

Two Queens

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Historical portraits

Margot Robbie as Elizabeth I of England.

Saoirse Ronan as Mary Queen of Scots.

Two queens whose lives, crowns and countries were inextricably linked: Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I of England have fascinated generations. A new biopic takes a different look at these two women rulers in a man's world.

Mary Queen of Scots opens in 1561, when the 19-year-old Queen Mary returns to Scotland to take up her throne.

Mary and her distant cousin Elizabeth had both had traumatic childhoods.

Mary's father died days after her birth in 1542, making her queen. She was engaged first to English King Henry VIII's son Edward, and then to French King Henry II's son François by the time she was six. At that point she was sent to live at the French court, while her French mother ruled Scotland as regent. She was married to the Dauphin François at 16, and in 1559, he acceded to the French throne. But his reign was short lived, and two years later Mary was a widow and an orphan after the death of her mother.

Elizabeth had been Queen of England since 1558, but unlike Mary had not been destined for the role. From birth she had been considered illegitimate because her father, Henry VIII, had defied the Pope and annulled his first marriage to marry Elizabeth's mother, Anne



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distant cousin (exp) Henry VIII, Elizabeth's father, was Mary's great uncle (her grandmother, Margaret Tudor was Henry VIII's sister)



Boleyn. Then, when Elizabeth was two, the King had her mother executed and went on to marry four more times, while Elizabeth spent most of her childhood under house arrest.

Following her father's death in 1547, England entered a period of political and religious strife. Elizabeth's half-brother Edward and then her half-sister Mary each ruled briefly. After her sister Mary's death, the throne was reluctantly given to Elizabeth. The country had been in religious conflict since her father left the Catholic Church and made the country Protestant. Elizabeth was Protestant, and as many considered her illegitimate, Catholic opponents saw in Mary Queen of Scots a possible alternative – she shared their religion and had a conveniently legitimate blood link to the same Tudor ancestors as Elizabeth.

The Widow and the Virgin Queen

Women's power and status in the 16th century was dependent on blood links and marriage. Mary's marriage fate had been chosen long before she could choose for herself. She now tried to strengthen her title to both crowns by marrying Lord Darnley, a Stuart

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house arrest (n) a form of imprisonment where you are confined to your home

strife (n) unrest, conflict

reluctantly (adv) without enthusiasm

cousin who had similar Tudor ancestors. And they soon had a son, James.

Elizabeth pursued a very different course. She steadfastly refused to marry or have children. The “Virgin Queen” knew that a male or even female heir would be a threat to her position. Her opponents would happily try to replace her with a child who could easily be influenced.

A Game of Thrones

It sounds like a storyline from *Game of Thrones*: a monarch from a Northern nation challenges for the throne of its richer southern neighbour against a background of conflicting interests and religious strife, plots and counterplots.

But the story of Elizabeth and Mary is history. And, like all history, it has all the elements of fiction. It depends on how you tell the story. The filmmakers of the latest *Mary Queen of Scots* biopic set out to tell a modern version of the tale. It attempts to give life to two women who have often been portrayed as simple archetypes, puppets manipulated by the men in power.

Historically, Elizabeth has often been portrayed as a cold, calculating political animal. In an era of rapid successions, she reigned for an impressive 45 years, in part because of her refusal to marry. Mary, meanwhile,



David Tennant as the Protestant reformer John Knox.

was portrayed as emotional and headstrong. Married three times and implicated in murder plots, she only practically reigned for six years before being forced to abdicate in favour of her infant son. Mistakenly hoping for support from Elizabeth, she spent almost half her life imprisoned in England before Elizabeth had her executed in 1587.

The irony of both women’s lives is that when Elizabeth died, it was Mary’s son, who she had barely known, who inherited the English throne and became the first British king.

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steadfastly (adv) determinedly, without changing

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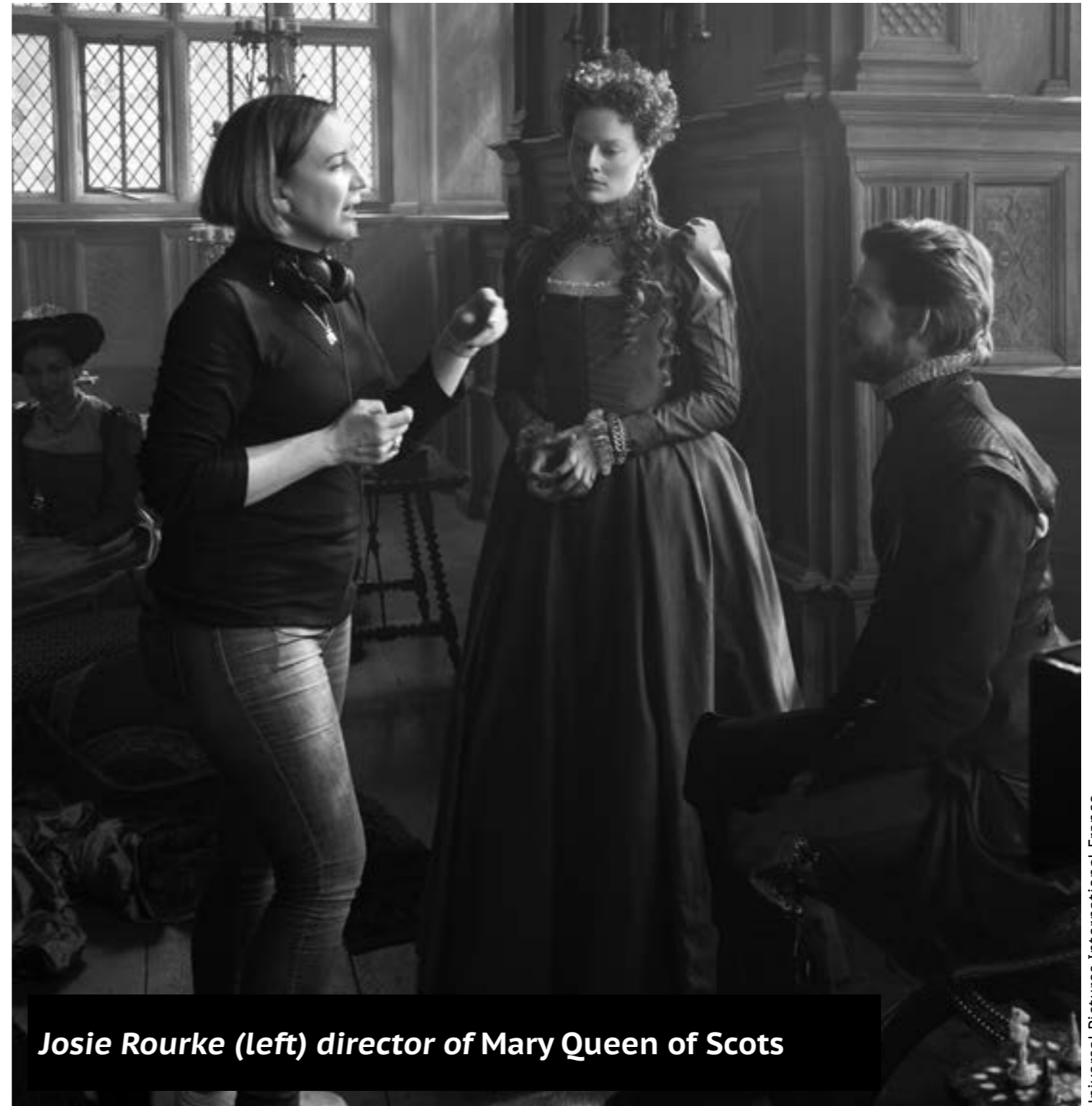


Nathan

The women were linked in life, and by posterity. Yet they never actually met. The new film concludes on an imagined meeting between the two women, searching for compromise but ultimately condemned to conflict by the politics that surrounded them.

They faced dilemmas and machinations typical of the political world of their time, but also ones specific to being women in power. Mary was denounced by the leader of the Protestant church in Scotland, John Knox, who claimed it was unnatural for women to rule.

The new film fits a 21st century narrative – the two queens are portrayed as complete personalities, and true political actors, not just victims of circumstance. But is that vision any more historically truthful than previous ones? Is it just the story we want to hear? History, it is said, is written by the victors. But in this case there is no real victor. The history has been written many times and will be rewritten again.



Josie Rourke (left) director of Mary Queen of Scots

Universal Pictures International France