

“No female weakness harbour’d there”: Epic Reframing of the Notorious Queen in Margaret Holford’s *Margaret of Anjou: A Poem*

Okaycan DÜRÜKOĞLU

Tokat Gaziosmanpaşa University, Türkiye

Abstract: Margaret Holford was a Romantic woman poet who published all of her works in the early nineteenth century. At the end of her literary career, she wrote her final work *Margaret of Anjou: A Poem* (1816). The poem retells the story of Margaret of Anjou’s fight for her son’s legitimacy for the English crown. Margaret of Anjou was the wife of Henry VI of England and she has always been regarded as one of the most bloodthirsty queens of England as a result of her decisions and actions in the Wars of the Roses. Although the Queen had a notorious reputation for centuries, Holford did not contribute to this negative image of her and she attributed positive qualities to Queen Margaret’s character by tailoring her as an epic hero. By writing in a heroic mode and attributing epic characteristics to her poem, Margaret Holford transgresses the boundaries of the epic genre in which masculine ideals and goals are celebrated in general. Holford reacts to the male-centred epic genre with her female epic hero. Accordingly, this study focuses on how Holford fashions Margaret of Anjou as an epic hero, and how she subverts the traditional epic tradition with her female heroine.¹

Keywords:

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“Hiçbir kadınısı zaaf barındırmazdı”: Margaret Holford'un *Margaret of Anjou* Şiirinde Kötü Şöhretli Kraliçenin Destan Kahramanı Olarak Yeniden Yorumlanması

Öz: Margaret Holford, tüm eserlerini on dokuzuncu yüzyılın başlarında yayınlayan Romantik kadın şairdi. Edebi kariyerinin sonunda, *Margaret of Anjou: A Poem* (Anjoulu Margaret: Bir Şiir, 1816) başlıklı eserini yazdı. Holford’un şiiri, Anjou’lu Margaret’in oğlunun İngiltere tahtı veliahtı olarak meşruiyeti için verdiği mücadelenin hikayesini anlatmaktadır. Anjou’lu Margaret İngiltere krallarından Altıncı Henry’nin eşiydi ve Güller Savaşı’ndaki kararları ve eylemleri sonucunda her zaman İngiltere’nin en kana susamış kraliçelerinden biri olarak kabul edilmiştir. Kraliçe, yüzyıllardır kötü bir üne sahip olmasına rağmen, Holford onun bu olumsuz imajına katkıda bulunmamış ve Kraliçe Margaret’i bir destan kahramanı olarak uyarlayarak karakterine olumlu nitelikler atfetmiştir. Margaret Holford, kahramansı bir tarzda yazarak ve şiirine destan özellikleri atfederek, genel olarak eril ideallerin ve hedeflerin kutlandığı destan türünün sınırlarını aşar. Holford’un, erkek merkezli destan türüne kadın destan kahramanıyla tepki verdiği gözlemlenmektedir. Buna göre, bu çalışma Holford’un Anjou’lu Margaret’i bir destan kahramanı olarak nasıl

Anahtar Sözcükler:

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Introduction

Margaret Holford (1778–1852) was a Romantic woman poet whose works did not receive the widespread attention of the reading public of the early nineteenth century. It was known that Holford had connections with the romantic literary coterie. For instance, she was the close friend of Joanna Baillie (1762–1851) who introduced Holford's first poetic work *Wallace; or the Fight of Falkirk; a Metrical Romance* (1809) to Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), and it was also known that Robert Southey (1774–1843), who was the Poet Laureate of the time, visited Holford in her house (Baillie 469). Although she achieved to form significant literary connections, Holford was neglected as a woman poet and she stayed in the shadows for centuries. In her approximately fifteen years of literary career, she published a novel in three volumes, two epic poems, and two other poetry collections. Among her works, *Margaret of Anjou: A Poem*, which will be the focus of this article, stands out as her final product as a poet and also as the most neglected work of Margaret Holford. Stuart Curran also acknowledges *Margaret of Anjou: A Poem* as "a minor masterpiece that has not been accorded the attention it deserves" (173). Albeit the poem's unpopularity, Holford's work has significant aspects which require an in-depth and closer analysis. Firstly, Holford wrote *Margaret of Anjou* by choosing her characters and subject matters from one of the most important political events of medieval England: The Wars of the Roses. In the poem, Holford shed light on the final phase of the war in which Margaret of Anjou, who was the wife of Henry VI of England (1421–1471), played a key role. Holford's protagonist, the historical Margaret of Anjou, is regarded as one of the most unfavourable characters of Medieval English history. In the absence of her mentally ill husband, Margaret of Anjou became a significant political figure in certain battles of the war including the Battle of Wakefield (1460) and the second battle of St Albans (1461) (Webster 23, 46). She has always been at the centre of severe criticism because of her role in the Wars of the Roses. For centuries, Anjou has been negatively stereotyped as a bloodthirsty queen. As opposed to this negative image of the queen, Holford chooses to portray her in a positive light by highlighting the Queen's bravery, her ability to command her followers with her rhetorical skills, her use of political tactics in times of turmoil, and her devotion to her cause when compared to her son and husband who are politically and

characterwise depicted as passive male figures. While doing so, Holford uses the epic convention as a medium and she depicts Margaret of Anjou as an epic hero in the poem. It should be underlined that Holford does not merely make use of the epic tradition but also subverts it by choosing a female epic hero. Taking into consideration her positive portrayal of the historical Margaret of Anjou, it can be asserted that Holford develops a pro-woman argument in her poem by excluding the patriarchal prejudices against the notorious queen. Hence, the primary focus of this article will be on Holford's fashioning of the historical Margaret of Anjou as an epic hero.

Contemporary critics analysed Holford's *Margaret of Anjou* from various aspects. While Elisa Beshero-Bondar analyses it as "a gothic epic" (13), Adeline Johns-Putra includes Holford's poem in the category of epics written by women in the Romantic era (79). Although Johns-Putra and Beshero-Bondar are the first critics that deal with Holford's *Margaret of Anjou*, they do not give a large place to Margaret Holford in their analyses. The analysis of Holford's poem in this article builds upon these scholars' readings of *Margaret of Anjou*, but this study aims to focus only on Margaret Holford's *Margaret of Anjou* with an in-depth analysis of Holford's characterisation of Margaret of Anjou as an epic hero. This article will argue that the positive characteristics attributed to Anjou not only serve to create an epic hero but also pave the way for the pro-woman argument in the poem. Although the historical Margaret of Anjou has had a notorious reputation for centuries, Holford does not follow this patriarchal tradition as she shows the Queen as a respectable leader who has a warrior soul. So, the final focal point of this essay will be directly on Queen Margaret's positive qualities which are attributed to her by Holford with the aim of showing that Holford not only challenges the epic tradition with a female epic hero but also the patriarchal tradition, which condemns women who take active roles in the public sphere as unnatural and unsexed, and in so doing, it will be concluded that Holford's *Margaret of Anjou: A Poem* can be accepted as the proto-feminist rendering of the story of a medieval queen.

Notorious Queen and the Reactions to Holford's *Margaret of Anjou*

After the publication of *Margaret of Anjou: A Poem* in 1816, the literary critics of the time attacked Holford in terms of the protagonist of the work. This harsh treatment of Holford's poem by the critics was the result of Margaret of Anjou's notorious image which was shaped by the patriarchal ideology. There were certain reasons behind the hatred for the Queen such as her inability to give birth to an heir in the first years of her marriage and her failure to act as a mediator to ease the tension between France and England, but the fundamental reason which paved the way for her notorious reputation was her active political identity. The Queen's husband, Henry VI, was unhealthy both physically and mentally. He was in a catatonic state most of the time and he was unable to communicate with his family and advisors (Maurer 44–45). In the absence of her husband, Queen Margaret was recognised as a leader of the Lancastrians and she achieved two victories in the Wars of the Roses. In this respect, Margaret of Anjou was accused of encouraging

bloodshed. Most importantly, she was not acting in accordance with the stereotypical example of a medieval queen with her active political involvement. As Diana Dunn states, “[medieval] queens were expected to provide leadership in a number of areas of life – spiritual, educational, charitable and cultural – but to remain outside politics” (143). It can be asserted that being a military and political leader as a female has always been regarded as unnatural activity, and as Megan McLaughlin puts it, “[i]n the European middle ages, as in virtually all periods of human history, warfare was seen as a masculine activity. Indeed, it was generally viewed as the quintessential masculine activity, through which ‘manhood’ was demonstrated” (194). Since the patriarchal tradition attributed passive and subordinate roles to women, the ones who opposed these gender roles were regarded as an anomaly and unnatural. In this vein, as a woman who was an active participant in the politics of her time and as a military leader, Margaret of Anjou was seen as a marginalised historical figure for her activity in the public sphere. Because of this negative image of her, she was described “as a malicious, selfish, manipulative French queen” (Radulescu 118).

Having this negative image of Margaret of Anjou before them, the literary reviews of Holford’s time severely criticised *Margaret of Anjou*. Possibly, the harshest criticism came from *The Literary Panorama* and the critic of the review claimed that Queen Margaret was not a suitable heroine for an epic poem: “Perhaps the chief error in this poem is the choice of the heroine. . . . [S]he is little known to fame, . . . [she is] incapable of governing herself or others discreetly, and exerting a superiority, which contrasts not to her advantage, over her meek and pious husband” (563). *The Eclectic Review* also suggested that Margaret of Anjou is “a woman who is prominently represented as forgetful alike of the ties of humanity and of nature; who shocks even her own son by the vehemence of her declarations of implacable hatred against her enemies, and who returns the services of her friends with insolence and ingratitude” (74). Both of the reviewers shared the idea that Queen Margaret did not represent the figure of a trustworthy leader who could guide her followers with reason and good sense. Also, according to them, she proved to be a selfish, ungrateful, and cruel woman who disappointed even her own son, Edward. It is observed that Margaret Holford became the target of the critics’ harsh criticisms since she did not contribute to the traditionally accepted negative image of the Queen. Instead, Holford praised the Queen’s deeds, achievements, and courage, and showed the Queen’s actions as heroic in the poem by fashioning her as an epic hero. Subsequently, the positive depiction of the historical Margaret of Anjou signals Holford’s formation of a pro-woman argument in her poem.

Apart from her epic portrayal of the Queen, Holford’s preface to *Margaret of Anjou* becomes another indicator of her pro-woman agenda. She not only pays tribute to Margaret of Anjou in the work but also to her mother by declaring that she inherited her literary skills from her mother. In this regard, the prefatory remarks of Holford can be accepted as an acknowledgement of her inherited literary genius to the public. She states that “to my Mother, likewise, I consider this tribute as an appropriate acknowledgement,

that from her I have imbibed and inherited the taste which has devoted me to the service of the Muse.” Furthermore, in the final part of the preface, Holford wrote that her mother “lent [her] courage to risk the trial, to which, with a mixture of hope and fear, [she is] looking forward.” This final sentence prefigures Holford’s anxiety about her subject matter and epic style. She was aware of the fact that her retelling of the notorious Margaret of Anjou’s story in an epic convention, which was regarded as off-limit for woman writers, was a risky choice for a woman poet, but she did not refrain from depicting Margaret of Anjou heroically. Besides, Holford’s tribute to her mother could be perceived as a homage to a female literary tradition or the lack thereof at the time. Holford’s concern about the publication of her poem can be the result of the lack of female literary predecessors like the “grandmothers” that Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) seeks everywhere but could not find (17). Yet, Holford aims to take courage and power from her mother, who is also a poet and a playwright, by assigning the role of a literary grandmother to her own mother. By taking into consideration Holford’s tributes to both her mother in the preface and to Margaret of Anjou in her poem, it is possible to claim that Holford celebrates female solidarity as opposed to the discriminating and debasing bias towards women in patriarchal societies, and this aspect of her work becomes one of the components of her pro-woman agenda.

Margaret of Anjou as an Epic Poem

Although Holford called her work “a poem” on the title page, many literary reviews of her time accepted *Margaret of Anjou* as an epic poem. For instance, *The Augustan Review* classified Holford as one of “the most esteemed of [England’s] living bards” (289). The reviewer claimed that writing an epic poem was not an easy task for every author; however, Holford proved her sufficiency in this genre with her masterly crafted poem. For the reviewer, “to sustain the interest of a continued narrative throughout ten cantos; to adhere to the facts; and yet embellish the details of history; to fill up the outline of the biographical portraits given by the severe chroniclers of the times; is no ordinary effort of the human mind” (289). Though Holford’s efforts in producing an epic poem were acknowledged by some critics, she was also criticised because of her choice of the epic genre. The anonymous reviewer of *The Literary Panorama* claimed that “the bloody scenes of battle and murder, and military execution, destruction of families, burning of towns, with all the horrors of war, especially of civil war, should rather be banished from the minds of the sex than cherished” (561–562). The reviewer underlined that the politics of war and the bloody scenes were not suitable for the female sex. The root of this kind of discriminating bias against women writers can be seen as the result of the separate sphere ideology which supported the idea that “the qualities of masculinity were suited for the public world and the qualities of femininity for the domestic world” (Price 205). Throughout the ages, women were always excluded from the public sphere by the patriarchal ideology and they were expected to dedicate themselves to domestic happiness. One of the extensions of this patriarchal ideology is observed in the epic tradition. Traditionally, writing an epic poem is attributed to the male gender since “[e]pic

norms – public, objective, universal, heroic – coincide with western norms for the masculine. . . . [T]he epic hero is traditionally male, his heroic qualities are masculine, and the ordeal he faces is a masculine agon” (Friedman 205). So, the world in which an epic hero dwells is in contrast with the norms of the female world. Epic poems are directly related to the public sphere since they deal with heroic adventures, wars, and fighting on the battlefield. As a result, when woman poets write about the public sphere although they do not have any claim or experience, they find themselves at the centre of criticism just like Margaret Holford. As a result of the prejudices regarding women who attempt to write epic poems, women refrained from composing epic poems since they suffered from the “anxiety of poetic genre” (Friedman 203). In Johns-Putra’s words, “[i]f the epic is about war, if war is the epitome of public activity, and if the public sphere is dominated by men, it follows that the epic is a masculine genre, rarely attempted by women” (40). Yet, Johns-Putra finds out that women poets, though they were limited in number, “wrote epics in the Romantic age and wrote them in greater numbers than has hitherto been suggested” and Margaret Holford is one of them (14).

Though Holford does not suggest or write anything about the epic status of *Margaret of Anjou*, her poem includes the essential hallmarks of epic. Most obviously, the poem’s length and its division into ten cantos are some of the indicators of the formal structure of traditional epics. Next, Holford’s poem opens with the epic invocation to the muse and the poem also begins *in medias res*. More importantly, Holford’s characterisation of Queen Margaret as an epic hero grants her poem the status of an epic. However, as mentioned earlier, she does not follow the traditional representation of an epic hero who is generally male, and his adventures, conflicts, and struggles take place outdoors. With her female epic hero, Holford subverts the epic tradition in which a male epic hero is a dominant figure. As she states in the preface, she knows that she “risks her trial” with the unconventional portrayal of the protagonist of the poem but she also shows that she is not comfortable with the patriarchal prejudices which restrict women’s roles in society. So, Holford chooses to praise one of the most controversial names of the Middle Ages by depicting her actions and life as heroic. In this vein, Anne K. Mellor argues that Margaret Holford “turned to history to challenge the view that women had no role to play in the crucial events of the past” (45). In other words, Holford tries to underline the importance and influence of Queen Margaret in one of the most crucial historical events of the Middle Ages with the aim of rejecting the medieval interpretation of Margaret of Anjou as a bloodthirsty and manipulative queen.

Although she subverts the idea of an epic hero that is generally male, it is observed that Holford follows the classical epic tradition in terms of the characterisation of a hero. In the early examples of epics, heroes are members of the royal family or they are powerful persons in their environment since the poets aim to show that tragic situations or events can only be experienced by these noble or high-ranking personalities (Fischer 21). At this point, Holford’s Queen Margaret is also one of the members of the English royal family and she is acknowledged as a powerful and authoritative figure. Especially in

the first two cantos of the poem, the Queen's power in influencing and commanding her soldiers and her son Edward is laid bare by Holford. In Canto I, Holford introduces Queen Margaret by using positive adjectives and this shows from the very beginning that the poet is going to praise the Queen without touching upon her notorious reputation. At the beginning of Canto I, Holford describes the Queen as follows:

But she is calm:---a peace profound
On the unruffled surface rests;
Yet is that breast in iron bound,
And fill'd with rude and sullen guests.
No female weakness harbour'd there,
Relentings soft, nor shrinking fear,
Within its centre deep abide. (I. VIII. 1-7)

As can be understood from the quotation, Queen Margaret is depicted as a woman who is neither soft nor fearful. Holford displays such a character to demonstrate that female weakness does not become an obstacle for the Queen's warrior soul. The poet repetitively refers to Margaret's warrior side in the first canto to establish a figure of strong authority: "For she it is,--meek Henry's warrior Queen!" (I. IX. 4), "the warrior Queen's unquiet breast" (I. XXX. 7). Not only her warrior soul but her fearless attitude also becomes an important aspect of the Queen's character. Holford writes

Where is the pang, the woe, the care,
This dauntless spirit shall not dare?
What path too rugged, wild and strange,
For Margaret's fearless foot to range? (I. XX. 6-9)

All of these qualities of the Queen are carefully depicted by Holford since she shows that although the Queen is a female, there is no insufficiency in her soul as a warrior. Holford reminds the readers that the Queen is ready for all the future turmoil and conflicts as a female epic hero.

Moreover, Canto I sheds light on the Queen's skills in encouraging the soldiers and her son Edward. It can be put forward that she has pro-war rhetoric that complements her depiction as an epic hero. Before she sends her troop to Hexham, the Queen utters that

Warriors, begone!--- the advancing day
To glory summons ye away!
Begone! A breathless nation waits—
And Victory the lingerer hates!
Begone, begone! (I. XXV. 7-11)

The Queen is aware of the fact that she cannot overcome her foes without her followers. More importantly, without her only heir Edward, her efforts are meaningless. As a result, before she urges her soldiers, she addresses her son as follows:

Now hear me, Edward! In thy heart,
Thy arm and sword, put I my trust!

Margaret invokes not, on thy part,
 A grandshire from the dust!
 Go, win me back thy father's throne;
 And, even as the wrong, be the success thine own! (I. XVIII. 1–6)

When the Queen's encouraging speeches are taken into account, it can be claimed that she is respected by her circle since her troop follows her orders without any sign of doubt. In this respect, her position as a military leader whose ability is to affect her environment is in accordance with the traditional representation of an epic hero because heroes in epics "must be a model character in the world being interpreted in the epic" (Fischer 23). Burçin Erol brings forward a different insight for Holford's hero by drawing parallelism between Queen Margaret and Elizabeth I (1533–1603). According to Erol, Holford fashions Queen Margaret by taking Elizabeth I as a model for her protagonist (144–145). Especially, when Queen Margaret's speeches in the first canto are analysed in-depth, it can be observed that there are strong allusions to the famous Tilbury speech of Elizabeth I:

I know I have the bodie, but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and Stomach of a King, and of a King of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any Prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my Realm, to which rather than any dishonor should grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I my self will be your General, Judge, and Rewarder of everie one of your virtues in the field. (Frye 98)

The last Tudor Queen emphasises that although she has a female body, this does not prevent her from defending her country against the enemies. She refers to the fact that she does not have only a political identity but she also embodies a warrior soul. In line with these aspects of Elizabeth I's speech, it is possible to draw certain parallelism between her and Holford's Lancastrian Queen. Margaret of Anjou utters in the poem that she is seen as a calm person from the outside but she is the owner of the iron breast from which she takes her power as a warrior and female weakness is removed from her body (I. VIII. 1–14).

In Canto II, Holford still continues to show her heroine as a powerful monarch no matter what she encounters on her path to glory. For example, she does not mourn for her fatally wounded friend Clifford and she says:

I seek those living friends, who still
 Can hear, and can perform my will!
 Of feeble sire the feeble child,
 Thou idly loitering, mayst remain. (II. XVIII. 7–10)

Apparently, the Queen hides her real emotions for the sake of her aim and she knows that she has to make certain sacrifices. Yet, this authoritative and strong position of the Queen is challenged by Edward who is wounded in the battle. When the Queen sees her child, she is devastated by his horrible condition and she exclaims that "Oh, save my gallant boy! Oh, Edward! Oh my son!" (II. XXXI. 10). It is seen that until Canto II, Queen Margaret stifles her maternal feelings so as not to be labelled as weak by the heavily patriarchal court. She

knows that she should not act emotionally but act with reason. However, seeing her child in a desperate situation forces her to remember her motherhood. In this regard, Johns-Putra underlines that Holford's heroine "resolves what is a veritable inner battle of the sexes, a psychomachia between warring and mothering, with an acceptance of the feminine role of the mother" (84). On the other hand, Beshero-Bondar claims that "her maternal and regal roles ultimately are one and the same, and both are fused in the body of the woman who falls to the ground in speechless torment in front of her enemies" (116). In line with Bondar's reading, it could be suggested that Queen Margaret embraces both the warrior and maternal sides of her soul, and she tries to balance her roles as a mother and a monarch. She also accepts that her maternal feelings become a sign of weakness for her: "Yet tho' maternal softness stole, / With force resistless, o'er her soul" (II. XXXII. 1-2). Clearly, the Queen cannot overlook her maternal feelings for Edward though she tries to be a warrior queen.

Although Margaret of Anjou is depicted as a woman who is ready to sacrifice everything for her son's claim to the English throne, her son Edward does not embody the same spirit as her mother. Edward's character is in contrast with the Queen's ideals and aims, and the conflict between mother and son is laid bare by Holford in almost every canto of the poem. The tension between the Queen and Edward reaches the highest point when Edward falls in love with Geraldine who is a lady disguised as a healer of the village where the Queen seeks refuge. Queen Margaret does not approve of this relationship since Geraldine might distract Edward from their path to glory. The Queen wants her son to act with reason rather than with passion. Her discontent with Geraldine is described by Holford as follows:

Looks kill not, but they can destroy
With fatal blight the buds of joy,--
Had Margaret's glance the pow'r to kill,
How had the wasted World deplor'd her deadly skill! (V. XIX. 13-16)

As is highlighted, even her glance disturbs Geraldine and the Queen threatens her with her looks. Accordingly, as Judith Bailey Slagle points out, Edward is "placed between a loving girl and a controlling mother" (69).

Edward is not the only character who experiences this kind of conflict in the poem. Queen Margaret is also stuck between two passive male figures, namely her son Edward and her husband King Henry. Traditionally, they should be the ones who fight for the throne but only the Queen acts wilfully as opposed to the male members of her royal family. The male passivity is foregrounded in Canto VII in detail by Holford. At the beginning of the canto, while Edward and Geraldine are walking along the mountain path, an unexpected storm strikes and they come across a hermit's cell. Holford adds a disguised character to the poem in this scene who is King Henry. It is reported that he lives in a cottage in the wilderness and he hides his real identity. It can be argued that this meeting of King Henry and Edward is one of the most significant scenes of the whole poem

because these two male characters show how they differ from the Queen in terms of their lack of determination and warlike attitude. When the King converses with his son, he suggests that he cannot bear to hear the Queen's name: "The Queen! The Queen!—her very name / With ague shakes my inmost frame!" (VII. LXIX. 7–8). Then, he addresses his son by stating that

My Edward, on thy gallant course!
I have not heart to fight, nor head
To marshal others to the fray,--
Thou little think'st what icy dread
Comes o'er me on the battle-day!
Oh! How I hate the field with human slaughter red! (VII. LXIX. 17–22)

As mentioned earlier, the historical Henry VI was a mentally ill person and he was in a catatonic state most of the time. In this part of the poem, Holford alludes to the King's mental illness. In the same canto, Edward also states the same thoughts as his father. He shows his unwillingness towards fighting as the future heir as follows:

"Why," cried the Prince, "did adverse fate
Oppress my lot with toys of state!
Oh! I could curse the star that shone
Upon the inauspicious morn,
When to the cares of England's throne
A hapless heir was born! (VII. XLVII. 1–6)

The words of King Henry and Edward prove that Queen Margaret is placed between an unhealthy king and a reluctant heir. Hence, the burden of the English throne rests on the shoulders of the Queen. She always urges her son and the ones around her with loyalty to her goals in regard to the English throne. Yet, her plans and determination are tested through many outside factors. Most importantly, in Classical epic poems, women characters are traditionally portrayed as passive figures whose presence in the epic world is underestimated. Yet, Holford not only challenges the traditional approaches towards her sex but also attributes passive roles to her male characters. By laying bare male passivity, which is in stark contrast with the masculine ideals of the epic, Holford aims to reframe one of the established masculine norms of the genre.

The Queen's determination and consistency, which are absent in her husband and her son, nourish her grandeur as an epic hero. Though she is surrounded by passive male figures, Queen Margaret never gives up her cause against her enemies. In the last canto, while preparing to clash with her enemies, a holy father approaches the Queen to convince her to leave the battlefield and to repent of her sins (X. XXI. 1–10). However, she rejects being remembered as a cowardly monarch and embraces the outcomes of the future by stating that

Know, holy father, at my birth
Fate chose me from the forms of earth,
Chose me, to tread while wand'ring here
A high, a wonderful career,

And on I must, till envious time
 Shall quench me in my path sublime!
 No after-chronicle shall say,
 That peril turn'd me from my way!
 I will go on!--My spirit high,
 Thus, meets in bold response, the call of destiny! (X. XXIII. 1-10)

Beshero-Bondar points out that “Margaret’s retort to the priest effectively defends her position on the poem’s and the nation’s centre stage boldly meeting a tragic destiny rather than praying for mercy” (108). Furthermore, her unyielding response to the priest also strengthens the Queen’s portrayal as an epic hero since it is traditionally expected of epic narratives to have a consistent hero no matter what he/she encounters in his/her sublime path to glory.

After Holford points out the differences between the Queen and her son and husband, she touches upon the Queen’s other characteristic which is her ability to make a political manoeuvre. To gain a victory against her enemy, the Queen comes up with a clever idea: she desires to marry her son to Nevil, the daughter of Warwick. This decision underlines the fact that the Queen is able to make a political decision just as any male authority. In this respect, Johns-Putra comments that

she is, in fact, so masculinised that she is able to marry the role of the mother with that of the father. She enters into an agreement with the Yorkist Earl of Warwick to unite his daughter to Edward, although Edward is in love with another. In doing so, a gender reversal is effected, in which Edward assumes what is traditionally the daughter’s part in gift exchange, and Margaret assumes the father’s role of the exchanger. (83)

Queen Margaret can be described as a multi-dimensional character that embodies many essential characteristics to be defined as a true epic hero. More precisely, Holford fashions the Queen as a strong female character who is determined, courageous, fearless, and consistent. However, this image of her disappears at the end of the poem.

The last canto holds a significant place in Holford’s poem since all the conflicts and struggles come to an end. It is highlighted at the end of the poem that the Queen’s efforts to protect her son appear to be futile. In the previous cantos, Holford’s Queen Margaret is attributed epic qualities and she is even “compared with Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of war” (Johns-Putra 80). Yet, when her son is murdered by the York side, Queen Margaret’s hopes and ideals perish irredeemably. What is remarkable in the canto is that though Edward, the only hope for the Lancastrian future, dies, the Queen does not show any sign of defeat. Instead, she expresses her anger and frustration with her words. Before “the heart-stricken Queen fell senseless on the floor” (X. LXXII. 9), she scolds her enemies and sends a mother’s curse to them:

Monsters! A mother’s curse lie strong
 And heavy on you! May the tongue,
 The ceaseless tongue which well I ween
 Lives in the murd’rer’s murky breast,

With goading whispers, fell and keen,
 Make havoc of your rest!
 For ever in your midnight dream
 May the wan, wintry smile, which stays
 On yon cold lips, appal your gaze,
 And may a madden'd mother's scream
 Ring in your ears, till ye awake
 And ev'ry unstrung limb with horror's palsy shake! (X. LXXI. 1-12)

Her final words signify that the Queen's warrior soul dies with the death of her son but even then, she tries to threaten her enemies with her harsh language. Queen Margaret wants the murderers of her son to be haunted by a mother's scream in their midnight dreams. Her outrage can be accepted as a sign of her commitment to the epic idea of heroic kinship. As Frederick Turner puts it, "kinship is an essential and foundational element in the motivation of behaviour, as epic recognizes" (127). An epic hero is responsible for protecting his/her kin group and harming one of the members of an epic hero's kin group is unacceptable for the honour and integrity of the same community. As a result, the death of Edward, who is the future heir of England, at the hands of English soldiers is a serious breach of the idea of heroic kinship. So, Queen Margaret's response to the death of her son can be interpreted as the outcome of her loyalty to the ideals that are celebrated in the epic genre.

Conclusion

After taking into consideration Margaret Holford's portrayal of the medieval queen, it could be concluded that Holford pays tribute to the notorious queen by depicting Margaret of Anjou in a positive light. Despite her previous negative representations in historical documents, Holford chooses a new role to attribute to her heroine. What is striking in her presentation of Margaret of Anjou is that Holford highlights her bravery, determination, consistency in her acts, as well as her warrior soul. Furthermore, Holford's refusal of the notorious image of Margaret of Anjou can be taken as a token of the proto-feminist aspect of the poem. Holford's version of the historical Margaret of Anjou is in stark contrast with the negative image of her shaped by the patriarchal ideology which marginalised politically active women as unnatural. Holford assumes the role of a defender of a traditionally humiliated woman figure to acknowledge her decisions and acts. Throughout the poem, Holford excludes any reminders of the Queen's previous negative representations from her work and, in so doing, paves the way for a new interpretation of Margaret of Anjou free from any prejudice and accusation. Another important conclusion to be drawn is Holford's subversion of the epic tradition. With her epic poem, Holford challenges the male-dominated epic genre which limits women's participation in it. Though patriarchal ideology is dominant in the traditional epic tradition, she transgresses the boundaries of epic poems by centralising a female-warrior epic hero. She shows that women can also be successful in the public sphere with their determination and unfaltering loyalty to their causes. It should be noted that although

Margaret of Anjou fails in her mission at the end of the poem, it can be claimed that Holford tries to draw readers' attention to the efforts and courage of the Queen throughout the narration. Even after the Queen is defeated after her son's death, Holford does not choose to portray her as a weak woman but as a woman who sends a mother's curse to her enemies as the last resolution.

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