

Many Marys

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A Review of

John D. Staines, *The Tragic Histories of Mary Queen of Scots, 1560-1690*, (Farnham, Ashgate, 2009), 278pp, £55

In this wide ranging volume, John D. Staines sets out to chart the shifting trajectory of the reputation of Mary Queen of Scots, and to assess the opportunities her name, image, and story offered to polemicists of every stripe. Mary's story is well-known. As the book opens in 1560, Mary Stuart was Queen of Scots and Queen of France. But this apparent triumph for the Catholic Stuart dynasty was not to last. Following the death of her young husband, Francois II, Mary returned to Scotland, the kingdom she had not known since her childhood, and which had been changed dramatically by the recent convulsions of the Calvinist Reformation of 1560. While her accommodation with the Protestant régime proved quite successful at first, it was her subsequent marriages that set her downfall in motion. Amid the scandal of the murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley, and her subsequent marriage to the prime suspect, the earl of Bothwell, in 1567, Mary was deposed from her Scottish throne and fled to England, where she was kept captive by Elizabeth I's government. For the remainder of her life, Mary, as the presumed heir of the childless Elizabeth, was the focus of Catholic conspiracies against Elizabeth's life. In 1587, after nineteen years in captivity, she was executed for treason following the exposure of one such plot.

By 1587, then, Mary's story could be readily shaped into a variety of versions to suit a variety of causes. Staines' study is a contribution to the growing corpus of work concerned with the reputations of historical figures, and the ways their descendants manipulated an array of versions of the past to suit their own needs. Re-written pasts, imposed pasts, and invented pasts, are all revealing of the intentions and the needs of those who contributed to shaping them, and Staines here reveals the spectrum of Marys that could be called upon to meet a range of political and polemical needs.

At one extreme, Mary could be presented, as she sought to present herself at her trial and execution, as a martyr for the Catholic faith; or, in more general terms, and particularly in the context of the execution of Charles I in 1649, as a martyr to the misguided bloodlust of republicans. At the other extreme, Mary could be portrayed as complicit in adultery and murder, as a negative example of female rule, or even as a critique of the institution of monarchy itself. Staines particularly associates this strand of her reputation with the political theorist and historian

George Buchanan, and demonstrates that his *Detection* of her nefarious doings, published in a variety of forms in Scots, Latin, English and French at crucial junctures in Mary's life and afterlife, reveals much of these various contexts. This approach, of examining the evolving editions, and in some cases the hesitations that prevented publication at particular moments, does much to illustrate the flexibility of Buchanan's text, and the sensitivities that successive governments felt about authorising or even promoting the work of such a notorious theorist of resistance.

Between these two extremes, Mary's status as a tragic icon is explored. On this subject, Staines' account bears comparison with Jayne Elizabeth Lewis' *Mary Queen of Scots: Romance and Nation* (1998) which also set out to chart Mary's afterlife, but that found it to be an essentially tear-stained and sentimental one. The main distinction between these works, and the foremost achievement of Staines' volume, is his demonstration that down to the end of the seventeenth century at least, such representations were inherently political and rooted in debates of the highest urgency.

Thus while Staines' priorities are primarily literary, there is much here that will be of interest to historians, particularly in the earliest and strongest sections of the book, those which deal with the sixteenth-century context while Elizabeth was still alive; and the early seventeenth-century context when James VI and I struggled with the weight of his mother's legacy. These sections are highly successful in considering a wide variety of textual representations of Mary, from the works of familiar canonical figures like Spenser, Camden and Montaigne, to lesser-known and more ephemeral tracts, all expertly rooted in the context, giving a rich sense of reception. The engagement with the French context is particularly impressive, as Staines demonstrates, not only the variety of uses to which Mary's story could be put in the struggles between the Valois monarchy, the Huguenot minority and the Guise-dominated Catholic League, but also how present these struggles were to contemporaries in Scotland and England.

It is in the later sections of the book, in the coverage of the mid to late seventeenth century, that Staines' analysis becomes a little stretched. The shifting factions and the rapid pace of events of the Civil War and Interregnum periods are insufficiently contextualised, and the scope shrinks to consider England alone. The Scottish Covenanters barely register, which is a surprising omission given that their interest in enlisting Buchanan and Knox as their predecessors and claiming custody of their own Reformation as a Presbyterian one, entailed considerable engagement with

Mary's history. Staines expresses surprise at the comparative lack of recourse that the English regicides had to Buchanan in the justification of their deed after 1649 (p. 210). Perhaps Buchanan's association with Protestantism of a particularly Scottish and Presbyterian cast, and those Covenanters who were busy crowning Charles II, might provide a partial explanation.

Finally, this reader was not entirely persuaded by the closing coverage of the aftermath of the Revolution of 1688. Staines concludes that the republication of Buchanan's writings in English translation following the Revolution indicates that the Whigs had won, that their negative view of Mary had prevailed, and that Buchanan's views were now 'respectable' and 'the last word' (p. 232). Such a judgement arguably overstates the extent to which the Whig mainstream accepted radical resistance theory as an advantageous part of its culture, and neglects to engage with the contrary arguments of J.P. Kenyon and Mark Goldie on England, and Colin Kidd on Scotland, who have emphasised the tentative and self-consciously moderate rhetoric of both Revolution settlements.

1690 was not the last word on Mary's tragic history. As Jayne Lewis has demonstrated, Mary's afterlife continued into the age of Jacobitism and the age of enlightenment, although, in these phases, sentiment did come to dominate her reputation. John D. Staines is right to emphasise, however, that the earlier phase of Mary's reputation was marked by political urgency, because the disputes between Catholic and Protestant, Tudor and Stuart, and royalist and republican, in which Mary was a symbol, remained vital and pressing. In short, this is an engaging and impressive book that reveals much of the political culture of Great Britain in the early modern period, and it will be of interest to historians and literary scholars alike.