*Marian Political Ideals*

Luke Pepin

HIST 1100W: The Historian as Detective

March 25, 2025

Mary I of England earned her title "Bloody Mary" through her policies that defined her controversial reign. The daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, Mary ascended to a throne divided by the religious and political instabilities left over from her father and her half-brother Edward VI. Her brief five-year reign reflected significant religious transformations across Europe as the Protestant Reformation challenged Catholic dominance throughout the continent, creating new alliances and conflicts between nations. Mary I's reign was marked by her determined efforts to restore Catholicism, her persecution of Protestants, her strategic Spanish alliance, and her centralization of authority, all of which left a lasting impact on England's religious and political landscape.

The restoration of Roman Catholicism in England became the primary political objective of Mary’s reign. In September 1553, even before her coronation she replaced Protestant bishops with Catholic ones, signaling her intent to reverse the Protestant Reformation[[1]](#footnote-27219). She took many wide and sweeping changes to reinstate Catholic practices and institutions. As Britannica notes, she “restored the Catholic creed, and revived the laws against heresy.”[[2]](#footnote-8201) Parliament further supported her agenda by passing an Act of Repeal that voided Edwardian reforms, reinstating clerical celibacy and ritual worship. Mary not only rejected the protestant reformation through her new policies according to official records in December of 1553 Mary also refused the title of Supreme Head of the English Church, highlighting a complete refusal to take any of the political benefits she had during the reformation.[[3]](#footnote-15792) However, Mary’s policies faced resistance from the English nobility, who had benefited from the wealth and lands gained during her father’s dissolution of monasteries creating immediate political and social tensions. Ironically, her efforts to restore Catholicism ultimately deepened Protestant sentiment among her subjects, solidifying the religious divisions she sought to heal.

As a part of her counter-reformation stance religious persecution became the defining feature of Mary’s reign. Following Parliament’s passage of heresy laws in November 1554, she began the systematic prosecution of Protestant dissenters. Over 300 people were executed, earning her the notorious nickname “Bloody Mary.”[[4]](#footnote-28964) Victims included Bishops Ridley and Latimer, as well as Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer’s execution in March 1556 was particularly symbolic; it was Cranmer who first opened the doors of England to the reformation as it was him who signed the controversial annulment between Henry VIII and Catherine of Argon. Reportedly he thrust his right hand into the flames first during his execution, declaring it “the hand that wrote it.”[[5]](#footnote-22419) These public burnings served as both religious and political statements, demonstrating the consequences of defying royal authority while reaffirming the Catholic orthodoxy. Mary’s relentless persecution aligned with the broader Catholic Counter-Reformation and mirrored efforts by Catholic rulers across Europe to suppress Protestant reformers.[[6]](#footnote-13704)

Mary’s political strategy also included an important marriage alliance with Philip II of Spain, designed to strengthen Catholic influence in England and align the nation with the powerful Habsburg dynasty. Parliament was particularly against the marriage as they feared foreign interference and the erosion of English sovereignty from the new King. To address these concerns, the Queen Mary Marriage Act ensured that Philip’s role was limited to that of a ceremonial king consort. Despite these safeguards, Mary overruled parliamentary protests and asserted her authority, directly declaring: “My marriage is my own affair.”[[7]](#footnote-23853) The marriage met the goals of further reinforcing Catholic influence however it was reportedly Philip’s idea to reinstate the heresy laws, and the marriage did not result in an heir for Queen Mary, both of which severely damaged Mary’s reputation.

Mary also sought to centralize royal authority by consolidating control over governance and diminishing the influence of the nobility. She appointed loyal Catholic administrators, including Gardiner as Lord Chancellor and Heath as Archbishop of York, to key positions. Her Royal Injunction of 1554 ordered bishops to remove married clergy and suppress heresy, with Gardiner leading efforts to purge Protestant clergy.[[8]](#footnote-2744) By 1557, small religious houses had been re-established, extending royal influence through church institutions.[[9]](#footnote-25761) These measures demonstrated Mary’s systematic approach to governance, which mirrored trends across Europe where monarchs sought to strengthen central authority amid religious and political upheaval. However, her efforts were often undermined by resistance from the nobility and societal divisions stemming from her religious policies, limiting their overall effectiveness.

Mary I’s reign, though brief, left a profound and lasting impact on England. Her dedication to restoring Catholicism, forging a Spanish alliance, and consolidating royal authority reflected her unwavering commitment to her faith and vision for England’s future. Yet her policies also deepened religious divisions, generating resistance that shaped the trajectory of English history. Her reign represents a critical turning point, both reflecting and influencing England’s evolving relationship with religion, monarchy, and international politics. While her efforts to restore Catholicism were ultimately undone, the patterns of religious conflict she set in motion endured long after her death, defining the struggles of subsequent reigns and shaping England’s identity for generations.

Bibliography

“Marian Government Policies – Queen Mary I / Mary Tudor” Hanson, Marilee. February 9, 2015, https://englishhistory.net/tudor/monarchs/marian-government-policies/

“Mary I, Queen of England” Simons, Eric Norman. Britannica. Last Modified February 14, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-I

“Mary Tudor – Queen of England” Rossi, Jacqui. Biography. Published April 17, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LS-27NuxqU8&t=3s&ab\_channel=Biography

“Archbishop Thomas Crammer Death by Execution” Anonymous bystander. March 21, 1556, https://englishhistory.net/tudor/thomas-cranmer-death/

“The Forgotten Tudor Queen: Bloody Mary” Real Royalty, November 8, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-ib-hqYjXM&t=3s&ab\_channel=RealRoyalty

1. “Marian Government Policies – Queen Mary I / Mary Tudor” Hanson, Marilee. February 9, 2015, https://englishhistory.net/tudor/monarchs/marian-government-policies/ [↑](#footnote-ref-27219)
2. “Mary I, Queen of England” Simons, Eric Norman. Britannica. Last Modified February 14, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-I [↑](#footnote-ref-8201)
3. “Marian Government Policies – Queen Mary I / Mary Tudor” Hanson, Marilee. February 9, 2015, https://englishhistory.net/tudor/monarchs/marian-government-policies/ [↑](#footnote-ref-15792)
4. “Mary Tudor – Queen of England” Rossi, Jacqui. Biography. Published April 17, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LS-27NuxqU8&t=3s&ab\_channel=Biography [↑](#footnote-ref-28964)
5. “Archbishop Thomas Crammer Death by Execution” Anonymous bystander. March 21, 1556, https://englishhistory.net/tudor/thomas-cranmer-death/ [↑](#footnote-ref-22419)
6. “The Forgotten Tudor Queen: Bloody Mary” Real Royalty, November 8, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-ib-hqYjXM&t=3s&ab\_channel=RealRoyalty [↑](#footnote-ref-13704)
7. “The Forgotten Tudor Queen: Bloody Mary” Real Royalty, November 8, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-ib-hqYjXM&t=3s&ab\_channel=RealRoyalty [↑](#footnote-ref-23853)
8. “Marian Government Policies – Queen Mary I / Mary Tudor” Hanson, Marilee. February 9, 2015, https://englishhistory.net/tudor/monarchs/marian-government-policies/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2744)
9. “The Forgotten Tudor Queen: Bloody Mary” Real Royalty, November 8, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-ib-hqYjXM&t=3s&ab\_channel=RealRoyalty [↑](#footnote-ref-25761)