable

⁴⁸ James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 23.

⁴⁹ Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 116.

⁵⁰ Rayne Allinson, 'The Queens Three Bodies: Gender, Criminality and Sovereignty in the Execution of Mary Queen of Scots', in *Practices of Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Megan Cassidy-Welch and Peter Sherlock (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 105; Doran, 'Revenge her Foul and Most Unnatural Murder?', 593.

⁵¹ Croft, *King James*, 22.

behaviour in all times hereafter may fully persuade the whole world of the same.⁵²

In this he indicated that while he would not question Elizabeth's honour, and that he would accept her protestations of innocence, he warned her that in her future actions she would need to be careful to protect her reputation of honour. He demanded an unspecified satisfaction for Mary's death to 'strengthen and unite this isle, establish and maintain the true religion, and oblige me to be, as of before I was, your most loving and dearest brother'.⁵³ The italic elements in the last quote indicate words not present in the autograph draft of the letter but from a copy of that he eventually sent to Elizabeth and the amendment could indicate the difficulty of his feelings to her at this time. It could also indicate the input of an advisor, but it is difficult to be certain and is highly unusual for a letter of this correspondence to be concluded in such a way. The words themselves also indicate that there was a diplomatic break as a result of Mary's death, and this required Elizabeth to make reparations to ensure that the alliance, and indeed the relationship, survived.

While James wrote his acceptance of Elizabeth's innocence, the broader Anglo-Scottish diplomatic situation was severely strained. Following the execution there was a breach in relations between the two kingdoms and unrest on the ever-problematic borders. Reports made their way to England of planned reprisals for Mary's death that added to the government's anxiety as the Spanish threat increased. The anger towards England was not limited to Catholic Scottish nobles but was shared by their Protestant compatriots and they jointly called for James to seek revenge for his mother's death.⁵⁴ The Scottish response was strong enough for some of Elizabeth's experienced councillors to become concerned about the possibility of war.⁵⁵ James, who viewed the alliance and his possible succession to the English throne, as of more importance than the idea of a war of revenge, did not share his kingdom's anger towards the English as strongly.⁵⁶ He was, however, forced to make concessions to the angry response of his people and did not ask for his pension, which he received from the English government following the agreement of the Anglo-Scottish alliance in 1556, to be paid in 1587 as it would have taken on the appearance of 'blood money'.⁵⁷ The anger within Scotland after the execution of Mary Stuart

⁵² 'James to Elizabeth', Late February 1587, in *Letters of King James VI & I*, ed. Akrigg, 84-5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 84-5.

⁵⁴ Doran, 'Revenge her Foul and Most Unnatural Murder?', 599-600.

⁵⁵ P.J. Holmes, 'Mary Stewart in England', in *Mary Stuart: Queen in Three Kingdoms*, ed. Michael Lynch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 214.

⁵⁶ Elton, *England Under the Tudors*, 370; MacCaffrey, *Queen Elizabeth and the Making of Policy*, 245.

⁵⁷ Julian Goodare, 'James VI's English Subsidy', in *The Reign of James VI*, eds. Julian Goodare

was beyond all calculation of the English Privy Council and was part of what Elizabeth had feared.

The failure of the correspondence indicated that a key aspect of the diplomatic relationship between the two kingdoms had been broken, that of personal communication between their monarchs. Allinson argues that a personal royal correspondence was an important element in maintaining the relationships between two kingdoms in alliance. Breaking a correspondence of this type could therefore cause considerable damage to the diplomatic relationship as a wider whole.⁵⁸ The suspension of the Anglo-Scottish diplomatic relationship was significant and those historians who argue that Mary's death had little impact greatly underestimate the heightened feelings this issue incited within Scotland.⁵⁹ For the year following the execution diplomatic relations were practically suspended between the two kingdoms.⁶⁰ Strained diplomatic relations made the threat from Spain even more severe and as it became clearer that the Armada would soon set sail England looked to its defences. It was in the midst of England's preparations that Elizabeth sought to secure her postern gate against the Spanish as she had previously done against the French. To that end Elizabeth resurrected her correspondence with James.

Elizabeth had allowed the silence in the correspondence to stand and she did not write to James again following her protestation of innocence until events of the wider world prompted her to do so in May 1588. This letter expressed her willingness to overlook the recent past and said that she wished 'to turn my eyes to the making up of that sure amity and staunch goodwill...'⁶¹ Elizabeth's language concerning the repair of the amity and the very length of time between her letters to James indicate how much of an impact the execution of Mary had on the relationship between England and Scotland. Yet Elizabeth's letter also indicated the strength of her desire to normalise relations between their kingdoms, promising that he would find her to be 'the carefullest Prince of your quiet government, ready to assist you with force, with treasure, counsel, or anything you have need of as much as in honour you can require, or upon cause you shall need'.⁶² This declaration of support and assistance underlined her desire to repair relations, but it was motivated by something far more substantial than a simple wish for her innocence to be accepted by James. In

and Michael Lynch (Phantassie: Tuckwell Press, 2000), 112-14.

⁵⁸ Allinson, *A Monarchy of Letters*, 91.

⁵⁹ Doran, 'Revenge her Foul and Most Unnatural Murder?', 589-590.

⁶⁰ Doran, 'Loving and Affectionate Cousins?', 206-7.

⁶¹ 'Elizabeth to James', 11 May 1588, in *The Letters of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. Harrison, 191-3.

⁶² 'Elizabeth to James', 11 May 1588, in *The Letters of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. Harrison, 191-3.

May 1588 England was well aware of the assembly of the Spanish Armada and was diplomatically isolated from much of the continent on account of the kingdom's Protestantism. The execution of Mary had alienated Scotland and thus made James an unpredictable neighbour. It was this concern that prompted Elizabeth's wide-ranging promises in her letter to James, ones that seem to have been well received as a little over a month later Elizabeth sent another letter to thank James for his acceptance of the 'truth' and questioned James about what he wanted as satisfaction for Mary's execution. For his satisfaction James sought from Elizabeth an additional £1000 per year for his pension and her acknowledgment of him as her heir.⁶³ It also appears that James had recently expressed a commitment, as written by Elizabeth in her letter, to the 'constant defence of your country, together mine, from all Spaniards or strangers'.⁶⁴ The commitment to the joint defence of England and Scotland by James seems to indicate a thawing of the diplomatic tension between them and an intriguing move of James' to align with Elizabeth against Spain.

The alignment of James with Elizabeth in the face of the Spanish Armada was possibly more curious than it seems at face value. Following Mary's execution, during the suspension of relations between England and Scotland, James could have found support across most of Europe and from most Catholics to make a move against Elizabeth. Indeed, parts of Protestant Scotland itself were in favour of acting against England in the aftermath of the execution.⁶⁵ Instead, James chose to commit himself to the cause of Elizabeth's England. This was most likely in order to secure his claim in the succession and a possible increase in his pension.⁶⁶ However, his passive support in itself would have been sufficient for that purpose. Instead James declared in a letter written in August that he:

offered unto you my forces, my person, and all that I may command, to be employed against yon strangers in whatsoever fashion and by whatsoever mean as may serve for the defence of your country. Wherein I promise to behave myself not as a stranger and foreign prince but as your natural son and compatriot of your country in all respects.⁶⁷

⁶³ Wernham, *Before the Armada*, 383.

⁶⁴ 'Elizabeth to James', 1 July 1588, in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Marcus, Mueller and Rose, 355-6.

⁶⁵ Doran, 'Revenge her Foul and Most Unnatural Murder?', 600.

⁶⁶ Wernham, *Before the Armada*, 383.

⁶⁷ 'James to Elizabeth', 4 August 1588, in *Letters of King James VI & I*, ed. Akrigg, 87-9.

His strong rhetoric was a declaration of alliance to Elizabeth and England, far more than the assurance that was necessary to maintain his position diplomatically, and therefore England could turn its attention to the Channel and its defence against the Armada assured of at least James' allegiance.

In 1588 the Spanish Armada failed disastrously in its attempt to invade England. This event was one of the few times in Elizabeth's reign that the threat of foreign invasion was more immediate than the concern of conspiracy and plots. It had also served to encourage England to rebuild its diplomatic understanding with Scotland. The dramatic confrontation that occurred off the south coast of England resulted in Spain's fleet fleeing and did not ultimately require Elizabeth to call upon James to make good on his rhetorical support. Elizabeth celebrated the achievement in a letter sent to James shortly following the Armada's dispersal. She wrote of the victory in the 'narrow seas' through the assistance of 'God's singular favour' before continuing to comment on how Philip II, the King of Spain, had given her the glory of a military victory through his attempts at duplicity rather than continue with the diplomatic alternative that they had been pursuing. As she wrote: 'even in the mids [sic] of treating peace, begins this wrongful war. He hath procured my greatest glory that meant my sorest wrack...'.⁶⁸ Her evident joy at the defeat of the Armada in the Channel did not remove her unease over English security, however, and she urged James to maintain his vigilance against the Armada that was returning to Spain by sailing around Scotland. Her concern was centred on the unreliability of the Catholic Lords in Scotland and the prevalent belief within England that they would align themselves with the retreating Spanish fleet.

The two years from the discovery of the Babington Plot in 1586 until the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 were amongst the most difficult for the Anglo-Scottish alliance during Elizabeth's reign. Mary's position within English custody had long been a delicate issue for Elizabeth's diplomacy but the discovery of her involvement in yet another plot had made it untenable. Elizabeth was torn between her personal beliefs in the rights of monarchs and the need to defend herself from the plots of others. While diplomats pleaded for Mary, James made direct appeals to Elizabeth calling upon her to act with honour and to uphold the divine right of kings, concepts that they both held in common. The appeals were insufficient to protect Mary and the warrant was eventually signed and dispatched. Through her correspondence with James she sought to express her innocence in the affair, using the rhetoric of modesty as a

⁶⁸ 'Elizabeth to James', August 1588, in *Queen Elizabeth I: Selected Works*, ed. May, 181-3.

framework, and attempted to protect their alliance. The matter caused a strong outpouring of anger in Scotland towards England and for a year following the execution of Mary Anglo-Scottish diplomacy was effectively suspended. It was the threat of the outside world that again urged Elizabeth to look north towards Scotland and in the face of the Spanish Armada she sought to mend her connection with James and resume their correspondence. James, seeing his future more in England as Elizabeth's successor, rather than alongside her continental opponents, swore to uphold their alliance regardless of the recent difficulties between them, laying down some of the initial groundwork for the joining of England and Scotland upon his eventual succession.