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Robert Tittler

Tudor England

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A Synopsis and Analysis of *The Reign of Mary I*

The Reign of Mary I provides an economical overview of the six year Mary I incumbency.¹ Beginning with a preambulatory "apprenticeship," this short section recapitulates Mary's abstruse and uncertain life during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward, placing particular emphasis upon the disparity between an ideal early childhood and her sudden fall from favour and impecunious excommunication from the family fold following the nationally tremulous divorce of Henry VIII and her mother, Catherine of Aragon. Subsequent to this, an equally brief discussion of the socio-economic condition of England pays particular attention to: the crisis in its raw wool and wool textile commerce; the early supplanting of commercial localism by regionalism--exemplified in "progressive" large scale brewing processes--offering a foretaste of the capitalism which will, during Elizabeth's reign, see the last gasps of those longevitous feudal structures and guild based industries; continued problems of a debased coinage begun by Mary's father; the financial and social burden of recently secularised institutions; and the natural disasters of crop failure and epidemic. All this accompanied by the rumbling of unremitting population growth and concomitant reduction in the cost of labour. The state of the realm was therefore not so much a state as an ongoing vicissitude.

Part two provides, in what is the most substantial body of

¹Religious connotation deliberate.

text, a narrative account of Mary's initially uncertain position upon the death Edward VI, with all the "flight and rally" of a ripping yarn; her successful succession; the Spanish match with Philip and the ensuing religious and political transubstantiations;² the economic and social activities of Mary's regime; and finally a few foreign policy particulars in which France and Ireland are notable examples. Amongst all this, a number of subplots are introduced, namely Wyatt's Rising, the repatriation of Cardinal Reginald and the implementation of his policies.

Part three offers an assessment of the Marian government, exploring the character and competence of the privy council, the royal household and court, and the influence of parliament. After a selective summation of the Whig perspective of Mary's reign, mainly derived from Pollard's turn of the century analysis, Tittler attempts the difficult and convoluted task of both paying homage to that view and simultaneously "howevering" it into a new and less critical picture.

Part four provides transcribed primary source documents introduced with editorial comments that offer both background authorial information and contextualisation. As well as this, several genealogical charts, a laconic glossary and an extensive bibliography, offering the student directions for further study.

²Poetic license here--as elsewhere--applied.

Any attempt to evaluate the success and contributational merit of an academic work must, in all fairness--and certainly in this case, attend not only its comprehensive content but also the scholastic level of the anticipated readership. *The Reign of Mary I* is aimed particularly at the English sixth-former and over-seas undergraduate. The opening: "For a future monarch, Mary had a most unusual and difficult start in life . . ." ³ immediately establishes the somewhat prosaic, elementary and mentorial style; thus revealing Tittler's position as one walking the fine and precarious line between condescension to reader and scholarly hyperbole. This tight rope writing--in terms of style--is very much reminiscent of the self-assessed "revisionary" content which, as already mentioned, offers both obeisance to conventional readings of the period whilst simultaneously attempting to provide a modified and more balanced rendition.

The Reign of Mary I, beyond doubt, demonstrates a decided craftsmanship with its diarchic structure of chronological and thematic integration, providing a minimalist account of Mary Tudor's reign designed as an introduction to this historiographically problematic period. Tittler demonstrates a remarkable talent for concentration and elucidation,

³R. Tittler, *The Reign of Mary I* (New York: Longman Group Limited, 1991), p. 1

rendering to paragraphs and halves of paragraphs information which other historians offer in excogitational pages and chapters of pages. Certainly, this necessitates an abandonment of detail and demands of the reader a face value acceptance of evaluations that otherwise and elsewhere might be generously supported; but, as we shall see, there is substantially little of controversial constitution, and this succinct method is certainly a positive characteristic which students must certainly welcome as an exemplum.

In terms of its suitability to the intended audience, *The Reign of Mary I* must be seen therefore as an unequivocal success. Besides successfully achieving what might be colloquially expressed as an ability to "cut out the crap," to incorporate the salient points of historiographically liberal and conservative readings both,⁴ this bantam book incorporates materials which are perhaps mundane to the scholar, yet vital to the student. Not least amongst these are the family tree sections, where separate leafs are provided to clarify the lineage of Mary Tudor, Jane Grey, and would-be royal suitor Edward Courtenay. Tittler also provides a section of transcribed⁵ documents which supply the student with both effortless reading and a sense of history being not merely an epistemological complexity, indifferently viewed in all its retrospective flatness, but

⁴Read "Whig" and "revisionist."

⁵Modernised.

of something that incorporates all the urgency, roundness and vitality of the present. It is these primary source documents that breathe life into persons and events, providing a compelling and intimate relationship between reader and period.

It should now be apparent to the attentive reader that a certain dichotomy exists: in attempting to provide both a succinct, general and comprehensive introductory overview of the Mary Tudor reign that is germane to the sixth-former, and also proffer a revisionary disquisition, certain accommodations must be made. The necessity of this accommodation seems to stem also from a certain reticence on Tittler's part: a implicit reluctance to relinquish the comfort and security of what has previously been fathomed, for the treacherous depths of absolute revision. Tittler, in simple terms, is unwilling to entirely relinquish the conservative view.

The manifest success of *The Reign of Mary I* as a general survey directed at the novice means, by definition, that the revisionary position is less successful. This becomes evident even in the first paragraph, where Tittler encapsulates her entire schooling with the terse: "She received a firm classical education, learned to play upon the virginals . . ." (Tittler 1) Even the encyclopaedic *Lives of the Tudor Age* offers a more detailed description, establishing not only the scope of her education but the scope of her intellect. This, along with the benefit of

humanist tutors, provides an initial point of departure for a revisionary analysis, for it establishes an acumen which we are more accustomed to read in respect of her much lauded half sister, Elizabeth. It is, of course, a point of departure which Tittler greatly neglects.

The benefit derived from a more complete expression of Mary's intellectual capacities and early emotional challenges can be seen in the solid foundation they provide for a revisionary analysis: firstly her intellect undermines the idea, to some extent, of the sterility of her reign: it is with great difficulty that we imagine a thoughtful and astute Queen as a unproductive Queen; secondly the hardship of her early years serves to engage our sympathy and establish a context in which the "Bloody Mary" myth might be banished. Indeed, Tittler decides--despite Mary's comprehensive education, despite the character building conclusion of numerous difficult years, despite the single-minded Tudor character inherited from her father, despite the boldness and astuteness of her manoeuvres to attain the throne--that Mary was "not well trained by her peculiar apprenticeship."⁶ The re-drawing of her character, in effect, is essential to a new appreciation of both Mary and her reign. M. St. Clare Byrne, in "Mary I" offers additional details which might radically change our assessment of Mary's character. One such example manages to both subvert

⁶Tittler, p. 3

the Henry VIII character and simultaneously engage our sympathy for Mary:

The methods of Henry's attack [upon Mary] make nasty reading. His privy purse expenses reveal that when Mary was sixteen he spent upon her in one year just a fifth of what he was accustomed to lavish upon Anne Boleyn in one day.⁷

Of perhaps more importance is the compassion that Byrne brings to light regarding the pieties and social conscience of Mary once she had ascended to the throne. A most particular example of this deserves a somewhat lengthy quotation:

Most significant detail of all was her habit of visiting poor men's houses in disguise, to see for herself the conditions of their lives, and to see that they were not victimised by officials acting in the name of the Queen.⁸

Byrne then provides a primary source quotation from one of the Queen's Ladies of the Bedchamber to substantiate this rather remarkable revelation.

Tittler also fails to explore the significance of Mary I being the first English female monarch to rule in her own right, a point which surely must be accommodated in any

⁷M. St. Clare Byrne, "Mary I," *The Great Tudors* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode 1956) p. 116

⁸Garvin, p. 121

reassessment of her rule.

Turning now to the Marian Parliament, Tittler discards the Whig tendency to entirely overlook this aspect of her reign, pointing out that the traditions revealed by Pollard and Neale--the growing importance of the House of Commons and sublimation of the House of Lord, as well as the growing reliance of the monarch upon this authority--in their respective examinations of the Henry VIII and Elizabeth I reigns apply equally to that of Mary. Tittler also suggests the recent studies cast serious doubt upon the accuracy of these previous assessments: that the House of Lords still maintained a good deal of hegemony. Furthermore, Religion *per se* was not so much the major point of opposition as the ownership of confiscated church property. Tittler fails to point out, however, that Mary's first Parliament threw out

. . . all the new treasons created since the time of Edward III and all the new felonies since the accession of Henry VIII . . . which meant a wholesale restoration of the ancient liberties of the English people.(Garvin 124)

It is, of course, the smoke of burning heretics that has most characterised Mary's reign. Tittler attempts to suggestively shift some blame to the presence of foreigners: notably, three Spanish Dominicans. Although he falls short of clearly pointing the black finger of responsibility, an introductory paragraphs serves no other purpose than to describe the wicked deeds of such Dominicans on the

continent and thereby inferring guilt by association. In examining the tremendous attention this extended episode has achieved, Tittler offers a Whig, xenophobic and almost teleological⁹ explanation that compares the English Reformation with that of the Continent, stating that "England was less used to this sort of violence."¹⁰ Admittedly, this is qualified with a distancing "It has been argued"¹¹; but by failing to refute this contention, we are forced to conclude that perhaps it is a belief in which the author himself secretly subscribes. It is perhaps an appropriate moment to recall that the executions of Mary's reign stemmed almost entirely from principle and probity, while other Tudor monarchs exercised death for political convenience; and that the number of religious martyrs killed was relatively modest as compared to the number of political victims sentenced by Henry VIII and Elizabeth I.

It should be clear by now, even with such a brief analysis, that Tittler's revisionary efforts are limited mainly to a refutation of the assessment that Mary's reign was one characterised by "sterility and stagnation."¹² Accordingly, he demonstrates that new markets were sought in

⁹Please consult a good dictionary for a good definition of this word.

¹⁰Tittler, p. 34

¹¹*ibid*

¹²Class lecture.

the Baltic and that both government and council were effective upon several fronts. Besides this, Tittler offers new analysis of the motivating forces behind Wyatt's rebellion, insisting that Protestant fervour outweighed opposition to the Spanish match, and that economic instability in Kent also played an important role. But again, he fails to reap the full revisionary potential of events. "Bloody Mary" was, in fact, a good deal less bloody than is generally believed. We have already examined the problematic nature of the martyr statistic, which seems less repressive when viewed in a larger context. As well as this, "political" traitors received greater leniency from Mary than offered by either Henry or Elizabeth. The Northumberland plot, for example, resulted in the death of only three conspirators, as compared to the hundreds executed by Henry as participants in The Pilgrimage of Grace. Similarly, Elizabeth had eight hundred killed following the rebellion of the Northern Earls, while only one hundred or so lost their lives due to Wyatt's Rebellion.¹³

History, as a fact or as a study, exists only in relation to the present. When we contextualise information, that contextualisation itself is contextualised by the present time, our situation in it and the knowledge it has granted us. For this reason, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that

¹³M. St. Clare Byrne, p. 113-128

the period of Mary's reign was in many ways regressive. Tittler makes numerous attempts to give Mary the benefit of ignorance: implying that only our privileged position and hindsight allows for overly critical judgements. But this "benefit of ignorance" is a position Tittler seems to adopt not as an element of a systematic philosophy of historical analysis, but as a convenience which is equally likely to be abandoned. Accordingly, Tittler suggests that the renewed war with France *seemed* like a sound piece of political manoeuvring; and the Spanish match with Philip *seemed* like a sagacious association, as did her efforts to reinstall the Catholic faith.¹⁴ And yet Tittler does not make this concession when dealing with Elizabeth's attempts to bolster the enfeebled Guilds, saying clearly and in no uncertain terms that such an effort was going against the tide of change--a tide which clearly is evident only through hindsight.¹⁵

In both style and content, we find^{16a} a certain conservative reticence which is entirely appropriate to an elementary over-view but which necessitates a weakening of the revisionary standard. Tittler, in providing what is

¹⁴Pollard: class lecture.

¹⁵Class lecture.

¹⁶Since an aversion to the MLA format was expressed, this paper conforms to a system of footnotes as outlined in the Prentice Hall *Handbook for Writers*..

essentially a basic introductory text, cannot stray too far from the solid ground and well marked trails set by previous historians of unquestionable renown. The somewhat foreign land of the revisionary remains one which we therefore glance only in passing.