

The Afterlife of Mary Queen of Scots

[The Hunterian, University of Glasgow, October 2022 – February 2023]



New exhibition explores the afterlife of controversial monarch, Image Credit Martin Sheilds, Whats on Glasgow.

Jenny Alexander

Mary Queen of Scots is perhaps one of Scotland's best-known and most controversial monarchs. Mary became Queen of Scotland at only six days old, she was briefly Queen Consort of France aged Seventeen, widowed and remarried twice, gave birth to a son who would

become the first King to unite the kingdoms of Scotland and England, and held captive by her cousin Queen Elizabeth I for eighteen-and-a-half years before being executed as a traitor in 1587. Mary was also a devoutly Catholic monarch who reigned over a Protestant

Scotland. There is no denying that Mary's life was one of constant transition, however it is the transitional state of this Queen's afterlife and legacy which The University of Glasgow's Hunterian Museum explored in their recent exhibition, *The Afterlife of Mary Queen of Scots* (14 October 2022 – 5 February 2023).

The Afterlife of Mary Queen of Scots was the result of a Glasgow University led research project, *'In my End is my Beginning' – The Memorialisation and Cultural Afterlife of Mary Queen of Scots, 1567 – 2019*, which explored Mary's posthumous reputation via artefacts found in Scottish Heritage Collections. Building on this exploration, The Hunterian's exhibition brought together a range of archival artefacts spanning multiple periods of history. In doing so, the exhibition encouraged audiences to consider the many transitions Mary's reputation and legacy has gone through as it has been repeatedly

reconstructed and co-opted in order to explore and represent Scottish heritage and culture, as well as themes of gender, sexuality, and monarchy.

Exhibits ranged from rare archival objects to everyday ephemera, including political legislation, works of art, and tourist memorabilia. Within the collection were objects from Mary's own lifetime, notably; *The Blackhouse Charter* featuring Mary's privy seal, and a 1553 deliberately defaced Testoon with Mary's portrait. *The Blackhouse Charters* date from 1304 and are the oldest records held by the University of Glasgow, documenting the expansion and relocation of the university. They are large, delicate documents featuring a wax seal attached by a ribbon. The charter featured within the exhibition dates from 1563 and documents Mary Queen of Scots' grant of former monastic lands to the University of Glasgow to provide bursaries for five poor students. This document has been cared for and carefully preserved as part of official

legislation and represents an item which arguably demonstrates an effort to preserve a record of Mary's influence over Scotland's domestic policy. By contrast, the deep and aggressive gouges within the defaced silver Testoon demonstrates the intensity of the hatred of the Queen of Scots from other political factions. The contrasting perceptions of Mary which can be detected in the comparison of these and other historical objects which date from Mary's lifetime, as well as the effort made to preserve them, helped to provide context to audiences as to why Mary's posthumous reputation has undergone so many variations.

Forming most of the exhibition was a range of artistic and cultural representations of Mary which were produced after her death. From paintings including *The Abdication of Mary Queen of Scots* (Gavin Hamilton, 1723 – 1798) and *Head of Mary Queen of Scots after Decollation* (by Amias Cawood, and once owned by Walter Scott), to Mary Queen of

Scots's rubber ducks. The final part of the exhibition focused specifically on films which have depicted Mary Queen of Scots, including the newly restored *The Loves of Mary Queen of Scots* (Clift, 1923) and a selection of posters for Hollywood's most recent depiction of *Mary Queen of Scots* (Rourke, 2018). The emphasis on these artistic depictions, especially those from Hollywood help to convey the way in which Mary Queen of Scots' life has been so highly romanticised. Within the films and their posters Mary is predominantly depicted as a regal and powerful women, and highlighted her relationships with either her husbands or cousin, Queen Elizabeth I.

In order explore the afterlife of Mary Queen of Scots, the Hunterian's exhibition followed the trajectory of Mary's life beginning from her time in France through to her death. Mapping the exhibition in this way also meant that exhibits could largely be presented in chronological order, with historic artefacts

from Mary's own lifetime telling the story of her life whilst those produced after her death explored her afterlife. This balance of old and new was extended to the branding of the exhibition itself, with historical imagery being recreated using a modern animated and colourful style (see above). By drawing attention to the consistency of depictions of Mary Queen of Scots within different time periods the exhibition introduced a strong sense of temporality. The chronological structure of the exhibition emphasised the way in which Mary's story has never fully faded from memory, her story maintains a relevance that is not constrained by the passage of time. Through this theme audiences could not only understand the transitional nature of Mary's life and afterlife, but it also highlighted that the way in which Mary was depicted within individual objects reflected the values of the periods in which these objects were produced. For example, her depiction as a romanticised Scottish leader in Hamilton's

and Cawood's paintings can be understood in more depth when you consider that they were both produced during a time when Scottish nationalism was undergoing a romantic reinvention. Perhaps more recognisable to current audiences, the films at the end of the exhibition depict a more empowered and sexual portrayal of Mary as both a woman and love interest, reflecting the changed understanding of women's place in society in the age of cinema.

The exhibition was careful to present a historically objective depiction of Mary Queen of Scots and instead drew attention to the multidimensional influence that she and her reputation have had throughout history. To do this, the exhibition asked attendees to focus on their own subject-object engagement of the exhibits and consider them alongside their pre-existing knowledge of Mary and draw their own conclusions of her as a historical figure. This subjectivity focused method added an interactive dimension to

what otherwise could have been just a more traditional look-and-do-not-touch exhibition. The Hunterian was able to extend this interactivity to all ages by including beautifully illustrated worksheets for younger attendees. The interactive elements of *The Afterlife of Mary Queen of Scots*, in conjunction with its focus on the temporality of the exhibits featured, positioned discussions of Mary as an important and continually relevant individual whose importance never ceases, but instead transitions throughout time.

As a biographical exhibition, *The Afterlife of Mary Queen of Scots* was extremely successful. It presented both a detailed representation of Mary as a historical figure and highlighted the way in the transitional nature of her legacy reflects the subjective nature of history. Within the exhibition the temporality and focus on the audience's subjective understanding of Mary draws attention to the fact that her image has been (and continues to be) revised, co-opted, and at

times manipulated in the construction of both national memory and social consciousness. Depending on which exhibit or element of the exhibition you focus on The Hunterian explores the ways in which Mary's legacy has been used to explore or emphasise debates around Scottish identity, power, gender, and sexuality. Yet when considered in its entirety, The Hunterian's exhibition demonstrates the importance of considering how the transitions of Mary's legacy are interconnected and contribute to the overall understanding of the afterlife of Mary Queen of Scots.

Films Mentioned:

The Loves of Mary Queen of Scots,
Denison Clift, UK, Ideal Film
Company, 1923.

Mary Queen of Scots, Joise Rourke,
United States, Focus Features and
Universal Pictures, 2018.

Image Credit

Glasgow, W.O. (n.d.). *New exhibition explores the afterlife of*

controversial monarch | News.
[online] What's On Glasgow,
Image Credit Martain Sheilds.
Available at:
<https://www.whatsonglasgow.co.uk/news/2022/10/13/new-exhibition-explores-the-afterlife-of-controversial-monarch/>
[Accessed 8 Apr. 2024].

Works Cited:

Mary Queen of Scots Project (2024). 'In my End is my Beginning' – The Memorialisation and Cultural Afterlife of Mary Queen of Scots, 1567 – 2019 [online] Available at:
<https://mqs.glasgow.ac.uk/>
[Accessed 8 Apr. 2024].

The Hunterian (2022). 'NEW EXHIBITION EXPLORES THE AFTERLIFE OF SCOTLAND'S MOST CONTROVERSIAL MONARCH' [Online]. Available at
https://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/about/news/pressreleases/headline_877821_en.html [Accessed 8 Apr. 2024].

The Hippodrome Bo'ness (2024) 'The Loves of Mary Queen of Scots (1923)' Programme Notes [Online]. Available at
<https://www.hippodromecinema.co.uk/media/5730/the-loves-of-mary-queen-of-scots-docx.pdf> [Accessed 8 Apr. 2024].