

Margaret of France

I came to look at the life of Margaret of France courtesy of the wonderful Alison Weir, who asked me to speak on her for her Great Queens Tour 2015. As biographer of Eleanor of Castile I thought I would have no difficulty, but I rapidly realised I was wrong, for if very little is generally known about Eleanor of Castile still less is known about her successor Margaret of France. Indeed considering Margaret's life rapidly made me realise what an embarrassment of material there is about Eleanor!

For example much of the little there is about Margaret dates from after her death, and cannot be entirely trusted¹. So the best known verdict on Margaret – that she was “good without lack” comes in a chronicle 20 years after her death².

I must confess also that for many years I had an irrational dislike for Margaret of France – simply because she married “Eleanor's husband”. That is, of course, completely ridiculous, since poor Margaret had no choice in the matter at all and after studying her rather more closely I have come if not to admire her, to like her. But, for reasons which I hope will become apparent, “poor Margaret” is how I have come to think of her.

Oddly, there are some interesting parallels between Margaret and Eleanor. We have a birthdate for neither. Both carried the Castilian bloodline. Both were the products of their father's second marriage. Both lost their father at a young age. Both came under the direction of an exceptional older brother. Both were effectively “sold” into an arranged marriage.

But in many ways Margaret's story points up how very lucky Eleanor was. Eleanor's brother plainly cared for her as a person, and did his very best for her in making her marriage. He made a marriage to a boy of her own age, and he fought tooth and nail to get her a good financial settlement. He also played very fair with her family by marriage after that.

Margaret – well, as we shall see – not so much.

Margaret's life falls naturally into three chapters: Her background up till her marriage aged 20, the eight years of her marriage and the ten years of her widowhood

Margaret's childhood

We must obviously start with the question: Who was Margaret?

She was the daughter of Philip III “the Bold” of France and his second wife, Marie of Brabant. Philip was first married to Eleanor of Castile's cousin and contemporary Isabelle of Aragon, who died in 1274 after a horse riding accident led to a catastrophic late miscarriage on return from crusade.

After this tragedy Philip married Marie, the daughter of Duke Henry III of Brabant and granddaughter of Duke Hugh IV of Burgundy³. The first child of the marriage was a son, Louis of Evreux. There were then two further children, Margaret and Blanche. Being girls, no-one bothered to record their births.

¹ The Rishanger continuation is dated to 127 at earliest. Langtoft is contemporary, but often demonstrably wrong

² Robert Mannyng of Brunne 1338

³ A most distinguished bloodline, which was arguably superior in terms of proximity to Charlemagne to that of the Kings of France.

Margaret's date of birth is often given in books and online as either 1275 or 1282, but there is no evidence for either of these dates. The best information we have is that a chronicle records that she was twenty when she married Edward I on 10 September 1299⁴, which would mean that she was born sometime between 11 September 1278 and 10 September 1279. This is also consistent with the date at which she first appears in the chronicles – around 1294 when she would have been around fifteen – prime marriageable age in the thirteenth century.

In fact we know nothing of Margaret from contemporaneous sources until her marriage started to be considered, so her childhood is completely unknown and we must work from inference.

We do know that Philip III died in October 1285 when Margaret was probably six. At the time he was on campaign during his war with Aragon and he had been gone for the best part of a year before his death. Therefore we can be pretty sure that Margaret will not really have seen him much after her sixth birthday.

On Philip III's death Margaret's seventeen-year-old half-brother acceded as Philippe IV. This was not good news for Margaret. Philip IV may have been a great King of France, but he had real issues forming emotional ties. This was perhaps not surprising given that he had been left behind aged 4 when his parents went on crusade and his mother never returned. It appears that he hated his stepmother, Margaret's mother, whom he blamed for his elder brother's death and whose superior bloodline made him uneasy⁵. Whether motivated by this hatred, or just by his general lack of emotional range, the chronicles do record that he showed his step siblings less distinction than he should have. Margaret's later attempts to gain his approval may have been rooted in the insecurity naturally consequent on this treatment.

We do not know what sort of education Margaret received – there is no material comparable to that about Eleanor's childhood. Again therefore all is inference. Margaret's later patronage of a chronicler suggests, that as might be expected of a princess brought up in Europe's foremost university city, she will have had a reasonably good education. But at the same time, there is no suggestion, for her, of serious academic interests. And as a northern European princess, she was unlikely to have grown up with the same expectation of active property management that was developed in Castilian princesses.

One thing that we do know that in later years she was emphatically Capetian – whether by reason of indoctrination by Philip, or simply as a reaction to her "poor relation" status, we don't know.

Margaret will almost certainly have met Edward I for the first time in summer 1286, when she was eight, and he was forty seven. He was visiting Paris en route to Gascony to conduct peace negotiations with Aragon, and was accompanied by his adored wife Eleanor. But otherwise we know nothing further until Margaret appears out of nowhere in 1294, when she was about fifteen in the context of marriage plans.

The story of the marriage is almost impossibly tangled, because it intersects with the power struggle which arose in the early years of Philip IV's reign. Maybe for this reason a romantic version, which involved Edward being in love with Blanche, was invented by a chronicler and forms the popular

⁴ Liber de antiquibus legibus

⁵ Philip's older brother Louis died suspiciously close in time to the birth of Margaret of Brabant's son. Phillips p 45

version of the background to Margaret's marriage. But the details of that story really do not stack up. What the verifiable facts suggest is essentially a political story⁶.

The starting point is that French relations with England were at a low ebb. There had been complex rows for years about the feudal duties owed by the English kings for their French lands – some lands were held on different terms to others for example. At least one person high in the French councils wanted relations to be worse, not better. This was Charles of Valois, Philip's uncle.

He had been chosen by the Papacy to be King of Aragon in the 1280s, when the Aragonese kings were excommunicated for seizing the Papal fief of Sicily from Philip III's uncle Charles of Anjou. Charles of Valois had (unsurprisingly) rather liked the idea of being a King. But the plan had gone wrong because Edward I, who had married his eldest daughter to the real King of Aragon, pulled off a great diplomatic coup, aided by his status as Europe's most successful King, and reconciled Aragon to the Papacy. In Charles' mind therefore Edward had cost him a crown and was his enemy for life.

Philip IV was not (as Malcolm Vale notes) too keen on Edward, either. Edward was annoyingly highly regarded, with French knights seeking knighthood at his hands rather than their king's. Thus, he too was keen to take Edward down a peg.

In 1294 a pro-English team of Queen Marie (now aunt in law to one of Edward's daughters), Edward's brother Edmund of Lancaster and his wife Blanche and Blanche's daughter Jeanne, Philip's queen, thrashed out a rather promising deal on the issue of English held territories. Edward would formally hand Gascony back to Philip, and it would then be re-granted to him on agreed terms – thus there would be no arguments over past ambiguities⁷.

The deal would be sealed by two marriages: Margaret should marry Edward I, and her sister Blanche should marry his son Edward. Although it was suggested by some later chroniclers that Edward's interest in remarriage was all about his lust for a young bride, the reality is he needed another son – only one of his, young Edward, survived, and he was not out of the danger age yet. Moreover Edward needed peace with France, to enable him to concentrate on Scotland. In fact the story that Edward would not sign up without some sort of portrait of his potential queen – and this smacks more to me of reluctance than keenness.

But however promising the deal, in the background the anti's - a powerful lobby - were not happy, and they saw a chance. Charles and his team⁸ managed to engineer a situation where the property handback was done – and France then refused to re grant the territories, citing historical arguments about breach of feudal duties.

So war, not love, became the order of the day. The betrothal of Edward junior to Margaret's sister Blanche was terminated, while Edward I's own marriage to Margaret was cancelled; or at least put on ice, as realistically some accommodation had to be reached, Edward still needed a spare heir, and no alternative marriage was proposed for Margaret. So while Blanche was disposed of to Rudolf of Austria, the son of Albert King of Germany and his wife Elizabeth Queen of Hungary and Bohemia, poor Margaret stayed at court awaiting the outcome of the war.

⁶ See Prestwich Edward I pp. 377-381, Morris Great and Terrible pp 267-8

⁷ The deal was of course wildly simplistic and would never have been sanctioned by Edward's Chancellor Robert Burnell, a very subtle lawyer and accomplished politician. Sadly however he had died shortly before.

⁸ Whether Philip IV was part of this team or was effectively trapped by them continues to be the subject of debate. Kathryn Warner (Edward II, The Unconventional King) favours Philip's active direction.

This rumbled on until May 1299 when a new treaty was agreed. Under this treaty Edward would marry Margaret, and his son would marry Isabelle, the daughter of Philip IV. While the latter match, and the return of Gascony, was not finally settled until 1303, Margaret's marriage was rushed on. After all, Edward was now sixty, and needed that spare heir urgently – just in case anything went amiss with young Edward.

So we arrive at Margaret's marriage in 1299. That is about all we know about her youth.

At twenty, she had already lived more than half of her allotted span

The Queen

The marriage of Margaret to Edward took place at Canterbury Cathedral on 10 September 1299 – 2 days after her arrival at Dover.

According to some accounts the wedding was followed by several days of elaborate feasts and a tournament at which most of the major earls and barons were guests. However one later account⁹, which suggests an elaborate Arthurian theme, has to be treated with caution, as it appears to be a "cut and paste job" from Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of Arthur's coronation feast¹⁰. And another similar account of an Arthurian extravaganza is riddled with obvious errors¹¹.

But certainly, however splendid the celebration one cannot but feel sorry for Margaret, who had to depart her homeland to marry a stranger who was, it should be recalled, not just forty or so years her elder, but also six years older than her own father - and her father's cousin to boot (since Philip III's mother was the sister of Edward's mother).

What is more, on the subject of the age gap, Edward even had daughters considerably Margaret's elder. Eleanor, the eldest surviving daughter, would have been a full ten years older than her, but had died in childbirth a year before. The lively Joan, Countess of Gloucester, was often at court – and she was six years older than Margaret. So too, rather more often than her professed status as a nun would seem to permit, was Mary, Margaret's close contemporary. Edward's youngest child, and heir, the future Edward II, was only five years Margaret's junior.

However while the set up facing Margaret does sound pretty awful one should not forget that Edward did have form as a very good husband, and this seems to have applied to his second marriage as much as his first.

He had always been good with gifts of jewellery; and as her wedding gift Edward I thoughtfully gave Margaret jewels which had once belonged to her great-grandmother Blanche of Castile, queen of Louis VIII: a gold crown, a gold coronet and a gold belt, all adorned with precious stones. He later bought her sixteen silver gilt cups¹².

Their first stop as a married couple was Leeds Castle, Eleanor of Castile's pet project, which was now given to Margaret as one of her dower properties. It was probably one of the most beautiful palaces then in existence, with its Gloriette floating above the enlarged lake, and with its lovingly designed garden, it was a gift to gladden any young bride's heart. The couple stayed there for a week before processing in easy stages to London.

⁹ Haines Edward II 20 re Rishanger

¹⁰ Phillips p 62

¹¹ Van Veltham

¹² Warner Marguerite of France blog post pt 2

Edward also seems to have been sensitive to the awkward age gap. Though the date of birth of Margaret's first child leaves no room for doubt that the marriage was consummated at once, Edward did his best to assimilate Margaret into her peers at the English court. So, when he departed for Scotland soon after this he escorted her to young Edward's household at King's Langley and Margaret apparently stayed there, in company with Edward, Mary and their friends and attendants until 20 November 1299¹³.

Part of the reason behind this was that Margaret was already pregnant, and for a first pregnancy relatively close supervision in the early months would have been deemed prudent. Joan would have been well placed to give good advice, since she already had a nursery full of children. Young Edward's household records paint a picture of a lively company, though. Plentiful supplies of fruit were brought from London. The count of Savoy's fool Henry provided entertainment, and the young people played dice – with Edward losing. Meanwhile, the apothecary Peter of Portugal supplied pomegranates and medicines for the queen and her ladies – very possibly for morning sickness on Margaret's part. Another apothecary supplied 12 pounds of sugar for the households. We know that Margaret was still attended by at least one French lady – Agnes de St Croix – possibly her midwife.

It seems likely that Margaret remained in company with Edward junior until Christmas, for they both are reported at Windsor¹⁴ when the King returned at the end of January 1300. After this the two Edwards and Margaret together visited the shrines of Canterbury, where young Edward made an offering on behalf of the royal baby.

By this stage even if she had been suffering from morning sickness, Margaret was fit enough to follow Eleanor of Castile's example and set forward to travel north with Edward when he departed in mid April 1300. However, as a belated honeymoon the trip must have lacked a little something, since the route chosen by Edward followed the route of the Eleanor crosses which he had raised in honour of his beloved first wife. All of these were now completed, featuring splendid figures of Eleanor in a variety of speaking poses – and many showing her crowned and with a sceptre – a distinction Margaret was never to be granted.

Margaret kept company with Edward until 5 May, when the party reached Stamford. There they parted – Edward to make one of his habitual speedy tours of the fen country's shrines, seeking aid for the forthcoming campaign, and the baby, before heading at a good pace into Yorkshire for the muster. Meanwhile Margaret moved slowly towards her destination, Cawood Castle near York, where her confinement was to take place.

This set up broadly mirrored that which would have taken place in previous years, when Eleanor of Castile accompanied Edward to within a very short distance of battle, so as to be constantly reachable by him. However Eleanor, pregnant or not, tended to travel with Edward at his pace, rather than adopt a separate, slower, itinerary as Margaret did.

If all had gone to plan Margaret would have reached Cawood at the start of June, with ten days or so to spare before her due date. But in fact she went into labour prematurely late in May – a little short of nine months after the wedding – and reputedly while hunting. She was forced to stop at Brotherton, a manor owned by the Archbishop of York. There, on 1 June, after a difficult labour, her

¹³ Phillips pp81-2

¹⁴ Rishanger 401

first son was born, and named Thomas, after the Plantagenet family saint, upon whom she had called in her labour.

Edward rushed to his new wife's side to congratulate her, and the child was baptised, probably in the nearby church conveniently dedicated to the other Plantagenet patron saint Edward the Confessor.

The arrival was greeted with general rejoicing. Sixteen-year-old Edward of Caernarfon, who had never known any of his brothers, seems to have been delighted at the birth of his half-brother: he gave twenty pounds to the messenger who brought him the news, and generous gifts to the baby's nurses¹⁵. One of these was a wet nurse, Jeanne, who had apparently come from France at the queen's request. This indicates that Edward had continued to allow his young wife compatriots around her for the period of her pregnancy at least – another example of sensitivity which was not always followed by his successors.

But with war with France still very possible, it was considered important to rebrand this substantially French baby as a good British product, and Jeanne was soon dismissed in favour of an English wet nurse. Though Margaret, the concerned first time mother, had a doctor check the quality of the milk was up to scratch!

Young Thomas was set up in considerable luxury with two cradles draped with scarlet and blue fabric and made up with linen sheets and fur coverlets with a decorative cloth of gold top cover and Margaret treated herself to a new fur trimmed scarlet robe for her purification.¹⁶

Again true to Edwardian form, Margaret was not long in becoming pregnant again. After the couple being together from September to November 1300, her second son, Edmund, later earl of Kent, was born on 5 August 1301 at the royal manor of Woodstock. It is likely that Margaret had remained in the North with Edward until shortly before the birth – certainly she and the baby had spent Christmas with Edward at Northampton and she is recorded with him at Kenilworth in April.

After this we can only glimpse her itinerary briefly.

It likely that she did not return north with Edward after the birth of Thomas of Woodstock, for in October 1301 she was with the boys and her step daughters Mary and Elizabeth at Hereford, Elizabeth's future home, and there is another letter from Elizabeth reporting the same group at Chichester. Edward's discharge of her (substantial) debts to merchants in early 1302 suggest that she hit the shops with a vengeance during this period with his daughters!

However by Christmas 1301 she had rejoined Edward at Linlithgow¹⁷. Margaret then appears to have travelled with Edward in the south for about a year, before heading north again in mid 1303 – we find her in Tynemouth in June 1303 while Edward moved into Scotland. Margaret seems to have joined him for Christmas 1303 at Dunfermline¹⁸ - and then returned to Tynemouth early in the new year, ready for the birth of her daughter, Eleanor, born on 4 May 1304 when the king was a few weeks shy of his sixty-seventh birthday. She was, of course, named for Edward's beloved first wife. Little Eleanor was betrothed at a mere four days old to Robert of Burgundy, the son and heir of Othon IV, count of Burgundy and Mahaut, countess of Artois – a fairly stellar match.

¹⁵ Hilda Johnstone, *Edward of Carnarvon 1284-1307*, p. 46 Kathryn Warner *Edward II blog Marguerite of France* pt 1

¹⁶ Prestwich p 131

¹⁷ Morris p. 336.

¹⁸ Langtoft

Throughout late 1304 and throughout 1305 into early 1306 Margaret seems to have travelled at Edward's side mostly in the southern counties¹⁹. During this period we find that Margaret's sister Blanche had died, and Edward, ever the considerate husband, ordered prayers said for his consort's sister. But no husband is perfect - and his reported verbal comfort may have fallen a little short on the sensitivity scale. He said that she shouldn't grieve now, as Blanche had been as good as dead for years, since she was married to a German²⁰. One notable feature of the period was Edwards provisions for Margaret to watch the bombardment of Stirling Castle with Greek Fire – he had a large new window inserted into her rooms to give her a good view.²¹

Margaret was certainly at Edward's side for the last great set piece of the reign – the knighting of young Edward, and most of young Edward's friends on 22 May 1306. Little expense was spared. The king purchased eighty rolls of scarlet and other coloured cloth, 2500 yards of linen and 5000 yards of canvas. During the banquet after the knighting, four lengths of gold-threaded cloth were hung on the wall of Westminster Hall behind Edward I and his son. The bill for minstrels cost Edward I £130, more than three times the minimum annual income for knighthood. Margaret, still uncrowned, had a circlet of gold made for her to wear to this event.

Margaret would also have attended the wedding of young Eleanor de Clare, the King's eldest granddaughter by Joan to Hugh Despenser "the Younger" - then heir presumptive to the earldom of Warwick - four days later.

But when Edward set out for the north again in mid 1306 Margaret remained behind at Winchester²². It is likely that the last that she saw of Edward was when he left Winchester in mid May 1306, his health already starting to give way. After years of rapid horseback transits the sixty six year old king was carried in a litter – an indignity to which he can have been driven only by dire necessity.

While away Edward wrote often to check Margaret was in good health, and it appears she did suffer from some illnesses in this period. On one occasion her physician asked the King for permission to bleed her. On another she was suffering from measles, and Edward sent instructions that made clear – or as he put it – by God's thigh – she was not to travel until fully recovered²³.

This concern is consistent with his treatment of her generally, which seems to have been very kindly and indulgent. The records show repeated instances of her interceding for wrongdoers, or people in need of a financial favour from the Crown, and of her intercessions bearing fruit. More touchingly, he called his new yacht the Margaret of Westminster after her.

What is more, Edward made increased grants to her, to give her more independent cash in hand, since, despite having been able, thanks to her predecessor, to enter into her dower on marriage, Margaret regularly outspent her income. So in 1303 her dower was supplemented with new properties. Among these was Berkhamstead Castle, which became a favourite with her. Also in 1305 Edward added to the financial provision made for Margaret by assigning her further properties worth over £400 per year including Grimsby (previously part of Eleanor of Castile's dowry) and properties near Northampton including King's Cliffe. From time to time he made her other grants

¹⁹ Though not entirely so: SC 1/31/184 shows that they were apart on 2 May 1305.

²⁰ Chaplais Some Private Letters of Edward I pp 82-5

²¹ Morris p 343

²² Phillips p 112

²³ Prestwich p 130

such as fines for misuse of the park of Camel –or the revenues of Axbridge and Cheddar. The vast majority of grants are grants of land acquired previously by Eleanor, part of what was to become known as the Terre Regine²⁴.

He also made considerable provision for their children. Although it was sometimes stated in Edward II's lifetime, and still is nowadays, that Edward I had intended the earldom of Cornwall for one of his sons by Marguerite, there is actually no evidence for this. But in a document which the king drew up in August 1306 when he was ill at Hexham Abbey it is stipulated, by reference to the dower document that Thomas should receive the earldom of Norfolk and Edmund unspecified lands worth 7000 marks a year, with no title mentioned. Young Eleanor was to have a dower of 10,000 marks for her dowry and 5,000 for her trousseau.

Other signs of her standing with Edward are that he also made provision for her interest in hunting – arranging for venison to be stocked in locations preferred by her and the fact that he sent plenty of bream and eels to her household – it would seem that Margaret was particularly fond of fish. He also granted her some houses for her favourite minstrel Guillot²⁵

He thought of her even as he neared death himself: In June 1307, Margaret was obviously in residence at the Tower of London, for Edward made an order forbidding burning of kilns nearby “and the king wishes to avoid the dangers that may arise to her .. from the infection and corruption of the air by such burning of kilns”²⁶.

But Eleanor of Castile's ghost loomed large over them. Every year on 28 November, the anniversary of Eleanor's death, Edward would attend a sumptuous memorial service for Eleanor, taking with him all resident members of his family. These long services, thick with incense and dazzling with candlelight from elaborate structures built for the occasion were so lengthy that priests were apparently left exhausted by them. On one occasion, at York, Edward even made arrangements personally for the tolling of the memorial bell.

Margaret could therefore count herself lucky in the consideration and affection she had from her husband, but she can have been in no doubt that she was always far behind his dead first wife in his affections.

Of course Edward was far from Margaret's only point of contact, and it is interesting to ask how she got on with her family by marriage during this time. Broadly, the answer is very positive.

We saw that her relationship with young Edward got off to a good start, and it seems to have gone from strength to strength. He sent her a gold ring set with a ruby as a New Year gift in January 1303, and in the regnal year of November 1302 to November 1303 gave her, and members of her household, jewels, rings, cups and belts to the value of a little over fifty pounds²⁷.

She reciprocated by interceding for him with his father when the two had a particularly bad falling out in 1305 – caused by Edward's best friend Piers Gaveston²⁸. Edward's properties were confiscated for a time and Margaret is recorded as arranging for Edward to be allowed freer use of properties in July 1305. Her step daughter Joan asked her to petition the King to allow two favourites – one of whom was Joan's son and the other Gaveston, to return to his household.

²⁴ Phillips p 105

²⁵ CCR429

²⁶ CCR 539

²⁷ Warner Marguerite of France blog pt 2

²⁸ Phillips p 106-7

Another letter direct from Edward begs her to intercede, stating: " My lady, will you please take this matter to heart, and pursue it in the most gracious manner that you may, so dearly as you love us."

Margaret evidently did so, for on 1 September 1305 Edward sent her a charming thank you letter: "We thank you as dearly as we may for the difficulties which you have endured for us, and for the good nature which you have put into my affairs". The wording suggests she may have had to brave Edward senior's wrath to bring about the desired result!

And this is not an isolated incident: 8 other letters from Edward which survive address her in the friendliest way as "my very dear lady and mother" (*ma treschere dame e mere*)²⁹. We know too that in June 1306 Margaret was at Winchester where she was visited by young Edward – perhaps to thank her for his return to favour after the row of the year before.

Margaret also continued to fare well with other members of her adoptive family. Aside from her co-operation with Joan in the matter of Edward's row with his father, we can see that she had built bridges with another sister, Elizabeth, some four years her junior. She had been abroad at the time of Margaret's marriage, by reason of her own marriage to the son of the Count of Holland. But the young man died in late 1299 and Elizabeth was soon after at home again.

Her friendship with Margaret is demonstrated by that long visit together in late 1301 and supported by the fact that in 1302 and 1303, we find her jointly interceding with Margaret for a number of wrongdoers³⁰. What is more in 1303 Elizabeth named her first daughter after Margaret, in preference to her own mother - and they seem to have been together at Tynemouth at the time young Margaret's place of birth is given as Tinemue.

Margaret also interceded jointly with Mary on one occasion to secure a preferment for a favoured clergyman. And another sign of her close links to the princesses is that children from both of Elizabeth's and Joan's marriages were sent to be brought up in the royal nursery run by Margaret. So from 1301 Joan's son, Gilbert de Clare, was sent to join Margaret's household, before progressing to become a valet to young Edward. Later Elizabeth sent Margaret her second daughter Eleanor de Bohun to raise³¹.

But what of her relationship with her own children? Here I confess I had been expecting to find Margaret – a less busy woman than Eleanor – to be a mother who maintained much closer ties to her children. However the surviving records do not really support that theory.

The boys had a household set up for them in 1301, based mostly at Windsor and the records of that household show only intermittent visits by their royal mother – she was a regular visitor but not an habitual one, nor was she more than fleetingly a resident. We know that she sent presents, which indicates absence – including an iron birdcage³². But of course, much of the time she was away with Edward. However, we also know that she was not always with them when she was not with Edward in November 1306 she writes to them reporting on their father's health.

Of course, this doesn't mean she never saw them; for some of the time that Edward and Margaret were in the south the children were with their parents – from February to April and October to

²⁹ Warner Marguerite blog post pt 2 citing Hilda Johnstone, ed., *Letters of Edward, Prince of Wales 1304-5*, pp. 44-45, 73-74, 88-90, 111, 127; J.S. Hamilton, 'The Character of Edward II', in *Reign of Edward II: New Perspectives*, pp. 16-17

³⁰ CCR16

³¹ Warner Edward II

³² Prestwich p 131

November 1305 for example, and there are incidents where Margaret uses members of the boys' staff as messengers indicating that she may in fact have been resident in periods when she is not recorded in the accounts.

But allowing for the regular long visits which Edward and Eleanor made most years to Windsor and London, and which can only have happened in 3 years between 1299 and 1307, because of the amount of time in Scotland, and bearing in mind that Margaret accompanied her husband north for most of their marriage, Margaret may well have seen less of her children than Eleanor did.

In all this time, by the way, there is little sign of contact with her family in France. One visit by her mother Marie of Brabant and her brother Louis of Evreux was planned in the summer of 1305 but was cancelled.

However Margaret continued to operate as a channel for Capetian influence. In particular she was an active patron of the Franciscans or Greyfriars in London. She funded extensive rebuilding works there along the lines of the Cordeliers church in Paris and paid for a "St Louis" altar. She also apparently encouraged the writing of a French chronicle of London.

All in all, her performance as Queen seems to have been steady and conventional, if not exceptional, and her life appears to have been a relatively happy one.

Widowhood

Edward I died, aged 68, on 7 July 1307. This left Margaret a widow in her late twenties.

Widowhood was a stage of life which many medieval noblewomen found fulfilling and empowering – at last they had a chance to stand on their own feet, to run property and exercise their own influence. For Margaret all seemed set fair for just such a future – she was well dowered, she had three young children and she was on great terms with the new King. What could go wrong? Well, in broad terms, everything.

Almost at once Margaret disappears from the list of successful intercessors – a stark contrast with the dowagers before her and after her³³, who both became powerful intercessors. This indicates that her influence ended and was perceived to end very quickly indeed. The puzzle is why this should be.

There is no proven answer to this, but the story seems to me pretty clear, and it centres on two things – young Edward's dislike of being lectured³⁴, and his love for Piers Gaveston. Before his father was cold in his grave young Edward determined to make rich provision for Piers, who he regarded at the very least as a favourite brother, and the dearest person to him in the world. He decided to make him Earl of Cornwall – a quasi royal earldom previously held by Henry III's brother and Edward senior's double cousin.

Now this was a distinction which the chroniclers clearly expected to fall to one of Margaret's sons – young Edward's half brothers³⁵, and while there is no evidence Edward senior had formally promised it, it is one we can infer she wanted, since her favourite castle, Berkhamstead, was in the middle of the Earl of Cornwall's Hertfordshire lands, and had previously been held by the Earl. Thus it seems

³³ Eleanor of Provence and Isabelle of France

³⁴ As his father had so often done

³⁵ Weir p 419

more than likely that when Edward announced his intention, Margaret protested and argued that the earldom should go to one of her sons.

If so, this was hardly a clever move since she was reliant on Edward for much of her status and doing anything which might alienate him was a seriously bad move, resulting in not just the loss of overt royal favour and hence her status as an intercessor, but a hostility on the part of Gaveston which could only harm her. As soon as he was installed as Earl of Cornwall Gaveston seems to have campaigned for the castle of Berkhamstead to be restored to the Earldom; and it is indicative of the way the wind was blowing that the royal favourite married Joan's second daughter Margaret de Clare there in November 1307³⁶.

If royal favour was gone, what of her children? Sadly there was no good news here, either. The stumbling point is that Margaret was French, and the boys were, until 1312, the next heirs to the English throne. As such, they simply could not be brought up to be Capets. So there is no sign that they saw any more of their mother than before. Thomas and Edmund, who became very close to Edward II, were given their own household at Windsor until 1312, when Thomas was awarded the Earldom of Norfolk and an income of £4,000 a year³⁷. At this point young Edmund probably entered his brother's household. What is more Thomas appears to have resided largely in Norfolk – away from Margaret's properties - where he married a neighbour's daughter

Young Eleanor likewise had to be raised to represent England. She therefore seems to have been given to the abbey at Amesbury where Edward's daughter Mary was a nun, and which had a high proportion of noble girls being raised from a young age. Consistently with this she was buried under the aegis of Edward II at Beaulieu, not at her mother's favoured foundation of the Greyfriars, which was, essentially, "the royal princesses church" already host to Eleanor of Provence and her daughter Beatrice.

Which leaves Eleanor of Castile's favourite hobby – property management. But property management did not become an interest of Margaret's. Of course she was never going to match Eleanor of Castile here but her correspondence on this contrasts strikingly even with the active approach taken by the previous dowager Eleanor of Provence, who saw herself as a good squire to her dower lands and put herself out for her tenants, corresponding very actively in their interests. Margaret's correspondence suggests an interest in the revenues and not in the people represented by the lands.

Still, while life was not, for her, the fulfilling one of some dowagers, Margaret was not completely exiled from court. She was a necessary attendee at the wedding of Edward II to her niece Isabella of France in January 1308 in cathedral of Notre Dame at Boulogne³⁸. The wedding was a sumptuous affair involving Philip, his son Louis, King of Navarre, Charles King of Sicily and Naples, Margaret's mother Marie of Brabant, the King of Germany, young Edward's sister Margaret of Brabant and her husband and a variety of other counts and Dukes. It has been suggested that Margaret commissioned the beautiful Isabella Psalter for young Isabella's wedding gift, though it may also have been the gift of Edward³⁹. But more likely she gave Isabella a casket, now in the British Museum on which the arms of both queens appear⁴⁰.

³⁶ Warner Marguerite blog post pt 2

³⁷ CPR 272

³⁸ Warner Edward II

³⁹ Phillips p 134-5

⁴⁰ Weir, Isabella She-Wolf of France, Queen of England p 27

But after the wedding Margaret again made a serious misstep – she remained in France until March 1308, a fact which gave colour to the rumour that she had teamed up with Philip to fund the Earls of Lincoln and Pembroke against Gaveston in April 1308⁴¹. Whether true or not – and it frankly seems credible - Edward seems to have believed the rumour, since Margaret fell decisively out of favour from then⁴².

In particular he ordered the transfer of three of her key castles Berkhamstead, Devizes and Marlborough to the custody of Despenser and Gaveston and he also granted Gaveston rent from Hailes Abbey⁴³. These dower lands were only confirmed back to Margaret two years later, at the instance of the opposition lords, the Lords Ordainers⁴⁴.

One must assume that Margaret underwent some difficulty being deprived of such a portion of her dower lands for two years. Not the less because, as I have noted above, the records from her married years suggest she was no great manager of money. Indeed we see signs of her poverty – she went so far as to petition Parliament in 1310 about the revenues which were not being paid to her⁴⁵.

There was a certain degree of thawing for a while after this: in November 1312 Margaret was at Windsor with her brother Louis of Evreux for the birth of future Edward III⁴⁶. Though whether this was a happy visit is doubtful - Louis was there effectively to strongarm a deal between Edward and the barons following their execution of Gaveston – an act for which Edward would in reality never forgive them. It seems likely that in his mind Margaret was tarred with the same brush

So it is unsurprising that for the next five years we hear almost nothing of Margaret. It is often said that she failed to support young Queen Isabella by withdrawing from court⁴⁷, but it is more likely, given this back story, that she was simply not welcome at court any more. In fact we know that she did correspond with Isabella, thereby providing what support she could⁴⁸.

Meanwhile, we might well ask, where was her own support? Her brother Philip died in 1314, Joan of Gloucester had died days after her father in 1307. And most importantly her closest friend in England, Elizabeth, Edward's youngest daughter, who twice named daughters for Margaret, died in childbirth in 1316. Nor is there any sign of friends interceding for Margaret.

How did she occupy her time? It seems likely that before Elizabeth's death Margaret attended her in a number of her annual births and she was therefore probably often at the Herefords' houses. But otherwise little sign of her remains. Where we do see traces of her there are strong hints of financial difficulties. In April 1314 she asked the Archbishop of Canterbury for help in recovering debts due to her⁴⁹. She petitioned Parliament again in 1315 because one of the King's new grants basically deprived her of the revenues of Hereford⁵⁰, and things seem to have gone from bad to worse in October 1317 when Edward again confiscated her castles of Gloucester Leeds Odiham and

⁴¹ Weir p 43, Warner Edward II

⁴² Phillips p 149

⁴³ Haines, Weir p 43

⁴⁴ CPR 1307 216-9

⁴⁵ C 49/4/6, SC 8/126/6270, SC 8/60/2973 also shows she petitioned for proper provision for her sons.

⁴⁶ Weir p 70. She also attended the christening p 72. See also Warner Edward II.

⁴⁷ Weir p 36 cites the criticisms

⁴⁸ Weir pp 56, 59, 61, Warner, Edward II The Unconventional King also cites numerous examples.

⁴⁹ SC 1/35/131

⁵⁰ SC8/2/69

Berkhamstead⁵¹. They were to be surrendered to Edward's latest favourite, Roger Damory, on national security grounds. This suggests that Edward considered that Margaret was involved with Lancaster, who was then being particularly troublesome at this point. Contrary to some reports, there appears no sign of a regrant of these properties to her before her death. And of course again, losing property meant losing money.

By January 1318 Margaret was obviously short of cash, asking the king to ensure payment of a sum which he had granted her, apparently to make up for her loss of income out of these properties. Overall the picture which emerges is of a somewhat forlorn and hand to mouth existence.

Queen Margaret died on 14 February 1318, probably not yet forty years old, at her castle of Marlborough in Wiltshire⁵².

We do not know the cause of death. Edward senior's correspondence suggests that her health may not have been great and in those days fairly inconsequential things could carry one off. I confess that I see a real possibility that poor Margaret, uncherished, not in the best of health and short of cash, may have been carried off by something as trivial as flu, after a hard winter

There certainly seems to me to be a touch of guilt in young Edward's reaction. On 8 March, he sent two pieces of rich Lucca cloth to lie over her body, and sent six more pieces after it was moved to London shortly afterwards. He visited Margaret's remains at St Mary's Church in Southwark on 14 March, and attended her funeral at the Greyfriars Church the following day, purchasing six more pieces of Lucca cloth for himself and two pieces each for two other people, his sister Mary the nun and Sir Roger Damory, to wear. Isabella of France, then about six months pregnant with her and Edward's elder daughter Eleanor of Woodstock, also attended her aunt's funeral, apparently without the benefit of new Lucca cloth; forty years later she would be buried in the same church⁵³. Thomas and Edmund, aged seventeen and sixteen, were appointed executors of their mother's will⁵⁴. Margaret's tomb, as befitted such a generous patron of the church, was placed to the east before the altar⁵⁵

Margaret was survived by her brother Louis, count of Evreux, her mother Marie of Brabant, dowager queen of France, and two of her three children.

Her younger son Edmund, earl of Kent, was beheaded in March 1330 at the age of twenty-eight after plotting to rescue the supposedly dead Edward II from Corfe Castle; her elder son Thomas, earl of Norfolk, died aged thirty-eight in August 1338 after a very quiet public career.

But Margaret's life was not without influence; As Kathryn Warner notes⁵⁶ her granddaughters Joan of Kent (Edmund's daughter) and Margaret Marshal (Thomas's daughter) produced offspring from whom Margaret has numerous illustrious descendants including Richard II, all the kings and queens of England from Edward IV onwards; all the kings and queens of Scotland from James II (1430-1460) onwards; and three of Henry VIII's wives, Anne Boleyn, Katherine Howard and Katherine Parr

Poor Margaret may have led a sad life, but she became a key link in England's royal family.

⁵¹ CPR 1317-21 pp 38, 46

⁵² Weir p 115

⁵³ Warner Marguerite blog post pt 2

⁵⁴ Warner Edward II

⁵⁵ Weir p 374.

⁵⁶ Blog post part 2

