

Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Three

Fortune's Wheel

By Lauren Johnson

'Beware beware, women beware,
See Eleanor Cobham, she goes there.
She was so high on Fortune's Wheel
She never thought that she could fall.
But as Lucifer fell down for pride,
So she fell too, and lost it all.
Beware beware, women beware,
See Eleanor Cobham, she goes there...'

Eleanor:

This is the ballad that echoes in my ear during those last days in London. It starts as an adolescent catcall in the street – mercers' apprentices, amusing themselves at my expense – then swells as it spreads through the city. By the time I take ship up the Thames for the last time, it is all I can hear, echoing off the river banks, north and south.

'As Lucifer fell down for pride...'

As if I had done all this for pride alone. It wasn't pride, you fools.

It was love. Isn't it always?

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I still remember the first time I saw him – Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester – hero of Agincourt and youngest brother of King Henry V. He was riding through the city streets towards the Tower of London surrounded by archers and men at arms. His brother the King had just made him Lieutenant of England and if you ever wanted a vision of pride, it was him. His shoulders set wide, head held high, his thighs gripping his horse with the easy grace of a prince who's been in the saddle since before he could walk.

Jesu, he was handsome. We all thought it, us gently-born daughters, as we dangled out the windows of our parents' London residences to catch a glimpse of him. And I'll never forget, he looked up at my window and winked. Tease.

The second time I saw him was a less happy occasion.

1422 and the great King Henry was dead. England was drowning in grief. Grown men wept in the streets. The king's wars had got him in the end – no glorious death for Henry V, but a puking, shitting desiccation into nothing while he watched his men lose a siege.

And now his corpse was trundled back to London, a painted effigy of boiled leather on top of his coffin, its eyes open and disturbing.

Still so young. And riding alongside his dead brother, there was the Duke of Gloucester again. He was grieving, of course, but there was something else in his face that day. Now Henry V's son was king – a baby who still wasn't weened from his wetnurse's tit – so of course someone else would have to rule until the baby grew to manhood, be the power behind the throne. You could see it in the Duke's eye that day – he was determined it would be him.

And in that moment I knew. He was going to be mine.

We would rule together. After all, whoever heard of the power behind the throne being a man? You know as well as I do.

It's always a woman.

I won't bore you with the details of how I got my place at Court.

My parents pulled the usual strings: some relation of my mother's had a cousin who had once been a lady in waiting of a countess...



It's not the getting there that matters, it's what you do once you're in.

And when I arrived, it was little enough work to catch the Duke's eye, and hold it. People say I bewitched him. It takes no magic charm to win a man who's willing to be won.

Of course, there was the minor inconvenience of his wife...

I will say that for Jacqueline of Hainault, she was a worthy adversary. The Duke was her third husband, and she married him solely for his army. But it didn't take long for him to forget her, once he'd taken me in his arms. He did half of the honourable thing: he escorted Jacqueline back to her own lands - then the moment the autumn rains set in he left her to her wars and returned to England, divorcing her and marrying me.

Ha! From a virtual nobody to duchess in a matter of months. And still that infant king Henry VI was too young to rule.

It was perfect.

We were perfect, the duke and I. The common people loved us.

We couldn't go anywhere without them fêting us, throwing wide their city gates to welcome us in with wine fountains and pageants of the saints. There was one imperfection though. The one, gaping, howling, sobbing imperfection. No child. We tried and tried, but every month - at best, every two months - there came a gush of blood and nothing more.

Eventually I sought out a woman in Westminster.

Margery Jourdemayne was her name, although for mystery's sake people called her 'the witch of Eye'. She'd already been arrested once for sorcery but I was desperate. And anyway, if the lords of England knew how many of them owed their heirs to her services - if the bishops knew how many of them had been spared bastards by her means - they would never have accused her. She was their helper as much as ours.

The first visit, she gave me herbs to drink. Later, oils to apply.

Later still, she pressed a little grey child made of wax into my hands. But all was for nothing.

Still the blood.

Still the grief.



Perhaps we should stop trying, the duke said.

And have the noble line of Gloucester end with us? I refused.

He was the heir to the throne, successor to little King Henry VI. Not that King Henry treated the duke with half the respect that was due to him.

I couldn't help but think how much better a king my Duke would have made than that boy. As the years passed, the injustice crackled like a fire under my skin. Here was the Duke, so wise, so strong.

And here was this puny child, unworthy to wear the crown, treating my Duke as if he were a serf.

As he grew to adolescence, it became all too clear the king was weak. Generous, certainly. Kind-hearted. Sensitive. But soft. Sometimes I looked at his pasty little face and wanted to strangle the life out of it. We didn't need a nice king. We needed a warrior, like his father. The wars with France had dragged on for a hundred years and still the English had not wrestled the French crown from the grip of their enemies.

Worse. The boy wanted to make peace. Peace.

'The dreadful effusion of Christian blood must cease,' he would say, as if he was an archbishop and not a teenage king.

'I would rather die,' the Duke would growl to me after yet another pointless council meeting with the boy. Did my brother give his life for this?'

Better by far the boy had died. Better he died now.

And maybe he would. I mean, he had to die eventually, didn't he?

We are all mortal. And when he died, the Duke would take the throne in his place and all would finally be well.

That was what got me wondering. We live in an age of science, the mysteries of heaven and earth revealed to us. Surely it must be possible to divine when a king would die? Great events like that are written in the stars, in the movements of planets, in eclipses and comets. Stands to reason. They say that before the deaths of kings, the lions in the Tower will perish - that terrible signs will be made manifest in our world. So if you could understand the natural signs, surely you could then predict when it would happen? Just to be ready, you know. Not to hasten things along.



I started in the Duke's library, riffling through all the books of astronomy and geomancy I could. But to me they were nonsense. Most of them were in Latin. I needed someone to help me make sense of them. Enter Roger Bolingbroke.

Roger was my clerk, a long-term servant of the Duke's who shared his ambition, and - I had heard whispered - had an interest in the dark art of necromancy. However, his necromantic interests were not his chief attraction to me.

So one day I just came out and asked him:

Would he mind drawing up a horoscope for the king? I was so terribly worried something might befall his grace, our dearest nephew, and if there was any way I could be warned of dangers to prevent them it would be the greatest comfort to me.

I did not say 'when will he die?' but Roger understood. He nodded his head gravely, and the next time I saw him he had a horoscope in his hands.

'I have terrible news,' he whispered. 'The King's health is dangerously imperilled. I fear he will be dead by August.'

'How awful,' I said. 'Now, show me how, on this chart.'

Let me be clear about one thing though. I never told Roger to work his craft against the King. I never ordered him to join forces with that quack Dr Southwell and hold weird rituals in churches, summoning thunder and sickness in the realm. Perhaps Roger thought I wanted events hastened, but all I had ever wanted was the certainty that my Duke would be king within a short space - and now the planets had given me that assurance. I never would have overreached myself like Roger did. That's the trouble with men. Always rushing to the climax.

I arrived in London that June with the delicious certainty that King Henry had only two months to live. I rode past the Tower, heard the lions roar and it was like an acclamation. As the aldermen of London bowed to me and the priests misted me with incense to welcome me to the city, I smiled down at them - little did they know but they were greeting their queen-in-waiting. Soon my darling Duke would be king. So, so soon. I rode to our inn on a cloud of



adulation, a coronation by proxy. It was Midsummer 1441. It was the most glorious moment of my life.

Then lightning struck.

As I sat at supper, my maid came tearing in:

'Boligbroke's been arrested,' she cried.

While I bundled my books and clothes into a chest to leave the city:

'Dr Southwell is taken to the Tower. Margery Jourdemayne too!'

I threw the chest aside. I left everything but the clothes on my back and rode for Westminster Abbey, hammering on the door for sanctuary.

I got there just in time. No sooner was I inside the cloisters than the King's men arrived. They couldn't drag me from sanctuary into a grim prison cell, but they could still put me on trial. The Duke had many enemies – and I daresay I had one or two – and oh! how delighted they were to see me humbled.

As a sign of good faith, I met with the King's bishops in Westminster – the Duke, of course, was not invited – and they took particular pleasure in reciting my crimes. Twenty-eight counts of treason and felony, to be exact.

They asked me outright: Had I conspired to bring about King Henry's death using necromancy and false horoscopes?

I denied it.

Had I gained my power as Duchess of Gloucester using witchcraft?

I bit my tongue. Of course they would think that. Heaven forbid a woman was deemed to hold any authority thanks to her own natural abilities – they must, of course, be supernatural. Sorcery made more sense to them than the notion of an intelligent woman.

But, again, I denied it.

As a noblewoman, they could not force me further, but my friends enjoyed no such protection. They appeared, one after the other before the bishops, wild-eyed and dishevelled. My 'accomplices' as they were now called: Roger. Margery. Dr Southwell. When I saw the state of them, my heart sank. God knows whether they endured physical torment or if they had simply been menaced with it, but when asked who was responsible for drawing that



horoscope - who wanted to destroy the King - they all pointed their trembling fingers at me.

Sanctuary, it transpired, would not protect me.

More 'evidence' was produced, to the grandstanding horror of the bishops. The books of astronomy in my possession were twisted into works of superstition. My oils and herbs were produced as instruments of witchcraft. Even the poor wax child Margery had made was held up as evidence of my treason. They claimed it was an image of the King and that by melting it, I would drain him of his life.

I tried to explain the truth, but it made no difference.

The verdict was the same for us all. We were traitors.

And traitors deserve death.

On 27 October they dragged Margery from her imprisonment in the Tower and burnt her at Smithfield. Dr Southwell should have joined her, but he died in his cell the night before, choosing a private self-murder over public execution. I waited.

My own death no longer seemed so remote a possibility.

In the end, it was winter before they decided what to do with me. Perhaps they waited so long to see if I had been right about the King's death but alas, the boy clung tenaciously to life. Since my horoscope had proven to be nothing but an inky jumble of false promises, the King chose mercy - of a sort.

My life was saved, but I was stripped of everything. The bishops annulled my marriage, claiming that since it had been procured by enchantments, the union was invalid. They didn't even allow me one last glimpse of my Duke, just told me that I was no longer his wife.

No longer a duchess. I was shorn me of everything that mattered. Everything but my pride. And then they he took that too.

Before I disappeared into my prison cell, the King wanted to make a public example of me. Penance. That was the word they used.



On three market days, I must walk in atonement through the streets of London to place a burning candle on the altar of three city churches.

I was allowed no furs, no velvet gown, no pearl-encrusted headdress. Nothing to show who I was – or rather, had been.

So there I stood on that first market morning, the Duchess of Gloucester no more. Just Eleanor Cobham; a sorry penitent, in nothing but a linen shift, bare-headed, shivering against the November chill as I walked through the city streets to church, the only warmth coming from the dribbling wax of the lit candle in my hands.

The city looked strange from down there. I was so used to being on horseback, raised above the filth and misery. On foot, London was cold and cruel. The buildings crowded in on me, blocking out the little wintery daylight. The street had not been sanded or strawed, and its icy muck clung to my legs. Faces stared down, unashamed and bold. Some spat. And finally, the candle trembling now in my frozen hands, I reached the church and placed it on the altar, knowing that I would have to make another journey the next market day.

And every day, glinting in the distance like a cruel eye, sometimes hidden by houses, sometimes thrown into shadow, but always there, glaring down at me was the Tower. The place that had once been the Duke's seat, the symbol of his power, where I had longed to go and see the glint of the crown jewels being readied for my coronation.

But now when I saw it, I shuddered and prayed to God that I would never enter it again. To go there meant death, and I was not ready to embrace that.

The day after I finished my penance, the Tower spat out the last of its victims. Poor Roger Bolingbroke. For helping me he was hauled through the streets, hanged until half-dead (but only half), his poor body butchered into quarters and his head stuck on London Bridge.

I should have been spared the sight of it, for when they sent me away to my prison, they moved me upriver from Westminster, away from the Tower.

But the river's loops are cruel and as I glanced back for one last look at the city, I thought I saw the pinnacles of London Bridge and the spikes atop it. For a



moment I saw his dead eyes staring back at me, unseeing but unforgiving. I turned away sharply. And in the sparkle of the water as the oars slid through it I saw dust, and thought of poor Margery, burnt to ash on the wind for service of me.

I had brought them to their deaths. I promise you, that in that instant there was never a more remorseful, less proud woman in existence.

I heard the ballad echo across the riverbanks and I nodded. All women may be ware by me.

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The years since that day have passed slowly. I moved from castle to castle – always further away from London – until eventually I was set down on Anglesey and here I remain. Duchess of an island of sheep.

You probably know that the king arrested my Duke for treason too. Without me to guide him, he unravelled at the seams. He had not the wit to know when to be silent. So, bereft of me, he sulked about the Court, grumbling to anyone who would listen about the King's plans for peace. And that did for him, my poor Duke. Despite it all, he was still popular enough with the Commons that the King feared his grouching would infect them. What did he imagine, that the Duke would incite rebellion? Preposterous! My Duke would never raise a finger against the boy – despite it all, he loved his brother too much to hurt his child. He, too, could sometimes be overly soft-hearted.

So, he was arrested too. The small mercy was he died before he could be put on trial. Some tattle-tongues in London said he was murdered – smothered between two mattresses, or stabbed in the arse with a poker – but I don't believe it. His heart broke when he lost power.

I know how he felt.

And me? What will my end be? The king will never let me go free. Oh, he can forgive anyone anything – anyone but me, and anything but this. So here on my island I will stay until my dying day. But I'll have my vengeance. I've seen it, in the stars.

I know they say once bitten, twice shy, but really, what else do I have to do on this godforsaken island, except consult horoscopes and put their readings into



effect? There's a local woman, comes in now and then to attend me, and she can read the Heavens as well as any clerk.

She's of Roger's ilk – says if we strike at the perfect time, under the right zodiac signs, at the best phase of the moon or sun, we can channel our energies into bringing the King down. This time I'm more than happy to hasten things along. He deserves a reckoning, does Henry VI.

Already, we've helped him lose his French kingdoms. There was an eclipse, a comet, and psht! there went France. But he has two crowns to lose, and one life. The stars assure me he will lose it all.

And, in recent days, not just the stars. I've seen a ship, from my window, struggling through the foaming waves towards this island.

It bears the banners of a falcon and fetterlock, a white rose of York.

My Duke was not the only one who opposed Henry VI's pathetic peace policy. I may not live to see the wars that are prophesied but three things I do know.

The First. Every bone in my body will grind itself to dust to bring down King Henry VI.

The Second. Eventually, he will die – in the Tower, apparently. Irony of ironies.

And the Third. When at last a new dynasty arises to take his place, the power behind the throne will be a woman again.

