Margaret of Burgundy

Anonymous portrait of Margaret of York, ca. 1468, Louvre

Students of the closing years of the Wars of the Roses will be aware of Margaret of Burgundy. It was she who was intent on spoiling the party for Henry VII when, so the narrative runs, the great first Tudor was frustrated in his fine purpose by the activities of those two historical oddities, the pretenders Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck. It has always seemed strange that such a mighty figure as Henry Tudor should have experienced so much trouble from such preposterous characters. Margaret of Burgundy provides an explanation, for this grand lady, proud scion of the Yorkists, sister of both Edward IV and Richard III, widow of the mighty Charles the Bold, was a frustrated lady with an abundance of time and wealth on her hands and an incurable propensity for dabbling in anti-Tudor intrigue.

Inevitably contemporary historians, often keen to ingratiate themselves with the Tudors, have been unkind to Margaret just as they have been unkind to her brother, Richard III. The ‘old venomous serpent’ and ‘the diabolical duchess’ are just two of the kinder epithets used by the chronicler Edward Hall, who also referred to Margaret’s activities as ‘a dog reverting to her old vomit’. Francis Bacon wrote that she had ‘the spirit of a man and the malice of a woman’. Yet a closer look at this remarkable woman shows how unfair and untrue these lurid descriptions are.

Margaret of Burgundy was a strong and cultured lady who bravely surmounted many personal and diplomatic crises and was much respected by those around her. A consideration of Margaret will show that, despite her own upbringing amidst violence and intrigue, she led a life of virtue and concern for others and that all she did was motivated by a consideration for those around her. She never had children of her own but was a much loved stepmother. During her French husband’s lengthy absences in battle she managed with skill his rich but diverse and troubled territories. It is hardly surprising that she took an interest in the dramatic events in her own country just across the North Sea; two of her brothers had been Kings of England and her father had been protector in the reign of Henry VI. Her hostility to a usurper whose legitimacy was doubted by even those close to him was hardly surprising.

A Troublous Life

Margaret’s life had been imbued with dynastic violence. Her father, Richard of York, had been killed at the Battle of Wakefield in 1460 and his decapitated head had been placed on the city walls of York with a paper crown mockingly fixed upon it; one of her brothers was also killed at the battle, as was an uncle. At the time Margaret was just 14. Her older brother, Edward, became King in 1461 but had to abandon the throne at the end of the decade because of a conspiracy against him involving his cousin and his younger brother. Subsequently the crown was regained and the cousin and brother, the Earl of Warwick and the Duke of Clarence, met violent deaths. Another brother, Richard, infamously claimed the throne having dispatched his, and Margaret’s, two nephews to the Tower. Margaret’s husband, Charles the Bold, was killed in battle at Nancy in 1477 and, finally, her beloved
stepdaughter, Mary, died in a riding accident in 1482. This succession of personal and dynastic calamities served only to strengthen Margaret.

The marriage of Margaret to Charles the Bold of Burgundy in 1468 was one of the great dynastic unions of the fifteenth century. At the time Margaret was the blonde, bright, 22-year-old sister of the King of England, and her new husband was the powerful and ambitious warrior-leader of a series of territories scattered across Northern Europe and Eastern France. It was Charles’ ambition to create a unified state from his diverse lands that brought him into conflict with the brilliant and ruthless King of France, Louis XI. Thus the marriage of Margaret to Charles was seen as inflammatory by Louis, and it was similarly regarded by a powerful faction within England who had been keen to guide Edward towards a pro-French foreign policy. Margaret, born into a world of dynastic intrigue in England, now saw this intrigue escalated onto a European level. Yet throughout she remained calm, efficient and resolute. While her husband was absent fighting, Margaret was left to govern his unruly territories. At the same time she took care of her stepdaughter and in due course successfully negotiated her marriage to the son of the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian Habsburg, which was a further rebuff to the French. When Charles was killed in 1477 it would seem that Margaret’s fate was sealed for the French king would surely sweep all before him now that the focal point of Burgundian territorial ambitions was dead. Instead Margaret steered a brilliant diplomatic course by successfully gaining the protection of the Habsburgs.

Anyone capable of getting the better of the wily French king was clearly a formidable operator. It also should be stated, given what was to happen with the Tudors, that Margaret’s inability to bear children never weakened her position. Charles the Bold loved and respected her and both her stepdaughter and stepson-in-law spoke of her in reverential terms. It is in this context that Margaret’s involvement with the pretenders needs to be seen.

Tudor Politics

The seizure of power in England by her younger brother, Richard III, actually suited Margaret’s purposes. She had felt badly betrayed by her elder brother, Edward IV, when in 1475 he had signed peace terms with Louis XI which had involved a very generous pension from the French king; for evermore Edward’s support for his Burgundian sister was at best lukewarm, for the English king needed to hold on to his vital French subsidy. Richard had been appalled by Edward’s decision to strike a pecuniary deal with the French and was determined to re-establish an anti-French foreign policy. Thus he would always find favour with his sister. His downfall at Bosworth in 1485 was thus a huge setback for Margaret, made worse because the usurper, Henry Tudor, had been supported by the French. Henry Tudor’s claim to the throne was extremely thin – the historian Bertram Fields wrote, ‘Even the King of Portugal and the Queen of Castile had a better claim to the English throne than either Henry Tudor or his mother.’ So it would seem that the chances of removing Henry, certainly in the early years of his rule, were considerable. It was certainly worth the gamble as far as Margaret was concerned. So it was that 2,000 mercenaries, led by the German Martin Schwarz, left Ireland and arrived in northern England in 1487 and began the march south. The subsequent Battle of Stoke, often regarded as the real conclusion of the Wars of the Roses, resulted in the annihilation of the invaders and, famously, the locking away in the royal kitchens of the figurehead for the rebels, Lambert Simnel. Why the gracious and civilised Margaret of Burgundy, with a fine record of diplomatic triumphs, should support someone as clearly bogus as Simnel is an intriguing question. It is clear Margaret did not believe his tale of being the Earl of Warwick, son of the Duke of Clarence and nephew of both Richard III and herself. There were in fact two serious contenders for the throne who were genuine Yorkists: one was the real Warwick, locked away in the Tower of London, and the other was the Earl of Lincoln. It would surely have been wiser to support one of these rather than the clearly false one. But a painful lesson had been learnt from Bosworth: if the real claimant is risked in battle then the cause is lost if he should fall; better to have a makeshift one who, if victorious, can be transplanted but, if vanquished, allows for the survival of the cause. This seems to have been Margaret’s reasoning.

The second pretender, Perkin Warbeck, was altogether more serious. The fact that he was causing alarm in England a decade into the reign of Henry VII does highlight the instability of the early Tudor regime as late as the very end of the fifteenth century. Perkin Warbeck was the son of a minor official from Tournai who, for obscure reasons, found himself in Cork as a teenager and soon became the focus of interest for surviving Yorkist sympathisers in Ireland. Warbeck, and more particularly the entourage around him, were more wily operators than
the Simnel group and soon attracted the funding and support of Margaret. He became a persistent source of grief to Henry VII for most of the 1490s and, at various times, had the support of the French King, the Habsburgs and the King of Scotland. Indeed so supportive of his cause was James IV of Scotland that he arranged for Warbeck to marry his cousin, Lady Catherine Gordon.

Henry VII needed to develop huge skills of diplomacy and espionage to contain Warbeck. Eventually he gained the upper hand so that, just when Warbeck seemed at a pinnacle of influence at the Stuart court, James IV was pressurised into making his peace with Henry and the pretender was banished. Warbeck was captured attempting to seek sanctuary in Beaulieu Abbey, having failed to exploit the rebellion of the Cornish taxpayers in 1497. At first Henry displayed the same clemency as he had shown with Simnel, but in 1499, with more stirrings of discontent and under much pressure from the Spanish royal family anxious for the wellbeing of their daughter, Catherine of Aragon, now betrothed to Henry's son, Arthur, Henry ordered the execution of both Warbeck and the hapless Earl of Warwick, who had committed no other crime than being the son of the Duke of Clarence and the nephew of Margaret of Burgundy.

Warbeck's sequence of supporters in the 1490s initially seems awesome but on all occasions these supporters were calculating their own self-interest. As Henry's rule prospered, survived, and was blessed with male offspring so it became embedded. Henry also succeeded in establishing a dynastic link with the most powerful royal family of all, the mighty Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. The appeal of Perkin Warbeck faded. The last person to give up on him was his chief benefactress, Margaret of Burgundy.

There is some evidence that Margaret may have actually believed Warbeck's tale of being the vanished younger prince in the Tower. Rumours had been widespread that, in fact, Prince Richard had escaped. There are tales of Margaret coaching Warbeck in the speech and mannerisms of the Yorkist court, although, given that Margaret had only made two brief visits to England in over a quarter of a century, it is debatable how valuable such coaching could be. Jean Molinet, a sympathetic Burgundian chronicler, referred to Warbeck as the claimant 'whom it was hoped was the Duke of York.' Again, as with Simnel, the key factor was the provision of a figurehead for the cause who would allow for its survival if defeated on the battlefield.

Conclusion

The execution of both Warwick and Warbeck in 1499 marked the end of Margaret's involvement in dynastic struggles. She was frail and ageing and even she had come to realise that international support for the Yorkists was no longer there. Her final years were spent in the encouragement of Catholic reform groups and providing patronage for artists and educators. When she died in 1503 at the age of 57, Jean Molinet described her as 'a mother of orphans, a nurse to the poor, and a solace for all grieving hearts.' On her tomb, long destroyed in the religious turmoil of the sixteenth century, was the inscription: 'A marvellous and devoted patroness of justice, of religion, of reform.' The course of her life would indicate that this was a fairer judgement than 'the diabolical duchess.'