The Marriages of Mary, Queen of Scots
Was She the victim of Her Passions?

By Dr. Charles Beem, History

Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-1587) had three husbands: King Francis II of France; Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley; and James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell. Scholars continue to debate the reasons why Mary consented to marry Darnley and Bothwell. These explanations range from the interpretation that Mary was the victim of her womanly passions to more feminist interpretations that highlight the difficulties for a woman ruling a violent and factious kingdom.

Main Points to Consider

The Traditional View: Mary Queen of Scots was the victim of her womanly passions, which explains why she made such disastrous choices for husbands, which ultimately led to her deposition. Mary's failure as queen is usually contrasted with Elizabeth I's ability to tame her feminine nature and rule England successfully.

There are a number of contemporary revisionist schools of thought concerning Mary, Queen of Scots:

John Guy: While Guy is a highly respected Tudor scholar, his interpretation of Mary as a spirited and intellectual queen, every bit the equal of Elizabeth I, tries too hard to reinvent Mary as a successful queen as he acquits Mary of any complicity in Darnley's death.

Jenny Wormald: Wormald removes gender as an analytic strategy to assess Mary's performance as a monarch, concluding she lacked the ability to comprehend political reality at key moments of her queenship, such as the decisions to marry Darnley and Bothwell.

Susan Doran: Doran looks beyond Mary's supposed guilt in Darnley's murder and her other alleged crimes to examine how Mary failed to control perceptions about her queenship, especially concerning her alleged complicity in Darnley's murder, which ultimately led to her deposition.

Charles Beem: Beem argues that Mary's training as a consort ill-prepared her for Scottish queenship, in which she prioritized her dynastic ambitions for the English throne over trying to rule Scotland effectively, and offers a more nuanced view of Mary's decisions to marry both Darnley and Bothwell.
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John Gray: While Gray is a highly respected Tudor scholar, his interpretation of Mary as a spirited and independent woman. Mary was the equal of Elizabeth. Even she had to prove that she was as successful a queen in the eyes of her subjects as Mary of any other queen in England.

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Due to her marriage to Bothwell, Mary's reign was marked by political intrigue and controversy. She was eventually forced to abdicate her throne, and the Earl of Bothwell was executed on charges of treason.

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