

The Affair of Robert Dudley and Queen Elizabeth I



Queen Elizabeth I's secret love affair, betrothal and marriage to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and the suspicious death of Amy Robsart, Lady Dudley.

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The turbulent events of 1549-1554

Soon after the execution of Thomas Seymour, England was racked with social unrest and a series of armed revolts. The Council blamed the Lord Protector, Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, for the lack of governmental control over the situation. By October, Somerset realised that he faced a serious threat and, for safety, withdrew to Windsor Castle, taking the boy-king Edward VI with him.¹ However, on 11 October 1549, the day before Edward's 12th birthday, John Dudley, Earl of Warwick, and Archbishop Cranmer brokered an unofficial deal with Somerset, who then surrendered. The King, having been returned safely to Richmond Palace, had Somerset arrested.

By January 1550 Warwick had consolidated his power and became, in effect, the new regent. On 2 February 1550 he was installed as Lord President of the Council, with the capacity to both appoint and debar councillors. He added supporters from his own faction to the Council and members of his family to the royal household. He arranged Somerset's release from the Tower and his return to the Privy Council and, on 3 June 1550, Warwick's eldest son John Dudley, Viscount Lisle, was married to Anne Seymour, Somerset's daughter, as a mark of reconciliation. The very next day, 4 June 1550, Robert Dudley, Warwick's third eldest living son, married heiress Amy Robsart, the daughter of a Norfolk squire. Robert (born 24 June 1532) and Amy (born 7 June 1532) were, respectively, just ten days and three days short of their 18th birthdays. King Edward and Princess Elizabeth attended the marriage. Robert Dudley and Princess Elizabeth, who was still a 16-year-old (born 7 September 1533), had been friends since 1541. As he would write much later in life, "I have known her better than any man alive since she was eight years old."

Somerset, with his power now much diminished and subject to the Council, thereafter schemed to overthrow Warwick's regime. But on 11 October 1551 Warwick was created Duke of Northumberland and his eldest son John, Viscount Lisle, became 2nd Earl of Warwick. Five days later Somerset was arrested. He was acquitted of treason, but convicted of felony for raising a contingent of armed men without a licence, and executed on 22 January 1552.

On 21 May 1553 Guildford Dudley, Northumberland's second youngest son, married Lady Jane Grey, daughter of the Duke of Suffolk and, through her mother Frances Brandon, a grandniece of Henry VIII.

Edward VI, Elizabeth's half-brother, died on 6 July 1553, aged 15. Northumberland, following the regal decree of King Edward (which was probably suggested by Northumberland), was

briefly able to install Lady Jane Grey as queen. On 19 July the reign was overthrown by Mary Tudor and, on 3 August 1553, Mary rode triumphantly into London with her half-sister Elizabeth at her side. On 1 October Mary was crowned Queen Mary I of England.

Northumberland and his five sons² were arrested and taken to the Tower of London on 25 July 1553. Northumberland was tried on 18 August and executed four days later, on 22 August 1553. Guildford and his ex-queen wife Jane were tried on 13 November 1553 and executed on 12 February 1554. Northumberland's eldest son John, who had become the 2nd Earl of Warwick in October 1551 when his father was created Duke of Northumberland, had been tried and condemned with his father but not executed. He, together with his brothers Ambrose, Robert and Henry Dudley, were kept imprisoned together in a room of the Beauchamp Tower, until they were finally reprieved and released in October 1554. (Warwick died immediately afterwards at Henry Sidney's home, Penshurst, in Kent.)

Elizabeth and Robert Dudley's secret betrothal whilst imprisoned in the Tower

The young Princess Elizabeth found herself involved in the complicated intrigue that accompanied these changes. Without her knowledge, the Protestant Sir Thomas Wyatt plotted to put her on the throne by overthrowing Mary. The rebellion failed, but a letter that Wyatt had written to Elizabeth, saying that he intended to overthrow Mary, was intercepted, as was a letter from de Noailles to the king of France which implied that Elizabeth knew of the revolt in advance and was gathering armed supporters. Elizabeth, despite her innocence in the matter, was sent to the Tower of London on 17 March 1554. Her stay in the Tower coincided with the imprisonment of Robert Dudley, and there are (hearsay and cipher) reports of them meeting up surreptitiously and even going through some form of marriage or marriage betrothal, as the threat of imminent execution haunted them daily.

After two months in the Tower, on Saturday 19 May 1554 Elizabeth was removed to the old royal palace at Woodstock, where she resided under house arrest. The following year she was brought to Hampton Court, still in custody. On 18 October 1555 she was allowed to take up residence at Hatfield, where she resumed her studies with the great scholar Roger Ascham. It was while at Hatfield that she began a correspondence with William Cecil, leading to a lifelong relationship.

Elizabeth's Accession as Queen of England; Robert Dudley's privileged office as Master of the Horse

On 17 November 1558 Queen Mary died. It was reputedly while sitting under the gnarled oak tree in the Great Park at Hatfield that Princess Elizabeth heard of her sister's death and therefore of her accession to the throne of England. The very next morning, 18 November 1558, the surrender of the Great Seal to Queen Elizabeth took place at Hatfield. One of the witnesses was Robert Dudley, who was made Master of the Horse on the same day. This was a highly important court position entailing close attendance on the sovereign. It not only made him the only man in England officially allowed to touch the Queen (as he was responsible for helping the Queen mount and dismount when she went horse-riding), but also the official quarters allotted to him were in rooms adjoining the Queen's bedchamber.

On 21 November 1558, just four days after her accession, Queen Elizabeth held her first Privy Council in the Great Hall at Hatfield. During that meeting she appointed William Cecil as Secretary of State. The next day, 22 December 1558, William Cecil's friend and brother-in-law, Nicholas Bacon, was appointed Lord Keeper of the Great Seal at Somerset House, London. Several days later, Elizabeth left for London to be crowned as the new queen, with those who had loved and supported her at her side. At her coronation on 15 January 1559 (a date chosen by her astrologer John Dee) she knighted her Lord Keeper. Sir Nicholas Bacon was sworn a Privy Councillor several days later. Sir Nicholas' wife, Lady Anne Bacon (née Cooke), second eldest daughter of Sir Anthony Cooke and already well-known to Elizabeth, became the leading lady-in-waiting to the queen. Her elder sister Mildred, wife of William Cecil, served briefly at court as a lady of the privy chamber.³ Katherine (Kat) Ashley was appointed First Lady of the Bedchamber, while her husband John was appointed Master of the Jewel House.⁴

On 6 February 1559, the Speaker of Parliament, Sir T. Gargrave, together with the Privy Council and some thirty members of the House of Commons, demanded an audience with the Queen, and they requested her in the name of the nation to take to herself a husband. She replied four days later that she intended to spend her own life for the good of her people, and that, if she married, she would choose a husband who would be as careful of them as herself. Children, she said, were uncertain blessings and might grow up ungracious—and anyway, for her it would be enough that “a Marble Stone should declare that a Queen reigned such a time, lived and died a Virgin”.⁵

To keep her country and Parliament happy, and foreign nations happy, the Queen began a policy of negotiating possible marriages with suitable foreign princes, or intimations of possible marriage with leading high-ranking countrymen; but this was all for show, to keep the peace, maintain her personal safety and that of the country, enhance her regal authority and autocratic control, and provide a cover for her own real desires and behaviour.

Elizabeth's intimate relationship with Robert Dudley

In a letter dated 18 April 1559, King Philip II of Spain was informed by his Spanish ambassador to the English court, Gómez Suárez de Figueroa y Córdoba, 1st Duke of Feria, that:

“During the last few days Lord Robert has come so much into favour that he does what he likes with affairs and it is even said that her Majesty visits him in his chamber day and night. People talk of this so freely that they go so far as to say that his wife has a malady in one of her breasts and that the Queen is only waiting for her to die so she can marry Lord Robert. I can assure your Majesty that matters have reached such a pass that I have been brought to consider whether it would not be well to approach Lord Robert on your Majesty's behalf, promising him your help and favour and coming to terms with him.”⁶

In a second letter, written whilst negotiations concerning a mooted marriage of Queen Elizabeth with the Arch Duke Ferdinand are taking place, Feria writes:

“They talk a great deal about the marriage with the Archduke Ferdinand and seem to like it, but for my part I believe she will never make up her mind to anything that

is good for her. Sometimes she appears to want to marry him, and speaks like a woman who will only accept a great prince; and then they say she is in love with Lord Robert and never lets him leave her.”

On St George’s Day, 23 April 1559, the Queen created Robert Dudley a Knight of the Garter. In addition, during that year, Elizabeth gave Robert Dudley land in Yorkshire, as well as the manor of Kew. She also gave him a licence to export woollen cloth free of charge.

It was from that month onwards that the Queen’s notably intimate relationship with Robert Dudley, her emotional dependence on him and her insistence on his constant presence at court, began to attract comment. Elizabeth’s close companion, Katherine Ashley, warned her about the rumours and even suggested that she should end her relationship with Dudley, as her behaviour in this regard threatened to tarnish her honour and dignity, but this only made the Queen angry and autocratically defensive of what she, in reply, declared to be her gracious behaviour towards her honourable Master of the Horse.

In a despatch dated 4 May 1559 written to the Doge and Senate of Venice, Paolo Tiepolo, the Venetian Ambassador at Brussels, informed by intelligence from England, reported that if Lord Robert’s wife “were perchance to die, the Queen might easily take him for her husband”:

“The Queen would still wish to some extent to feign to profess the Catholic religion, but she can conceal herself no longer. On St. George’s Day, the patron saint of the Knights of the Garter, she attended the ceremony then performed, never having appeared at any other. During the procession not a single cross was displayed, and when the Queen asked where the crosses were, she was answered, that being of silver and gold they were deposited in the Tower, and could not be produced. On the morrow mass was sung as usual for the souls of the deceased knights, but the Queen, who was to have been present, altered her mind, and the mass was said without the elevation of the Host. With the consent of the Chapter, the Queen created the Earl of Arundel her Vice-regent, and three new knights, the Duke of Norfolk, the Earl of Rutland, and Lord Robert Dudley, Master of the Horse, and son of the late Duke of Northumberland, *a very handsome young man (giovane bellissimo), towards whom in various ways the Queen evinces such affection and inclination that many persons believe that if his wife, who has been ailing for some time, were perchance to die, the Queen might easily take him for her husband.*”⁷

In a letter dated 10 May 1559, Don Aloisio Schivenoglia (“Il Schifanoia”)⁸ wrote to his Italian friends that “Lord Robert Dudley is in very great favour and very intimate with her Majesty”:

“The day before yesterday there came Sir William Pickering, who is regarded by all people as the future husband of the Queen. He remains at home, courted by many lords of the Council and others, but has not yet appeared at Court. It is said they wished in Parliament to settle what title they should give him and what dignity, but nothing was done. Many deem this to be a sign that she will marry the Archduke Ferdinand, but as yet there is no foundation for this, although the news comes from Flanders. *Meanwhile my Lord Robert Dudley is in very great favour*

and very intimate with her Majesty. On this subject I ought not to report the opinion of many persons. I doubt whether my letter may not miscarry or be read, wherefore it is better to keep silence than to speak ill.”⁹

Illness and Death of Amy Robsart, Lady Dudley

In May 1559 Robert Dudley’s wife, Amy Robsart, came to London from Throcking, but spent only a month there before returning to the country. Seemingly, she came to be with her husband or to persuade him to return home with her; but, if so, clearly this didn’t work. Lady Amy never saw her husband again.

In November 1559, the new Spanish ambassador, Álvaro de la Quadra, wrote to King Philip of Spain:

“I have heard from a person who is in the habit of giving me veracious news that Lord Robert had sent to poison his wife. Certainly all the Queen has done with us and with the Swede, and will do with all the rest in the matter of her marriage, is only to keep Lord Robert’s enemies and the country engaged with words until this wicked deed of killing his wife is consummated. I am told some extraordinary things about this intimacy.”

De Quadra was convinced that “Lord Robert” was the man “in whom it is easy to recognise the king that is to be.... she will marry none but the favoured Robert.”

From December 1559 or early January 1560, Amy Robsart went to live at Cumnor Place, Berkshire, a mansion created from a 14th century monastic complex that was rented by Sir Anthony Forster, Robert Dudley’s Receiver and Treasurer. Forster lived there with his wife and Mrs. Odingsells and Mrs. Owen, relations of the house’s owner, William Owen, son of Henry VIII’s physician. Robert Dudley looked after his wife financially and Amy received the proceeds of the Robsart estate, which she inherited after her father’s death. She appears to have lived modestly but comfortably, with a household of ten servants, and regularly ordered dresses and finery, and received presents of money and other material things from her husband. However, it was reported that, besides missing her husband’s presence, she was not only subject to depression but also terminally ill, with ambassadors noting a “malady in one of her breasts.”

In a letter dated 26 May 1560 De Quadra wrote:

“Lord Robert says that if he lives a year, he will be in another position from that which he now holds. Every day he presumes more and more. It is said he means to divorce his wife.”

In May 1560 Sir William Cecil went north to Scotland to negotiate the Treaty of Edinburgh. It was concluded in July, at the end of which Cecil journeyed back to London again. Whilst he was away, Elizabeth and Robert Dudley made the most of their freedom, with the Queen refusing to attend to any matters of state. The couple spent every day closeted up together, so much so that it was widely commented on and reported that the Queen’s health was

suffering. The result, not surprisingly, was that Elizabeth became pregnant. Naturally, the condition did not go unnoticed.

The story that the couple were lovers and that Elizabeth was pregnant spread across the country. So much so that, on 13 August, it was reported to Cecil that a sixty-eight-year-old widow from Essex, “Mother Dowe” (Anne Dowe of Brentwood), had been arrested and sent to prison for openly asserting that the Queen was pregnant by Robert Dudley,¹⁰ and John de Vere, the 16th Earl of Oxford, wrote to Cecil with news that Thomas Holland, vicar of Little Burstead, had been detained for telling another man that the Queen “was with child”, and asked Cecil whether he should follow the usual punishment for “rumour-mongers” and cut off Holland’s ears.

In the late afternoon of Sunday 8 September 1560, Amy Robsart was found lying dead at the foot of the staircase to her chamber in Cumnor Place, with her neck broken and two wounds on her head. That morning she had given all her servants permission to attend a local fair in the afternoon, which, on Amy’s insistence, they did. Amy took lunch with Mrs. Owen and afterwards she, Mrs Owen and any others still in the house appear to have departed for their private rooms. In the late afternoon, the servants returned and discovered Amy’s dead body. The finding of the coroner’s jury afterwards was that it was a “misfortune”—an accidental death brought about as a result of falling downstairs, sustaining two head injuries and breaking her neck.

The tragic incident naturally caused a commotion in both the court and the country. Murder and suicide were each contemplated as possible alternatives to the jury’s official statement of “misfortune”, with the general belief being that either Dudley or Elizabeth, or both, had engineered Amy’s death, or that she was murdered by persons who hoped to profit by Dudley’s now expected marriage to the Queen.

Just before Amy’s death, Cecil had unburdened himself to De Quadra, who then penned a letter to the Duke of Parma, which was not completed until after the report of Amy’s death had reached him, when it was dated 11 Sept 1560:

“After my conversation with the Queen I met with Secretary Cecil, whom I knew to be in disgrace. Lord Robert, I was aware, was endeavouring to deprive him of his place.... With little difficulty I led him to the subject, and after my many protestations that I would keep secret what he was about to tell me, he said that the Queen was conducting herself in such a way that he was about to withdraw from her service. It was a paid sailor, he said, who did not make for port when he saw a storm coming, and for himself he perceived the manifest ruin impending over the Queen through her intimacy with Lord Robert.... The Lord Robert had made himself master of the business of the state, and of the person of the Queen, to the extreme injury of the realm, with the intention of marrying her, and she herself was shutting herself up in the palace to the peril of her health and life.... He was therefore determined to retire in the country although he supposed they would send him [Cecil] to the Tower.

“He implored me for the love of God to remonstrate with the Queen, to persuade her not utterly to throw herself away as she was doing.... Lord Robert, he twice said, would be better in paradise than here....

“He told me the Queen cared nothing for foreign Princes She did not believe she stood in any need of their support. She was deeply in debt, taking no thought how to clear herself, and she had ruined her credit in the city. Last of all he said that they were thinking of destroying Lord Robert’s wife. They had given out that she was ill, but she was not ill at all; she was very well and taking care not to be poisoned. God, he trusted, would never permit such a crime to be accomplished or so wretched a conspiracy to prosper....

“The day after this conversation, the Queen herself told me that Lord Robert’s wife was dead or nearly so, and begged me to say nothing about it. Assuredly it was a matter full of shame and infamy, but for all that I do not feel sure that she will immediately marry him, or that she will marry him at all, as I do not think she has her mind sufficiently fixed. She wants resolution to take any decided step; and, as Cecil says, she wishes to act like her father (i.e. to be the sole head of the State without any sharing of power with a husband-consort).”¹¹

In a postscript of the same letter, De Quadra gives the news of poor Amy Robsart’s death:

“Since writing the above, I hear the Queen has published the death of Robert’s wife. She broke her neck—she must have fallen down a staircase, said the Queen.”

As De Quadra noted, Amy’s suspicious death made any intended marriage of the Queen with Dudley fraught with danger to them both, and particularly to the Queen. So, despite the gossip, it seems, on the face of it, unlikely that either of them engineered Amy’s death, but rather that it was either the result of her illness (which is thought possible nowadays by modern medical experts) or else a murder arranged by some person or group who was highly antagonistic to the possible marriage of Robert Dudley and Elizabeth.

The fact that the Spanish Ambassador De Quadra reported to Philip of Spain that “Lord Robert says that if he lives a year, he will be in another position from that which he now holds,” and added “It is not said he means to divorce his wife”, suggests that Dudley had been expecting the death of his wife within the year because he knew she was seriously ill, and that then he would be free to marry the Queen.¹²

Whatever the cause of Amy’s death, because of what people thought, it now made any public marriage of the Queen and Dudley well-nigh impossible.

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Endnotes ►

Endnotes

¹ Edward VI (12 October 1537 – 6 July 1553), son of Henry VIII and Jane Seymour, was the King of England and Ireland from 28 January 1547 until his death. He was crowned on 20 February at the age of nine and died aged 15.

² John Dudley, Earl of Northumberland, and his wife Jane Guildford, actually had eight sons, but the first two and last had died by c.1544. These sons were: Sir Henry Dudley (c.1525 – 1544); Thomas Dudley (died at the age of two); John Dudley, 2nd Earl of Warwick (c.1527-1530 – 21 October 1554); Ambrose Dudley, 3rd Earl of Warwick (c.1530-1 – 21 February 1590); Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester (24 June 1532 – 4 September 1588); Lord Guildford Dudley (c.1535 – 12 February 1554); Henry Dudley (died 10 August 1557); Charles Dudley (died at the age of eight). The five still-living sons who were imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1553 were John, Ambrose, Robert, Guildford and Henry.

³ The sisters, Anne and Mildred, were two of the five daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke, tutor to Queen Elizabeth's half-brother Edward before he became Edward VI. Her father, while tutoring young Prince Edward, also provided his children the same classical education. Anne remembers being a teenager in the schoolroom with the royal children and participating in courtly events at Hatfield House with Princess Elizabeth.

⁴ In 1545, Katherine Champernowne married John Ashley, Elizabeth's senior gentleman attendant and cousin of Anne Boleyn.

⁵ James Anthony Froude, *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, Vol.VI. p.159. To research his *History*, Froude (1818-1894) worked extensively with original manuscript authorities at the Record Office, Hatfield House, and the village of Simancas, Spain. The work was published in 12 volumes between 1856–70.

⁶ *The Courtships of Queen Elizabeth: A History of the Various Negotiations for Her Marriage*, by Martin A. S. Hume, F. R., Hist. S. Editor of *The Calendar of Spanish State Papers of Elizabeth* (Public Record Office). New York: Macmillan & Co. London: T. Fisher Unwin. Mccccxcvi.

See: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/53559/53559-h/53559-h.htm>.

⁷ Original Despatch, Venetian Archives.

⁸ Don Aloisio Schivenoglia, who signed himself as "Il Schifanoia", was an Italian in the service of Sir Thomas Gresham, Prior of the Order of St John of Jerusalem in England, and was apparently himself a member of that Order. Sir Thomas Tresham died on 1st March 1558, and, the house of the Priory and the property belonging to it having been seized by order of the Crown, Il Schifanoia went to reside with Monsignor Priuli, the intimate friend and testamentary executor of Cardinal Pole. Schivenoglia seems to have remained an inmate of Priuli's household until the date of his last extant communication. At the time of Elizabeth's coronation there was no Venetian ambassador accredited to the English court, but the letters Schivenoglia wrote to Sabino Calandra and other Italians between 17 December 1558 and 27 June 1559 gave Northern Italians an absorbing eye-witness report of events.

See: British History, State Papers, Venice; *The Queen's Majesty's Passage & Related Documents*, by Victoria University (Toronto, Ont.), Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies.

⁹ Venetian Calendar of State Papers. See *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts. relating to English Affairs, existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice, and in other Libraries of Northern*

Italy, edited and translated by Rawdon Lubbock Brown (Cambridge Library Collection, Cambridge University Press).

¹⁰ 13 Aug 1560 Report to Lord Burleigh, Calendar of State Papers.

¹¹ 11 Sept 1560, Letter of Bishop De Quadra to Ottavio Farnese, Duke of Parma. Spanish Calendar (Elizabeth).

¹² Francis Bacon's Word cipher, according to Owen (the decipherer), says that it was the Queen who ordered Dudley to arrange for his wife's death, first by spreading the rumour that his wife was ill and dying, and then by killing her in an appropriate way. Although this does not seem likely, it is, of course, possible: it could be that the Queen did order the killing, perhaps in one of her emotional outbursts or rages, without fully realising the consequences. (Owen, *Cipher Story*, I, pp 227-8.)