A child which thou to Mary, O Lord of
might! hast send, To England's joy, in
health preserve—keep, and defend!
—Inlay on the cradle in
Mary Tudor's bedchamber,
anticipating a royal heir for
England, 1555.1(p301)

In 1547, Henry VIII, King of En-
gland, lay dying. He sent for his el-
dest child, Princess Mary, to ask a spe-
cial favor of her. At this point in time,
Mary was a 30-year-old spinster who
had for several years been living qui-
ently in a royal home outside Lon-
don, content with her religion, her
music, her needlework, and her
many pets. When she arrived, her
father said to her, "... daughter,
fortune has been hard against thee
and I grieve I did not have thee mar-
rised as I wished ... I pray thee, try
to be a mother to thy brother, for
look, he is very little yet...." He was
referring to his 10-year-old son and
heir, her half brother Edward.
Henry VIII failed to mention the
many wrongs he had inflicted on
Mary for two decades.

Mary had been born on February
18, 1516, to Henry's Queen, Cath-
erine of Aragon, at Greenwich Palace,
near London. Her father was at that
time the most imposing royal figure in
Europe; he was 25 years of age, 6
feet in height, handsome, athletic,
and well educated. Astonishingly,
Mary was the only surviving child of
her mother’s nine pregnancies,
which included four sons and two
other daughters who died at or near
birth!

As an infant, Mary Tudor was
the most eligible Princess in Europe.
When she was only 2 years old, she
had been betrothed to Francis, son
and heir of Francis I, King of France.
When that proposed groom died as a
child, she was engaged to her older
cousin King Charles V of Spain,
which he broke off in 1525 when he
was 25, she 9. She was mentioned as
wife for another of her cousins, the
9-year-old King James V of Scotland.
Then when she was 11, the recently
widowed King Francis I of France, age
38, briefly considered marrying her
himself!

During Mary’s teen years, her fa-
der father waged a campaign to gain
his freedom through the Church of
Rome in order to remarry and pro-
duce the son and heir he so badly
needed. From that time, his treatment
of Mary and her mother became pro-
gressively worse. Despairing after 6
years, Henry took matters in his own
hands in 1533, assumed the title of
Head of the Church in England, and
divorced Catherine by proclamation.
Mary had to witness her mother being
cast off and disgraced.

At the birth in 1533 of Princess
Elizabeth to her father and his new
Queen, Anne Boleyn, Mary was de-
declared illegitimate by parliament
and excluded from the succession.
In 1536 the defiant Princess was forced to sign
a complete surrender to her father,
which acknowledged that her parents
had never legally married, that their
union had been incestuous and that as
a consequence, that she herself was il-
legitimate. Following this capitula-
tion, she was treated better, was re-
ceived once again at Court, and, oddly
enough, restored to the succession
second to her younger half sister. After
Anne Boleyn’s execution, Mary fared
better with the later wives of her fa-
ther, in particular Jane Seymour, who
had died in 1537 producing Henry’s
long sought-after son Edward, and
Katherine Parr.

During the brief reign of her
young half brother, Edward, Mary
was often in fear of her life, since she
was the obvious focus of Catholic ef-
forts to regain influence in the gov-
ernment. Edward’s reign was marked by
fierce struggles for control of the gov-
ernment and influence over him. Just
before he died at age 16, one powerful
advisor, the Duke of Northumber-
land, persuaded him to name his 15-
year-old cousin Jane Grey as his heir
(she was the granddaughter of Mary
Tudor, Henry VIII’s sister.) Conve-
niently the ambitious Northumber-
land had married Jane to his own
teenage son Guilford Dudley. In the
immediate aftermath of Edward’s
death, Northumberland placed the
ill-used Lady Jane on the throne; this
plot collapsed, however, after only 9
days, swept away by popular support
for Mary Tudor as the rightful
Queen. The young couple and
Northumberland were eventually ex-
ecuted.

On October 1, 1553, Mary Tu-
dor was crowned at Westminster Ca-
thedral, the first woman to occupy the
throne of England as Queen in her
own right. The Queen, a spinster at
age 37, was described as having, "... tiny wrinkles in the corners of
her eyes and mouth, and her face,
framed in skimpy red-brown hair,
though not unattractive, was bitter
and resolute. ..." The Spaniards
who arrived at her court in 1554 were
far less complimentary. "Rather older
than we have been told, she is not at all
beautiful and is small and flabby
rather than fat. She is of white com-
plexion and fair, and has no eye-
brows. ..."1(p274)

After Mary began her reign, the
former fiancé King Charles V of Spain
proposed that she marry his son,
Philip. In a historical curiosity,
Mary, having once been engaged as a
child to the father, married the son
almost 30 years later!

Prince Philip had been born May
15, 1527, at Valladolid in Castile, the
son of Charles V and his consort, Is-
bella of Portugal. Philip was de-
scented from the Habsburg Emperors
of Austria as well as from the Kings of
Spain. His father’s sole heir, Philip
was well educated but not a scholar.
He excelled in outdoor activities such
as hand-to-hand combat and horse-
manship. At age 16, Philip was mar-
rried to his first cousin, Marie of Por-
tugal, but she died in the second year

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HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Empty Cradle: Queen Mary Tudor’s False Pregnancies

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of their marriage after giving birth to a son, Don Carlos.

Not wanting to proceed until she was shown a likeness of her bridegroom-to-be, a copy of Titian’s splendid portrait of Philip was sent her. His likeness pleased her very much, but the devout Mary was concerned about two things: she thought she was too old to marry a man 11 years her junior, and the thought of marital sex upset her. Although she told her ladies that she harbored no “carnal desires,” she knew, of course, that she would have to submit to her future husband in order to produce an heir.

In England, strong opposition to the marriage arose, yet the Queen would not be dissuaded. The famous nursery rhyme “Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?” dates from this time and is a protest against the Spanish marriage. “Cockleshells” referred to badges worn by pilgrims to the shrine of the patron Saint of Spain; “little maids” were the nuns Queen Mary and her Catholic husband brought back into England.

In June 1554, Philip arrived in England. Five days later, the bridal couple first met in Winchester, where the wedding was to take place. When they came face to face, she modestly kissed her own hand before taking his, but he countered by kissing her on the mouth, having been told that this was “the English fashion.” They were married July 25, 1554, in Winchester Cathedral.

Philip knew that a difficult task lay ahead of him. He must marry a middle-aged, plain woman who could not have appealed to him from a physical standpoint. While he bore the title of King, he had no formal authority. Nonetheless, the couple shared the same political and religious hopes, and knew that the birth of a Catholic heir would ensure that their religious changes would endure.

Few of the people believed that the Queen, at age 38, could bear children. To the surprise of all, in early November of 1554, rumors had begun to circulate that she was, indeed, pregnant. Preparations were made at Hampton Court Palace for the arrival of a royal child, expected in the spring of 1555. By mid-November, observers reported that Mary had gained weight and had a better color; her abdomen was already visibly distended. The Venetian ambassador wrote to his government, “Besides all the other manifest signs of pregnancy, there was the swelling of the paps (breasts) and their emission of milk.”

By April 1555, the Queen withdrew to her chambers at Hampton Court to await the birth, and Philip by default became the reigning sovereign, discharging all the affairs of state. Many noblewomen throughout the realm came to Hampton Court to observe and witness the birth of the child; at this point, no one but the Queen’s ladies was allowed to enter her rooms. When the first due date had passed, new calculations were made to suggest that May 23rd, or perhaps June 4th or 5th would see the birth occur. On June 1st, the Queen was reported to feel the first pains, but that came to nothing. It was not long before the rumor-mill took some interesting turns. Some said that Mary had been delivered of a “mass of flesh” and was at death’s door. Others, both in England and on the continent, said she was already dead. Another rumor surfaced that the Queen was conspiring to pass off someone else’s child as her own.

At this time Ruy Gomez, a Portuguese friend of Philip’s who had accompanied him to England, had begun to develop doubts about the situation, having personally observed the “expectant” mother walking what he thought to be too hastily around the palace gardens. He had also received reports that the Queen often sat for long periods of time on the floor, her knees pulled back to her chin—a position that was unlikely to have been comfortable for a woman in her last days of pregnancy. Gomez recorded, “... All this makes me doubt she is with child at all...”

By August, all hope was abandoned and everyone had to accept that no child would be born. Philip wrote to his brother-in-law, “The Queen’s pregnancy turns out not to have been as certain as we thought.” In the end, the midwives, doctors, and chamber woman had prolonged the situation, having offered every explanation except the true one for the Queen’s long “confinement.” Finally, leaving Hampton Court Palace and moving her household back to London, Mary accepted the fact that her pregnancy had not been real.

It was unfortunate that coinciding with the drama of the supposed pregnancy, the burning at the stake of Protestant heretics began. Parliament, in restoring the Catholic Church, had also revived the ancient laws of Richard II whereby burning punished heresy, and had given the Bishops the authority to enforce these laws. All told, about 300 unfortunate souls died by this means during Mary’s 5-year reign.

Philip had been eager to see the conclusion of the pregnancy, as he was acutely needed by his father for other European projects. Accordingly he bid Mary goodbye and sailed September 4, 1555, from Greenwich.

The lonely Queen fretted when he did not write regularly; for his part, he chronically promised to return, but failed to live up to the promises. Philip finally returned to England a year and a half later, but then only for a few months. By that time, having succeeded his father as King of Spain, he was the sole ruler of the largest empire in the world—Spain, England, the Netherlands, and half of Italy; Burgundy, Mexico, Peru, the Spice Islands, the Philippines (named after him), and parts of America and Africa. The Queen was thrilled to have him back, but she found that he was a changed man; concluding that his fortunes lay elsewhere, he left England again in July 1557 for the last time.

In a development that somewhat defies belief, no sooner had he left, than the Queen announced once more that she was pregnant! Because of the ridicule the news was certain to bring if again proven false, and so that she herself could be certain, she waited until December to send news of this development to Philip. She let it be known that the child would be born in March 1558, and hoped that her husband could return to England to be by her side. Philip responded in the following fashion: “... the news ... was the one thing in the world (he had) most desired. ...” Others were more skeptical; in France, the Cardinal of Loraine, hearing of this “pregnancy,” quipped, “... we shall not have so long to wait this time, since it is eight months since the King left England. ...” Philip sent his envoy, Count Feria, to England to
congratulate the Queen. Feria concluded on arrival that the Queen was once more deluding herself that she was with child; in addition, she looked so unhealthy with her swollen belly that Feria sensed that she would not live long. Finally, the Queen had to accept that it was not God’s will that she have a child.

Unfortunately, as Queen Mary had sensed, she now became the object of scorn and ridicule. Slanderous things were said and printed about her; her piety was said to be bigotry, her devotion to her husband was said to be a combination of slavery and uncontrollable lust. The people jeered at her tragic marriage and said that her husband had left her for good. Many asked why he had married her in the first place, since she clearly had been old enough to be his mother! What, they asked, was the King to do now with such an “old bitch”?

Pseudocyesis, or false pregnancy, is a rare condition in which signs and symptoms of pregnancy are present in a nonpregnant woman who firmly believes she is with child. Signs are weight gain, increased abdominal girth, and breast enlargement. Symptoms are menstrual changes (cessation, decrease, or irregularity), nausea and vomiting, “fetal” movements, and even breast discharge. The condition has been observed throughout history; Hippocrates (460–377 BC) himself had reported 12 such cases.

It is known that Mary Tudor had not had regular menses throughout her adult life, and in fact she sometimes went months between periods. Morning sickness can be imagined; fat, intestinal gas, abdominal fluid, lax abdominal muscles, or some combination of these can explain an increase in abdominal girth. Fetal movements or “quickening” may even be “confirmed” by the midwives and attendants who wish to please. The primitive state of medicine in the 16th century made all the confusion possible. Furthermore, the male doctors of the time would never have touched the Queen, much less have examined her abdomen or pelvis.

In hindsight, other explanations for the Queen’s indisposition can be proposed. She may have had a pituitary tumor; in addition to causing breast discharge, such a tumor could explain her frequent headaches and diminished vision, which, before her death was so bad that documents had to be read to her. Her lack of eyebrows may have been related to diminished thyroid function, which may accompany pituitary tumors. Other schools of thought are that she may have had a molar or a retained pregnancy; both are called into question by the fact that there is no record of her expelling tissue or having had any significant vaginal bleeding at the time.

In recent centuries, a number of medical reviewers have suggested that Mary Tudor may have had congenital syphilis, which could have caused many, if not all, of her health problems. Certainly, a strong case can be made that her father King Henry VIII had syphilis, and this disease, passed on to his first Queen Catherine of Aragon, may have caused her abysmal obstetric performance as well.

Queen Mary’s final health deterioration began in the spring of 1558. At the end, her doctors said she had “dropsy.” At the end, her body was greatly wasted in appearance, which, combined with the swollen abdomen, suggests an intra-abdominal cancer.

Mary Tudor had been starved of affection since childhood and deprived of the fulfillment of sexual love and the possibility of children during her early adulthood. Her revenge for the abuses she and her mother suffered had come in 1554, when she reigned the title of Supreme Head of the Church of England and took as her husband a Catholic Prince of her mother’s house. She had started her reign with great popular support, yet in only 5 years, the Spanish marriage and the burning of heretics changed all that. Yet, what if she had produced an heir during this marriage? One can only speculate that something approaching a united Europe linked to North and South America would have occurred in the 16th century!

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