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Sorcery at court and manor: Margery Jourdemayne, the witch of Eye next Westminster

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Abstract

Margery Jourdemayne, the ‘witch of Eye next Westminster’, Eleanor, duchess of Gloucester, and three scholars of the ducal household were foremost amongst those accused of treasonable witchcraft in 1441. The paper explores Margery’s part in this episode, and then examines her background: her husband William came from a prosperous Middlesex yeoman family living at Acton, and he himself was a manorial official on Westminster Abbey’s Ebury (Eye) estate.

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One of the most sensational episodes of the mid-fifteenth century was the trial for treasonable witchcraft of Eleanor, duchess of Gloucester. As the wife of a royal duke, Humphrey of Gloucester, uncle to the young Henry VI, she not only moved in the highest circles but, since the king was still unmarried, was also amongst the first ladies in the land. In the summer and autumn of 1441 this scandal was probably the most widely-discussed issue in the country: all the fifteenth-century chronicles written in England, for example, mention it, as well as several

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ballad-writers.¹ Yet the duchess did not stand alone before the courts since four others were accused with her. Three of these were clerics: Master Roger Bolingbroke, a well-known Oxford scholar and member of Duke Humphrey's household who was Eleanor's personal clerk, John Home, canon of Hereford and St Asaph, chaplain and one-time secretary to both Eleanor and her husband, and Master Thomas Southwell, a physician who was canon of St Stephen's Chapel in the palace of Westminster, rector of St Stephen's Walbrook, London and vicar of Ruislip, Middlesex.² The fourth accused, however, was not only another woman, but one of much lower social standing, whom one chronicler describes as 'Margery Jourdemayn otherwise callid the wyccch of Eye, that dwellid nere unto Westmynster'.³ Who was Margery, what was her role in Eleanor's fall, and what was her family background in fifteenth-century Middlesex?

In the following century the rise and fall of duchess Eleanor and the role played by Margery Jourdemayne continued to fascinate writers. The collection of political poems put together c.1559 and known as *The Mirror for Magistrates*, included the 'tragedy' of Duke Humphrey (who died in mysterious circumstances after his arrest in 1447), as well as the 'tragedy' of his duchess. The author describes those attributes of Margery which proved to be such a fatal attraction for Eleanor:

There was a Beldame called the wytch of Ey,
 Old mother Madge her neyghbours did hir name
 Which wrought wonders in countryes by heresaye
 Both feendes and fayries her charmyng would obay
 And dead corpsis from grave she could uppere
 Suche an inchauntresse, as that tyme had no peere.⁴

¹ *The Brut, or The Chronicles of England*, ed. F.W.D. Brie, 2 vols, Early English Text Society, 131 and 136 (1906, 1908), ii, 477-82; *Chronicle of the Grey Friars of London*, ed. J.G. Nichols, Camden Society, old series 53 (1851), 18; *Chronicles of London*, ed. C.L. Kingsford (Oxford, 1905), 148-49 and 154-55; *An English chronicle of the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI, written before the year 1471*, ed. J.S. Davies, Camden Society, old series 64 (1856), 57-60 and 189-91; C.L. Kingsford, *English historical literature in the fifteenth century* (Oxford, 1913), 340 [Appendix VI, 'The Story of Eleanor Cobham']; *The Great Chronicle of London*, ed. A.H. Thomas and I.D. Thornley (London, 1938), 175-76; *Incerti scriptoris Chronicon Angliae Temporibus de regnis Henrici IV, Henrici V, Henrici VI*, ed. J.A. Giles. (London, 1848), part 4, 30-31; *Monumenta Franciscana*, 2 vols, ed. J.G. Nichols (vol. i, London, 1858), and R. Howlett (vol. ii, London, 1882), II, 171; *Six town chronicles of England, 1399-1543*, ed. R. Flenley (Oxford, 1911), 102 and 115-16; *Three fifteenth-century chronicles*, ed. J. Gairdner, Camden Society, new series 28 (1880), 63; 'Wilhelmi Wyrcester Annales', in *Letters and Papers illustrative of the wars of the English in France during the reign of Henry VI*, ed. J. Stevenson, 2 vols (1861-61), vol 2, part ii, 743-93, at 762-63; 'William Gregory's Chronicle of London', *Historical collections of a citizen of London*, ed. J. Gairdner, Camden Society, new series 17 (1876), 57-239, at 183-84. At least two, *The Brut* and *An English chronicle*, are based on eye-witness accounts.

² R.A. Griffiths, 'The trial of Eleanor Cobham: an episode in the fall of Duke Humphrey of Gloucester', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 51 (1968-69), 381-99, at 386-87.

³ *Great Chronicle of London*, 175. For similar descriptions see G.L. Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1929), 417, n.55.

⁴ *The Mirror for Magistrates*, ed. L.B. Campbell (New York, 1960), 435. The 1578 edition was the first to carry the 'tragedy' of Duke Humphrey; in the 1559 edition, it had been noted in the index but then omitted from the text. Also in the 1578 edition was a separate poem on the 'tragedy' of Dame Eleanor Cobham, *ibid*, 4, 10 and 16-8.

However, twentieth-century writing on this *cause célèbre* has concentrated on the politics of the time and on Eleanor herself, together with the legal, astrological and magical aspects of the case.⁵ Modern writers have little to say about Margery Jourdemayne, apart from a discussion by Kittredge on her activities in the context of image magic, a form of witchcraft which seems to have occurred frequently in politically-motivated trials. This magic was intended to inflict bodily harm by, for example, the making of a wax image of the victim, which would then be destroyed to his or her supposed detriment.⁶

Margery had in fact already come to the attention of the king's council, for it was disclosed at her arrest in 1441 that she had spent many months in royal custody at Windsor Castle ten years previously for an unspecified offence concerning sorcery. It may be a coincidence, but in 1430 seven witches from different parts of England had been arrested in London accused of plotting the young king Henry's death, and then imprisoned in the Fleet; possibly Margery was implicated. In any event, on 22 November of that year one of the king's serjeants-at-arms was paid to escort 'a certain woman' from the city of London to Windsor, and six days later another serjeant was reimbursed for taking friar John Ashwell on the same journey.⁷ A subsequent writ directed payment to the lieutenant of Windsor Castle, John Wintershull, for his costs for keeping Friar John and Margery Jourdemayne, and their two gaolers, from 18th November 1430 to 9th May 1432. Another writ of July 1432 authorised payment to Wintershull for his costs not only for keeping Margery and Ashwell, called 'le priour de Sent Cross', i.e. the Crutched Friars, but for an unnamed clerk of St Margaret's, Westminster, probably John Virley. His connection, if any, with Margery, remains undiscovered.⁸

Margery's imprisonment at Windsor ended when on 6th May 1432 the constable of the castle was directed to bring three prisoners to Westminster: Margery, friar Ashwell and Stephen Urly [sic]. Three days later Ashwell, Margery and John Virley, clerk, were examined before the Council on charges of sorcery. Ashwell and Virley were then discharged from prison on their own security but Margery's freedom was made conditional upon her future good behaviour and a promise that she would use no further sorcery nor witchcraft, an undertaking of crucial significance in later events.

⁵ J.G. Bellamy, *The law of treason in England in the later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1970), 126-27, 152-54 and 236-37; H.M. Carey, *Courting disaster: astrology at the English court and university in the later Middle Ages* (London, 1992), 136-57; Griffiths, 'Trial of Eleanor Cobham', 381-99; W.R. Jones, 'Political uses of sorcery in medieval Europe', *The Historian*, 34 (1972), 670-87, esp. 672-74 and 682-84; H.A. Kelly, 'English kings and the fear of sorcery', *Medieval Studies*, 39 (1977), 206-38, esp. 214-29; Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, 79-84; J.H. Ramsay, *Lancaster and York*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1892), ii, 32-35; K.H. Vickers, *Humphrey duke of Gloucester* (London, 1907), 270-78. Griffiths and Kelly contain the fullest accounts, on which I have drawn particularly, whilst Kittredge includes extensive references.

⁶ Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, 81-4; Jones, 'Political uses of sorcery', 672-74. As an example, in 1429 a group of knights, gentlemen and clerics, plus a 'housewife', Agnes Burgate of Exeter, were accused of placing a wax image of a small boy, representing Henry VI, to burn on a spit of alder, so as to weaken the king's body and cause his death, London, National Archives, Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), KB 9/224 m.123.

⁷ Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, 83; F. Devon, *Issues of the Exchequer* (London, 1837), 409-10.

⁸ PRO, E 404/48/255 and 47/330.

Described for the first time in contemporary sources as Margery Jourdemayne of Eye by Westminster, she was released under a recognisance dated 17 May for £20 provided by Hugh Swynfleet of Kingston-upon-Hull, Yorkshire, gentleman, William Jourdemayne of Westminster, and John Cole of Knightsbridge, husbandmen. Swynfleet was possibly a provincial attorney, and may also have engaged in trade: he was described as ‘late of London’ when he was pardoned in 1430 for not appearing to answer debts due to a London draper and two merchants from Bordeaux and Gascony. John Cole had ‘lately lived’ in the vill of Westminster in 1412, and elsewhere it is stated William was Margery’s husband.⁹ William’s involvement in his wife’s activities has gone unremarked by contemporaries, although, at some cost of time and money, he supported her during this critical period. He was perhaps a silent partner who appreciated the extra income or local influence her enterprise brought in, or he may have seen her activities as a purely female affair, with which he did not meddle.

Despite her recognisance, Margery felt sufficiently secure after her release in 1432 to continue to practise traditional magic, although no doubt discreetly. The statement by Eleanor at her trial that she had sought Margery’s help in conceiving a child with the help of a special image or images points to a reputation in the field of fertility magic.¹⁰ Reading between the lines one suspects that Margery was not unknown to the ladies (and no doubt also the men) of the court, to whom she may have dispensed love potions, charms and cosmetics, and on whose behalf she cast spells. This may be one way that she came to the attention of Eleanor who, before her marriage to the duke in c.1428, had been a lady-in-waiting to his first wife, Jacqueline, countess of Hainault. Indeed, it was also alleged that Eleanor ‘had longe tyme usid’ the services of Margery, who had provided her with ‘medicines and drynkis’ to force the duke of Gloucester ‘to love her and wedde her’.¹¹ Sorcerers, magicians, witches and soothsayers, both male and female, appear to have been common enough in pre-Reformation London, and were usually left alone by church officials unless they used their talents to defraud or harm others. The London Commissary Court registers of the latter half of the fifteenth century reveal that the authorities ‘were neither eager nor willing to prosecute ... practical magicians’, that is those consulted by women who wanted to attract a lover or find a husband (love magic) and by people who had lost, or had stolen, valuable items (thief magic). Minor offences were punished with lesser penalties: in 1444, for example, a man was placed in the pillory in London for working with a wicked spirit called ‘Oberycrom’.¹²

⁹ *Calendar of Close Rolls 1429-35*, 150 and 192; *Foedera Conventiones et Litterae*, ed. T. Rymer, IV, iv (3rd edn., London, 1740), 178; *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1429-36*, 21; *Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council*, ed. H. Nicolas (London, 1835), vi, 114; London, Westminster Abbey Muniments (hereafter WAM), MS 17,746.

¹⁰ *The Brut*, ii, 480; Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, 82.

¹¹ *English chronicle*, 58-9.

¹² R.N. Wunderli, *London church courts and society on the eve of the Reformation* (Medieval Academy of America, 1981), 81 and 126-27; K. Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic* (London, 1970), 454-55 and 465-67; ‘William Gregory’s Chronicle’, 185. Examples of fifteenth-century witchcraft offences in the church courts of London can be found in W. Hale, *A series of precedents and procedures in criminal cases 1475-1640* (Edinburgh, 1847, 2nd ed. 1973) nos. 10, 43, 65, 43 and 123.

The events of 1441 in which Margery was caught up undoubtedly owe their origin to the declining political influence of Humphrey of Gloucester, whose stance against peace negotiations with France was increasingly unpopular. His interest in humanism, combined with an enthusiasm for book collecting, including scientific and astrological texts, may have been viewed with suspicion by his enemies, and enabled them to exploit the less theoretical approach to the occult taken by his duchess. Eleanor's interest in the magical arts is confirmed by a reference in Roger Bolingbroke's writings to a work 'composed for my esteemed and most reverend lady [presumably Eleanor] in the mother tongue, concerning the principles of the art of geomancy'.¹³ Then too, men would have remembered Humphrey's protection of the Franciscan friar John Randolph, who, imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1425 as a heretic, was released on the duke's orders, much to the fury of cardinal Henry Beaufort. Indeed, amongst the duke's books was a collection entitled, *Canones pro tabulis ejus astronomicis secundum Fratrem Randolfe*. Randolph is assumed to be the same friar who in 1419 was involved in the accusation of witchcraft that Henry V brought against his step-mother, Queen Joan of Navarre, though the motives here appear to have been more financial than political.¹⁴

The events that led to Margery's death probably began just after Midsummer 1441. On the vigil of St Peter and St Paul (28 June) duchess Eleanor made a grand entrance into London, splendidly dressed and accompanied by many lords and magnates riding beside her.¹⁵ Processions frequently feature in fifteenth-century chronicles, and it has been suggested that such events were literary devices used by chroniclers to project a particular image. In this case the image was Eleanor's pride, arrogance and aping of royal practice when she was only the daughter of a knight, Sir Reginald Cobham of Sterborough, Kent, although a previous generation had reached the ranks of the lesser peerage.¹⁶ The exact sequence of events that followed is not always clear but either that night or the next, whilst dining at the King's Head in Cheap, Eleanor heard that three of her servants - Bolingbroke, Southwell and Home - had been accused of conspiring to harm the king.¹⁷ The original accusation may have been that Roger had cast Eleanor's horoscope to see what the future held for her and if, or even when, she would be queen. This was not a remote possibility for, since Henry was childless, Gloucester was heir presumptive. And, although astrology in itself was not a crime, by its very nature the casting of Eleanor's

¹³ Vickers, *Humphrey of Gloucester*, 276 and Appendix A; Carey, *Courting disaster*, 142.

¹⁴ Vickers, *Humphrey of Gloucester*, 276; Ramsay, *Lancaster and York*, 31-2; Jones, 'Political uses of sorcery', 682-83; A.R. Myers, 'The captivity of a royal witch', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 24 (1940), 265-85, esp. 274-76; W. Paley-Baildon, 'Three inventories', *Archaeologia*, 61 (1908), 163-76, at 166-68. Randolph was murdered in the Tower by a crazed priest in 1429.

¹⁵ *Chronicles of London*, 154; *Incerti scriptoris Chronicon ... Henrici IV*, 30.

¹⁶ M-R. McLaren, 'The aims and interests of the London chroniclers of the fifteenth century', in: *Trade, devotion and governance*, ed. D.J. Clayton, R.G. Davies and P. McNiven (Stroud, 1994), 158-75, esp. 163 and 170-71; N. Saul, *Death, art and memory in medieval England: the Cobham Family and their monuments 1300-1500* (Oxford, 2001), 33, 140-43 and 262.

¹⁷ Kingsford, *English historical literature*, 340-41; *Six town chronicles of England*, 102; Griffiths, 'Trial of Eleanor Cobham', 383.

horoscope included foretelling the date of the king's death, which carried with it the suspicion that the parties involved could be tempted to make the prophecy self-fulfilling.

The later indictments against the accused claimed that Eleanor's association with astrology and necromancy (the black arts) had begun a year earlier, in June 1440, a time when Gloucester's fortunes were at a low ebb, and to have continued until March 1441. In particular, these indictments alleged that in October 1440 Bolingbroke and Southwell, at the direction of Eleanor, attempted to predict the date of king Henry's death by disclosing in the parish of St Sepulchre without Newgate, London, that the king would soon die, or, at the very least, go through a dangerous period in the twentieth year of his reign, i.e. 1441–1442. The prophecy was viewed as treasonable for, by suggesting that Henry was in poor health (whether physically or mentally), it destroyed the 'cordial love' which existed between ruler and subject.¹⁸

The information that Roger and Thomas had cast such a dire horoscope for his future brought a swift response from Henry. He directed John Langton, a lawyer and Chancellor of Cambridge University, together with John Somerset, the king's physician since 1427, and now the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to commission an alternative and, by implication, a more propitious reading. This new treatise was completed on 18 July (and delivered to the king at Sheen on 14 August 1441) by an anonymous author relying, he stated, on more accurate astrological calculations than those used by Bolingbroke and Southwell.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the discovery of these two horoscopes (for the king and the duchess) enabled the king's council to charge Bolingbroke and Southwell, together with John Home, with conspiring to kill the king through necromancy. It thus appears that the initial charge against Eleanor and her co-accused was narrower in scope than that brought later. Probably the realisation that trusted members of the Gloucester household had played into their hands gave the duke's enemies, notably cardinal Beaufort, their opportunity to accuse Eleanor and her servants of plotting not simply to make herself queen but of wishing to cut short Henry's life. By 10 July Southwell, charged with saying mass unlawfully with heretical accompaniments in Harnesey (Haringey) Park, just to the north of London, with the aim of destroying the king, was imprisoned in the Tower of London, and Bolingbroke was being closely watched.²⁰

¹⁸ PRO, KB 9/72 mm.1-5, 11 and 14; Bellamy, *Law of reason*, 126-27 and 236-37.

¹⁹ Carey, *Courting disaster*, 144-49; A.B. Emden, *Biographical register of the university of Cambridge to 1500* (Cambridge, 1963), 351-52; and *Biographical register of the university of Oxford to AD 1500*, 3 vols (Oxford, 1957-59), iii, 1734-35; J.C. Wedgwood, *History of Parliament*, vol. 2, *Biographies* (London, 1938), 780-81. Somerset had an interest in astrology, owning at least one work on the occult, and may have contributed to this rebuttal.

²⁰ *Three fifteenth-century chronicles*, 63; 'William Gregory's Chronicle', 183-84; *The Brut*, ii, 478; *English Chronicle*, 57; *CCR 1433-41*, 422. The warrant for Southwell's arrest was dated 10 July 1441, PRO, C 81/730/6011, and expenses for watching Bolingbroke were paid on 12 July 1441, E 403/742 m.8; see Griffiths, 'Trial of Eleanor Cobham', 387.

Roger Bolingbroke was then brought before the Church authorities to be examined for heresy, since what followed was a religious punishment. At ‘sermon-tyme’ on Sunday 23 July, Roger, seated on his own painted chair, with a paper crown on his head, was displayed on a high stage at St Paul’s Cross, London, before a large and important lay and clerical audience. Surrounded by his instruments of magic, including images of wax and metal, he made a public confession that his practices were inconsistent with the Christian faith, and swore to forsake his dealings with the devil.²¹

Probably just before this public humiliation Bolingbroke also appeared before the king’s Council, there to answer accusations not just of sorcery, but of treason. His response was to incriminate Eleanor by saying that she had ‘first stirrd himme’ to know ‘to what astate she sholde come’. The duchess, warned of her servant’s confession or, perhaps, alarmed at his public recanting, fled into sanctuary within the abbey of St Peter, Westminster, although as a means of escape this was ineffectual against charges of heresy. She was cited to appear before an ecclesiastical court headed by Henry Chichele, archbishop of Canterbury, and other leading churchmen at St Stephen’s chapel, Westminster, on either the following Monday or Tuesday, the 24 or 25 July. Here she was charged on several counts of witchcraft, heresy and treason (though the latter was not an ecclesiastical offence) which she strongly denied; when, however, on the following day she was again summoned before this court, she was faced with Roger, brought along to testify against her. She then admitted to five of the charges but pleaded not guilty to the rest, and was permitted to return to sanctuary.²²

When Margery Jourdemayne had been drawn into the political intrigues of the duchess is unrecorded, but, if she had made the wax image displayed at St Paul’s in July, this suggests an association with Bolingbroke and Southwell of several months. It was apparently at the above ecclesiastical court that Eleanor confessed that she had long used witchcraft through the counsel of the ‘witch of Eye’, thereby implicating Margery as Bolingbroke had implicated her.²³ It seems likely that not only was their long association, of at least ten years, common knowledge at the royal court but that Margery was well-known, and accepted, in her neighbourhood as a woman who met a demand for such magical services.

By the end of July, either Eleanor’s enemies or, more plausibly, those of her husband, had set in motion a secular enquiry to investigate the charges of treason and other acts calculated to harm the king, and on 11 August Eleanor was committed to Leeds Castle in Kent, there to await this further hearing. Also at this time ‘divers doctors, notaries and clerks [were] lately by the king’s command laboriously employed respecting a superstitious sect of necromancers and persons charged with witchcraft and incantations’, at a cost to the Crown of £20.²⁴

²¹ *The Brut*, ii, 478; *English chronicle*, 57; ‘William Gregory’s Chronicle’, 183-84; *Chronicles of London*, 148; *Six town chronicles (Robert Bale’s Chronicle)*, 115.

²² *English chronicle*, 57-8; *The Brut*, ii, 478-79 (the chronology here is confused).

²³ *English chronicle*, 58; *Chronicles of London*, 149.

²⁴ PRO, E 403/744 m.2, and 741 m.12.

Before this secular commission met it was ordered that ‘all the other persones, bothe men, women wicches, and other’, were to be kept at the king’s will in the Tower of London. Another chronicler specifically notes that ‘a womman callid the wicche of Eye’ was then arrested.²⁵ Margery may have been taken up by the authorities soon after 15 July, for on that day the king’s visit to London was disrupted by severe hail, rain and lightning. Londoners considered this storm was caused by wicked spirits, conjured up to destroy both king and people by ‘certeyne clerkes, and women that are called “wicches”’, principally the duchess of Gloucester.²⁶ On the other hand, Bolingbroke’s jailor was later paid £10 for his expenses for the hire of horses, boats - suggesting the accused were taken to and from Westminster by water - bed, food and drink for eight weeks and six days (presumably up to the day of Bolingbroke’s death, 28 November), which may place the start of Bolingbroke’s imprisonment in the Tower, and perhaps that of Margery’s, at around 27 September.²⁷

On 19 October the duchess was brought back to Westminster Palace, and re-examined in St Stephen’s chapel by a second ecclesiastical tribunal, headed this time by Robert Gilbert, bishop of London. Here she was charged with attempting to encompass the king’s death by sorcery and witchcraft; once more Eleanor denied the accusations against her. On 23 October there was a further hearing where Eleanor, and also probably Margery - who by now had spent several weeks in the Tower - were confronted by Roger, together with his magical objects and images previously displayed at St Paul’s Cross.²⁸ It was through one or more of these images that Eleanor and the others were accused of attempting to harm the king, although it was not specifically claimed at the time that the image was made of wax.²⁹ This is, however, the most likely explanation:

How she in waxe by counsel of the witch,
 An image made, crowned like a king,
 which dayly they did pytch
 Against a fyre, that as the wax did melt,
 So should his lyfe consume away unfelt.³⁰

Wax images were also used in fertility magic, and this is probably why Eleanor countered the accusation by saying that the image was not meant to harm the king, but that she had had it made ‘forto have borne a child by hir lord, the duke of Gloucestre’.³¹

²⁵ *The Brut*, ii, 479-80; *English chronicle*, 58.

²⁶ *The Brut*, ii, 477-78.

²⁷ *English chronicle*, 191; PRO, E 403/743 m.11 and 742 m.8.

²⁸ *The Brut*, ii, 480; *English chronicle*, 58-9.

²⁹ Hall and Fabyan, writing in the sixteenth century, both state that Bolingbroke, Southwell and Home had, at the request of the duchess, constructed an image of wax to represent and then destroy the king, and so place her husband - and herself - on the throne. In this later perspective, the whole affair was seen as a plot to ruin Henry’s uncle, the duke of Gloucester, *Hall’s chronicle* (London, 1809), 202; R. Fabyan, *New chronicles of England and France*, ed. H. Ellis (London, 1811), 614. See also Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*, Part 1, Act II, Scene III.

³⁰ Campbell, *Mirror for Magistrates*, 454.

³¹ Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, 82-3; *The Brut*, ii, 480.

Yet although Eleanor admitted consulting Margery on matters of witchcraft, she remained firm in denying the charge of treason. In their turn both Margery and Thomas Southwell accused Eleanor of being the ‘causer and doer of all these deeds’. Yet there was to be no way out for Margery, who had once already abjured the practice of witchcraft; she would not escape as lightly on a second occasion. In the ‘Bishop of Canterbury’s court’ Margery was found guilty of heresy and the longtime practice of witchcraft, and sentenced to death by burning. After recanting, Margery was delivered from the Tower, placed in the hands of the sheriffs of London, and taken by their officials to Smithfield. There she was burnt to death on the eve of the feast of Saints Simon and Jude, 27 October. Southwell died, ‘of sorrow’, in the Tower either the day before or after; possibly, as a doctor, he had acquired poison and so taken his own life before any judicial sentence could be carried out.³²

Margery’s sentence may have been confirmed by, or at least brought to the attention of, a secular commission which convened that same day, 27 October, at the London Guildhall to enquire into Eleanor’s treasonable activities. Not only were the duke of Norfolk, four earls, and other noblemen and royal judges present, but also London’s mayor, together with five juries drawn from the city’s wards. These jurors drew up presentments charging the duchess, together with Bolingbroke, Southwell and Home, with seeking to cause the king’s death by the black arts the previous October. There was, however, no mention of Margery in these secular charges, probably because the case against her was perceived to be the province of ecclesiastical, not lay, authority.³³

On 9 November Eleanor was herself found guilty of sorcery and witchcraft, but not of heresy and treason, for the secular case against her was abandoned. She was sentenced to undertake great penances on foot around Westminster and the city of London, followed by imprisonment for life. It was probably an astute decision on her part to submit to the discipline of an ecclesiastical court, whilst firmly denying the secular charges of felony and treason, although she was aided by legal uncertainty as to the procedure for trying a peeress for treason. And, since it was claimed that Eleanor had used sorcery to trick the duke into marrying her, the Church pronounced their marriage null and void.³⁴ However, her erstwhile rank did allow for favourable treatment, for she was given a royal pension of 100 marks a year and lived in a degree of comfort (attended by twelve servants), in the custody of members of the king’s household, until 1454.³⁵ Although Humphrey was not

³² *The Brut*, ii, 480; *Great Chronicle of London*, 176; *English chronicle*, 59; *Chronicles of London*, 149, 154; *Six town chronicles*, 102; *Three fifteenth-century chronicles*, 63; ‘William Gregory’s Chronicle’, 184; Kingsford, *Historical literature*, 341.

³³ London, Corporation of London Records Office (hereafter CLRO), *Journal of Common Council* 3, f. 100v; PRO, KB 9/72 mm.1-6d, 11 and 14; *Chronicles of London*, 148-49; *English chronicle*, 58; *The Brut*, ii, 479 (the sequence of events described here is confused); *Six town chronicles*, 116.

³⁴ *The Brut*, ii, 481; *English chronicle*, 59-60; Kingsford, *Historical literature*, 340; *Chronicles of London*, 149; *Monumenta Franciscana*, II, 171; Griffiths, ‘Trial of Eleanor Cobham’, 398-99; Bellamy, *Law of Treason*, 154; PRO, E 403/744 mm.2, 3, 10 and 11. Much of her imprisonment was in Wales and on the Isle of Man.

³⁵ Griffiths, ‘Trial of Eleanor Cobham’, 390; Vickers, *Humphrey of Gloucester*, 274; *English chronicle*, 190-91. Rumours occasionally surfaced of attempts to free her.

himself implicated in the activities of his duchess - he is notably absent from the chronicles - his enemies did achieve a measure of success, for he was discredited by the fall of his wife and never recovered his influence at court.

The ill-starred Roger Bolingbroke fared far worse: he was brought from the Tower to the London Guildhall on 18 November to stand before the king's commissioners, since he had been found guilty of treasonable felonies. That same day he was dragged on a hurdle to the Tyburn gallows, where he was hung, drawn and quartered. His head was set on London Bridge, and his four quarters parcelled out to the towns of Oxford, Cambridge, Hereford, and either York or Bristol, all centres of Lollardy and heresy.³⁶

The last of the four alleged conspirators, John Home, had been a fellow prisoner of Bolingbroke's in the Tower, together with William Woodham of London, esquire, a man not mentioned earlier, but probably a member of the ducal household. Home and Woodham were also handed over to the sheriffs of London and brought for trial on 18 November at the Guildhall before the king's commissioners, although Woodham's indictment was not for involvement in necromancy at all, but for armed affrays against various Londoners in the past year (in which Home also took part). In February 1442, Woodham was pardoned these offences.³⁷ The case against Home, however, was weaker than that against Bolingbroke and Southwell, since he was indicted simply for having knowledge of their actions and not of participation, and the king felt able to pardon him. In fact John Home, who could justly be described as a turbulent priest, had only been released on bail from the Marshalsea prison on 29 June 1441 for a breach of the peace against a London draper. After his acquittal in November, Home was transferred from the Tower to one of the London compts (or sheriff's prison) and sent back to the Marshalsea. Here he was again bailed and was granted a second pardon in the autumn of 1442.³⁸ The leniency shown Home, despite these spells in prison, was in marked contrast to the fate of Roger and Margery. It may well have owed something to the fact that he came from a gentry background and that he had received much royal patronage in his acquisition of benefices. Home continued to enjoy Gloucester's favour, and retained his prebend at Hereford cathedral, where he was buried in November 1473. His brass recorded his most important achievement, secretary to that *illustrissimis princeps*, Humphrey, duke of Gloucester.³⁹

³⁶ *CCR 1441-1447*, 5-6; PRO, KB 9/72 mm.1-5 and 11; CLRO, Jnl. of Common Council 3, f.104v; *The Brut*, ii, 480-81; *English chronicle*, 58, 60; *Six town chronicles*, 102, 116; *Chronicles of London*, 149, 155; *Great Chronicle*, 176.

³⁷ *CCR 1441-47*, 5-6; PRO, KB 9/72 mm.7, 12 and 15-16; *CPR 1441-46*, 75. Nothing further is known of Woodham (Wodam, Wodeham), although there are chance references to a man of this name: PRO, KB 9/210 m.44 (of Enfield, 1416); London, Guildhall Library (hereafter GL), MS 9171/5 f.371 (of Hackney, 1465); PRO, C 1/66/432 (of Uxbridge, 1478).

³⁸ Griffiths, 'Trial of Eleanor Cobham', 395; PRO, KB 29/74 m.39d, and 29/75 m.8d.

³⁹ *Calendar of Papal Letters*, VIII, 656; John le Neve, *Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae 1300-1541*, vol. 2, *Hereford Diocese*, 37; vol. 11, *Welsh Dioceses*, 44; vol. 12, *Introduction, Errata and Index*, 49 (I owe these references to Dr David Lepine); PRO, KB 29/75 m.8d; *CPR 1446-52*, 458; F.M. Havergal, *Monumental inscriptions in the Cathedral Church of Hereford* (London, 1881), 40; Thomas Dingley, *History from Marble temp. Charles II*, ed. J.G. Nichols, Camden Society, 94 (1867), 180.

But what in fact was Margery's background? Although nothing has been discovered of her own family, the surviving evidence indicates that her husband's family of Jourdemayne were well-established and prosperous Middlesex yeomen from at least the end of the fourteenth-century. John Jourdemayne was a Middlesex juror on an inquisition of September 1400 held at Staines enquiring into the activities of highwaymen preying on travellers at Brentford and Hounslow Heath, and in July 1401 he sat on a murder inquest held at Acton, where the jury was drawn from men of that vill, as well as Ealing, Chiswick and Fulham.⁴⁰

John was almost certainly the father or close kinsman of Robert Jourdemayne, husbandman of Church Acton, who appears as a juror at Fulham manor court in 1418–1419 and at the 1428 sessions of the peace, and was chief pledge at Acton court in April 1422. He seems to have had trading links with the capital, for in 1431 he sued for debt a London salter and tallow chandler, Thomas Wynchecombe. Robert was of sufficient status, perhaps even aspiring to gentility, requesting burial within his parish churchyard when in 1438 he made his will. His wife Alice was to have her due part of his goods in his hall, chamber and kitchen, all corn harvested and sown in the field of Acton, together with ten marks, six cows and sixty sheep. He was equally generous to his eldest son, Thomas, the latter's son, Richard, and to his younger children and a step-daughter.⁴¹

As one executor of his will Robert appointed Richard Fenyngley, also one of Acton's more affluent yeomen; his family had prospered sufficiently by 1452 for his son John to style himself a gentleman.⁴² In addition, Fenyngley had links with the royal court, for his stepson John Scoryer was a yeoman in the king's household, and amongst those sent to escort Margaret of Anjou to England for her marriage to Henry VI in 1444. Robert Jourdemayne's son, Thomas, was one witness at Fulham manor court in 1458 when Scoryer conveyed his lands in Ealing to feoffees, who included a fellow royal servant, John Myryweder, member of Parliament for the shire in 1459.⁴³ These links suggest that the royal household was not a remote institution to the villagers of Acton, including the Jourdemayne family, but one of which they heard news and gossip from first-hand sources. It may have been through associations such as these that Margery's skills first came to the attention of the duchess.

⁴⁰ PRO, KB 9/185/1 m.5 and 191 m.28. William Jurdemayne held a messuage as a serf on the abbot of Cirencester's estate at Broadwell, Oxfordshire in 1279–80, *Oxfordshire Hundred Rolls of 1279, (1) Hundred of Bampton*, ed. E. Stone, Oxford Record Society, 46 (1968), 43.

⁴¹ PRO, SC 2/188/69 mm.6, 11; KB 9/223/2 m.26d; KB 29/65 m.6; GL, MS 9171/3 f.505v; MS 11, 766 ff.70, 70v. The mention of a grandchild suggests Robert was by then in his late fifties or early sixties.

⁴² PRO, C 219/15/1 (Fenyngley was a Parliamentary attester, i.e. a forty-shilling freeholder who attended the Hustings); GL, MS 9171/4 f.267; *CFR 1445–52*, 260 and 267. His wife, Alice Holmes, widow of John Scoryer, was a modest heiress, PRO, SC 2/188/77 f.4; GL, MS 9171/2 ff.222v, 167v and 324v, 3 f.359; *CCR 1377–1381*, 467–68.

⁴³ London, British Library, Add. MS 23,938 f.15; *CCR 1454–61*, 80; PRO, E 404/62/143; GL, MS 11,766 f.106. Scoryer was of Friern Barnet in 1457 and had died by 1462, PRO, KB 9/288 m.33A; *CCR 1461–68*, 136.

The other executor of Robert's will was his brother William Jourdemayne, who was almost certainly Margery's husband. Since Robert apparently inherited John Jourdemayne's lands at Acton, he was probably the elder, causing his younger brother William to seek a livelihood elsewhere. This William found a few miles to the east, nearer to London, on the manor of Eye, Eia or Ebury, held by Westminster Abbey since 1100. It was a well-watered estate with much meadowland lying between the Tyburn and Westbourne rivers and stretched south from modern-day Marble Arch to the Thames, incorporating what is now Pimlico, Ebury and Hyde Park. The manor house, known as La Neyte, lay to the south and consisted of a substantial range of buildings where the abbot frequently lodged. La Neyte also received other important visitors: John of Gaunt, for example, used it as a townhouse after his Savoy Palace was burnt down in 1381 during the Peasants' Revolt, and Cecily (Neville) wife of Richard duke of York gave birth to her fifth son there in 1448.⁴⁴ Aristocratic visits such as these to La Neyte could have furnished other opportunities for Margery to become known to the duchess. Indeed, in a final irony, Eleanor was herself lodged at La Neyte for two nights after performing her public penance in the autumn of 1441.⁴⁵

The Jourdemayne family's association with the manor of Ebury may go back a previous generation. From 1393 until 1401, the rent-collector's accounts for the manor note that a man called simply 'Jordemayn' or 'Jordeman' was *firmaryus vaccorum* (farmer of the cows). This practice of leasing a manor's stock of cattle was possibly one that he followed with other manors and he may well have moved stock between various sites, including Acton.⁴⁶ After a gap in the accounts, in 1426 the name of William Jordeman appears as receiving an annual stipend of wheat valued at twenty shillings, and this continued until his death in 1449-50. In addition, between 1430 and 1447, William accounted for the sale of varying types of sheep skins from the manor's flock.⁴⁷ It seems likely that these were two different men, the earlier one possibly being John Jourdemayne, whose 'farm' his son or kinsman took over. William also leased land in Ebury manor for in December 1439 two men were indicted for breaking into a close called 'Mablescroft' at Tyburn and stealing four of his oxen worth £4. This was no doubt 'Magotescroft', stated in the rent-collector's

⁴⁴ D. Sullivan, *Westminster Corridor* (London, 1994), 84, 136 and 145; W.L. Rutton, 'The Manor of Eia, or Eye next Westminster', *Archaeologia*, 62 (1910), 31-58, esp. 43; C.T. Gatty, *Mary Davies and the manor of Ebury* (London, 1921), 41; *Westminster Chronicle 1381-1394*, eds L.C. Hector and B.F. Harvey (Oxford, 1982), p. lvi.

⁴⁵ *The Brut*, ii, 482. At the time of the arrest of Eleanor and Margery the abbot was Edmund Kirton, who had succeeded Richard Harwden in 1440; in July 1442 Kirton was charged with financial incompetence, and the abbey's administration investigated by the abbots of St Albans, Abingdon, Colchester and Chertsey. He was later accused of fornication and other misdeeds but, although suspended for a time, remained in office until 1462, and died in 1466. V.H. Galbraith, 'A visitation of Westminster in 1444', *English Historical Review*, 37 (1922), 83-88, esp. 85.

⁴⁶ WAM, MSS 26,947A and B; 26,945. Since Richard Rubbe held this post in 1390, Jourdemayne presumably came to Ebury/Eye between that date and 1393.

⁴⁷ WAM, MSS 26,948-26,953, 26,957, 26,960, 26,963, 26,965-67 and 16,969-77. Only the accounts for the rent collector and for the keeper of the parks and the meadows survive for this period.

accounts to have been let to Jourdemayne the previous year at an annual rent of fifteen shillings. The two thieves were later pardoned for the offence, as was Robert Algar of Ealing, the adjoining parish to Acton, for sheltering them.⁴⁸

William Jourdemayne was not as prominent in local affairs as his brother Robert or his fellow-executor, Richard Fenyngeley. And there are only rare glimpses of William's neighbours and fellow parishioners; few testamentary records, for example, survive for Ebury in this period. However, William not only outlived Margery but also remarried, for when his name ceases to be listed in the manorial accounts in 1450–51, it is replaced by *uxorem nuper Willelmi Jordeman*. She accounted for sheepskins to the value of five shillings that year and sold a quarter of oats to the keeper of the meadows. William's unnamed second wife continued to appear in the accounts until 1463–64, and was sufficiently capable for the manorial officials to leave her in possession of her husband's position and lands.⁴⁹ It is noteworthy that both of William's two wives had the opportunity and ability to lead independent lives and to earn their own livelihood even if Margery over-reached herself so spectacularly.

The accusations against Margery left unscathed not just her husband, but also the Jourdemayne family of Acton. Robert's son, Thomas, husbandman of Acton, continued to hold land in that parish, and to appear as a juror in the hundred court and at the sessions of the peace in the 1440s and 1450s.⁵⁰ He died in 1464, holding lands and tenements in Church Acton and East Acton, which he bequeathed to his daughter and heir, Alice. In his will Thomas also gave a cow to his servant, John Jourdemayne, probably a relation, but perhaps a young man who simply adopted his master's name.⁵¹

One aspect of Margery's life that set her apart from her family and neighbours was her relationship, from at least the 1430s, with men of learning and scholarship: in 1432 her fellow prisoners at Windsor Castle included friars and clerics, one of whom, Ashwell, was proficient in astronomy and would in June 1433 successfully forecast an eclipse.⁵² Were Margery and her fellow captives able to meet within the confines of the castle, and was it through one of them that she was introduced to Roger Bolingbroke and Thomas Southwell? Bolingbroke was the best known of these scholars, described as a 'gret and konnyng man in astronomye' and 'renowned in all the world',⁵³ and at

⁴⁸ PRO, KB 9/231/2 m.54; *CPR 1436–41*, 381 and 389; WAM, MS 26,966. Very possibly something more than a simple theft was involved, perhaps an unpaid debt or a dispute concerning the administration of Robert Jourdemayne's will. Algar, in fact, was another locally important figure, who had served as a Middlesex juror in 1422 and 1428 at the same time as Robert, PRO, C 219/14/4; SC 2/188/69 rot.10; KB 9/217 m.32 and 223/2 m.26d; GL, MS 9171/5 f.119.

⁴⁹ WAM, MSS 26,977–26 and 26,982. Ebury lay partly in the parish of St Martin's in the Fields and partly in that of St Margaret's, Westminster.

⁵⁰ GL, MS 11,766, f.70; PRO, KB 9/235 m.69; 240 m.57; 1050 m.74d; 996, m.23d; 260 m.112; 271 m.85d; 262 m.84; 282 mm.84 and 89d; 296 m.23; 304 m.69.

⁵¹ GL, MS 9171/5 f.353; PRO, KB 9/307 m.55.

⁵² Kittredge, *Wüchcraft*, 418 n.57.

⁵³ *English Chronicle*, 57; 'Wilhelmi Wyrcester Annales', 763; Emden, *Biographical Reg. Oxford*, I, 214–15.

least two of the chroniclers showed sympathy for his appalling death, seeing him and Southwell simply as tragic accomplices to the duchess. Southwell, who was probably Eleanor's personal physician, was an eminent doctor of medicine, at home both at the royal court and in the city of London. He, together with Gilbert Kymer, Duke Humphry's own physician, and John Somerset were amongst those who petitioned the mayor and city of London for the foundation of a college of physicians and surgeons in 1423. The following year Kymer was Master of the college, and Somerset and Southwell its two surveyors or wardens.⁵⁴ Margery thus associated with men of education who would have read astronomical writings translated from Greek and Arabic, and whose medical training touched on astrology. At first interested in the theory of the supernatural, they were then drawn into its practical applications, and for this they needed the services of someone with Margery's skills.⁵⁵

Although the charges brought against Margery included treason, heresy and witchcraft, it was probably for the latter two crimes that she was burnt, particularly since she had already once sworn to renounce the practice of sorcery. *The Brut* chronicle states that the 'wicche of Eye' was 'brent for hir fals beleve and wicchecraft that she had used of longe tyme', whilst *The English Chronicle* considered that it was not just sorcery and witchcraft, but also 'for cause of relapse' that she was burnt. This agrees with the fact that Margery was not named on the surviving London and Middlesex indictments, but was sentenced by a church court.⁵⁶ The eminent jurist, Sir Edward Coke, referred to the case in 1642 when he said that he had seen a report in an 'ancient Register' that in 1441 Margery Gurdeman of Eye was burnt for witchcraft and consultation with the devil, after sentence and relapse, by the king's writ *de haeretico comburendo*.⁵⁷

In character, Margery may have resembled Eleanor, who was considered arrogant and ambitious, and whose fall was a popular theme in the poetry composed after her death, such as *The Lament of the duchess Gloucester*, written c.1465.⁵⁸ Eleanor's rapid and inexplicable rise in status had long been viewed with suspicious envy by courtiers and rivals, who attributed it to magical practices, and contemporaries seem to have accepted Eleanor's guilt in 1441. The chronicle-writers on the whole were unsympathetic to her, although many wrote favourably of Duke Humphrey.

⁵⁴ Emden, *Biographical Reg. Oxford*, III, 1734-35; II, 1068-69 (Kymer brought Duke Humphrey's gift of 120 books to the University); *Calendar of London Letter Book K*, ed. R.R. Sharpe (London, 1911), 11 and 41; *Calendar of Select Plea and Memoranda Rolls, London, 1413-1437*, ed. A.H. Thomas (Cambridge, 1943), 174; Carey, *Courting disaster*, 145-47.

⁵⁵ Carey, *Courting disaster*, 141. Indeed, scholarship itself could be viewed with suspicion by the less educated, see for example PRO, C 1/11/59.

⁵⁶ *The Brut*, ii, 480; *English chronicle*, 58-9.

⁵⁷ E. Coke, *Institutes and Laws of England, Part III* (London, 1642), 44 (where he mistakenly placed Eye in Suffolk, not Middlesex.) By a statute of 1401, the penalty for relapse into heresy was burning by the secular authorities, although at the bishop's discretion, Kelly, 'English Kings and the Fear of Sorcery', 214.

⁵⁸ A. Davenport, 'Fifteenth-century complaints and Duke Humphrey's wives', in: *Nation, court and culture: New essays on fifteenth-century English poetry*, ed. H. Cooney (Dublin, 2001), 133-45, at 142-43; and see also *Political poems and songs*, ed. T. Wright, 2 vols, Rolls Series 14 (London, 1861), 205.

Margery's guilt was also assumed by the chroniclers, none of whom expressed any compassion for her fate.

But, just as Eleanor believed herself protected by her powerful husband, Margery imagined herself safeguarded by her aristocratic clients and the scholars, clerks and doctors whom she assisted in magical practices. She was not a pathetic, aged figure living in poverty denounced by jealous or frightened neighbours, but probably an able and ambitious woman who met a demand for love potions, folk medicines and charms, in a practice that was usually tolerated by the authorities, and whose customers included the highest in the land. Margery came from a yeoman family rising in status: her husband William held his office in the manor of Eye for some twenty years, whilst his family was respected and prospered amongst their neighbours at Acton. She was surely aware of the fate that could overtake her, having once been imprisoned for witchcraft, but apparently decided that the rewards outweighed the dangers. Her involvement in Eleanor's schemes may have tempted her to allow her practice of witchcraft to become darker and designed to harm, and therefore no longer tolerated by the authorities. On the other hand her reputation as 'the witch of Eye' and her lower social status may have made her a convenient scapegoat; her fate can be contrasted to the more lenient treatment shown to both Eleanor and John Home. If Margery had 'refrained from mingling in high society',⁵⁹ and not involved herself in court politics at a time of dynastic uncertainty and intrigue, she might well have died in her own bed, rather than in the smoke and flames of Smithfield.

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⁵⁹ Kittredge, *Witchcraft*, 84.