

A TUDOR PRINCESS AT FOUR TUDOR COURTS

In April 1530 Henry VIII's ordered dress from the Great Wardrobe for 'our niece', Lady Margaret Douglas, to welcome her arrival at court. The fourteen-year old princess was destined to be a player in key events over four Tudor reigns. Her youthful romances would see her caught up in the fall of two of Henry's queens, she would be arrested at least four times, imprisoned in the Tower twice, and plot - ultimately successfully - for her heirs to inherit queen Elizabeth's throne. In Margaret's will of 1578, she still remembered her uncle fondly, listing a picture of Henry amongst her treasured possessions. Yet until I rescued her story from obscurity in *Tudor: The Family Story*, her dramatic life and dynastic significance was obscured by the story of a quarrel between them that never was.

I am the historian Leanda de Lisle, uncovering the Tudors and Stuarts behind the myths

Margaret Douglas was the child of Henry's elder sister, Margaret Tudor, Queen of Scots, by her second husband Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus. As such she was third in line to the English throne in 1530, following her elder half-brother, the sixteen-year-old James V of Scots, and Henry's daughter, Mary Tudor, who was four months younger than she. Her parents' unhappy marriage had been annulled in 1527 and a year later, when her father was anxious to flee the stepson who hated him, and needed free passage to England, he had kidnapped Margaret and sent her to Henry as a good will gesture.

Henry had ignored her mother's pleas for her to be returned home. Margaret was too valuable a commodity on the international marriage market to let go. Nevertheless, for eighteen months Margaret had been left in the north of England while Henry had focussed on his pursuit of a papal annulment of his own marriage to Katherine of

Aragon. His hopes of being freed to marry his mistress Anne Boleyn, had all but drained away when he, at last, sent for Margaret. She found Henry living alongside a ‘somewhat stout’ Katherine, as well as the hit-tempered Anne, in what David Starkey has characterised as a virtual ménage à trois.

Henry left Katherine of Aragon for good in the summer of 1531, while Margaret was sent on to join her cousin Mary’s household as her principle lady-in-waiting. She was to stay at Mary’s side during one of the most traumatic periods of the princess’s life: the break with Rome, Henry marriage to Anne Boleyn, the birth of Anne’s daughter, Elizabeth, and Henry’s decision to have Mary declared a bastard. With Mary’s household broken up in 1534, Margaret was then transferred to Anne Boleyn’s Privy Chamber where she now served the queen.

The now eighteen-year-old Margaret was described by foreign ambassadors as beautiful and highly esteemed. Despite her closeness to Mary she made friends with a group of talented young courtiers related to Anne, and who together contributed to the famous collection of poetry known as the Devonshire manuscript. Amongst these friends was the twenty-three year old Lord Thomas Howard, a younger brother of the Anne’s uncle, the Duke of Norfolk. He and Margaret fell in love and at first Henry seemed to encourage the couple, but when they betrothed at Easter 1536 they did so in secret.

The atmosphere at Court was tense. Henry had married Anne in the expectation of her delivering male heirs, but the birth of Elizabeth had been followed by miscarriages – the latest that January. He had begun flirting with another of Anne’s ladies in waiting, Jane Seymour, and Anne was quarrelling with the King’s chief minister and vicar-general, Thomas Cromwell. On May Day 1536 Anne was suddenly arrested, accused of adultery with several men, including her own brother, and of plotting the King’s death. By the end of the month she was dead, beheaded for treason.

Henry promptly married Jane Seymour with Margaret obliged to attend on the bride at the wedding. But these shocking events had a still more personal impact. Anne's daughter Elizabeth was bastardized, leaving Margaret and her brother James V as Henry's senior heirs in blood. As Henry had no legitimate heirs they were also a potential alternative focus source of loyalty. To counter this a new Act of Succession was drawn up that gave Henry the right to appoint his heirs: even, if he wished, his illegitimate children over his legitimate nephew and niece. Henry's bastard son Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond, stood to be the principle beneficiary, since of the king's children he, at least, was male.

It was as it emerged that Fitzroy was terminally ill with, 'a rapid consumption' that Henry learned of Margaret Douglas's betrothal to Thomas Howard. His bastardized daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, made far weaker claimants than Margaret, legitimate and married into the powerful Howard family. Henry had the couple sent to the Tower.

On 18 July a Bill of Attainder proclaimed that Thomas Howard, having been 'led and seduced by the devil' had 'traitorously contracted himself by crafty, fair and flattering words to .. the Lady Margaret Douglas'. His object being to usurp the throne, trusting people would prefer the English-born Margaret, to the foreign King of Scots, 'to whom this Realm has, nor ever had, any affection'.

On 23 July it was reported that Thomas Howard had been condemned to death for treason and that the twenty-one year old Margaret Douglas was spared only because the marriage had not been consummated. There was, in fact, a further reason. The annulment of the marriage of Margaret's parents' had left her legitimacy intact. The Attainder nevertheless referred on several occasions to Margaret Douglas as being her mother's 'natural (ie bastard) daughter'. This was a clear attempt to demote her in the succession and ensure Henry's children had the superior claim.

Margaret believed that Cromwell had also helped to save her life, and she took his

advice in pretending she had no further interest in Howard. The King's anxieties were further reduced after Jane Seymour bore a son, Edward, on 12 October 1537.

Margaret (by then imprisoned at Syon Abbey) was released early in November, only to learn that Thomas Howard had died in the Tower of 'an ague'. Margaret took the news 'very heavily'. It would be four years before Margaret risked her heart again.

Henry was married to his fifth wife, Katherine Howard, when Margaret formed an attachment to the new queen's brother, Charles. Unfortunately for Margaret – and still more so for the doomed Katherine Howard – it emerged in November 1541 that the queen had been unchaste before her marriage and was conducting a new relationship with a gentleman of the Privy Chamber, Thomas Culpepper. As the investigations uncovered Margaret's latest romance she was delivered a chilling warning. She had 'demeaned herself towards His Majesty, first with the Lord Thomas Howard, and second with Charles Howard', to whom she had shown 'overmuch lightness'. She was advised: 'beware the third time'.

Following Katherine Howard's beheading Margaret was careful not to risk any further unauthorized love affairs, and when she did marry it was at Henry's arrangement. In 1543 he was hoping to build up a body of support in Scotland for a marriage between James V's infant daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, and his son Edward. Margaret was to be a pawn in these plans, with Henry offering her as a bride to Matthew Stewart, Earl of Lennox, who was to lead a pro-English Scots party from England. Happily, Margaret was delighted with Lennox, 'a strong man of personage well shaped' who 'was most pleasant for a lady'. Lennox was equally enamoured of Margaret and their marriage of 1544 proved happy.

Margaret was not mentioned in the Third Act of Succession, which had been given the royal assent in that spring. Having named Mary and Elizabeth as Edward's heirs, the Act merely promised that Elizabeth's heirs would be named later in letters patent. The king remained anxious to protect his children from rival claimants, but on a personal level Henry was fond of Margaret, writing to her from Calais that September, sending

the new bride his special 'recommendations'.

Margaret's biographers tell us that, nevertheless, in 1546 she quarrelled with Henry so bitterly over religion, that, when the dying king named the long stop heirs to Elizabeth that winter, she was denied her rightful place in line of succession, along with James V's daughter, Mary, Queen of Scots. This supposed quarrel has helped diminish Margaret's significance in Tudor and Stuart history, with the impression given that she was a woman of poor judgement and one who lacked political importance thereafter. This is far from the truth.

The Lennox payments that year to chantry priests, who prayed for souls in purgatory, does indicate religious conservatism, but Henry's will also asked for masses to be said for his soul. The only evidence for Margaret's quarrel lies in a source that postdates Henry's death by fifteen years, but it remains important because, four hundred and fifty years later, the mud thrown at Margaret then still sticks.

By this time, early in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Margaret was forty-six, and the birth eight children had taken its toll on her good looks. But she had done well in negotiating the lethal riptides of the changing courts of Edward VI and Mary I, as well as being deeply involved in Scottish affairs, promoting her claims as her father's heir. Indeed Margaret had matured into a political operator to match her great-grandmother, Margaret Beaufort, who had helped plot her son Henry VII's rise to the throne.

The twenty-nine year old Elizabeth had invited Margaret to court to celebrate the Christmas season of 1561/2, and in order to keep an eye on her cousin. Elizabeth had discovered Margaret was plotting to marry her eldest son, Henry, Lord Darnley, to Mary, Queen of Scots. Under the terms of Henry's VIII will Elizabeth's heir was her Protestant cousin, Lady Katherine Grey, granddaughter of Henry's younger sister, Mary, the French Queen. But some considered this unsigned document invalid, even forged, making Mary, Queen of Scots Elizabeth's heir, as the senior in blood. If she

were to be married to Darnley his English birth, combined with his Tudor blood, would greatly strengthen her claim.

A nervous Margaret insisted to the Spanish ambassador, Alavarez de Quadra, that securing the succession for Mary, Queen of Scots was her duty, for it would protect England from a civil war on Elizabeth's death. But as the ambassador noted, Elizabeth based 'her security on there being no certain successor should the people tire of her rule'. Margaret was in danger of being returned to the Tower, and her fears of this grew when she spotted an agent of a sacked Lennox servant called Thomas Bishop, skulking at court.

Margaret and Lennox suspected Bishop was feeding information against them to Elizabeth's Secretary of State, William Cecil. In response they launched a pre-emptive attack on Bishop's reputation. They described how Bishop had come to work for Lennox while their marriage was being arranged in 1543. Henry VIII had rewarded Bishop for his good service to Lennox, but, they claimed, Henry later regretted this, 'understanding that [Bishop] went about to set dissension between the said Earl and his lady', and Bishop had proved a coward, a sexual reprobate, and a thief to boot.

It is Bishop's reply to the Lennox attack that is quoted by historians as evidence of Margaret's fatal quarrel with Henry. In a long memorandum Bishop focuses his attention on Margaret, describing his work for Elizabeth's predecessors in the face of Margaret's enmity, and his rewards. In particular he refers to land grants Henry gave him in October 1546, 'a little afore his death and after the breach with my lady Lennox'. Bishop does not say what her argument with Henry was about, but in previously overlooked manuscript, Bishop clarifies matters.

Bishop claims that Margaret had wanted him sacked in the 1540s, 'seeking the rule of her husband' and that Henry VIII was so angry about her false accusations against Bishop that, 'she ever after lost a part of [the King's] heart, as appeared at his death'.

In other words, Henry VIII demoted Margaret in line of succession because she was rude about Thomas Bishop!

Now, Henry VIII evidently did value Bishop's services, but the king had named the Grey sisters as Elizabeth's heirs because as unmarried females and minors, with only a distant claim under Common law, they had posed far less of a threat to his children than either Mary, Queen of Scots, or Margaret, who alone amongst his sisters' children, had a growing son.

It was nowhere else suggested that Margaret had ever quarreled with Henry over religion, and Bishop's claim that there had been any quarrel at all does not appear to have been taken seriously. But he had other, more acute, accusations to make and by 2 April Margaret was imprisoned at the former Carthusian Abbey of Sheen, while Lennox was in the Tower.

In May Margaret's interrogators complained she was being extremely obstinate in her replies to charges that included treason in the recent war in Scotland, and secret communications with a foreign monarch, (Mary, Queen of Scots) as well as the French and Spanish ambassadors. There were also said to be 'proofs' that Margaret did 'not love the Queen'.

Bishop claimed Margaret had persuaded Mary I to imprison Elizabeth in the Tower in 1554 – which was believable as Mary I had wanted to leave Margaret the throne, against what proved possible. Other servants confessed that Margaret often referred to Elizabeth as a bastard. They further described how her fool would roundly mock Elizabeth and her favourite Robert Dudley. Dudley's wife, Amy Robsart, had been found at the bottom of a flight of stairs in 1560 with a broken neck, and the servants said Margaret called him as a pox-ridden wife-murderer.

There was even an attempt to accuse Margaret of planning to kill the Queen with witchcraft, a smear Cecil had used successfully against several Catholics the previous

year. Margaret often heard Mass said 'by one little Sir William' and it was being alleged that she was in contact with 'witches and soothsayers', even that she had conjured the lightning that had burned down of the steeple of St Paul's in 1561 on the feast of Corpus Christi.

It was to be Cecil's life's work to prevent any Catholic inheriting Elizabeth's throne, and it is this Elizabethan antagonism to Margaret's post Marian Catholicism that has been read into her relationship with Henry VIII. It is the kind of anachronism we see time and again in Tudor history, with later anti Catholic attitudes projected into the past.

Meanwhile, with fear of witchcraft being stoked in parliament, where MPs were making it an offence in common law, Cecil had been busy seeking information in Scotland to 'prove' Margaret illegitimate. This concerned Margaret still more than the wild claims of treason and occult practises, which Lennox characterized as the lies of, 'exploiters, hired men and other fantastical persons'. When Margaret learned that Bishop had described her as 'a mere bastard', she fired off a furious missive, reminding Cecil, 'Even as God hath made me, I am lawful daughter to the Queen of Scots [Margaret Tudor] and the Earl of Angus which none alive is able to make me other'.

In the end Elizabeth chose to leave Margaret's life unharmed and her legitimacy intact. Margaret's royal claims remained a useful counter balance to those of the Protestant Katherine Grey. The following year, with Elizabeth believing Margaret's ambitions had been tamed by her imprisonment, Margaret and Lennox were freed. Margaret even became godmother to Cecil's baby daughter in 1564, and named the child Elizabeth. But behind the scenes she continued to seek support for her son's marriage.

Eventually Margaret's allies helped convince Elizabeth to grant Darnley a passport to Scotland, and in April 1565 a horrified Elizabeth realised his marriage to the Queen of

Scots might actually go ahead. It was in a failed effort to prevent it that Margaret was, at last, returned to the Tower. For nearly two years following Darnley's proclamation as King of Scots, Margaret remained imprisoned – with disastrous consequences for mother and son.

The new Spanish ambassador, Diego Guzman de Silva, believed that if Margaret had been in Scotland her good counsel would have prevented the breakdown of Darnley's marriage, and his involvement in the killing of his wife's principle servant, David Riccio in 1566. As it was, Darnley's misjudgements paved the way to his murder in Edinburgh in 1567.

When Margaret was given the terrible news of Darnley's death, she collapsed in 'such passion of mind' it was feared she might die of grief. To ease her suffering Elizabeth had her moved out of the Tower and by the time Mary, Queen of Scots was overthrown in Scotland and fled to England in 1568, Margaret was free once more. It was the safety of her infant grandson, James VI, that now most concerned Margaret.

Although James is known as a 'Stuart', using the French spelling of 'Stewart' favoured by his mother, the dynasty takes its name from the paternal line represented by Margaret's son Darnley – and it was a line she was determined to protect. In 1570 Margaret persuaded Elizabeth to accept Lennox as James's regent in Scotland while she remained in England as his ambassador at Court. The couple kept in close touch, with Lennox relying on his 'Good Meg' for her advice until he was shot in 1571, during a raid on Stirling made by supporters of the imprisoned Mary, Queen of Scots. His last act was to send his love to Margaret.

Of her eight children Margaret was now left with one surviving son, Charles. Despite Elizabeth's virulent opposition to his marrying anyone, Margaret arranged a match to a daughter of the courtier Bess of Hardwick in 1574. Since this non-royal, non-noble, marriage did not pose a threat to the queen, Margaret was punished only with a spell

of house arrest. Charles died of an unknown illness in 1576, but he left a daughter, little Arbella, to comfort Margaret in her last years.

A picture Margaret had painted of Arbella, aged twenty-three months, depicts a hazel-eyed infant clutching a doll, and around her neck, on a triple chain of gold, hangs a shield with the countess's coronet along the Lennox motto in French, 'To achieve, I endure' – and Margaret did endure. Her old enemy Thomas Bishop had, by 1576, proved a rather less reliable Tudor servant than he had claimed to be. In 1569 he had been found to be in contact with adherents of Mary, Queen of Scots, and had ended up in the Tower from where he was released only that year.

Eventually Bishop would return to his Scottish homeland, where Margaret remained in contact with her grandson, sending James works of history, and on one occasion a pair of embroidered hawking gloves. In 1578, aged sixty-two, Margaret also continued to entertain Elizabeth's most powerful courtiers. At a dinner that February she had Robert Dudley, now Earl of Leicester, as her guest. Margaret was adept at turning enemies into allies and they had once even worked together towards the Darnley marriage, despite her earlier accusation that he was a pox-ridden wife murderer.

By the end of that month Margaret was seriously ill and on 26 February she wrote her will. Twelve hundred pounds was put aside for Margaret's funeral and burial expenses at Westminster Abbey, while amongst her many bequests was her 'tablet picture of Henry VIII', which she left to Dudley.

'Tablets' often referred to pendant jewels containing pictures or even miniature prayer books. Margaret's could be the famous gold enameled Tudor girdle prayer book known as Stowe manuscript 956. It came to the British Library from a collection that belonged to the heirs of William Seymour, Duke of Somerset, the widower of Margaret's granddaughter Arbella. She had, as a child, been betrothed to Robert Dudley's short-lived legitimate son, and it may have passed to her then, if it had not

always stayed in her care. It contains an illuminated miniature bust of Henry VIII, dating from around 1540

Margaret Douglas died on 10 March and on 3 April she had a funeral appropriate to a royal princess. She was buried in what is now called the Henry VII chapel close to her ancestress and namesake Margaret Beaufort, whose role in ushering in the Tudor dynasty she had emulated in her own life and dynastic ambitions. Few tombs in the Abbey match the royal ancestors listed on Margaret's, but she was prouder still to be 'a progenitor of princes' in her son Darnley and her grandson King James.

When Darnley was a baby Margaret had heard a prophecy that he would one day unite the crowns of England and Scotland. Although he was dead his English birth, as well as his Tudor blood, greatly enhanced James's claim to Elizabeth's throne. One day, Margaret believed, James would lie in Westminster Abbey, as a King of England - as indeed he does today.

You can learn more about King Henry's niece in my biography of the dynasty Tudor, The Family Story. You are also welcome to contact me via my website, facebook or twitter