

MARGARET BEAUFORT

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ALSO BY LAUREN JOHNSON

*So Great a Prince:
England and the Accession of Henry VIII*

*Shadow King:
The Life and Death of Henry VI*

MARGARET
BEAUFORT
SURVIVOR, REBEL,
KINGMAKER

LAUREN JOHNSON



An Apollo Book

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For Willow

For her three siblings, who were with me for however
short a time during the writing of this book

And for Anne, Irene, Margaret and Anne.
Foundations of my patchwork family.

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Dramatis Personae

Note: Names are listed alphabetically by the most commonly used form in the text, whether Christian name or noble title. For instance, Margaret Beaufort would be listed as ‘Margaret’ not under Beaufort, countess of Richmond or king’s mother.

Bernard ANDRÉ (c.1450–1522). French-born cleric who came to England with Henry Tudor and became his official poet and historian.

ARTHUR Tudor, Prince of Wales (1486–1502). First-born child of Henry Tudor and Elizabeth of York, Arthur’s birth united the warring roses of York and Lancaster.

John BEAUFORT, 1st duke of Somerset (1404–44). Margaret’s father, who died before her first birthday.

Edmund BEAUFORT, 2nd duke of Somerset (1406–55). Margaret’s paternal uncle, governor of English-held France and the power behind Henry VI’s throne. His ascendancy was bitterly resented by the duke of York.

Henry BEAUFORT, 3rd duke of Somerset (1436–64). Eldest son of Edmund Beaufort, the angry young nobleman became an inveterate enemy of the Yorkists.

Edmund BEAUFORT, 4th duke of Somerset (c.1438–71). Younger son of the second duke of Somerset who attempted to win his cousin Margaret back to the Lancastrian cause.

Reynald BRAY (c. 1440–1503). Margaret's low-born and straight-talking receiver-general was her right-hand man, at the heart of every conspiracy she masterminded.

Anne Neville/Stafford, duchess of BUCKINGHAM (d. 1480). Margaret's mother-in-law was the guiding light of the Stafford clan – and Margaret herself – throughout the tumultuous 1460s.

Humphrey Stafford, duke of BUCKINGHAM (1402–60). Margaret's father-in-law vainly tried to keep the peace in the early years of the Wars of the Roses and died defending Henry VI.

Henry Stafford, duke of BUCKINGHAM (1455–83). The grandson of Anne, duchess of Buckingham became duke at four years old. He championed Richard III's accession – until a better offer came his way through Margaret.

Edward Stafford, duke of BUCKINGHAM (1478–1521). Heir of Henry Stafford and Katherine Woodville. As children, he and his brother Henry were Margaret's wards.

Charles the Bold, duke of BURGUNDY (1433–77). Husband of Margaret of York and ruler of the Burgundian Low Countries.

Margaret, duchess of BURGUNDY (1446–1503). The youngest sister of Edward IV and wife of Charles the Bold caused persistent trouble for the Tudors from her base in the Low Countries.

Philip the Fair, duke of BURGUNDY (1478–1506). Philip's Low Countries territories, and his pretensions to the Spanish throne, made him a crucial international ally to Henry VII.

Isabella of CASTILE (1451–1504). The 'Catholic monarch' ruled Spain with her husband, Ferdinand of Aragon. She gained international renown for her *Reconquista* of Muslim Granada.

Joanna of CASTILE (1479–1555). The wife of Philip the Fair was, in her own right, heir to Castile, but that did not save her from the jealous schemes of her husband's courtiers.

CECILY Neville, duchess of York (1415–95). One of the twenty-three children of Ralph, earl of Westmorland; wife of Richard, duke of York; mother of Edward IV and Richard III. Cecily exerted considerable influence, and became a role model for Margaret.

CECILY, princess of York (1469–1507). The second-eldest child of Edward IV became one of Margaret's closest friends and protégés. Margaret arranged Cecily's marriage to her half-brother John Welles.

Thomas, duke of CLARENCE (1387–1421). The younger brother of Henry V and – after marrying Margaret Holland – stepfather of the Beaufort dukes of Somerset. Killed in the French wars.

George, duke of CLARENCE (1449–78). The abilities of the middle Yorkist son did not match his ambition. His marriage to Isabel Neville, daughter of Warwick the Kingmaker, put him on a collision course with his brother Edward IV.

'Crowland Chronicler' (fl. c.1486). Anonymous author of a continuation of the chronicle compiled at Crowland Abbey in Lincolnshire, who wrote of Richard III's reign shortly after it ended. States that he was a former councillor of Edward IV with links to Richard's court and therefore eyewitness to events.

Alice (née Chaucer) and William DE LA POLE, duchess and duke of Suffolk (c.1404–75 and 1396–1450). The architects of Margaret's first marriage, to their son – an arrangement that accelerated their disgrace.

John DE LA POLE, duke of Suffolk (1442–92). Margaret's first, short-lived, marriage ended before she and John really began a

relationship. John's mother then arranged his union with the duke of York's daughter Elizabeth.

John DE LA POLE, earl of Lincoln (c.1460–87). The eldest son of Elizabeth and John de la Pole became a leading Ricardian.

Edmund DE LA POLE, earl of Suffolk (c.1472–1513). Cousin of Queen Elizabeth of York, who ultimately rebelled against the Tudors.

Thomas Grey, marquess of DORSET (c.1455–1501). Elizabeth Woodville's eldest son (from her first marriage) was a man of mediocre abilities but considerable pride.

EDWARD IV, aka earl of March (1442–83). First Yorkist monarch. Handsome, charismatic and militarily daring, in the end the only thing that could destroy Edward's regime was himself.

EDWARD V (1470–83?). Heir of Edward IV. One of the two 'Princes in the Tower' usurped by their uncle Richard, duke of Gloucester. Their disappearance incited rebellion, but they were never seen alive again.

ELIZABETH of York (1466–1503). The eldest child of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville was as beautiful and accomplished as her parents, but considerably more submissive. Throughout much of her marriage, Elizabeth worked and lived at court with her mother-in-law, Margaret, and for the most part enjoyed a close relationship.

FERDINAND of Aragon (1452–1516). With his wife, Isabella of Castile, Ferdinand ruled Spain, and was an important (if unreliable) ally to the Tudors.

HENRY VI of Lancaster (1421–71). 'Holy King Henry' was an abysmal failure as ruler: vacillating, eager to please and terrified of conflict.

HENRY Tudor, earl of Richmond/Henry VII (1457–1509). Margaret's only child and, in later life, the crucible of her hopes.

William HERBERT, earl of Pembroke (d. 1469). Edward IV's 'lock key in Wales' caused the death of Margaret's second husband and became the guardian of her son, but still managed to work with Margaret for their mutual benefit.

Anne Devereux, Lady HERBERT (c. 1433–c. 86). Anne brought up Henry Tudor at Raglan Castle, and saved him from the violence of 1469–70, an act Margaret never forgot.

KATHERINE of Aragon (1485–1536). The younger daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain was betrothed to Arthur Tudor from infancy. This Anglo-Spanish alliance was the lynchpin of Tudor diplomacy, but Katherine was left in limbo after Arthur's death.

Francis, Viscount LOVELL (c. 1457–c. 88). Richard III's loyal 'dog' grew up, like him, in the care of Warwick the Kingmaker and refused to bow to the Tudors.

MARGUERITE of Anjou (1430–82). French princess Marguerite was the effective leader of the Lancastrian regime from 1453, and proved considerably more adept – and ruthless – than her saintly husband, Henry VI.

Thomas MORE (1478–1535). Humanist lawyer who wrote a famous 'history' of Richard III c. 1513–18. A protégé of John Morton, some of More's work may have been gleaned from first-hand testimony, but much was a rhetorical exercise in tyrannical kingship.

John MORTON (1420–1500). A champion of Marguerite of Anjou who shared her exile for years, Morton nonetheless made his peace with the Yorkist regime after Henry VI's death. His political sagacity and Church connections proved essential to the Tudor cause.

Anne NEVILLE, Queen (1456–85). The second daughter of Warwick the Kingmaker enjoyed a large northern following, which bolstered the rule of her husband, Richard, duke of Gloucester.

John de Vere, earl of OXFORD (1442–1513). The daredevil earl never fully made peace with the Yorkists, and was implicated in one rebellion after another.

Margaret Plantagenet, Lady POLE (1473–1541). The daughter of George, duke of Clarence inherited the Yorkist royal claim, and was safely absorbed into Margaret's family through marriage to her nephew.

Sir Richard POLE (1462–1504). Margaret's nephew was a Tudor loyalist who served as councillor to three generations of her family.

RICHARD, duke of Gloucester/Richard III (1452–85). Schooled in warfare and intrigue from childhood, Richard served as his brother's right hand in the north, where he often clashed with the Stanleys.

Prince RICHARD of York (duke of Norfolk) (1473–83?). The younger 'Prince in the Tower' disappeared in summer 1483. Under Henry VII, Perkin Warbeck of Tournai assumed the prince's identity, and garnered enough support to seriously endanger the Tudor regime.

Sir Harry STAFFORD (c.1425–71). Margaret's third husband, and first lasting relationship. A younger son of the duke of Buckingham, with ongoing ill health which may have contributed to his and Margaret's inability to have children.

Margaret Beauchamp, dowager duchess of SOMERSET (c.1410–82). Margaret's mother was widowed three times by war, both French and civil, leaving her to raise seven children alone. She taught Margaret to be astute – and sometimes unscrupulous – to survive.

Lord Thomas STANLEY, earl of Derby (1435–1503). Margaret's fourth and last husband was the turncoat warlord of much of Cheshire and Lancashire. Thomas stood aloof from the violence of the Wars of the Roses and thus outlived most of his rivals.

Sir William STANLEY (c.1435–95). Thomas's younger brother was a Yorkist through and through, serving both Edward IV and V.

George STANLEY, Lord Strange (1460–1503). Thomas Stanley's heir and leading commander, who owed his title and some of his northern estate to his wife, Joan.

James STANLEY (1465–1515). Although always intended for the Church, Margaret's stepson (and eventual bishop of Ely) lived a disreputable early life, gambling and maintaining a mistress. Nonetheless, he and Margaret were close throughout their lives.

Tom STANLEY, earl of Derby (d. 1521). Thomas's grandson, a contemporary of Prince Arthur, who remained close to Margaret long after she separated from Thomas.

Owen TUDOR/Owain ap Maredudd ap Tudur (d. 1461). The second husband of Queen Catherine Valois was a lowly Welsh servant, who fathered Edmund and Jasper Tudor.

Edmund TUDOR, earl of Richmond (c.1430–56). The eldest son of Queen Catherine Valois and Owen Tudor. He married his ward Margaret when she was twelve.

Jasper TUDOR, earl of Pembroke (c.1431–95). The Welsh powerhouse and younger brother of Edmund Tudor risked everything to defend the House of Lancaster.

Polydore VERGIL (c.1470–1555). Italian priest and writer who came to England in 1502 as a papal agent and celebrity in cultured circles. Wrote a history of England that is an important source for

fifteenth- and sixteenth-century events, much of it gathered from first-hand testimony.

Perkin WARBECK. See Prince **RICHARD** of York.

Richard Neville, earl of WARWICK aka **Warwick the Kingmaker** (1428–71). Commander of the port of Calais and the steel core of the Yorkist regime.

Edward, earl of WARWICK (1475–99). The only son of George, duke of Clarence and Isabel Neville spent most of his life in prison.

John WELLES (c. 1450–98). Margaret's youngest half-sibling and Tudor loyalist.

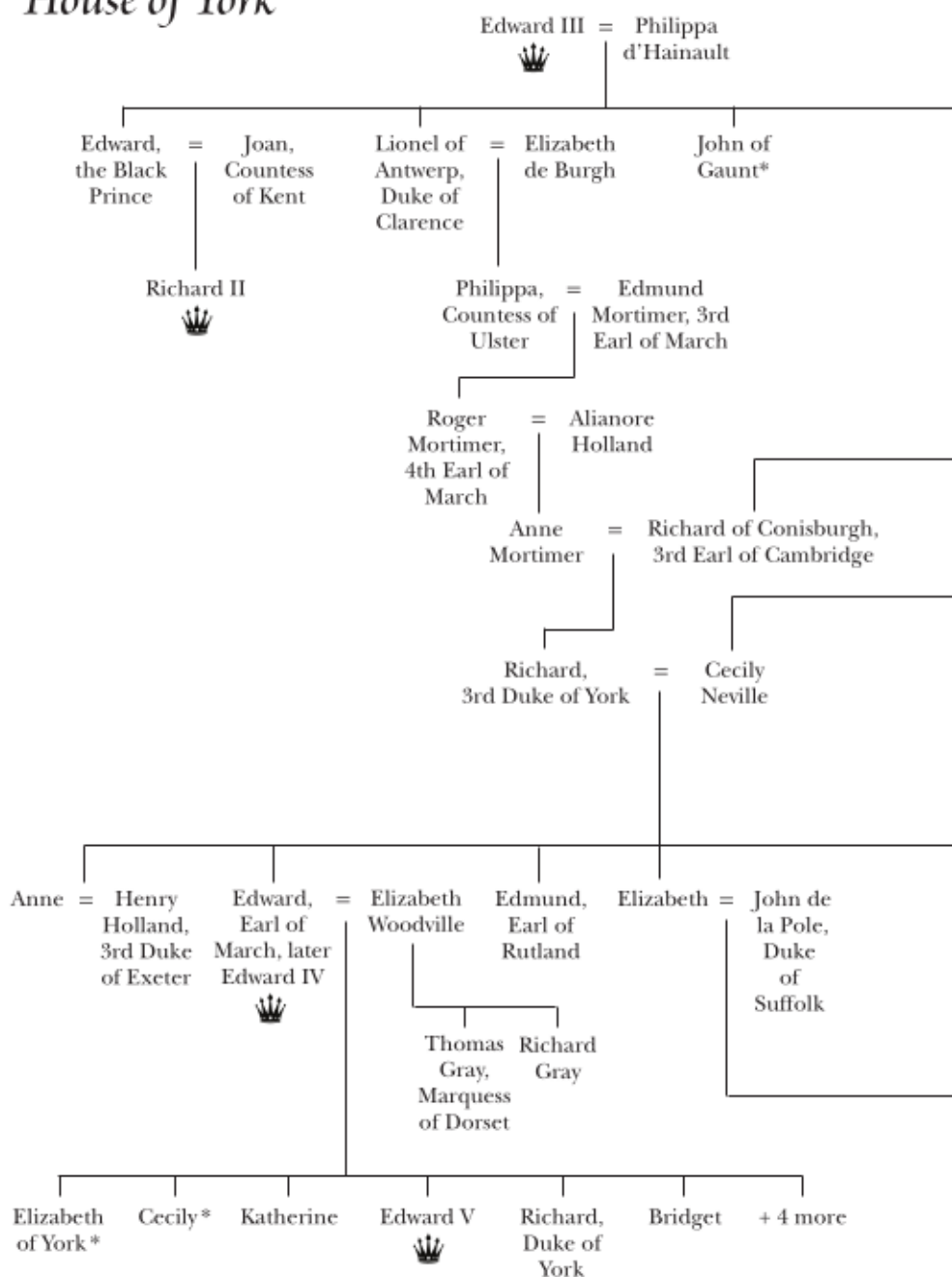
Elizabeth WOODVILLE (1437–92). The first English-born Queen of England since the Norman Conquest came from a large family. Her rampant nepotism made her and her relatives deeply unpopular.

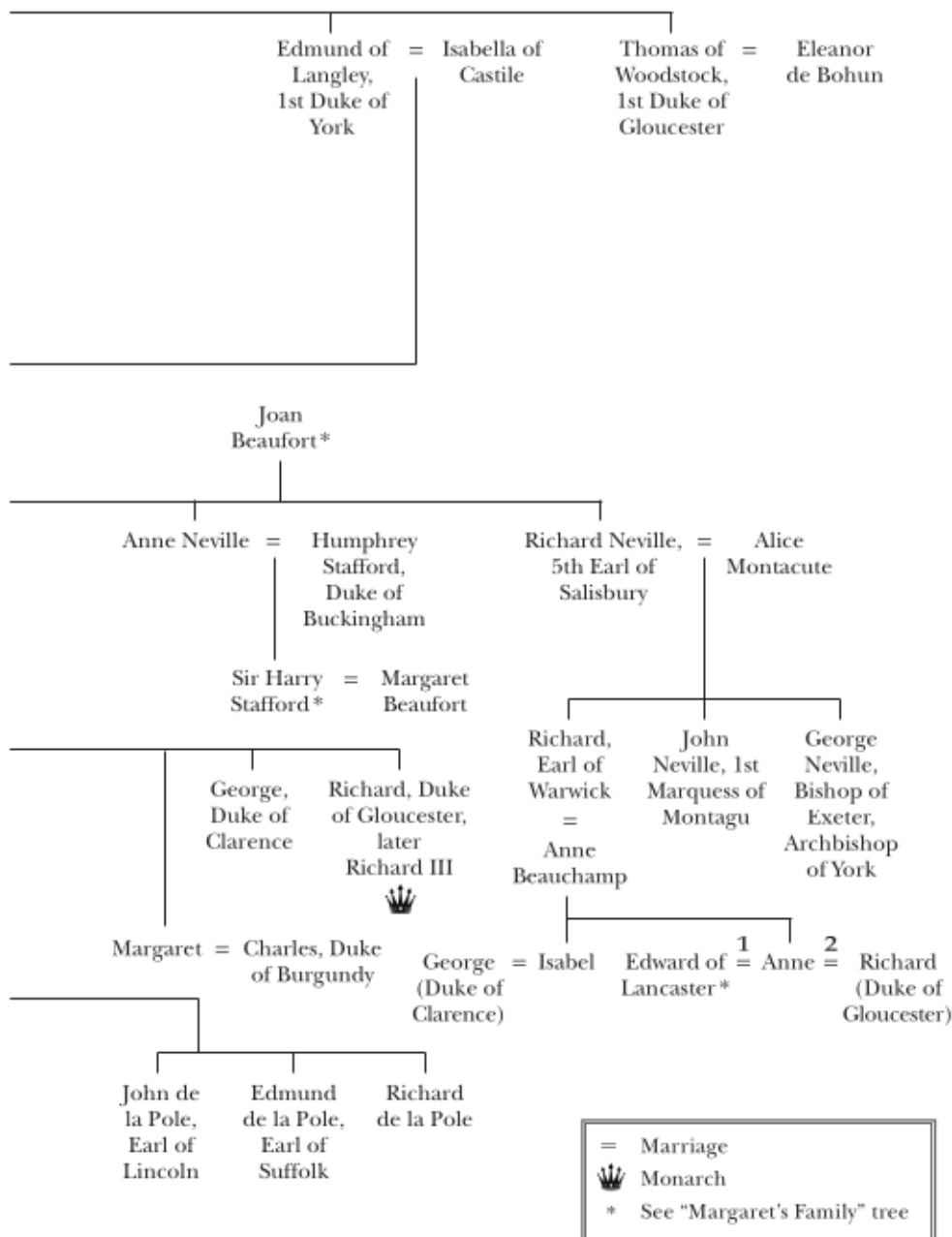
Katherine WOODVILLE, duchess of Buckingham and Bedford (1457/8–97). Younger sister of Queen Elizabeth, her marriage was arranged to Henry, duke of Buckingham – a union he found socially disdainful. A second arranged marriage (this time to Jasper Tudor) appears to have been even less affectionate.

Richard, duke of YORK (1411–60). The proud and ambitious York was acutely aware of his status as Henry VI's closest adult heir. He was on the point of gaining the throne when killed in battle.

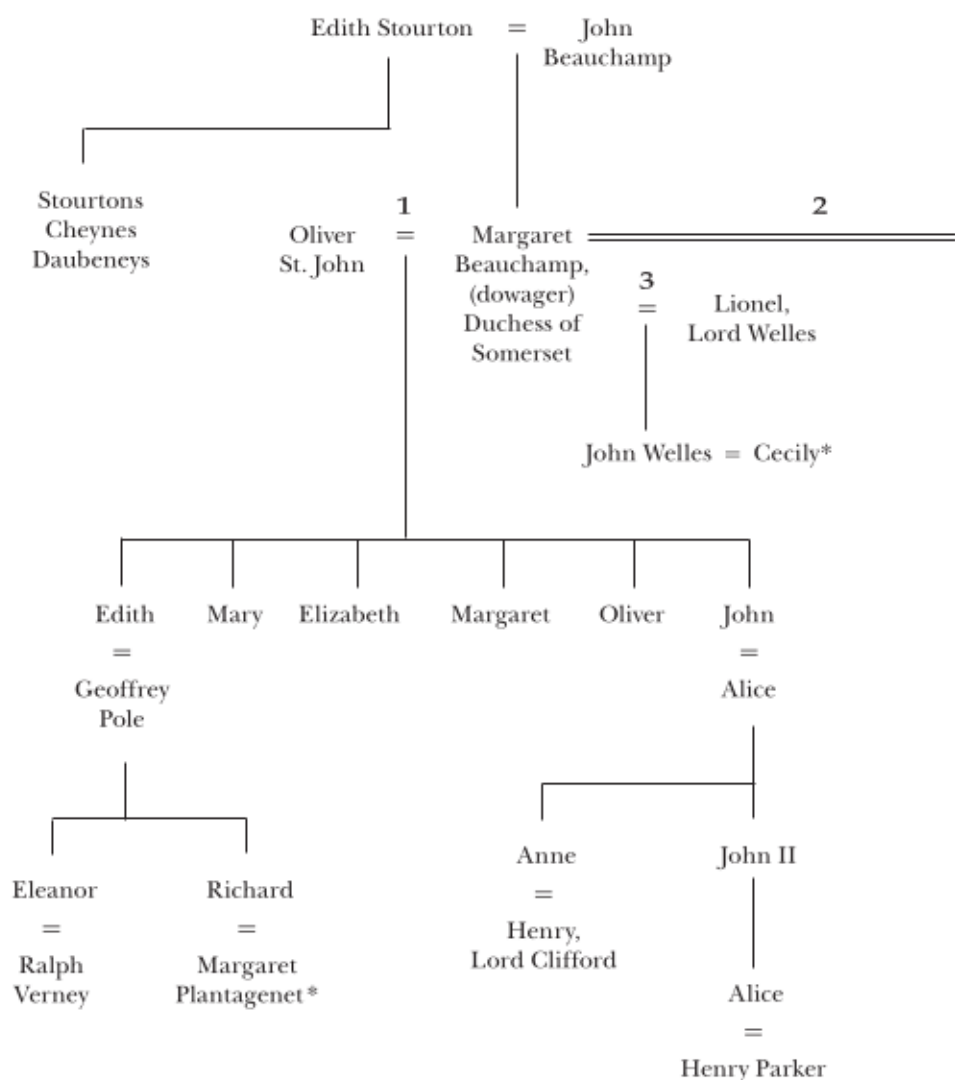


House of York





Margaret's Family

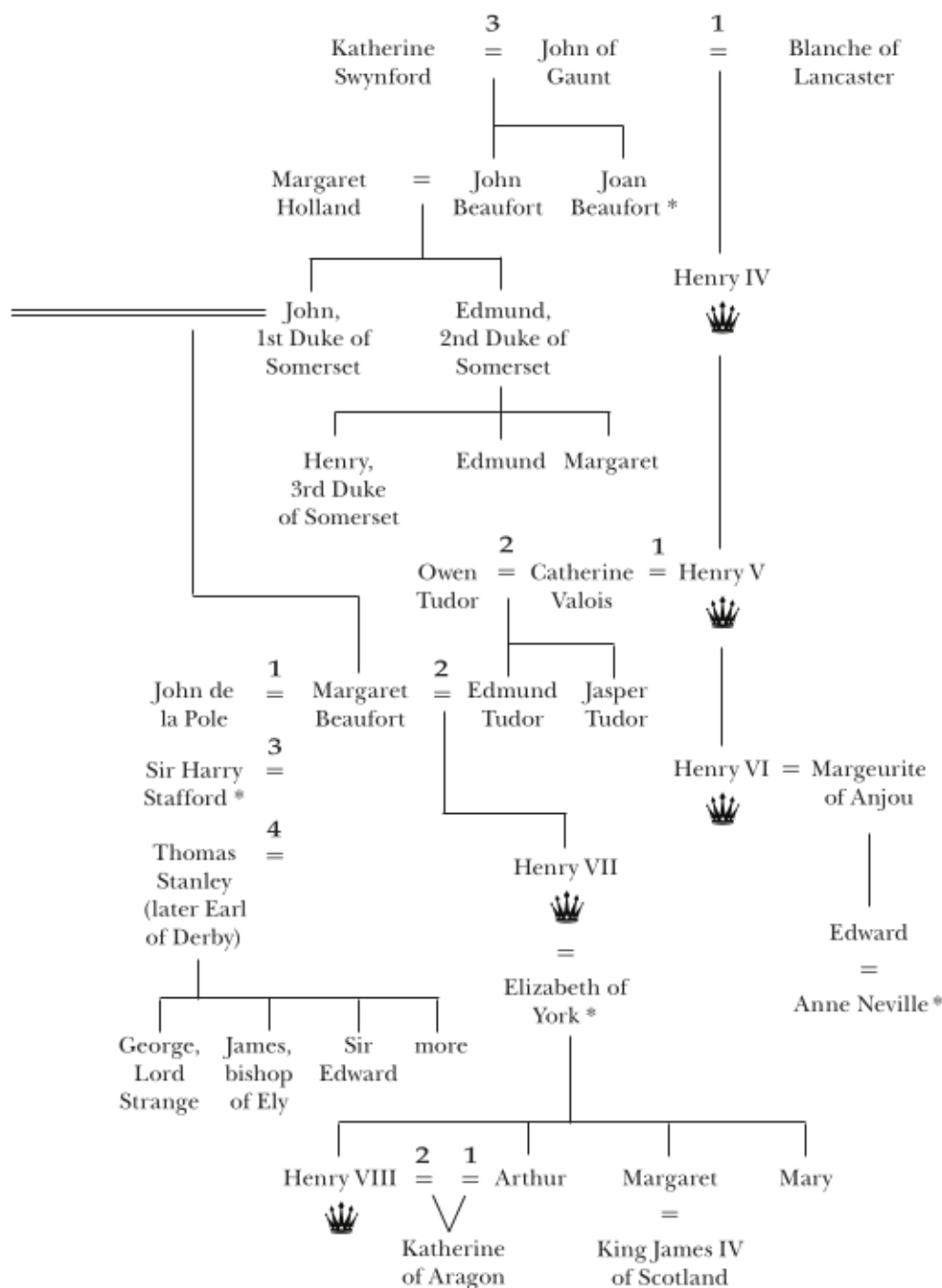


= Marriage



Monarch

* See "House of York"



Prologue



Five hundred years after she died, she lives. So diminutive in life, here she is transformed, painted inside an almost two-metre frame. The prayer book in front of her lies unclasped on a pillow, the carefully written Latin text opening with a red circle ‘O’, perhaps: *Obsecro te* (I beseech thee) or *O Intemerata* (O undefiled one). She, too, is conspicuously undefiled, her hair bound up in a white headdress, her body swathed in black fabric that merges into the shadows on the floor. Her only visible features are a benign face, gazing into the next world, and a pair of pale hands studded with gold rings, lightly pressed together in supplication.

She is pious. She is rich. She is old. All three qualities stand testament to incredible good fortune – and her own formidable persistence. Pushing seventy, she has far surpassed the thirty-something life expectancy of most of her contemporaries. Repeated childbearing, the desperate thrusting quest for an heir, carried away many of the women she knew at a young age. Beyond the misfortunes of being female and aristocratic – a sorry combination – there were the specific calamities of her own existence. Born into a century of conflict, and deprived of her father while she lay in her crib; she was married at twelve, widowed and in labour at thirteen; her only child born into a plague-stricken war zone. Then two more husbands followed and, like so many women struggling to assert their rights against a predatory ruling regime, she conspired and rebelled, not once or twice but ultimately four times. She would become the mother and grandmother of kings,

part of a usurping dynasty whose rivals were legion and whose tragic pattern of infant mortality deprived it of heirs.

Yet none of this experience is conveyed by the painting of the nun-like figure beneath her golden canopy of estate.

She is pious. She is rich. She is old.

But how did she get that way?

THIS PORTRAIT OF MARGARET BEAUFORT, MATRIARCH OF THE Tudor dynasty, hangs in St John's College, Cambridge. At 180 cm tall by 122 cm wide, it is one of the earliest large-scale portraits of a single individual in the country, and the first of its size of any Englishwoman. Other surviving portraits of contemporary women show them alongside men or accompanied by religious figures. But in this portrait Margaret Beaufort is, exceptionally, alone. Her solitariness makes this an utterly misleading image. For in life, Margaret was almost never physically alone – at prayer, she was with a confessor or priest; asleep, she was attended by ladies of the bedchamber or occasionally, one presumes, a husband – and her world was constantly peopled. Her dependents were almost beyond counting: almspeople, servants, solicitors, petitioners, tenants, farmers, retainers. Unlike in her portrait, Margaret would never have been viewed in life divorced from her surroundings, or from other people. Context is key to understanding Margaret Beaufort – to making sense of how she emerged from a period of terrible warfare, against the odds, to assume her unassailable position of authority in the dawn of the Tudor age. Too often, Margaret has been viewed through a lens of exceptionalism – and she was in many ways exceptional. She would not be such an interesting topic for a biography were she not. But emphasising that exceptionalism can be misleading. We need to repopulate her world to find the real woman behind the painting.

This is not the first biography of Margaret, and I must acknowledge my debt to the work of Margaret's historians who came before me. However, one element has been consistently missing from Margaret's story: her womanhood. Not just her

status as a woman, but her place in a network of women that extended across generations, counties and ultimately international borders. Historians have been obsessed with Margaret's relationship with her only (male) child – which is fair enough, since Margaret was obsessed with him too – but the Wars of the Roses suffer from this androcentric myopia: we recite the battles that men won or lost, we scroll through the parliamentary rolls that only men wrote. The challenge of locating women in an era when female identity, and especially autonomy, is often concealed and sometimes eradicated hardly needs reciting. Married women were so 'covered' by their husband's existence that they were forbidden to write wills – bequeathing *their* possessions – without said husband's permission.

But the past decades of research by diligent and patient historians have revealed, time and again, the presence of women in our archives. The issue has not been a lack of evidence of women's activities, but a failure to read the sources in a way that revealed them. We can too easily forget that when men rode to war, they did so having discussed their choice with their female relatives, especially the wife who would be most immediately affected by that choice. We can be so befuddled by the intricacies of legal or accounting sources that we do not investigate the subtle ways in which women protected themselves and their loved ones from deprivation. A suit for illegally escheated jointure is less immediately enticing than hearing about someone being hacked to death in battle, but for fifteenth-century survivors the former was likely to be much more important in the long term. We can even sometimes forget that, because men were so often absent making war or attending court, it was women who actually did the hard work of running their homes. 'Homes' in this context potentially meant mile after mile of land, servants in the household, tenant farmers working the land, travellers using the roads or bridges they maintained, merchants supplying their provisions and fellow Christians being baptised, married or buried in the churches they supported.

All of this was understood implicitly by Margaret Beaufort. She was acutely aware of her responsibility as a 'lord' – in her case, a female lord – to her dependents, and she learned that responsibility

from the women around her. She passed on her knowledge to her daughter-in-law, her sister-in-law, her granddaughters, her servants, her cousins, distant relatives and friends. It would be ridiculous to insist that Margaret existed in female isolation. She actively chose to live a public life, which meant in many ways a male life. Her senior servants were men, as too were many of the leading influences in her life – but not all. By interpreting Margaret as an anomaly, whether the Perfect Pious Patron or the original Mother-in-Law from Hell, we have done her and her contemporaries a huge disservice. We need to restore Margaret to the world in which she lived. A world that was half female.

Margaret has enabled us to do this because of the extraordinary resources she left, which have been preserved by archivists for five centuries, particularly her household accounts. The years where we lack these accounts – frustratingly, the very years that marked her political ascendancy – are desperately bare by comparison. These sources reveal her personal networks and concerns like nothing else. They humanise a woman who can otherwise appear monumental.

Margaret's was a remarkable life, and it makes a compelling story. But it begins a century before the tree that provided the boards for her portrait was felled, when its branches still stretched to the sky and its leaves turned towards the sun.

It begins with a child born to grief.

Money, Time and Distance

BEFORE DECIMALISATION, ENGLISH MONEY WAS CALCULATED IN pounds, shillings and pence: twelve pennies made up a shilling, and twenty shillings (240 pennies) a pound. Where modern financial equivalents appear for sums, I have used the National Archives' Currency Converter.

Hours and minutes existed in the fifteenth century, but seconds did not. The year was measured in various ways and might begin on Lady Day (25 March), the accession date of the king (22 August for Henry VII), the date of election of the mayor

(in London chronicles), and occasionally from New Year's Day (1 January). All my years are dated from 1 January.

Distances have been calculated using Google Maps's 'walking' function. Where possible, I have checked the time taken for individual journeys against contemporary descriptions, particularly in Margaret's household accounts.

Names and Titles

IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY, NOBLEMEN AND -WOMEN WERE referred to by their highest-ranking title. Thus, Margaret was the 'Countess of Richmond' or 'my Lady Countess' until she became 'my lady the King's Mother'. Her own mother, Margaret Beauchamp, continued to enjoy the title 'Duchess of Somerset' even after she had married Sir Lionel Welles following the death of her husband the duke, and even though another duchess of Somerset (Eleanor Talbot-Beaufort) had stepped onto the political stage. Inevitably, this can cause confusion, especially in the tumultuous Wars of the Roses when titles passed between different families, depending on the whim of the ruling regime. The earldom of Pembroke, for instance, passed from Jasper Tudor to William Herbert, then back to Jasper, while later Charles Beaufort (aka Charles Somerset) was made Lord Herbert, despite not being a Herbert. Spelling was also inconsistent, with 'Richmond' rendered often as 'Rychemonde' and Elizabeth variously as 'Elysabet', etc.

In naming the historical characters peopling this book, I have therefore prioritised narrative clarity over strict historical accuracy. Thus, Queen Margaret of Anjou is called by her French name, Marguerite, even though this was not used in England during her queenship. Elizabeth Woodville continues to be given her birth name, even though she was at various stages of her life known as 'Lady Grey' or 'the Queen'. This helps distinguish her from her daughter (Princess) Elizabeth of York.

For nominal variety, the various dukes of Somerset are usually referred to by their Christian names (Henry/Edmund/John Beaufort) while the Yorkist princes take their ducal titles

(York/Clarence/Gloucester). In an era where Johns, Henrys, Richards and Margarets are legion, my choices are made for the ease of the reader – with all due apologies to any fifteenth-century aristocrats who are thereby demoted.

I

‘MOTHER OF THE KING’S
GREAT REBEL AND
TRAITOR’

I

‘The stain of so great a disgrace’¹



She was born on the feast day of St Petronilla the virgin, 31 May 1443. There could be no doubt of the day² for the birth was recorded in the family prayer book. Margaret could find the note in the calendar of saint days, under the flourished *Sanctis* in blue and red ink, right on the thin, red line that ended the month. ‘*Natale domine Margarete...*’ it began: ‘The birth of lady Margaret, daughter of the illustrious Lord John, duke of Somerset, Anno Domini 1443’. Four lines above, in darker ink, were scrawled: ‘Death of John, duke of Somerset, 27 May 1444’.³

Margaret’s birth and the death of her father – triumph and tragedy – were closely interwoven in the revolving calendar of family anniversaries. The family prayer book did not record the cause of his death but other contemporaries were less circumspect. The monks of Crowland, recipients of Beaufort patronage and well placed to know the truth, reported that John Beaufort had died by his own hand – a terrible sin for a Christian. Whether suicide or natural causes ended her father’s life, there was no denying that he died in disgrace. His disastrous military endeavours had damaged his pride and made his dishonour unbearable.

Therefore, even before her first birthday, Margaret Beaufort had been taught an important lesson in the transience and danger of fifteenth-century life. Joy was fleeting and honour all too easily destroyed. Even the highest-born were prey to the whims of Fortune. It was a lesson that Margaret never forgot.



LIKE ALL FIFTEENTH-CENTURY PRINCESSES, MARGARET'S SENSE of self-worth was rooted in her family history and it is impossible to understand her world without looking back at her family tree. It was in the footprints of her ancestors that Margaret placed her own halting steps and her bloodline determined how she was treated and which doors opened before her. In a court packed with noble families, the question of precedent – quite literally, who stood nearest the king and queen, who handled their clothes, who entered a room first – were symbols of power and jealously guarded. When precedent was ignored, it was not uncommon for blood to be spilled. Margaret would have been alive to the names and deeds of her ancestors, their tombs and heraldry, the records of births, marriages and deaths. So, while Margaret never knew her father, she would have known a great deal about him. Unfortunately, little of it was good.

John Beaufort was 'a man full of pride and self-importance', wrote the contemporary chronicler Thomas Basin, 'but in reality vain and incapable'.⁴ He was also crippled by a misplaced instinct for secretiveness, so anxious to keep his own counsel that he once told his soldiers that 'if the linen shirt on his skin learnt of his intentions, he would burn it'.⁵ By the time John Beaufort came to prominence, the Beauforts were already famed for their arrogance and avarice. Like all noble families they sought self-enrichment at the expense of their rivals and jealously guarded their good name and their reputation – that intangible, yet vital, fifteenth-century concept of honour. They had more cause than most for sensitivity to such concerns, for they were little more than royal bastards.

The roots of the Beaufort family lay in the illicit liaison of John of Gaunt, third surviving son of Edward III, and the Lincolnshire governess Katherine Swynford in the last decades of the fourteenth century. Both Katherine and John of Gaunt were already married to other people when their affair began in 1371 but that did not stop them producing a full nursery of children: three boys and a girl. The children were given the honorific surname 'Beaufort', after part of John of Gaunt's estate in northern France. This neatly

distinguished them from John’s legitimate children, who took their name from his Lancastrian estates.

It was only in 1396, when both his and Katherine’s spouses were dead, that John took the unusual step of legitimising their offspring by marrying his mistress. Contemporaries blinked in surprise at the decision, not least because John and Katherine’s eldest child was by then twenty-four years old. However, although John of Gaunt persuaded both the Pope and the English parliament to retrospectively legitimise his Beaufort children, the taint of bastardy lingered, especially for their eldest son, Margaret Beaufort’s paternal grandfather, John the elder. He had been born before Katherine was widowed and while a nobleman’s adultery could be winked at, a woman’s was more troubling. Thanks to the timing of his birth, there was an uncomfortable possibility that John the elder was not a Beaufort at all, but a Swynford.⁶

The Beauforts’ royal half-blood was another sensitive issue. In 1399, John of Gaunt’s legitimate heir – and the Beauforts’ half-brother – Henry of Lancaster usurped their cousin, Richard II, of the house of Plantagenet. The unpopular King Richard was starved to death in Pontefract Castle and Henry IV assumed the throne as head of a new Lancastrian dynasty. The Beauforts carefully fostered their loyalty to the new regime, but all the same, their close kinship made their status in the line of succession a delicate one – what if they grasped for the throne as their half-brother had done? To quell any such anxieties, in 1407, at their own request, the Beaufort royal rights were exemplified by parliament. A new clause was inserted into their statute of legitimisation, entitling the Beauforts to inherit from their parents but explicitly denying them ‘the dignity of the crown’ (*excepta dignitate regali*).⁷

Such circumspection was rewarded by the grateful Henry IV. By the time Margaret’s grandfather John the elder died in 1410, he had been created earl of Somerset, royal chamberlain and a chief counsellor of the king. So closely had Lancastrian and Beaufort fortunes entwined that John asked to be buried at Canterbury as close as possible to the tomb of his king. He left his widow, Margaret Holland, to bring up six children, including Margaret’s father, John the younger. Capable, intelligent,

and a patron of literature and religion, Margaret Holland knew that the best way to provide for her children's future was to maintain the Lancastrian alliance by the primary means at her disposal: marriage. Thus, in 1412 she remarried Thomas, duke of Clarence, younger son of Henry IV and brother of the future Henry V. After decades of uncertainty and illegitimacy, this royal match finally gave the Beauforts just cause for pride.

Out of respect for his wife, Thomas took his stepsons under his wing, and when he was appointed Henry V's second-in-command in Normandy, he chose to take the Beaufort boys with him.⁷ These were the glory days of the Hundred Years War and a good time for a young nobleman like John – then only fifteen – to test his military worth. In 1415, Henry V had won a momentous victory at the Battle of Agincourt, but there was little glorious about the campaigns that Thomas and the Beauforts endured. In 1418–19, Henry V laid siege to Normandy's capital, Rouen, for six months. As supplies in the city ran out, the citizens began to kill and eat their own pets: first horses and dogs, and eventually any rats or cats they could lay their hands on. In desperation, the garrison ejected all their women, children, sick and elderly, hoping that Henry V would let them seek refuge elsewhere. But Henry was not inclined to show mercy. The Rouennais citizens were forbidden to pass the English encampment, and cowered in the sodden ditches, slowly starving to death. The English besiegers fared little better. As autumn advanced towards winter, conditions were persistently wet and cold. John's eldest brother, Henry Beaufort, died on 25 November. When the English finally took Rouen on 19 January 1419, its streets were strewn with the dead and dying.⁸

John managed to escape these horrors, arriving in Rouen in late 1419 just in time to enjoy Christmas festivities with the royal court. That winter he and his younger brothers, Thomas and Edmund Beaufort, were knighted by Henry V himself. As the adolescent Beauforts stood proud in their red silken mantles before the

⁷ The duchy of Normandy in what is now northern France was contested between the kings of France and England.

king, they shared in the chivalric ideal of warfare.⁹ But this would be the highpoint of John Beaufort’s military experience.

What young warrior lords in training like John really sought was not a siege but a battle in the open, like Henry V had won at Agincourt. The English had gained a reputation for military prowess in the field and it was blithely assumed that they could triumph in any pitched battle with the French. On 22 March 1421, they had their wish. In a boggy marshland close to Baugé, in what is now the Pays de la Loire, John Beaufort and his stepfather, Thomas, intercepted a Franco-Scottish force and attempted to bar their route through Anjou. Not realising – or unconcerned by – the numerical disadvantage of his own forces, Thomas ignored his captains’ advice and launched a headlong assault on the enemy. His army was annihilated by Scottish archers and Thomas himself killed. It was the first time an English army had been defeated in battle in France for a generation. The seventeen-year-old John Beaufort was dragged from the battlefield into French captivity.

Margaret’s father had the unfortunate distinction of being the most valuable English prisoner of war in French control, and in the following years was reduced to the status of pawn in an international game of chess. His younger brother, Thomas, taken hostage in the same battle, was ransomed and released by 1430, but John remained in captivity for seventeen years – the longest imprisonment of any English nobleman in the entire Hundred Years War. His gaoler was Marie, duchess of Bourbon, whose own husband had been captured by the English at Agincourt and – ominously for John – died still an English prisoner twenty years later in 1434. Noble captives were treated well, kept under a form of house arrest as guests of their captors, and John had sufficient liberty to father a child, Tacyn, during his imprisonment. But he was a prisoner nonetheless and, as the years gnawed away his youth and his prospects, his position became intolerable. Despite the unfailing efforts of his mother and kinsmen, John began to despair of ever being freed. In 1427, six years into his captivity, he wrote to the English parliament of his sufferings and pleaded with them to secure his liberty. He was to remain a prisoner for another decade.¹⁰

It was late summer 1438 before John’s release was finally

secured. His ransom was set at £24,000, the entire value of his and his mother's inheritance combined.¹¹ He returned to England as a ghost from a lost age of military optimism, with a bastard daughter, crippling debts and a bitter sense of grievance against a world that had robbed him of twenty years of opportunity. He found England much changed. In 1422, John's cousin Henry V had died of dysentery, contracted during a siege of the northern French fortress of Meaux. For the past sixteen years, England had been ruled by a child: Henry's son, Henry VI, who had inherited the thrones of England and France before his first birthday. By the time of John's return, the young king was finally emerging from his minority and beginning to rule for himself, but there was little indication that he would become the towering warrior his father had been. The devout and virginal Henry VI had an almost pathological fear of conflict and promoted a peace policy that was completely at odds with the regime under which John Beaufort had grown up. Henry and his councillors reluctantly realised that war for the French crown could no longer be sustained. The English treasury was empty and the expense of campaigning on multiple fronts had ground the English commons into disobedience and lawlessness.

The dynamics of the Beaufort family had also changed during John's exile. He was now eclipsed by his last surviving brother, Edmund.^{*} Edmund Beaufort was a handsome military hero who once had a short-lived romance with Henry V's widow, Catherine of Valois. He was now married to the widowed heiress Eleanor Beauchamp, daughter of the earl of Warwick. By contrast, John's estate was so encumbered by his ransom that the only respectable bride he could persuade into marriage was a knight's widow who already had six children: Eleanor's distant relative Margaret Beauchamp of Bletsoe in Bedfordshire.[†] Margaret Beauchamp's first husband, Oliver St John, had died in France in 1437, but while her fortune may have been lacking, her strong personality was more than a match for her husband. She took pride in her noble

^{*} Their only other brother, Thomas Beaufort, had died at the siege of Louviers in 1431.

[†] Through Margaret's West Country relations she had connections to John's powerful uncle Cardinal Beaufort and also, distantly, to the Beauchamp earls of Warwick.

ancestry, and her experience of marriage and widowhood had made her a capable administrator with a keen sense of her rights at law. Her proven ability to bear children also gave John hope that he could promptly sire a legitimate heir of his own.¹² Together, John and Margaret set about stamping their authority on John's estates, so zealously that they immediately enflamed local tensions. John's neighbour, the Abbot of Crowland, lamented that no sooner was John back in the country than he was violently asserting his right to the manor of Market Deeping, which neighboured his wife's estates, levying illicit tolls, blocking roads and rustling cattle in order to undermine the abbot's local power.¹³

But, no matter how ruthlessly John harangued his neighbours, he could not wring enough money from his lands to make a dint in the debts he owed for his ransom. Not even close. When his mother died in 1439, she left him a substantial inheritance, but still he was humiliatingly poor. And, without money, his high birth counted for nothing. For impoverished noblemen in John's position there was really only one option. A mere five years after his release, he was forced to go to war again.

By 1443, very few lords remained willing to front the expense, effort and physical danger of long campaigns in France. Sensing an opportunity, John Beaufort offered to command a royal army himself – but demanded a high price for his services. He insisted on being promoted from an earl to a duke – the highest rank below prince – with accompanying lands worth 600 marks to maintain his estate.* He also haughtily demanded a command independent of the existing governor of English-held Normandy and France, Richard, duke of York, and the governments of the continental territories of Anjou and Maine, even though Maine had already been granted to his brother Edmund. There was some justification for John's high-handedness. For while he was negotiating with the crown, his wife Margaret Beauchamp was preparing to give birth to their first child. It was an anxious time for the prospective parents. Margaret Beauchamp had already lost one husband to the French wars and John knew well the bitter consequences of

* John had originally demanded lands worth 1,000 marks, but was bargained down.

imprisonment. Thus, the last demands he made of King Henry VI were to protect his wife and children in the event he did not return. John's illegitimate daughter Tacyn, who was probably living under Margaret Beauchamp's care by this point, was made a denizen of England, enabling her to inherit some of John's English lands. The bulk of his inheritance, however, John sought to safeguard for his and Margaret's legitimate, unborn child.¹⁴ The couple feared that, if John died, his heir would become royal property, their wardship sold to whoever happened to be in favour at court. So, John insisted that in the event of his death the 'keeping' of his heir would be granted to his wife Margaret 'since she should by nature have [the child] in more tenderness than any other creature'. The soft-hearted Henry VI agreed, since 'it should be to her too great an heaviness, the lack of her husband and also of her said issue'.¹⁵ Indeed, Henry agreed to every single one of John's demands. Confident he had done everything possible to protect Margaret and their children, John readied himself to take ship to France that summer.

But something was wrong. As artillery and ordnance were carried along the Thames towards the South Downs, where arms were stockpiled to ferry across to Cherbourg, John Beaufort failed to appear. Early in 1443 he had been sufficiently unwell – 'diseased and not in bodily health' – that the king had dispatched councillors to investigate if he was up to the task of commanding an army.¹⁶ John had persuaded Henry of his capability, but, as the day of his departure neared, he prevaricated and made excuses, absenting himself from one muster after another. Before his army had even left the country there were rumours of financial malpractice and military misconduct.

It was an unusually hot summer and tempers flared as the king and his council tired of Beaufort's excuses. Finally, on 9 July, Henry VI sent an uncharacteristically acerbic last message to John: the king 'marvelleth greatly', he wrote, 'and not without cause the long abode of his said cousin on this side the sea... to the king's full great hurt, harm and charge'. Now he chastised John, 'all excusions ceasing', to lead his army to France within a fortnight or face extreme royal displeasure.¹⁷

In the midst of these anxieties, John's heir was born on 31 May 1443, possibly at Corfe Castle.¹⁸ No doubt to his disappointment, it was a girl. Daughters had an important place in noble powerplay due to their marriage potential, but they carried their estates to their husbands, away from the direct line of their fathers. Instead of a third generation of proud 'John Beauforts', John had to make do with another Margaret, no doubt named for John's wife and mother. It must have been hoped that, in the fullness of time, she would be supplanted by a male heir. In August, John finally left for France, swearing 'that he would do great and marvellous things'.¹⁹ It was a promise he could not keep.

IN THE NEW YEAR OF 1444, JOHN BEAUFORT RETURNED TO his family in the West Country, a ruined man. The disorder and ineptitude that had characterised John's preparations in England had worsened after he crossed the Channel. His army meandered through Anjou and Maine, apparently unaware of exactly what their plan of attack was. Some suspected that John's notorious secrecy concealed the fact that he really had no plan at all. This was not quite fair: his intention was clearly to force the French to meet his army in battle, but as autumn turned to winter, his bored soldiers began ravaging the countryside. John's sole military success was the seizure of the town of La Guerche, which was technically within the territory of England's ally the Duke of Brittany, and therefore incited a major diplomatic incident. A fruitless siege of the neighbouring town of Pouancé was abandoned and, by December 1443, John admitted defeat and marched his army back to England, apparently trusting to the king's gentle nature to forgive him for such a futile and costly campaign.

John had hoped that this military campaign would restore his fortunes but instead he was banished from court, a figure of mockery and derision. There were even whispers that he would be charged with treason.²⁰ The ill health from which he had suffered a year earlier returned. It was not uncommon for noblemen

confronted with public falls from grace to suffer sudden, terminal declines, and the chronicler Thomas Basin believed this was what ailed John: 'He took such chagrin at [his disgrace], that his petulance and pride could not support such criticisms and he fell sick.'²¹ On 27 May 1444, four days before his daughter Margaret's first birthday, John Beaufort died.

To die in political disgrace was bad enough, but rumours soon circulated that John had taken his own life. The chronicler of Crowland Abbey, which had so recently endured John's mercenary attentions, reported:

The noble heart of a man of such high rank... was moved to extreme indignation, and being unable to bear the stain of so great a disgrace, he accelerated his death by putting an end to his existence, it is generally said; preferring thus to cut short his sorrow, rather than pass a life of misery, laboring under so disgraceful a charge.²²

If John had taken his own life, he would have been committing a felony. To kill yourself was to defy God's will; suicide was believed to have been the fate of the biblical arch-villains Judas and Herod, who languished in Hell. The goods of a suicide were confiscated under English law, including, grimly, the tool of suicide itself, but, most alarmingly for Christians, suicides were denied the rites and burial place of the Church.²³

If John had indeed hastened his end, his family must have concealed the fact, for he received burial in Wimborne Minster in Dorset, where a priest was paid £10 for two days of prayers for his soul. A small commemorative window was erected there in his honour.²⁴ Decades later, Margaret founded a chantry chapel and grammar school at Wimborne in memory of her parents. Perhaps, after all, the rumours of her father's suicide were no more than that. What was certain was that his surviving family would suffer from his death. When John died, the dowager duchess of Somerset was pregnant again and Margaret was still a baby. They both now faced an uncertain future.