

## Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England

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**Author:**

Helen Maurer

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Joanna Laynesmith

Margaret of Anjou, unlike most medieval queens, has been the subject of many biographies over the centuries but Helen E. Maurer's feminist approach to the queen's political life offers a substantially new presentation of Henry VI's queen. It is a scholarly but very accessible work that challenges traditional interpretations of the Wars of the Roses and makes a valuable contribution to understandings of queenship in the later medieval period.

In the past two decades there has been a significant surge in interest in the study of medieval queenship. The role of intercession, the limitations of female authority, the potential for informal power, and perceptions of the ideal queen are all persistent themes of this scholarship upon which Maurer has drawn. Maurer argues effectively that Margaret has hitherto been judged according to masculine standards, judgements that fail to take into account the limitations placed upon her actions by her gender. The principal thesis of the book is that Margaret's response to the failure of her king's authority and the need to exercise some form of power on behalf of the Lancastrian dynasty was striking, not because it transgressed gender expectations, but for the extent to which the queen endeavoured to live up to them.

The book is essentially chronological in structure, divided into four sections - 'Expectations', 'Mediations', 'The Crisis of Kingship' and 'Queen's Rule?'. The introduction discusses medieval perceptions of the frailty of women, arguing that although women were denied authority, they were often allowed considerable power because they were encouraged to act as intercessors and as representatives of their menfolk. Maurer argues that queens often wielded less effective power than women a little lower in the social scale because as

queens they were expected to be exemplars of ideal feminine behaviour, 'more visible and hence more vulnerable to judgement than other women'.(p. 12) However, her sources for this assessment, primarily Christine de Pizan's *Book of the Treasure of the City of Ladies*, are all French and Maurer does not address the implications of the significant differences in French and English queenship in the fifteenth century. Moreover, a more cultural-historical analysis, assessing the pageantry of Margaret's first arrival in London and her 1456 arrival in Coventry, as well as the traditional rituals of coronation and childbirth and her legal status, would suggest that the expectations on English queens were more complex than Maurer's thesis allows - not merely higher than for other women but distinctly different. As L. O. Fradenburg has argued, there is a 'plasticity of gender in the field of sovereignty' that this book does not really address.<sup>(1)</sup> Nonetheless, Maurer's conclusion that Margaret's role in the Wars of the Roses cannot be understood without examining the limitations placed upon her by her gender is well-argued and sustained throughout the book.

Part One deals with the negotiations surrounding Margaret's arrival in England, the contentious surrender of Maine, and her motherhood. In contrast to most recent political historians of this period, Maurer argues that Margaret's role in the surrender of Maine was significant but that her actions reflect her commitment to the traditional queenly role of mediator and should not be seen as diplomatic meddling. The chapter on motherhood does not consider the practicalities of the role but discusses contemporary concerns about her initial failure to produce an heir and later allegations that Prince Edward was either a changeling or a bastard. The latter, Maurer argues, are closely connected with political events and reflect the complexities of Margaret's position as a woman being drawn into politics. The allegations either denied the queen's ability to 'do what a proper woman would do' - that is, produce children - or intimated that she had 'transgressed the boundaries of her proper place' through an extra-marital affair. In each case the allegations were also a commentary upon Margaret's political behaviour.

Part Two begins with a chapter on 'Business-as-Usual', which is primarily an assessment of the queen's surviving letters. Maurer convincingly rejects the assertions of earlier biographers that these are apolitical, contending that many involve mediation and intervention with political implications. While the original editor of these letters, Cecil Monro, asserted that many of the queen's attempts at intercession failed, Maurer argues that what is more important is that over half were written in response to an appeal to Margaret, which implies that the initiators expected Margaret's intervention to be effective. Maurer's very interesting analysis concludes that the one area in which action seemed to be more often entirely at Margaret's initiative was that of clerical preferment and that the things she was asked to do were not gender-specific. Maurer also shows that the letters reveal 'female networking within the system of intermediaries' (p. 60), who included in their number the duchesses of York and Somerset.

The next chapter is a study of Cade's Rebellion, focussing largely upon Margaret's role in the issuing of a pardon to the rebels. Maurer argues that this was an instance of Margaret's personal political influence, aimed both at undermining rebel unity and presenting herself as the ideal intermediary queen tempering the king's justice. Although Maurer admits to the complexities of the practice of intercession in which the queen's name might be invoked merely to allow the king to save face, her arguments are a little unsatisfactory here. She does not fully examine how this model works when, as on this occasion, the king had fled the scene. Nor does she address the fact that no contemporary chronicler seems to have been aware of the queen's supposed role at this point: which leaves the question of whom the language of Margaret's intercession was intended to impress unanswered.

Part Three examines the period 1453-6, characterized as the 'political education of Margaret of Anjou'. Maurer argues that the enmity between Margaret and the duke of York has been habitually assumed to have been of long duration, but that the evidence of the queen's relations with York prior to the first battle of St Albans indicates that this was not the case. Maurer's important study of Margaret's gift-giving indicates that the queen was careful to signal that she favoured Somerset and York equally in the early 1450s and that Somerset only began to rise in her favour after he had increased his influence with the king. Maurer argues persuasively that this calls for a reevaluation of events following Henry VI's mental collapse in 1453. In the light of Margaret Howell's recent work on Eleanor of Provence <sup>(2)</sup>, Maurer suggests that Margaret's bid for regency was not as novel as has usually been argued. She depicts Margaret attempting to create a royal

centre of authority that would offer greater stability than either York or Somerset could do, but contends that it was the limitations of her gender that told against Margaret: wives could only act on their husbands' behalf, as Eleanor of Provence had done in Henry III's absence, if the husband was 'cognizant and capable of the authority and will that are to be represented'. (quoted on p. 109) Tellingly, the post of Protector, which was established in 1454 (as it had been for Henry VI's minority), assumed a military role that inevitably prevented a woman from occupying the position whereas a regency would have had less exclusive implications.

Margaret seems to have accepted York's protectorate and Maurer observes that there is no evidence that she was responsible either for Somerset's release or York's exclusion from power on Henry VI's recovery. Maurer argues that after the protectorate, Margaret's role as representative of her dynasty had become redundant and that she stepped back out of the political frame. However, following the first battle of St Albans, Maurer asserts that the queen must have perceived York and his associates as a threat to her husband's authority and that the enmity began at this time, possibly increased by a sense of betrayal following her earlier efforts to signal friendship.

Part Four, the longest section of the book, examines the final years of Lancastrian kingship and Margaret's efforts to exercise power in her family's interest despite her lack of formal authority. In a fascinating exploration of the workings of power, Maurer asserts that Margaret's approach was always to represent herself 'as subordinate and adjunct while asserting the king's authority', but that such a position was inevitably short-term, because it 'denied her a more lasting authority and made her vulnerable to charges of transgression when the extent and nature of her activities attracted notice'. (p. 127) Maurer argues here that Margaret was instrumental in undermining York's second protectorate but, having driven him from power, was once again without a role herself and therefore retreated from the centre of power by moving out to her midland estates. However, with Henry's arrival in the Midlands later in the year, she was able to begin to exercise indirect rule on her family's behalf, influencing the replacement of the Keeper of the Privy Seal, the Treasurer and the Chancellor and being given institutional influence through her son's newly-appointed council. Maurer suggests that by appealing always to the authority of her husband or son to obscure the extent of her actual power, Margaret was able to push at the 'porous boundaries' of 'right order'. (p. 139)

Maurer contends that the gap between the image and reality of Margaret's power was especially evident in the rituals associated with her arrival and departure from Coventry on occasions in 1456 and 1457. In September 1456 the queen was greeted by a series of pageants that referred to her in the context of traditional ideals of womanhood: the Virgin Mary, a queen served by chivalric heroes, and her name saint, Margaret. For Maurer this indicates Margaret's self-association with acceptable power relationships. However, as she mentions briefly in a footnote, the king himself was already present in Coventry and he had not been so welcomed. Maurer does not address the implications of this unprecedented situation or the prominence in the pageant scripts of themes and images of kingship, that again suggest a more complex notion of gender and sovereignty than Maurer allows. Her analysis of Margaret's controversial departure from Coventry following the 1457 council is, however, more convincing.

Maurer argues that Margaret's aims in the later 1450s were twofold - to exercise practical power drawing on and reasserting the king's authority and to nullify the threat posed by York and the Nevilles, drawing them back into the Lancastrian polity. The second aspect is explored in a fascinating chapter, focussing primarily upon the Loveday procession of 1458, which has usually been dismissed as 'a fairly silly exercise'. (p. 151) This, Maurer asserts persuasively, was significant and meaningful at the time, despite its ultimate failure. Because Margaret, as a woman with no official political role, could not be party to the formal settlement of recompense for St Albans, the Loveday procession was a crucial opportunity to involve her in the demonstrations of reconciliation that both she and the king desired. The occasion did imply some 'mixed and murky' degree of role reversal between king and queen in terms of prayer and intercession, although it did not challenge the king as source of authority. Initially it strengthened Margaret's position because York acknowledged her informal exercise of power.

In analysing 'The Road to War' which followed the failed reconciliation attempts, Maurer challenges the

accuracy of the single source, Benet's Chronicle, which claims Margaret advised a great council at Coventry to indict the Yorkist lords in the summer of 1459 - thereby highlighting the difficulties involved in judging Margaret's actual role in events from the primarily Yorkist accounts that survive. Maurer maintains that, following Henry VI's captivity after the battle of Northampton, Margaret at last emerged as the publicly-acknowledged leader of the Lancastrian party, but that there is no way of knowing if she was responsible for the earl of Northumberland's decision to raise the army that was ultimately to defeat York at Wakefield during her absence in Scotland. Maurer suggests that, although Margaret rightly recognised the need to act immediately to capitalise upon the Lancastrian victory, being forced to travel south in winter probably made provisioning difficult, thereby leading to the pillaging which so damaged her army's reputation and her own. After victory at the second battle of St Albans, Maurer asserts that Margaret was again without a public role and stepped out of the political frame. This point is perhaps debatable since the City of London's decision to send three ladies to negotiate suggests that they still considered Margaret to be the central decision-maker. Various explanations for the failure after St Albans are mentioned but none explicitly favoured. Maurer argues that the attainder against Margaret in the first Yorkist parliament identified her as their principal opponent, using gender-determined language to depict her crimes: 'a "contrary" woman, guilty of sexual transgression and of faithless - female? - mutability'. (p. 202)

The conclusion deals very briefly with the last two decades of Margaret's life, rehearsing the generally-accepted version of events up to 1471. The sources for her fate after 1471 are contradictory and unclear, but Maurer opts for the interpretation that a brief period of confinement was followed by four years in the custody of Alice Chaucer, duchess of Suffolk, prior to her return to France, 'ransomed' by Louis XI.

There is much more that might be said about Margaret's queenship. The management of her household and her properties or her religious interests, for instance, are scarcely mentioned but have considerable political significance. However, the narrow focus of this book enables Maurer to tell a very readable and engaging story and to concentrate the reader's attention on the central arguments of the limitations of Margaret's power and the circumspection of her behaviour. This makes it a book that will be appreciated by both general readers and scholars alike. Such a significant (and long overdue) reappraisal of one of the key figures of the Wars of the Roses must be welcomed by all historians of both fifteenth-century politics and gender studies in the later middle ages.

## Notes

1. L. O. Fradenburg, 'Introduction: Rethinking Queenship', in Fradenburg ed., *Women and Sovereignty. Conference Papers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pp. 1-13.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. M. Howell, *Eleanor of Provence: Queenship in Thirteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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