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In Their Own Time: Four Women

In the Fifteenth Century

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### Women in the Fifteenth Century: Four Women in the Fifteenth Century

The fifteenth century in England was a pivotal era in the history of that country.

Outright war with France did not end until one hundred years after it broke out in the thirteenth century. The wars left the country financially unstable and politically vulnerable. A little less than twenty years after Henry VI assumed the throne of England in 1437, civil unrest exploded in the Wars of the Roses, culminating in the establishment of a new English dynasty. While the exploits of fifteenth century men occupy most of the pages in the histories, women had at least as great an impact on some events as did the more celebrated men. This paper will discuss the historical contributions of four women who lived in England during the fifteenth century: Margery Kempe, Margaret Paston, Margaret of Anjou, and Margaret Beaufort. These women were wives and mothers whose accomplishments went outside the traditional limits of marriage and motherhood.

For example, Margery Kempe does not fit into the traditional mold of the medieval peasant woman who worked to maintain the integrity of her household. Margery was the wife of a man who owned a little property, most of which Margery brought into the marriage. Because she was an alewife and engaged in sundry other businesses, Margery would have had a small place in the documents of the time as a taxpayer. It is not for her business acumen, however, that Margery is known. In an age when a woman of her class lived her entire life in the village in which she was born, Margery experienced a series of religious revelations which prompted her, in her middle age, to wander the roads of England and to pay visits to the Holy Land and Rome. Her biography, written by a priest at her earnest request, is the most unusual piece of religious literature from that period

precisely because it contains the revelations of a religious enthusiast who lived in the world rather than a cloister.<sup>1</sup> It is also a remarkable accomplishment in secular history. Her biography was only the second biography to be written in the English language since The Life of Wulfstan of Worcester which was written in the eleventh century.

Margaret Paston also left her mark on the history of the fifteenth century. The Paston Family papers are an invaluable documentary source for the fifteenth century historical scholar and Margaret's letters to her husband are the largest part of those documents. The letters demonstrate Margaret's struggles with day to day problems that are exacerbated by the prolonged absences of her husband during the civil unrest in northeastern England. Further, despite the threat of violence that shadowed her family, Margaret was able to manage the Paston estates so well that they continued to show a profit when other members of the gentry were becoming bankrupts.<sup>2</sup>

Margaret of Anjou, one of Margaret Paston's contemporaries as well as her queen, was the ambitious and intelligent wife of Henry VI. She had more battlefield experience than most of the English male population. In fact, had she been able to control London in 1461, the Wars of the Roses would have ended and the Tudor dynasty might well have never been seated on the English throne.<sup>3</sup> Henry VII took great pains to establish his right to kingship by victory in battle, but Margaret preceded him by more than twenty years in her attempt to establish the same right for her son.

Finally, no account of the fifteenth century in England would be complete without the inclusion of Lady Margaret Beaufort. She would have been assured of her place in history simply by being the mother of Henry VII. Although later Tudor historians gave her a backhanded tribute when they credited witchcraft for her political and financial

abilities, Lady Margaret's foresight saved the life of the future king and helped to propel England into one of the golden ages of its history. Margaret was a singularly perceptive woman. When Edward IV offered her son Henry a pardon for fighting with the forces that supported Henry VI, Margaret advised her son not to accept. Subsequent breaches of Edward's promises to Lancastrian kinsmen proved that she was correct in her assumption that Edward would seek vengeance.<sup>4</sup>

Modern scholarly research has revealed a rich and varied history for medieval women. Research suggests that women had an active role in events that crossed the historically imposed boundaries of gender. For example, Margaret Beaufort, the king's mother, was also famous for her cultural patronage and for establishing several colleges. Lady Margaret's accomplishments are diminished, however, if patronage is assigned a primary place in the list of her accomplishments. Women patrons tended to be socially powerful, which Lady Margaret certainly was.<sup>5</sup> The historical assumption is that they were able to be patrons only because of the wealth that they inherited from a male relative or from a spouse. While Margaret did inherit a large estate from her father, the Duke of Somerset, she added to her wealth through clever marriages, all but one of which she arranged for herself, and a series of political and business deals in which she was an active participant. Therefore, to reduce the king's mother to the status of patron would be to deny her impact on a substantial part of English history.

Margaret of Anjou led armies into battle. Although there are historical precedents for women as military leaders, Margaret's motives were perhaps less pure and certainly as politically motivated as the actions of the most greedy magnates. The queen even developed a reputation for barbarity in an age when lawlessness replaced barbarity. When

the head of the defeated Richard of York was brought to her at Wakefield, she laughed and slapped it in the face.<sup>6</sup> It is an error to assume that Margaret is merely a disloyal and ambitious wife. She was also a woman who demonstrated a remarkable ability to adopt the methods of fifteenth century men to achieve her own ends.

In the context of events in the fifteenth century, Margaret Paston also merits<sup>7</sup> consideration that extends beyond her fulfillment of the traditional roles of wife and mother. She exhibited remarkable courage when she was faced with violence. In 1448, she was evicted from the Paston house at Gresham by a force of more than one thousand men while her husband John was many miles away in London. Margaret's calm demeanor in the situation prevented casualties.<sup>8</sup> Further, historians have been able to reconstruct the daily living conditions of the English people during the Wars of the Roses in large part because Margaret wrote clear accounts of events in her letters.

It is also important to look at Margery Kempe's life as part of the whole history of England in the late medieval period. Margery volubly practiced religion in an age when volubility was invariably associated with heretical beliefs and with being a woman. In fact, she was detained on several occasions for questioning on the Articles of Faith.<sup>9</sup> It is erroneous to conclude, however, that Margery was an itinerant madwoman whose claims to mysticism are suspect in the light of her religious contemporaries' erudition and seclusion. Rather, her actions should be seen and valued as antecedents to modern feminist movements. Margery engaged in a lifelong attempt to establish her personhood.

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Although this study of four disparate women does not reflect the entire spectrum of women's contributions to fifteenth century history in England, the women discussed in

this paper represent the secular, religious, political and cultural accomplishments which helped to shape events in that pivotal era.

### *Margery Kempe*

Margery Kempe was born Margery Brunham in 1373. Her father was one of the leading citizens of King's Lynn and he provided Margery with an ample dowry upon her marriage at the age of twenty. Her husband was John Kempe. The Kempe family name appears in the Lynn records although the family was not as well regarded as the Brunhams, a fact that gave Margery occasion to make disparaging remarks about her husband. John Kempe was an unsuccessful businessman. Over the years of his marriage to Margery, he tried his hand at brewing, milling, and farming. His wife enjoyed greater success at brewing and milling and she paid John's debts with her profits.<sup>11</sup> The financial situation in the Kempe home was a reversal of the domestic ideal in the middle ages in which the husband was ultimately responsible for all the debts incurred during the marriage by either spouse.<sup>12</sup>

Finances were not the only area in which the Kempe marriage differed from those of their contemporaries. After the birth of their fourteenth child, Margery told her husband that sexual relations with him disgusted her. This was an extraordinary position for a woman in Margery's social and historical class. As a Catholic, and as a peasant woman, it was incumbent upon her role as a wife that she continued to honor the marriage contract. But Margery felt that in order for her to do the will of God, it was necessary for her to lead a celibate life. The desire to serve God through celibacy resulted in one of

Margery's most notable accomplishments. Acting upon advice that she received in a vision of Christ, Margery approached her husband and offered to pay his debts in exchange for her freedom from marital obligations. "Grant me that ye will not come into my bed, and I grant you to requite your debts ere I go to Jerusalem. Make my body free to God so that ye never make challenge to me by asking any debt of matrimony."<sup>13</sup> As the Lord told her in the vision, her husband acquiesced.

Margery Kempe was a troublesome mystic. Unlike her contemporary Julian of Norwich, whose withdrawal from the world was the norm for holy women, Margery's life was spent in the turbulence of the fifteenth century world. While Julian was respected and revered during her lifetime, Margery was the subject of controversy and disbelief. There are grounds for questioning the validity of her mysticism. Margery herself admits that the initial visit she received from the Lord had only temporary results. Her vision came during an apparent postpartum breakdown following the birth of her first child. She wrote that she came to her senses after the Lord talked to her but, "When this creature had graciously come again to her mind, she thought that she was bound to God and that she would be His servant. Nevertheless, she would not leave her pride or her pompous array."<sup>14</sup> Margery was not cut from the usual sanctified cloth of holy womanhood.

From the historian's point of view, Margery's most significant accomplishment was her book. Although Margery was born into rather a well-to-do family, she was, for all intents, illiterate. It is remarkable that she thought to write her life story at all, and even more remarkable that she convinced a German priest who spoke no English to write it for her. The historian can surmise that Margery's motivation for accomplishing this



enormous task may be attributed to her desire for validation in the Church. Her contemporary, Julian , was as revered for her writing as she was for her devotion.

Along with most of the other religious literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Margery's book disappeared after the Reformation and it has only recently been recognized as a rich source for historical research.<sup>15</sup> Margery's book is a vivid travelogue that describes the religious fervor that took an alewife from Lynn to Rome while it provides the reader with an accurate account of daily life in early fifteenth century England. By studying Margery Kempe's actions in the context of the everyday life of her century, the modern historian gains a greater appreciation of the enormity of her task when she decided to listen to the voice of the Lord.

One of the greatest sources of controversy that arose from Margery's conversion is the question of her vocation as a religious figure. In the days before the Reformation, when the Catholic Church was the center of medieval life, every Christian was believed to have a calling. Margery's calling was Wife.

A Wife in late medieval England was the spouse who was the mistress of the house.<sup>16</sup> In medieval terms, the call to be a Wife was also the second highest temporal vocation, the first being a celibate life, preferably spent in seclusion from the world. A Christian's calling was his status for life.

Margery experienced early difficulties with her calling as Wife. In her book, she recounts her illness after the birth of her first child. She describes herself as a creature who was beset by devils to slander her husband, her family, and herself. When she had her first dream about the Lord, she recalled her wifely duties. Margery's postpartum illness left a permanent impression on some of her neighbors in Lynn. They would later

remember that it was difficult for them to believe that the Lord spoke with Margery's sharp tongue.<sup>17</sup>

Margery's illness was the first of many trials in her life. When she had recovered her physical health, she began several businesses that eventually failed. Two of those ventures, a horse mill and a brewery, were quite successful in their first few years. Margery blamed herself for their failure, attributing their downfall to her excessive pride in their success. The villagers said that she was accursed and that no man or woman could serve her. Margery, beset on all sides by adversity, began to enter the way of everlasting life and to forsake her pride and her covetousness.<sup>18</sup> She wrote,

"Then this creature, seeing all these adversities coming on every side, thought they were the scourges of Our Lord that would chastise her for her sin. Then she asked God's mercy, and forsook her pride, her covetousness, and her desire she had for the worship of the world, and did great bodily penance, and began to enter the way of everlasting life as shall be told hereafter."<sup>19</sup>

Another trial for Margery was the skepticism that she encountered through most of her religious career. Her neighbors were not the only people who questioned the validity of her vocation. Margery herself wondered about changing her calling from Wife to holy woman. The issue that troubled her the most was chastity. Margery's Lord, however, came to her aid in another dream. He said, "I take no heed what a man hath been; but I take heed what he will be. Have mind, daughter, what Mary Magdelene was, Mary of Egypt, Saint Paul, and many other saints that are now in Heaven, for of unworthy, I make worthy."<sup>20</sup>

Margery also faced opposition to her self-imposed mission from church leaders. Various heretical movements were beginning to make inroads into the solidarity of the

Christian community. The Lollards were especially strong during this period and Margery was detained and questioned several times because area church leaders associated her open air preaching with the tactics that were used by the sect.<sup>21</sup> Margery continued to preach outside the church walls, however, because her form of Christian expression was not suited to the meditative and contemplative Christianity that worshipped quietly beside an altar. In fact, she credits her public admonition to a priest for that cleric's return to a more Christian life.<sup>22</sup>

Margery's choice of religious expression presented other problems. She was not a contemplative penitent who spent long hours at the altar praying for souls and accepting the occasional vision as affirmation of her faith. Rather, the housewife from Lynn was vocal and demonstrative. Most of her prayers were said outside of the church walls and they were accompanied by loud sobs and plentiful tears. These fervid expressions alienated many churchgoers and, at times, her traveling companions. Further, Margery's visions were almost exclusively related to mundane matters. While her reclusive contemporaries' visions were wonderful and terrible scenes of heaven and hell that foreshadowed the fate of mankind, Margery's visions are homely talks with the Lord that are intensely personal. For example, she asks for help to cease crying and the Lord tells her that she will continue to weep for the next fifteen years.<sup>23</sup>

Although Margery's immediate problems were skepticism, the Church leadership, and proper religious expression, the most troubling aspect of her religious calling is one that divides historians today as it divided people in the fifteenth century. Margery does have some of the basic characteristics of the "true" mystic. One of the mainstays of mysticism is the ability of the mystic to restrain the physical and emotional selves in order to free

the spiritual self. Margery had no emotional inhibitions and her physical expressions have been noted. Although the phenomenon of tears was an acceptable expression of sorrow for the sufferings of Jesus Christ, Margery practiced an extreme form of affective piety that trapped her within her subjectivity and she might be seen to have created space for the subversive potential of the disorderly woman.<sup>24</sup> Margery lived in a patriarchal society that depended on place and order to sustain its power. Her religiosity threatened the societal order because it was neither confined to the ordinary spheres of home and church and also, because she controlled the intensity and depth of her devotion. If Margery is viewed as a threat to the natural order of a hierarchical society regulated by a sternly paternal Church, her impact on modern feminist thought cannot be denied. Unlike other mystics whose rebellious stances were ultimately safe, stylized, and acceptable, Margery's idiosyncratic behavior struck too close to the heart of problematic Church doctrine to award her the approval and ultimately acceptance of, her calling to the religious life. Margery's devotion was in this sense, a forerunner to the Reformation and Humanism.

Any historical discussion of Margery's religious life cannot dismiss the importance of her secular life to her development of her spiritual career. Margery's abandonment of her first calling was the subject of controversy in her century and continues to trouble modern historians. Windeatt seems perturbed that only one of Margery's fourteen children is mentioned in her biography.<sup>25</sup> But Margery's marriage to John Kempe was less than ideal. Also, when she decided to accept the way of everlasting life, it is possible that one sacrifice she made was distance from her family. Any earthly marriage and its subsequent children, however, would have been less than ideal for Margery. She felt that the only

perfect union was between herself and the Lord Jesus. She attempted to reach this ideal by leaving her husband, and one presumes, her children, periodically. Margery, despite her intentions to reach a union with Jesus, was never able to rid herself of the need for public approval. When John fell victim to his final illness, Margery mentions the public's condemnation of her apparent neglect of his health. It was public opinion, rather than any private feelings of concern or remorse, that led her to go to his sickbed and to care for him until he died.<sup>26</sup> Margery's earlier calling as a wife also dominated her images of her relationship with Christ. It is almost always expressed in domestic terms that are visualized in house settings. She is a wife waiting at home for her husband or accompanying him on a journey. In fact, her most intense visions rely on marital imagery. "The aforesaid creature had a ring, which Our Lord had commanded her to have made while she was at home in England, and she had engraved thereon, 'Jesus Cryst est amor meus.'"<sup>27</sup>

Margery Kempe continues to be a controversial figure because no one seems able to agree on the precise definition of her role in the fifteenth century. Margery's book has been variously read as both a religious text and an academic one. A devout reader looks for evidence of spiritual validity and the academic analyzes the text for historical and anecdotal validity. The book is a valuable resource for both readers but it also reinforces the paradox in Margery's life. Contemporary religious literature was written with certain devotional expectations clearly in mind. The authors were primarily reclusive and educated. Margery's book, written through a scribe, reflects a personality that clamored for public attention. Whether Margery wanted the public's attention to focus on her or on Christianity is open to scholarly interpretation. If the book was an attempt to validate her

devotion in the eyes of the Church, and through the Church, her contemporaries, interpretation becomes more complicated and as yet, indefinite. Margery either sought validation for a new form of Christian expression in the fifteenth century or validation for herself as a Christian woman. It can be argued, however, that Margery created an important place for herself in her own century. Her Christian devotion, real or not, predated the Reformation and Humanism but contained elements of both movements. She also provided a model for later feminist thought when she listened to an inner voice that told her that it was time to make changes in the old order of her life.

### *Margaret Paston*

Margaret Paston lived during some of the most turbulent years of the fifteenth century in an area of England that was the seat of much violence in the Wars of the Roses. In her lifetime, the country was ruled by three kings and two protectorates. The civil disturbances threatened the lives of first her husband, and then her sons. Like many of their neighbors, the Pastons allied themselves with different factions and, in the end, they emerged on the winning side with property and a title for the eldest son.

The Pastons owed their success in no small way to Margaret. While her husband John alternated between taking cover and taking court cases, Margaret managed the family holdings.<sup>28</sup> It was not unusual for a woman to manage a family estate in the fifteenth century because war and disease had thinned the ranks of the male gentry. Ten per cent of all land in England was either owned or managed by women.<sup>29</sup> But the circumstances under which Margaret Paston labored were unusual, and the letters that document her efforts are rarer still. Literacy was a state that very few people in fifteenth century

England enjoyed, and there are few records outside of official documents that detail the lives of everyday individuals. Margaret's letters provide the historian with a first person account of a woman's response to the danger and challenges of life during the Wars of the Roses.

Margaret's husband was a lawyer. Even in times of stability, lawyers were often in the middle of disputes, and thus, subject to hard feelings. John Paston appeared to be respected by his neighbors until the will of Sir John Fastolf was made public. The Pastons were the heirs to a large portion of his estate, part of which was the house at Gresham from which Margaret was later evicted. Fastolf's will was the subject of years of litigation and a source of constant worry for Margaret. At one point, her husband had to go about London with an armed guard and Margaret wrote to him to be careful and not take meat or drink with someone who was unknown to him.<sup>30</sup> Margaret knew what she was writing about. In the same letter, written after a period of months in which the couple had no communication, she said, "I could get no messages to London except by sending letters with the sheriff's men; as I knew neither their masters nor whether they were friends of yours or not, I thought it was best not to send anything by them."<sup>31</sup>

While John searched for patronage and watched his back, Margaret attended to the daily work that was necessary for the maintenance of the Paston property. She employed extra workers at harvest times. She decided how much cloth was needed to make clothing for the household. She ensured that a steady flow of cash kept John in comfort and eventually, she would do the same for two of their sons. Since her husband was the property owner, he was expected to make all the larger decisions concerning his family and the estate. Long periods of separation, however, forced John to rely on his wife to

report conditions that needed his attention. In a letter that he wrote to Margaret in 1461, it is clear that he credited Margaret with good judgement and courage. “If any entry is made at Hellsdon [a Paston property], shove them out and put someone to keep the house if need be, even though it does not belong to the manor.”<sup>32</sup>

In order to understand the enormity of the burden that Margaret carried, it is necessary to understand some things about the way that gentry households were organized in late medieval England. Rich households were bigger and more complex than those of the poor. Often, as in the case of the Paston family, there was more than one house to care for. The properties were sometimes a few days’ ride apart from one another and it was important for the landowner to have trustworthy people in his employ. Because John Paston was away from home on many occasions, it was left to Margaret to oversee her husband’s interests. In 1549, Margaret wrote to her spouse, “Please try to get someone at Caister [another Paston property] to keep the buttery, for the man who you left with them will not make up the account daily as you ordered. And I think that you would be glad to get another man instead of Simon for you are none the closer to a sensible man with him.”<sup>33</sup>

Rich households also served as repositories for members of the extended family. Margaret wrote, “Your mother [Agnes] is displeased with your son John as he hath used the best horse in the house to death.”<sup>34</sup> Agnes Paston was widowed in early middle age. Although she lived as a semi-permanent guest in Margaret’s house, she was an outspoken and sometimes quarrelsome woman whose presence sometimes added to Margaret’s problems.



Margaret also had to contend with the problems of being pregnant under stress. In 1454, she wrote to John reminding him of certain items which were needed by the household and she signed the letter, "Your groaning wife".<sup>35</sup> She was pregnant with her second son at the time.

Because of her husband's protracted absences, Margaret had the added responsibility of ensuring the physical safety of the household as well. Margaret's eviction from the house at Gresham demonstrates the extraordinary mental and physical pressures that were an integral part of Margaret's life.

John Damme, a servant to the Paston family, wrote to John Paston on November 30, 1448 concerning the unsettled atmosphere at Gresham with its undertones of violence. The henchman for the sheriff, a man named Gunore, told Margaret to, "Get your men to lay aside their leather jackets and their battle axes."<sup>36</sup> Lord Moleyns, the man to whom the sheriff answered, was a strong enemy of John Paston. Margaret suspected that he would try to remove her from the house because Moleyns was one of the persons who felt wronged when Fastolf left considerable property to John Paston. The house at Gresham was part of that legacy. Margaret was willing to do battle to keep the property in the Pastons' hands. She told the men that they were to remain armed until John returned home.

Margaret's premonitions about eviction proved to be true. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of January, 1449, an armed and riotous body of men in the employ of Lord Moleyns attacked the house. Twelve people were inside, one of whom was Margaret. The raiders, about a thousand in number, broke up the walls of the house around its occupants and proceeded to carry Margaret out the door and through the gate. The indomitable woman sought and

obtained refuge with John Damme, and when her household had a safe haven, she pleaded her husband's case with Moleyns for restitution. Lord Moleyns did not restore the house but he did pledge peace and promised to abstain from further violence against the Pastons. Pledges and promises notwithstanding, Margaret had learned a great deal from her exchanges with men. In a letter to her husband in February she wrote, "I do not trust their promises because I find them to be untrue in other things."<sup>37</sup>

Margaret was destined to live under threat of violence for many years. In 1460, twelve years after the eviction from Gresham, Margaret wrote to John, "The people in this part of the world are beginning to grow wild."<sup>38</sup> One year later, when Margaret of Anjou and Edward IV were battling for the throne, Margaret Paston prayed, "May God in his holy mercy give grace that a good and sober government is soon set up in these parts, because I have never heard of so much robbery and manslaughter as there has been here recently."<sup>39</sup>

Margaret Paston was an unusual person in an unusual century. Although she lived in an area of England that was intermittently gripped by violence, she was able to raise a family and manage a large estate in the absence of her husband. Although John Paston was legally responsible for his family's welfare, it was his wife who held the responsibility for their actual care. One incident that illustrates the mundane matters which had to be attended to despite civil disturbances is recorded in a letter she wrote to her eldest son in January, 1464. In typical maternal fashion, she reminds him that his old armor was left laying about the house and it will deteriorate if it is not properly cared for. She also wrote the his mare was , "Splayed. She will never be able to be ridden again and I do not know what to do with her."<sup>40</sup>

Other women in the fifteenth century endured similar difficulties. What sets Margaret apart from her sisters, however, are her letters. The fact that she was not literate enhances her accomplishment. Margaret had to find someone whom she trusted to write the letters for her and to read her husband's answers to those letters. The letters are not great literature in the sense that they are quotable or inspirational, but they do provide historians with a contemporary view of a tumultuous era in which the routine lives of the English people were violently disrupted by the greedy magnates.

### *Margaret of Anjou*

Although Margaret of Anjou was French by birth, she reigned as queen of England by virtue of her marriage to Henry VI. Had she been married to any other king of England, her place in the historical record would have been smaller. But Henry was not any other English king, he,..."was one of the most spectacularly inadequate kings of England. . .

"<sup>41</sup> Henry's weakness as a ruler enabled Margaret to indulge her personal ambition.

Margaret inherited her strength of purpose from her mother Isabel, herself the wife of a weak and inadequate king. But while Margaret's mother concealed her actions and made her heroics appear to be the work of her spouse, Margaret formed her own political alliances early in her marriage. <sup>42</sup> In fact, it was her friendship with the Earl of Suffolk, later executed by Yorkist forces, that focused the first negative attention on the new queen.

Margaret was educated as a child. Her early behavior suggested that she had an independent spirit. She demonstrated contempt for physical fatigue and she loved

hunting and war-like spectacles. She also inherited a sense of refinement from her father Rene. She had a keen artistic sensibility which later revealed itself in her cultural patronage in England.<sup>43</sup>

Margaret was only fourteen years old when she crossed the English Channel. The modern reader can only imagine Margaret's feelings when she arrived in England and prepared to be the wife of Henry VI. Her new husband was physically weak and mentally suspect. Contemporaries, when they wanted to be kind, described his demeanor as "gentle and monk-like" and his contemporaries who were not as kind decried his mental deficiency and lack of moral fiber.<sup>44</sup> Although Henry's true character and intellect cannot be known for certain, Margaret must have felt a sense of déjà-vu when she saw that her husband was in so very many ways like her father. Rene's aesthetic interests overrode any sense of his duty to rule Anjou.<sup>45</sup> Henry spent money that he did not have, curried favor where there was no hope of political gain, and supported the arts in a country where the nobility was illiterate. Margaret entered a world where refinement was rarely exhibited, where the French were considered duplicitous and greedy, and where her husband, the king, was unable to protect her.

The young bride from Anjou was not without resources, however. Contemporary accounts credit or discredit her character and morals in varying degrees but all the accounts agree that she had great physical charms. Her enemies would use this against her; even before she reached England she was accused of having an affair with Suffolk in France.<sup>46</sup>

Margaret's resources went beyond physical beauty. She also had a quick intelligence. The nature of her relationship with Suffolk will never be clear but there is evidence that

they used one another for political gain. It was Suffolk who negotiated for the marriage between Henry and Margaret. He saw the marriage as one way for England to retain some of the French territory that it was in danger of losing. He also envisioned himself as a hero and possibly the governor of that territory. For her part, Margaret saw in Suffolk all the qualities that she admired in a nobleman; Suffolk was first and foremost a soldier, a fighting man who was not afraid to take what he wanted. Surely Margaret, with the nature of the rumors which flew between France and England, knew that she would need a strong political ally to guide her in her role as queen of a foreign country.<sup>47</sup>

Margaret of Anjou does not shine in contemporary fifteenth century writing. Her character and her actions did not follow the normal patterns that were associated with fifteenth century queens and noblewomen. Margaret and her contemporaries were expected to know how to ride and to hunt, dance, sing and recite poetry, and to attend military demonstrations in peacetime only, dressed in their finest clothing.<sup>48</sup> While Margaret's education and ancestry ensured that she was capable of doing all of these things, the circumstances of her life in England and her own strength of character effectively removed any satisfaction that she may have derived from playing the part of a noblewoman.

In 1444, the year that Margaret arrived in England, her new country had serious political and economic problems. The Hundred Years' War with France had only recently been concluded and feelings against France ran high in England. Henry was not the military leader that his father had been and England lost most of the French territory that it gained under the elder Henry. The War took a heavy economic toll as well. The loss of revenue from the French land combined with the enormous cost of feeding,

clothing, and arming men to fight in the War left many estates impoverished and the treasury empty. Had France been able to launch an invasion of England, Henry would not have had the money to defend the crown.<sup>49</sup>

The politics and economics of the War were reflected in the civil conditions in the fifteenth century. Six years after Margaret's arrival, the Jack Cade Rebellion indicated that internal problems were reaching a state of revolution. In the north of England, the traditional home of the greediest magnates, preparations were made to seize control of the throne in an effort to secure the political power that would enable them to expand their land ownership into the south. Also, in 1447, the Duke of Gloucester, the most powerful northern magnate, was called before the throne to explain his slanderous linking of the queen's name with that of Suffolk. He was arrested after his audience and three nights later, he died. An immediate cry of "Murder" was followed by the accusation that Margaret and Anjou had poisoned him.<sup>50</sup> Thus did the early years of Margaret's marriage pass into what later historians called the Wars of the Roses. Because the greater part of Margaret's life was consumed with the civil war, most of her life history derives from her actions during that time. Margaret's prominence in the historical record was assured when she began exercising her will and her ambition in the face of her husband's inability or unwillingness to rule. Although England had an institutionally strong government in the late middle ages, it was also rife with unrest. The power of the government lay in the person of the king, a difficult situation to handle when that person, Henry VI, had a nervous breakdown in 1453.<sup>51</sup> According to witness accounts, the king had simply retreated into his own mind. He had to be fed and dressed, but more importantly, he lost the power of speech, and Margaret was unable to use her husband as a political tool.

Richard of Gloucester, the son of the man whom Margaret and Suffolk were accused of poisoning, became the Lord Protector of the kingdom. Richard already felt that he had a claim to the throne through Edmund Crouchback. In fact, the legitimacy of the Plantagenet claim to the throne had been in dispute in certain quarters since the reign of Henry IV. As can be expected, the state of affairs was uncomfortable for Margaret at best and dangerous at worst. Unpopular with the people because of her nationality, politically suspect because of her attempts to resolve problems with France diplomatically, and married to a man who could not even speak in her defense, Margaret spent some months in virtual seclusion, waiting for her husband's mind to return to his body. She did not even have the comfort of her old ally Suffolk; he had been executed by Gloucester's men in 1450.<sup>52</sup> Further, she was pregnant with a son, the future heir to a throne that was coveted by Gloucester.

In January 1455, Henry appeared to make a full recovery. Margaret, however, chose to keep his recovery secret that was revealed to only a few close friends. She planned to remove the Protector from power and her plan was admirable for its simplicity and effectiveness. Later that winter, without warning, Henry walked into parliament. He thanked Gloucester for taking care of the country and he wished him well on his return to the north. There was nothing for the Protector to do but to accept the king's thanks and say farewell.<sup>53</sup> One man among the members of parliament did not accept Henry's return. The Earl of Warwick, the kingmaker, and Margaret of Anjou emerged as the real leaders in the fight for the throne.

The true force of Margaret's character began to show itself. Before the birth of her son, Margaret had been protective of Henry. Different reasons can be offered for the

reversal of traditional medieval roles. Two are cited earlier in this paper: Henry's incompetence as a ruler and Margaret's mother Isabel as a role model for her daughter. The other reasons are admittedly speculative. Perhaps Margaret, even before the marriage took place, saw in Henry a chance to obtain the power and prestige that were integral to the most consolidated throne in Europe. Certainly, there were many other suitors for her hand, including the Duke of Burgundy's nephew.<sup>54</sup> She was even considered as a candidate for marriage with Fredrick of Hapsburg. But the emperor's power was not centralized. When Margaret assumed the title of Queen in England, she also assumed at least a share in the control of the most institutionalized nobility in Europe. It is not difficult for the historian to infer that when she realized that Henry was an enfeebled ruler, her ambitious mind began to calculate the ways in which she could secure the power of the English monarchy for herself.

Another possible explanation for her actions may be that she truly adopted England as her country and she tried to ensure that order was maintained within the government. Certainly, the idea of a protectorate was foreign to medieval politics when the king had reached his majority and therefore ruled by divine right.<sup>55</sup> For Margaret, the deviation from the norm of medieval kingship might have been sufficient grounds to lay plans for Gloucester's humiliation.

Margaret's protective focus shifted to her son after his birth in 1453. While maternal love was almost certainly an adequate reason for this shift, Margaret had another reason to keep her son safe. Like most royal mothers, Margaret wanted to ensure that her son's dynasty would be strong and intact when he was old enough to rule. But Margaret was not content with a throne for her son. She also wanted to destroy anyone who threatened



the dynasty. This would satisfy her ambition on multiple levels. First, she would have the satisfaction of ruining anyone who had tried to ruin her. Then, she would be in control of the government, for all practical purposes, until Edward reached his majority. Finally, she would know that the greedy and powerful nobles were doomed to be ruled by her family for at least another generation.<sup>56</sup> It is impossible to underrate the scope of Margaret's ambition. She sought to satisfy it in three areas; redress for past grievances, political advantage in the present, and insurance for her agenda to be continued in the future. Whether or not her ambitious agenda is admirable cannot be decided in twentieth century terms. In her own era, Margaret was a better political strategist than most of her male contemporaries.

The Wars of the Roses and Margaret of Anjou are inseparable in historiography. The first Battle of St. Albans in 1455 was arguably the beginning of the first English civil war.<sup>57</sup> Richard of York was the victor and the second protectorate was established. Margaret and her family were effectively left in limbo; technically they were the royal family but the power of the state was in the hands of the northeast magnates with Richard at their head. Margaret was outside the circle for a short period of time, however. Richard was in a tenuous position. The northern gentry were a fractious group, and they failed to support Richard's position.

The second protectorate was short-lived and once again, Henry was in the sole position of authority. There is every indication that Henry wanted to reconcile the government with the northeastern forces. For example, he offered a lieutenancy to Richard that would give him more power than he had previously enjoyed as a magnate but less than the power he had as a protector. But Margaret regarded York as a threat to

the crown and she made efforts to block the appointment.<sup>58</sup> Eventually the division at court led to another outbreak of fighting.

Margaret and the Earl of Warwick battles in the second round of the civil wars. It proved to be a fateful encounter for both of them. While Margaret won some of the earlier battles at Ludlow and later, at Wakefield, the Yorkist forces eventually prevailed at Towton on March 29, 1461. Edward, the Earl of March, led his fighters to victory. Warwick, the new king's cousin, won the war against Margaret.

It is not possible to discuss the life of Margaret of Anjou without discussing the Wars of the Roses and their antecedents. Contemporary gossip suggested that Margaret was in fact a spy for the French government. Her enemies cited the volume of her correspondence to the French court when she claimed to be working for a diplomatic resolution to hostilities.<sup>59</sup> If Margaret did spy for France, it is certain that she did so in her own interest. Margaret was an ambitious and intelligent woman who was able to use the civil unrest, generated in large part by her husband Henry's inability to rule, to pursue her own goals. While it is difficult to ascribe motive from a twentieth century perspective, some of the queen's actions reveal her nature. Her eagerness to revenge Suffolk's death and the barbarity she displayed with Gloucester's head demonstrated a lack of control over her impulses combined with her use of personal charm only when she wanted to achieve her own political ends.<sup>60</sup> Her apparent early affection for her husband Henry eroded over time until, in the words of Charles Ross, "He became a useful political vegetable."<sup>61</sup> Margaret used her hapless spouse as an excuse for engaging in the second Battle of St. Albans; her victory over Warwick temporarily erased the

validity of the Yorkist regime and set the stage for the largest set-piece battle of the Wars at Towton that proved to be the end of the Plantagenet rule.

Margaret of Anjou spent three years in the Tower of London. Henry died there; he is generally thought to have been poisoned at Edward IV's behest. The royal couple was housed in separate cells. Phillipe Erlanger provides a touching scenario wherein the ex-rulers meet and wish each other well until they meet in heaven.<sup>62</sup> There must not have been anything more to say to one another. Their son Edward was dead, a casualty at Towton. The new king was not known for his charity; therefore, the Plantagenets were almost certain to die in the Tower.

Margaret was ransomed by France but at a tremendous personal cost. She had to cede all her property to the government and she spent the rest of her life on the estate of a family friend, dying before age fifty.

The character and actions of Margaret of Anjou in the fifteenth century represented the complexity and unrest which plagued England in that era. Although her political cunning and battlefield barbarity might appear brutal and unseemly to twentieth century historians, Margaret was simply adopting the methods which the magnates used to achieve and to retain power. The throne of England was open to anyone who was strong enough to claim it and Margaret took up the challenge first for her husband, then for herself, and then for her son. Margaret failed to reach her goals. Her signature on the papers ceding her property to the French government are perhaps the most poignant testimony to the loser's fate in fifteenth century politics. She wrote, "Ego, Margarita, olim in regno maritata. . ."<sup>63</sup>

*Margaret Beaufort*

No history of the fifteenth century in England would be complete without the life story of Margaret Beaufort. She was a politician, landowner, patron, and benefactress.<sup>64</sup> Although she demonstrated acute political skills as noted in the introduction to this paper, historians traditionally emphasize her cultural patronage. But Lady Margaret did much more than endow colleges and donate art to churches. She was the mother and the grandmother of one of England's most powerful dynasties, the Tudors, not as much by virtue of her ability to give birth as by her extraordinary feelings for her family's place in England.

Lady Margaret survived the turmoil of the second half of the century. Her various marriages placed her on both sides of the conflict for royal power which was not unusual in England at that time. Unlike Margaret of Anjou, however, Lady Margaret did not pursue a political agenda for obvious personal gain. Her work in the political world was subtle and therefore, subject to different forms of historical interpretation.

Margaret Beaufort thrived despite the social and political upheavals of the fifteenth century. Survival would have been an impressive accomplishment if her family ties are considered. Margaret was related to the houses of both Lancaster and York. She descended from John of Gaunt.<sup>65</sup> Her first marriage brought her into the Tudor family and her fourth marriage, to Lord Stanley, allied her with the Yorkists. Early in her life, she demonstrated remarkable political acumen when she decided to take her infant son Henry to Wales. Jasper Tudor, Margaret's late husband's brother, sheltered them in a

fortified castle. Her ability to predict the political future was further demonstrated when she sent her son to safety in 1471, just before the final overthrow of the Lancastrians.

The dynamic and politically<sup>66</sup> active side of Lady Margaret has always been submerged under historical images of the lady as a pious benefactress. In part, this is due to the writings of the historians and poets in the Romantic era. Thomas Baker, the historian of St. John's College at Cambridge, was naturally sympathetic to his benefactress and he praised her piety although he lived in an anti-papist climate. The poet Wordsworth enhanced her reputation by portraying her saintliness in verse.<sup>67</sup>

Margaret was a devout Catholic. She wrote that her highest ambition was, "The imitation and the following of the blessed life of our most merciful Saviour Christ."<sup>68</sup>

But Margaret, for all her documented religious devotion, had both feet firmly planted in earthly ambition as well. Sir George Buck, a seventeenth century historian, claimed that Margaret used the Duke of Buckingham, her nephew, as a tool to overthrow Richard III and gain the throne for her son. He also claimed that Margaret used sorcery and poison to bring about the deaths of the princes in the Tower.<sup>69</sup> Buck was not the first antiquarian to accuse Margaret of sorcery; Francis Bacon used the term "magic arts" to describe Margaret's political maneuvers. It was Margaret's natural intelligence, however, combined with the money to buy influence, that enabled her to attain a level of power that was unrivaled by any other woman of her time, including Margaret of Anjou.

Consider Lady Margaret's founding of two colleges at Cambridge. The Renaissance was slow in coming to England and in fact, it was not until long after the death of Henry VII that the effects of the Renaissance could be seen in the English people. But through Margaret, acting as the king's mother, founding new institutions of higher learning

became fashionable. These foundations produced some of the most noted English humanists, among them Grocyn and Colet.<sup>70</sup> Margaret was also an expert on court ceremony. This proved to be a valuable asset to Henry who was bent on bringing the English court up to the standards of other European courts in hopes of restoring the monarchy to its former institutional strength. There is ample evidence to suggest that Margaret retained considerable influence at court; most of the guest lists for ceremonies include the king's mother and her name follows only the names of her son and his wife.<sup>71</sup> The public profile that Margaret enjoyed at court was a visible sign of the respect accorded to her by her son.

Lady Margaret, on her part, loved her son until his death in 1507. In a letter to Henry, dated 1501, she wrote, "I wish you my very joy, as I oft shewed, and I fortune to get this or any part thereof, there shall be neither that or any good that I have, but it shall be yours and at your commandment." <sup>72</sup>

Margaret's influence and affection were not limited to the political and maternal spheres, however. She was also a very wealthy woman in her own right. She inherited a sizeable estate from her father and her first marriage brought her land in Wales. But it was during the Wars of the Roses that Margaret entered the realm of magnificent wealth. After the Yorkist victory at Towton in 1461, her second husband, Lord Stafford, made peace with the new regime and was able to obtain clauses protecting his wife's property. This was important to Henry Stafford as he was largely dependent on his wife's income. After Stafford's death, Margaret became even wealthier because her late husband left her the lands that had been bequeathed to him by his father. When she married Stanley, she married into large midland and Welsh property. There is some evidence that she was

active in her husband's affairs because her name appears in the legal records as an arbiter in some of the Lancastrian land disputes.<sup>73</sup>

By 1485, the year that Henry won at Bosworth Field, Lady Margaret was engaging in her own estate management. As king, her son declared Margaret a *femme sole*, a status normally accorded to widows in medieval England.<sup>74</sup> The new status freed Margaret to develop her own system of estate management since all the income from her property would be paid to her directly. Further, she could sue in any number of legal actions and draw up her own will as many times as she wanted to. The change in her legal status was unprecedented by an aristocratic woman. The king's mother was now a powerful landowner in her own right, entrusted with major wardships, and able to act as arbiter in local disputes.<sup>75</sup>

Most of this discussion has centered on Lady Margaret Beaufort's accomplishments. Historians should naturally be curious about the character of a person who rose from self-imposed exile in Wales to become the mother of the king of England and a respected and sometimes feared figure in her own century and beyond. Different histories offer different characterizations of Lady Margaret. Buck concedes that she was subtle and politic and exerted a malign influence in her efforts to realize her personal ambitions. This was not an unusual assessment for a seventeenth century historian to make; overt political activity was equated with women's wiles.<sup>76</sup> An early Tudor historian, Polydore Vergil, decried her constant political interference, describing her as having, "the spirit of a man and the malice of a woman."<sup>77</sup> Vergil claimed that he based his observation on Henry's obsession with her "great malice".

Later historians were kinder. Baker wrote his history as an act of piety toward his benefactress. In his introduction he wrote, “I am amazed that amongst so many hundreds, I may say thousands, as have eat her bread, no grateful hand has been found to do her right.”<sup>78</sup> Baker saw Lady Margaret’s beneficence as proof of her sanctity. He also stressed her humility, a characteristic that was brought out in accounts of her early life. Caroline Halstead, the Victorian antiquarian, provides solid evidence of Margaret’s humility. She recounts a story from Margaret’s childhood. At the age of nine years, she had a dream in which she saw and talked to Saint Nicholas. The Saint advised her to marry Edmund Tudor. Upon awakening the next morning, she told her parents, who concluded that the supernatural omen was sufficient motive for the marriage.<sup>79</sup> There is, however, an unintentional, on the part of Halstead, indication of Margaret’s ability to maneuver events to fit her own agenda. Before the appearance of the dream saint, Edmund Tudor was not considered worthy of Margaret’s hand. But Margaret wanted him as her husband and as Halstead wrote, “She nevertheless had sufficient discernment to prefer enriching her noble kinsman Ap Tudor, rather than to gratify the ambitious and overbearing minister.”<sup>80</sup> It should be noted that the favored candidate for marriage to Margaret was John De La Pole, nephew to the avid Duke of Suffolk, who was politically allied with Margaret of Anjou.

In any age, Lady Margaret would have made history. Her contributions to fifteenth century English society cannot be overlooked or underestimated. In fact, her social concerns, especially in education, led an early twentieth century historian to remark that one could easily see her running a Red Cross canteen.<sup>81</sup> Margaret’s self-appointed position as the keeper of royal customs also enhanced the monarchy, helping Henry to build a



strong court from the ruins of the old government. While it can be argued that Lady Margaret had as much ambition as Margaret of Anjou, her desire for revenge was channeled in more productive directions. For example, if she were guilty of instigating rebellion against Richard III, it would be another demonstration of her political acumen. It is possible that the conspiracy was fact; Richard's position was resented by many English people. Margaret Beaufort could trace her lineage in the ranks of English kings and perhaps, the tenuous hold that Richard had on the throne fired her ambitions for her only child.

Margaret Beaufort was an integral part of fifteenth century English history. Through her bloodline and her character, she provided England with one of its greatest dynasties. She helped to bring humanism to her country and she helped the English court to gain a measure of pomp and refinement that was already a part of other European courts. She was a landowner in an age when married women's property was at the disposal of their husbands, and she endowed colleges and churches with some of the wealth that she accrued.

### *Conclusions*

Earlier in this paper, I proposed that histories of fifteenth century England are dominated by the roles that men played in shaping the future of the country during that pivotal era. Recent research has proven that women were also an integral part of that history and their impact extends beyond their places in time. This is not, however, an attempt to create a discussion from a twentieth century perspective.

Margery Kempe, Margaret Paston, Margaret of Anjou, and Margaret Beaufort were fifteenth century people whose actions were the results of the particular era in which they lived. Attempts have been made to interpret their lives using modern models and the results have been uneven at best. For example, Margery Kempe's vocation is as problematic today as it was at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Her book is as open to interpretation as is any other piece of literature from any other period in history. But the question of her vocation is only complicated by the application of feminist theory. Her tears, easily the most controversial aspect of her religious expression, are alternately labeled as 'strategic', a 'gift that has the potential to disrupt logocentric discourse', or that her 'hysteria' was a means of rebellion against a patriarchal system.<sup>82</sup> These theories eliminate Margery's religious calling and reduce her version of Christianity to a medieval form of menopause. Historians derive more value from the acceptance of Margery's contributions to the historical record of an era that is noted for its dearth of primary resources. As Mr. Chambers said in the introduction to his book, "We can hardly deny that students of English literature and of English history have every reason to be grateful to her. A full discussion of the light she throws would fill a book at least as long as her own."<sup>83</sup>

Margaret Paston preserved the daily life of the northeastern gentry during the civil disruptions in the middle of the century. Her courage and tenacity are indicative of the character of the late medieval woman and provide us with a contemporary window into the past.

Margaret of Anjou's life suffers when it is taken out of context. Charles Ross said that , "Being French, she had an exalted view of royalty."<sup>84</sup> Ross is a modern British

historian who can be expected to demonstrate a certain prejudice against members of the French nation. But Ross has overlooked the fact that Margaret's ambition was aimed at the throne of England. She wanted to secure the kingdom first for her husband, and then later, her son. There is no indication that her view of royalty was more exalted than that of any other member of the English nobility in the fifteenth century. The fact that the English monarchy was the most institutional monarchy in late medieval Europe demonstrates the power that the king enjoyed. While the magnates were also powerful, they deferred to the right of the king to rule. Gloucester's abdication of the protectorate clearly shows the willingness of the nobility to acknowledge and obey the royal will.

Finally, Margaret Beaufort preserved the Tudor dynasty and encouraged the growth of humanism in England. Her close attention to ceremony and custom helped to strengthen the monarchy and her contributions to colleges and churches have prolonged her reputation as a pious and generous woman long past the fifteenth century.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Ross. The Wars of the Roses. London: Thames and Hudson, 1976, p.60

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- <sup>14</sup> Chambers, p. 3
- <sup>15</sup> Chambers, pp.3-4
- <sup>16</sup> Chambers, p. 5
- <sup>17</sup> Chambers, p.148
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- <sup>19</sup> Chambers, p. 5
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- <sup>22</sup> Chambers, p. 56
- <sup>23</sup> Chambers, p. 152
- <sup>24</sup> Wilson, p. 88
- <sup>25</sup> Windeatt, p. 65
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- <sup>27</sup> Chambers, p. 66
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- <sup>31</sup> Davis, p. 94
- <sup>32</sup> Davis, p. 118
- <sup>33</sup> Barber, p. 77
- <sup>34</sup> Barber, p.108
- <sup>35</sup> Barber, p. 66
- <sup>36</sup> Barber, p. 35
- <sup>37</sup> Barber, p. 37
- <sup>38</sup> Davies, p. 94
- <sup>39</sup> Davies, p. 95
- <sup>40</sup> Davis, p. 202
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- <sup>44</sup> Ross, p. 26
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- <sup>46</sup> R. L. Storey. The End of the House of Lancaster. London: Barrie and Rockcliff, 1966, p. 102
- <sup>47</sup> Erlanger, p. 67
- <sup>48</sup> Shahr, pp. 152-153
- <sup>49</sup> Ross, p. 26
- <sup>50</sup> Erlanger, p. 102

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- <sup>51</sup> Barber, p. 78  
<sup>52</sup> Erlanger, p. 115  
<sup>53</sup> Ellanger, p. 153  
<sup>54</sup> Erlanger, p. 54  
<sup>55</sup> Watts, p. 57  
<sup>56</sup> Storey, p. 201  
<sup>57</sup> J. R. Lander. The Wars of the Roses. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966, p. 23  
<sup>58</sup> Storey, p. 177  
<sup>59</sup> Erlanger, p. 107  
<sup>60</sup> Erlanger, p. 160  
<sup>61</sup> Ross, p. 89  
<sup>62</sup> Erlanger, p. 228  
<sup>63</sup> Erlanger, p. 240  
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<sup>67</sup> Jones, pp. 5-6  
<sup>68</sup> Halstead, p. 99  
<sup>69</sup> Jones, p. 2  
<sup>70</sup> Gladys Temperly. Henry VII. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1971, p. 306  
<sup>71</sup> Temperly, p. 389  
<sup>72</sup> Jones, pp. 206-207  
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<sup>79</sup> Halstead, p. 25  
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<sup>82</sup> McEntire, p. 122  
<sup>83</sup> Chambers, p. xx  
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