



**“for goddes sake kepe my writing
secrete for it is my destruction:”**

**Strategies of Epistolary Secrecy in
the Letters of Margaret Tudor,
Queen of Scots (1489-1541)**

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Abstract: This article provides a detailed analysis of the strategies of epistolary secrecy that Margaret Tudor, Queen of Scots, employed in her correspondence with Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, in autumn 1523. During this period, Margaret Tudor acted as a double agent, appearing to be a willing mediator of peace to the Scottish government, whilst simultaneously acting as a spy for England. In this study, I examine how Margaret established separate overt and covert channels of communication with Thomas Howard to maintain her dual identity and to protect herself in a challenging political situation. This analysis provides evidence for the use of multiple channels of communication as a method of epistolary secrecy: a strategy which has been seldom recorded in other studies of early modern letter-writing. Furthermore, this study provides important insight into *how* intelligence-gathering networks operated in the sixteenth century, revealing the important roles that lesser-known figures (such as members of Scotland’s royal household) played in the operation of these networks. My analysis also challenges previous, highly gendered ideas of female political activity which accused Margaret Tudor of being “inconstant” and “politically inept.” Instead, I argue that Margaret Tudor was exercising excellent political and diplomatic strategy. This provides an important reassessment of the strategies that late medieval queens could employ to exert power and agency in high-risk diplomatic and political negotiations.

Keywords: Epistolary Studies; Letters; Secrecy; Diplomacy; Spying; Messengers; Anglo-Scots; Espionage

Introduction

In 1523, England and Scotland were at a political stalemate: Scotland would only agree to peace with England if France were included in the treaty, and England would only agree to peace if John Stewart, Duke of Albany (c. 1482–1536) was removed from the role of governing regent of Scotland. When James IV, King of Scots (1473–1513), was killed at the Battle of Flodden in September 1513, it was his wife,

Margaret Tudor, Queen of Scots (1489–1541), who initially took up the role of regent and governed Scotland on behalf of her young son, James V, King of Scots (1512–1542). However, the will of James IV dictated that Margaret could only be regent on the condition that she remained a widow. As a result, when Margaret married the Scottish nobleman Archibald Douglas, 6th Earl of Angus (c. 1489–1557), in August 1514, the Lords of Scotland sent for the next male descendant of the Stewart bloodline, the French nobleman John Stewart, Duke of Albany, to replace Margaret as the governing regent of Scotland.

On two occasions during his regency, the Duke of Albany returned to France where his wife, Anne de la Tour (also known as Anne de Boulogne (c. 1479–1524), maintained a permanent residence. Albany took leave for France for the second time during his regency in October 1522, though with the promise that he would return to Scotland by 15 August 1523.¹ During Albany’s absence, Henry VIII, King of England (1491–1547), signed a treaty with the Papal States and the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V (1500–1558), promising to protect them in the event that war broke out with François I, King of France (1494–1547). When Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk (1484–1545), led a band of English troops to Calais to launch an attack on France in autumn 1523, Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey (1473–1554), also led a large army of Englishmen to the Anglo-Scots borders in preparation for a Scottish attack in honour of the Auld Alliance (a Franco-Scottish treaty signed in 1295).²

On 22 September 1523, Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey and his army crossed the border into Scotland and launched an attack on the town of Jedburgh.³ As part of this raid, Surrey and his army captured the abbey, and spent the night of 22 September destroying much of Jedburgh.⁴ The following day, Surrey heard word that John Stewart, Duke of Albany, had returned to Scotland—landing at Dunbarton on 21 September 1523—bringing with him a large army of French soldiers, ready to launch an invasion on England.⁵ Following the campaign of Jedburgh, Surrey was forced to dismiss many of the soldiers in

¹ John Stewart, Duke of Albany, left Scotland twice during his regency. Albany’s first visit back to France took place between June 1517 and November 1521. His second visit took place between October 1522 and September 1523. Albany returned to France in May 1524 and did not return to Scotland again.

² For further discussion of the Anglo-Scottish war of 1523 see Neil Murphy, *Henry VIII, The Duke of Albany and the Anglo-Scottish War of 1522–1524*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2023); Neil Murphy, “The Duke of Albany’s Invasion of England in 1523 and Military Mobilisation in Sixteenth-Century Scotland,” *Scottish Historical Review* 99, no. 1 (April 2020): 1–25; Neil Murphy, “Spies, Informers and Thomas Howard’s Defence of England’s Northern Frontier in 1523,” *Historical Research* 93, no. 260 (May 2020): 252–272.

³ Murphy, *Henry VIII*, 38.

⁴ Murphy, *Henry VIII*, 38.

⁵ Murphy, *Henry VIII*, 40.

the army who had led the attack, a situation which left him “concerned about obtaining the manpower he needed to defend the frontier.”⁶ Whilst Surrey wrote to Thomas Wolsey on 1 October 1523 to “highlight the lack of resources the crown was putting into the defence of the north” (in contrast to the large number of soldiers in Calais), Surrey was forced to use his remaining resources selectively in his efforts to defend England.⁷ As part of his military strategy, Surrey made use of networks of spies to provide vital intelligence on the Duke of Albany’s military preparations.⁸ Surrey used this intelligence “to make informed decisions about how best to deploy his soldiers” in the conflict.⁹

During 1523, Margaret Tudor was in regular correspondence with Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey. This series of correspondence is particularly intriguing as within some of these letters, Margaret Tudor presented two contrasting epistolary personas: one that appeared willing to continue her previous role of diplomatic mediator, making efforts to organise peace between England, Scotland, and France, and a second in which Margaret acted as a spy, secretly reporting Scottish military information to Thomas Howard, as well as desperately seeking permission to flee Scotland and seek refuge at the English court. But why did Margaret Tudor present two very different epistolary personas in letters to the same recipient? Whilst the calendar records make little distinction between these documents—they were all sent to the same recipient, at the same period in time—close analysis of the specific agents and routes of correspondence used during this period reveals that Margaret dispatched letters to Thomas Howard using two separate channels of communication. One channel—the overt route—was used to convey letters to Surrey that requested peace between England, France, and Scotland, and which were sent with the knowledge and approval of the Scottish government. The second channel—the covert route—was used to dispatch secret correspondence to Surrey which offered reports on Scottish military preparations, and which were sent without the knowledge of the Scottish government.

Over the course of this article, I will seek to reconstruct the intricate network of communication that Margaret Tudor established with Thomas Howard in autumn 1523 and bring to light the individual bearers and agents who facilitated her covert and overt routes of delivery to the English nobleman. This analysis will provide evidence for the use of

⁶ Murphy, *Henry VIII*, 41.

⁷ Murphy, *Henry VIII*, 41.

⁸ Murphy, *Henry VIII*, 195–213.

⁹ Murphy, *Henry VIII*, 195.

multiple channels of communication as a strategy of epistolary secrecy, a strategy which has been seldom recorded in other studies of early modern letter-writing.¹⁰ Through this investigation, I will demonstrate that Margaret Tudor went to great lengths to establish these separate avenues of communication as a means of personal protection in a challenging political situation. Furthermore, this study also highlights the role that lesser-known individuals—such as members of the royal household of Scotland—played in Anglo-Scots espionage networks in the early sixteenth century, as well as revealing *how* such networks operated.

Early modern espionage and epistolary secrecy

In recent years, scholarship on the study of early modern espionage has flourished, as highlighted by Danielle Shaw and Matthew Woodcock in their introduction to a special issue on “New Explorations in Early Modern Intelligence-Gathering.”¹¹ Such work includes: studies of early modern spymasters (such as Sir Francis Walsingham), analysis of the ways in which intelligence networks were built and how they operated, investigation of the activities of individual spies and informers, analysis of the roles women played in early modern espionage, study of the relationship between early modern intelligence and epistolary culture, as well as the use of innovative methods in the study of early modern intelligence networks (such as the “Networking Archives” project which seeks to analyse the metadata of *State Papers Online*).¹² The present study contributes to this flourishing field of scholarship by providing new perspectives on the roles women—in this case royal women—played in early modern espionage, and the methods through which intelligence was transmitted between England and Scotland in the early sixteenth century.

Issues of secrecy and confidentiality were a prime concern for many writers in the medieval and early modern periods, especially those writing about delicate political or diplomatic matters. A variety of methods could be drawn upon by a writer seeking to

¹⁰ The only other mention of covert correspondence being conveyed via an alternative, secret channel of communication occurs in Nadine Akkerman, “The Postmistress, The Diplomat, and Black Chamber?: Alexandrine of Taxis, Sir Balthazar Gerbier and the Power of Postal Control,” in *Diplomacy and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Robyn Adams and Rosanna Cox (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 172–188, 174.

¹¹ Danielle Shaw and Matthew Woodcock, “New Explorations in Early Modern Intelligence-Gathering: Introduction.” *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 108, no. 381 (June 2023): 190–201.

¹² Shaw and Woodcock, “New Explorations in Early Modern Intelligence-Gathering”, 190–201. See <https://networkingarchives.github.io> for further details on the AHRC-funded “Networking Archives” project.

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protect the contents of their correspondence from prying eyes. Writers could focus on the material features of their letters: one might employ a cipher, use invisible ink made from lemon or orange juice that would be revealed only when a letter was exposed to water or heat, or a writer could ensure that a letter was not easily tampered with by employing complex letterlocking mechanisms.¹³ On the other hand, secret letters might be conveyed by covert means, for example by being “sewn into collars, sleeves or other clothing [or] hidden in trunks, pots, barrels and staffs,” or conveyed as a verbal message by a trusted servant to ensure that no physical evidence of the communication could be discovered.¹⁴

Margaret Tudor’s granddaughter, Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots (1542–1587), was notorious for sending secret letters whilst being under house arrest with George Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury (c. 1522–1590), and his wife, Bess of Hardwick (c. 1527–1608). David Durant notes that:

[Mary’s] letters and answers in secret went and came with surprising freedom. Sometimes her letters were written completely in code and others had the vital and revealing names substituted by seemingly innocent alternatives. At Sheffield, where Mary was taken in December, the Earl’s servants found secret letters hidden under stones and once a message was found inside the hollow staff of a visitor; there was no end to the ingenuity employed by Mary and her friends and it required all the wits the Earl possessed and the absolute loyalty of his servants to forestall Mary in her plottings.¹⁵

Mary Stuart clearly employed a variety of creative methods in an attempt to conceal her treasonable correspondence, regularly using ciphers, omitting incriminating names, and resorting to somewhat extraordinary means in an attempt to hide her letters. To date, no scholar has examined the letters of Margaret Tudor for any similar signs of epistolary concealment and secrecy. As far as the surviving documentation suggests, Margaret does not appear to have made use of ciphers or invisible ink in her own letters. However, my examination of the correspondence sent by Margaret to Thomas Howard in autumn 1523

¹³ Letterlocking is defined by Jana Dambrogio and Daniel Starza Smith as “[t]he technology of folding & securing an epistolary writing substrate to function as its own envelope.” See letterlocking.org for further details.

¹⁴ James Daybell, “Secret Letters in Elizabethan England,” in *Material readings of Early Modern Culture: Texts and Social Practices, 1580–1730*, ed. James Daybell and Peter Hinds (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 56

¹⁵ David N. Durant, *Bess of Hardwick: Portrait of an Elizabethan Dynast* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2008), 75.

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shows that Margaret did in fact make use of alternative methods of epistolary secrecy, such as operating covert and overt channels of correspondence, as well as employing other material strategies of epistolary secrecy.

Research into the delivery and transmission of early modern correspondence has shown that the identity of the messenger entrusted to deliver correspondence was integral to how a letter was read and understood by a recipient, and this was especially important in highly covert communication.¹⁶ Alan Stewart notes that:

Every early modern letter required a messenger, and who the messenger was mattered. Much of the correspondence of early modern England was not carried by the employees of impersonal, organised postal systems, but by identifiable and often personally known individuals. These might be the carriers of the royal post making journeys up and down England’s thoroughfares, a feed ride or runner, or a household servant whose sole mission was to deliver a single letter to a particular person. These letters *rely* for their meaning on a specific messenger whose employment as bearer impinges on, or indeed creates, the conditions of the relationship between writer and recipient.¹⁷

Stewart’s observation of “who the messenger was mattered” is especially pertinent to my analysis of Margaret Tudor and Thomas Howard’s epistolary communication of Autumn 1523, as only Margaret’s most faithful servants were entrusted with conveying her covert, and potentially treasonable, correspondence to the Thomas Howard. Analysis of the comments and names referenced in correspondence sent by Margaret Tudor and Thomas Howard in this period allows one to identify some of the specific agents responsible for carrying letters and messages between the two correspondents.

On Thomas Howard’s side of the exchange, it would appear that he used a number of spies to deliver some of his letters to Margaret and to have her letters brought to him,

¹⁶ For further discussion of the identity of early modern messengers, and the roles they could play in the delivery of correspondence see Nadine Akkerman, *Invisible Agents: Women and Espionage in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512-1635* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Katy Mair, “Anne, Lady Bacon: A Life in Letters,” (PhD thesis, Queen Mary, University of London, 2009); Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare’s Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Alison Wiggins, *Bess of Hardwick’s Letters: Language, Materiality, and Early Modern Epistolary Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁷ Stewart, *Shakespeare’s Letters*, 196.

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including a spy named James Rodgerforth.¹⁸ Margaret Tudor also employed a diverse collection of individuals as her personal messengers, many of whom had additional occupations in the Scottish royal household.¹⁹ Two messengers are of particular importance to this study. The first, named Jammy Dogg (also known as “James Dogg” and “James Doig”) is listed as the keeper of Margaret’s wardrobe in 1511.²⁰ Dogg travelled with Margaret to the English court in 1516-1517 and is first mentioned as performing the role of messenger in a letter sent by Margaret to Thomas Dacre on 4 October 1522.²¹ The second individual, named Patrick Sinclair, was a squire of attendance at Margaret’s marriage to James IV in 1503, and is also listed as a messenger and master of hunting in the account books of James V.²² Margaret first mentions Sinclair by name in a letter sent to Henry VIII on 13 September 1520, in which she notes that Sinclair was her “trasty and trw sarwand” (*trusty and true servant*).²³ In addition to these messengers, Margaret also sent letters to Thomas Howard via Isabella Hoppringle, Prioress of Coldstream, a Scottish prioress who often acted as a spy on behalf of the English court.²⁴ Margaret first met Hoppringle when she sought refuge at the priory of Coldstream when she fled to the Anglo-Scottish borders

¹⁸ Thomas Howard to Thomas Wolsey, 22 September 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 179; Margaret Tudor to Thomas Howard, 23 November 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 194.

¹⁹ For further discussion of the messengers that Margaret Tudor entrusted to deliver her correspondence see Helen Newsome-Chandler, *The Holograph Letters of Margaret Tudor, Queen of Scots (1489-1541)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2025).

²⁰ Michelle Beer, *Queenship at the Renaissance Courts of Britain: Katherine of Aragon and Margaret Tudor, 1503-1533* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2018), 85. James Dogg is also the subject of some discussion in William Hepburn, “The Household of James IV, 1488-1513,” (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013), 116-159 and William Hepburn, *The Household and Court of James IV of Scotland 1488-1513* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2023). Dogg was also the subject of a number of satirical poems by the Scots court poet William Dunbar (see “Of James Dog” and “He is Na Dog, He Is a Lam”).

²¹ Dogg’s name appears in the Henry VIII’s book of payments in January 1517, see <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol2/pp1473-1476>. Dogg is also mentioned in a letter sent by Margaret to Thomas Dacre on the 4 October 1522, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B VI fol. 246b.

²² See Hepburn, “The Household of James IV,” 217, and Andrea Thomas, “Renaissance Culture at the Court of James V, 1528-1542,” (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1997), 331.

²³ Margaret Tudor to Henry VIII, 13 September 1520, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 246b.

²⁴ See Margaret Tudor to Thomas Howard, 24 November 1523, The National Archives, SP 49/2 fol. 62; Murphy, “Spies, Informers and Thomas Howard’s Defence of England’s Northern Frontier in 1523,” 252-272; Kimm Perkins-Curran, ““Quhat say ye now, my lady prioress? how have yey usit your office, can ye ges?” Politics, Power and Realities of the Office of a Prioress in Her Community in Late Medieval Scotland,” in *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Janey Burton and Karen Stöber (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), 124-141.

in September 1515, following the Duke of Albany’s assumption of the Scottish regency. Margaret went on to become the patron of the priory of Coldstream, which eventually led her son, James V, to give land and money to Coldstream in 1525.²⁵ The above list of the messengers illustrates that Margaret was operating an intricate network of communication with Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, a network far more complex than simply using a single messenger to convey letters between the two correspondents.

“Overt” and “covert” channels of communication

The archive of Margaret Tudor’s correspondence totals 248 documents, and includes the largest collection of holograph correspondence written in English or Scots by any medieval or early modern queen (111 holograph letters and diplomatic memorials (instructions)).²⁶ Much of Margaret’s surviving correspondence is dedicated to diplomatic matters, including negotiating peace between England, Scotland, and sometimes France, organising the details of diplomatic meetings, and requesting safe conducts (diplomatic passports) for people travelling between England and Scotland. Whilst Margaret spent much of her life carefully managing relations and communications between England and Scotland, often seeking to perform the role of peacekeeper between the two nations, Margaret showed a clear allegiance with England in Summer/Autumn 1523.²⁷ For example, in a letter sent to Thomas Howard on 8 September 1523, Margaret requested Henry VIII’s “lycens ... to come In hys sayd rawlme” (*licence ... to come in his said realm*) and to flee Scotland.²⁸ If Henry VIII did not grant her request, Margaret noted that she would be “constraynd to make of my onfryndys fryndys” (*constrained to make of my unfriends [enemies] friends*). By “onfyndys,” Margaret was likely referring to the governing regent, John Stewart, Duke of Albany, and the Lords of Scotland who did not support her cause. She also noted that remaining in Scotland and working in conjunction with her enemies would be “ryght heffy” (*right heavy*) to her, and “ryght dangero3” (*right dangerous*) for her son, James V.²⁹ Whilst Margaret did not articulate precisely what this danger might be, she was most likely referring to long-

²⁵ Elizabeth Ewan, Sue Innes, and Siân Reynolds, *The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women: From Earliest Times to 2004* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 169–170.

²⁶ See Newsome-Chandler, *The Holograph Letters of Margaret Tudor, Queen of Scots (1489–1541)*.

²⁷ For an example of Margaret Tudor’s activities as peacekeeper between England and Scotland, see Helen Newsome, “The Function, Format, and Performance of Margaret Tudor’s January 1522 Diplomatic Memorial,” *Renaissance Studies* 35, no. 3 (June 2021): 403–424.

²⁸ Margaret Tudor to Thomas Howard, 8 September 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 170.

²⁹ Margaret Tudor to Thomas Howard, 8 September 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 170.

standing, though largely insubstantial, rumours that the Duke of Albany intended to kill James V and take the Scottish throne for his own.³⁰

It is in this period that Margaret Tudor began to act as a spy for the English faction, providing Thomas Howard with secret intelligence on the military preparations being made by the Duke of Albany for his impending invasion of England.³¹ Margaret’s spying activities can be seen in a letter sent to Thomas Howard sent on 25 September 1523:

1) also vyt 3e that ther Is com vyth the dwk sent be the ~~kyng~~ the french kyng vi^m fwt men a hvndreth men of army3 twa hondreth lyght hor3 and thyr ar comm by thaym that var here afoor therfor lok the betar a bowht beth at the vest border and the eest for thay volbe doying som thyng ryght swn for thay may not half them lang for the expensys Is gret I avartys you of all thyng I know³²

also wit [know] ye that there Is come with the duke sent by the French king vi^m foot men a hundred men of arms two hundred light horse and these are come by them that were here before therefore look the better about both the west border and the east for they will be doing something right soon for they may not have them long for the expenses is great I advertise you of all thing I know

In this letter, Margaret detailed the number of men and horses that had arrived with the Duke of Albany from France and advised that Surrey should look to both the “vest” (west) and “eest” (east) Anglo-Scottish borders in preparation for Albany’s attack. Providing such information to the head of the English army saw Margaret writing explicitly against Scottish interests, and acting as a spy for the English faction – an act which Margaret herself noted might be regarded as “tresson” (treason) and result in her “destruction.”³³ Whilst this correspondence presents Margaret Tudor as hostile towards the Duke of Albany

³⁰ Rumours of this kind had been in circulation since at least 1515.

³¹ In using the term “spy,” I refer to Nadine Akkerman’s definition: “[a] spy, at its most basic, is one who sees, one who gathers information.”³¹ Akkerman also defines an “intelligencer” as being someone who “makes information intelligible; his or her ‘intelligence,’ in the early modern sense, constitutes ‘Exchange of knowledge, information, opinion, etc.; mutual conveyance of information; communication, esp. of confidential information.’”³¹ However, Akkerman notes that “[t]he responsibilities of intelligencer and spy overlapped to such a degree that they are practically interchangeable.” In this article, I have therefore chosen to employ the term “spy.” See Nadine Akkerman, *Invisible Agents: Women and Espionage in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

³² Margaret Tudor to Thomas Howard, 25 September 1523, Bodleian Library, Tanner MS 90 fol. 41.

³³ Margaret Tudor to Patrick Sinclair, 24 October 1523, The National Archives, SP 49/2 fol. 44; Margaret Tudor to Patrick Sinclair, 13 October 1523, The British Library, Add MS 24965 fol. 94b.

and the Lords of Scotland who supported his governorship, Margaret’s stance is somewhat complicated in a series of letters sent to Thomas Howard only a few weeks later.

On 19 October 1523, Margaret sent two holograph letters to Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey. In the first of these two letters (MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 268), Margaret is styled in the role of diligent peacekeeper, who was writing on behalf of the Scottish government to attempt to secure peace between England, Scotland, and France.³⁴ In this letter, Margaret noted that she had spoken with the Duke of Albany, and that she had “prayd hym for gwd pece to be had betwxt the rawlmy3 vnyvarsaly” (*prayed him for good peace to be had betwixt the realms universally*). Margaret then requested that Surrey “schaw me your mynde and the kyng my brothars pleswr that I may labor In thys matar” (*show me your mind and the king my brother’s pleasure that I may labour in this matter*), and inform her how she could best act to facilitate the proposed peace. Margaret also emphasised her own personal investment in the peace, noting that the current tensions between England and Scotland were “a ryght sare matar to me that Is mothar to the on and systar to the tothar” (*a right sore matter to me that is mother to the one [James V] and sister to the other [Henry VIII]*). This letter is stylistically similar to Margaret’s wider diplomatic writing, and from the perspective of the Duke of Albany and the Lords of Scotland who had commissioned Margaret to mediate with England, this document would have appeared to have been a genuine written appeal for peace. Furthermore, as she took the time and energy to personally pen this letter in her own hand, instead of enlisting the services of a professional royal scribe, Margaret further materially demonstrated that she an ardent advocate of peace, who was committed to working in allegiance with the Scottish faction to secure peace between England, Scotland, and France.

The second letter that Margaret directed to Thomas Howard on 19 October 1523 (SP 49/2 fol. 38) is also a holograph composition, though it serves a very different communicative function. It reads:

2) My lord of sowray I haue sent you a olde trast sarwand of myne vyth thys vryteng vham to I pray [deletion] you gyff credens and to send me a gwd and honest answar to my sayd vryteng that I may schaw It to the gowarnor that he may ondarstand that my vryteng Is thankfolly takyn vyth and that the kyng my brothar and you vol do for me more than any othar and that vhan any gwd vay Is that It schal be vrowht [performed, carried out] be me and no nothar not the le3 to do as 3e knav best the

³⁴ Margaret Tudor to Thomas Howard, 19 October 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 268.

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plesyr and vyll of the kynys grace my brothar and that I be excwsyd of my vrytyng In thys behalfe for I most of force do as he vol byd me or ely3 get dyspleswr bot 3e know my mynd In all matars therfor do as my trast Is In you and god kype you vryten thys xix^t day of octobar

yous Margaret R³⁵

My lord of Surrey I have sent you an old trusty servant of mine with this writing whom to I pray [deletion] you to give credence and to send me a good and honest answer to my said writing that I may show it to the governor that he may understand that my writing is thankfully taken with and that the king my brother and you will do for me more than any other and that when any good way is that it shall be wrought [performed, carried out] by me and no other not the less to do as ye know best the pleasure and will of the king's grace my brother and that I be excused of my writing in this behalf for I must of force do as he will bid me or else get displeasure but ye know my mind in all matters therefore do as my trust is in you and god keep you written this xix^t day of October

yours Margaret R

In this letter, Margaret noted that she had sent this letter with “a olde trast sarwand” (an *old trusty servant*), for whom she requested that Surrey “gyff credens” (*give credence*). In the closing sections of the letter, Margaret made reference to the other holograph letter that she had sent to Surrey on the same day (MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 268) and asked that she “be excwsyd of my vrytyng In thys behalfe” (*be excused of my writing in this behalf*). Margaret noted that she had sent this letter “of force” and under the “byd[ding]” (*bidding*) of the Duke of Albany, for fear that she would “get [his] dyspleswr” (*get [his] displeasure*) if she did not agree to his requests. This phrase functioned to signal to Surrey that Margaret’s previous holograph letter (MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 268), also sent on 19 October 1523—which saw Margaret actively performing the role of diplomatic intercessor and requesting peace between England, Scotland and France—was not a sincere request for peace. Instead, Margaret reminded Surrey that he knew her “mynd In all matars” (*mind in all matters*), and that in reality she was loyal to England, and was keen to leave Scotland.

Whilst Margaret used this phrase to tell Thomas Howard that he should not fully trust the contents of her peacekeeping letter (MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 268), Margaret was also keen to ensure that the Scottish government continued to believe that she was an active mediator of peace. In her second 19 October 1523 letter to Surrey (SP 49/2 fol. 38),

³⁵ Margaret Tudor to Thomas Howard, 19 October 1523, The National Archives SP 49/2 fol. 38.

Margaret thus made a somewhat unusual request, asking that Surrey send a “gwd and honest answar to my sayd vryteng that I may schaw It to the gowarnor that he may ondarstand that my vryteng Is thankfoly takyn vyth” (*good and honest answer to my said writing that I may show it to the governor that he may understand that my writing is thankfully taken with*). Margaret thus wanted Surrey to send a reply which portrayed her as willingly performing the role of peacekeeper between the three nations, which she could use as evidence to assure Albany and the Lords of Scotland that she was loyal to Scotland, and that her letters to Surrey were sent only with the intention of seeking to organise peace.

In this letter, we can therefore see that Margaret was to some extent operating as a double agent and presenting contrasting epistolary personas to the Scottish and English divisions.³⁶ To the Scots, by noting that she would send a letter to Thomas Howard that requested peace, and by scripting a reply from Surrey which corroborated this story, Margaret presented the illusion that she was an ardent advocate for peace. But why did Margaret go to such lengths to maintain the illusion of being a willing mediator to the Scots, when she in fact wanted to escape to England? I would argue that this was a strategic epistolary move, designed to secure her protection in the event that Henry VIII denied her requests to come to England, and she was forced to “to make of my onfryndys fryndys” (*to make of my unfriends [enemies] friends*) and make allegiance with the Duke of Albany and the Lords of Scotland whom she claimed to oppose. While the presentation of two somewhat paradoxical epistolary personas may explain why some historical biographers have branded Margaret as “the inconstant queen,” such a move actually allowed Margaret to protect her reputation in Scotland whilst also secretly scoping out possible opportunities to flee to England.³⁷

Analysis of the methods of transmission used to convey the two 19 October 1523 holograph letters to Thomas Howard reveals that Margaret Tudor went to extensive lengths to maintain these two distinct epistolary personas, even going as far as to establish two separate channels of overt and covert communication with Thomas Howard. Whilst the two letters were both written on 19 October 1523, they were received by Surrey at different times, and were delivered by different messengers. In a letter sent to Thomas Wolsey sent on 23 October 1523, Thomas Howard reported that:

³⁶ By double agent, I refer to the OED’s definition of “[a] spy who works on behalf of mutually hostile countries, usually with actual allegiance only to one.” See “double agent, n.,” Oxford English Dictionary, September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4712085350>.

³⁷ Wood, *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of Great Britain*, 264.

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3) vnto this day that I haue received dyvers lettres aswell fro the quene of scottis fro si^r william bulmer and others ... and where in one lettre is conteyned that she doth send her seruante vnto me for peace comprehending fraunce /³⁸

unto this day I have received diverse letters as well from the Queen of Scots from Sir William Bulmer and others ... and where in one letter is contained that she doth send her servant unto me for peace comprehending France /

This letter shows that Margaret’s first letter – which requested peace between England, Scotland, and France (MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 268) – reached Thomas Howard on 23 October 1523 and was carried by one of Margaret’s (unnamed) personal servants. This route formed Margaret Tudor’s overt channel of communication with Thomas Howard. In a second letter to Wolsey, Surrey reported that Margaret’s second, secret letter to Thomas Howard (SP 49/2 fol. 38) arrived the following day on 24 October 1523 and was conveyed via one of Margaret’s most trusted bearers, Jammy Dogg. Surrey wrote:

4) Pleasith it you^r grace to be aduertised that this present houre is come to me Iamy dog the quene of scottes seruante whom you^r grace doth know ffor he hath ben with you and he hath broght me one lettre ffre the seid qwene and one other wich she hath sent sith hys departure fre her vnto patrik synkcler wich lettres you^r grace shall receyue with this and be cause the one lettre sent to patrik synkcler is off great Importannce if it be trew³⁹

Pleaseth it your grace to be advertised that this present hour is come to me Jammy Dog the Queen of Scots’ servant whom your grace doth know for he hath been with you and he hath brought me one letter from the said queen and one other which she hath sent since his departure from her unto Patrick Sinclair which letters your grace shall receive with this and because the one letter sent to Patrick Sinclair is of great importance if it be true

Letters carried via Jammy Dogg thus formed a second covert channel of communication between Margaret Tudor and Thomas Howard. Though records of comparable practices of separate avenues of covert and overt transmission are relatively scarce in early modern archives, a similar method was used by the seventeenth-century queen, Elizabeth of Bohemia. Nadine Akkerman observes that:

³⁸ Thomas Howard to Thomas Wolsey, 23 October 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B VI fol. 289.

³⁹ Thomas Howard to Thomas Wolsey, 24 October 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B VI fol. 311.

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Sir Balthazar Gerbier’s private notes reveal that the high-profile defender of English Protestantism abroad, Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia, the exiled Winter Queen, who lived in the Hague from 1621 to 1661, often smuggled letters to London via the channels of the Taxis post. When writing from The Hague, the courtly capital of the Dutch Republic, Elizabeth and her supporters often reveal that they sent their mail to London via two separate routes, “by sea and by land.” This phrase is peculiar because evidently all letters to England from the Continent had to travel over land and cross the Channel. The question arises, then, through which mysterious, alternative channel did their letters pass? Gerbier’s manuscript treatise “Notes for a Resident att Bruxeles (sic)” (1636), jotted down in a letter book riddled with ciphers, reveals that instead of dispatch via Calais, the so-called “letter by land” would be sent to Ostend, the postal crossing in the Spanish Netherlands, by way of Brussels and Antwerp. In other words, at certain times the Queen of Bohemia and her courtiers took care to circumvent the regular postal channels in which letters were transmitted via Calais. Instead, they opted for an underground postal network, sending their letters unregistered by Ostend.⁴⁰

In a similar fashion to Margaret Tudor’s practices in autumn 1523, the Queen of Bohemia and her supporters sent secret letters to England via an “underground postal network,” a transmission route that circumnavigated the official postal port of Calais and helped to protect their covert correspondence from falling into the hands of their enemies. The use of two separate channels of communication with Thomas Howard would have enabled Margaret Tudor to achieve a similar outcome. Sending official written petitions of peace to Surrey via the overt route would have allowed Margaret to convince the Scottish faction that she was a willing mediator, who was acting with their best intentions in mind. However, sending an additional secret letter via the covert route of communication, using a different messenger entirely, would have allowed Margaret the opportunity to inform Surrey of her true intentions, without openly exposing her double-crossing actions to the Scottish government. Such a strategy would have served as a means of safeguarding Margaret against accusations of treason and helped her to preserve positive relations with the Scottish government in the event that she was forced to remain in Scotland.

Such preparations were indeed necessary when we read Thomas Howard’s correspondence to the English court during this period. In letters addressed directly to

⁴⁰ Akkerman, “The Postmistress, The Diplomat, and Black Chamber?,” 174.

Margaret herself, Surrey gave the impression that her requests to come to England would be granted by her brother, Henry VIII, and Surrey also noted that he would gladly travel into Scotland to accompany Margaret to England himself.⁴¹ However, Surrey’s letters to Thomas Wolsey sent at the same time tell a very different story:

5) Also considering that I see noo proufigthe shuld come of hir [Margaret] being here but great costes and chargis / wherefor vnder the kinges high correccion and your graces me think it were as proufitable and more good shuld come thereof to haue hir remayne in scotland than too come into England / if she maye be soo conv[inced] with good perswasions⁴²

Also considering that I see no profit should come of her [Margaret] being here but great costs and charges / wherefore under the king’s high correction and your grace’s me think it were as profitable and more good should come thereof to have her remain in Scotland than to come into England / if she may be so conv[inced] with good persuasions

In reality, it would seem that Thomas Howard felt that it would be more “proufitable” (*profitable*) and involve less “costes and chargis” (*costs and charges*) if Margaret were to remain in Scotland. Such comments, and the duplicity of Thomas Howard, underscore how important Margaret’s efforts to protect herself and maintain positive relations with Scotland were. Despite her repeated appeals for assistance over this period, Margaret Tudor in fact never went to England again during her life.

Further analysis of Margaret Tudor’s correspondence sent in October 1523 reveals that Jammy Dogg formed only one aspect of a complex network of covert communication that was in operation between Margaret Tudor and Thomas Howard in this period. On 21 October 1523, Margaret sent a brief holograph letter to another of her trusted messengers, Patrick Sinclair.⁴³ It reads:

6) patryk synklar I command me hartly to you and vyt 3e for veryte that edam donda3 Is passt to som of Inghland vyth the frence kyngs gret seel and ther for In qwyr tyl vham It Is for I dred tresson and thys 3e do In all hast for and I vyst tyl vham It var I

⁴¹ See Thomas Howard to Margaret Tudor, 20 September 1523, The National Archives, SP 49/2 fol. 30; Thomas Howard to Margaret Tudor, 29 September 1523, The Bodleian Library, MS Tanner 90, fol. 47; Thomas Howard to Margaret Tudor, 1 October 1523, The National Archives, SP 49/2 fol. 31.

⁴² Thomas Howard to Thomas Wolsey, 1 October 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B VI fol. 284.

⁴³ Margaret Tudor to Patrick Sinclair, 21 October 1523, The National Archives, SP 49/2 fol. 44.

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schwld schaw It and thys 3e fayly not to dw In all hast vyth answar of all matars and
I pray you kype thys vryteng sekret and dw as my trast Is In you and be not ovr lange
a doIng bot thys Is trowth that I vryt and god kype you vryten thys vedynsday
yours 3e vayt

*Patrick Sinclair I command me heartily to you and wit [know] ye for verity that Adam Dondaz
is passed to some of England with the French king's great seal and therefore enquire to whom
it is for I dread treason and this ye do in all haste for and I wit [know] to whom it were I should
show it and this ye fail not to do in all haste with answer of all matters and I pray you keep this
writing secret and do as my trust is in you and be not over [too] long doing but this is truth
that I write and god keep you written this Wednesday*

yours ye wit (know)

In this letter, Margaret requested that Sinclair act as a spy on her behalf and gather intelligence about an individual named Adam Dondaz, who was reported to have passed into England “vyth the frence kyngs gret seel” (*with the French king's great seal*). Margaret's use of the directive “thys 3e do In all hast” (*this ye do in all haste*), as well as the urgent request that Sinclair “kype thys vryteng sekret” (*keep this writing secret*), and Margaret's confession that she “dred[ed] tresson” (*dread[ed] treason*) all emphasise the delicate, urgent, and secret nature of this exchange. Whilst this letter is addressed to Patrick Sinclair alone, this document was somehow conveyed to Thomas Howard on the Anglo-Scottish borders, who then forwarded the letter to Thomas Wolsey in London, noting that it was a “lettre ... off gret Importannce if it be trew” (*letter ... of great importance if it be true*).⁴⁴ But how did this letter come to be in Surrey's possession? Analysis of the wider discourse context reveals that Margaret's letter to Patrick Sinclair was likely transmitted to Thomas Howard via a complex, multi-stage chain of communication, which involved at least three different agents.

Unfortunately, there are no surviving records that detail exactly how Margaret's 21 October 1521 letter to Patrick Sinclair was conveyed to its named addressee. However, another letter sent by Margaret to Patrick Sinclair in this period offers one potential answer to this query. In a letter sent to Sinclair on 9 October 1521, Margaret noted that:

⁴⁴ Thomas Howard to Thomas Wolsey, 24 October 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B VI fol. 311.

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7) I haue resayved a letar fre my lord of sowray that Is answar to my last letar sent to you be the priore3 of calstram brothar⁴⁵

I have received a letter from my lord of Surrey that is answer to my last letter sent to you by the Prioress of Coldstream's brother

This comment suggests that on some occasions Margaret Tudor passed secret letters to the Prioress of Coldstream's brother, Alexander Hoppringle, who then conveyed these letters to Patrick Sinclair.⁴⁶ Isabella Hoppringle, Prioress of Coldstream, played a central role in transmitting Margaret Tudor's correspondence to England during this period, a point which Margaret herself articulated in a letter to Surrey sent on 24 November 1523, noting that “thayr Is non that may do It so viel and swrly as sche may to convay letars” (*there is none that may do it so well and surely as she may to convey letters*).⁴⁷ Whilst the next stages of the transmission process are not entirely clear, Thomas Howard's letter to Thomas Wolsey sent on 24 October 1523 notes that:

8) this present houre is come to me Iamy dog the quene of scottes seruante whom you^r grace doth know ffor he hath ben wi^th you and he hath broght me one lettre ffre the seid qwene and one other wich she hath sent sith hys departure fre her vnto patrik synkler⁴⁸

this present hour is come to me Jammy Dog the Queen of Scot's servant whom your grace doth know for he hath been with you and he hath brought me one letter from the said queen and one other which she hath sent since his departure from her unto Patrick Sinclair

From this comment, it therefore appears that at some point between 21 and 24 October 1523, Patrick Sinclair rendezvoused with Jammy Dogg (or another agent connected with Dogg) and had Dogg forward Margaret's holograph letter to Sinclair on to Thomas Howard. On 24 October 1523, Jammy Dogg thus arrived at Surrey's residence carrying Margaret's covert 19 October 1523 (SP 49/2 fol. 38) letter to Thomas Howard, as well as her 21 October

⁴⁵ Margaret Tudor to Patrick Sinclair, 9 October 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 269.

⁴⁶ See Alexander Pringle, *The Records of the Pringles or Hoppringills of the Scottish Border* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1933), 12-13.

⁴⁷ Margaret Tudor to Thomas Howard, 24 November 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B I fol. 279.

⁴⁸ Thomas Howard to Thomas Wolsey, 24 October 1523, The British Library, MS Cotton Caligula B VI fol. 311.

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1523 letter to Patrick Sinclair. From this analysis, it can thus be seen that in October 1523 Margaret Tudor was operating a complex network of communication with Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, employing the services of numerous agents including Jammy Dogg, Patrick Sinclair, and potentially Isabella Hoppringle and her brother, Alexander Hoppringle, to ensure that her secret correspondence was securely conveyed to Thomas Howard.

Further material strategies of epistolary secrecy

Whilst the need for secrecy clearly affected the transmission of Margaret Tudor’s correspondence in Autumn 1523, Margaret’s letter to Patrick Sinclair sent on 21 October 1523 also shows that, in some circumstances, Margaret adapted the material format of her correspondence as a further strategy of epistolary secrecy. The most striking difference between Margaret’s holograph letter to Patrick Sinclair sent on 21 October 1523 and the other letters explored in this article, is the absence of Margaret’s concluding signature. Instead of signing the letter with her conventional signature “Margaret R,” Margaret instead concluded this letter to Patrick Sinclair letter with the closing subscription “yours 3e vayt” (*yours ye vyt [know]*).

In the early modern period, writers might choose to pen a letter in their own hand for a variety of communicative and interpersonal functions, including “as a marker of affect, duty or obligation, or [to] represent a desire for secrecy.”⁴⁹ Along these lines, by choosing to write the 21 October 1523 letter to Patrick Sinclair herself and thus dispensing with the services of an amanuensis, Margaret could ensure that the contents of this letter remained secret. Furthermore, by sending this letter as a holograph composition—written in a hand which would have been instantly recognisable to Patrick Sinclair—Margaret could ensure that her servant understood that the letter was from herself and that its contents could be trusted. However, by refraining from signing her name “Margaret R” and instead concluding the letter with the phrase “yours 3e vayt” (*yours 3e vyt [know]*), Margaret could also ensure that if this letter fell into the hands of one of her enemies, she would not be immediately identified as the sender of this covert communication. A similar strategy is used in a letter sent by the Abbot of Kelso to Thomas Dacre on 8 September 1523.⁵⁰ Kelso noted that he had written this letter with his own hand with the phrase “3e ken ye hand”

⁴⁹ Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England*, 87.

⁵⁰ Abbot of Kelso to Thomas Dacre, 8 September 1523, The British Library, Add MS 24965 fol. 77.

(*ye know the hand*), but also refrained from concluding the letter with his signature. In both letters, the absence of a signature, but use of a holograph hand for the main body of the letter, functions as an additional strategy of epistolary secrecy.

Conclusion

As highlighted in the introduction of this article, medieval and early modern writers could draw upon a variety of epistolary strategies to protect the contents of their correspondence from prying eyes. Whilst Margaret Tudor does not appear to have used some of the more common methods of epistolary concealment—such as the use of cipher or invisible ink—this article demonstrates that when circumstances required, Margaret employed covert channels of communication to transport her secret correspondence to Thomas Howard. The use of multiple channels of communication as a strategy of epistolary secrecy has not been reported widely in studies of early modern correspondence, with the exception of Nadine Akkerman’s analysis of the undercover postal networks employed by Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia, and her supporters, in the early seventeenth century.⁵¹ My study of Margaret Tudor’s covert correspondence networks with Thomas Howard in Autumn 1523 thus provides another example of this epistolary practice over one hundred years earlier, though on a smaller, more local scale than Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia’s covert communicative networks. The rare survival of this information may thus provide evidence to suggest that such practices were more widespread in medieval and early modern epistolary culture than previously known.

This analysis also offers a reconstruction of the intricate networks of communication that Margaret Tudor established with Thomas Howard in Autumn 1523, as well as revealing the identities of some of the individual agents who facilitated her covert and overt routes of delivery to the English nobleman. In doing so, this study provides an important insight into *how* intelligence-gathering and communication networks operated between England and Scotland in the sixteenth century, as well as highlighting the vital roles that lesser-known figures (such as members of Scotland’s royal household) played in the operation of these networks. In addition, my analysis demonstrates that Margaret herself was also an important part of these Anglo-Scottish espionage networks. Whilst there has been extensive scholarship on the roles that women played in early modern espionage, there has been little work investigating the spying activities of royal women in

⁵¹ Akkerman, “The Postmistress, The Diplomat, and Black Chamber?”, 174.

this period.⁵² This article therefore provides important evidence that medieval and early modern queens—such as Margaret Tudor—could perform the role of spy and play an active role in intelligence-gathering networks when the need arose.

Finally, this study also offers a reconsideration of the character and diplomatic and communicative activities of Margaret Tudor, Queen of Scots (1489–1541). Despite being branded as an “inconstant queen” and described as “politically inept ... [i]mpulsive, greedy and lacking in sound judgement” by scholars and biographers, this article provides evidence for an alternative view.⁵³ Whilst Margaret Tudor presented two somewhat contradictory epistolary personas in her correspondence to Thomas Howard, she did not do so not because of issues of inconstancy, but as a means of personal protection. By sending correspondence under the direction of the Scottish government that saw Margaret performing the role of willing mediator, and requesting replies from Surrey that corroborated this presentation, Margaret sought to maintain good relations with the Scottish faction in the event that Henry VIII denied her requests to come to England (which he eventually did). However, by having additional covert avenues of communication with Surrey, Margaret could also provide important intelligence to the head of the English army and make efforts to persuade Henry VIII and Thomas Howard to allow her to come to England.

This analysis thus shows that in Autumn 1523 Margaret Tudor exercised shrewd political and diplomatic acumen to protect herself in a high-risk situation. Despite the criticisms that Margaret Tudor was an “inconstant queen” and “politically inept,” in reality Margaret was simply mirroring the behaviour of her male contemporaries. For example, Thomas Howard’s correspondence explored in this article shows that his offers of support to Margaret and to help her flee Scotland were insincere, and that in reality he and Thomas Wolsey felt that Margaret would be of greater use to them if she remained in

⁵² For investigations into the roles and importance that women held in early modern espionage see Akkerman, *Invisible Agents*; Carolyn James and Glenda Sluga, ed., *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics since 1500* (London: Routledge, 2016); Alan Marshall, “‘Memorials for Mrs Affora’: Aphra Behn and the Restoration intelligence world,” *Women’s Writing* 22, no. 1 (2015): 13–33; Ann Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2012); John Fox, *The King’s Smuggler: Jane Whorwood, Secret Agent to Charles I* (Stroud: History Press, 2010); Sarah Poynting, “Deciphering the King: Charles I’s letters to Jane Whorwood,” *The Seventeenth Century* 1, no. 1 (2006): 128–40; William J. Cameron, ed., *New Light on Aphra Behn: An Investigation into the Facts and Fictions Surrounding her Journey to Surinam in 1663 and Her Activities as a Spy in Flanders in 1666* (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1961).

⁵³ Wood, *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of Great Britain*, 264; Emond, *The Minority of James V*, 293.

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Scotland, regardless of her pleas to return to England. Henry VIII, too, often changed his political and diplomatic allegiances, depending on which foreign leader or faction offered him the best deal at the time. Comparison of Margaret Tudor’s diplomatic and epistolary activities with those of her male contemporaries thus highlights the gendered bias of previous interpretations of Margaret Tudor, and shows that, in reality, Margaret was an intelligent and resourceful communicative and diplomatic agent.

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