The ‘Champchevrier portrait’: a cautionary tale

B. M. CRON

The study of fifteenth century diplomacy is notoriously studded with pitfalls for the unwary. Certain traditions are so strongly entrenched and substantive evidence so conspicuously lacking, that the repetition of what should be regarded with extreme scepticism tends to establish a probability where none exists. The question of who engineered the marriage of Margaret of Anjou to King Henry VI of England is still an open one, and all too slowly the legends surrounding it are being dismantled. A slight tale in this context, and one which should long ago have been dismissed as a farrago of nonsense, is still being given credence, albeit conditionally. It is repeated by J.J. Bagley in what, for want of a better, is the ‘official’ biography of Margaret of Anjou despite its obvious deficiencies. The story of Guy de Champchevrier and the portrait of Margaret of Anjou is described by Bagley as ‘a pretty one and not improbable,’ although how he reached this conclusion must remain a mystery. According to Bagley,

Prevost d'Exiles tells a romantic story of how Henry [VI] in 1443 sent Guy de Champchevrier, an Angevin prisoner at large of Sir John Fastolf, to the court of Lorraine to procure a portrait of Margaret of Anjou. Champchevrier eventually obtained the portrait, but in the meantime Fastolf, not in the secret of Champchevrier’s mission, had persuaded the unsuspecting Duke of Gloucester to write to Charles VII asking him to send his prisoner back to England as his ransom was still unpaid. Champchevrier was arrested, but when brought

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before Charles VII at Vincennes cleared himself of the charges brought against him by explaining his mission and producing a safe-conduct signed by Henry VI. Charles, amused by the story so unexpectedly revealed, released him and wished his mission success. Beaufort, it is suggested, was in agreement with Champchevrier’s attempt to pave the way for the Angevin marriage. Gloucester still gave his support to the proposed Armagnac alliance, but Champchevrier’s return to England, his frequent conversations with Henry, and Henry’s offer to Fastolf to pay his prisoner’s ransom aroused his suspicions.²

To trace the story back to its source, which is not Prevost d’Exiles, is an instructive exercise in the genesis of a legend. The Abbé Prevost d’Exiles’ biography of Margaret of Anjou was published in 1740 and translated into English in 1755.³ French historians dismiss it, quite rightly, as a romantic novel not a serious biography, and certainly not a reliable source.⁴ Prevost was an arch romancer, and Agnes Strickland, herself of a romantic disposition, could not resist his Champchevrier story (among others) when she came to write of Margaret in her Lives of the Queens of England, originally published in 1840 and revised in 1851.⁵ Unfortunately Bagley paraphrased Strickland not Prevost, but Prevost did not create the character of Guy de Champchevrier, that piece of dubiety belongs to Margaret’s first biographer, Michael Baudier, historiographer to Louis XIII in the seventeenth century. His unpublished French manuscript was translated into English and published in 1737.⁶

Baudier is Prevost’s source for Champchevrier. He records that during the truce obtained at Tours in 1444, ‘a gentleman of Anjou who had been a prisoner of war in England was suffered to go at large upon his parole and make his escape out of that country and return to France.’ King Henry VI wrote to Charles VII to protest at this dishonourable conduct and demand his return. Baudier claims that Henry’s original letter is in his possession, supplied to him by the auditor of the Chambre des Comptes in Paris. He prints the text of the letter in full⁷ and it names the erring knight as Guy de Champchevrier, who is also a thief: he has ‘carried off an horse and other goods belonging to some of our liege subjects’ and in so doing he has violated the truce as well as his parole. The letter also names Champchevrier’s captor as Sir John Fastolf. Interesting, although not corroborative, details are added. A commission had been appointed to look into the matter, headed by Dunois, Bastard of Orleans, for the French and Lord Dudley for the English. Henry wanted Champchevrier arrested and handed over ‘to our bailiffs of Cotentin or Alençon or to other of our officers at Cherbourg,’ all territories still in English hands. To the unwary this letter is plausible. Its style is not unlike that of Henry VI’s letters printed in
Stevenson’s *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France*, and Henry VI addresses Charles VII as ‘our dear uncle of France’, a term he adopted for the first time during and after the negotiations at Tours. An examination of the dates, however, establishes that the letter is incontestably a fake. It is dated 3 February 1444. The Earl of Suffolk’s embassy did not leave England for Tours until the end of that month and the truce was not signed until the end of May. Moreover the letter claims that Henry has written before, three years earlier in fact, ‘it is about three years ago since we wrote you word . . .’ which would mean that Champchevriër made his escape in 1441 at a time when England and France were unquestionably at war. It would be interesting to know whether Baudier faked the letter or whether he accepted it in good faith from the auditor of the *Chambre des Comptes*. Perhaps that gentleman had a sense of humour or became tired of Baudier’s importunities for access to manuscripts in his keeping? Baudier is the more likely candidate, he would have been familiar with Fastolf’s name as a veteran war captain who features in the French chronicles of the period. Baudier correctly identifies him as a Knight of the Garter, and there may be a faint echo of an incident dating to the 1420s. Fastolf had captured John, Duke of Alençon at the Battle of Verneuil in 1424, and when Alençon was released on payment of his ransom three year later Falstolf complained that he had not received an adequate share of this money. Dunois was a prominent member of French peace embassies to England after 1444 and Lord Dudley was an English commissioner for peace over an extended period in the 1440s.

Prevost elaborated Baudier’s letter out of all recognition. He, too, sets the story after the signing of the truce of Tours, ignoring the fact that Margaret of Anjou was betrothed to Henry VI as part of the treaty settlement. Instead the fragile truce ‘was well nigh frustrated by an event so remote that it has escaped the notice of the greatest part of our historians’, this is Champchevriër’s escape. Prevost introduced the Duke of Gloucester, who does not appear in Baudier. Fastolf, bent on revenge, ‘employed the Duke of Gloucester to engage the king his master to solicit Charles more earnestly than ever, by letter under his hand, the original of which is still preserved.’ Agnes Strickland accepted Gloucester’s intervention and made a fatal alteration: ‘Sir John Fastolf . . . employed the duke of Gloucester . . . to write a letter to the king of France explaining the circumstances and entreating that he might be restored to him.’ Her note to this reads ‘This letter is still in existence in the royal archives of France—Prevost.’ Muddled pronouns apart, this is the first trap for the unwary, and should have alerted Bagley to the spuriousness of the story. Gloucester is traditionally believed to have been the champion of Henry VI’s claim to the French throne, implacably opposed to peace with France and
Henry’s marriage to Margaret of Anjou. Be that as it may, it is impossible to imagine Gloucester writing to Charles VII as king of France on any subject whatsoever, let alone a demand that he apprehend a prisoner, to do so would be to acknowledge Charles VII’s authority as king, something Gloucester would not do. Had the need arisen, which it did not as the incident is fictive, the proper person to handle it would have been Richard, Duke of York, from Rouen, as the king’s lieutenant in France.

Prevost then gets into his stride: Champchevrier was arrested in Champagne on the orders of Charles VII, as he returned from Nancy in Lorraine; he was brought to Vincennes for a secret interview where he showed the king ‘a passport signed by Henry’s own hand.’ Champchevrier further revealed that he had won the confidence of the English king who had entrusted him with ‘a negotiation of a very delicate nature at the court of René of Anjou, King of Sicily, who usually resided at Nancy’. Although Henry VI had been betrothed for the past three years to a daughter of the count of Armagnac, a marriage arranged by Gloucester, he was secretly so ‘subdued by the charms of the princess Margaret, René’s daughter [that he] gave up all the advantages he might have reaped from an alliance with the count to seek that of the house of Anjou.’ But this had to be kept secret from Gloucester and from the English people ‘who without doubt would see with regret the loss of the earldom of Armagnac’.14 Charles VII was delighted and urged Champchevrier to make all haste to England, which the knight did, although he stopped off in Paris to apprise Henry’s ambassador the Earl of Suffolk, who knew of Henry’s secret passion, of the success of his mission. According to Prevost it was Suffolk (not Champchevrier) who had sent a portrait of Margaret to Henry VI ‘that com-
pleted the conquest of his [Henry’s] heart.’ (It must have been a triumph of art, for Suffolk fell in love with Margaret as well.) ‘The fatal picture inflamed him as much as it had done his master, he had caused it to be drawn by one of the best painters in France whom he privately sent to Nancy for that purpose’.15 The second trap for the unwary is an uncritical acceptance of the whereabouts of the protagonists. Vincennes, not far from Paris, is an emotive name, for it was there that King Henry V died before he could complete his conquest of France, but Charles VII did not go anywhere near Paris in 1443/44. Suffolk was supposedly in Paris, where indeed he was for a short period in 1445, but only after Henry and Margaret had been married at Tours and he was waiting to escort the bride to England. Duke René was in Anjou entertaining the French king for much of 1443, until both went to Tours early in 1444 for the treaty negotiations. And Margaret herself did not leave Anjou for Nancy until 1445, after her wedding at Tours. It is just possible that Strickland did not appreciate this, as she is responsible for the legend, which is still being repeated, that

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Margaret of Anjou was brought up in Italy whilst René was trying to establish himself as King of Naples, and she may have thought that Margaret returned to Lorraine with her mother Isabelle in 1441. Strickland diverges from Prevost in dating the Champchevrier incident, albeit vaguely, to early 1444 immediately before the negotiations at Tours. But Bagley, who alone dates the story to 1443, was well aware that René and Margaret were in Anjou, which makes his repetition of the story all the more remarkable. Prevost would probably have gone unnoticed by English historians had it not been for Agnes Strickland. Apart from translations of Baudier and Prevost, hers was the first English biography of Queen Margaret and it became extremely influential; her work has been reprinted as recently as 1972. It was also translated into French and J.-J.-E. Roy based his Histoire de Marguerite d'Anjou, published in 1857, on Strickland. Even so fine an historian as Vallet de Viriville quotes her uncritically when dealing with Margaret of Anjou's marriage. It appears from his synopsis that Bagley, despite quoting Prevost as his source, had read Strickland but not Prevost; and although he lists Baudier in his bibliography he did not make the connection between Prevost's Champchevrier and Baudier's letter. In the main Strickland repeats Prevost, to whom she refers, whilst mis-quoting him, as a 'learned but somewhat romantic French author' whom she does not identify. But she made a few changes, presumably in the interests of credibility. In her adaptation Champchevrier takes no part in the negotiations for Margaret's marriage. He is an intermediary of a different kind. Champchevrier has seen Margaret (he is after all a gentleman of Anjou) and he 'gives so eloquent a description of the rare endowments which nature had bestowed on the portionless daughter of the titular king of the Two Sicilies that Henry despatched him to the court of Lorraine to procure a portrait of the young princess'. Strickland was being disingenuous here as she implied that this is a direct quote from Prevost, which it is not. She justified it by stating, correctly, that during the negotiations for him to marry one of the daughters of the Earl of Armagnac Henry VI had asked for portraits of all three daughters so that he could make an informed choice. Obviously, now that Margaret had become the object of his attention he could be expected to do likewise in her case. As Strickland indignantly, and again correctly, refuted the suggestion that Suffolk and Margaret were lovers, she altered Prevost's story so that Suffolk employed the painter but Champchevrier obtained the portrait. Strickland also introduced Cardinal Beaufort who is not mentioned by Prevost, claiming that it was Beaufort who encouraged Champchevrier to describe Margaret to Henry VI: 'There can be little doubt from whom Champchevrier had received his cue when he described to Henry in such glowing colours the charms and mental graces of the very princess to
whom Cardinal Beaufort wished to unite him'. 21 Here we have the traditional background to Margaret's marriage, Beaufort and the 'peace party' promoted it, Gloucester opposed it in favour of Henry VI's marriage with a daughter of Armagnac.

Prevost's story continues: When Champchevrier returned to Windsor with the coveted portrait, Henry VI received him warmly and agreed to pay his ransom, which made the Duke of Gloucester suspicious, especially as his agents reported seeing Champchevrier at the court of Lorraine. Thus far Strickland concurs although she does not endorse Prevost's contention that Gloucester decided immediately to wreck the Angevin marriage. She ends her account abruptly by having Henry send Champchevrier back to Lorraine 'a second time on a secret mission'. 22 What that mission was is unspecified and is probably Strickland's interpretation of Prevost, who claims that Henry ordered Suffolk to go back to Lorraine 'to give René a confirmation of his agreement to the proposals he had already received from Champchevrier, but to regulate, in concert with him, the conditions required in granting his daughter . . .'. 23 The pronoun 'him' appears to refer to René but was taken by Strickland to refer to Champchevrier who then fades from the scene and from history. It is noticeable that Bagley's account breaks off at the same point as Strickland's.

The fictitious Champchevrier can thus be traced to a letter purportedly written by Henry VI, as printed in Baudier. His mission to René of Anjou to arrange a marriage with Margaret was added by Prevost and the portrait of her obtained by Champchevrier for the love-lorn king is an adaptation by Strickland. The selectivity of the evolution of the legend is a cautionary tale, and if anyone is still inclined to credit the good Abbé as a source, all Ricardian readers should be warned that they are suffering from mass delusion, for, according to Prevost, not only did Suffolk become enamoured of Margaret, but Richard, Duke of York, proposed to marry her. The idea originated with Gloucester as a means of thwarting Henry VI's marriage to Margaret. York was married, 'but his wife was then sinking under a disorder which all her physicians had declared to be mortal'. Duke Richard fell in with Gloucester's plan, and, leaving a dying Cecily in London, made haste to put a counter offer to René, as Gloucester had instructed. The bribe was the ceding of Anjou and Maine to René, these provinces to be inherited by Margaret and Richard's children. 24 If Richard of York became a widower as early as 1445, either Richard III is a figment of our imagination or he was considerably older than his thirty-three years when he died at Bosworth Field. Nonsensical? Of course. But so is the story of the 'Champchevrier portrait' which can safely be consigned to the scrap heap of Victorian romanticism.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. H. Maurer, ‘Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England, 1445—1461,’ University of California, Irvine, PhD Dissertation, 1999, p. 61: ‘When attention shifted to Margaret of Anjou it seems that Henry may have requested and received a portrait of her’. It must be pointed out that Dr Maurer does not name Champchevrier and that the background to Margaret of Anjou’s marriage is outside the scope of her enquiry.


10. Dunois was one of the greatest of Charles VII’s war captains. Dictionnaire de Biographie Française, vol. 12, pp. 279–93. Dudley accompanied embassies to France including one in 1446 on which he carried a letter from Queen Margaret to Charles VII. J. Ferguson, English Diplomacy, 1422–1461, Oxford 1972, p. 29, n. 4 and p. 184.


