

Margaret of Anjou: The Literary History of an Aberrant Woman Warrior

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Margaret of Anjou has always had a bad reputation among the warrior women of fact and fiction. Joan of Arc, her peasant contemporary, who was also denounced in her own lifetime, was consecrated by the popular imagination soon after her death and has remained a universal hero and martyr ever since, achieving official sainthood nearly five centuries later. Margaret remained the epitome of unwomanly evil as late as the Romantic period. This paper is an attempt to illustrate and account for her persistent unpopularity, especially in an age of apparent libertarianism.

Born in 1429, Margaret was, from the age of sixteen, wife of the ineffective and at times catatonic King Henry VI. Recent historical studies of her life suggest that she was an unwilling actor on the political stage who would have been much happier living out the traditional role of king's consort (Maurer 210; Laynesmith 166, 169). However, during the Wars of the Roses she was the *de facto* leader of the Lancastrians and, though she never actually took part in combat, she has traditionally been depicted as a warrior queen, riding armed into the battles of Wakefield and Tewkesbury. Her very active roles in this bloody succession conflict (both in reality and in fiction) may seem unusual, but even before the reigning Tudor queens of England women often ruled as regents in Europe – as did Margaret's own mother, Isabelle of Lorraine, and grandmother, Yolande of Aragon (Maurer 23; Laynesmith 161). Moreover, in literature, warrior women characters

such as Boiardo's Marfisa have been popular from the very earliest of modern times. Not all of these are wholly fictional. Some, like Queen Philippa in *Edward III*, are based on historical figures..

However, Margaret's traditional depiction as a soldier queen cannot be solely responsible for her prevailing unpopularity. According to Patricia-Ann Lee (199–210), Margaret's literary fate was probably determined by Tudor historians such as Robert Fabyan, Polydore Vergil, Grafton, Hall, Hakluyt and Holinshed, all of whom tended to take the Yorkist side in their chronicles. (Some even repeated hostile propaganda that had circulated during Margaret's lifetime, for example, the rumour that her son Edward was illegitimate.) The Yorkists had made the most of the fact that, in England, queens were not protected by the law that forbade speaking against the king. From Fabyan's belief that the loss of French territories was Margaret's fault, through Polydore Vergil's opinion that her 'manly qualities' coupled with womanly mutability were fatal to the Lancastrian cause, it was but a short step to Hall's vision of monstrosity: a 'manly woman, usyng to rule and not to be ruled', preparing 'to plucke the sword of auctoritie out of [the king and kingdom's] hands' (Lee 192–99). Lee also observes that Queen Elizabeth was not perturbed by this demonization of a queen's power because she herself had been 'so successful in turning her [own] femininity to positive purposes, or in surmounting it to wield a kind of androgynous power, that [Shakespeare's] depiction of Queen Margaret posed no practical threat' (217).

These historians, particularly Holinshed, provided the source of Shakespeare's history plays, four of which depict Margaret. In *1 Henry VI* she is merely the wrong choice of wife for the king, but by *2 Henry VI* she is already an adulteress and an ambitious and ruthless intriguer. In *3 Henry VI* she reaches her apogee of power and cruelty when, after successfully conquering Richard of York at Wakefield, she mocks and torments him before stabbing him to death. She reappears in *Richard III* as a hateful harridan filled with *schadenfreude*, cursing Richard and teaching other

women how to curse. We must concede that Queen Margaret, at least in the final two plays of this tetralogy, is a great force for other characters to contend with and a powerful presence on the theatre's stage. If she is not heroic she becomes at least a terrifying figure – of command and brutality in *3 Henry VI* and of malevolent soothsaying in *Richard III*. She is a force of evil – and her evil is precisely consequent on her gender. Throughout these Shakespearean representations runs the motif of perversion: perversion of a woman's nature, which should be 'soft, mild, pitiful and flexible' into something so 'abominable' that only animal imagery, the 'wolf', the 'adder' and the 'tiger', can adequately represent it (*3 Henry VI* I iv 112–69). And this perversion includes corruption of that specially feminine virtue, chastity. As Phyllis Rackin observes,

The same qualities that make Margaret 'unwomanly' also associate her with a specifically female form of wickedness. 'How ill-beseeming is it in thy sex', York protests, 'to triumph like an Amazonian trull' (*3 Henry VI* [I iv 113–14]). Here, as in Shakespeare's emphasis on Margaret's adulterous affair with Suffolk, the masculinity of the female warrior is linked with the sexual promiscuity of the harlot. The same associations color Shakespeare's characterization of Joan, who is both the leader of the Dolphin's army and his 'trull' ([II ii 27]) (Rackin 6; see also MacDonald 52–53).

Thomas Heywood may be the only Renaissance commentator to offer any alternative to this view of Margaret. Including her among his *Nine the Most Worthy Women of the World* (1640), he presents as praiseworthy her 'heroic spirit', her 'magnanimity' and even her usurpation of her husband's 'Sword and Scepter' (Heywood 152, 180). The 'Nine Worthies' tradition, originating in the Middle Ages, had originally featured warlike heroes such as Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great and Charlemagne. When, fairly early

in the tradition, collections of ‘Nine Women Worthies’ were invented as a counterweight to these masculine heroes, they too were heroic and warlike figures (Waith 225; Warner 207). According to Kathryn Schwartz, Heywood’s book, though written during the reign of James I, is an expression of ‘Elizabethan nostalgia’ (20). As is conventional in the ‘Nine Worthies’ series, all the women that it features, including Camilla, Boadicea and Penthesilea, are Amazonian heroines, and the Amazon was at this time of masculine reign reminiscent of Queen Elizabeth, who had been a more popular monarch than the Scottish James (Crawford 358). Heywood extols his warlike women for being ‘Heroyicke Ladies’, ‘Viragoes’, possessed of ‘Masculine Spirits’ and capable of ‘those brave and Martial Enterprises, which belong to the honour of men’ (37). However, even in this company, Margaret is not quite as attractive a warrior woman as others. Heywood does not fail to include the usual complaints against her: that she brought ill-fortune to Henry because he had previously been betrothed to the daughter of the Earl of Armagnac; that she was the cause of England’s relinquishment of the French provinces of Maine and Anjou; that she made a favourite of the Marquess of Suffolk; that she helped to incite war with York, crowned him with a paper diadem, ‘taunted’ him and ‘caused him to be slaine’ after the Battle of Wakefield (Heywood 156–69). Thus even the one defender of her ‘manly’ or leadership qualities cannot tell her story without some taint of censure.

Shakespeare was enormously influential in the ensuing centuries – immeasurably more so than the historians – and this offers a simple explanation for the persistence of Margaret’s bad press. But the simple explanation just will not do when we compare her with Joan of Arc. In *I Henry VI*, Joan is the perverse virago, her evil nature signalled by her use of black magic. While Joan’s rehabilitation and idealization in France are fairly easy to understand, given the successful end of the Hundred Years’ War and the gradual growth of French national identity (Warner 185–254), the same causes cannot be traced in England, whose national identity has

since Joan's time always defined itself as decidedly not-French. However, by the late eighteenth century she was clearly a popular heroine in England, *pace* both Shakespeare and British nationalism. When, in a Covent Garden pantomime in 1793, the figure of Joan was carried off by devils on the first night, such an uproar ensued that the plot had to be revised and in subsequent performances she was ushered into paradise instead (Warner 242; Southey xxviii). This popular outburst of enthusiasm for the heroine of the French Hundred Years' War amazingly occurred in a year in which Britain was once again at war with France.

English admiration for Joan becomes less surprising, perhaps, when we consider the enormous popularity of ballads featuring warrior women at this time. According to Dianne Dugaw, who has collected over a hundred separate ballads of this type from both sides of the Atlantic (most of these possessing variants), these songs enjoyed great success, mainly among the lower classes, from 1600 to 1800 (1–3, 20–21). Like most popular genres, this one is formulaic. The heroine is young, beautiful and in love: she decides to follow her sweetheart to the wars, either at sea or on land; she becomes a very successful soldier or sailor, often rescuing her lover in the heat of battle; finally she removes her disguise and marries him with the acclaim of all the other characters – and often a medal for bravery as well. Variants have her going to war just because she feels like it and falling in love only later; occasionally she is left only with her military glory and no marriage at the end (Dugaw 41).

The popularity of these ballads peaked in the eighteenth century, probably lifting Joan's ratings by association. Joan was very young during her military career and is always depicted as beautiful; in some versions of her story a love interest is added (Southey 64–65; Warner 241); if one ignores the aftermath of the coronation at Rheims, her tale is immensely successful and resembles the ballad plot fairly closely.

Margaret, who could potentially be identified, as in Heywood, with the queenly Amazons of classical tradition, is out of her class here – and out of

her age-group. She was already a wife and mother at the beginning of the Wars of the Roses and in her forties by the Battle of Tewkesbury. If her life story ever included love – for Suffolk, or for Henry – she was past the romantic stage by the time the wars began. But, far worse for her popularity as a warrior heroine, she was eventually unsuccessful in all her efforts and, instead of dying heroically (preferably for love) at the time of her catastrophe, as occasionally happens in the later period of the ballad's decline, she lingered on for years after the demise of her husband, her son and her political hopes.

The Romantic Period is regarded as an age of revolutions – in thought more even than action. In the English literature of the time feminism crops up among the many challenges to the reigning patriarchy – though not in the dominant pattern, which is a masculine, Oedipal struggle between son and father, with its archetype in Satan's rebellion in *Paradise Lost*. Woman warriors, both fictional and historical, do occur, but not as commonly as one might expect. The most compelling of these is probably the fictional Cythna in Percy Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* (first appearing as *Laon and Cythna* in 1817), who leads a bloodless revolution against the tyrant Othman, but, unsurprisingly, Joan of Arc features almost as impressively among the historical heroines. Robert Southey's epic of 1793, named after her and tracing her career from her early calling to her triumphant crowning of the Dauphin in Rheims Cathedral, is a radical, anti-war, anti-establishment *tour de force*. Coleridge and de Quincey, as well as numerous French and German writers, also use her as a revolutionary symbol.

Margaret of Anjou was not as famous as Joan, and she appears in only one work by a canonical male Romantic writer. This is Walter Scott's novel, *Anne of Geierstein*, published in 1829, in which Margaret features as an exiled, ransomed and broken queen in France after the Lancastrian defeat at Tewkesbury and the death of her son and husband. Though haughty and showing the habit of power, she is impotent and frustrated and is not depicted as a warrior at all, not even in retrospect.

She appears more vitally at this time in poems by women, presumably because she was by reputation an English woman warrior. The fact that she was English only by adoption was something to be overlooked, since the warrior woman was a popular subject for poetry and English examples were somewhat rare. There was Boadicea/Boudicca, but, as Marilyn Gaul points out in a recent article, Roman Britain did not hold much appeal for the Romantics, especially in comparison with the great attraction of all things Mediaeval (15, 18). Specifically, Margaret appears as a character in three long narrative poems written by women in the second decade of the nineteenth century: Eliza S. Francis's *The Rival Roses* (1813), Margaret Holford's *Margaret of Anjou* (1816), and Cecilia Cooper's *The Battle of Tewkesbury* (1820).

Of these, only the last presents Margaret at all positively. *The Battle of Tewkesbury* is unashamedly Lancastrian in sentiment and it takes a tragic view of this last battle which finally established the Yorkist Edward IV as king of England. Cooper's narrator is obviously partisan to Henry VI's 'sacred rights' to the throne he occupied for over forty years and, in consequence, to his son Edward's 'birth-right' as heir-apparent to this throne (33). Margaret's military actions as defender of their rights must therefore be seen as part of the good fight for legitimacy and justice. But Cooper manages to fudge the warrior aspects of her character by presenting Margaret only at the last-ditch stage of her career. Thus, although Margaret rides into the battle with 'glitt'ring breast-plate', 'falchion' and 'bright burnish'd shield' and, although the narrator mentions that she has done so 'in twelve Battles' (28), Margaret essentially appears not so much as warrior as *mater dolorosa* to her son Edward, who is the real hero of the poem. In fact, despite being accused of 'ambitious fire' (18) in the opening lines, her actions in the poem are decidedly non-heroic. When she finds her troops failing, she flees the battlefield in the company of two monks, casting off her armour and weapons as she goes. Edward exhorts his troop to rescue her, crying 'Support my Mother! Rally round your Queen!' (27) but she is nowhere to be found.

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Later the Yorkists discover her ‘in her wand’ring’ and bring her ‘with spirits quite subdu’d’ to Tewkesbury where she learns the tragic fate of her son and husband (41). At this point, far from harbouring ambition,

She drank the dregs of mis’ry’s bitter cup,
And all her hopes, in this sad world, gave up.
(*The Battle of Tewkesbury* 42)

Having been ransomed, significantly by her father, she goes to France, where:

Secluded from the world, she humbly pray’d
For resignation, while on earth she stay’d;
But look’d, with fervent hope, for peace and rest
To that bright Sphere where all she’d lost were blest.
(*The Battle of Tewkesbury* 42–43)

Thus, despite the original ‘rightness’ of her cause, she is rebuked as a warrior and even as a free agent, forced by circumstance to embrace a woman’s place as property of her father and to live the rest of her life humbled and bereft of worldly hopes.

Holford’s *Margaret of Anjou* is a much longer, more ambitious work than *The Battle of Tewkesbury* and her Queen Margaret is a much more central character. Without a great deal of faithfulness to historical fact, the poem traces the later phase of the Wars of the Roses from the Battle of Hexham to the Battle of Tewkesbury. Although the narrator’s attention is taken up for significant stretches by a romance between Prince Edward and the mysterious and at first epicene Lady Geraldine, this does not undermine Margaret’s claim to be the main protagonist because she commands the power to destroy this relationship – even after the two have been married privately in the presence of her husband King Henry.

Holford's Margaret is a larger-than-life Satanic figure whose centrality and sheer *chutzpah* (as we might call it today) ensure the reader's absorption in her character and story. However, she is presented more as a Macbeth than as a Romantic rebel like Blake's Los, Byron's Manfred or Shelley's Prometheus. An audience may find Macbeth compelling but is nevertheless required to stand in judgement over him; in contrast, the reader of a Romantic text is often invited to suspend judgement and empathise to an extraordinary degree with the hero, rejecting with him, or revising, whole systems of thought and government.

Holford's narrator concedes to Margaret the virtues of 'dauntless[ness]', 'dignity', '[strength]', and 'majesty' (Book 1, line 5), but never mentions these features without admixture of such signs of hubris and cruelty as her 'awful mien', 'scornful brow', 'proud veins' or will to revenge:

She feeds, she feasts her eager eye
Upon her foeman's misery!
(*Margaret of Anjou* 1.1–20)

She is described as unwomanly, 'harbour[ing]' in her breast no 'female weakness' but instead the manly characteristics of 'stern resolve and purpose dire / And grim revenge's quenchless fire' (1.7). These features do not make her an integrated person, however (Johns-Putra 84), for she retains a 'woman's form', leading her to curse Nature for creating in her such an ill-mixed hybrid:

Ill did'st thou, Nature, to combine
With woman's form a soul like mine!
What heart in either grim array
Throbs to the charge with wilder beat!
What ear so loves the trumpet's bray
That bids contending thousands meet!

Whose thirst like mine, when blood of foes
Warm from the gasping fountain flows!
Whose nerves more firmly brac'd to dare!
Who loves like me to crush! who hates like me to spare!
(Margaret of Anjou 1.33)

But strangely, despite these Lady Macbeth-like declarations, this Margaret, even though she is more than once described as a 'warrior queen' (1.9, 1.30), does not actually take part in the battles that she orchestrates. As with some other female Romantic writers, for Holford the idea of a woman taking part in the brutal business of inflicting and receiving wounds may have been finally impossible to imagine or represent (see Deverell 23 and Cowley 41). Margaret in this poem arms herself, rides about on horseback and lectures her troops, but in the end hides in nearby woods when battles actually begin.

Margaret's single most striking exploit in this poem is the conquest (using her eyes only) of the ruffian Rudolph, a man of enormous physical strength, whom she encounters robbing the bodies on Hexham Field. Despite her complete helplessness as a woman alone, burdened with her wounded son, and despite Rudolph's clear intention of doing her harm, she gazes him down by the sheer conviction of her own superiority, until:

his vassal soul
Felt and obey'd the strange controul:
Trembling he stood, he knew not why,
Oppress'd beneath the sovereign's eye!
Oh, strife, sublime! – of issues glorious!
'Tis mind, majestic mind, o'er brutal strength victorious!
(Margaret of Anjou 2.15)

From this moment on, like a faithful dog, Rudolph is her and her son's devoted servant and protector. He dies at Tewkesbury warding off a 'death-stroke' intended for 'his Prince' (10.53).

This episode gives convincing evidence of Margaret's intrinsic mental power. It is potentially very seductive for a reader, who is invited to sympathise with a woman in danger and be deeply impressed with her self-rescue, but it is an isolated episode. Elsewhere we see Shakespeare's Margaret: a cruel intriguer, guilty (even before the poem's action begins) of adultery (1.7), the brutal murderer of York (8.6), sacrificer of her son's happiness and ruthless warlord of the Lancastrian faction. In addition to all the evils assigned to Shakespeare's Margaret (or Margarets), Holford confers on her character the devilry that Shakespeare attributes to his Joan of Arc. In Book 6, Margaret visits a witch who conjures evil spirits and, as in *Macbeth*, shows her a pageant of future events. Early in the visit, the 'sorceress' explicitly identifies Margaret as 'One who . . . from her birth, / Unflinching does [Satan's] work on earth' (6.22). Thus is Margaret made Satanic in this poem – not in the heroic masculine Romantic sense but in the patriarchal tradition that labels any woman who steps out of line as a witch or as being complicit with witches.

Francis's anonymously published *The Rival Roses* gives Margaret much less prominence. But, as Adeline Johns-Putra claims, 'Francis expounds much more explicitly than Holford does on the transgressive nature of female warriors' (89). The text is a complex romance involving a large number of characters, many of whose identity or birth is at first concealed. The Wars of the Roses provide a suitably chaotic background for the unravelling of identities and love affairs, and Margaret of Anjou is squarely blamed for these wars (3.28). Although the tenor of the poem is Yorkist, the narrator sympathises with Henry VI, suggesting that his troubles stem not from York's ambition but from Margaret, who is his 'bane' (3.13). Margaret is unquestionably a warrior in this poem; she not only dresses in 'polished armour', 'snowy feathers', 'beamy helm', etc., but appears 'in the fight',

'like Pallas's self' (6.3–4). Nevertheless, dashing as she might seem, the narrator is disapproving. Margaret is 'haughty', 'artful', 'unbending', 'cruel and insulting' (3.13–20); 'Hatred, revenge, and cruelty' reside in her bosom, from which 'pity' has apparently 'fled'; in the face of all this unwomanly harshness the narrator asks indignantly: 'Suits fell revenge the female breast?' (3.24). Although it is not implied that Margaret indulges in either adultery or witchcraft, she is held personally responsible for York's execution and for displaying his head 'Before the windows of [his wife's] tow'r' (3.24).

In *The Rival Roses*, Margaret does possess some admirable qualities, but even the most feminine of these – beauty – is used in an unfeminine way to shore up her power over men:

But Margaret's high unbending soul,
Had never yielded to controul.
Here, subtle art, and tow'ring mind,
To conquer, not submit, inclin'd;
And her's was every beauty too,
That could the heart of man subdue.
Her art and beauty ruled her royal lord,
She frowned, he yielded, smiled, and he adored.

(*The Rival Roses* 3.19)

This substitution of conquest for submission is not celebrated here as one might expect in a Romantic-era poem; it is consistently censured throughout the text, which turns out to be a kind of handbook of decorum for young ladies. The heroine, Isadore, submits to the will of her male guardians and is unexpectedly rewarded with the hand in marriage of her true love, Reginald. But Jane de Clifford, another strong, self-willed woman, though not a warrior, is also decried as evil – for having a 'wily heart' (4.6) and 'yielding rein' to non-womanly 'passion' (4.27) and 'vengeance' (5.2).

In this company Margaret of Anjou retains her bad reputation well into the Romantic era. Having traced her unfortunate image (from) Renaissance times, when Yorkist politics and fear of masculine tendencies and witchcraft in women dominated, to the Romantic period, we must conclude that, for Margaret, there was to be no vindication or canonization by later ages. What she demonstrates is that, despite libertarian impulses, women in the early nineteenth century remained subject to the old patriarchal rules and authority, as they still do in many contexts today. Until very recently, the fictional or historical heroines who have broken out of the mould, asserting manlike authority and even military prowess, have been exceptional – and a few exceptions to the rule are tolerable, as long as they exhibit some of the features conventionally admired in women. In an age that does not permit the actual existence of woman warriors, fictional examples that are especially beautiful, youthful and inspired by love for a man or God may be acceptable to a reading and writing public. Margaret was too old for beauty or love, made no special claims to divine inspiration and was moreover unsuccessful in all her military and political endeavours, and has therefore never captured the popular imagination.

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