

# **Marginalised Monarch**

## **Mary Stuart and the Cultural Supremacy of Gloriana as Manifested in Film and Television**

### **1. Introduction**

**M**ary Stuart, Queen of Scots (1542-1587; Queen of Scotland 1542-1567), is a culturally and historically significant character whose dramatic life and untimely end at the hands of an English executioner have made her live on in the popular imagination, most prominently as the heroine of romantic tragedy (Graham 2008: 440). The Queen of Scots has figured in diverse works of literature and the arts since her death, and through her role as victim and “unofficial” Catholic martyr she has achieved legendary status in popular culture. Due to her background and the political climate of her time, it is difficult for any treatment of Mary, whether scholarly, fictional or otherwise, to skip over her relationship with her English cousin, Elizabeth Tudor (1533-1603; Queen of England 1558-1603). Their relationship was problematic and paradoxical to say the least; they were closely bound through both kinship and queenship, yet they were rivals and eventually mortal enemies, representing different and opposing religions, Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as being the rulers of countries whose relations had for centuries been fraught with tension. This is what Antonia Fraser refers to as “the strange tortuous map” of the cousins’s relationship (Fraser 2002 [1969]: 535), and Jane Dunn calls it the “most compelling relationship of their lives” (Dunn 2004: xxxi).<sup>1</sup> Obviously,

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1 The opinions of Marian scholars on the exact nature of different aspects and phases of Mary and Elizabeth’s relationship vary, but there is an overall agree-

Elizabeth always needs to be taken into account when fictionalizing the life of Mary Queen of Scots.

Mary's relationship with Scotland was, and remains, complicated and paradoxical. Her reign there after returning from France was filled with difficulties and the events that shocked her contemporaries at home and abroad (the murders of Rizzio and Darnley and Mary's subsequent marriage to Bothwell) are seen by modern historians as both a result of her own misguided actions and of the divisions and rivalry endemic among the Scottish nobility of the time (e.g. Fraser 2002 [1969]; Graham 2008; Guy 2004; Weir 2003). Mary's own Catholicism complicated matters further, and her forced abdication was clearly welcomed by Scottish Protestants. Repudiated by the Scots and thrown on the mercy of her cousin Elizabeth, Mary's religion and the threat it invoked eventually determined English policy towards her affairs, leading to her execution on 8 February 1587 after more than eighteen years of imprisonment in England. Consequently, because of her Catholicism, Mary can be seen as a symbol for an old form of religion

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ment on the troubled nature of this relationship. Jane Dunn sums it up as a relationship where kinship played a big part and where opposites attracted: "While Mary lived, Elizabeth's isolation as a regnant queen in a world of men was relieved; there was a sympathy between them and [...] they were among the closest blood relations that either had left in the world. Although temperamentally opposed and living their lives to different ideals, Mary had insisted on stressing this familial female relationship: mother, daughter, sister, cousin; in every one of her multitude of letters over the years she reminded Elizabeth of their blood connection. There was an attraction too in opposites, a fascination with those who lived out the un-lived side of oneself. Mary had recklessly pursued her heart in a way Elizabeth would never contemplate and Elizabeth had assumed authority in government that had won the world's grudging respect. Elizabeth and Mary had offered to each other a different way of seeing, a point of identity and contrast. In their solitary queenship, the existence of the other, a cousin too, meant each was not entirely alone" (Dunn 2004: 500). John Guy points out an element of jealousy in Elizabeth's feelings towards Mary, to the extent that it prevented a meeting between the two queens simply because Elizabeth was afraid that Mary would "overshadow or surpass her" (Guy 2004: 511). While agreeing to a certain extent with the "well-entrenched interpretation" of the two women as "rival" queens, Guy also argues that Mary and Elizabeth "had much more in common than this reductionist model allows" (Guy 2004: 511). He moreover points out that the common representation of Elizabeth as ruling from the head and Mary from the heart, a notion clearly echoed in Dunn's summary above, is based on a Protestant stereotype derived from John Knox's proclamation to this effect, because in Knox's eyes "a Protestant Queen was an 'exceptional' personality able to overcome the frailty of her gender, whereas Catholic Queens were not" (Guy 2004: 203).

that was forced to make way for the new religious order promoted by Elizabeth and her councillors. As a Scottish monarch, Mary can now also be read as representative of the subjugation—and even assimilation—of Scotland by England, despite her historical repudiation by the Scots; cultural and national memory is highly selective, and today we only need to visit Holyrood Palace or tourist shops on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh to see that Mary Queen of Scots is accorded a highly significant status in representations of Scottish history, cultural heritage and identity. Indeed, according to Esther Breitenbach and Lynn Abrams, Mary remains one of few popular icons of Scottishness that are female, in the company of male figures like William Wallace and Robert Burns (Breitenbach and Adams 2006: 17). Nevertheless, Mary's symbolic function in Scotland is both paradoxical and problematic in the historical sense, both because Mary's Catholicism allied her with Europe, in particular France and Spain, and because she was in her own time rejected by the country whose tourist industry now claims her as the Scots' most potent romantic icon.

Comparable to Mary, Elizabeth I has become an English icon and "England's most recognizable royal export" as noted by Julia M. Walker (Walker 2004: 3). Elizabeth I is seen to represent an English "Golden Age," standing for "the beginnings of empire, the defeat of the Armada [...] and an England without the complications of a fallen empire, postcolonial immigrants, or economic recession" (Moss 2006: 807). Through such associations, the figure of the Virgin Queen, Good Queen Bess, or Gloriana, has retained a considerable hold on the public consciousness. Elizabeth has become a sort of trademark, or logo, for England, her image even marking England as the centre of the literary world (Moss 2006: 798). While each queen can thus be seen as a symbol for her country, Elizabeth's image is much more clearly invested in a notion of national, cultural, and even historical, superiority. Indeed, it is my contention that in filmic dramatisations of Mary, there is a clear tendency to measure Mary's story against that of Elizabeth's in a way that Mary's role, her political importance, her value and strengths as a monarch, are trivialised or even marginalised. This applies even to some films where the main subject is the life of Mary Stuart herself. In addition, there is even a tendency to glorify the power and success of the English Gloriana as a means of upholding a

myth of English national superiority, as set against what many view as the failures of Mary's reign.<sup>2</sup> This paper seeks to address this issue of marginalisation and mythologisation as it appears in historical film, focusing specifically on films and TV series produced from the early 1970s onwards.

## 2. Mary vs. Elizabeth in Film and TV

All the films and TV series focusing on the story of Mary Stuart that are discussed here accord great significance to her cousin Elizabeth. In certain cases, such as in *Gunpowder, Treason and Plot* (2004), Elizabeth herself is situated more in the background, whereas in other instances her role is much more prominent, even on a par with that of Mary. As Walker states in her book *The Elizabeth Icon*, even if Elizabeth herself is not the focus of a film production, she is “very much the axis around which the characters turn” (Walker 2004: 186). Bethany Latham's argument echoes this, as she holds that films about Mary “are often just as much about Elizabeth as they are about Mary” (Latham 2011: 47). This classification very much applies to *Mary Queen of Scots* (1971), in which Vanessa Redgrave takes the role of Mary and Glenda Jackson that of Elizabeth I. Here, the importance accorded to the role of Elizabeth, brilliantly played by Jackson, who arguably steals the scene (she is seen by some to overshadow Redgrave's Mary),<sup>3</sup> results in the fact that Mary is to some degree marginalised while actually being the main subject of the film. Her story ultimately becomes a story of failure as she is outmanoeuvred by the

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2 Indeed, the representation of the astute and superior Elizabeth and the emotional and politically weak Mary has remained surprisingly unchanging and stereotypical in the filmic portrayals and adaptations discussed here despite the significant shifts that have taken place since the 1970s in the political and cultural dynamics of Scotland and England. These shifts involve, for instance, the devolving of legislative powers to a separate Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh (from 1999), along with an increased awareness of the problematics of Scottish cultural identity within a British framework as well as increased recognition of Scottish literature and culture in a British, European and global context. However, these issues, along with the specific cultural-historical contexts of the films and TV series addressed in this article would need to be discussed in much more detail and in greater depth than the length of this article allows for.

3 See, for example, Ford and Mitchell (2009: 146), and Guy (2009: 148). This view is also echoed in Kearsten's review of the film: “Jackson's performance is unparalleled, and she walks away with the show” (Kearsten 2009: n.p.).

much more politically astute English queen; her political inadequacies are emphasised as opposed to Elizabeth's political shrewdness. Moreover, the film's most striking and powerful scenes are those depicting either Elizabeth talking about Mary or the two scenes in which the two queens meet face to face (a fictional invention as this never truly happened). In truth, it is fair to assert, as does Latham, that this film is not really about Mary, but is "in actuality the story of Elizabeth and Mary's rivalry" (Latham 2011: 131). This rivalry is the driving force behind the scenes mentioned above. They revolve around such things as Mary's naïve efforts to be "friends" with Elizabeth, which are then thwarted by Elizabeth's refusal to meet her, and Elizabeth's desire to limit Mary's power and her efforts to lay traps for her Scottish cousin (such as by offering the Earl of Leicester as a suitable husband for Mary but sending Darnley also with the express intent that Mary fall for him instead and so be weakened through his folly). Also, Elizabeth's jealousy and fear of Mary are clearly demonstrated, and there are comparisons where Mary is made out to be a weak and ineffectual monarch who follows her heart instead of her head, while Elizabeth is made out to be exceptionally shrewd and to place political benefit above her feelings.

This rivalry between the two queens and their contrasting personalities and behaviour are central to how Mary's story is presented in *Mary Queen of Scots*. Indeed, in historical film as well as fiction, Mary and Elizabeth are frequently measured against one another in terms of the feminine and the masculine; thus Mary becomes the "feminine ideal, a woman victimized by her gender," while Elizabeth is the masculine woman "because she ... puts the public world of politics above the private world of emotions" (Wallace 2008: 19). This is much in line with the stereotype established by the Scottish reformer John Knox and maintained ever since (Guy 2004: 203). Film portrayals of Mary tend to focus on her sympathetic, tragic aspects; she is accorded beauty, charm, education, yet also unable to rule effectively because of her tendency to base her decisions on emotions, on private reasons rather than public or political ones. Elizabeth I, by contrast, tends to be the cold, calculating Virgin Queen, constantly plotting against and manipulating Mary. This is even reflected in the choice of clothes for the two characters, as Walker suggests: "Mary is always subliminally

more fluid, more pliant, more naturally attired, while Elizabeth is encased in the virtual armor of her profession” (Walker 2004: 188). Moreover, Mary is often portrayed as an innocent victim of circumstance, or as one manipulated by bickering and ruthless Scottish lords and devious English politicians. This contrast between Mary and Elizabeth, as feminine and masculine, as ruled by emotion, on one hand, and calculation on the other, is clearly evident in *Mary Queen of Scots*. A pivotal scene is a discussion between Elizabeth and her advisor William Cecil, in which Elizabeth’s argument that Mary will reject Dudley, despite being offered England’s crown after Elizabeth’s death, and marry Darnley instead, is based on Elizabeth’s belief that Mary is “first a woman,” while Elizabeth herself is “first a monarch.” When the two queens then finally meet in Northern England, this contrast of weak and naïve femininity and strong and shrewd masculinity is the underlying theme of their conversation. Elizabeth’s words in both scenes encapsulate the myth of Mary and Elizabeth as feminine and masculine opposites and the film upholds this myth throughout.

Overall, therefore, Elizabeth is revealed as the polar opposite of Mary in *Mary Queen of Scots*: the shrewd, calculating monarch who puts the interests of state first and does not hesitate to plot against Mary in order to weaken her power in Scotland. Elizabeth is jealous of Mary’s beauty, despises her for her weaknesses and sees her as a threat to herself and English interests, while, conversely, she is unwilling to execute Mary because of the principle of divine monarchy. This film’s Elizabeth does what she wants to and makes her own plans; her councillors seldom succeed in dissuading her from a course she has chosen to follow. She is, in Susan Doran’s words, portrayed as “a woman who could succeed in a patriarchal world” (Doran 2009: 102). Conversely, Mary is shown to rely almost entirely on the men around her for help and protection. She lacks decisive agency and is shown to make all the wrong decisions. The film fails to reveal – except to a very limited degree – those aspects of Mary’s rule that were in some measure a success,<sup>4</sup> but instead conveys an overriding impression of

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<sup>4</sup> In his biography of Mary Stuart, a reappraisal of Mary based on original documents many of which have not been freshly examined since the nineteenth century, Guy discusses various aspects of Mary’s reign in Scotland that reveal her strengths. In his assessment, Mary’s enemies, both during her time and after her

an emotional, naïve and ineffectual queen.<sup>5</sup> She is to be sympathised with, but more as a victim of the political machinations of Elizabeth and her councillors, plotting Scottish nobles, the unruly nature of Scottish politics, and overall circumstance. Through this sympathetic approach, as well as through the Mary-Bothwell love story at the centre of the film, the Scottish queen is merely made to appeal to our romantic imagination. As a result, she is accorded importance through the viewer's emotional identification with her character, rather than through his or her rational appreciation of her political abilities. At the same time, Queen Elizabeth is seen to represent power, political astuteness, and the willingness to sacrifice emotional interests for the benefits of her realm. The superiority of England and of Elizabeth is made quite clear. Gloriana rules, Mary must succumb to English power and Scotland is seen as merely a plaything of English policy,

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death, have managed to negatively affect our image of a woman who was in reality "a shrewd and charismatic young ruler who relished power and, for a time, managed to hold together a fatally unstable country" (Guy 2004: 10). Guy's biography presents a woman who, while flawed, showed remarkable strength, courage and ingenuity during times of crisis. One such is the Rizzio plot and its aftermath, when Mary demonstrated great independence, self-reliance, "extraordinary daring and presence of mind" (Guy 2004: 257, 261); another is her escape from her imprisonment at Loch Leven (Guy 2004: 367-368). When returning to Scotland to take up her throne, Guy asserts, she "brought something different and altogether more vibrant and compelling to the drab routine of Scottish government" (Guy 2004: 512). Mary was someone who "sought to soothe conflict," contrary to many of her nobles and also her third husband, Lord Bothwell (Guy 2004: 327). While Queen in Scotland, and particularly in the first part of her reign there, Mary made genuine efforts to reconcile her Lords (262, 287), upheld religious tolerance, practising the Catholic faith in private and accepting the reformed religion as the state religion (Guy 2004: 219-220; see also Fraser 2002 [1969]: 155, 264-265, 339-340), and dealt efficiently and decisively with her brother James Stewart, Earl of Moray, and his co-rebels during the Chase-about Raid of 1565 (Guy 2004: 229-232). After this event, Mary "had never been more powerful or more popular" (Guy 2004: 232), and Guy sees the Chase-about Raid as the high point of Mary's career as Queen of Scots, and one in which the feminine Mary was replaced by a wholly masculine image (Guy 2009: 230). Some of the events surrounding the Chase-about Raid are portrayed in *Mary Queen of Scots* but this is a very brief and unclear rendering of a significant part of Mary's reign.

5 As pointed out by Guy (2009) and Ford & Mitchell (2009, 146), the film does treat historical facts lightly and even distorts them beyond recognition. This and other aspects of the film and its reception are discussed in my article "Mary Queen of Scots as Feminine and National Icon: Depictions in Film and Fiction" (Ágústsdóttir 2012: 83-87).

manipulated through Elizabeth's influence and hold on the Scottish nobility.

BBC's TV drama series *Elizabeth R* (1971) was produced slightly earlier in the same year as *Mary Queen of Scots* and here Glenda Jackson also plays the role of Elizabeth. One episode out of six, "Horrible Conspiracies," focuses on Mary Stuart, the Babington plot and Mary's execution. This film's Mary, here played by Vivian Pickles, is again shown to be very different from Elizabeth; as Ford and Mitchell rightly point out, the separate, juxtaposed scenes that focus alternately on Mary and Elizabeth make clear "the disparities in their personalities" (Ford and Mitchell 2009: 264). Most strikingly, however, she differs from most other portrayals in exhibiting none of the physical beauty and charm that the historical Mary is so famous for, and in having little personal allure. Instead, Mary is shown as complaining, quarrelsome and naïve, with a brooding and frowning look. Great emphasis is placed on representing her as a tireless schemer and plotter (not unique in representations of Mary, as discussed below), while she is also portrayed as simple enough to trust other people just because they profess Catholicism, as in her dealings with Gilbert Gifford, who pretends to be sympathetic to her cause but is in reality Walsingham's agent sent to entice Mary into becoming involved in the Babington Plot.<sup>6</sup> Just as in *Mary Queen of Scots*, Mary is here portrayed as Elizabeth's impulsive, emotionally driven opposite. Ironically, the contrast between the feminine and emotional Queen of Scots and the masculine, politically astute Gloriana is driven even further home through Mary's assessment of her own character: "I know that I am a creature of impulse, seldom thinking before I act, driven on by passions, delighting in the unexpected and bored by sensible caution." Mary's words seem a contrived way to sum up her character and motives for the viewer, especially as Pickles fails to endow Mary's character with the spirit that her words indicate is such a significant part of her personality.

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6 The Babington Plot of 1586 was an unsuccessful Catholic conspiracy aimed at assassinating Elizabeth I and installing Mary Queen of Scots on the throne of England. Its chief conspirator was a young Catholic nobleman, Sir Anthony Babington.

When considering how highly important Mary Stuart and the Catholic problem were to Elizabeth's reign, it is clear how trivialised and denigrated Mary's role is in *Elizabeth R*. First of all, the series limits Mary's story to only one episode (aside from the occasional brief mention in passing), while in fact her very existence, along with developments in Scotland, had great bearing on Elizabethan politics through much of Elizabeth's reign. Secondly, the problem of Mary is dealt with in the context of Elizabeth's fear of mortality, thrown into sharp relief by her dilemma over Mary's execution. Thus Elizabeth's internal battle is a major issue, while Mary's desperate reasons for plotting against Elizabeth, that is, her long imprisonment and hopelessness of being released, are treated as secondary or even irrelevant. Finally, as suggested by Moss, the focus is on Mary's execution as "a result of political maneuvers [*sic*] by Walsingham," who in effect wages "a battle of wits" with Elizabeth, and emerges as the victor (Moss 2006: 800). The focus remains on Elizabeth's struggles in a personal and political sense, on her struggles with herself and her fight with her councillors. Mary is secondary, even though Elizabeth's struggles originate in the problem presented by her and her religion. Moreover, as demonstrated by Moss, Elizabeth always seems to be in control, as even her hot-tempered tantrums are "largely strategic in tone," and even though she is sometimes thwarted or out-manoeuvred, her "aims and purposes are clear" (Moss 2006: 799). Accordingly, when comparing these two filmic productions of 1971, *Mary Queen of Scots* and *Elizabeth R*, and considering that the very titles indicate their primary subject matter – Mary and Elizabeth, respectively – it is clear that the perception of Elizabeth as a powerful, shrewd and – even if flawed – successful female monarch by far outshines any small political triumphs Mary of Scotland might have enjoyed in her time. These filmic representations of the two queens clearly emphasise a view of Elizabeth I as superior to a naïve, emotional, foolish and deceitful Scottish queen.

Later filmic treatments of Elizabeth I repeat this type of marginalization although in different ways. An interesting example is Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998), noted by Susan Doran as using the long-established historical interpretation of Elizabeth as self-fashioned Virgin Queen and her status as national icon "to explore subversively issues of gender, sexuality, and Englishness" (Doran 2009: 102). The

film explores the early part of Elizabeth's reign and her struggles to secure her throne, a significant part of the threat posed being Scotland's alliance with France and Marie of Guise's efforts to strengthen the French garrison in Scotland. Mary Stuart is rarely mentioned except in connection with this threat, and in the context of her early claim to the English throne (one of the accurate details in a film that otherwise plays fast and loose with historical facts).<sup>7</sup> However, while Mary herself is never actually seen in *Elizabeth*, the film's portrayal of her mother sheds interesting light on the tendency to emphasise Mary's emotional and "feminine" nature, alongside the ostensible weakness for men which ultimately caused her downfall. A key scene is set in Scotland, where Walsingham is having dinner with Marie of Guise<sup>8</sup> and pretends to be against Elizabeth's rule, saying she will soon be overthrown because "her Majesty rules with the heart, not with the head." Marie de Guise replies: "I understand. It is hard for a woman to forget her heart." During their conversation, the Scottish Dowager Queen not only looks at Walsingham seductively and voraciously, as if she cannot wait to get into bed with him, but she also kisses her nephew the Duke of Anjou sensually on the mouth when he bids her goodnight, thus hinting that they enjoy an incestuous relationship. After a short scene in England the film cuts back to Scotland, where the Duke of Anjou is screaming "Elizabeth is a witch [...] and her servant is the devil" over the naked, dead body of his aunt Marie. Thus sexual lust has been the end of the Dowager Queen, as her desire for Walsingham has overruled caution and made her take a mortal enemy to her bed. The implications are clear; the rash, sexually-driven actions of Mary Stuart's mother mirror, foreshadow and emphasise the later weaknesses of her daughter. Again, Mary's impetuous actions, such as her marriages to both Darnley and Bothwell, are capitalised

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7 As Susan Doran asserts, a notable aspect of *Elizabeth* is "its deliberate trampling over historical fact" (Doran 2009: 103). The film's historical inaccuracies are also discussed by Carole Levin (1999) and Michael Morrogh (2008). Morrogh, however, sees value in how these are presented, asserting that a 20-year chronology needs to be "telescoped into a seamless, interconnected mass" in order to make sense for the viewer (Morrogh 2008: 47).

8 This whole episode is entirely fictitious as a meeting between Walsingham and Marie de Guise never took place, nor has it ever been proved that her death was the result of foul play, despite speculation to this effect.

on, and presented in sharp contrast to Elizabeth who, despite some setbacks at the beginning of her reign, ultimately becomes an icon of female empowerment, albeit empowered through renouncing both her sexuality and her emotions. She emerges as “a goddess, a queen, and a living symbol of the limitless potential of Renaissance England,” as one review of *Elizabeth* states (Verburg 2001: n.p.). Furthermore, Elizabeth proves the opposite of Walsingham’s false description: she becomes a queen not ruled by her heart, but by her head. Walsingham’s words gain further meaning also when viewed in relation to the most enduring myth surrounding Mary Queen of Scots: that she was a queen ruled by her heart only. Indeed, viewers familiar with the story of Mary Stuart and the two queens’ troubled relationship would certainly not fail to notice the true implication of Walsingham’s snide remark: the perceived inferiority of Mary when measured against the success of her cousin Elizabeth.

Shekar Kapur’s second film on the reign of Elizabeth I is *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007), which focuses on the latter part of Elizabeth’s reign, in particular the Catholic threat as exemplified in the Babington plot and the Spanish Armada. Here, Mary Stuart, played by Samantha Morton, actually gets some screen time and although she is shown to be secondary or marginal to the main plot she is more fully developed as a character, shown to be attractive and given more dramatic influence overall than in many other film versions that focus on Elizabeth. However, as in *Elizabeth R*, this Mary is a schemer and a plotter who clearly desires Elizabeth’s death, both in order to be freed and to become the next queen of England. There is no question here as to Mary’s implication in the plot against Elizabeth’s life, and she is shown to be utterly disappointed to hear that Elizabeth has survived Babington’s assassination attempt. She fails to hide her guilt when Paulet, her jailor, confronts her and reveals that her letters have been intercepted by Walsingham and tells her she is to be tried for treason, and then she collapses to the floor screaming hysterically, “Traitors!” At her trial, Mary places herself above morality and human law, despite her obvious guilt, saying that God is her only judge. This view of Mary as a plotter and a schemer, a fellow monarch and cousin who is in reality Elizabeth’s nemesis, is clearly contrasted with Elizabeth’s anguish over signing Mary’s death warrant as well as her torment at the

time of Mary's execution, as pointed out by Vivienne Westbrook (Westbrook 2009: 171). Kapur clearly wants to stress Elizabeth's reluctance to have Mary executed, while this also underlines the historicity of Mary's guilt in the Babington plot<sup>9</sup> and supports the view that Mary showed a "ruthless resolve to see her sister queen murdered" (Dunn 2004: xxxii).<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth is therefore shown as morally superior to the manipulative, murderous and hysterical Mary. Significantly, the film portrays the Catholics as "the villains of the piece," (Latham 2011: 165),<sup>11</sup> and Mary is one of these villains.<sup>12</sup> One negative review of the film even observes that Mary is presented as "a religiously delusional and despicable traitor, and perhaps a vampire to boot, given that she and her ladies-in-waiting get about their brooding Scottish castle in such opulently gothic attire" (Hennings 2008: 36).

Somewhat paradoxically, though, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* does give us a romanticized and highly visually and emotionally appealing version of Mary's execution, casting Mary in the role of a martyr for her religion by highlighting the red dress she wears – red being the colour of Catholic martyrdom – and showing her bravery and dignity in the face of death. Kapur maintains that this scene shows Mary becoming "the Queen," becoming divine and "being married to God" (Murray, n.d.: n.p.). But even if Kapur "lends a dignified fiction to Mary's departure" (Westbrook 2009: 172), the film's final scenes, set

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9 See, for instance, Fraser (2002 [1969]), Guy (2004) and Graham (2008). All three biographies are sympathetic portrayals of Mary, yet all assert that Mary did indeed indicate agreement to the assassination of Elizabeth in her reply to Babington.

10 Not all of Mary's biographers would agree with this view. For instance, Antonia Fraser qualifies Mary's agreement to the plot to kill Elizabeth as being caused by her desperate desire to break free from captivity: "There can be no doubt but that Mary in her reply [to Babington] took this prospect [the assassination of Elizabeth] briefly into consideration, weighed it against the prospect of her own liberty, and did not gainsay it" (Fraser 2002 [1969]: 607). John Guy details how Mary deliberated for a week over her incriminating answer to the conspirators, finally deciding to take a gamble because she feared "that she was likely to be quietly murdered" (Guy 2004: 482).

11 Vivienne Westbrook demonstrates how the Catholic threat in this film reflects contemporary concerns derived from 9/11, and how the portrayal of Catholics can be read as symbolic for the current threat of Islamic fundamentalism (Westbrook 2009: 167).

12 The film caused outrage among Catholics, who branded it as "anti-papist propaganda" (Moore 2007: n.p.).

when the Spanish Armada comes to attack England only to be defeated, clearly demonstrate the cultural supremacy of Elizabeth over her Scottish cousin, as the iconic image of Gloriana, almost an other-worldly being that appears to command the elements, leaves an impression on the viewer that entirely overshadows the romantic appeal of Mary's religious martyrdom. Indeed, in another interview, Kapur says that his film is about absolute, divine power and that the film shows how Elizabeth finds it in the Armada, which is when Elizabeth "finally becomes divine." Kapur describes the scene when Elizabeth walks up onto a cliff above the sea and watches the Armada burn and be blown away by the storm:

She's clothed, and, as the Spirit, really. And it's almost like the Spirit willed the waves. It's almost like the spirit willed the fire. It's almost like the Spirit willed the storm. So she truly became of the gods. And the Armada was won by the spirit of this woman. ("The Reign Continues" 2008)

The scene therefore suggests that Elizabeth has "transcended mere royalty and become a goddess," and what is more, this implication is carried forward into the film's final scene, where Elizabeth blesses Raleigh and Bess's newborn child: "The credits fade up on the queen haloed in a blaze of light, babe in arms: a Protestant Virgin Mary, reconfigured as Mother of England" (Hennings 2008: 38). Again, Elizabeth is portrayed as an icon of English greatness, while Mary's role, though quite significant, is reduced to that of a spiteful, manipulative and scheming woman stuck in a gloomy castle somewhere on the periphery of Elizabeth's glorious kingdom (in fact, the castle of Fotheringay, rightly in Northamptonshire, is shown to be sitting on a Scottish lake). Romantic death and religious martyrdom aside, Mary is just a pawn in a grand game, secondary to Philip's aims and entirely dispensable, and far inferior to the great monarch Elizabeth I, the mythic Gloriana, symbol of a superior England.

Two twenty-first century TV series on the life of Elizabeth I are worth discussing here also. Again, Mary is a marginal figure and Elizabeth's power emphasised, though in different ways. The first one is BBC's *The Virgin Queen* (2005), where Elizabeth is played by Anne-Marie Duff, a well-known English actress, while Mary is played by

Charlotte Winner, a minor actress about whom virtually no information can be found on the Internet, aside from her role in this TV series. As is to be expected, the dramatic focus rests on Elizabeth, since the series covers her entire reign as well as the years before her accession. Mary Stuart, however, is shown as a very elusive figure in the background, glimpsed only very rarely in brief shots through the door to her room in captivity, fondling and kissing her lapdog terrier, alongside brief voiceovers in a strong French accent of a letter from Mary to Elizabeth, where Mary denies ever having sought Elizabeth's death and reproves her cousin for treating her so cruelly. This very exclusion from our view makes Mary a very marginal character and as such seemingly unimportant to Elizabeth and the English court. Yet she stands at the centre of what is a very real threat to Elizabeth: Catholic plots against her life. At the same time, the series reiterates, once again, an interpretation of Mary as a victim, a plaything of (male) English plots.<sup>13</sup> Even the brief shots of Mary serve to demonstrate her vulnerable, emotional and feminine nature. Significantly, the one person able to persuade Elizabeth to order Mary's execution, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, does so through outlining Mary's impulsive, feminine nature as opposed to Elizabeth's political astuteness:

You make such a play that as queens you and she are alike. But is it not in how you discharge that duty where the difference lies? She has always let her heart rule her head, put passion before politic need. If you shrink before this duty now, Bess, then indeed you risk the accusation that you are alike. As a woman, you are just not equal to the task. (*The Virgin Queen*)

Thus Leicester shows Elizabeth "the path of feminine weakness" while also appealing to her vanity and pride in "threatening comparison with a woman she considers inferior" (Latham 2011: 233).

Channel 4's award-winning miniseries *Elizabeth I* (2005) depicts the later years of Elizabeth's reign. Helen Mirren stars as Elizabeth while Mary Stuart is played by Barbara Flynn. This is a well-acted and convincing portrayal of Elizabeth, making it "ultimately Mirren's show"

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13 As in *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* it is Walsingham who is instrumental in Mary's downfall here.

as stated in one review (Lowry 2006: 26). However, it also portrays Mary and her fate quite differently from the rest, so that she receives much fairer treatment here than in the other films and TV series that focus on Elizabeth's reign and are discussed in this article. Not only is Mary given some prominence in the part of the series dealing with the problem of the "so-called Queen of Scots," as Walsingham puts it, but her portrayal is also refreshingly un-romantic and true to historiographical accounts of Mary. True to history, Mary speaks with a French accent, and when the two queens meet at Fotheringay we are presented with a more realistic version of Mary as she is reported to have looked after almost two decades of imprisonment in England. Latham discusses this version of Mary at some length:

[P]hysically, this Mary [...] is nothing like the perfectly angled beauty of Hepburn [in the film *Mary of Scotland*, 1936], the breathlessly lovely Redgrave, or the sensually attractive Morton. Flynn's characterization stresses realism over romanticism: she's overweight, sickly pale, with graying hair that frizzes out from underneath her auburn wig. Her clothing is as drab as her person, a simple grey gown and a simple crucifix. All of this is a believable side-effect of many years' imprisonment with nothing to do but sew, eat and scheme. She is, in short, now unattractive and completely unassuming – the exact opposite of the often-romanticized characterization of Mary. (Latham 2011: 250)

At her trial, Mary looks so pale and bloated, she seems to be ill. This makes her into a really pathetic figure. She keeps standing on her pride as queen, as being no subject to English law, but tells the judges to continue nevertheless "for I see you are all determined." Furthermore, the scene of Mary's execution is no romanticised affair, but graphic, brutal and true to the historical record. The beheading is shown in close detail with the first blow only cutting through less than half of Mary's neck and her face contorting in terrible pain. Then when the executioner holds up her head after the second strike of the axe, it comes loose from the wig and rolls away and off the scaffold. As Latham argues, therefore, there "is nothing triumphant, reverent or glorious in Mary's end [...] and] Mary presents a pitiful figure on the scaffold" (Latham 2011: 254). Leicester's reaction speaks volumes: "How can I ever tell the Queen of this? How can I tell her ... and

keep her love?” Indeed, his words when telling Elizabeth about the execution sum up very well the things that went wrong – and were not done properly – at Mary’s execution: that she was denied her priest, denied her rosary and had to endure two strokes of the axe (Guy 2004: 8; Fraser 2002 [1969]: 671).

As all of the above details demonstrate, *Elizabeth I* presents a fairly balanced view of Mary and her last days and avoids romanticizing and glorifying the whole affair, quite unlike many previous portrayals. This is clearly no stereotypical representation of the Scottish queen. As suggested by Marian biographers such as Fraser and Guy, Mary Stuart must have cut a pitiful figure at the end of her life, having been confined in various cold and damp English country houses for years, unable to get proper exercise or air, denied the people and the company she would have wanted the most: her own son and her most trusted advisors and friends (Guy 2004: 445-447, 453-454, 456, 487; Fraser 2002 [1969]: 596-597, 610, 633). All this deprivation and suffering is made clear in Flynn’s portrayal of Mary in *Elizabeth I*. Furthermore, Mary’s death was quite simply brutal, bloody and shocking, as any death on the scaffold would have been, and the series conveys this fact very well to the viewer. As one reviewer notes, the “brutality of the age is well documented” (Stanley 2006: n.p.).

As can be seen therefore, *Elizabeth I* affords more space to the story of Mary Stuart than most other dramatisations of Elizabeth’s life, while also depicting in a convincing manner the frustration, bitterness and suffering that marked Mary’s last days. Nevertheless, Mary is made out to be a schemer and plotter like in *Elizabeth R* and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*. When Elizabeth remarks rather nastily to Leicester that Mary has grown fat during her imprisonment for lack of anything else to do but eat and sleep, he adds: “And plot, your Majesty.” Other scenes and conversations foreground the view of Mary as inferior and marginal, a failure as a queen and a footnote to the history of England’s greatness. In an early scene with her suitor the Duke of Anjou, Elizabeth dismisses Mary as a nonentity: “Queen of France, Queen of Scotland, and now, she is nothing.” In a later scene, Elizabeth worries over the problem of Mary Queen of Scots and Leicester asks “Mary of Scots? Or Marie of France? Or Marie of whoever will have her?” Thus Mary is dismissed as a pathetic beggar for favour and shelter abroad.

Later in the same scene, Elizabeth tells Leicester that James VI of Scotland has accepted a pension from England, i.e. has been paid off for not stirring up any trouble even though his mother is Elizabeth's prisoner.<sup>14</sup> Leicester laughs and says: "Bess, you're formidable," and Elizabeth replies "the Scottish Queen is little pleased by it," at which Leicester laughs gleefully. The ironic and cruel situation of imprisoned mother and pensioned son is therefore a source of amusement for Leicester and, it is implied, Elizabeth herself, whose face we do not see. When Elizabeth then goes to meet Mary at Fotheringhay she places herself on the moral high ground, saying she intends to use "sweet reason" to reason Mary "from her unreason," that is, through her own logical and righteous arguments dissuade the irrational Mary from taking part in plots against Elizabeth. Furthermore, Elizabeth believes that her cousin's imprisonment is entirely her own fault, asking "Was it I who brought you to this Mary?" to which Mary replies, "Who else?" Finally, Elizabeth cruelly taunts Mary about her son James VI's betrayal, asking Mary "Who would have you? Scotland? Or your, oh, so grateful son?" In all these exchanges, the traditional view of Mary as a failure, as irrational and scheming, and in all respects Elizabeth's inferior, is upheld. Given the realistic details of the pitiful, bloated figure of Mary and her brutal end,<sup>15</sup> this lack of critical engagement with other stereotypical notions about her is therefore a little surprising.

Related to this obvious lack of critical engagement with the Marian stereotype in *Elizabeth I*, it is notable how steadfastly unchanging and stereotypical the representations of Mary and Elizabeth are from the 1970s onwards. This is the case despite the various cultural

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14 The pension is a fact true to history.

15 Both Guy and Fraser discuss Mary's physical state during her imprisonment. She quickly began to put on weight due to very limited exercise and "heavy eating caused problems," while also beginning to stoop slightly (Guy 2004: 445). Over time, her health problems increased, and she suffered from digestive disorders, severe headaches, chronic rheumatism, a gastric ulcer and bad swelling of her leg; her poor health was chiefly caused by inactivity, stress and depression (Guy 445-447). In short, her incarceration worked to ruin her health (Guy 2004: 456), and towards the end of her imprisonment, when being moved to Fotheringhay, she was "prematurely aged" and "a physically broken woman" (Guy 2004: 487). At the time of her trial in October 1586 she had become lame with rheumatism and could hardly walk or even limp along due to lack of exercise (Fraser 2002 [1969]: 633).

and political shifts that took place during this time in the British context.<sup>16</sup> Also, this adherence to stereotypes is all the more surprising since John Guy's groundbreaking biography of Mary had, by the time *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, *The Virgin Queen*, and *Elizabeth I* were produced, presented some serious scholarly revision of Mary Stuart's political abilities and successes, her relationship with Elizabeth I, the political machinations of Elizabeth's chief advisor William Cecil, and the impact of these on the question of Mary's survival as Queen of Scotland (Guy 2004).

This article began by discussing Mary's marginality in the film *Mary Queen of Scots*, where we have a heroine who has an emotional and romantic appeal; she is a figure to be sympathised with, ineffectual as a queen and a victim of English and Scottish plots. Although Redgrave's Mary is clearly the focus of the film, her English cousin is seen to be superior and the stereotype of masculine, politically clever Elizabeth and feminine, impulsive and disastrous Mary is clearly upheld. After *Mary Queen of Scots*, the mini-series *Gunpowder, Treason & Plot* (2004) is the first filmic dramatization of Mary's story for more than thirty years. The first episode covers Mary's life from her return to Scotland until her surrender to the Scottish lords and subsequent imprisonment in Scotland in 1567.<sup>17</sup> Initially unable to deal with matters of state successfully without the help and advice of her brother Lord James Stuart, Mary (Clémence Poésy) gradually comes into her own as queen with the help of Bothwell's devoted encouragement. After a brief hesitation over how to tackle religious matters, she calls for a religious settlement, i.e. that Scotland stay Protestant and that she practise her Catholic faith in private while getting guidance from John Knox, thus cleverly conning her Protestant lords into thinking she might one day convert to Protestantism. She soon stops letting her brother James order her about, so that his promise to Elizabeth that Mary is a silly girl who will let him rule cannot be fulfilled. In short, Mary is portrayed as an able and shrewd queen who fights against and defeats her enemies, demonstrated most clearly in her assertive,

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16 See footnote 2.

17 The second episode of the series deals with the life of Mary's son, James VI of Scotland and I of England.

and by implication manly, demeanour during the Chase-about-Raid. The series thus highlights Mary's strengths as a monarch, as well as portraying her as witty, charming and graceful, much in accordance with historical accounts. However, by having Mary eventually fall for Bothwell (Kevin McKidd) and choose to have Darnley killed to protect her infant son, the series also shows her as ruled by her emotional and feminine side.<sup>18</sup> Despite presenting Mary and Bothwell's attachment in highly romantic terms, the series also highlights the utter folly of marrying Bothwell, which really spelt the end for Mary historically. The series thus arguably presents a more rounded view of Mary's strengths and weaknesses as a monarch than previous portrayals.

As in other major portrayals of Mary, Elizabeth Tudor is again revealed as her greatest enemy in this mini-series. Here, the narrative is interspersed with short scenes at Elizabeth's court, where she orders a subservient Lord James Stuart about. Elizabeth (Catherine McCormack) does not want Mary to have power, she is afraid Mary will become the focus of Catholic uprisings in England and therefore she plots against her Scottish cousin at every opportunity. She is very angry after Mary's son is born and rails against James Stuart, saying Mary is in "total control of Scotland, there is no challenge to her rule." Thus Elizabeth and the two queens' rivalry is a highly significant framework for Mary's story, and Elizabeth, lurking on the periphery with her spiteful schemes, in league with the jealous and power-hungry James Stuart, provides a political dynamic which heavily influences the way in which Mary is presented. Mary is not a marginalized figure in this series; she is the main subject, shown to possess determination and acuity, and is played convincingly and engagingly by Poésy, who "gives a fine performance" according to *Variety* (Adams 2004: n.p.). But neither is Elizabeth I a marginal figure despite being only occasionally seen, since she is shown to be instrumental in much of what befalls Mary during her brief reign in Scotland. It seems simply impossible to dramatise Mary's life without highlighting the influence of Elizabeth and her ultimate triumph over Mary. Mary's life on screen is therefore continually overshadowed and manipulated by the English Gloriana; she cannot gain dramatic life purely on her own terms.

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18 This aspect of the series is discussed in more detail in Ágústsadóttir (2012: 88-89).

Much the same can be said about the last film discussed here, Thomas Imbach's *Mary Queen of Scots* (2013), an adaptation of Stefan Zweig's *Maria Stuart* (1935) and, overall, a rather unconvincing portrayal of Mary, which tries to be artistic and original but fails to convince entirely or take off properly in this endeavour. Mary herself (Camille Rutherford), is the main focus of this film, and Elizabeth never makes an appearance except as either a doll in a puppet show, a painted figure in the many portraits of her presented at the Scottish court, or – once – as a shadowy figure on horseback at the time of Mary's execution. Despite this, the narrative of Mary's life is heavily influenced by the presence of her English cousin. Thus the film begins on the eve of Mary's execution with a voiceover in which Mary reads her letter to Elizabeth in French, starting with the words: "Elizabeth, my dear cousin, this will be the last of my unsent letters. Tomorrow, there will no longer be two queens in England". There are several such voiceovers during the film, wherein Mary expresses her desires, fears and political frustrations to her cousin, albeit in unsent letters, which according to one critic is a clever way to lay bare Mary's emotional state while avoiding the "stolid tendencies" of other historical films on Mary (Weissberg 2013: n.p.). The story is then interspersed by episodes in which Mary's adviser Rizzio oversees a puppet show where Elizabeth and Mary are bickering like children over who is queen, whether the other should wear a crown, and other petty things. This, as Weissberg points out, gives voice to Mary's "troubled relationship" with Elizabeth (Weissberg 2013: n.p.). The puppet Elizabeth also appears during times of crisis for Mary, for instance when her first husband King Francis is dead and the puppet speaks to her as she lies on the floor overcome by grief: "Over, gone and done! In future, choose your husbands very wisely, to keep them alive, my dear." Elizabeth's puppet even appears in the hands of a ghostly Rizzio after he has been killed, as if to taunt Mary. It thus functions as a malicious symbol for the real queen, in truth Mary's adversary, but still someone whose favour and friendship Mary desperately seeks. Elizabeth, despite being presented in such a way, is a looming presence over Mary's life and reign, and someone against whom Mary is continually measuring herself. In the end, a devastated and ruined Mary states the impact Elizabeth has had on her: "For all these years she has been reluc-

tant to meet me. She made me hope and yearn with all her letters and promises to meet. But she is the crowned sovereign now, and I am just a poor woman, without a crown, a country, a people. I can't bear it any longer. I wish she would kill me." Mary's existence is again heavily measured against that of Elizabeth; she cannot function independently from her English cousin in filmic dramatisations of her life.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, as Thomas Betteridge aptly states, it seems that historians and filmmakers are still under Elizabeth's spell (Betteridge 2003: 248). Elizabeth's power and success are repeatedly glorified in film adaptations of her story, and in some instances, as in *Mary Queen of Scots* (1971), Mary's portrayal suffers in comparison with Elizabeth's even though the main subject of the film is not Elizabeth. Perhaps this can be partly explained by the twentieth century tendency to use Elizabeth as a "quasi-feminist heroine" or a symbol of feminist independence, as laid out by Moss and Latham (Moss 2006: 798; Latham 2011: 130). In this context, it is important that Elizabeth tends to be seen in terms of a "'masculine' political culture" (Moss 2006: 810). Thus, her "masculine" attributes denote political success, the maintenance and implementation of power and, through these, the move away from stereotypical notions of women as unable to rule effectively. While Mary is presented as Elizabeth's opposite in being feminine, weak and a failure as queen, Elizabeth's supremacy within this frame of comparison is unassailable. A queen, who was in her day and age seen as an "unnatural" woman, has now become a model of success. More important, however, is the fact that the image of Gloriana is used by those "who wish to proclaim themselves inheritors of a great cultural tradition" (Moss 2006: 803). Due to this, the notion of English cultural superiority has become so heavily invested in the myth of Gloriana that the marginalised Queen of Scots, presented as feminine, emotional and politically ineffectual, has little chance of being in any way measured equally to her cousin in modern filmic portrayals of these two rival queens.

## ÚTDRÁTTUR

**Einvaldur á jaðrinum: María Stúart og menningarlegir yfirburðir „Gloríönu“ í kvikmyndum og sjónvarpi.**

Þessi grein fjallar um hvernig mynd er dregin upp af Maríu Stúart Skotadrottningu og frænku hennar Elísabetu fyrstu Englandsdrottningu í kvikmyndum og sjónvarpsmyndum frá 1970 til dagsins í dag. Sýnt er fram á hvernig María og Elísabet hafa báðar orðið táknmyndir landa sinna, Skotlands og Englands. Engu að síður á ímynd Elísabetar, eins og hún birtist í kvikmyndum og dægurmenningu, sér mun sterkari rætur í hugmyndum um þjóðernislega, menningarlega og sögulega yfirburði Englands. Þess vegna er tilhneiging í kvikmyndum um líf Maríu og Elísabetar að halda uppi og lofsyngja völd og velgengni hinnar ensku „Gloríönu“, andspænis því sem margir telja að hafi brugðist á valdatíma Maríu. Þannig kemur saga Maríu iðulega illa út úr samanburði við sögu Elísabetar fyrstu, með þeim afleiðingum að lítið er gert úr hlutverki Maríu, pólitískri þýðingu hennar og gildi hennar og styrk sem þjóðhöfðingja.

*Lykilorð:* María Skotadrottning, Elísabet fyrsta, kvikmyndir og sjónvarp, menningaryfirráð, jaðarsetning

ABSTRACT

**Marginalised Monarch: Mary Stuart and the Cultural Supremacy of Gloriana as Manifested in Film and Television**

This article discusses portrayals of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, and her cousin Elizabeth I of England, in film and TV dramatisations from the early 1970s onwards. It establishes how Mary and Elizabeth have both become icons of their respective country: Scotland, on one hand, and England, on the other. At the same time, Elizabeth's image in popular representations is much more clearly invested in a notion of English national, cultural and historical superiority. As a result, there is a tendency in filmic dramatisations of the lives of both Mary and Elizabeth to uphold and glorify the power and success of the English Gloriana, as set against what many view as the failures of Mary's reign. Thus, Mary's story tends to be measured against and marginalised by that of Elizabeth I, which has the effect that Mary's role, her political importance, her value and strengths as a monarch are denigrated and trivialised.

*Keywords:* Mary Queen of Scots, Elizabeth I, film and TV, cultural supremacy, marginalisation

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