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## Long May She Reign: Portrayals and Interpretations of Mary, Queen of Scots, in Popular Media

Scott Culpepper

*Dordt College*, [scott.culpepper@dordt.edu](mailto:scott.culpepper@dordt.edu)

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## Long May She Reign: Portrayals and Interpretations of Mary, Queen of Scots, in Popular Media

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### Comments

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**Long May She *Reign*:  
Portrayals and Interpretations  
of Mary, Queen of Scots, in Popular Media**

Even the most casual observer might conclude that Mary, Queen of Scots, has finally found a measure of vindication four hundred twenty-seven years after her tragic life was cut short at Fotheringay Castle. Or, if she has not found vindication, she has at least received a new hearing. No less than three film projects about her life were rumored to be in development in 2013. One of those projects, Swedish Director Thomas Imbach's *Mary, Queen of Scots*, has seen limited release on the film festival circuit and in Europe.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the CW Network's new series *Reign* has brought a fictionalized version of Mary's early years in France to a younger demographic. The Queen of Scots seems poised to make a renewed bid for hearts and minds centuries after she lost that bid during her lifetime.

Portrayals of Mary, Queen of Scots, in popular media began quite early. From plays to pamphlets to propaganda, her tale served a variety of purposes for different interpreters. At the dawn of modern cinema, the Edison Company filmed a short reenactment of her execution. Since then, a number of notable portrayals of Mary have graced the silver screen. Like all such cultural products, they are very much artifacts of the times in which they were created as well as attempts to understand the historical Mary. The Mary they often discovered, much like Albert Sweitzer's famous commentary on the search for the historical Jesus, yielded a queen crafted in the image and tweaked to suit the needs of her interpreters. Selected interpretations of Mary and her times in popular cinema and television will be explored, and the goal of this exploration is to study the way that popular interpretation of Mary, or "cinematic historiography," has shifted to accommodate changing times and perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Dayla Alberge, "After 400 years Mary, Queen of Scots again captures the fascination of film-makers," *The Observer: The Guardian*, August 17, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/aug/17/mary-queen-of-scots-films-exhibition>, (Accessed June 11, 2014.)

Mary was fond of the motto, “In the end is my beginning.” She reportedly wove this motto on a tapestry created during her English confinement and was reported in some accounts to have spoken the words at her death.<sup>2</sup> The phrase rings true in regard to her continuing legacy. Fascination with the Queen of Scots generally begins with the tragic circumstances of her downfall and death. Interest in her life and personality tends to follow rather than precede fascination with her death in popular media. This trend can be illustrated by a glance at the earliest portrayal of Mary on film.

The Edison Company launched Mary’s cinematic career with a short film produced in 1895 entitled *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*.<sup>3</sup> Shot on August 28 with a troupe of actors outside the Edison Laboratory at West Orange, New Jersey, the film is only fifteen seconds long. Gathering around the execution block, the actors gaze at the male actor playing Mary. “Mary” kneels before the block. The executioner raises his axe. Before the axe descended, the actor playing Mary was exchanged for a mannequin. A stop-motion effect was inserted with the goal of creating the illusion of a fluid descent of the axe to remove the Queen’s head. The mannequin head falls to the ground to be picked up and displayed by the executioner as the film ends. While the special effect in the film looks artificial to a contemporary audience, it was much more convincing to audiences of its time.

Mary’s next feature film incarnation was the 1936 production, *Mary of Scotland*. *Mary of Scotland* was adapted from Maxwell Anderson’s play by Screenwriter Dudley Nichols and directed by John Ford.<sup>4</sup> Katherine Hepburn starred as Mary, and Frederick March played James

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<sup>2</sup>Atonia Fraser, *Mary Queen of Scots*, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969), 555.

<sup>3</sup> Edison Company Laboratory, *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*, August 28, 1895, (West Orange, NJ: Edison Company, 1895.). Archived at the Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division Washington, D. C, <http://www.loc.gov/item/00694120>, (Accessed June 9, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Dudley Nichols and John Ford, *Mary of Scotland*, (RKO Radio Pictures, 1936). Maxwell Anderson, “Mary of Scotland,” *Four Verse Plays by Maxwell Anderson*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1959).

Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell. The film was a typical example of the romantic historical epics of the 1930's. Hepburn portrays Mary as a sincere Catholic who nevertheless has accepted the notion that she must be willing to offer religious toleration to the Protestants of Scotland. In this regard the film is true to the intentions of the historical Mary.<sup>5</sup> She arrives in the midst of a meeting of the Scottish Lords at which she quickly learns that the Protestant leaders among them are resistant to tolerating her Catholicism. Sharp words are exchanged from the very beginning, even with her half-brother, James Stuart, Early of Moray. The manner of her arrival in the film and her early friction with Moray diverge from historical fact.<sup>6</sup> John Knox, played by Moroni Olsen who also played Knox in Anderson's play, appears on the night of Mary's arrival to underscore the Protestant intolerance spreading in Mary's realm.<sup>7</sup> Knox is disrupted by the arrival of Bothwell, who is anachronistically accompanied by a band of pipers in full tartan. Bothwell's pipers drown out the exhortations of the Presbyterian firebrand.

Bothwell's characterization in *Mary of Scotland* provides a key for understanding the interpretive slant given to Mary as well. Bothwell as portrayed by March is a rebellious soul who has been deprived of his lands by Moray and the Scottish Lords. He defies the Lords and offers his sword to Mary. His amorous interest in Mary is evident from the outset, but her advisors urge Mary to accept marriage to Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, in order to bolster her claim to England. She is finally pushed to accept Darnley's suit when her secretary, David Rizzio, endorses the match and Elizabeth I (portrayed in snarky fashion by Florence Eldridge) insults her by proposing a match with the Earl of Leicester. When Darnley inevitably proves to be abusive and ineffective, Mary turns to Bothwell with results familiar to students of her life.

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<sup>5</sup> Magnus Magnusson, *Scotland: The Story of a Nation*, (New York: Grove Press, 2000)., 344-48.

<sup>6</sup> John Guy, *The True Life of Mary Stuart: Queen of Scots*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 128-134.

<sup>7</sup> Ardis E. Parshall, "Moroni Olsen: Class Act," *The Keepapitchinin*. July, 26, 2009.

<http://www.keepapitchinin.org/2009/07/26/moroni-olsen-class-act/>, (Accessed July 09, 2014).

Mary Stuart in *Mary of Scotland* is a queen whose good intentions are thwarted by the incompetence and intolerance of those around her. She vacillates between ringing declarations and uncertainty. Despite her obvious attraction to Bothwell, Mary bows to the advice of those around her and marries Darnley. By the time she begins to follow her heart, events that will doom her are already set in motion. Bothwell returns as the tragic hero who nobly strikes a deal with the Scottish Lords to accept exile in exchange for a pledge to let Mary keep her crown. The film follows the historical facts of Mary's forced abdication and escape to England.

While Mary and her cousin Elizabeth I never actually met in life, they repose together in death at Westminster Abbey. This ironic circumstance is due to the decision of James I to move his mother's body from Peterborough Cathedral to Westminster Abbey in 1612.<sup>8</sup> The idea that these two iconic queens never met in person has been too frustrating for filmmakers to accept. They have compensated for this historical disappointment by crafting their own fictional encounters between Mary and Elizabeth. *Mary of Scotland* placed this meeting at the end of the film on the night before Mary's execution. Their exchange highlights the contrast between their personalities and fates. Mary reproves Elizabeth's unfeeling pragmatism by saying, "You're not even a woman." "I am a Queen. You've been a woman. See where it's brought you," Elizabeth responds. Mary delivers an emotional testimony about how she would never trade a moment of her time with Bothwell for a century of Elizabeth's life. In fact, both Elizabeth and Mary acknowledge that Mary has "traded her kingdom for love of Bothwell."<sup>9</sup> This maudlin melodramatic statement overlooks the hard political realities that actually confronted Mary and the loutish behavior of the real Bothwell.

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<sup>8</sup> Fraser, 551-553.

<sup>9</sup> Nichols and Ford, *Mary of Scotland*.

The conclusion of their interview emphasizes the reality that *Mary of Scotland* was made in a time during the 1930's when men were still viewed as the romantic protectors of their ladies and traditional roles for women were still preferred. When Elizabeth proclaims Mary's life to be a failure, Hepburn launches into a soliloquy as Mary that drives her rival from the room:

You've always loved power and cherished it fiercely. I've loved as a woman loves, lost as a woman loses. But, still, I win. You have no heir. My son will inherit your throne. My son will rule England. Still, still, I win!<sup>10</sup>

Though Mary has lost political power, freedom, and her life, she is "saved through childbearing."<sup>11</sup> Her decision to live as other women live enabled her to secure the one thing that Elizabeth's different course has not secured, an heir to her throne. Mary marches to her death as a Catholic martyr, clothed in black rather than the red gown in which she was actually executed. Bothwell's pipers play as she ascends the platform, heralding her reunion with her deceased consort.

Mary returned to the cinema almost forty years later in *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1971). *Mary, Queen of Scots* was written by David Hale and directed by Charles Jarrott.<sup>12</sup> Vanessa Redgrave portrayed Mary, and Glenda Jackson portrayed Elizabeth I. Jackson also portrayed Elizabeth in a BBC television series.<sup>13</sup> Jackson's portrayal of Elizabeth has often been acclaimed by film critics and historians as one of the best. Redgrave won an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role for her performance.

*Mary, Queen of Scots* begins in France with the death of Francis II. Mary's mourning for her first husband and rejection by her mother-in-law, Catherine de Medici, are clearly shown. The opening scenes in France provide an opportunity to contrast the opulence of the French court

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<sup>10</sup> Nichols and Ford, *Mary of Scotland*.

<sup>11</sup> (1 Timothy 2:15, New International Version).

<sup>12</sup> David Hale and Charles Jarrott, *Mary, Queen of Scots*, (Universal Pictures, 1971).

<sup>13</sup> Glenda Jackson, *Elizabeth R* (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1971).

with the relative wildness of Scotland. The viewer gains a much better appreciation of what Mary left behind and how different her native land was than *Mary of Scotland* permitted. While *Reign* has often mentioned the tremendous cultural difference between the two countries, the show has yet to actually carry its audience to Scotland to witness those differences.

Some of the historical difficulties in *Mary of Scotland* were corrected at the beginning of *Mary, Queen of Scots*. These include Mary's earlier introduction to Bothwell in France, her meeting with the Scottish Lords on her arrival outside the city rather than in Edinburgh, and her early affection for and reliance on her half-brother, the Earl of Moray.<sup>14</sup> Moray's control of state affairs and of her person ultimately leads Mary to express her frustration that he has her "in a cage."

Marriage becomes the way out of the cage in Mary's estimation. Seizing on this opportunity, Elizabeth masterfully offers her favorite, Robert Dudley, as a suitor while sending the tempestuous Darnley north as her Trojan horse. As Elizabeth planned, Mary falls in love with Darnley and weds him. While Elizabeth vigorously protested the marriage in historical reality, the filmmakers go with the interpretation that Elizabeth's protests were a pretense to cover her hope that Darnley would doom Mary's rule.<sup>15</sup> Darnley was portrayed by Timothy Dalton. Dalton's oscillation between vicious abuser and cowering conspirator seems to capture the real Darnley quite well. Nigel Davenport played the role of James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell. Bothwell is not the romantic hero of the earlier film, but Mary does turn to him for assistance and appears to have genuine feelings for him in *Mary, Queen of Scots*.

While *Mary of Scotland* left some room for ambiguity in Mary's association with Darnley's death, *Mary, Queen of Scots* clearly embraces the idea that the "Casket Letters" were

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<sup>14</sup>Guy, 128-134.

<sup>15</sup>Alison Wier, *The Life of Elizabeth I*, (Ballantine Books, 1999), 134-168.

genuine and that Mary plotted with Bothwell to kill her husband. She is also a willing participant in Bothwell's plan to marry her and seize the throne. After the abdication, both Mary and Bothwell flee the country. Bothwell journeys to Denmark where he will die in prison, and Mary attempts to secure help from Elizabeth in England to retake her throne.

Not to be outdone by the previous film, *Mary, Queen of Scots* includes two counterfactual meetings between the two queens. Elizabeth personally meets Mary in secret upon her arrival in England to inform her that she will not support Mary unless Mary submits to a hearing concerning her role in Darnley's murder. Elizabeth also returns before Mary's condemnation. While *Mary, Queen of Scots* skips the Northern Rebellion of 1569 and most of Mary's time in confinement, as did *Mary of Scotland*, there is a discussion of the Babbington Plot and Francis Walsingham's efforts to ensnare Mary. *Mary, Queen of Scots* takes more seriously than the previous film the possibility that Mary did indeed give her consent to plots against Elizabeth.

Mary's final interview with Elizabeth again raised questions of gender and leadership, but this time the tone of the conversation and its resolution were different. *Mary, Queen of Scots* was produced at a time when the feminist movement was gaining traction. Women were asking serious questions about their role in both the home and the workplace while pondering whether they could truly have the best of both worlds.<sup>16</sup> There is a hint of this social context in the final conversation between Mary and Elizabeth in *Mary, Queen of Scots*. Mary is more confessional in this version and readily admits to failures as a monarch. She expresses the belief that her impending death is both a martyr's testimony for her faith and an atonement for her poor choices. Rather than boldly defending her love for Bothwell, Redgrave's Mary views her

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<sup>16</sup>Historian Christopher Haigh explores this feminist interpretation of the film in Christopher Haigh, "Mary Queen of Scots," *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman, New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Also see Thomas Betteridge, "A Queen for all Seasons," *Elizabeth I and Her Age*, ed. Donald Stump and Susan Felch, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 853-856.

feelings for him as a weakness. She presents herself as a person driven by emotion and feeling. She is sentimental. Elizabeth is shrewd and calculating. There is a sense in which Elizabeth is portrayed as the more successful of the two in terms of worldly success, and that success is not denigrated as it was in *Mary of Scotland*. But that success has come at the price of denying herself many of the typical experiences of other women. She will not marry and will never bear a child. Elizabeth is also portrayed as suppressing her natural emotions, refusing to feel as fully as Mary does, in order to maintain control of her realm and person. A closer look at Elizabeth's character and experiences might call this characterization of her into question. Elizabeth was often given to violent expression of anger and jealousy as well as fawning admiration of favorites.<sup>17</sup> She was no absolute stoic, but she did seem to be convinced that her exalted position demanded subordination of her personal feelings to public duty and also freed her from the typical constraints of womanhood.

Mary, on the other hand, was not the hapless all-feeling victim offered in the film. Scholars have made good arguments that Mary was often very effective and very firm in her rule. Arguments that invest Mary with full complicity in the murder of Darnley often brand her as a gullible pawn while ignoring the fact that the very "Casket Letters" that are used by these scholars to seal her guilt, if they are genuine, reveal a Mary who is more of a partner than a pawn. Her failures in Scotland are attributed in the film to the conquest of Mary's head by her heart. Jackson's Elizabeth even goes so far as to say, "Madam, if your head had matched your heart, I would be awaiting death."<sup>18</sup>

The execution scene is executed with greater accuracy than in previous films. Mary is accompanied in this version, as in real life, by four of her servants who act as comforters and

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<sup>17</sup>For an interesting discussion of Elizabeth's view of herself a person and ruler consult David Loades, "The Great Queen," *Elizabeth I and Her Age*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 659-674.

<sup>18</sup>Hale and Jarrott, *Mary, Queen of Scots*.

witnesses. She removes her black outer garments to reveal the red dress beneath which signifies a martyr's death. This symbolic apparel also matches Mary's actual behavior. Redgrave speaks the actual phrases Mary said herself including her response to the executioner, "I forgive you with all my heart. I thank you even. For I hope this death shall put an end to all my troubles." The film also includes the more questionable "For in my end is my beginning" and her recorded final words, a quotation from Luke 23:46, "Lord, into your hands I commend my spirit."<sup>19</sup>

Having begun at the end, more recent popular treatments of Mary Stuart in this prequel obsessed culture are turning to her beginning. The CW Network television series *Reign* premiered on October 17, 2013 and ran in the Thursday evening nine o'clock (EST) time slot throughout its first season of twenty-two episodes.<sup>20</sup> The series was co-created by Laurie McCarthy and Stephanie Sengupta. Australian actress Adelaide Kane stars as Mary, and Toby Regbo portrays Francis II. Megan Follows also stars as a calculating Catherine de Medici. Unlike previous popular attempts to tell Mary's story, *Reign* begins with Mary's time in France. The series presents the historical fiction that Mary had actually been living away from French court at a convent. She is returned to the French court after an assassination attempt at that convent. The first season (televised in 2013-14) follows Mary's adjustment to life back at court, the struggle to define her dual roles as fiancée of the Dauphin and Queen of Scotland in her own right, as well as the fragile nature of the alliance between France and Scotland.

*Reign's* creators and stars are very quick to assert that the series is meant to be historical fiction with "imaginary situations" created for the real historical players.<sup>21</sup> Within the framework of historical fact, there are a number of plots in the first season that delve into soap

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<sup>19</sup> Luke 23:46, New International Version.

<sup>20</sup> Laurie McCarthy and Stephanie Sengupta, *Reign*, (CBS Television Studios, 2013-14).

<sup>21</sup> Bonnie Fuller, Mary Queen Of Scots: 'Reign' Stars Separate Historical Fact From Fiction," *Hollywood Life*, October 18, 2013, <http://hollywoodlife.com/2013/10/18/mary-queen-of-scots-historically-accurate-reign-cw/>, (Accessed June 12, 2014).

opera style drama or even flirt with the supernatural. A vision of Francis' premature death is seen by Nostradamus, who makes a counter-factual appearance as an advisor to Catherine de Medici. This vision fuels much of the conflict in the first season of the series because Nostradamus believes the death of Francis is linked to his marriage to Mary. There is also the presence of a strange cult engaging in blood sacrifice in the woods outside the castle. The French crown in all of its power seems unable to drive these "pagans" from the surrounding wood. The series is very much targeted to appeal to the CW's typically younger demographic.<sup>22</sup> It has the teen romance and glitz of *Gossip Girl* and the paranormal elements of shows like *Supernatural*. The series manages to work in some sly dodges to explain away its departures from history as flaws in the historical record itself. In the fourth episode, "Hearts and Minds," Mary mentions the view across Europe that Francis is weak and sickly, which is actually historically accurate. Francis, who looks older than he should and much healthier in *Reign*, brushes the rumors of his sickly nature aside as the unfortunate result of a bad portrait painted when he was young.

While this treatment of Mary's life can be dismissed as light fare, the show often connects well with history in spite of itself. Significant details such as the political alignments of the day, the brevity of Mary's marriage to Francis, and the death of Henry II in a jousting tournament are still respected even if the events in the framework are tweaked for dramatic effect. One interesting example of how *Reign* seems to hold a sort of bi-polar respect and disdain for history in tension is the explanation of the death of Francis, Henry II's older brother, in the season finale. Henry, played by Alan Spring, related to Francis II the story of how he and his brother were held as hostages for four years in place of their father after the Battle of Pavia in

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<sup>22</sup> Yvonne Villarreal, "CW network revamp aims to draw wider audience," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 2013.

1525.<sup>23</sup> On his deathbed Henry confessed that he poisoned his brother to gain the crown. While the idea that the elder Francis was poisoned has tended to be the domain of conspiracy theorists, the young dauphin did die, probably of tuberculosis, after a tennis match in 1536 at the age of eighteen.<sup>24</sup> The manner in which *Reign* surfaced this little known fact illustrates the strange relationship of *Reign* with historical accuracy.

Adelaide Kane's Mary is an interesting addition to the series of media Marys. Kane portrays Mary as a fairly innocent girl who is forced to quickly adapt to the Machiavellian politics at French court. She discovers immediately after her arrival at court that the alliance with France and her engagement to Francis are not as secure as she thought. The first season chronicles her marriage to Francis, her struggle to gain assistance for the beleaguered Marie de Guise in Scotland, and her eventual ascension to the throne of France. Her decision about whether to assert her claim to England against her cousin Elizabeth is a major conflict of the final episodes of the first season. In between these more historical matters, there are "pagans" to evade, matchmaking to be done for ladies-in-waiting, and an excuse for a formal social or party almost every episode.

Kane's Mary does experience measurable growth over the course of the series' first season. She becomes increasingly more assertive and Machiavellian. Both the vivacious queen of friendly commentators and the plotter of Darnley's death at Kirk O' Field advanced by critics can be glimpsed in Kane's portrayal of Mary in *Reign*. In the final episode of season one, fittingly titled "Slaughter of Innocence," Catherine de Medici remarks to Mary, "I miss the girl that you were." Mary responds, "Many will. She was easier to kill." That cold exterior seems to melt slightly again at the end of the episode when Mary expresses to Francis her fear that she

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<sup>23</sup> Alistair Horne, *LA Belle France*, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 84.

<sup>24</sup> Desmond Seward, *Prince of the Renaissance: The Golden Life of Francis I*, (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

is becoming and must become a ruthless person to rule well. She remarks, "It is always the woman who must bow to the queen." Kane oscillates in the opposite direction again as the episode ends with Mary ordering the gates of the castle to be lowered to protect the people inside from plague. She gives the order despite the fact that Francis is riding into the plague-infested countryside to be with Mary's lady-in-waiting, who is giving birth to his fictional illegitimate child. So the season ends with both Mary and soap opera shenanigans continuing to *Reign*.

This new conflicted Mary, both compassionate and cold, may ironically approach the historical reality in ways never before displayed in popular media. Such a portrayal at least underscores the reality that there is much the modern world may never know about Mary Stuart despite the evidence. In fact, the nature of evidence such as the "Casket Letters," the letters exchanged by Mary and Elizabeth, and the chaotic accounts of the events leading to Darnley's death tend to yield uncertainty rather than light. It will be interesting to see if *Reign* tackles these issues in future seasons and how Mary will be characterized if the show follows her later misadventures.

The evolving cinematic historiography of Mary Stuart will continue with more recent and future productions. Thomas Imbach's film has been released in Europe and at film festivals, but has been notoriously difficult to view in the United States. Imbach said his version of Mary Stuart is portrayed as, "neither a saintly heroine motivated by Catholicism nor ambitious queen obsessed with power, but as a modern woman, passionate and fragile."<sup>25</sup> A second film is also now in production under the direction of Susan Bier. It will be produced by the team of Eric Fellman and Time Bevar. Saoirse Ronan, an Irish actress, has been signed to star as Mary, and

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<sup>25</sup>Alberge, "After 400 Years."

one of the scriptwriters is Michael Hirst, who has worked on such productions as *Elizabeth* and *The Tudors*.<sup>26</sup> These films will add their own interpretive layers to Mary's cinematic persona.

Mary Stuart's complex and controversial history continues to draw the interest of new generations of popular interpreters. Her personification in film has shifted to meet the needs and tastes of each generation. Hepburn's tragic romantic heroine typified the longing in an age of depression and rising fascism to recapture the simplicity of romantic chivalry. Redgrave's chastened martyr spoke to western cultures of the sixties and seventies who were experiencing new freedoms and unspeakable tragedies. Her Mary prodded women in particular, but also all people, to consider what they were willing to exchange to realize their potential. Kane's Mary combines fairy tale trappings with the grim realities of how heavy the crown sits on the heads of those who wear it. She poses one of the existential questions of this age. Can one be a good leader and a good person as well? In the opening credits of *Reign*, the narrator intones, "Long may she reign." While her reign was brief in life, Mary Stuart's reign over our collective imaginations has been long indeed.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.