Mary I, Queen of England: How ‘Bloody’ Was She?

By Johanna Strong

Johanna is a PhD student at the University of Winchester

One significant formal event in Winchester Cathedral has consequences which are felt to this day: the July 1554 wedding of Mary I – England’s first crowned queen regnant, that is: queen in her own right – and Philip II of Spain. Their marriage has significantly influenced how Mary is remembered in the English historical narrative and her legacy is very much tied to Philip’s unpopularity in England and Spain’s expansionist hopes in the early modern world. It is their wedding, their marriage, and the legacy of Mary’s reign which is the focus of this article.

Mary’s Life and Reign in Contemporary Eyes

Mary was born on 18 February 1516 to Catherine of Aragon and Henry VIII and was the only one of Catherine of Aragon’s children to live past childhood. As a result of the breakdown of her parents’ marriage, Mary suffered greatly watching her mother exiled from court and left to die alone at Kimbolton in 1536. Just under 20 years later, Mary’s situation changed drastically when she was proclaimed queen in July 1553 after Lady Jane Grey’s brief tenure on the throne. On 25 July 1554, Mary married Philip II of Spain at Winchester Cathedral in an elaborate ceremony with a banquet following at Wolvesey Castle. Most of the time when heirs to the throne become king or queen, their suffering and unhappiness ends. Unfortunately for Mary, this was not the case. She has been overlooked, forgotten, or – worse – vilified since her death on 17 November 1558 particularly since she set the precedent for all future crowned queens regnant, because of the religious policies she undertook, and for her marriage to Philip II.¹

As historian Anna Whitelock has said, the way that Mary ruled can be seen to define how female monarchy would function in England.² In the early modern world, though, women were not unique in this leadership role, but instead, in the words of

Sharon Jansen, “occupy a place in and perpetuate a continuing, though largely unrecognized, tradition of political rule.”

Ernst Kantorowicz’s theory on the monarch’s two bodies serves to explain this juxtaposition of traditional gender roles. His theory states that every monarch has two bodies; one is their personal body, the one that needs to eat and sleep, and the other is the body politic, the one that governs and rules and which is passed unbroken from one monarch to their successor at death. This theory, as historian Sarah Duncan has examined in her research, grew during Mary’s reign, particularly since the early modern world saw women’s bodies as weak, meaning that early modern society required a way to make female monarchy seem stronger and more stable. Despite this, many exiled reformers – who had left England when the Catholic Mary came to the throne – still feared female rule, particularly Catholic female rule.

John Knox’s *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* is one such example.

Mary’s reign cannot really be described as a failure, though, despite how it is portrayed in the traditional English historical narrative presented by historians such as G.R. Elton and H.F.M. Prescott. Mary’s reign was stable, even when there was famine and a flu which may have killed up to 6% of the English population at the time. Mary also reformed the coinage and reintroduced Catholicism as England’s official religion.

Recent re-evaluations of Mary’s reign have also contextualised Mary’s reign as a precedent for Elizabeth’s own queenship; before Elizabeth claimed that she was married to her realm, Mary presented her coronation ring as her wedding band to her realm. Before Elizabeth claimed that she was her people’s mother, Mary assured her people that though she had never had a child she imagined that a mother’s love was the same as that which she held for her subjects. Even Elizabeth’s marriage negotiations were based on Mary and Philip’s negotiations and marriage treaty.

---

4 Sarah Duncan, *Mary I: Gender, Power, and Ceremony in the Reign of England’s First Queen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 12. Early Modern is a term used by historians to categorise the period between roughly 1450 and 1800, though there is much academic discussion among historians about the precise beginning and end dates of this period.
8 Duncan, *Mary I*, 57.
9 Elena Woodacre, ‘Questionable Authority: Female Sovereigns and their Consorts in Medieval and Renaissance Chronicles’, in *Authority and Gender in Medieval and Renaissance Chronicles*, ed.
Marian Religious Policy

Mary’s religious reforms, however, have come to overshadow – at least in the popular imagination – the other aspects of her reign which deserve historical recognition. Over the course of her reign, approximately 280 people were executed for heresy, which broadly means that they failed to practice Christianity according to the Catholic rite. Inheriting the realm after Edward VI’s Protestant reforms, Mary saw one of her most important tasks as re-Catholicising England, which meant stamping out any overtly and explicitly Protestant and reformed practises, a task largely undertaken by her clergy-councillors but ultimately headed by the Queen herself. At the same time that Mary’s regime welcomed Catholicism back into England, it continued to partially reject papal authority, thus creating, in historian Alexander Samson’s words, “an indigenous, innovative Catholicism that influenced theological debates at Trent and beyond.”\(^\text{10}\) One Elizabethan source recalls that in Mary’s time “then was there burning and hanging at home”.\(^\text{11}\) The longer Mary’s reign went on, the number of burnings – the punishment for heresy – decreased, meaning that fewer people were being found guilty of heresy and so fewer people were being sentenced to burning.\(^\text{12}\) Nevertheless, this is not how the traditional historical narrative remembers it. While burning as a punishment for heresy seems extreme in our modern-day context, it was the accepted method of punishment for heresy across Europe. Mary and her regime certainly were not unusual in its introduction; before he died, Mary’s predecessor and brother Edward VI was on the verge of introducing burning, though of course the heresy he would punish would be not following the reformed faith.\(^\text{13}\) Interestingly, Mary is portrayed in a much more positive way in Spain, where she is recognised and praised for her piety, as would be expected of the granddaughter of the Catholic Kings Ferdinand and Isabella.\(^\text{14}\)

---

\(^{10}\) Samson, *Mary and Philip*, 55. The Council of Trent occurred in the mid-sixteenth century and laid out the Roman Catholic Church’s Counter-Reformation movement. The Counter-Reformation largely reformed the Catholic Church in response to both internal and external factors, such as the Protestant Reformation.

\(^{11}\) ‘Transcripts of State Papers and political tracts made chiefly by Ralph Starkey (d. 1628), relating with few exceptions to the royal marriages of England; 1474-1624’. 1603. ADD MS 4149. British Library Additional Manuscripts. British Library, London, 45. Throughout this article, I have modernized the spelling from the original early modern conventions.


Mary and Philip’s Wedding

With these broader overviews of Mary’s reign in mind, let us turn now to Mary and Philip’s wedding and marriage. They married in Winchester Cathedral, partly out of fear of the London crowds and London disease – it was after all the middle of the summer, which was a high season for plague and other contagious diseases – and partly because at Winchester the wedding could be performed by Bishop Gardiner. Gardiner was the Bishop of Winchester as well as the Chancellor of England, so if he performed the wedding, it would hold secular and spiritual power under his authority.¹⁵

One aspect rarely highlighted or mentioned beyond a simple reference about Mary and Philip’s wedding is that, during the marriage negotiations, Philip signed an ad cautelam, which literally translates to “with caution”. This ad cautelam declared that Philip had signed the marriage treaty under duress, meaning that he would not have to follow its tenets if he decided it was unsuitable later on in their marriage.¹⁶ A contemporary Spanish source notes that Philip “protested […] against the articles and everything contained therein […] desiring that it should forever be recorded, as a plain, clear and certain fact” that he was marrying Mary “not of his own free will.”¹⁷ If there was any doubt that Philip was serious, he swore on Christ, the Virgin Mary, the sign of the Cross, and the Gospel itself.¹⁸ There were several reasons why Philip may have done this. Perhaps he thought that the marriage treaty was more favourable to England than it was to Spain, so wanted to find a way to back out of the marriage if it proved too unpopular with his Spanish subjects.¹⁹ More likely, though, was that he realised Mary was unlikely to give him an heir.²⁰ At this point, Mary was thirty-seven and Philip was still in his twenties. Mary was approaching menopause and so the odds of her conceiving, having an uncomplicated pregnancy, and carrying a healthy child to term were slim, though not impossible. This put Philip in an awkward position because one of the main reasons for a king marrying was to secure a dynastic alliance and to produce heirs. If Mary could not do this for him, it was unlikely to be perceived in the early modern context as a successful marriage.

¹⁶ Samson, Mary and Philip, 63.
¹⁸ ‘Spain: January 1554, 1-10’.
¹⁹ Samson, Mary and Philip, 63.
²⁰ Samson, Mary and Philip, 64.
The conception of heirs was the traditional role of a queen consort, but the role of mother gained a greater significance when the woman in question was a queen regnant. The tension between Mary’s monarchical authority as a queen regnant and her childbearing role typical of a queen consort came to the fore when her marriage to Philip was announced, as we see in the following analysis and discussion. Early modern women were expected to be submissive to their husband, so Mary’s gender was a massive concern for her subjects; there were great concerns that Mary would become the traditional wife when she married Philip. Would all her patronage pass to him as the husband? Would her political and property rights also go to him? These concerns remained, even though the marriage treaty was quite clear that Mary would retain all the power and authority she had held before she married.

One way Mary undertook to calm her subjects’ fears was in the marriage vows themselves. In their proxy wedding, done before Philip arrived in England, (as an effort to make sure that Mary could not leave Philip if a better marriage prospect arose), Philip’s vows were traditionally female “per verba de praesenti” (literally, “by words in the present”), which made the marriage valid and legal from that moment. On the other hand, Mary took the traditionally male vows of “per verba de futuro” (literally, “by words in the future”), which made their marriage valid and legal from a specified future moment. Once again, Mary assumed the dominant role in the partnership.

Mary and Philip’s statuses were also made very clear in their physical positioning during the wedding ceremony and the ensuing banquet. Mary was always on the right-hand side during the ceremony, the more prestigious position. Spanish subjects were also particularly conscious that during the wedding banquet Mary was served on gold plate while Philip’s was only silver. Philip wore white cloth of gold to their wedding ceremony, which is a white piece of fabric that has beaten thread of gold sewn into it. Traditionally, a queen consort wore white cloth of gold to her coronation, so Philip’s wedding outfit indicated to Mary’s subjects that he was firmly England’s king consort to Mary’s queen regnant.

---

22 Samson, *Mary and Philip*, 68.
Foreign marriages were historically a common way for the English monarchy to achieve advantageous political and military alliances, with previous examples including Prince Arthur’s marriage to Katherine of Aragon in 1501, Henry VIII’s 1509 marriage to the same Katherine, and Henry VIII’s – albeit brief – marriage to Anne of Cleves in 1540. Mary was, by far, being presented as the higher-status member of the couple, but many of her subjects failed to notice or chose not to. Later, when Mary and Philip entered London for the first time as a couple, Mary was again on the right-hand side. Those who had come from Spain with Philip were deeply upset that Philip was seemingly still coming second to Mary, even after he had been publicly proclaimed King of Naples on their wedding day, a present from his father, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. There were some concessions and changes the longer they were married. Originally, Mary was on the right-side of one of the coin faces with Philip on the left, but as she pushed for Philip’s coronation as king consort of England, Philip appeared on the right-hand side for the first time.

Posthumous Perceptions of Mary and Philip’s Marriage

Despite Mary and her regime’s clear division between Mary as a wife and Mary as a queen, posthumous understandings of Mary and Philip’s marriage have differing interpretations from contemporary perceptions of Mary’s life and reign. At the time, some opposition to the marriage was based on religious antipathy to Catholicism, but mostly “the fear of a Spanish Servitude”. As soon as Mary died and Elizabeth came to the throne, however, the continuation of Catholicism in England was rather tenuous. The longer Elizabeth was on the throne, the greater the threat became which was posed by Catholic European powers, meaning that in Elizabethan subjects’ imagination, Mary’s marriage became a moment of Catholic tyranny over England. During Mary’s lifetime, though, as one historian has put it, “everything [i.e. the successful re-Catholicisation of England, the birth of a male heir, the expansion of England’s influence in Europe] still seemed to be possible”;

30 Richards, *Mary Tudor*, 159.
32 Francis Bacon, *The history of the reigns of Henry the Seventh, Henry the Eighth, Edward the Sixth, and Queen Mary the first written by the Right Honourable Francis Lord Verulam, Viscount St. Alban; the other three by the Right Honourable and Right Reverend Father in God, Francis Godwyn, Lord Bishop of Hereford* (London: 1675), 168.
33 Streckfuss, ““Spes Maxima Nostra””, 153.
triumph in England and it was not a given that Mary would be seen as the aberration of English history. As we have seen, Mary’s subjects were concerned about their queen marrying a foreigner, a criticism which has been integrated into traditional histories of Mary’s reign. The issue with that criticism is that Mary really had no other choice. She could not marry one of her subjects; how would it look if a husband was head of the family and so was superior to his wife the queen?  

In addition, Philip was the most eligible bachelor in Europe at this point. Why would Mary marry a subject when she could have the best possible marriage there was? It was only once England became consistently Protestant and consistently wary of foreigners that Mary’s marriage to Philip II became seen as a moment where the monarch in a sense sacrificed England to its enemies. And surely the marriage treaty between Mary and Philip was not so awful if Elizabeth I used it as a precedent for her own marriage negotiations in the 1560s!

Mary as the ‘Bloody’ Queen

But was Mary as ‘bloody’ as her nickname suggests? Marian expert Alexander Samson’s most recent work argues that “the image of an emotionally hysterical queen beset by tragedy exculpates the Tudor monarch, in order to reassign agency and blame to Catholics and foreigners.” Mary’s memory has become “deeply intertwined” with the Reformation and the British Empire, so she is caught up in two of the most important aspects of English and British national identity and history; English and British patriotism is deeply tied to anti-Catholicism and anti-papalism, which means that it is inherently anti-Spanish and anti-Marian. Further, the early modern English empire defined itself in opposition to the Spanish Empire, so the Black Legend which vilified Philip II – and by extension Mary – was kept alive beyond its historical

---

34 Richards, *Mary Tudor*, 144.
Interestingly, the anti-Marian sentiment that is evident in the traditional English and British historical narrative was first encouraged by Protestant exiles and really was not a defining feature of Mary’s reign until after her death.\(^{42}\)

John Foxe (1516-1587) – author of *Acts and Monuments*, or more commonly known as the *Book of Martyrs*, a copy of which can be found in the Morley Library at Winchester Cathedral – was instrumental in creating Mary into a bloody figure of history, portraying in intense detail as he did the religious persecution undertaken during Mary’s reign.\(^{43}\) Foxe’s work, however, cannot in any stretch of the imagination be termed unbiased. He was of a reforming mindset and supported the return of England to Protestantism under Elizabeth I, so it is understandable that his work would portray a Catholic queen in such a negative light. Not that it condones Mary’s behaviour, but – as previously noted – burning as the punishment for heresy was an accepted practice in the early modern European world.

Further, the fear of foreign rule which many Elizabethans perceived to have been narrowly avoided during Mary’s reign re-emerged when Elizabeth I entered marriage negotiations with foreigners. Susan Doran, a leading Elizabethan historian, argues that the English people were so worried about one of Elizabeth’s proposed marriages with France because the prospective husband was Catholic and there was seen to be a potential “dreaded […] return to popery”, a reminder “of the experience of burnings and exiles during Mary’s reign”.\(^{44}\) These fears emerged, too, at the same time that recusancy in England was growing and so the threat of inconspicuous English Catholicism was seen to be even greater.\(^{45}\) A contemporary source even goes so far as to say that an Elizabethan marriage to France could be worse than the Marian marriage to Spain because at least in Mary’s reign the Catholic Holy League was not yet in existence.\(^{46}\) If Elizabeth married a French noble, then she was marrying an entire alliance of Catholic forces, something which was incomprehensible to many of her Protestant subjects.\(^{47}\) Even more significantly, an Elizabethan fear was that the queen

---

\(^{41}\) Samson, *Mary and Philip*, 1.

\(^{42}\) Samson, *Mary and Philip*, 145.

\(^{43}\) Samson, *Mary and Philip*, 149.

\(^{44}\) Doran, ‘Religion and Politics’, 921.

\(^{45}\) Doran, ‘Religion and Politics’, 910.


\(^{47}\) ‘The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulffe’, C2v.
would be drawn into foreign wars “as Queen Mary was with King Philip against France whereby Calais was lost.”

Continuing Perceptions

Finally – and to bring us back to Mary and Philip’s marriage more specifically – “[t]he problem with Mary is in many ways a problem with Philip.” Philip represented much of what Elizabethan English people were afraid of: foreigners and Catholics. These fears re-emerged, as Marian scholar Sarah Duncan puts it, “in the reign of Elizabeth I each time she contemplated marrying a foreigner, suggesting that the particular nationality of Mary’s spouse held no real significance and that the English would have objected to a foreign king consort whatever his country of origin.” After Mary’s death, Philip married Elisabeth of Valois in 1559 and continued his tenure as an imperialist Spanish monarch. Meanwhile in England, Mary’s death meant a cementing of perceptions of her reign, understandably without Mary to tame Elizabethan concerns about her memory. The rest of Philip’s life continued to affect Elizabethan perceptions of Mary’s reign, but – given her death – Mary was no longer an active protagonist in the creation of her own legacy. Mary became the scapegoat for the introduction of these two elements into Elizabethan society and so was vilified as being an un-English monarch. Alexander Samson’s strongest statement in his work – and what I think really encapsulates why Mary is remembered the way that she is – relates to how modern British people see Mary and their own history. He says that “[t]he acceptability of Mary’s foreign marriage will no doubt continue to inflect the evolving relationship between Britain and Europe, and its cultural politics.” As Britain’s relationship and connection to the rest of Europe becomes more strained at an administrative and governmental level, there really is no other option than to continue the traditional anti-Catholic and anti-foreigner historical narrative. And vice versa. Corinna Streckfuss provides perhaps the best summary of this complex

48 ‘Transcripts of State Papers and political tracts made chiefly by Ralph Starkey (d. 1628), relating with few exceptions to the royal marriages of England; 1474-1624’, 101.
49 Samson, Mary and Philip, 2.
50 Duncan, Mary I, 44.
51 Duncan, Mary I, 45.
52 Samson, Mary and Philip, 4.
53 Samson, Mary and Philip, 225.
narrative: “That [Mary and Philip’s] marriage lost its attraction with time cannot be blamed on unsuccessful propaganda but on the course of history.”

---