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Introduction



Philippa Gregory's name has become increasingly familiar with the historical fiction readers over the years, as one of the natural consequences following the author's own voice becoming more and more sonorous with every book she launched on the market. With a disciplined nature, writing with admirable tenacity and with a clear, feminist agenda on her mind, Philippa Gregory has proved herself to be one of the best writers of historical literature in Great Britain and, as it is aptly put in the "Bibliography" section of her own webpage¹, "one of the world's foremost historical novelists". The author graduated from the University of Sussex and received a PhD from the University of Edinburgh, a university where she is also a Regent, and where she received the title "Alumna of the Year" in 2009. As a sign of appreciation for her merits in the writing of historical fiction², in 2020 she was made a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours for her services to literature and charity.

¹ <https://www.philippagregory.com/biography>

² As well as in supporting the cause she has invested so much in – her charity [Gardens for The Gambia](#)

The starting point for the project undertaken here is the very position that the British author has earned in the pantheon of historical literature as “a recognised authority on women’s history” – the description given on her own webpage. The study here focuses on four of Philippa Gregory’s novels, from the series titled *Plantagenet and Tudor Novels*, namely *The Lady of the Rivers* (2008), *The White Queen* (2009), *The Red Queen* (2010) and *The Kingmaker’s Daughter* (2012), and also relies heavily on a fifth book, designed to explain and introduce to the large audience the personalities of the fabulous women who orchestrated the dispute over the crown of England in what is generally known as “The War of the Roses” – book titled *The Women of the Cousins’ War* (2011), which she coauthored with historians David Baldwin and Michael Jones.

The 2013 TV miniseries *The White Queen* – produced by Starz and the BBC, and still available at the moment on HBO Max – has contributed significantly to the efforts made by historians such as Gregory herself in their mission to re-establish the value of some long-lost female historical characters (with their diverse personalities) – and to present them to the wide audience in hopes they will be given a second chance to the hall of fame of those who get to be heard, understood, pitied and/or forgiven, not simply forgotten. With an audience that is becoming more and more interactive, a trait demonstrated by the immense popularity of shows, games or movies to the detriment of books, Philippa Gregory’s challenging efforts to play

both teams have paid off, and some of *The White Queen's* viewers have become readers of the historian's literary productions that had formed the foundation of the miniseries – which is the case of the author of this study and her friends from the academia.

With respect to the medium that may best popularize the drama of the historical events recounted and reshaped in the series, we may wonder whether the lights and colours of the film draw more people in front of the TV sets than the books may persuade readers to go through their pages without a moment's pause. The debate regarding the perpetual war between the written word of the book against the flashing image of the movie is not a new issue, with critics from Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco to Hillis Miller and W. J. T. Mitchell drawing boundaries and taking sides. Kamilla Elliott, who has read them all and has also written a few studies on the subject herself, remarks on the dilemma presented by the word/image debate:

At the heart of the novel and film debate lies a particularly perplexing paradox: on one side, novels and films are diametrically opposed as "words" and "images" at war both formally and ideologically. [...] On the other side of the paradox, novels and films are integrally related as sister arts sharing formal techniques, audiences, values, sources, archetypes, narrative strategies and contexts³. (Elliott 2003, 1)

³ The Major Film Theories: An Introduction

Combining the two media of reaching their audience, Philippa Gregory's view of the Medieval era, as well as her imaginary reconstruction of the women who have played their crucial parts in changing the course of history in England, are vividly perceived and successfully transmitted in both the TV series and the four novels. The fact that, despite the BBC's initial announcement on 20 August 2013, that the 10-episode series *The White Queen* was not to be followed by any sequels, the plans have changed, has demonstrated the viability of the project. Thus, Starz network took over and produced, without their former partners, the BBC, the next two series that have completed the project, *The White Princess* (2017) and *The Spanish Princess* (2019). Although the Tudor period has not been fully presented to the movie fans, so far, and no further projects have been announced by either producing companies, Philippa Gregory's novels from the Tudor series are full of narrative challenges and deserve the attention and appreciation of the readers. Although my initial plans were to include in this study a more detailed discussion of the televised version of the novels, with a focus on the differences between the written/filmed versions of the historical/fictional events, the material devoted to that has been saved for another volume. Still, the chapter about the author of the Plantagenet series will contain a brief description of the mini-series broadcast so far.

Taking a broad view of the historical events recounted in *The Lady of the Rivers* (2008), *The White Queen* (2009), *The Red Queen* (2010) and *The*

Kingmaker's Daughter (2012), the objective of the study is to analyse the proposed literary corpus and, by means of discussing key aspects of historical relevance through a feminist and narratological perspective, to demonstrate that women's narratives may, to a significant degree, change the readers' perception of the historical events in question. By doing so, these women's voices and stories could be construed as making an attempt at challenging the traditional, patriarchal view of history, while lending it a more authentic, personal and deeply touching perspective.

The analysis proposes a multi-faceted approach to the books, their narrators (and their personal views), which will take into account the various elements that may prove essential to the depiction of the historical characters and events in the four novels. These key aspects will also form the core and provide the themes of the chapters of this study, which are listed below, with a brief summary for each.

The first part, titled *About Philippa Gregory*, gathers the information found mainly from internet sources, including interviews, newspaper articles, podcasts or data posted by Gregory herself on her Facebook group, which I follow. This first chapter tries to give in a nutshell some facts about the author's work and life that are representative for her and relevant for the study.

The second chapter, *Theoretical background: narrators and narrative choices* attempts to give the theoretical backbone of the study, and presents the methodology applied in the research here. Most of the

theories that have been chosen as supportive of the work undertaken in this volume belong to narratologists such as Gérard Genette (whose *Narrative Discourse* has remained a milestone for any study in this field), Mieke Bal, Rimmon-Kenan or Seymour Chatman.

Readers and audience comes next, as another theoretical chapter in which the focus of the study is directed towards the target audience in general, and of the *Plantagenet* series in particular. This part of the research tries to establish a connection between Saussure's linguistic system, Wolfgang Iser's reception theory and Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogism. At the same time, feminist views inform the study – such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?", corroborated by Philippa Gregory's own opinions on the role and importance of the women in history.

The fourth chapter, *History and/or fiction?* represents the part where the demonstration places in the limelight the author herself, who expresses her own ideas on the ratio that imagination or deduction may have in any historical account. A historian herself, Philippa Gregory criticizes the limited view adopted by the majority of the historians of the Medieval Age, who only registered women's accomplishments with regards either to their ability to give birth to male heirs or to their Christian patronage of sorts.

With that, the study follows naturally with a discussion of *Powerful women in the Middle Ages: between history and myth*, preparing the more applied parts of the research, where each of the ladies considered