

**‘How far did personal beliefs influence Mary Stuart’s reign  
in Scotland?’**

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**Final draft**

Mary Stuart, more commonly known as Mary Queen of Scots, reigned over Scotland in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Her life is one of the most fascinating to observe, all the way from her birth amidst religious conflict in 1542, to her life being cut short by the swift blow of an axe in 1567. Her reign is important because of the way it ended, not with her dying of old age as the Queen of England and Scotland, but being forced to abdicate to her infant son, James. Had she ruled differently, matters of state may have been very different today. This essay shall explore what the effects of her reign were in four subject matters, economic, religious, political and personal and then evaluate which was the most influential on her reign. Some may say religion, others politics, but after considering Mary's personal beliefs, they may prove to be the most important.

Economics was a large cog in the clockwork that was Mary's reign. From the age of five until adulthood Mary lived in France; she was betrothed to its next king, Francis Valois and attended the French court from a young age. The lifestyle she enjoyed there was luxurious, but it came at vast expense, 'Mary's account for the year 1556 to 1557 showed outgoings of 58,607 livres' (Fraser, 1969). It was estimated that King Henry had spent the equivalent of 1 million livres in gold on Mary over 10 years (Windsor, 2004). Scotland had only a fifth of England's good pastoral land which meant they had trouble raising enough crops to feed the population. More land became unproductive in the Middle Ages due to a decrease in temperature and increase of precipitation. Due to this, neighbouring countries had not much interest in trade with Scotland and this was a great loss to the economy, 'The financial resources of the Scottish crown were cripplingly restricted' (Fraser, 1969). Mary did not cope in the ideal way with Scotland's financial state. The transition from her careless spending to restricted saving did not go well, and expensive items often

appeared in her inventory that had not been bought in France. Scotland already found it difficult to provide the money needed for its armies and food for its people. This affected her reign because it angered Mary's subjects by putting her pleasure above their needs, and was one of the causes of their eventual rejection of her as their queen. In comparison to personal beliefs, economic aspects were not as important. Both were essential to her downfall, but her personal beliefs meant that not only did Mary put herself before her subjects, but England before Scotland.

Religion was the next problem Mary Stuart faced. After Francis died, Mary returned to Scotland a widow. The reception she received was unpleasant; most people disliked her for her gender, religion, French manners or all three. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, many countries were converting to Protestantism from Catholicism, England, Germany, Scandinavia and more. Others, like Scotland, were becoming Protestant despite the country's official religion still being Catholicism, 'The Scottish national church...still officially Catholic...already torn between those who wished to reform its manifold abuses from within, and those who wished to follow England's example by breaking away root and branch from the tree of Rome.' (Fraser, 1969). The person who most greatly expressed their dislike that Mary was Catholic, and a woman was John Knox, an influential minister and writer. He believed it was not by God's will that a woman should rule, 'I am assured that God hath revealed unto some in this age, that is more than a monster in nature that a woman shall reign and have empire above man' (Knox, 1558). Mary was born at a disadvantage because she was female, then held at one because she was Catholic. She returned to her home country in the new days of Protestantism, so it was a very precarious and confused time for the people of Scotland. This affected her reign because followers turn to leaders for guidance, but as Mary did not

share her subject's religion, this was not an option. To the people of Scotland, Mary seemed like an outsider and her religion only helped further isolate her from them. It could be argued that religious aspects had a much more influential effect on her reign than economic ones. The root of the Scots general dislike for their queen can be traced to the fact that she was different from them. The biggest difference people found fault with in medieval times, that caused many wars and crusades, was religion. Mary was Catholic, and they were Protestant. God demanded a man on the throne, and she was a woman. To many, Mary Stuart would have been a living embodiment of societal disorder. Economic aspects would have only enhanced the feelings of mistrust people already had towards her because of the issues surrounding religion. When compared with personal beliefs, one can see that religious aspects were not as important. Personal beliefs led her to not only defy people such as John Knox, but to speak up against the inequality between men and women. Religious beliefs only influenced how she practiced Catholicism, more discreetly, and exercised her powers whereas her personal beliefs affected her whole reign and outlook on inequality.

Mary had strong political ties with France, having grown up there and being its former queen. Even from a young age, she was treated with the utmost respect, 'The rank in which I want my daughter the Queen of Scotland to occupy...it is my intention she should take precedence over my daughters' wrote Henri II, her father-in-law (Fraser, 1969). This means that Mary was treated as more high-ranking than King Henri's own children, which demonstrates the strength of their relationship. She also had close ties with England, being the great-granddaughter of Henry VII. Many Catholic Englishmen wanted Mary to overthrow Elizabeth, as they did not like the Protestant queen; this greatly worried Elizabeth, 'Although

tacitly excluded from the throne...Mary certainly had the best claim after Elizabeth' (Rex, 2002). Legally, Mary could not ascend the English throne, but her claim to it was still as great, if not more so, than Elizabeth's. There was also the political issue of Mary's later husbands after Francis. Lord Henry Darnley was her cousin, and seemingly a suitable match for her. He was also descended from Henry VII which bolstered Mary's claim to the throne of England. At first, she was infatuated with him, but she soon learned what his true personality was, 'Darnley could pour his rage and jealousy against his wife.' (Fraser, 1969). After they were married, Darnley became arrogant, and started to demand more power. He was murdered just two years after they married, and Mary was implicated in his death, causing a scandal. Then she married the 4th Earl of Bothwell, James Hepburn, who had also been implicated in Darnley's death. There are theories that suggest that Mary did not do this of her own free will, 'Bothwell made his second planned move...he decided to complete his formal abduction of her person by the physical possession of her body...he intended to place the queen in a situation from which she could not possibly escape marrying him.' (Fraser, 1969). Bothwell abducted Mary and then possibly raped her. This may have led to her believing that morally she had no choice but to marry him. All this affected her reign because she formed alliances that all the people, from farmers to high ranking courtiers disapproved of. Some of her choices were so poor that there were rebellions and battles over them. An example of this is the Chaseabout Raid, which occurred after Mary's marriage to Darnley, which her own half-brother James participated in. Four protestant lords led the raid and tried to take Edinburgh castle, but failed. Some people believe political factors had more effect on Mary's reign than religious ones. Religious problems prompted mistrust, gossip and lack of allegiance, which was simply her people not supporting her. Political problems caused actual violence in the form of coups

and battles, which far from people not supporting her, was people opposing her. Religion and politics seemed to mean the same things as talk and action. Political and personal influences both had astonishingly similar effects on her reign, however, personal was decidedly the greater of the two. Personal beliefs were what she used to make decisions in the situations that political aspects caused. For instance, Mary could have executed Bothwell for treason, however her pride and other personal aspects meant that she felt she had no choice in the matter. Politics may have landed her in a situation, but however unsuccessful it proved, her personal beliefs guided her attempts to resolve them.

When asked what they thought influenced her reign most, guides at Holyrood Palace said, ‘When Mary came to Scotland she basically said to the Protestants, you can practice your faith as long as I can practice mine. She also denied Darnley the crown matrimonial, as she rightly believed that although he was a man, he did not hold equal rank to her. I think that what influenced her reign the most is that she was a modern-thinker’ A woman from 450 years ago had the same opinions on equality that we do today. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we prize those qualities in a leader. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, that opinion was not wanted or tolerated. Another guide replied with, ‘She was very ambitious. Mary had the English Tudor emblem all over her bedchamber-almost as stamp to say she was the rightful queen of England. She also had the initials of her ex father-in-law Henri Valois throughout her apartments. He was very dear to her and set her a great example of what a ruler should be like.’ Mary’s ambition for England is what motivated her. In fact, you could argue that she prioritised her want for the English throne over the many problems there already were in Scotland. Henry would have been a role model to Mary, he was strong, brave, rich and he fought in many battles. She modelled

her reign to be like his, but it did not work. He inspired fear because of his strength and power. For Mary, as a woman, all she inspired was challenge from those who disliked her. These factors affected her reign because they were personal to her. She was a queen that ruled with her heart rather than her head which is what made her so brave, defiant and passionate in the face of mockery and opposition. One could say that personal reasons were more influential to her reign than politics. The problems that came from politics and caused fighting changed the way she approached certain things, but her personal beliefs formed the entire foundation for the way she ruled. If Mary wanted acceptance, she promoted it for all. If she wanted the English throne, she prioritised it above all else. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century it was far from the best way to rule, but looking back from today, her simple approach to the problems she constantly faced should be admired.

When comparing each subject matter with the other, it becomes apparent that personal aspects were the most influential on her reign. Even outside of her rule, her ambition for England continued and would eventually lead to her death. Mary Stuart ruled Scotland how she wanted to, on her terms, even though many went out of their way to stop her. Though Mary was abducted, exiled and executed in the 1500's, had she been alive today there is no denying she would have made a good head of state, and her talents and attributes would have fitted much more readily into today's political state than they did then.

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