



**“Doutfull in her mynde”:
Margaret Beaufort’s Eulogy
as the Story of a Survivor**

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Abstract: Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry Tudor, later Henry VII, is well known for having a carefully crafted public persona. From signing official documents as “Margaret R” to a story of a dream vision in her youth which ordained her marriage to Edmund Tudor, all aspects of her identity were meticulously constructed. Yet the story of the vision, as told by her confessor John Fisher in a sermon a month after she died, has increasing relevance in light of current discussions of consent and sexual violence. It tells how St. Nicholas instructed Margaret to choose Edmund over her previous betrothed, John de la Pole, as her husband, despite the former being much older than her young years. Though scholars and biographers have described the story as an act of agency in her youth, or else a strategic lie, they do not consider how this story excuses what was likely a real trauma for Margaret: a child (on her part) marriage and a young and dangerous pregnancy and delivery. Drawing on recent scholarship on medieval and modern sexual violence, this paper looks at how the myth of Margaret’s marriage decision through the lens of a male authority figure justified a woman’s traumatic experience despite it not being the norm for royal women as has so often been assumed.

Keywords: Margaret Beaufort; child marriage; Henry VII; the Tudors; John Fisher

A central preoccupation of royal women from before the Middle Ages to the present is the decision to marry. Whether arranged by parents or a love match, this decision is imperative to fulfill what Elena Woodacre calls the “three core aspects of queenship: Family, Rule, and Image.”¹ For a medieval queen, an essential part of this third category of “Image” was how she presented herself as a member of the first, “Family,” as a daughter, a wife, and a mother. A facet of each of these identities was her sexuality. Before marriage, a daughter would be expected to remain pure, in order to contract a valuable alliance. Once she was a wife, however, sexual activity was necessary in order to provide her husband with heirs as a mother. As such, the

¹ Woodacre, *Queens and Queenship*, 3.

sexuality of queens has been a subject of much scrutiny, both in their own time and in present scholarship, most recently in RSJ’s cluster on “Royal Sexualized Bodies at the Tudor Court.”² Studies have shown how royal and elite women had to navigate this emphasis on their body. Catherine of Aragon, for example, as discussed by Emma Luisa Cahill Marrón in the aforementioned issue, found herself doing so when Henry VIII wanted to put her aside for Anne Boleyn in what would be called “The Great Matter.”³ Many years later, Anne’s daughter, Elizabeth I, died unmarried after a long, successful reign.⁴ And many more examples would follow in England and other countries.

Despite our extensive knowledge of royal marriages, however, there is still a perception, even among scholars, that young marriage and consummation of both royal men and women, but especially women, was the norm, with the preservation of the royal line by the production of an heir taking precedence over the desire—both sexual and to fulfill this role—of the bride.⁵ However, this was not always the case in the Middle Ages. Stories exist both of kings and princes who delayed the consummation of their marriage until their bride grew or served as cautionary tales of reasons why consummating a marriage with an immature partner, male or female, was undesirable and even dangerous. Speaking of Isabella of France, wife of Edward II of England, John Carmi Parsons notes that it was not only the King’s sexual interest in men that prevented him from initially consummating his marriage to his young bride, but rather a concern that she was not yet strong enough to risk carrying a child.⁶ Henry of Derby, later Henry IV, proved this by consummating his marriage to his first wife Mary de Bohun. She gave birth only a year or two after their marriage at fourteen and twelve, respectively, to secure her husband’s claim to her vast inheritance; however, their son died, and Mary was sent back to her mother until she was older.⁷ Several generations later, the aforementioned Catherine of Aragon’s virginity, at the time of her marriage to the younger Henry Tudor after she had been widowed by his brother Arthur, was supported by the idea that consummation at a young age was dangerous for the husband, as well as the bride. Cahill Marrón explains that,

² Schutte, “Royal Sexualized Bodies at the Tudor Court,” 7–80.

³ See Marrón, “Questioning an Honest Queen,” 147–180.

⁴ For more about Elizabeth’s courtships, see Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony*.

⁵ Such was the case in the Q & A of a recent Institute for Historical Research seminar. “Sexual Violence during the Lancastrian Occupation of Normandy,” 21 November 2023.

⁶ Parsons, “Mothers, Daughters, Marriage, Power,” 67.

⁷ Parsons, “Mothers, Daughters, Marriage, Power,” 67.

In the case of the questionnaire [in which the validity of Catherine’s marriage to Arthur was scrutinized], several of the inquiries were related to virginity and sex. For example, the second question cited King Henry VII’s royal council advising against the early consummation of the marriage over health concerns focused on Prince Arthur. It’s important to note that in 1497 Catherine’s brother Prince John had died shortly after his marriage to Margaret of Austria, leaving his young bride pregnant. There were many who thought that an early consummation could lead to death or fertility problems, like in the case of Arthur’s paternal grandmother Margaret Beaufort. She was never able to conceive again after giving birth to Henry VII at thirteen years old.⁸

Within this quotation we find another story that helps explain Catherine’s virginity: that of Margaret Beaufort, her grandmother-in-law. A descendant of John of Gaunt, the mother of the first Henry Tudor, and ancestor of the Tudor kings and queens, Margaret was a shrewd politician as well as an important literary figure, patronizing books by William Caxton and Wynken de Worde and even herself translating a portion of Thomas a Kempis’s *Imitatio Christi*. Anne Clark Bartlett and Sally Fisher have discussed Margaret’s “self-fashioning,” using Stephen Greenblatt’s term, as a statesman and almost queen (though she was only ever officially a Queen Mother), signing documents as “Margaret R,” possibly for “Richmond,” of which she was countess, but also possibly for *Regina*.⁹ It was from Margaret whom the Tudors had a tentative biological claim to the throne, and thus her marriage and its relationship to issues of age and consent is of specific interest for royal studies. It is her experience which will be the focus of this paper.

While the danger of Margaret’s delivery of Henry VII has been well known, the subject has been less discussed in scholarship from the perspective of recent conversations on sexual violence and survival. Margaret’s sexual encounters with her second husband, Edmund Tudor, Henry’s father, have often been taken for granted as fulfilling the expectations of a medieval royal woman’s duty, not considering that the early consummation of their marriage for her young age might not have been thought of as advisable even from a medieval perspective. Furthermore, even though she was Edmund’s wife, their sexual relationship may have been without her true consent. This idea has been posited by acclaimed historical fiction writer, Philippa Gregory, whose *The Cousins’ War* series about Margaret and the other key women in the Wars of the Roses conflict was made into a Starz mini-series *The White Queen*. In her novel *The Red Queen*, Gregory presents young

⁸ Marrón, “Questioning an Honest Queen,” 24.

⁹ Bartlett, “Translation, Self-Representation, and Statecraft,” 53–66; Fisher, “‘Margaret R,’” 151–172.

Margaret’s sexual relationship with her husband as against her will. Margaret, the narrator, describes her married life with Edmund as follows:

Every night I grit my teeth and say not one word of protest, not even a whimper of pain, as he takes me without kindness or courtesy, and every night, moments later, he gets up from my bed and throws on his gown and goes without a word of thanks or farewell. I say nothing, not one word, from beginning to end, and neither does he. If it were lawful for a woman to hate her husband, I would hate him as a rapist.¹⁰

While this literary interpretation is influenced by modern concerns, using the vocabulary of rape in the present sense rather than its past meanings, it does not follow that this sexual relationship was acceptable in its own time. I will explore in this paper how what we know of perceptions of sexual violence in the Middle Ages can help us read Margaret’s story. I emphasize the word “story” as I aim to examine the myth of her marriage to Edmund, in which the nine-year-old Margaret has a dream vision of St. Nicholas telling her which of her two suitors she should choose. The vision, along with the events leading up to it, is described in a eulogy called the “Mornynge Remembraunce Had at the Moneth Mynde of the Noble Prynces Margaret Countesse of Rychemond and Darbye” given by her confessor John Fisher one month after her death.¹¹ This myth has often been interpreted as either an act of consent on Margaret’s part or a well-crafted lie to deceive this holy man.¹² The reality of the vision, however, might be less important; Carole Levin notes that whether the dream was real or not, its significance is that the idea of such a vision would have been believed by those who were listening to it, since dreams carried a great deal of weight at the time.¹³ Instead, I want to focus on how this mystical narrative might mask what, even by medieval standards, was a traumatic event for so young a child: to marry at nine years old and give birth a few years later. I argue that this male storyteller shapes an event that may not have been considered ethical in the medieval period, even if it was legal—an older man having sexual relations with his very young wife—in order to justify it not only as a marker of her son’s divine destiny as king but as a sign of her own good conduct. This shows how ideas of good behavior could contribute to medieval royal women’s harm with respect to sexual violence.

¹⁰ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 33.

¹¹ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 289–310.

¹² Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 11, 37–38; Simon, *Of Virtue Rare*, 15; Tallis, *Uncrowned Queen*, 40–41; Norton, *Margaret Beaufort*, 33–34.

¹³ Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance*, 105–107.

Methodology

In the following paper, I will proceed as follows. I will begin with a brief explanation of what we know about medieval conceptions of sexual violence in both law and literature. It has generally been known how, legally, there were many restrictions on what qualified as *raptus*, which was not absolutely identical to our modern crime of rape. However, despite the limits to the law, it did not always follow that sexual violence outside of those categories was accepted as the norm. Such scenarios were often depicted in the literary imagination, including nonconsensual sex within marriage. After an overview of these concepts, I will then turn to some background on Margaret’s life and four marriages, focusing on the first two as they comprise the myth in Fisher’s eulogy.

The central analysis in this essay is a close reading of the section of the eulogy depicting the choice allegedly posed to Margaret on whether to marry John de la Pole or Edmund Tudor at the age of nine, resulting in a dream vision of St. Nicholas. I will put this myth in the context of how medieval women could be depicted as sexual objects even if, or perhaps even because they were young, despite the risks. I will show how, in Margaret’s case, these risks were known by comparing the depiction of this incident to what Fisher says about Henry’s birth, using a brief excerpt from the Bishop’s Latin work to show how he downplays the danger that Margaret herself faced in the delivery, as opposed to her son. Finally, I will discuss how on a rhetorical level, Margaret’s vision is grammatically ambiguous in its depiction of her agency, presenting her as either making her own choice or performing an act of obedience to a male authority. Looking at her behavior next to Fisher’s depictions of Margaret elsewhere in his work as a “good woman” according to medieval ideas of female conduct, to use the Chaucerian term, I suggest that he is using the story to illustrate her obedience.¹⁴ We can therefore interpret this text as an example of the way that this medieval woman may have been socialized to consent to intercourse for reasons other than her own inclinations.

A Review of the Literature

Contemporary discussions of sexual violence, brought on by the popularization of the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements, have led to an increased interest in medieval views on the subject, most recently with Carissa Harris’s standout first book, *Obscene Pedagogies*,

¹⁴ Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women*, 587–630.

along with a co-edited volume *Rape Culture and Female Resistance in Late Medieval Literature* with Sarah Baechle and Elizaveta Strakhov.¹⁵ These works have shifted the narrative from the question of what rape consisted of in the Middle Ages, that is, what was legally classified as a crime, to how rape culture has developed into what it is today and its impact on survivors. Suzanne Edwards explains the difference, saying,

Discourses of sexual violence debate what defines an act of rape or ravishment, what constitutes its harm, and how perpetrators can be made responsible for the injuries they have caused. Discourses of survival, in their focus on how a victim makes do in the aftermath of sexual trauma often set aside the question of whether an act would be considered rape according to any prescriptive norm. Instead, discourses of survival elaborate how sexual violence reconfigures a victim’s understanding of corporeality, the will, temporality, and community. Further, discourses of survival emphasize life after rape as both desirable and ethically important.¹⁶

Though I ultimately argue that the story of Margaret Beaufort’s second marriage is relevant to conversations of survival even though and perhaps because it was not legally classified as a rape, it is important to remember the definitions within medieval law in order to see how this case study deals with a different kind of moral dilemma. The legal term *raptus* applied to rape as both an act of coerced sex and abduction. Scholars like Edwards and Caroline Dunn have examined how laws, such as The Statutes of Westminster (1275 and 1285) and the Statute of Rape (1382), considered the idea of women’s consent, but were also concerned with respecting the rights of her parents. The last statute did so by disinheriting the victim of such a crime so that she might not use it to consent to a man that she wanted but her parents did not.¹⁷ Additionally, as Chelsea Skalak points out, “*raptus*, in all its capaciousness, implies that a woman has been stolen away—from a father, from a husband, from a guardian. It therefore follows that the word cannot be applied to sexual crimes that might take place between a woman and her husband, who is her proper owner.”¹⁸ She further explains, however, that even though, in law, a husband could not have sex with his wife against her will (or vice versa), that did not mean it was considered right. To illustrate this, she uses several literary examples from *The Canterbury Tales* of

¹⁵ Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*; Baechle, Harris, and Strakhov, *Rape Culture and Female Resistance*.

¹⁶ Edwards, *The Afterlives of Rape*, 1–2.

¹⁷ Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 191; Edwards, “The Rhetoric of Rape,” 4–14.

¹⁸ Skalak, “The Unwilling Wife,” 123.

Geoffrey Chaucer, a book that Margaret Beaufort is known to have owned by an author who also had ties to her ancestors.¹⁹

Of relevance to Margaret’s own situation is the story of *The Merchant’s Tale* which tells of the marriage of an old man, Januarie, to a young wife, May. The tale is a fabliau, meant to evoke laughter at awkward sexual situations. But Skalak suggests the story holds a ring of truth, even though the characters themselves are fictional, indicating a real concern at the time it was written. In the tale, Januarie thinks to himself, “Allas! O tendre creature, / Now wolde God ye myghte wel endure / Al my corage, it is so sharp and keene! / I am agast ye shul it nat susteene.”²⁰ Reading these lines, Skalak explains,

Januarie’s attitude here is obviously played as comedy, inviting the reader to make fun of the impotent old man fantasizing about how much sex he is about to have. But Januarie is depicted here also as a husband who genuinely believes that he will physically harm his wife by having sex with her, and, moreover, that it is his right and responsibility before God to do so.²¹

The fabliau does not indicate May’s specific age, but, considering this fantasy of such a large gap between husband and wife, she may not be much older than the age of first marriage for another wife in *The Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath, who had been married “sith [she] twelve yeer was of age,” the legal age of consent for a woman.²² As seen in the stories of Edward II and Isabella of France, and Catherine of Aragon and Prince Arthur mentioned in the introduction to this paper, physical harm to a young spouse was a concern even in the upper echelons of society, where young marriage might be more desirable to secure an inheritance and/or heirs.²³ As such, putting Margaret Beaufort in this context suggests she may not have been truly required to consummate her marriage and become pregnant at thirteen: the trauma she experienced was not inevitable and the events leading up to it could have been viewed as unethical, even within that period of time so distant from our own.

¹⁹ Powell, “Lydgate, Chaucer, and Lady Margaret Beaufort,” 507.

²⁰ Chaucer, “The Merchant’s Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue,” 4:1757–1760. Fragment and line numbers will generally be given in lieu of pages for works from *The Canterbury Tales*. All other Chaucer works will include page numbers.

²¹ Skalak, “The Unwilling Wife,” 130.

²² Chaucer, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale,” 3:1–4.

²³ Chaucer, “The Merchant’s Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue,” 4:1757–1760.

Margaret’s Marriages

If there was a preference of waiting to consummate their marriage, why then did Margaret’s husband at the time risk impregnating her right away, despite her youth? Though a descendant of Edward III and his son John of Gaunt, Margaret’s surname, Beaufort, indicated her family’s illegitimacy. The mother of the line, Katherine Swynford, who was Chaucer’s sister-in-law, was governess to John’s daughters from his first wife, Blanche of Lancaster, and his mistress for several years during his marriage to his second wife, Constance of Castile. After Constance’s death, they married and their children, including Margaret’s grandfather, were legitimized, though with a proviso that, ironically, they could not inherit the English throne.²⁴ Despite this, the family was close to the English monarchy until Henry VI banished Margaret’s father, John, the Duke of Somerset, who died a year afterwards, possibly by suicide. Although the Duke had wanted his wife, Margaret Beauchamp, to have the rights to their daughter Margaret’s wardship and marriage, they went to William de la Pole, the Earl of Suffolk, instead.²⁵

Margaret’s biographers, Michael K. Jones and Malcolm G. Underwood, note how, despite the Beauforts’ exclusion from the succession, contemporaries speculated that Suffolk wanted to have a claim to the English throne through Margaret, and Henry VI had the same thought for his brother Edmund.²⁶ However, they posit a financial motive instead, stating “Margaret’s territorial position gave the twenty-six-year-old Edmund a brutal and exploitative motive for immediately making her pregnant. By this, he ensured a life interest in his wife’s inheritance, for once a living child was produced (no matter how short its life), the father became tenant by courtesy of England, and was legally entitled to enjoy his wife’s estate until his death.”²⁷ If we compare this rationale to the circumstances of Henry IV and his first wife, this was the reason for their initial consummation and then Mary de Bohun’s return to her mother afterwards, once her husband’s claim was secure.²⁸ Consummating just long enough to get an heir and then becoming celibate again until the girl was older, thus, had a historical precedent. We do not know if Edmund might have

²⁴ Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 20–21.

²⁵ Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 35–36. For more about Suffolk’s own relationship with Alice Chaucer, the poet’s granddaughter, see Katz Seal, “Chasing the Consent of Alice Chaucer,” 273–283.

²⁶ Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 25.

²⁷ Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 95.

²⁸ Parsons, “Mothers, Daughters, Marriage, Power,” 67.

made the same choices had he lived, but instead of going back to live as a child instead of a wife, Margaret would become a widow, thus surviving not only the difficulties she faced, but also surviving, in a different sense of the word, her husband, outliving him by many years. Emotionally, we do not know how this young widowhood might have impacted her, as a young mother having to raise her son on her own, whatever she might have felt about the specific husband. But Edmund’s death did have one positive impact on her monetary value, which increased after his and her third husband Henry Stafford’s deaths, a fortune that her final husband, Thomas Stanley, would not get to enjoy, since Margaret Beaufort was declared a *femme sole*, able to hold the property in her own right.²⁹

Yet despite her many marriages, Henry Tudor would remain her only child, leading to speculation that, because of his difficult delivery, Margaret could not have other children, which is ironic with respect to a description of her in Fisher’s eulogy.³⁰ Whether or not she made attempts to conceive others with her later husbands is unclear; unlike her granddaughters-in-law, there are no records of unsuccessful pregnancies, so she did not necessarily experience the false hope of believing she would have another child and then become disappointed by some kind of pregnancy loss.³¹ However, we might imagine that the circumstances of Henry’s birth as they were, without those potential losses compounding them, were difficult enough in their own right that, as Gregory considered, she may not have wanted to become pregnant again.³² Furthermore, whatever she may have felt about sexual activity, which cannot be known for sure, Margaret Beaufort still remains a survivor in several ways: from a child marriage, from a difficult pregnancy and delivery, from the death of her second husband, and from two subsequent husbands after him, to say nothing of the tumultuous political circumstances surrounding all of these events that nonetheless she was able to emerge triumphant from, putting her son, if not herself, on the throne.

“Doutfull in Her Minde”

Although Margaret herself never held the throne, like many medieval queens, her marriage and sexuality were pivotal in shaping her identity from an incredibly young age. As stated in the previous section, she survived several traumatic events that we know of,

²⁹ Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 97, 98–99.

³⁰ Marrón, “Questioning an Honest Queen,” 24.

³¹ See, for example, Armbuster, “This Dolorous Chance,” 27–33 for a recent discussion of these losses.

³² Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 33.

including the difficult birth of Henry which I shall return to later in this study. How much or how little the consummation of her marriage to Edmund Tudor itself affected her with respect to her own psyche and emotions is uncertain. However, how Fisher speaks about Margaret in the story of that marriage bears resemblances to how survivors of sexual violence, both in the past and the present, have been treated with respect to how they are often blamed for the things that happen to them first by virtue of being a woman and then by their behavior, despite it often being consistent with their upbringing. Looking at this myth through this lens as well as how Fisher’s language reflects those attitudes in this and the following section, I now turn to the eulogy itself.

John Fisher, the Bishop of Rochester, was an appropriate person to deliver a speech about Margaret a month after her death. The two had a personal connection with him as her spiritual advisor, and he participated in important decisions, such as her vow of chastity in her final marriage. He also participated in her public life, specifically, her patronage of St. John’s College at Cambridge University.³³ While not present for all of her marriages, he was familiar enough with the circumstances of them. This familiarity, however, may not have been just because of an especially close relationship between himself and his patroness alone. Leading into his description of the myth, in a throwaway phrase, the confessor implies something interesting. According to Fisher, the dream vision was “A meruaylous thing [that same nyghte] as I have herde her tell many a tyme.”³⁴ Notably, he says, “as I have herde her tell” rather than “she told me.” This suggests that Margaret did not just tell him this story in confidence, but, in fact, it was one she told on regular occasions to many, likely including people in the congregation who were listening to this sermon.

Scholars of Margaret’s life have cast doubt on the validity of the account that this vision actually happened, as well as whether it was a divine occurrence or a mere dream. According to Jones and Underwood, the unpublished biographer John Britton accused Beaufort of “hav[ing] deceived Fisher when she told him that a vision of St. Nicholas guided her choice of husband.”³⁵ Yet Britton’s suggestion of a deception is unfounded. As far as we know from the historical record—unless some new documentation is discovered,—the only source for this story is Fisher’s eulogy, but neither has his suggestion that she told the story

³³ Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 187–188, 167–168.

³⁴ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 293.

³⁵ Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 11.

“many a tyme” been disputed.³⁶ Members of the audience may have been familiar with the tale, even if they were too young to witness the actual events. As such, we cannot know for certain where this story originated, whether it was made-up, a memory Margaret relayed to others, or a tale Fisher created either by himself or in collaboration with her. But, as Levin has noted, whether a dream vision did or did not occur, the possibility of such did carry weight with the audience who was listening.³⁷

My purpose in examining this dream vision, then, is not to determine its truth but to examine how it was crafted in the eulogy, specifically. While Margaret may have had some involvement in the origins of this vision, the version that we have in our possession has been filtered through, and likely influenced by, a male gaze. Unlike accounts like that of Margery Kempe, in which the narrative presents itself as a female, autobiographical voice, even if written by a male scribe, this is a third person narrative removed from Margaret’s own voice.³⁸ As such, even if the basic story of the vision of St. Nicholas was something circulated by Margaret Beaufort herself, the language that I will be analyzing here is that of Fisher, and we should assume a male perspective of the account. Such an awareness of this lens is important when considering the possibility of Margaret Beaufort as a survivor. The challenges to seeing her as such may stem from the fact that stories like these are often told in problematic ways. Sarah Baechle, in a recent special issue of the *Chaucer Review*, has noted that while survival speech has power, “feminist theorists of sexual violence and survivor speech also stress the exploitability of survivor speech: Linda Alcoff and Lara Gray note the variety of ways in which individual accounts of rape survival are repackaged for consumption by wide audiences as entertainment or erotic titillation, and are even made to reinscribe myths about assault that are damaging to victim-survivors.”³⁹ Though not erotic, as such, Fisher’s description of the vision illustrates similar problems to those of these “myths about assault.” Thus, we should be cautious interpreting Margaret’s choice of her husband as agency on her part. Skalak points out debates of whether consenting to marriage also involved consenting perpetually to sexual activity.⁴⁰ If then, the myth is suggesting that Margaret consented to Edmund as her

³⁶ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 293.

³⁷ Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance*, 105–107.

³⁸ “The Book of Margery Kempe: Book I, Part I,” <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/staley-book-of-margery-kempe-book-i-part-i>.

³⁹ Baechle, “Speaking Survival,” 467.

⁴⁰ Skalak, “The Unwilling Wife,” 123.

husband, by this token, it could also suggest that she permitted, if not invited, this consummation.

Though we do not know if Margaret verbally agreed to sexual activity, as contemporary theories of consent require, the myth does suggest that she invited it in other ways by presenting Margaret as a precocious youth. Fisher says, “For in her tendre age she beyng endued with so grete towardnes of nature, & lyklyhode of enherytaunce many sued to haue had her to maryage.”⁴¹ The word “tendre” has familiar echoes as the word *Januarie* attributed to *May*.⁴² Margaret, therefore, was not only young but fragile and vulnerable to physical harm. This might contradict part of Fisher’s assessment as to why her suitors were interested in her.⁴³ Margaret’s “enherytaunce” or inheritance, has been, as previously mentioned, posited as the main reason for her attractiveness on the marriage market.⁴⁴ However, Fisher also adds this “grete towardnes of nature.”⁴⁵ The *Middle English Dictionary* defines “towardnesse” as “(a) An inclination to do something; (b) the state or progress of a matter,” with the first of these definitions better suiting this case.⁴⁶ It is interesting that Margaret’s inclination is to “nature” when, according to Steven Epstein, that could be contrary to moral behavior, possibly indicating untamed sexuality.⁴⁷ If we consider the purpose of the sentence, to explain why many suitors tried to gain her hand, it may not be so extreme as that, but could still be connected to procreation. Perhaps Fisher claims here that the young Margaret’s path was as a mother. While he most likely is not indicating that she had her first menstruation before the age of nine, when this vision occurred, the phrase suggests motherhood might be her purpose, identifying begetting heirs as what she was good for.⁴⁸ This could also disturbingly suggest a predisposition to sexuality in general. Both interpretations are ironic, most obviously because of Margaret’s vow of chastity in her last marriage, which Fisher knew. Additionally, as previously stated, Henry was Margaret’s only child—she was not fruitful with heirs like, for example, her

⁴¹ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 292.

⁴² Chaucer, “The Merchant’s Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue,” 4:1757.

⁴³ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 292.

⁴⁴ Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 95.

⁴⁵ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 292.

⁴⁶ “towardnesse, n,” *Middle English Dictionary*, accessed 12 Oct 2025, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED46615/track?counter=1&search_id=16316726.

⁴⁷ Epstein, *The Medieval Discovery of Nature*, 1.

⁴⁸ As Carissa Harris notes, the age of first period during the Middle Ages, on average, was five or six years afterwards. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 60.

son’s mother-in-law, Elizabeth Woodville, who had ten children, eight surviving, with Edward IV.⁴⁹ Therefore, Fisher’s description of Margaret was not true in that sense. However, this portrayal could be considered akin to those of young women, from medieval *pastourelles* to modern rape cases, such as those Harris discusses with respect to the poem “And I was a madyn.” She finds that, in this *pastourelle*, “the speaker embodies the enduring stereotype of the precocious twelve-year-old ‘wanton wench’ far more mature than her age.”⁵⁰ In that story, the maiden is a victim of sexual violence, but is painted as promiscuous despite and perhaps because of her young years. In doing so, the poem justifies what is done to her as something she may have deserved.

Fisher describing Margaret in a vaguely erotic sense also seems contrary to his portrayal of her as chaste elsewhere in the sermon. Furthermore, it seems to be inappropriate for a bishop to make sexual comments about any woman, but the King’s own grandmother, especially. But this surprising addition of her “grete towardnes” posits that Margaret’s suitors were not just attracted to her for her money, but also her ability, and strong ability as indicated by “grete,” to handle sex, pregnancy, and childbirth.⁵¹ Perhaps Fisher included this line to absolve Edmund Tudor from the danger Henry’s birth posed to Margaret, suggesting that he believed her capable of becoming a mother as her other suitors also did. The evidence is too limited to say whether or not either of these things were true. But we do have evidence, albeit retroactive, that Margaret’s ability to carry a child physically was not expected, and if Edmund was therefore aware of that fact, then it calls into question the ethics of the decision—whether his alone or in conjunction with others like his brother the King—to impregnate her regardless. This evidence comes from Fisher himself.

Three years before Margaret Beaufort died, John Fisher gave an oration to the university she patronized, Cambridge, for her son Henry.⁵² Margaret herself was present at this speech, though since it was given in Latin, she may have understood little of it, as Fisher mentions in the eulogy.⁵³ Fisher uses her difficult labor with Henry in this speech

⁴⁹ Tallis, *Uncrowned Queen*, xi.

⁵⁰ Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 160.

⁵¹ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 292.

⁵² Fisher, “Oration,” 2:264–272.

⁵³ In the “Mornyng Remembraunce,” he says of Margaret, “Ful often she complayned that in her youthe she had not gyuen her to the understondyng of Latyn, wherein she had a lytell perceyuyng, specially of the rubrysshe of the ordynall for the sayeng of her seruyce whiche she dyde wel understande.” Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 292.

for a clear rhetorical purpose, comparing Henry’s trials and tribulations at birth to the troubles of Moses and painting the son very clearly as a survivor, even if he does not do precisely the same for the mother. He says of him, “While, in [her] womb, [your] mother carried you, you scarcely escaped from danger of the disease [the plague], which could easily kill a very delicate fetus, of which your father the illustrious prince died.”⁵⁴ Fisher presents Henry as being in danger even before he was separated from his mother’s body. This sentence shows who was clearly the priority, referring to the fact that the plague could kill the “fetus,” a term that has been especially controversial since the 2022 Dobbs Decision by the U.S. Supreme Court. Looking at the Latin verb conjugation Fisher uses for “escaped,” we find “*evasisti*,” the perfect 2nd person singular form instead of “*evasistis*,” the 2nd person plural. This conjugation suggests the sentence was directed at Henry alone, despite Margaret’s presence. As such, Fisher seems to disregard her life, although she was likely in as much, if not more, danger. If Fisher had not explained ahead of time, we could imagine Margaret being somewhat confused if others looked back at her as a prop for this speech, several times, as the vessel of Henry’s birth, focusing on the object of her body as a spectacle without considering the person underneath. In doing so, he suggests that Margaret was not, in fact, capable of bearing children at that point. Pointing out the Countess in the audience directly, possibly with a gesture that put all eyes on her, he explains the reason for his comparison of Henry Tudor to Moses: “No doubt that we understand/recognize how much importance is yours, illustrious king, from whom [you were] so amazingly born, and in the light of day raised by the most noble princess your mother, now present, who at that time in years had not completed fourteen.”⁵⁵ Fisher explicitly describes Margaret as “now present,” during the oration. The word he uses to describe her is “*magnitudo*,” which I have translated here as “importance,” but also contains other meanings, including size.⁵⁶ This word will be an interesting contrast to how Fisher describes Margaret in the sentence following, which I shall come back to shortly. But he emphasizes that the danger to Henry was, in part, because his mother “had not

⁵⁴ “*Nam et dum in utero portarit te mater, vix discrimen pestis evasisti, quae teneriores foetus facile consuevit interimere de qua et pater tuus princeps illustris interiit.*” Fisher, “Oration,” 265.

⁵⁵ “*Nimirum ut intelligamus quant sit magnitudo tua, Rex illustrissime, qui tam mirabiter natus, atque in lucem editus a nobilissima principe genetrice tua, nunc praesenti, quae tum annum non implevit quartum decimus.*” Fisher, “Oration,” 265.

⁵⁶ “Online Latin Dictionary: Latin-English,” accessed 12 August 2023, <https://www.online-latin-dictionary.com/latin-english-dictionary.php?parola=magnitudo>.

completed fourteen.”⁵⁷ As we have Margaret being described as of “tendre age” in the eulogy, Fisher also emphasizes her youth here in order to highlight the wondrous nature of Henry’s birth.⁵⁸ This, again, “repackages,” to use Baechle’s phrasing, what was also a traumatic experience for Margaret, having a child at the mere age of thirteen years old, into a triumph for Henry, surviving against all odds, including his mother’s own body.⁵⁹

The degree of license Fisher may be taking with the story of the betrothal in the “Mornyng Remembraunce” is also even more apparent in another passage which shows how Margaret was not built for pregnancy. Later on in the Cambridge oration, he describes her as follows: “Surely unaccustomed to birth, she herself (as we see) is not a woman of great stature and was a great deal smaller at that time (as is claimed) to such a degree that it was seen altogether as a miracle in those years to be begotten by someone in that smallness of body, such a birth explained in detail by leading men.”⁶⁰ Fisher notably includes little asides that bring his audience back to his present moment and the woman he saw sitting in front of him. He points her out, saying “as we see,” appealing to what the audience could see with their own eyes. He also says, “as is claimed,” telling us what male “experts” explained about this woman’s body. Fisher does not identify these “leading men” by name, or whether they happened to tell this to Margaret or Edmund themselves in the early months of their marriage. Regardless, it indicates that others also knew it was inadvisable for Margaret to conceive at less than fourteen years old, especially considering her slight stature. Yet Fisher is using her diminutive body, which seemingly continued to her old age, to describe the birth as miraculous, celebrating because of the extra challenge it posed. While it is possible that he may have been exaggerating her size for artistic effect, either way he is downplaying the harm to Margaret by focusing on Henry and the danger he was exposed to, portraying him quite clearly as a survivor by virtue of his mother. Comparing this to the sermon, however, Fisher depicts the nine-year-old child as naturally inclined to be a wife and a mother, which seems to directly contradict the safety risks of consummation that he knew were apparent.⁶¹ We might see why Fisher chose to eliminate

⁵⁷ Fisher, “Oration,” 265.

⁵⁸ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 292.

⁵⁹ Baechle, “Speaking Survival,” 467.

⁶⁰ “Rarus profecto partus et insolitus, ipsaque (ut cernimus) non magnae staturae foemina est at multo tunc (ut asseritur) minoris fuit, a deo ut miraculum cunctis videbatur in illis annis, et in illa corporis parvitate gnatum aliquem, maxime tam procerem tam elegantem edidisse.” Fisher, “Oration,” 265.

⁶¹ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 292.

the story entirely in the sermon on Margaret Beaufort’s death as it would hinder the narrative of her marriage to Edmund as divinely ordained. But it can also tell us about his attitude towards Margaret, in particular, focusing on how she was socialized. In looking at the sermon’s portrayal of Margaret’s conduct, we can see how her story resembles that of many female survivors of sexual violence in the modern era, as well as in the Middle Ages, in which the woman has often been taught to concede in order to make another, usually a man, happy, despite this concession potentially running contrary to her own true consent.

Margaret’s Conduct

In this section, I will consider how Margaret’s decision in the eulogy reflects standards of behavior as prescribed in medieval conduct books and other literature. Conduct literature was a genre directed at women to teach them how to run a household and function in society. The books combat medieval stereotypes of women as an Eve or a Jezebel with a voracious sexual appetite, suggesting that its reader could become a “good wife.” However, considering this genre from a perspective of analysis of how rape culture is perpetuated through the socialization of women, I argue that Fisher’s portrayal of the child Margaret Beaufort as having good conduct could put her in the same categories as other survivors, especially those of statutory rape. As we have seen thus far, Fisher presents young Margaret as having a choice among several suitors desiring both her money and future heirs. Specifically, he focuses on Edmund and her first husband, John de la Pole, saying, “The duke of Suthfolke whiche than was a man of grete experyence moost dylygently procured to haue had her for his sone and heyre. Of tho contrary parte kinge Henry the .vi. dyd make meanes for Edmonde his broder then therle of Rychemonde.”⁶² Notably, both John—who is not named outright—and Edmund Tudor have someone suing on their behalf: John’s father the Duke of Suffolk and Henry VI for Edmund, his half-sibling. The reference to the suitors’ advocates sets up a unique contrast to Margaret, who seems to act on her own—though with assistance, as we shall see. As Jones and Underwood note, “The validity of a child marriage had a suspended quality, with the child having the choice of ratifying or reclaiming (i.e. revoking) the contract at a future date.”⁶³ The “future date” most likely refers to when the child reached her (or his) majority, which is a little older than Margaret’s age at the time of the event in this story (nine when usually girls were twelve). But while Margaret is required to say the words of consent to the marriage herself, it is not

⁶² Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 292.

⁶³ Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 37.

truly her choice alone. Of course, the King, Henry VI, looms in the background as the authority over her decision, in which he would naturally favor his own brother. In addition, however, Fisher’s account suggests the involvement of other influences, which could mean that Margaret’s choice was not truly an autonomous one. Rather than asking does she consent to marriage in this story with an affirmative “Yes,” then the question we should be asking is why Margaret might say “Yes” for reasons other than her own desire: what other forces might be at work to prompt that response? We might imagine that, by the time a noble girl like Margaret Beaufort reached the age of consent, she had been raised to do her duty to those who arranged her marriage and go through with their choice for her. In most cases, as Shannon McSheffrey and other scholars of marital consent have noted, families often did hold a great amount of influence, even though the Church required the spouses to consent themselves.⁶⁴ And if we look more closely at the story, it shows how Margaret bases her decision on the suggestions of others.

Margaret’s first action in this story when presented with the choice of John or Edmund is to turn to another older, wiser person. Fisher continues, “She whiche as then was not fully .ix. yeres olde, doutfull in her mynde what she were best to do asked counsayll of an olde gentylwoman whome she moche loved & trusted.”⁶⁵ Margaret looks for “counsayll,” which the MED defines as “Counsel, advice, instruction.”⁶⁶ The identity of the “olde gentylwoman” in this story is not given. Margaret’s mother, Margaret Beauchamp, was still alive and likely with her daughter when the marriage to John de la Pole was dissolved and the child’s wardship transferred to the Tudors. But, if Fisher is referring to her, why not just say “her mother?” The Bishop does mention Margaret Beauchamp earlier in the sermon when describing Margaret’s noble (as in character and blood) lineage.⁶⁷ The wording, therefore, suggests that Fisher is speaking about another, unnamed woman. Margaret may have had a nurse or a governess, for example. However, the gentlewoman’s identity matters less than the fact that Margaret consults such a figure, who may or may not have had direct authority over her body at all.

⁶⁴ McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture*, 18.

⁶⁵ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 292.

⁶⁶ “Counseil: Middle English Compendium,” *Middle English Dictionary*, accessed 18 January 2024.

https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED9981/track?counter=1&search_id=56745744.

⁶⁷ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 290–291.

Medieval conduct literature, such as the Middle English poem “How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr Doughter,” encouraged young women to get advice when choosing a husband.⁶⁸ In fact, these books served as avenues of advice themselves, with one, *Le Ménagier de Paris*, set up explicitly as an older husband instructing his young wife in behavior, which was then preserved in a book so that, when he is dead and his wife remarried, she will be able to consult it.⁶⁹ The existence of these books, which became popular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, could, in retrospect, pose a problem, however, with respect to how, although they defied stereotypes of women, they also might have reinforced the status quo. Glenn Burger explains that

The logic of conduct literature for women is therefore often divided and self-contradictory. Such texts can never stand completely outside long-standing and powerful anti-feminist modes of thought prevalent in medieval clerical and lay culture. At the same time, however, they argue that a woman’s nature is inherently capable of self-improvement. To reconcile this paradox, conduct literature for laywomen must continue to practice a certain degree of stabilizing citation from a long-standing and dominant antifeminist tradition even as such citation occurs in radically different contexts that represent women’s nature as open to significant self-improvement. Not surprisingly, perhaps, conduct literature addressed to good wives often brings a stultifying repetitive and conservative content that attempts to contain female behavior in oppressive, even violent ways, *alongside* experiments in narrative form that pragmatically seek to fuse old and new ideologies in innovative ways.⁷⁰

Although the literature had some benefits for women’s reputation, suggesting that wives were able to become “good,” as Burger explains in this passage, these texts also contained harmful examples, none more apparent than the story of “Patient Griselda,” which appears in the aforementioned *Menagier*, but was also told by three preeminent pre-modern authors: Francis Petrarch, Giovanni Boccaccio, and Chaucer.⁷¹ In the story, a powerful marquis, Walter, marries a poor but virtuous woman, Griselda. Not content with Griselda’s promise of absolute obedience to him, which she gives him no true reason to question, he

⁶⁸ The Good Wife says “Yef any man byd the worship, and wold wed thee, loke þat þou scorne hym nat, whatsoevyr he bee. / Shew hit to thy frendys, and fowhele hit nought” (21–23). “Item 4 How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr Doughter,” <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/salisbury-trials-and-joys-how-the-goode-wife-taught-hyr-doughter>; line numbers in parentheses.

⁶⁹ *The Good Wife’s Guide*, 37.

⁷⁰ Burger, *Conduct Becoming*, 4–5.

⁷¹ Chaucer, “The Clerk’s Prologue and Tale,” 4:1–1112; Boccaccio, “Day 10, Story 10,” 839–860, and Francis Petrarch, “Petrarch’s Tale of Griselda,” *Harvard’s Geoffrey Chaucer Website*, accessed 30 March 2024, <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/tale-griselda>.

pretends to murder their children in order to test her. The meaning of this story has been debated since the Middle Ages itself. Some writers, like Petrarch, found the story to be allegorical, representing how humans can “submit themselves to God with the same courage as did this woman to her husband.”⁷² Yet its presence in conduct literature might also suggest that the story was gendered and did have perhaps an extreme ideal of female obedience coming at the expense of a woman’s own suffering. While obtaining “counsayll” from other women does not seem to be as threatening as Walter’s cruel tests, it has its own elements of violence, more potent by the fact that it was more likely to occur in real life than child murder.⁷³ We can compare it to a role Margaret herself served, later in life, arranging marriages and commissioning the printer Caxton to translate into English the French romance *Blanchardyn and Eglantine*. This story includes a nurse character reminiscent of the woman in Margaret Beaufort’s story, advising her charge, who was kissed without her consent, to forgive and fall in love with her attacker.⁷⁴ Therefore, this character, whether a real person or a fictional creation of Fisher’s (or Margaret’s), illustrates a cycle of what might have been considered “good conduct” according to these texts but we might consider damaging advice for a woman to embrace male control over her body, even when it is unwanted.⁷⁵ On one hand, this character could help Fisher show the young Margaret as a modest woman who recognizes her difficulty in making this decision between suitors “in her minde” and as a result does not make it herself.⁷⁶ However, it also provides a figure who does not protect this child from marrying before she is ready.

This request for advice, however, only sets in motion a greater sequence of events. The gentlewoman does not, in fact, give Margaret a definitive suggestion of whom to choose but instead refers her to consult a male authority in the form of a saint. She, according to Fisher, “dyde advyse [Margaret] to commende herself to Saynt Nycholas the patron & helper of al true maydens & to beseche him to put in her mynde what she were

⁷² “Francis Petrarch (1304–1374), Letters of Old Age, xvii, 3,” *Harvard’s Geoffrey Chaucer Website*, accessed 30 March 2024, <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/francis-petrarch-1304-1374-letters-old-age-xvii-3>.

⁷³ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 292.

⁷⁴ Alberghini, “A Kisse Onely,” 347–357.

⁷⁵ Biographers mock this woman, with Horace Walpole accusing her of “The old gentlewoman I suppose was dead” and therefore conveniently unable to interfere in her third or fourth marriage. In Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 7.

⁷⁶ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 292.

best to do.”⁷⁷ St. Nicholas at first seems like an odd choice. Modern consumerism paints him as the omnipresent symbol of Christmas, Santa Claus. However, the hagiographical background of this figure is actually quite different from a man who brings toys to children, although we can see how elements of the legend might have developed into the modern myth. Though the Saint was associated with youth, the association was specifically, as Fisher says, with “true maydens,” and the story of his first deed is quite serious. In his *Legenda Aurea* or *Golden Legend*, a popular and extensive collection of saints’ lives, Jacobus de Voragine describes the following story about St. Nicholas:

Now one of [Nicholas’s] neighbors, a man of noble estate, was so poor that he was about to deliver his three daughters to prostitution in order to make a living from the profits of their shame. As soon as Nicholas heard of this, he was horrified at the thought of such a sin; and wrapping up a lump of gold in a cloth, he threw it through the window of his neighbor’s house during the night, and then fled without being seen. When the man arose the next morning, he found the bundle of gold; and, thanking God, he at once set about preparing the nuptials of his eldest daughter.⁷⁸

Nicholas saves the three daughters in the story from unlawful sexual activity by preventing them from becoming prostitutes. But it is notable that he does not keep them from any manner of intercourse—the oldest, at least, would still be engaging in sexual activity, just within a sanctioned marriage. This shows how their agency remains quite limited: when the money is received, the father does not present his daughters with the option to go to a convent or live a chaste, but still secular, life if they so desired, as Margaret Beaufort herself would eventually do. The story also does not specify the ages of the daughters, only that the one who will be married is the oldest—so, possibly not even of age herself. Thus, Nicholas only protects these girls’ bodies to a point, saving them from the literal traffic in women as prostitutes only for them to be trafficked in a different way on the marriage market.⁷⁹ His main concern is preserving them from a sin that would dishonor them and also their father, rather than being concerned about their own physical and emotional well-being.

Similarly, St. Nicholas does not ask Margaret in her vision if she is inclined to marry at all, only tells her which husband would be the better option. Fisher says,

⁷⁷ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 292.

⁷⁸ De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 17.

⁷⁹ Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” 157–210.

as she lay in prayer callynge vpon Saynt Nicholas, whether slepyng or waking she could not assure, but aboute. iiii. of the clocke in the Mornynge one appeared vnto her arayed like a bishop, & naming vnto her Edmonde bad take hym vnto her husbnde, And so by this meane she dyde enclyne her mynde vnto Edmonde the kings broder & erle of Rychemonde. By whom She was made moder of the kynge that deed is, whose soule god pardon, & grandame to our Soverayne lorde kynge Henry the. viii. whiche now by the grace of god gouerneth the realme.⁸⁰

The language in this passage is ambiguous, and thus the choice could be read either as an act of passive obedience or Margaret’s own agency. St. Nicholas “bad [her] take” Edmund. The Middle English Dictionary defines “bidden” as either “(1b) To request, beg, or beseech” or “(4b) To demand, prescribe, or order,” among other things.⁸¹ Thus, we can interpret the phrasing of the saint’s answer in two ways: as just a recommendation or even a plea that she might follow, if she chooses to, or a direct order that she is required to obey. If we follow the first definition, it presents Margaret in a position of power, able to choose her own destiny, with even a saint subject to her will. But the second definition presents her as a follower of a male authority. If Margaret was circulating this story in her own right, either side could work in her favor with respect to her “self-fashioning.”⁸² The first definition could establish her as the main actor that founded the Tudor dynasty: it was her choices, young though she was, that, at the point of her death, had already led to two generations of kings. Certainly, it might be consistent with her role as a “femme sole,” having control over her own property and other people’s fates through her wardships.⁸³ But, alternatively, it could show another side of Margaret as a dutiful woman, illustrating a degree of propriety consistent with the conduct books, as obedient as Patient Griselda.

While we can only speculate how Margaret herself may have used this story, it is again important to remember that the only account we have is not her own, but rather filtered through John Fisher’s lens. While it is possible that Fisher wanted to ascribe some agency in her marriage to the late Margaret, if we compare it to his other writings, both in other passages in the “‘Mornynge Remembraunce,” and the Cambridge oration, it seems more likely that he would use the second definition, “(4b) To demand, prescribe, or order,”

⁸⁰ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 293.

⁸¹ “Bidden: Middle English Compendium,” accessed 17 August 2023, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED4381/track?counter=2&search_id=19418760.

⁸² Fisher, “‘Margaret R,’” 151–172.

⁸³ Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 97–99.

when St. Nicholas “bad” her to marry Edmund Tudor, and Margaret obeyed.⁸⁴ In doing so, Fisher presents Margaret as virtuous but also limits her agency; while she is officially the person making the decision, it is the one that is more pleasing to another—notice that she is “enclyn[ing] her mynde,” leaning towards the one the Saint suggested rather than selecting him outright. In that respect, we might not be able to truly consider the choice as one of her own.

The message conveyed through this definition could be explained through a comparison with modern ideas of female socialization in a rape culture. Gary W. Harper notes how contemporary gender stereotypes could lead to heterosexual relationships that are legally considered “statutory rape,” with an older male partner and an adolescent female, by influencing the behavior of the young victim. He says,

young females who have been raised with traditional gender roles, modeled and reinforced by individuals within multiple ecological systems, may become “targets” for older men seeking young partners. These men may exploit the message that females have received and convince them to put the man’s sexual needs paramount over any desires or opinions they may hold. This type of behavior may not “feel” coercive or exploitative to the young female who may view herself as being a “good girl,” due to the fact that her behaviors conform to the gender stereotypes that she learned during her childhood and adolescence.⁸⁵

Fisher is not the male partner himself, of course, but we can see in this passage how he is reinforcing, through the figure of St. Nicholas, Margaret’s image as a “good girl” or to rather a “good woman.”⁸⁶ Margaret, like the girls Harper is describing, likely does not see anything inappropriate about her marriage but in doing what St. Nicholas “bad” her behaves in the way she is supposed to.⁸⁷ Even if it is only a request, not an explicit command, her socialization as a young woman would require her to concede, if not truly consent, without concern if she actually desires to marry Edmund or prefers something different altogether, like living chastely. We do not know, of course, how Margaret actually felt as a child (though in modern cases, a girl her age would not be capable of consenting to sex, regardless) or if the idea of a chaste marriage had even occurred to her when she

⁸⁴ “Bidden: Middle English Compendium,” accessed 17 August 2023, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED4381/track?counter=2&search_id=19418760; Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 293.

⁸⁵ Harper, “Contextual Factors That Perpetuate Statutory Rape,” 904.

⁸⁶ Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women*, 587–630.

⁸⁷ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 293.

first began having intercourse with Edmund. As mentioned earlier, Philippa Gregory, in her fictional account, surmised that young Margaret was repulsed by sexual activity.⁸⁸ But the records we have cannot tell us how long she considered the idea before she made a vow of chastity. We can, however, see how Fisher is painting her as being respectful of authority, both male and religious. By examining that passage, therefore, we can then apply back her behavior to that during her encounter with St. Nicholas.

Margaret’s obedience is shown as a part of Fisher’s comparison of the Countess with the New Testament Martha earlier in the sermon.⁸⁹ Continuing with this comparison, Fisher talks of Margaret’s temperance in various areas, focusing especially on food and fasting.⁹⁰ At the end of the passage, he adds one final note:

As for chastyte thoughe she alway contynued not in her vyrgynyte yet in her husbandes dayes longe tyme before that he deyede she opteyned of hym lycence & promysed to lyue chast, in the handes of the reuerende fader my lorde of London, whiche promyse she renewed after her husbandes dethe in to my handes agayne, wherby it may appere the dyscyplyne of her body.⁹¹

This promise could potentially be considered subversive, as scholars of marriage have shown how vows of chastity taken before widowhood were controversial for their contradiction of the purpose of marriage, to bear children.⁹² But Fisher presents Margaret’s vow very carefully in order that whatever her true intentions, she at least appears to be obedient to authority. In this passage, there are three male authorities that are mentioned: Margaret’s husband, a “lorde of London,” and Fisher himself. The first of these is her husband. Fisher makes clear that while her chastity is not perfect virginity, Margaret had begun living in this pure state while married, presumably to her last husband, Thomas Stanley. As is the case with John de la Pole in the myth, neither here nor anywhere else in the sermon does Fisher name Stanley—nor her third husband, Henry Stafford, for that matter.⁹³ Even though both were important financially, and the alliance with Stanley was vital to Henry’s ascension to the throne, like the gentlewoman, the identity of the exact

⁸⁸ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 33.

⁸⁹ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 289.

⁹⁰ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 293–294.

⁹¹ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 294.

⁹² McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England*, 107–125.

⁹³ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 292.

person does not matter.⁹⁴ The most important part is to say that Margaret had a husband at all.

The reference to a husband is significant because while not having a sexual relationship could have been something against Stanley’s—or any husband’s—inclinations, Margaret does not fight or negotiate with him as, for example, Margery Kempe had done with her husband.⁹⁵ Fisher skips over any possible conflict that might have led to this agreement, only indicating that she “obteyned of hym lycence.”⁹⁶ Margaret got “lycence” or permission from her husband to have a chaste marriage. This permission implies that she did not act fully of her own accord but deferred to the authority in her marriage, her husband, before making the vow. As Skalak has noted, there was a dilemma of which was the greater sin: for a husband to force his wife into intercourse, what we would now consider marital rape, though it was not technically illegal, or, alternatively, the wife not paying her husband the “marital debt” that she owed to him.⁹⁷ Fisher’s depiction of Margaret suggests that she was more against the latter: had her husband not agreed to a life of chastity within their marriage, presumably, she would have subjected herself to his advances against her own inclinations, showing how affirmative consent is not always enough to make a sexual encounter mutual. Thus, we could possibly project this attitude back onto the young Margaret and consider her as a survivor in that instance since she did not have the option of having a chaste marriage then but rather may have fulfilled her marital duties with Edmund Tudor because she was obligated to do so. Her husband’s desires—to beget an heir, if not actual sexual attraction to Margaret—were more important than her own, whether or not she herself felt ready, to say nothing of her actual physical readiness—which we know was lacking—at that time of her life. This concession to Edmund’s need to secure his possession of her inheritance would consist with the gender stereotypes Harper discussed, where a young woman in a relationship with an older man, especially, would prioritize his needs as opposed to vice versa, even though, in this case, doing so would be quite dangerous.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 292. For Stanley’s involvement in Henry’s war against Richard III, see Jones and Underwood, *The King’s Mother*, 98–99.

⁹⁵ See Chapter 11 in “The Book of Margery Kempe: Book I, Part I,” <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/staley-book-of-margery-kempe-book-i-part-i>.

⁹⁶ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 294.

⁹⁷ Skalak, “The Unwilling Wife,” 25.

⁹⁸ Harper, “Contextual Factors That Perpetuate Statutory Rape,” 904.

It seems natural for Margaret to need her husband’s consent as a vow of chastity would have directly impacted him, as it would other husbands whose wives broached the topic of a chaste marriage.⁹⁹ But, as she does as a child deciding whom to marry, Margaret also consults other authorities as well, thus behaving as a woman should across both instances. The second authority referenced is “the reverend father my lorde of London.”¹⁰⁰ According to the record of her vow of chastity, which we have in its entirety, the person referred to was Richard Fitz James, the Bishop of Rochester prior to Fisher.¹⁰¹ We might imagine that this initial vow would be sufficient: that once she declared her intentions to Fitz James to live chastely with Stanley, Margaret did not need to do anything more when he died in 1504. But Fisher emphasizes that “she renewed [it] in to [his] handes agayne” afterwards, which he considers as a mark of “the dysceplyne of her body.”¹⁰² Fisher places his focus on the chastity aspect of the vow, as we might expect. But if we focus more on the mention of the very man speaking this eulogy himself, it presents a picture of Margaret as obedient to authority to a fault, doing not only what was required but going above and beyond.

We could, of course, read Margaret’s vow of chastity as an act of resistance later in her life, to finally avoid sexual acts which she may have been previously influenced, pressured, or even forced to engage in. We know that Margaret did try to prevent her namesake, Margaret Tudor, from an early consummation with her husband James IV of Scotland—an action she took on a very public stage, that ambassadors from other countries actually remarked upon it.¹⁰³ Henry VII is known to have said, talking about his mother and his wife, Elizabeth of York, that “the Queen and my mother are very much against this marriage. They say if the marriage were concluded, we should be obliged to send the Princess directly to Scotland, in which case they fear the King of Scots would not wait, but injure her, and endanger her health.”¹⁰⁴ Margaret and Elizabeth’s assessment of this future husband is not flattering, as they assume that James IV would want to consummate the marriage right away, despite, as I have shown elsewhere, there having been concerns about

⁹⁹ McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England*, 117.

¹⁰⁰ Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 294.

¹⁰¹ Cooper, *Memoirs of Margaret*, 98. It is also mentioned in a marginal note to Fisher’s sermon. Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 294.

¹⁰² Fisher, “Mornynge Remembraunce,” 294.

¹⁰³ Norton, *Margaret Beaufort*, 39–40.

¹⁰⁴ Gristwood, *Blood Sisters*, 294.

doing so for past kings, and, in the case of Margaret Tudor’s brother, Arthur, possibly even discouragement.¹⁰⁵ Why, then, would Margaret think the worst of her future grandson-in-law? Looking back at Fisher’s sermon, we see her described as at the “tendre age” of nine, which was her granddaughter’s exact age at the time this marriage was being discussed.¹⁰⁶ So, Margaret may have based her fears (and possibly influenced Elizabeth’s) on her own experience, and, in this case, she may not have been the perfectly obedient woman that Fisher tries to depict her as in real life—or at least, she wanted to give her granddaughter the opportunity to avoid having to submit to this in accordance with the expectations for a woman, especially a princess. Within the text of the eulogy, however, Fisher maintains Margaret’s position in the status quo as a woman who asks for advice, obeys authority, and remains immersed in what we would label as the “rape culture” of her time, rather than a survivor of a dangerous consummation before her body, to say nothing of her mind, was physically mature enough to handle it—despite his depiction of her son Henry, elsewhere, as a survivor of that very thing.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

What, then, can we glean from Fisher’s depiction of Margaret Beaufort’s dream vision of St. Nicholas when placed against a backdrop of his portrayal of the King’s mother as an obedient woman and what we know about attitudes towards sexual violence, outside of and inside a marriage, in the Middle Ages and beyond? We can narrow it down to three key points. First, there is the difference between the ethical and the legal when it came to sexual acts against a person’s, usually a woman’s, consent. Second, looking at Margaret’s story, especially in comparison to other royal figures, suggests that the modern misconception that child marriage was just the way things were at the time was not always the case, even for royalty or nobility, for whom begetting heirs was an imperative. And, finally, we can consider Margaret Beaufort as a survivor, even if she might not have labeled herself as such back then, not because of unprovable sexual violence against her person but, in addition to the dangers we know she faced in childbirth, because of how a male writer shaped both her personality and her story, as subject to authorities like himself—an attitude which Margaret herself may have internalized.

¹⁰⁵ Marrón, “Questioning an Honest Queen,” 24.

¹⁰⁶ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 294.

¹⁰⁷ Fisher, “Oration,” 265.

The first point, the difference between the ethical and the legal, comes back to Skalak’s analysis of Middle English literature showing how, even though a wife could not prosecute her husband for rape, as she was an extension of his own legal personhood, medieval people did not automatically assume the husband’s right to his wife’s body.¹⁰⁸ In particular, as Januarie surmised about his young wife May and as Fisher said in the “Cambridge Oration,” consummating sex when a wife was too young could physically cause them harm because of their small stature.¹⁰⁹ Thus, it was not the case that, even at the highest levels, medieval people disregarded the child bride’s—or groom’s—health. The treatment of Margaret Beaufort, then, was an exception; she was not necessarily the rule. And her failure to carry another child indicates that even if the well-being of a possibly non-consenting bride was not the main priority, consummating too soon could therefore risk the potential of creating a “spare,” or more, to inherit in the event of something happening to the first heir because of harm to either the mother’s or the father’s (as in the case of Prince Arthur) health.¹¹⁰ Thus, for more practical reasons, early consummation might have been inadvisable.

Finally, acknowledging that Margaret’s story is told through a male account shows how, like many other survivors, medieval and modern, her tale of sexual violence was reconfigured as something different, in fact, something miraculous. And, even if Margaret took part in the creation of this story, it does not make her experience any less traumatic. Rather, even if she did concur with Fisher’s interpretation of the events, it could suggest that she had taken upon herself such perspectives that might have made her downplay or ignore any pain, physical or emotional. She may not have been depicted as “asking for it,” so to speak, but her attraction to suitors as a young girl is attributed to her “grete towardnes of nature” in addition to her money, which is in the same vein, albeit linguistically dressed up.¹¹¹ And depicting Margaret’s decision as guided by others, especially a male authority in the form of a saint, consists with the socialization of women, beginning with the conduct literature of the time, which included stories of Patient

¹⁰⁸ Skalak, “The Unwilling Wife,” 125.

¹⁰⁹ Chaucer, 4:1757–1760; Fisher, “Oration,” 265.

¹¹⁰ Marrón, “Questioning an Honest Queen,” 24.

¹¹¹ Fisher, “Mornyng Remembraunce,” 294.

Griselda, but continuing with the present-day emphasis on prioritizing a man’s needs over a woman’s own.¹¹²

In sum, we can see how the story of Margaret’s childhood vision, leading her to choose Edmund Tudor as her husband, can be read as part of a larger experience of survival. As previously stated, the real Margaret Beaufort most likely would not have used the term of rape as Philippa Gregory did in her novel.¹¹³ And her husband Edmund certainly would not have been prosecuted for it. But although she was, as far as we can tell, obedient in her marriage, her actions later in life, both in taking her own vow of chastity and in trying to protect her granddaughter from repeating the same fate, suggest that what happened to her did affect Margaret’s life in a very real way. Even if the main cause was Henry’s birth, not the sexual acts themselves, Margaret did, we can agree, experience something traumatic in relation to this early consummation, which was not necessarily morally right, even if it was technically allowed. And, like other survivors, she continued to live on in spite of what happened, not only outliving Edmund, but her other two husbands after him as well as her son. Margaret Beaufort, therefore, provides another example of a royal woman who had her sexuality judged and discussed by men. We could perhaps consider Fisher telling this story as an act of violence in its own right, blaming the victim of a circumstance which may have been an act of agency, as it is sometimes interpreted, but also could be considered a young girl conforming to societal expectations of female conduct—expectations that do, to an extent, remain for women in the present. Using this story, then, we can perhaps think twice when we read accounts of royal women represented as either perfect virgins or creatures with voracious sexual appetites. Rather than reducing them to a binary of perfect or imperfect, we should look beneath to see them as people who were just trying to navigate the dangers of the world in which they lived, where their bodies were not always their own, and their decisions may have followed social norms rather than what they truly desired for themselves.

¹¹² “Item 4 How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr Doughter”; *The Good Wife's Guide*; Harper, “Contextual Factors That Perpetuate Statutory Rape,” 904.

¹¹³ Gregory, *The Red Queen*, 33.

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