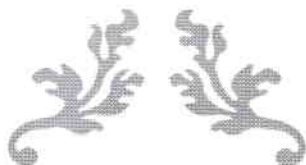


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**HER VERSION OF
(HIS)STORY: A STUDY OF
PHILIPPA GREGORY'S
PLANTAGENET NOVELS**

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Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	7
About Philippa Gregory	17
Theoretical background: narrators and narrative choices	31
Readers and audience	50
History and/or fiction?.....	60
Powerful women in the Middle Ages: between history and myth.....	75
Jacquetta of Luxembourg: the maid and the unicorn	90
Margaret of Anjou: the predatory queen	105
The Goddess Queen: Elizabeth Woodville	120
The Kingmaker's Daughter: Anne Neville	144
Mysticism, faith, ambition and the will of God: Margaret Beaufort	157
The battle for the throne: a kaleidoscopic view ..	171
Conclusions	183
<i>Bibliography</i>	195



About Philippa Gregory



The real author of a book, the information gathered about their life and work, usually steers the course of any study. Nothing exists in a vacuum, and, with a contemporary author who is still producing one bestseller after another, the need to look into the life of the respective author becomes a must. With contemporary sources that may include Wikipedia, authors' Facebook groups or personal pages on the internet, the real author might be perceived as the readers' neighbour, friend, or interlocutor. It would, then, seem that, since anyone is able to communicate freely with the flesh-and-blood author (or their virtual representative), any biographical data would be rendered superfluous and should consequently be eliminated from the study. Still, this study, which relies on theories of reception, intertextuality and narratology, needs to start in a more traditional manner, from the brief introduction of the real author Philippa Gregory.

British author Philippa Gregory is a historical novelist whose activity has become increasingly popular since her first published book in 1987. Philippa Gregory

was born on 9 January 1954 in Nairobi, and was the second daughter of Elaine (Wedd) and Arthur Percy Gregory, a radio operator and navigator for East African Airways (Curry 2007). As a little girl, she grew up in Clifton, Bristol, UK, where she had moved with her family. The site presenting this information also gives its visitors a little insight into about the little girl's character – she was a little rebel at Colston's Girls' School: “She was a right little troublemaker at school - trying to organise her fellow pupils into an anti-uniform union!”⁴ (BBC Bristol)

A Chronicle Live article (updated as Evening Chronicle⁵ on February 28th 2013) about the historical novelist shares with its readers the secret of why Philippa Gregory detested history at school, and quotes her on it:

Like a lot of people, I found the history I was taught at school was very, very boring. The A-level syllabus in particular was disastrous. We were doing ancient military history and had to study the wars of Justinian. You would have to be a hell of a scholar to enjoy that. (Chronicle Live)

Because she found there was no love lost between her and the school subjects (or the way they were taught), Philippa Gregory obtained a B grade in English and two E grades in History and Geography at A-level.

⁴https://www.bbc.co.uk/bristol/content/articles/2006/08/31/phillipa_gregory_walk_feature.shtml

⁵ <https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/history-no-longer-mystery-author-1620530>

As the author herself explains in an interview with Alice Wignall for The Guardian, studies were not a priority on her list, and, at that point in time and education, no one would have given her any chance as a historian or a fiction writer:

The B was in English and the Es in history and geography. At the time the A-level history course was terribly dull. It seemed designed for the purpose of turning people off history, so to emerge with an E was rather a triumph. (Gregory qtd in The Guardian)

At 18, she went to attend a journalism course in Cardiff and then got an apprenticeship with the Portsmouth News. When she discovered that she missed going to university, she succeeded in getting a place to read literature at the University of Sussex, where she enjoyed her Jane Austen because of her “economy of style and precision” (Chronicle Live). Since at Sussex the rules said she had to study another subject, because the university was keen on interdisciplinary education, Gregory enrolled in a history course, and, this time, she was lucky enough to have an inspirational historian as her professor – Maurice Hutt, who was a specialist in the French Revolution. That proved to be the turning point in her career: “It was such a powerful experience that, really, it transformed my life. I was looking for something that would explain everything - I was that kind of earnest young woman! - and history seemed to be able to do that.” (Gregory qtd in The Guardian). She

switched to history and her efforts, passion for and love of history were paid off in 1982, when she received a B.A. degree in history from Sussex University.

After getting her degree, Philippa Gregory worked in radio for BBC radio for two years before making up her mind about doing a PhD. Once she was convinced that that was what she wanted to do, she went to the University of Edinburgh to research the characteristics of heroines in 18th-century popular novels – the result got her a Ph.D. degree in 18th-century literature in 1985 for the thesis entitled “(The⁶) Popular fiction of eighteenth-century commercial circulating libraries”. The University of Edinburgh also honoured her with the 2009 Alumnus of the Year award for her contribution to historical fiction and charity work, as we can see on the University webpage⁷. From Philippa Gregory’s own site⁸, we learn that she also holds honorary degrees from Teesside University and the University of Sussex, and that she is a fellow of the Universities of Sussex and Cardiff and an honorary research fellow at Birkbeck University of London.

Once she committed herself to writing and produced her first novel *Wideacre* (1987), a story about the love of land and incest – which happened while completing her doctorate – she met with success and became even more

⁶ The definite article is optional here, as The University of Edinburgh Archive records show – for details, see

<https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/7447?show=full>

⁷ <https://www.ed.ac.uk/alumni/services/notable-alumni/alumnus/gregory>

⁸ <https://www.philippagregory.com/biography>

committed to her mission to depict historical women and help their voices be heard in fiction. The next two books in the *Wideacre series*, *The Favoured Child* and *Meridon* followed in 1989, and 1990, respectively, and the author moved south to near Midhurst, West Sussex, where the *Wideacre* trilogy was set. By that time, Philippa Gregory had divorced twice and had given birth to a daughter, Victoria, and a son, Adam⁹.

After the break-up of her second marriage, as she confesses in an interview with Maxine Gordon for Gazette & Herald in 2009, she rekindled her relationship with Anthony Mason, whom she had first met 20 years before, which led to her getting married for the third time. In the respective interview, she praises both love and her countryside life at their family farmhouse in North Yorkshire, cherishing her newly-found privacy: "One of the nice things about Yorkshire village life is that people don't make a lot of fuss about you." (Gregory qtd. in Gazette & Herald). At the time of the interview, *The White Queen* (2009) came out in print and, with the suggested solution to the mystery of the princes in the Tower's disappearance, was expected to "court controversy" (Gordon in Gazette & Herald).

As chronology goes, Philippa Gregory's books have been published with a clear agenda in mind, with the occasional random book finding its way in a series; still, since the author herself indicates a certain order of reading her historical fiction, we will oblige and list the

⁹ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/gregory-philippa-1954-kate-wedd>

books in (more or less) that order. Thus, *Tradescant series*, set during the English Civil War, tells the story of a gardening family, and comprises *Earthy Joys* (1998) and *Virgin Earth* (1999).

The books that are not part of any series and came out as standalones are as follows: *Mrs. Hartley and the Growth Centre*, or *Alice Hartley's Happiness* (1992), *The Wise Woman* (1992), *Fallen Skies* (1994), *A Respectable Trade* (1995), *Perfectly Correct* (1996), *The Little House* (1998), and *Zelda's Cut* (2000). They were all published before Philippa Gregory embarked on the journey to the discovery of the Plantagenet and Tudor court dramas, as were her books for children – all picture books: the *Princess Florizella series* comprising *Princess Florizella* (1988), *Florizella and the Wolves* (1991), *Florizella and the Giant* (1992), and the standalones *Diggory and the Boa Conductor* (1996), *The Little Pet Dragon* (1997), and *A Pirate Story* (1999). From among all these, the 1995 novel *A Respectable Trade*, which tells about the slave trade in England, and is set in 18th-century Bristol, was adapted by Gregory for a four-part drama series for BBC television. The series won critics' recognition, with the script written by Philippa Gregory, Ruth Baumgarten, and Suri Krishnamma, nominated for a BAFTA¹⁰ award in 1999, and Frances Tempest winning the BAFTA award for Best Costume Design.

In 2001, Gregory dazzled readers and critics alike with probably the best known of her works, the novel

¹⁰ https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0154083/awards/?ref_=tt_awd

The Other Boleyn Girl, which won the Romantic Novel of the Year Award from the Romantic Novelists' Association in 2002¹¹ and has been adapted for television twice. The first time, the novel was adapted for BBC television in 2003, starring Natascha McElhone, Jodhi May and Jared Harris. After a few years, Miramax showed interest and bought the film rights to *The Other Boleyn Girl*, which resulted in the 2008 release of the film with the same title, starring Eric Bana, Natalie Portman and Scarlett Johansson.

The series that we are particularly interested in is The Plantagenet and Tudor court series, and it comprises the following titles, in chronological order: *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001), *The Queen's Fool* (2003), *The Virgin's Lover* (2004), *The Constant Princess* (2005), *The Boleyn Inheritance* (2006), *The Lady of the Rivers* (2008), *The Other Queen* (2008), *The White Queen* (2009), *The Red Queen* (2010), *The Kingmaker's Daughter* (2012), *The White Princess* (2013), *The King's Curse* (2014), *The Taming of the Queen* (2015), *Three Sisters, Three Queens* (2016), and *The Last Tudor* (2017). An adept of order and clarification, author Philippa Gregory posted a list that guides her readers in the intricate maze of her series; we have below Gregory's reading order, with a few words about each novel in the list.

Thus, the first in the reading order is the novel *The Lady of the Rivers*, which focuses on the life of Jacquetta of Luxembourg, the mother of the future Queen of

¹¹ <https://romanticnovelistsassociation.org/awards/#1558103531462-a03d3a64-9cff>

England Elizabeth Woodville. *The White Queen* comes naturally next, and, apart from giving the readers insights into the life of the controversial historical character Elizabeth Woodville, the wife of Edward IV, it also propounds a theory related to the mysterious disappearance of the two princes in / from the Tower. *The Red Queen* and *The Kingmaker's Daughter* give voice to the narratives of the other female contenders (Margaret Beaufort and Anne Neville) to the throne of England, fighting both/either for themselves and/or for their families. These books are to be studied in more detail later on, so we will not dwell much on them at this point.

Elizabeth Woodville's oldest daughter, Elizabeth of York, is the narrator and main character of the next book, *The White Princess*. Here, we learn more about her life as Henry VII's wife and Margaret Beaufort's daughter-in-law, and are given hints as to why Henry VIII, who was born as a spare in case anything happened to his older brother Arthur, the Prince of Wales, was not brought up to become a king. *The Constant Princess* recounts Katherine of Aragon's story as the wife of Prince Arthur's and then Henry VIII's, and her struggles in between the two marriages. *The King's Curse*, narrated by Henry VIII's aunt Margaret Pole comes next in the reading order, followed by *Three Sisters*, *Three Queens*, with Margaret Tudor as the storyteller, and also featuring Mary Tudor and Katherine of Aragon.

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The Other Boleyn Girl, featuring Mary and Anne Boleyn – and narrated by the former sister – is to be read before *The Boleyn Inheritance*, which tells the story of Jane Boleyn, Anne of Cleves and Katherine Howard. The last book in the series featuring Henry VIII is *The Taming of the Queen*, with the king's sixth wife Kateryn Parr surviving the increasingly dangerous marriage to Henry.

The series continues with *The Queen's Fool*, a novel whose narrator / protagonist is a young Jewish girl, Hannah, who gives the readers the story of her service in the courts of Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I. The next in line is *The Last Tudor*, about Jane, Katherine and Mary Grey. *The Virgin's Lover* describes the intricate relationship between Elizabeth I, Robert Dudley and his wife Amy Robsart, and comes before the novel that focuses on Mary, Queen of Scots, entitled *The Other Queen*, which closes the list of the Plantagenet and Tudor series.

There are two other series of novels written by Philippa Gregory: *The Darkness series*, made up of *Changeling* (2012), *Stormbringers* (2013), *Fools' Gold* (2014), and *Dark Tracks* (2018), respectively *The Fairmile series*, with *Tidelands* (2019), *Dark Tides* (2020), and *Dawnlands* (2022).

Apart from her fiction, Philippa Gregory has also published as a columnist for Guardian under the pseudonym Kate Wedd, and has been a contributor of articles She is also a frequent broadcaster and a regular contestant on Round Britain Quiz for BBC Radio 4 and the Tudor expert for Channel 4's **Time Team**. She won the 29