**HM5414 Politics of Gender - Shannon Mcmillan**

**Write an analytical critique of the life of a prominent individual from this period, assessing the extent to which they exhibited or denied contemporary gender ideals.**

Mary Tudor’s reign as the first Queen of England subverted the gender norms and roles of the 16th century with authority now moved to a woman for the first time in British history in 1553, not including Lady Jane Grey’s very short reign as Queen. Mary Tudor’s right to rule was denied by her father Henry VIII in his succession favouring Edward VI as he wated a male heir and his sons to rule, it was also denied by Edward VI and his council who favoured Lady Jane Grey. This aversion to Mary began as a rejection of a woman in a position of power and authority over England then developed into concern over the religion of England as ‘my sister Mary would provoke great disturbances’ due to her biological sex, gender, and Catholic beliefs. Edward VI focused on Mary’s illegitimacy and religious values over her gender. [[1]](#footnote-1) The idea of a British Queen in the 1500s was rejected by Henry VIII then embraced by Edward VI, only if it aligned with his religious values. During Mary I’s reign, she exhibited both masculine and feminine qualities of the time, with her most famous subversion of female purity and fragility is her execution of around 300 protestants between 1553 and 1558. Queen Mary I, maintained control and authority over her people with the Marriage Act of 1554 which declared her complete authority over England even after marriage, this act aided Mary as Queen solidifying her authority in England as its rightful ruler. Elizabethan England’s royal advisers used Mary’s rule as a lesson in how not to be Queen however, acts and the distinction of their Queen’s authority remained a top priority in terms of religion and the social hierarchy.

Henry VIII and Edward VI had a lasting impact on Mary’s legitimacy and right to rule in the 1540s with Henry Tudor’s succession declaring Mary and her sister Elizabeth to be illegitimate with his only heirs being Edward VI and his sons. Henry’s attitudes towards his daughters and his insistence on having a male heir was so intense that one of his wives was beheaded for not conceiving a male heir, which reflected and enhanced the Tudor expectation of a King and the intense focus on masculinity via religion, fashion, and the royal family. Fashion in England during the 1500s was focused on the masculine with squared shoulders, sword and codpieces which altered social interaction and societal values, especially amongst the King’s court. Within the social hierarchy of the time, there was a clear patriarchal structure to Tudor society with Henry Tudor the VII & VIII and Edward VI who followed a long line of Kings of England. Edward VI Tudor’s defence of his succession rested upon Henry VIII’s succession and if Mary were to ‘possess the Kingdom… religion whose fair foundation we have laid’ would be disregarded.[[2]](#footnote-2) Concerned with his religious legacy overshadows the gender normalities and expectations of women in Tudor England.

Tudor England’s gender roles and ideals were quite inflexible with the women of all classes focusing on keeping house, raising children and teaching children while the men were the bread winners and the patriarch of all families of all classes. Femininity equalled weak, quiet, submissive, homely duties, and were always linked to her male kin, owned by her father then her husband. While masculinity equalled power, dominance, patriarch, leader, breadwinner and ownership of his daughters and wife. Mary’s life, actions and authority were also always linked with male figures, a king, reinforcing the patriarchal structure of society and the household in Tudor England, with mention to this link at her funeral by the Bishop of Winchester, ‘She was a king’s daughter; she was a king’s sister she was a king’s wife. She was a queen, and by the same title a king also.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Aligning with gender historians’ treatment of ‘gender as a social category that produces social hierarchies and relationships of power.’[[4]](#footnote-4) This argument suggests that Mary did exhibit contemporary gender roles that were out of her control due to the deep-rooted belief of a patriarchy and that everyone fits into their own categories regardless of status, as Queen she could not avoid her links to Kings of the past and present. Including to her husband King Philip II of Spain, this marriage occurred early in her reign to solidify her legitimacy with the link to a King, and the prospect of a potential heir from this marriage in 1554. However, this marriage formed the Marriage Act of 1554, which created Phillip to be King all but in name and with no influence on the laws of England, solidifying Mary’s complete control and authority over England, its people, and its laws. This act subverts the gender normalities of the 1550s, creating an almost matriarchy with Queenship however most if not all other important and influential figures were male leading to one Elizabethan belief on Mary’s reign to be that she was corrupted by these influential male figures.

Alongside this reliance on a male figure, femininity was celebrated and highlighted in a sermon by James Brookes, he relied on feminine language in defence of the childless Queen using notions of ‘motherly affection and tender love, take pity and compassion on her dead child.’[[5]](#footnote-5) This failure to bare a child and an heir to the throne created an image of a failed woman and a failed monarch due to not conceiving an heir to the British throne, which enhances the importance of motherhood in the 1550s and that it was commonplace for a woman to be a mother, those who did not were cast aside. Brookes then uses religion to solidify her authority of England and her legitimacy as a mother by claiming her to be their ‘spiritual mother, in our mother the holy Catholic church, towards her spiritual child?’[[6]](#footnote-6) Religious imagery which could be linking Mary Tudor to the Virgin Mary who is accredited as the mother of Christianity, this connection would be an effective one amongst the Catholics with the worship of the Virgin Mother. With James Brookes’ sermon claiming that Mary is ‘most noble godly, and gracious Queen Mary’ who restored ‘all good order, all good living, all good believing, all godliness and goodness.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Drawing the people’s attention to her achievements while praising her femininity and womanhood reinforces the idea that Mary Tudor both exhibited and denied feminine traits within Tudor England.

Elizabethan thinkers such as John Aylmer argued that ‘Mary might have been influenced or even bewitched “by Cardinall, Bishoppes and churchmen” because such “rigour and extremities” was unnatural to one “bearinge, and wearing a woman’s hart”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Even though Mary’s actions as Queen were traditionally masculine, people of the time turned a blind eye, believing that it was impossible for the Queen to have orchestrated these actions alone without male influence. Reinforcing the Tudor expectation of women to always be linked and dictated over by a male relation or figure. Other Elizabethan views on Mary’s reign was that ‘Mary’s ascension [was] God’s punishment for England’s sins.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Alongside the ‘plagues, “pestilent agues”, “strange diseases” and freak weather conditions that afflicted England from 1555 to 1558.’[[10]](#footnote-10) These things being thought of as punishments from God, would be affective in convincing the people of England due to the high religiosity of the time. Arguing that God sent them a Catholic Queen to punish them would have been taken seriously and believed, using this logic Protestants could convince the people that Queen Elizabeth was sent from God to help heal England, ‘A few writers condemned [Queen Mary] unequivocally for the policies undertaken in her name and identified her as a member of the False Church or an agent of Antichrist.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

The contrasts in gender expression and identity were visible religiously, with only men being a part of the clergy or key members in both the Protestant and Catholic Churches. Historians Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Tovo argue that ‘religion often is seen as a tool of oppression and a major force of history that holds ack both societies and women, preventing freedom, activity and subjectivity.’[[12]](#footnote-12) Religion can also be argued to be one of the major factors in the division of duties amongst the sexes with the notion of One (male) God and his Son which has been upheld since the beginning of Christianity and most Western religions, with ‘medieval misogyny as reflected in clerical rhetoric, which for the major part dominated the first works on medieval or early modern women.’[[13]](#footnote-13) Linking to the hostility that was targeted towards Queen Mary Tudor for being the head of England and the religious influence with the restoration of Catholicism during her reign in the 1550s.

Queen Mary Tudor’s reign both complied and subverted 1550s gender role and expression expectations. Mary complied with gender stereotypes with the loss of Calais after being persuaded to help her husband in Spanish conflict. Her lack of heir and children painted her as a failed woman which affected her authority as she did not meet the expectations of a monarch and a woman. Elizabethan thinkers beliefs that she was corrupted reinforces the fact that she was seen as a weak, nurturing woman of the time and was not capable of violence. Mary also subverted gender expectations due to the fact that she created policies to avoid her husband taking over, reverting to Catholicism and as a matriarch.

# Bibliography

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2. D. MacCulloh, pp247-248 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bishop of Winchester at Mary I’s funeral in 1558 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Katajala-Peltomaa and Tovo, pp.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. James Brookes. A Sermon Very Notable (1553) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman. Mary Tudor: Old and New Perspectives. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp.27 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, pp.21 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, pp.21 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, pp.27 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Tovo. Lived Religion and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Taylor & Francis (2020), pp.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, pp.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)