

'A man's courage in a woman's breast'

Margaret of Anjou: the battle for the English Crown

Margaret of Anjou was a daring, domineering and ruthlessly determined woman who was near universally condemned by her contemporaries and dealt harshly by historians for her unusual role during the Wars of the Roses. Her story reveals how a medieval foreign-born queen came to dominate English politics and military affairs during the 1450s and ultimately lead the king's Lancastrian dynasty into a civil war against their Yorkist cousin...

Overwhelmingly, chroniclers and other contemporary or near-contemporary writers were largely biased against Margaret of Anjou and her role within English affairs from the 1440s-1470s. Such adverse contemporary criticism of the queen, which was only part of a much wider policy of anti-anything Lancastrian, has been cemented until fairly recently in popular myth through the biased quills of Shakespeare and Tudor historians such as Sir Thomas More and Polydore Vergil. In general these documents convey the dangerous and uncomfortable position Margaret's ambitious and powerful character posed to fifteenth-century English high politics and affairs. Presenting Margaret of Anjou, therefore, in a balanced light has meant historians tackling the tremendous task of extracting the truth about this remarkable woman from the heavily biased and mostly pro-Yorkist propagandist contemporary records.

Born in 1430, she was the youngest daughter of René Duke of Anjou and the titular King of Sicily, Naples, Hungary and Jerusalem. She was bought up in the highly cultivated and female dominated court of René and his strong-minded wife, Isabella of Lorraine, Margaret rapidly developed into an attractive, sophisticated and highly able teenager who, by the 1440s, held the diplomatic key to a two-year truce between warring England and France. In 1445, after a year-long diplomatic wrangle which resulted in the secession of most of England's



Centre: After the cosmopolitan sophistication with which she grew up, Margaret of Anjou may have found England a little pale. January from *Les Très Riches Heures* of Duc de Berry.

territorial possessions in northern France and a crippling financial bill for Henry VI's government, Margaret of Anjou became queen of England - in contemporary beliefs the act of union heralded the undoing of the House of Lancaster.

Margaret's Arrival

No expense was spared on Margaret's procession to England despite bringing nothing in the form of a dowry except for a tenuous military truce and the end of the English empire. The lavish extravagance that characterised the embassy accompanying Margaret to England included a litany of English nobles and their retainers totalling half of Henry VI's permanent household in England and a fleet of fifty-six ships. Henry VI was sending a clear message of peace and diplomacy to France and Anjou. The marriage service was held in Nancy with William de Pole of Suffolk acting as proxy for Henry VI who remained in England and had never seen his wife. The distance and lack of familiarity between the two newly-weds remained with them throughout their marriage. So unknown to each other were the royal couple that the contemporary Milanese diplomat, Raffaello de Negra, reported back to the Duchess of Milan in October 1458 on the alleged, and almost comical, first meeting of Margaret and her husband in England. The diplomat noted in his official papers that Henry VI disguised himself as a squire and pretending to deliver a message for the newly arrived queen of England was kept on his knees in front of his oblivious queen.

Controversy surrounded the marriage from the offset. The diplomatic and territorial conditions that preceded the marriage agreement came under universal attack within English politics even before the queen had arrived in England. Yet this did not dampen the rapturous welcome the fifteen-year old queen received from the wine-drinking populace of London on the way to her coronation. The streets of the City to Westminster Abbey were crammed with spectators enjoying the royal expenditure on wine filled conduits, musicians and street entertainers. The queen all dressed in white and dusted with gold processed through the streets with a hugely decorated entourage of nineteen chariots of ladies and their gentlewomen. The theme of doves of peace echoed along the route. It was to become a PR disaster which contemporary writers and Yorkist sympathisers profited from enormously. Henry was keen to associate his new wife in the public