

Bloody Mary – Killer Queen?

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Mary and Elizabeth, the two Tudor queens, have contrasting reputations. But is it time for a positive reassessment of the notorious Mary Tudor, England's trailblazing reigning queen?

Half-sisters Mary I and Elizabeth I are buried in the same tomb in Westminster Abbey, London. The plaque on their grave reads 'Partners both in throne and grave, here rest we two sisters Elizabeth and Mary, in the hope of one resurrection'. One resurrection, perhaps, but they have very different reputations. Elizabeth is celebrated as Gloriana, the virgin queen from a 'golden age' of English history who declared that she was married to her country. Mary, on the other hand, has been vilified for centuries as Bloody Mary, the barren queen who failed to produce an heir, but executed more than 300 of her subjects for their Protestant faith. Yet as Henry VIII's elder daughter, Mary was carried to the throne on a wave of popular support in 1553. People lit bonfires and celebrated with shouts of 'God save Queen Mary!' So what went wrong for England's first **queen regnant**?

Religious divisions

The answer lies mainly in religion. Mary (Figure 1) was steadfastly Roman Catholic, but she ruled over a country which had become divided along religious lines. Her main aim was to restore the Catholic faith which had been undermined by her father's break with Rome and her half-brother's short but evangelically Protestant rule. Her wedding to Philip of Spain in 1554 was designed to shore up this plan by creating an alliance with the most powerful family in Europe, the Habsburgs, who were also Catholic (Figure 2).

But even those who had enthusiastically supported Mary's accession with bonfires, bells and banquets just the previous year were dubious about the wedding. For one thing, Philip was foreign. People feared that England would be drawn into his expensive wars against France and that the queen might even leave the country to be with her husband. The evidence suggests that there was widespread opposition to the match, not just from parliament and the privy council, but from the people too. Sir Thomas Wyatt's rebellion portrayed the Spaniards as an invading army intent on incorporating England into the Habsburg empire. The seeds of her poor reputation were already being sown.

In November that year, Mary and Philip began the process of restoring the **pope's** authority over the English church. The following February, John Rogers, the first of more than 300 Protestant **martyrs**, was burned at the stake, as part of their plan to root out **heresy** (Figure 3). It is for this course of action, more than any other, that Mary has had such a bad name for so many centuries.

Foxe's Book of Martyrs

The nickname 'Bloody Mary' probably originates with John Foxe, author of hugely popular and massively influential *Acts and Monuments of the English Church*, more commonly known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. First published during the Protestant regime of Elizabeth I in 1563, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* described with gruesome detail the trials and executions of these men and women. The volume was extensively illustrated with woodcut images which graphically depicted the executions (Figure 4).

Moreover, Elizabeth sealed her half-sister's historical fate by ordering that a copy of the book should be placed in every parish church alongside the Bible for everyone to read. Of course, it was in the interests of Elizabethan Protestants to justify the Protestant succession by criticising Mary. It was Foxe who characterised Mary as personally responsible for the burnings. All her misfortunes, from her false pregnancies to her short reign, were portrayed as God's punishment for the Catholic beliefs which led her to persecute her Protestant subjects. Never, according to Foxe, was 'so much Christian blood, so many Englishmen's lives spilled within this Realm, as under Queen Mary'.

'Whig' history

This characterisation continued for hundreds of years, reinforced by British wars against Catholic powers and the 'Whig' tradition which viewed history as a story of Protestant progress towards parliamentary democracy. For the Whigs, and for many years after, Mary was an ineffective ruler unsuited to her role. Writing in 1856, J. A. Froude characterised Mary as a frail woman whose religious bigotry led to a reign of terror. Like Foxe, Froude's writing was infused with loathing of a Catholic queen whose reign could only have been a temporary hiccup on the road to English Protestant supremacy. Even well into the 20th century Mary's reign, like her body, was seen as sterile. The historian David Loades described Mary as lacking in judgement and easily led. Her mind was 'limited, conventional and obstinate'. Geoffrey Elton famously summed up her reign with the line 'positive achievements there were none'.

Tudor trailblazer

More recent interpretations, however, have begun to redress the balance in favour of Mary (Figure 5). For many 21st century historians, Mary was the trailblazer who broke the mould. Paulina Kewes showed that Elizabethan propaganda drew heavily on the 'tremendous power' of Mary's example. Unlike Elizabeth, Mary was actually educated as Princess of Wales, because as a child, she was the only heir to the throne and therefore needed to be prepared for rule. She was the one with the tough task of finding out whether it was even practically possible for a woman to rule in a patriarchal society where men held the positions of authority in both government and home. Mary was the one who had to adapt procedures and practices which for generations had been the exclusive preserve of the male monarch, not least of which was the coronation ceremony itself. Five years later, Elizabeth was able simply to follow in her sister's footsteps, even wearing Mary's hand-me-down robes for her coronation (Figure 6).

A Mid-Tudor Crisis?

Reports of Mary's contribution to a so-called 'mid-Tudor crisis', meanwhile, have been greatly exaggerated. Much of the criticism was levelled at her **Privy Council**. It is true that she had to appoint inexperienced Catholics as a reward for their loyalty to her cause alongside those who had experience of government from her father and brother's reigns. But although the ranks of the Privy Council swelled considerably, this did not make it unworkable. Many of the members rarely attended its meetings. Most of the time, the work was divided between committees, while Philip ensured that a small group of the most able men became a 'select council' which could report to him during his long periods of absence from England. Their reign also saw the extension of royal power over the localities, reform of the coinage and the rebuilding of the navy. Many of the areas for

which Elizabeth still receives praise, such as social reform and the extension of trade, in fact originated under Mary, although they remained incomplete at her death in 1558.

Burning heretics

Abhorrent though the burning of heretics may seem now, even that must be re-evaluated by viewing it through the lens of the time. For early modern monarchs, heresy was not a matter of individual conscience. Instead, it was like a disease which had the potential to spread through society, infecting the faithful, separating them from God and leaving their souls to burn in hell for eternity. Heresy, therefore, was the most serious of crimes. Like cancer, it needed burning out of the body of the faithful.

Mary's approach to rooting out heresy was not out of the ordinary. Similar executions were carried out by both Protestant and Catholic states across Europe. What was different was the scale of the executions that took place over a comparatively short period of time. It seems likely, however, that Mary did not expect so many people to stick to their Protestant views in the face of execution. Indeed, it is important to remember that with the exception of a minority of show trials, all those who were executed went through a legal process intended to give them every opportunity to recant their Protestant beliefs and return to Catholicism. Moreover, Eamon Duffy has argued that although there was opposition to the executions, Mary's religious policy was working.

Time for the truth?

Despite her reputation as a killer queen intent on destroying those who stood up to religious tyranny, it seems that Mary's greatest enemy was time. A hard-working and conscientious queen, time cut short Mary's reign before she was able to complete her plans and reshape the country. It is arguable that had Mary lived longer and perhaps been lucky enough to have a child, the Catholic renewal which she began would have become embedded and the story of England would have been very different. It has taken around 450 years for historians to recognise that many of the successful aspects of Elizabethan England had their roots in Mary's reign. It is a heavy irony for a queen whose motto was 'Truth is the daughter of time'.

Captions

Figure 1 – Mary I in 1554

Figure 2 – Philip and Mary

Figure 3 – Execution of John Rogers from Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*

Figure 4 - Execution of Thomas Cranmer from Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*

Figure 5 – Mary I in 1544, aged about 28

Figure 6 – The coronation portrait of Elizabeth I shows her wearing her sister's golden robes.

Definitions

Annulment

Legal cancellation of a marriage. Unlike divorce, an annulment means that the marriage never legally existed.

Heresy

A belief contrary to the authorised teaching of the church. Someone who holds these views is a **heretic**; their views are described as **heretical**.

Martyr

A person who voluntarily dies as a penalty for their religious beliefs

Privy Council

The group of men who advise the monarch on policy.

Pope

The leader of the Roman Catholic church

Queen regnant

A woman who is queen in her own right, because she has inherited the throne, not because she is married to a king or the mother of a king.

Chronology

6 July 1553 - Death of Edward VI leads to Northumberland's coup and the installation of Lady Jane Grey as queen, although she is never crowned.

19 July 1553 - Mary proclaimed queen by the Privy Council

25 July 1554 - Mary I marries Philip of Spain

4 February 1555 - First Protestant burned

21 March 1556 - Archbishop Cranmer executed

17 November 1558 - Death of Mary I/accession of Elizabeth I

Who's Who

Edward VI

- Son of Henry VIII and his 3rd wife, Jane Seymour
- Protestant
- Ahead of his elder sisters in the line of succession because he was male
- Inherited the throne at 9 years old
- Duke of Somerset and then the duke of Northumberland ruled on his behalf
- Died before he was able to rule as an adult

Mary I

- Daughter of Henry VIII and his 1st wife, Katherine of Aragon
- Roman Catholic, which brought her into conflict with her father and her half-brother

- England's first reigning queen
- Married Philip of Spain

Elizabeth I

- daughter of Henry VIII and his 2nd wife, Anne Boleyn
- Protestant
- Refused to marry

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer

- Protestant archbishop of Canterbury, 1533 to 1555
- Annulled Henry VIII's marriage to Mary's mother, Katherine of Aragon.
- Executed by Mary

Discussion Points:

- What accounts for the two queens' contrasting reputations?
- Why was Mary's marriage to Philip unpopular?
- Was Mary's religious policy different to those of other sixteenth-century rulers?
- Would we view her reign differently if she had lived longer?

Exam Links

AQA 1C The Tudors: England, 1485–1603

Edexcel 1B: England, 1509–1603: authority, nation and religion

OCR Unit Y106: England 1485–1558: the Early Tudors

OCR Unit Y107: England 1547–1603: the Later Tudors

OCR Unit Y307: Tudor Foreign Policy 1485–1603

Further Reading:

Richards, J. (2008) *Mary Tudor*, Routledge.

Tittler, R. and J. Richards (2013, 3rd Edition) *The Reign of Mary Tudor*, Pearson.

Whitelock, A. (2009) *Mary Tudor: England's First Queen*, Bloomsbury.

Online Resource:

The Acts and Monuments Online, <http://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe>

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