Bringing down a monarch, even a treasonous one, was no small task in the era of the divine right of monarchs. Nevertheless, Sir Francis Walsingham, principal secretary of state to Elizabeth I from 1573-1590 and a devout Puritan, aimed to accomplish this difficult and dangerous objective. Walsingham believed that the safety and security of England and the Protestant Faith lay in securing the execution of Mary, Queen of the Scots and Catholic claimant to the throne of England. As Walsingham once wrote to the Earl of Leicester, "So long as that devilish woman lives neither her Majesty must make account to continue in quiet possession of her crown, nor her faithful servants assure themselves of safety of their lives" (Read ii.342). When Mary came under the supervision of Elizabeth I in 1568, she became the centre of numerous plots and conspiracies to destroy Elizabeth and raise herself to the English throne. In 1585, Walsingham became aware of one such plot, developing under the direction of English Catholics, that came to be known as the Babington plot. This plot threatened the assassination of Elizabeth I and the accession of Mary to the English throne but yielded, in Walsingham's service, the crucial evidence that would result in the execution of Mary. This essay will examine the history of the Babington plot and Walsingham's part in revealing the plot as well as securing from it, the trial and execution of Mary.

The Babington plot originated amid volatile foreign affairs that threatened the realm and crown of Elizabeth I. The volatility of these affairs was in large part due to the religio-political upheaval between Catholics and Protestants throughout Europe. While Spain, the most powerful of the European states, remained the committed defender of the Catholic cause, the states of Scotland, France and the Low Countries suffered enormous religious turmoil during Elizabeth's reign, which in turn threatened the Protestant cause in England.

In Scotland, the Catholic cause came under severe attack by John Knox's reformation movement. By 1567, the Catholic position weakened to such a degree that Mary Stuart, the reigning Catholic monarch, was successfully deposed in favour of her one year old son, James VI. (For whatever reason, Mary Stuart sought refuge with Elizabeth, her cousin, only to be placed under virtual house arrest in England from that point forward). Nevertheless, the Protestant

victory remained tenuous as nobles from both causes engaged in power struggles to position themselves favourably with the up-and-coming king. By 1579, the Catholics successfully shifted the balance of power and England faced a renewed threat from her Northern neighbours.

In France, the intrigues and wars between the Catholics and the Protestant Huguenots continuously threatened the balance of power in Europe. Though the ruling monarchs of the period, Catherine de Medici, Charles IX and Henry III, were all Catholic, the Huguenots exerted constant pressure because of their power in the provinces. The Wars of Religion from 1567 to 1577 forced these monarchs to make concessions to the Huguenots, which seemed in turn to strengthen the Protestant cause throughout Europe. In actuality, it had the adverse affect of uniting the strongest of the French nobles, the house of Guise, with Spain into the Catholic Holy League (1576).[1] The primary objective of the Catholic League was the defence of the Catholic Faith and hence, it supported any viable cause, conspiracy or plot that sought to advance the Catholic cause. The Catholic League, therefore, became the centre of plots against the Huguenots, William of Orange and Elizabeth.

In the Low Countries, the religious controversy was fuelling massive discontent against the Spanish regent. The Spanish responded harshly only to have revolts against Spanish rule flare in 1567. Initially, the revolts were unorganized and largely ineffectual. In 1572, however, William, the Prince of Orange, with support from England, Germany and the Huguenots, launched an aggressive, coordinated attack against the Spanish forces. As a result, William gained control of Holland and Zeeland. From 1572 until 1578, William's power remained strong. In 1578, however, Alessandro Farnese, the Duke of Parma, became the new Spanish regent and quickly set about to reclaim the Low Countries. In 1580, Phillip II of Spain placed William under the ban. In 1584, a radical Catholic assassinated the Prince and the Spanish reexerted their control over the Low Countries. The ban, a heretofore unheard of measure, had enormous implications not only for William of Orange but also for Elizabeth. As John Pollen notes, "The first

[1] Before the formation of the Catholic Holy League, the French and the Spanish had been enemies. For England, the conflict between France and Spain had ensured a measure of security for the realm but now, facing a united coalition of France's strongest noble family with the leading world power, Spain, England's security was clearly threatened.

known instance of any discussion among the English catholics concerning the assassination of the Queen [Elizabeth] occurred at the end of 1580, not long after the ban was published" (xx). The ban unequivocally demonstrated that the Catholic League, specifically Phillip II of Spain, would take any measure in defence of the Catholic Faith and furthermore, that the Catholic League regarded all Protestant monarchs as illegitimate rulers.

Domestic affairs were also conspiring against the Queen's security. Though Elizabeth largely succeeded in settling the religious question by way of the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity in 1559, there is some question as to the extent that Protestantism really established itself in England. According to John Guy's analysis of Elizabethan religion, it seems that while the Acts repudiated Catholicism and made allegiance to the Pope treasonous, there was no real concerted effort to embrace Protestantism (290ff). In fact, the evidence suggests that there was a "popular irreligion" in England, marked by declines in clergy, benefactions, church repair and construction, and an increase in lay improprieties (Guy 293-295). Many Elizabethan nobles and gentry may have been only nominally Protestant, motivated primarily on grounds of political expediency. Indeed, the revolt of the northern earls and the Duke of Norfolk-Mary Stuart marriage proposal in 1569 suggests a strong willingness among the higher classes to restore Catholicism in the realm. In any case, from 1570 to 1584 several factors conspired to threaten the apparent triumph of Protestantism (whatever its strength), which in turn threatened Elizabeth. In 1570, Pope Gregory XIII excommunicated Elizabeth in the papal bull *Regnans in excelsis*. By pronouncing Elizabeth a heretic, the Roman Catholic Church discharged English Catholics of their fealty to the Queen. This bull also had the affect of reaffirming Elizabeth as a bastard-child of Anne Boleyn and therefore, an illegitimate ruler. It is at this point that Mary, as a Catholic Queen and the next in legitimate succession to the throne of England, became an even more serious threat to Elizabeth's security. The bull was followed by increased Catholic missionary efforts, beginning in 1574 with the seminary priests and continuing in 1580 with the Jesuits. Also in 1580, the Papal Secretary, in a letter to the Jesuits in England, wrote, "there is no doubt that whosoever sends [Elizabeth] out of the world with the pious intention of doing God

service, not only does not sin but gains merit" (Neale 251). It is clear that challenges to Protestantism in England and Elizabeth's legitimacy threatened her rule.

It is generally accepted then that when Sir Francis Walsingham was appointed principal secretary of state to Elizabeth in 1574, his term "coincided with the period in Elizabeth's reign when she was most gravely threatened by conspiracies to depose and destroy her" (Read ii.340). In service to the Queen, Walsingham was instrumental in uncovering many of these conspiracies, most of which centred on raising Mary to the throne. Mary, a legitimate successor to the throne of England, cultivated sympathy and support as a Catholic martyr from within England, claiming to be unjustly betrayed and imprisoned by her cousin, the Protestant heretic, Elizabeth. Taking advantage of the foreign and domestic threats against Elizabeth, Mary utilized two agents, Thomas Morgan and Charles Paget, to represent her case to Spain, France and the English Catholics in exile. Indeed, the intrigues of Morgan, Paget and still other agents on behalf of Mary gave birth to numerous plots in the period of 1571-1583, most notably, the Ridolfi plot (1571), the Don John plot (1577) and the Throgmorton plot (1583). Yet, despite Mary's obvious connection to these plots and despite the urgings of her Privy Council and parliament, Elizabeth did not bring Mary to trial nor condemn her to the executioner's axe for her complicity. Elizabeth believed that Mary was an anointed sovereign and that no suitable precedent existed to sanction her execution. By the standards of her age, Mary's plotting was not only understandable, it was expected of an anointed sovereign in captivity. If Elizabeth had Mary executed, it could undermine the historic claim that a sovereign's authority was accountable only to God. Elizabeth understood these repercussions, recognizing that to execute Mary, while it would preserve her own security in the interim, it would challenge the whole institution upon which her authority ultimately resided. Given the strength of Elizabeth's convictions on this matter, Walsingham understood that to secure the execution of Mary, he would require unequivocal proof that Mary had not only plotted against Elizabeth but had supported a plot to assassinate her. For it would only be on the latter count that Elizabeth would be forced to execute the "bosom serpent" that

endangered not only her realm but also her very person. The Babington plot produced the required proof.

The Babington plot initially consisted of two separate plots: a plot by the Spanish to invade England and raise Mary to the English throne and another plot to assassinate Elizabeth. Both of these plots originated in Paris, under the guidance of Mary's chief agents, Morgan and Paget. Since the papal bull of 1571, King Philip II of Spain and his ambassador to London, Don Bernardino de Mendoza, were always prepared to assist English Catholics who plotted the overthrow of Elizabeth. Ever since the death of Elizabeth's predecessor, Mary Tudor, who had been married to the Spanish King and had faithfully served the Catholic cause in England, the Spanish had desired to regain influence in English affairs. Initially, the Spanish had sought to regain that influence through various marriage proposals. It became clear, however, that Elizabeth would not seriously consider any marriage proposals. As such, the only alternative for the Spanish was to set a new monarch upon the English throne that would be more receptive to their interests. Mary commanded the loyalty of English Catholics and her legitimate claim to succession made her the ideal candidate around whom to form such plans. With papal support, the enterprise to assassinate Elizabeth, invade the island supported by a local Catholic insurrection and establish Mary as Queen seemed the logical course of action. Morgan and Paget then, with the blanket support of the papacy and Spain, diligently pursued the cause by seeking out loyal English Catholics who could assist this objective.

In 1585, Gilbert Gifford, an English Catholic exile, met with Morgan. Though somewhat wary of Gifford, Morgan enlisted him to re-establish correspondence with Mary, whose correspondence had been cut-off by Walsingham after the discovery of the Throgmorton plot. When Gifford arrived in England, Walsingham detained him and enlisted the man as a double agent. Though Walsingham had ensured that Mary could no longer receive correspondence, he recognized that she could hardly then be found guilty in plots that she was unaware were taking place and more significantly, had not approved. Walsingham and Gifford, therefore, devised a new channel of correspondence for Mary that could be carefully scrutinized by Walsingham and

yet, would appear secure to Mary and her supporters. Gifford was then able to return to Morgan having established the necessary channel for correspondence.

Any method that Gifford or Walsingham devised as a channel of correspondence could not arouse suspicion. Walsingham had recently moved Mary to Chartley, a less hospitable castle, under the supervision of the devout Puritan and ever-vigilant Sir Amias Paulet. For over a year, Walsingham and Paulet had ensured that Mary had no contact with her agents overseas. To re-establish a channel of correspondence, Walsingham and Gifford arranged for a local beer brewer to act as the facilitator. The brewer would move letters in and out of Chartley by placing them in a watertight casing that could be placed in the bunghole of a beer keg. The mechanics, therefore, were really quite simple yet sufficiently clandestine not to arose suspicion. With the method for conveyance established, Gifford approached Charles de l'Aubespine, Baron de Chateauneuf and the French ambassador to England, described the new plan to him and requested the first correspondence that should be sent to Mary. Chateauneuf gave Gifford a letter and thus, the whole arrangement began. Subsequent letters to Mary passed from the sender across the Channel in diplomatic packets to Chateauneuf, who then passed them on to Gifford. Gifford would then submit these letters to Walsingham, who would have his master decipherer, Thomas Phelippes, decode and make a copy of the letter. The original would then be resealed and given back to Gifford, who would deliver it to the beer brewer. The brewer would then use the beer keg to "smuggle" the letter to Mary. On January 16, 1585, Mary received her first letter from the outside world in over a year. So excited at the prospect of renewing communication, Mary immediately dispatched a letter to Morgan requesting all of her undelivered mail that had collected on the Continent over the past year. Letters from Mary passed from the brewer to Gifford to Paulet. If Phelippes was in Chartley, the letter was opened, deciphered and a copy made that was passed on to Walsingham. If Phelippes had already returned to London, Paulet would send the letter to Walsingham, who would then have Phelippes decipher and copy the letter. Once this was done, the original letter would be resealed, returned to Gifford, who would pass it to Chateauneuf, the French Ambassador, whereupon it would be sent to the

addressee in a diplomatic packet. The new channel of correspondence soon satisfied all the parties, most of all Mary. In short order, Morgan sent all the correspondence that Mary had requested and Walsingham became duly aware of all the plots and plans for and from the captive Mary. Walsingham had only to wait for Mary to incriminate herself in one of the many letters that were now passing between Mary and her advocates.

With established lines of communication, a plot developed quickly. At this point, historiographers diverge sharply into pro-Marian and pro-Walsingham positions. Pro-Marian historiographers, such as Fraser, Pollen and Zweig, place the chief responsibility for the development of this plot squarely upon Walsingham. They charge that Walsingham, through agents such as Gilbert Gifford and Robert Poley, encouraged and prompted the conspirators with exaggerated stories of support from the Catholic League and English Catholics. To the contrary, the pro-Walsingham historiographers, such as Froude and Read, argue that the pro-Marians do not give sufficient weight to the state of foreign and domestic affairs already conspiring against Elizabeth nor do they give sufficient weight to the role of the Catholic priest and conspirator, John Ballard.

Certainly, John Ballard does become a prominent figure at this point in the development of the plot. Ballard was among the Catholic priests sent to England in 1581 as a part of the Catholic missionary efforts. He likely returned to the continent in 1584 to consult with clergymen of the Catholic Church and make a pilgrimage to Rome.[2] In 1585, however, Ballard was in England again, visiting the Catholic faithful. In March 1586, Ballard met John Savage, an ex-soldier who was involved in a separate plot against Elizabeth. Savage admitted to Ballard that he had sworn an oath to assassinate Elizabeth; a resolution made in 1585 after consultation with

[2] The divergent views of the historiographers are plainly seen on this issue. According to a confession given by Anthony Tyrell, a Jesuit priest and associate of Ballard, the two men met in England during the mission between 1581-84. Tyrell goes on to state that in 1584 the two men returned to the continent to consult with clergymen of the Catholic Church. Upon William of Orange's assassination, Tyrell and Ballard began to inquire as to the legality of attempting an assassination of Elizabeth. On Sept. 7, 1584, as confirmed by the *Pilgrims' Register at Rome*, Tyrell and Ballard arrived in Rome, apparently with the purpose of securing the Pope's blessing upon an enterprise to assassinate Elizabeth (*DNB* i.1005). According to Tyrell, they received this blessing and subsequently, they returned to England. Froude unequivocally accepts this confession (xii.227); Read acknowledges it as unreliable, though finds it "hard to believe that [Tyrell] invented the whole story of his journey to Rome in 1584 with Ballard" (iii.17n); Pollen rejects it as preposterous (lxxii-lxxviii; esp. lxxvi).

three friends, Dr. William Gifford, Gilbert Gifford and Christopher Hodgson.[3] The Savage plot would soon become a key component in Ballard's plans. Later that same year, Ballard returned once again to the continent to meet with Charles Paget and the Spanish ambassador, Mendoza. He reported to them that English Catholics were prepared to mount an insurrection against Elizabeth, if they could be assured of foreign support (Read 17). It is difficult to determine whether Ballard's report of English Catholic opposition to Elizabeth was accurate. Nevertheless, Ballard did receive general assurances from Paget and Mendoza that support would be available. He was also instructed by Paget and Mendoza to return to England to secure commitments on the part of leading English Catholics. Before the end of the month, Ballard was back in England.

Shortly after his return to England, Ballard approached a member of the Catholic gentry to lead and organize the English Catholics against Elizabeth; the man chosen was Anthony Babington. Ballard informed Babington of all the plans so far proposed. From Babington's confession, however, it is clear that Ballard over-exaggerated the support of the Catholic League:

> He toulde me he was retorned from Fraunce uppon this occasion. Being with Mendoza at Paris, . . . it was resolved by the Catholique league to seeke redresse and satisfaction, . . . havinge in readiness suche forces and all warlike preparations as the like was never seene in these partes of Christendome. The Pope was chiefe disposer . . . The conductors of this enterprise for the French nation, the D. of Guise, or his the D. de Maine; for the Italian and Hispanishe forces, the P. of Parma; the whole number about 60,000 (Pollen 53).

Despite the support that Ballard claimed for the plot, Babington remained hesitant; stating to Ballard that he did not believe any invasion could succeed while Elizabeth remained alive. Ballard

[3] The involvement of Gilbert Gifford in this separate plot against Elizabeth forms the subject of a disagreement between John Pollen and Conyers Read. The central issue of their disagreement is whether or not Walsingham was aware of the Savage plot, before its assimilation into the Babington plot. Both scholars agree that Gilbert Gifford was already in Walsingham's employ at this point but Read argues that Gifford was playing false with both Thomas Morgan and Francis Walsingham—a dangerous game to be sure. Read notes that "Gifford was at times disloyal to Walsingham" (iii.28n) and that a letter sent by Gifford to Phelippes, after the Babington plot had been revealed, seems to suggest that Walsingham did not know about his earlier dealings with Savage (iii.27). Read goes on to comment that Gifford "may have hoped to reveal Mary Stuart's correspondence on the one hand and to accomplish by Savage's means the death of her rival on the other" (iii.27). Even Pollen, against whom Read argues, notes that Gifford may have been involved in the George Gifford plot against Elizabeth in 1583, long before he came into the service of Walsingham (xlvii-xlviii). I am inclined, therefore, to accept Read's views concerning Gilbert Gifford and John Savage.

answered that the plans of John Savage already addressed this difficulty (Pollen 53-54). After discussion with friends and soon to be fellow conspirators, Babington assented to the plot.

By this time, Walsingham was certainly aware of almost every aspect of the plot. By late 1585, Walsingham deployed his agents against all the major figures of the conspiracy. Gilbert Gifford spied on Morgan and Paget in Paris as well as Ballard and Babington. Barnard Maude reported on Ballard, until the conspirators discovered him sometime after Ballard had returned to England. Robert Poley carefully watched the French ambassador as well as Babington. Moreover, there were most probably still other agents reporting to Walsingham on relevant matters. So, in possession of every piece of correspondence passing between Mary and her advocates and with spies upon every major figure in the Babington plot, Walsingham could have shut the whole operation down at any moment.[4] However, Walsingham did not yet have the crucial evidence he needed to bring Mary to trial; namely, Mary's written assent to all the details of the developing plot.

In mid-summer 1586, the particular correspondence that would prove fatal to Mary finally passed through Walsingham's hands. On June 28, encouraged by a letter received from Morgan, Mary wrote a letter to Babington that assured the conspirator of his status as her friend. Upon receiving this letter, Babington sent in reply all the details of the present plot. Babington informed Mary of the foreign plans for invasion; the plans of English Catholics for insurrection; and, his own plans to take six men in his charge to rescue Mary from Chartley (accompanied by a hundred men), and to send another six men (of whom Savage was a key member) to assassinate Elizabeth. It was unnecessary for Babington to inform Mary of these plans but he did so probably seeking rewards for the men of his charge. On July 18, Mary replied. It was a fatal response. In her letter, Mary commended and praised all aspects of the Babington plot. The letter also

[4] It is easy to overestimate the control that Walsingham exerted over the plot, while underestimating the very real danger it posed to Elizabeth. While much of the plot rested on over-exaggerated claims to support of a foreign army, the assassination itself only required one determined conspirator. Indeed, Mary Luke recounts the story of Elizabeth walking through Richmond Park when she encountered one of the Babington conspirators. She recognized him from a portrait shown to her by Walsingham. Luke goes on to tell how Elizabeth approached the man and said, "Am I not well guarded today, with no man near me who wears a sword at his side?" (503). The man fled and nothing came of the incident. Nevertheless, it shows that Elizabeth was far from secure and perhaps, a more determined conspirator might have taken this opportunity to murder her.

contains her request for further details of the plot. Mary also counsels Babington on the crucial importance that the plan be supported by a foreign invasion. On July 19, Phelippes copied the letter and sent it to Walsingham with a small picture of the gallows on its seal. Walsingham had his proof.[5] By September 1586, Ballard, Babington, Savage and four other English Catholics were convicted of treason. On September 20, Ballard and Babington were drawn and quartered in an especially cruel display, while Savage and the other four men were hung. By force of evidence and with the urgings of not only the Privy Council and parliament but also the general populace, who were outraged by the plot, Elizabeth, despite vacillations, ordered a trial for Mary in October 1586 and on the guilty verdict, ordered her execution, which was carried out on February 8, 1587.[6] Walsingham had accomplished his objective; the "bosom serpent" was dead.

The Babington plot had many implications for Elizabethan England beyond the deaths of the conspirators. Walsingham, and his supporters in the Privy Council and parliament, used the details of this plot, as it was developing and in its aftermath, to secure many important policy actions. As Patrick Collinson notes, "The Babington plot and Mary's proven complicity ensured a favourable hearing for any puritan measure which promised to make better provision for the safety of the queen and country" (309). Acts of parliament, intended for the Queen's safety, included oppressive measures against seminarians, Jesuits and the English Catholic community. The polarization created by the plot was significant in permanently establishing Protestantism in England (Collinson 302). Regardless of the implications on Elizabethan religion, the Babington plot will always be recalled and studied primarily as the plot that resulted in the death of Mary. Yet, it is also the plot upon which much of the Walsingham popular tradition survives (Read

[5] There are several different versions of Mary's letter available. Aside from a postscript (rejected by even Walsingham as an addition), it has been accepted by most critical scholars that the content of the original does not differ substantially from the trial copy. Mary does assent to all the critical elements of the plot (Read iii.33-44; cf. Pollen 26-46). Pollen suggests that Mary does not approve of the assassination, but I am inclined to reject his argument, which seems to be based on Pollen's overwhelming Marian bias and hair splitting about the tone of certain sentences (Pollen 33-34). Even Zweig, also extremely pro-Marian, accepts that Mary approved of the assassination (316).

[6] It is not altogether unimportant that the foreign and domestic situation had also changed significantly. By the time Walsingham revealed the plot, Scotland had signed the Treaty of Berwick, which bound the Scots to England. Furthermore, James VI now seemed more concerned about his own right of succession to the English throne than any loyalty he possessed towards his mother. The French were suffering from deep internal divisions that would soon result in renewed civil war. The Spanish were now firmly committed to an enterprise of war against England that did not hinge on Mary at all. In fact, in 1588, the Spanish would launch the first of their attacks. And, as P.J. Holmes notes, "the patriotic feeling [Mary's conspiracies] aroused among the English strengthened Elizabeth's hand at home" (214).

ii.340-341). The greatest significance of the plot, however, may rest in the fears that Elizabeth possessed over its end, namely the death of an anointed sovereign by a trial of parliament. Elizabeth feared that this act would threaten the very principles upon which her authority rested, creating a dangerous precedent, and perhaps, the trial and execution of King Charles I of England should be regarded as the fulfillment of those fears.

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