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Revision

A queen without a kingdom

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Consider the following question, then take a look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

How serious a threat to Elizabeth I was Mary, Queen of Scots?

Student answer with commentary

To many contemporaries, Mary, Queen of Scots was a serious threat to Elizabeth. This was because of her claim to the throne, her Catholicism and support both in England and from abroad. However, in reality, the threat never materialised, and it is debatable – given Mary's behaviour and lack of support from both within England and from overseas – whether she was actually a serious threat to Elizabeth.

The opening identifies the major factors that might have made Mary a threat and offers a view as to how serious these challenges were to Elizabeth.

Although Mary had a claim to the English throne and used the royal arms to propagate that claim – and for some Catholics, her claim was as good as Elizabeth's, if not better – few were willing to take action to put it into practice. She could trace her descent back to Henry VII and her marriage to Darnley strengthened this claim. However, Henry VIII had excluded the Stuarts from the line of succession and many in England saw her as too foreign, particularly given her link to the French Guise family. They did not want a repeat of the perceived foreign domination that had followed Mary Tudor's marriage to Philip of Spain. However, there were some traditionalists who did not believe that Henry could alter the succession and exclude her. Furthermore, if Elizabeth did not marry and have a child, Mary was the legitimate successor, and this became more likely as Elizabeth refused to marry, despite pressure from both her Privy Council and parliament. As a result, Mary was likely to succeed Elizabeth should the queen die childless, as had appeared possible following the smallpox scare of 1562, threatening the Protestant ascendancy in England.

There is a balanced discussion of the threat Mary posed because of her claim to the throne, particularly if Elizabeth should die childless, and how this would threaten the Protestant ascendancy. This was an increasing issue as Elizabeth became older and was less likely to marry or have children. There is a clear argument based on the threat and some limited judgement.

Mary was, in the eyes of some Catholics, the legitimate queen. They argued that Henry had never lawfully dissolved his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and therefore Elizabeth was illegitimate. This was given even greater force with the Papal Bull of Excommunication in 1570, which declared Elizabeth both a heretic and usurper. Despite this, most English Catholics were loyal to Elizabeth and

had been scandalised by Mary's behaviour and likely involvement in the murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley. Furthermore, by the time of the Papal Bull, Elizabeth had been on the throne for 12 years and had secured her position and the threat from the rebellion of the Northern Earls had been crushed. This greatly reduced Mary's threat to Elizabeth, as she would need either mass support in England or foreign support if she were to attempt to overthrow Elizabeth.

The response continues its balanced discussion about support for Mary, but has a clear line of argument and wide-ranging evidence to show that she was not a serious threat, given the lack of mass support.

Mary's arrival in England in 1568 presented Elizabeth with a potential threat to national security, even though she was able to hold her prisoner for the next 19 years. However, despite Mary's presence in England and the possibility that she would act as a figurehead for a Catholic rebellion, support for her was limited, reducing the threat. This was seen most clearly in the rising of the Northern Earls, which followed the discovery of Mary's potential marriage to Norfolk. Not only did this reveal the ability of Elizabeth's spy master, Walsingham, but the lack of numbers who rose in support of the Northern Earls showed the limited support Mary had, suggesting that the rising was little more than a court conspiracy which ended with the execution of Norfolk. Similarly, other plots to remove Elizabeth, such as the Ridolfi and Throckmorton, horrified most Catholics and again showed the lack of support for her. This was only confirmed by her involvement in the Babington plot, where she was even abandoned by her own son, who realised that any support for his mother would endanger his succession. Once again, the intelligence service was so good that the plot was uncovered and, as with all the plots, did not seriously endanger Elizabeth. None of the plots hatched on Mary's behalf actually developed into anything serious, suggesting that even her presence in England was not a serious threat.

The lack of support for Mary is further developed in this paragraph, with the response arguing that the plots scandalised most Catholics and that both the rising of the Northern Earls and the other plots showed that the chances of Mary being able to overthrow Elizabeth were limited. The response stresses the strength of the regime and the growing security of Elizabeth's position to further strengthen the argument that Mary was not a threat.

However, the threat of Mary was made greater by foreign support and the changing international situation. The murder of both William of Orange and Admiral Coligny explain why it is understandable that many people in England believed that there was an international Catholic conspiracy to destroy Protestantism and that the next target would be Elizabeth. Foreign support, most notably from the Guise family and France, could have proved a threat. Mary was the daughter of Mary of Guise and in 1558 had married the Dauphin of France, later Francis II. Her claim to the English throne had been recognised by Henri II in preference to that of Elizabeth, who the French still regarded as illegitimate. However, the death of Francis II, Mary's husband, together with Catherine de Medici's attitude towards Mary, made it unlikely that France would be willing to make her claim reality. Furthermore, France was engulfed by a series of Wars of Religion, which distracted from any attempted intervention. The other major Catholic power who might have aided Mary was Spain. However, it was not in Spain's interest to overthrow Elizabeth and replace her with a pro-French ruler who would then control the Channel and Spain's route to the Netherlands. As a result, Philip acted to protect Elizabeth, preventing her early excommunication and only turning against her in 1569, by which time her position was more secure, thus reducing considerably the potential threat from foreign powers.

The paragraph suggests, in the opening, that foreign support had the potential to make Mary a threat. However, this line of argument is then convincingly undermined by an examination of the position of the states that might have acted. There is some acknowledgement of the fears of an international conspiracy, and again there is a clear judgement

Mary was a focal point of concerns about Catholicism, the succession, and national security. However, despite her claim to the English throne, she was not as serious a threat as many feared. The majority of English Catholics were unwilling to rise up in her support and were loyal to Elizabeth, and the two major foreign powers who might have supported Mary had other, more pressing concerns. France was involved in a civil war that lasted into the 1590s and Spain had financial problems, the threat of the Turks and the Dutch revolt. It was only English support for the Dutch rebels that led to the Armada, not Mary's execution that provoked Spain, suggesting that Mary was not a serious threat.

The conclusion follows from the view suggested in the opening paragraph. The line of argument is consistent. The response contains a wide range of supporting detail and has a series of interim judgements, as well as an overall verdict. This response would be placed in the top level.

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