

# Queen Elizabeth I's Pregnancy, Secret Marriage and Childbirth

---



*Evidence concerning Queen Elizabeth I's secret marriage to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and the Queen's pregnancy and childbirth.*

Author: Peter Dawkins

## Queen Elizabeth I's Pregnancy, Secret Marriage and Childbirth

In November 1560 the Queen's "looks" were quite consistent with a pregnant woman, and in December 1560, according to Mme D. von Kunow, a secret despatch among the Escorial Papers said that the Queen was expecting a child by Robert Dudley. In early 1561, it was reported that Elizabeth was bedridden with a mysterious illness that caused her body to swell. In addition, there were rumours that some private or formal betrothal had passed between the Queen and Robert Dudley.<sup>1</sup>

On 31 December 1560 Throckmorton, the English ambassador in Paris, wrote to Cecil, querying what to do "if her Majesty do so foully forget herself in her marriage as the bruit runneth here," for the Spanish ambassador, who had just visited him, did "earnestly require me to tell him whether the Queen's Majesty was not secretly married to Lord Robert; for, said he, I assure you, the Court is full of it, and the rumours of her doings be very strange in all courts and countries."

Throckmorton also wrote privately to the Queen and Dudley, saying that if the rumours were true, he would be unable to effect any successful diplomacy at the French Court or elsewhere. Cecil responded to him on 15 January 1561 with a warning:

"I advise you not to meddle with the matters of this Court, otherwise than ye may be well advised from hence. What Her Majesty will determine to do only God, I think, knoweth; and in her His Will be fulfilled. Writings remain, and coming into adverse hands may be sinisterly interpreted.... Servants and messengers may be reporters to whom they list, and therefore I cannot give you so plain a counsel as I wish: But in one word I say, Contend not where victory cannot be had."

In other words, Cecil did not deny outright that the reports and rumours were untrue, which he would certainly have done if they were, and warns Throckmorton against committing anything about it in writing.

On 22 January 1561 De Quadra reported to Phillip that Sir Henry Sidney, who was married to Robert Dudley's sister Mary, told him that the marriage between the Queen and Dudley was now "in everybody's mouth", and had said that if the King of Spain would countenance it, they would restore the Catholic religion. De Quadra added that:

"If she marry Lord Robert without his Majesty's sanction, your Majesty has but to give a hint to your subjects and she will lose her throne. Without your Majesty's sanction she will do nothing in public; And it may be when she sees she has nothing

to hope for from your Majesty, she will make a worse plunge to satisfy her appetite. She is infatuated to a degree which would be a notable fault in any woman, much more in one of her exalted rank."

An implication here is that if the Queen was unable to obtain Philip's sanction, she would marry in secret.<sup>2</sup> However, this may already have happened, if what the *Dictionary of National Biography* XVI p. 114 states is accurate:

"It is herein recorded that on Jan. 21 1560/1 Queen Elizabeth was secretly married to Robert Dudley in the House of Lord Pembroke before a number of witnesses."

The next day, 22 January 1561, the Queen was in residence at York Place and had no public engagements or interviews. It was on that day, according to William Rawley, that Francis Bacon was born to Sir Nicholas and Lady Anne Bacon, either at York House or York Place.<sup>3</sup> York Place, also known as Whitehall, was the Queen's palace. There are many things to suggest that Francis was actually the Queen's son and was adopted by the Bacons.

23 February 1561 De Quadra reported to Phillip that, in an audience with Queen Elizabeth, he had said to her that the King [Philip] desired to see her married and she replied that "she would make me her ghostly Father and I should hear her confession. It came to this, that she was no angel... that she had not resolved to marry Lord Robert or anyone. She thought her own people would like to see her married to an Englishman... She promised to do nothing without your Majesty's sanction." De Quadra ended by saying that he refrained from saying more for fear of making a mistake, "and because she is what we know her to be... She is double-minded and unstable."

Sir Henry Sidney, the Earl of Leicester's brother-in-law, wrote to the Bishop of Aquila, remarking: "The Queen and Lord Robert were lovers: but they intended honest marriage." To which the Bishop replied: "Some say she is a mother already, but this I do not believe."

The 1895 edition of *British Dictionary of National Biography* Vol.16, p.114, under the heading "Dudley", states:

"Whatever were the Queen's relations with Dudley before his wife's death, they became closer after. It was reported that she was formally betrothed to him, and that she had secretly married him in Lord Pembroke's house, and that she was a mother already." - January, 1560-1.<sup>4</sup>

The Earl of Pembroke's town house was Baynard's Castle in London. This would have been William Herbert, 1st Earl of Pembroke.<sup>5</sup>

The information contained in the following anecdote was mentioned in the 1895 edition of *British Dictionary of National Biography*:

"When Queen Victoria was staying at Wilton House, the Earl of Pembroke told her that in the muniment room was a document which formed written evidence that in 1560 Elizabeth I married the Earl of Leicester. The marriage was performed in secret oath of absolute secrecy. At the time of that marriage the Queen was

pregnant by Lord Leicester. The French and Spanish ambassadors reported this and the death of Amy Robsart to their Courts. They also told the Queen that if this was confirmed by her marriage to Leicester, France and Spain would jointly invade England, to remove the Protestant Queen and replace her by a Catholic monarch. Queen Victoria demanded that this document should be produced, and, after she had examined it, she put it on the fire, saying, 'one must not interfere with history.'"

This information was given to me by the 15th Earl of Pembroke, the grandfather of the present Earl. – Andrew Lyell.<sup>6</sup>

When Cecil was accused of having informed King Philip of Spain, "that the Queen had previously married Lord Robert in the Earl of Pembroke's house," his defence was:

I wrote what I said to the Queen herself, that it was reported all over London that the marriage had taken place. She betrayed neither surprise nor displeasure at my words. Had I so pleased I might have written all this to his Majesty; nor do I think I should have done wrong had I told him the World's belief that she was married already.

In October 1562 Queen Elizabeth fell ill with smallpox. believing her life to be in danger, she asked the Privy Council to make Robert Dudley Protector of the Realm and to give him a suitable title together with twenty thousand pounds a year. However, Elizabeth made a quick recovery and the plan was not enacted. Dudley was instead made a privy councillor. The following year, in June 1563, the Queen granted him Kenilworth Manor, Castle and Park, together with the lordships of Denbigh and Chirk in North Wales, and in September 1564 she created him Earl of Leicester.

Among all classes, in England and abroad, gossip got under way that the Queen had children by Dudley, and such rumours never quite ended for the rest of her life, with some unpleasant consequences. For instance, in 1562, Robert Brooks of Devizes was sent to prison for publishing the 'slander', and, in 1570, a gentleman named Marsham of Norwich lost his ears for saying "My Lord Leicester has two children by the Queen."

In 1571 Parliament was invoked to make it a penal offence to speak of any other successor to the Crown of England than the natural issue of the Queen. The historian William Camden noted:

"I myself have heard some oftentimes say, that the word was inserted into the Act of purpose by Leicester, that it might one day obtrude upon the English some Bastard son of his for the Queen's natural issue."

### Education of a Prince and the Sin of David

The great scholar Roger Ascham,<sup>7</sup> private tutor to both Edward VI and Princess Elizabeth, gives powerful hints of Elizabeth's direct involvement in the death of Amy Robsart, and of her secret marriage, pregnancy and motherhood, in his dedication to the Queen, entitled *Divae Elizabethae*, which was intended as the preface to his book, *The Schoolmaster*. This dedication

was written as a personal letter to the Queen and dated 30th October 1566. The book, which Ascham had started writing in 1563, was finished in 1566 but not published until 1571, three years after Ascham's death. Not surprisingly, the dedication was suppressed, so it didn't appear in the published book. The book itself concerns the education of young noblemen, Ascham's theory being that young children were "sooner allured by love than driven by beatings to attain learning". It was not intended for schools, but "for the private bringing up of youth in gentlemen and noblemen's houses."

Ascham's dedication eventually came to light in 1761, when it was first published by James Bennet. In it, Ascham makes it clear that he was asked personally by the Queen, in a private interview at Windsor Castle, to write the book. Moreover, he shows that he is intimately conversant with Elizabeth's secret private life by likening it to that of David, King of Israel, and singling out in particular the sin of David with respect to Uriah, whose death David brought about in order to marry Bathsheba:

"Most Noble Princess ... Thinking of David's life, his former miseries, his later felicities, of God's dealing with him to bring happiness to his present time, and safety to his Posterity, I have had for many like causes, many like thoughts one of the Life and State of Your Majesty.

"God said to David ... 'Thine own seed shall sit in thy seat', which is the greatest comfort that can come to a great Prince ... And in the end he had the joyful blessing from Nathan, which all true English hearts daily do pray that God will send to your Majesty, 'I will set up thy seed after thee'.

"Yet when God had shown him the greatest favour... God suffered him to fall into the deepest pit of wickedness, to commit the cruellest murder, the shamefullest adultery.

"He did not stumble by ignorance, nor slide by weakness, nor only fall by wilfulness, but went into it advisedly ... to bring mischief to pass ... Yet God had not taken from David His Grace.

"So out of this foul matter is gathered the fairest example, and best lesson for Prince and private man... As in a fair Glass your Majesty shall see and acknowledge, by God's dealing with David, even very many like dealings of God with your Majesty. And in the end have as David had ... Prosperity and surest felicity for you, yours and your Posterity ..."

The sin of David with Bathsheba resulted in the birth of a son. It was further compounded by David sending Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, to his death in battle so that David could marry the pregnant Bathsheba.

Copyright © Peter Dawkins, 2020

Endnotes ►

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> J. A. Froude, *History of England*, vi, pp 427-431.

<sup>2</sup> William Comyns Beaumont, *The Private Life of the Virgin Queen*.

<sup>3</sup> William Rawley, 'The Life of the Honourable Author', prefacing *Resuscitatio, Or, Bringing into Publick Light Severall Pieces of the Works, Civil, Historical, Philosophical, & Theological, hitherto sleeping, Of the Right Honourable Francis Bacon, Baron of Verulam, Viscount Saint Alban* (1657). Rawley was Francis Bacon's chaplain and secretary in Bacon's later life.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography* (1895). The entry is written by Mme Amelie Deventer von Kunow.

<sup>5</sup> Owen's *Cipher Story*, I, pp 250, recounts that a secret marriage of the Queen and Dudley took place in the house of "Lord P", performed by Sir Nicholas Bacon and witnessed by Lady Anne Bacon and Lord Puckering. Bacon's Word Cipher, as deciphered by Orville Owen and his assistants, is a mixture of verifiable truths, unverified or unverifiable information, questionable information, and verifiably wrong or erroneous statements. "Lord Puckering" would seem to be one of the erroneous statements, as the only Lord Puckering was Sir John Puckering (1544-1596) who was Lord Keeper of the Great Seal from 1592 until his death in 1596. He would have been only 17 years old when the Queen married Robert Dudley, so could not have acted as a legal witness. Clearly, instead of Puckering, Pembroke is meant, since the marriage took place at Lord Pembroke's London house. Otherwise the cipher account fits with the other information concerning the marriage, with the addition that Lady Anne Bacon was a witness, which assuredly she would have been, as the wife of Sir Nicholas Bacon and senior lady-in-waiting to the Queen.

<sup>6</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> Earl of Pembroke was Reginald Herbert (8 September 1880 – 13 January 1960). The 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Pembroke was Henry George Charles Alexander Herbert (19 May 1939 – 7 October 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Roger Ascham (c.1515-1568) was, at her request, Princess Elizabeth's private tutor from 1548 to 1550. He was a remarkable scholar and a brilliant teacher, and at the same time one of the truly enlightened souls of that period. He was a tutor also to both Edward VI, Robert Dudley and Lady Jane Grey. He served in the administrations of Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I.