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## Q&A: Rosamund Gravelle on the play 'Three Queens'

BY TUDOR EXTRA    AUGUST 3, 2023

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This week, I am delighted to welcome playwright Rosamund Gravelle to Tudor Extra to discuss her latest play, *Three Queens*, which explores a fictional encounter between Mary I, Elizabeth I, and Lady Jane Grey, as well as another royal cousin, Cardinal Reginald Pole. All this takes place on the

night before Jane's tragic execution. Rosamund has graciously provided us with an advanced copy of the *Three Queens* script, and we are privileged to have her join us on the blog today.

*The following is a transcription of our Zoom conversation with Rosamund Gravelle, lightly edited for length and clarity.*

## Q&A

**Daniella:** Well, first of all, thank you again so much for joining me today. I am hugely excited to hear more about you and this project. To start things off, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

**Rosamund:** So, at the moment I'm a writer. I was an administrator for many years, and then I developed Celiac disease. I was going to become a psychotherapist, but with all that going on, I took a year out from work, and then all my writing came. I've had some poems published and have just always been a history and Tudor nerd. During my year off, I got another job in the theater industry. But obviously when COVID came along, it just decimated everything. But then I met a guy who had set up his own small theater, and he asked, 'Do you have any small plays?' Because all the plays I had written were quite big! So, I decided to develop the idea for *Three Queens*, and we took it on the road. Unfortunately, things happened and it didn't end up being with them. Another theater company has since been interested, so I've taken up with them from there. I live in London, I'm married, and I have a cat.

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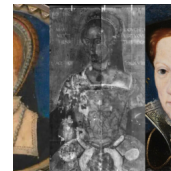
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Magdalena Ivanova as Lady Jane Grey

**Daniella:** The period that *Three Queens* covers is actually quite brief, but it's absolutely packed with drama and intrigue. I'll provide a couple of links to some excellent books that cover the period below, but would you mind setting the stage for us, pun intended, for listeners who might not be experts on 1553-54?

**Rosamund:** Sure, absolutely. This is a really interesting period of time. You have Edward, who is King Henry VIII's son, who's just died. In his will, he supersedes his father's, which would have allowed Mary and then Elizabeth to reign, and also that he wants to instead appoint Lady Jane Grey, his cousin, as his successor. Lady Jane has just been married to Guildford Dudley, and that seems to have been arranged by a man called the Duke of Northumberland, who's also with Edward. They effectively try to take over the country and supersede Henry's will, but then there's a rebellion against Jane as Queen. She's gone to the tower to be crowned, but that doesn't happen. Then there's this rebellion of people wanting



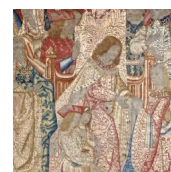
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Mary, and Mary rises up to claim her crown again. Northumberland tries to rally, but it fizzles out as the people want Mary. The Privy Council that had been backing Jane and Guildford as King and Queen then turn around and support Mary. And then, of course, Jane and the Dudleys are installed in the Tower.

Jane is actually kept in the Palace of Greenwich for a bit. It seems as though Mary's going to keep her cousin alive – underwraps, but close to her. But then there's another rebellion and she sends Jane to the Tower to be executed. Eventually, Jane is executed, which starts the reign of Queen Mary with this killing a family member. It's a very tumultuous period. There's still a lot of disagreement whether or not Jane was actually Queen or not. She wasn't actually crowned, but it was in the will.

You've got all these intrigues happening, and then obviously you've got Elizabeth [Elizabeth I] in the background. She went to her sister rather than support the Dudleys and the Protestant faith, even though she was brought up in that. It's just this really interesting meeting of not only female rulers and female heirs, but also what the people want and what they don't want, Protestant and Catholicism, all churning around. That's the stage. And then you have Mary coming into power and how is she going to be Queen? You have Elizabeth, again, still around and about to be Queen.

It's also a really thrilling time dynastically. At this point, all the inheritors will be female in their own right. That's when my curiosity was bubbling up to see if all these three different types of royal women, who could wield power in different ways, met... How would that go?

**Daniella:** I'll try not to share much because, of course, the full script hasn't been released yet. But Edward VI has died. But in this script, and of course, in history, he is quite a felt



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presence. None of the following events would have happened without his death. How differently do you think things would have worked out had Jane actually kept the throne versus Mary?



*We have this idea of Jane as being very passive. We obviously know she's very intelligent, and she really believed in her Protestant faith. It leads me to wonder, would she have been as meek as the later Protestant writers made her to be? Maybe there was something more steely within her.*

**Rosamund Gravelle**

**Rosamund:** I think that's a really interesting question. We have this idea of Jane as being very passive. We obviously know she's very intelligent, and she really believed in her Protestant faith. It leads me to wonder, would she have been as meek as the later Protestant writers made her to be? Maybe there was something more steely within her. It'd be interesting had she ruled, alone in her own right, rather than being controlled by a husband or a father-in-law. Jane's grandmother was Queen of France for a while, so she has all these antecedents in her for ruling. I think that she's a really interesting, strong character who may have seen the world a bit differently from what we've been given about her character, and how we've been made to see her.

**Daniella:** On the topic of characters, can you talk me through your characterisation process? Did you base these characters on your personal opinions, reports, other authors? Can you

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walk us through that a little bit?

**Rosamund:** So, it's very strange with my writing. My characters are already there, if that makes sense. Obviously, there is characterisation from the history that you read and the research that you have, but how they interact – you have to counterpoint them slightly. It was interesting, especially with Mary and a bit with Jane, because there isn't so much literature or historical research about their characters. It's a difficult one. I've watched so many films about Elizabeth being a really strong woman, but I knew there must have been a vulnerability there. Some of it is my own intuition, that comes from research, and some of it is the characters interacting when I write the play.

**Daniella:** Is there a particular character you related to most?

Full table read of *Three Queens*, featuring Duncan Dury as Robert Dudley

**Rosamund:** I think I saw bits of myself in all of them, but actually I had a lot of empathy for Mary. I'm a huge Elizabeth I fan forever, but I think I saw a lot more of myself in Mary

wanting to keep her family together, and wanting to repair the past. Again, it's where they are with their lives – they're still quite young, they're still going forward. It surprised me that I felt a lot more empathy for Mary.

**Daniella:** I think it's so wonderful that there has been more empathy for Mary in recent years. A lot of revisionist work has been done. At this point in her life [1553-1554] she was very ill, she knew that maybe she wouldn't have a ton of time, but she also strikes me as a very nostalgic figure. It's about going back to the past for her, in whatever way she can – her faith, her family – so I think you've done a really fantastic job interpreting that really sad, tragic medley of emotions she must have been feeling at this time. But also, coupled with this sense of triumph, this support she's had. It's really unprecedented, isn't it?

**Rosamund:** Absolutely, you're spot on with that analysis, and thank you as well. As you said, there's been a lot of revisionism – we can't discount what she did later on, but also at the same time she has to navigate all these difficulties. Her physical issues, especially. We know about the phantom pregnancy later on, and of course her early death, and she must've been carrying that pain and discomfort for so long while she was going through this. She's a really interesting woman, and I hope to bring her more to life.

**Daniella:** Shifting back to your Mary, the Mary of *Three Queens*, how important is the bond of sistership with Elizabeth for her?

**Rosamund:** I think it's really important. I think I've shown that it is still a bit of a difficult relationship. Again, with *Three Queens*, it's about all the queens that have come before, too, so there's Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn, those histories are still there. The relationship is complicated, because it's a rivalry as well – knowing this person could

come after you, being older and seeing this younger and potentially more dynamic lady in your shadow. It's a very interesting sister-bond. It's loving, but it's also 'I love you and I trust you and I want you to be okay and yet...' There's another, fascinating side.

Pete Picton as Cardinal Pole and Magdalena Ivanova as Lady Jane Grey

**Daniella:** You've walked us through a really wonderful research process, and it's clear that you have so much knowledge about the subject. One topic I know people will want to hear about is that you've actually included Robert Dudley in the script. What is the basis of their relationship when *Three Queens* opens up?

**Rosamund:** In the beginning, they're flirting – but it's awkward. Obviously Elizabeth hasn't joined the Dudleys in helping Jane cement the throne, but there is love there. There's danger for both of them. I wanted to convey the idea that they love each other, but they know it will be really difficult. And they know each other's sides, how to annoy each other. They both want something from each other, which I don't know if either is willing to give. How could they

love? How could they love in these positions? It's a really interesting relationship, and I wanted to show that in the opening scene.

**Daniella:** If you were to write a sequel to *Three Queens* – just two queens or maybe even one queen – do you think we would see that relationship continue to blossom, or has Elizabeth put her foot down?

**Rosamund:** I don't know! She knows that it would be bad to actually go for Robert. My feeling is that they were both in love with each other, and maybe it could be shown more, the flirtation – this dangerous flirtation – because we know in history Robert kept on until he married Lettice Knollys. I think maybe, a sequel would see more of their thwarted love.

**Daniella:** Can we talk a little bit about what it was like bringing *Three Queens* to the stage? Where will it be premiering, and when can we expect to see it?

Mary I, Elizabeth I, and Lady Jane Grey

**Rosamund:** We're in talks with a theater in London, and we're going for the 2023-2024 theater seasons, so this upcoming season. We're still in the process of finding a venue for it to happen, but all the details will be updated on my social media, so people can get tuned in to that! More information will hopefully be announced in the next couple of months.

**Daniella:** Have you already gone through the casting process?

**Rosamund:** We are going through the process now, yes. We're going to have firm casting by the end of summer.

**Daniella:** What is your priority with casting for Three Queens? Is it looks, resemblance, aura? What are you looking for with in a potential Mary or Elizabeth?

**Rosamund:** I think you're right – it's aura, and how they inhabit the roles. With each of them, they all have their vulnerabilities and strengths, so you need someone able to bring that aura on the stage.

**Daniella:** For those of us interested, where can we get more of your work or follow you in your endeavors?

**Rosamund:** Oh, thank you. I'm on [Instagram](#) and I also have a [website](#).

*Rosamund Gravelle, playwright and poet.*

## Suggested reading

1. *The Children of Henry VIII* by Alison Weir
  2. *Crown of Blood* by Nicola Tallis
  3. *Mary Tudor* by Linda Porter
  4. *The Sisters Who Would Be Queen: The tragedy of Mary, Katherine and Lady Jane Grey* by Leanda de Lisle
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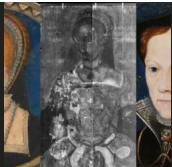

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