

The *Women*  
*of the*  
Cousins' War



*The* DUCHESS, *the* QUEEN,  
*and the* KING'S MOTHER



PHILIPPA  
GREGORY,  
DAVID BALDWIN, & MICHAEL JONES



**DR. PHILIPPA GREGORY** studied history at the University of Sussex and received a Ph.D. at the University of Edinburgh. She is a recognized authority on women's history; the author of several bestselling novels, including *The Other Boleyn Girl*; and a regular contributor to TV, radio, and international newspapers. She welcomes visitors to her website, [www.philippagregory.com](http://www.philippagregory.com).

**DAVID BALDWIN** taught history at the Universities of Leicester and Nottingham for many years and is the author of four books dealing with people and events of the Wars of the Roses, including the acclaimed *Elizabeth Woodville, Mother of the Princes in the Tower*.

**MICHAEL JONES** did his Ph.D. on the Beaufort family and taught at the University of South West England, the University of Glasgow, and Winchester College. He is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society and now works as a writer and media presenter. He is the author of six books, including *The King's Mother*, cowritten with Malcolm G. Underwood, a highly praised biography of Margaret Beaufort that was shortlisted for the Whitfield Prize.

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MANUSCRIPTS FROM 9TH–14TH CENTURY, CHAPTER XVI, PLATE LXVII, FROM *THE*

*GRAMMAR OF ORNAMENT*, 1868 (COLOUR LITHO); JONES, OWEN (1809–74)/

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#1 *New York Times* bestselling author  
**Philippa Gregory** teams with two eminent  
 historians to explore the historical  
 characters in the real-life world behind her  
**Wars of the Roses** novels.



**PHILIPPA GREGORY** and her fellow historians describe the extraordinary lives of the heroines of her Cousins' War books: Jacquetta, Duchess of Bedford; Elizabeth Woodville, wife of Edward IV; and Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII.

In her essay on Jacquetta, Philippa Gregory uses original documents, archaeology, and histories of myth and witchcraft to create the first-ever biography of the young duchess who survived two reigns and two wars to become the first lady at two rival courts. David Baldwin, established authority on the Wars of the Roses, tells the story of Elizabeth Woodville, the first commoner to marry a king of England for love; and Michael Jones, fellow of the Royal Historical Society, writes of Margaret Beaufort, the almost-unknown matriarch of the House of Tudor.

In the introduction, Gregory writes revealingly about the differences between history and historical fiction. How much of a role does speculation play in writing each? How much fiction and how much fact should there be in a historical novel? How are female historians changing our view of women in history?

*The Women of the Cousins' War* is beautifully illustrated with rare portraits and source materials. As well as offering fascinating insights into the inspirations behind Philippa Gregory's fiction, it will appeal to all with an interest in this period.



The extraordinary true stories of  
three women who until now have been  
largely forgotten by history

JACQUETTA OF LUXEMBOURG  
ELIZABETH WOODVILLE  
MARGARET BEAUFORT

*The Women of the Cousins' War*



PRAISE FOR PHILIPPA GREGORY



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THE  
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COUSINS' WAR

*The Duchess, the Queen, and  
the King's Mother*

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MICHAEL JONES

A TOUCHSTONE BOOK  
Published by Simon & Schuster  
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

Touchstone

A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

1230 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10020

[www.SimonandSchuster.com](http://www.SimonandSchuster.com)



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First Touchstone hardcover edition September 2011

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Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011933893

ISBN 978-1-4516-2954-5

ISBN 978-1-4516-2956-9 (ebook)

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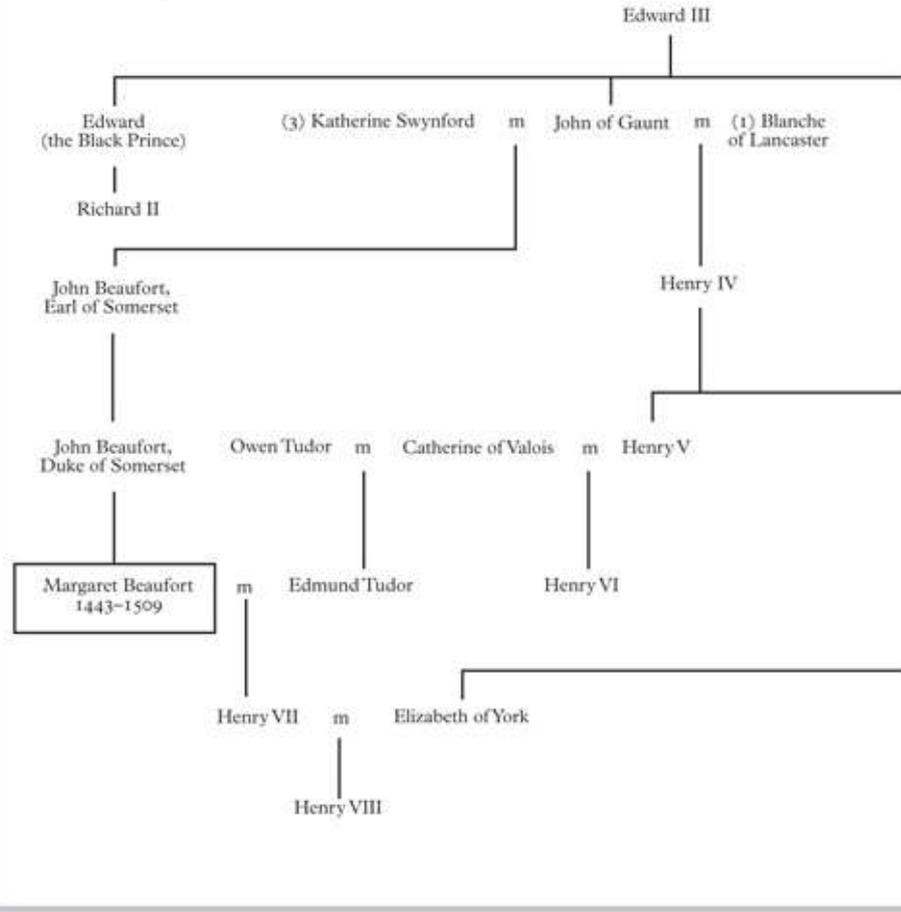
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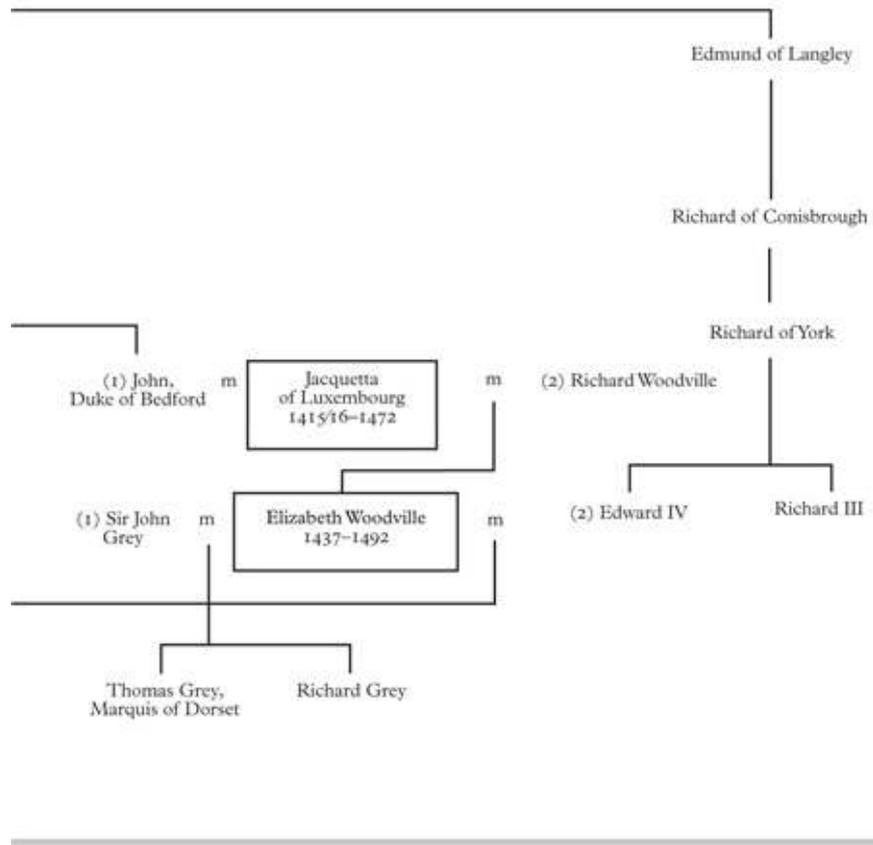
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# The Duchess, the Queen, and the King's Mother





# Battles in the Cousins' War

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## HOUSE of LANCASTER VICTORIES

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	Northampton 10th July	1460	Wakefield 30th December
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		1487	
		● Stoke—Tudor victory 16th June	



# Battles in the Cousins' War



# INTRODUCTION

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*Philippa Gregory*

This is a new sort of book for me; a collection, written by myself and two other historians, of three short “lives” of three extraordinary women: Jacquetta, Duchess of Bedford; Margaret Beaufort and Elizabeth Woodville. This book came about because so many readers ask me for the “true” stories on which I base my novels, and there is nothing readily available for these three: *The Lady of the Rivers* (2011), *The Red Queen* (2010), and *The White Queen* (2009). The existing biographies of Margaret Beaufort and Elizabeth Woodville were out of print when I started my research, and so I worked from rare secondhand copies. I invited the authors, David Baldwin and Michael Jones, each to write a short essay on their subject for us to jointly publish here.

There was no biography at all of Jacquetta, and I realized that if I wanted to find out about her life, I would have to do my own original research from the early documents, and trace the brief references to her that occur throughout other histories. As a woman who was present at many great events, and a kinswoman of both royal houses of England, she is often mentioned in the histories of her time; but her story has never before been told. To trace her life, I had to read accounts of the lives of her contemporaries and of her times, forever looking out for a reference to her, her husbands, or her family. This way I have managed to trace her from her childhood in English-held France, to her family home of Luxembourg, through her first marriage into the royal House of Lancaster, into her second marriage, when she lived at the royal courts of Lancaster and York and in her country house in England. If she was present at a great event, she was sometimes mentioned by name; once or twice she was one of the primary actors. Most of the time the record does not speak of her, and I can only speculate as to what she was doing.

In the course of writing the biography of a woman who was present at the events but all but missing from the record, a woman who is “hidden from history,” I had to think about what it means to write the different forms of history-based writing. In one week I wrote some of the nonfiction biography, some pages of the novel, and a synopsis for a drama screenplay that is based on the novels. All of these are grounded on the few known facts of Jacquetta’s life, and all of them (including the history) are works of speculation, imagination, and creativity.

## **WHY WRITE A HISTORY OF THESE WOMEN?**

Why should one bother to write the history of a woman such as Jacquetta, Duchess of Bedford? Or of Elizabeth Woodville? Or of Margaret Beaufort? Does Jacquetta’s absence from the record of her own time indicate that she is no great loss to the history books of today? Of course not. Jacquetta is absent from the records of her time because the letters, chronicles, and journals written at the time were then mostly told of public events, and as a woman, excluded from formal political power and military service, Jacquetta was not a primary actor. Occasionally, she was at the forefront, and the

we find her recorded, for instance, accused of witchcraft, or kidnapped to Calais; sometimes she was an actor representing the queen or king; sometimes she was in a conspiracy, and her work is still secret. So she does have a presence in the historical records if they are carefully examined.

But the interests of medieval chroniclers were not the same as ours. Historians today are interested in women, in the dispossessed, in the marginal, in the powerless. In particular, we are interested in women's history—women as a group, and individual women. Historians would not agree that an account of a society that does not look at the lives of half of the population is only half an account. Jacquetta's life, as a prominent medieval woman, can tell us much about the queen's court, about elite life, about marriage, loyalty, social mobility, sex, childbirth, and survival. She is interesting as a representative of her time and class as well as her gender. The medieval historians do not record such things; we have to look for them through the records, reading between the lines.

The histories of the other two women of this book are little better known; but Elizabeth Woodville's life story has been told largely in terms of her second husband, Edward IV, and the tragedy of her son Edward V. She is often slandered—as a social climber, as an abuser of power, and as morally corrupt—on a biased reading of very little evidence. Margaret Beaufort, on the other hand, has been made into a stereotype of virtue. There is very little written about her, and even less that sounds realistic. We can read about her piety and self-sacrifice, almost nothing about her ambition, conspiracy, and passion. Much of the work she undertook for her son was done in secret, the collaborators sworn to silence and any documents destroyed. It is almost impossible to reconstruct the history of her life's work: it was a secret she kept to the grave.

And finally, to me, these women are interesting as individuals. They are my heroines; they are my foremothers. To paraphrase Ecclesiasticus 44:1, "Let us now praise famous women, and our mothers that begat us . . ." If a woman is interested in her own struggle into identity and power, then she will be interested in other women. The lives of these, and other women, show me what a woman can do even without formal power, education, or rights, in a world dominated by men. They are inspirational examples of the strength of the female spirit.

## WHAT IS HISTORY?

History is not a simple factual record, though it depends on the facts. There are sciences underpinning the making of history; for instance, the sciences of archaeology, or forensic genetics, or geography; but history itself is not a science. There may be historical explanations that can be expressed in forms other than prose: in formulas, in statistics, or in maps. But most history is written in prose; and the selection of the material, the organization into narrative, and the choice of language show that it is a created form, an art.

Selection is inevitable. No history can include all the known facts of any event, even a single small limited event. There is simply too much material for one description. This is now so thoroughly agreed that the very idea of a total history—a *History of the English-Speaking People*—is regarded by historians as impossible. We all understand that under such inclusive titles there were massive exclusions by the historian, sometimes unstated, sometimes unconscious. These days we understand that only a partial story can ever be told, and there is no longer any expectation that a historian will tell the whole of history, or even explain the full context. Historians select what story they are going to tell, then they select what facts they are going to use.

to illustrate and prove this story. They make this selection on the basis of what they think is most relevant to their subject, and on what is most interesting to themselves. Just because it is factual does not mean it is innocent of artifice. It is structured: the process of selection, assembly, description, consideration, and ranking of facts shows that. There is no such thing as an unbiased, unprejudiced history. The very act of selection of the subject introduces a bias. The author's preferences and opinions are the basis of the history that he or she writes, though sometimes readers—reading only one account or perhaps watching only one historian on television—think that this single view represents the totality of the subject. It does not: it cannot. It only ever represents the totality of the view of one historian. Someone else, even looking at exactly the same facts, might read them differently to a different conclusion, or start with a different view.

The writing of a history book is a personal process, a creative process, undertaken inside the strict innate rules of a craft form. Historians only rarely explain their process and their prejudices; these are rightly concealed under the smooth narrative of the story they have chosen to tell. They almost never discuss their writing style. Reviewers and readers tend to look at the content, but hardly ever question the narrative technique of a history. It is interesting that the convention of how histories are written is almost never challenged, though it is a powerful unstated convention almost universally applied. Almost all histories are almost always written in the third person. Very occasionally, histories are written in third-person present tense—a device to give the illusion of intimacy. You will often see this in promotional material trying to entice readers into studying a history that the publicist secretly fears is too old and too dull: “Mary Queen of Scots is in flight from rebels in Scotland and puts her trust in her cousin Elizabeth.”

Most histories are written in third-person past tense, with a concealed narrator—the magisterial voice, a tone most powerful in conveying information without inviting challenge: “For Elizabeth Robert Dudley had one supreme advantage over all her other male admirers. He could not offer her marriage.”

As readers we are accustomed to accepting information from a concealed narrator. It is also the form used to convey instruction in everyday life: “During rapid heat-up, do not place any food in the cooking compartment.” And, of course, it is the form usually used for orders: “Jews will not be permitted to employ female citizens of German or kindred blood as domestic servants.”

In short, the concealed narrator is the one who reassures the reader that he is an authority to be trusted, or whose commands should be obeyed. The historian, fallible, biased, prejudiced, sometimes ignorant—above all, singular with a singular point of view—writes in a form that sounds universal, authoritative, certain. And—significantly—the form conceals his or her very presence. How much less powerful is the phrase “I think that, for Elizabeth, Robert Dudley had one supreme advantage over all her other male admirers. He could not offer her marriage . . .” than the authority of the sentence when the historian's thought process is unstated, and the historian herself is invisible.

History is a personal creative craft, not a science; it is an account made by each historian, not a body of facts that exists independently of them. Indeed, there is no such thing as a “body” of accepted facts—it is more like an “amorphous flock” of accepted facts of which the individuals come and go. E. H. Carr, answering this very question, discusses how a fact discovered by one historian might become an accepted “historical” fact, and be admitted to the general body of known historical facts, changing the narrative. He suggests a fair admission policy would be when a fact has been cited by three different historians.

Equally, I suppose, a historical fact might fall out of the historical record. Perhaps Ann

Boleyn's vestigial finger (almost certainly a fallacy invented by her detractors) may disappear over time. It was "common knowledge" when I was at school; it has now disappeared from reputable scholarly histories, lingering only in popular belief. Perhaps another decade will see it disappear altogether. History is a created narrative that tells a story stepping from one agreed fact to another with gulfs of unknown between each step, bridged only by speculation and imagination.

## WHAT IS FICTION?

Fiction is not wholly the creation of an imaginary world, any more than history is the total description of a real one. Even the most unrealistic and fantasy-like fictional creations have a lineage that often stretches back to a reality. The extraordinary creations of science fiction are often rooted in science research, as the work of Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert Heinlein demonstrates. Their fiction is rooted in science fact, research, or possibility and is called "hard science fiction" as a result. Other novel forms are also based on reality. Some great classics have even been written to expose a reality of life and stimulate change. Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* is a novel set in the northern manufacturing towns as an appeal for better treatment of the workers. Other novels, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, use a real childhood experience as the starting point for the fiction. Some novels are firmly based in the real present world of the author, with fictional characters and story. Jane Austen's *Persuasion* accurately describes Bath and Lyme. Some novels go even further into reality, taking their setting, characters, and, even, events from everyday life; and some tell stories of the historical past.

## HISTORY AND FICTION

It is odd that—even though history is not purely fact, nor fiction purely imaginary—historical fiction, which openly declares itself to be both fact and fiction, should be denied serious attention. Too many critics think of historical fiction as flawed and unreliable history, written by authors too lazy to check the facts. Others condemn it for being insufficiently imaginative, written by authors too lazy to invent. Some readers want to know the proportion of fact to fiction—as if fact and fiction were not combined in every form of writing, as if historical fiction were a recipe. Some readers want to identify the facts from the fiction; but this is to deny the very form of the novel, something that combines fact and fiction.

As a writer who prefers to read history to fiction—but loves to write history, journalism, and fiction—I choose to write historical fiction for love of the form. I find it uniquely satisfying to be able to research real characters in the real past and then speculate about their emotions, motives, and unconscious desires, which cannot be discovered from the records they left but have to be imagined.

There are differences between historians and novelists, of course. But perhaps fewer differences than readers think. Historians, like novelists, have to make things up—make up their view of the character, theorize about the character, imagine the character's inner life—just as novelists do. As any biographer will confirm, the subject of a history is created in the mind of the author, built up from anecdotes and facts and snippets and portraits, in just the same way as a fictional character is made in the mind of a novelist. Both writers use their imagination to flesh out and animate the

subject. The process of imagining someone who no longer exists is very like the process of imagining someone who has never existed.

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Historians have to speculate. There are simply not enough certain facts available to write an unbroken historical account in which everything is known. Historians have to speculate about how one character arrives at a conclusion, who has advised him, how events are caused. When historians speculate, they make it clear they are doing so (at any rate the good ones do!). You will find the essays in this book are full of “probablys,” “maybes,” and “likelys.” It is frustrating for the historian; but in many instances, when there is no record of what exactly a historical character was doing, the historian has to fall back on what was most likely, what people of the same sort were doing, what would be typical behavior at this particular time.

Novelists writing historical fiction do the same (at any rate, the good ones do!). A nonsensical novelist will make up whatever he likes—but I am not concerned here with what should really be called historical fantasy—when an imagined historical period offers little more than the costume and the excuse for the story, a creation more like a pantomime than a realistic drama. Here I am discussing the serious historical novel in which the author takes the history seriously, researches like a historian, but chooses to write as a novelist. A historical novelist who is serious about his craft will speculate just like the historian: falling back on the most likely of the facts available. The job of the historian is to select the facts, speculate, and then declare the speculation and acknowledge other possibilities. The job of the novelist is to take the facts, speculate, and make such a convincing story path of the speculation that the reader does not wonder if there was any other route. The novelist cannot allow the reader to escape from the spell of the novel; the reader cannot be allowed to unpick the history from the fiction until the book is closed at the very end of the story. To write a successful novel, the historical fact, the history-based speculation, and the pure fiction have to blend.

The novelist has all this to do and more. The novelist has to write something that is pleasing on the page and to the ear. The very words are chosen with care, not just for what they mean, but also for what they conjure, perhaps even for how they sound or what they look like on the page. Far more than the historian the novelist is concerned with extraneous detail: costume, saddlery, food, hobbies, weather. The novelist is also concerned with the inner life: secrets and the unconscious.

And a novel, unlike a history, has a choice of narrators. A novel can be written from many points of view. Most often a novel is written in the style called omniscient narrator or concealed narrator, in which the story is narrated by a disembodied voice, someone who sees everything and describes it with apparent neutrality, just like the usual style of a history. When the novel is narrated by the omniscient narrator, the rule generally is that the narrator has to be omniscient and stay omniscient: this narrator knows everything. The omniscient narrator cannot write as a historian who is honor bound to acknowledge the limits of the research. Readers of history are accustomed to a break in the narrative when the historian explains that the facts are missing and that at that point we are inside the realm of informed speculation. Sometimes the historian will even step into the third-person prose to say why he or she personally cannot be certain about a fact. But this is not possible for the novelist. The reader of a novel doesn't want to start with a worldview, a god's-eye view, which suddenly breaks down and says, “Actually, we don't really know the facts here, but the most likely thing is . . .” The reader wants to be captured by the narrator, and the reader wants to stay captured.

Not all novels are told by an omniscient narrator. They can come from an authorial voice whose presence is understood by the reader and who sometimes directly addresses the reader.

They can be written as if by one of the characters, looking back over their lives. As I have developed my own writing I have come to love the narrational device of writing in the first person present tense, as one of the characters reporting on the events from her own viewpoint, as they happen. The advantage of this is to put the reader in the shoes of the protagonist, seeing the world from her viewpoint:

I touch the milestone once more, and imagine that tomorrow the messenger will come. He will hold out a paper sealed with the Howard crest deep and shiny in the red wax. "A message for Jane Boleyn, the Viscountess Rochford?" he will ask, looking at my plain kirtle and the dust on the hem of my gown, my hand stained with dirt from the London milestone.

"I will take it," I shall say. "I am her, I have been waiting forever." And I shall take it in my dirty hand: my inheritance.

The present tense also has the advantage of avoiding the hindsight of historians who know what is going to happen and whether or not it was a success. Some of my favorite scenes have been where the narrator expected the "wrong" history: thinking that something would happen, that did not, in the end, take place. This challenge has been very stimulating for me as a novelist and sometimes even led to new conclusions for me as a historian. For example, I suggested that Mary Boleyn in *The Other Boleyn Girl* was certain that her sister Anne would escape execution. The historical record indicates this. Anne made an agreement, mediated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, to accept that her marriage with Henry VIII was null and void. She was probably expecting retirement to a nunnery. Historians have not paid much attention to this agreement since they write from the point of view of knowing the end of the story: that the agreement did not save her, and Anne was executed. From the point of view of the history of what happened, the agreement is not very interesting—it made no difference to the outcome; it can be safely all but forgotten.

But for me thinking as a historian about what might have happened, or what Anne might have hoped and planned, these days become tremendously interesting. By thinking about them as "live" negotiations and putting aside the eventual outcome, I came to realize the importance of those last days in the Tower. That Anne should have struggled for her life, should have been prepared to set aside her position as queen and the inheritance of her daughter is a most important historical insight. For me as a novelist, writing "in role" as the doomed woman's sister, this is also tremendously interesting. This is a moment where I (speaking as Mary Boleyn) am absolutely convinced that my sister will survive, that my former lover Henry VIII will let her go. The tension and then pathos of the execution scene are based on the history but draw all their energy from the fact that it is written from the point of view of Mary, who is expecting a pardon not a death. To write this scene as a novelist, I had to "forget" what I knew of the history.

"Thank God," I said, knowing only now how deeply I had been afraid. "When will she be released?"

"Perhaps tomorrow," Catherine said. "Then she'll have to live in France."

"She'll like that," I said. "She'll be an abbess in five days, you'll see."

Catherine gave me a thin smile. The skin below her eyes was almost purple with fatigue.

"Come home now," I said in sudden anxiety. "It's all but done."

“I’ll come when it’s over,” she said. “When she goes to France.”

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Interestingly, readers captured by the novel and by the controlled delivery of the information seem to accept the convention, and “forget” the history they know. Many people have told me of the sense of great tension in the novel at the prospect of the execution, though, of course, we all know that Anne will die.

A novel about Anne Boleyn need not end with her death—though every biography does so. Most histories aim for a complete account of their subject, and so a traditional biography starts with the birth of the subject and ends with the death. History, as a study of time, tends to be written in a narrative line that follows time from the furthest past to the most recent. But a historical fiction need not do this. It can obey, instead, the requirements of the novel form to open with a powerful and engaging scene, and this can be a foreseeing, or a flashback, or an event outside ordinary time, or outside the story altogether. Over the years this has become a signature technique for me. I try to make the opening scenes of my novels a powerful insight into the entire story, a vivid freeze-frame moment: a gestalt moment. The first scene for me does not just start the narrative—it symbolizes it. My novel *The Other Queen* opens with Mary, Queen of Scots, breaking out of Bolton Castle by climbing down a rope made of sheets, a factual event and an act of typical adventure, courage, and recklessness that the more traditional and sentimental portraits of the doomed queen deny. The man who is going to fall disastrously in love with her sees her captured, circled with torches, lit like an angel, ringed with fire like a witch.

In *The Red Queen* the novel opens with a dream sequence, the dream that inspires Margaret Beaufort to her life’s work, and that warns her that exceptional women face exceptional dangers. *The White Queen* opens outside of time altogether, with the myth of Melusina, the water goddess, which is threaded through the novel as both a traditional story and one of the themes of the book, the different worlds of men and women. *The Lady of the Rivers* opens with the young Jacquetta meeting Joan of Arc, a girl who sees visions and speaks with angels, just as Jacquetta sees visions and hears the singing of spirits.

## THE RECIPE

But how much fiction should there be in an historical novel? And how much fact? All historical novelists would give their own answer. Personally, I would say: as little fiction as possible in the chronicle of events. A chronicle is a simple narrative that says: this happens and then this happens. I believe that the chronicle should form the structure of the historical novel, and it should be as solid as the historical record allows. If we know that a battle happened at Bosworth in 1485 and we know how it was fought and who won, then this must be the fact in the novel as it is in the historical book. But what it was like, and how it felt to people at the time: this is where a historical novel can be a far more exciting, inspiring, poignant, and beautiful form than a factual account.

But however vivid and powerful the historical novel, I believe it should be based on the recorded facts and never deviate from them when they are available. How few facts are available for some periods and lives, and how much the historian has to speculate to tell a coherent story is perhaps demonstrated in this collection of three essays: the factual basis that underpins my first three novels of “the cousins’ war.”

## WOMEN AND HISTORY

When I consider how significant a role these women played in their times, the interest of their own lives, and the importance of their children, it amazes me that their histories have not already been thoroughly explored and recorded. Why are there not many histories of the three women of the book, when one was a queen, one was a royal duchess, and the other the founder of the best known line of monarchs in the world? Why are these three women, and so many of the other women I write about, either absent from the historical record altogether, or hardly mentioned? Michael Hicks the medieval historian explains:

Historians used to suppose that there could be no history of women; especially medieval women, and certainly none that was worth the recounting. Initially, perhaps, this was because historians (especially male historians) had no wish to write about members of the other sex. They subscribed to the presumption that history was about politics, in which women have traditionally played little part. Women's failure to participate in what really mattered in the past meant that women themselves were unhistorical and unworthy of the historian's attention.

When women do emerge into the historical record, why are they viewed so negatively? Why was Mary Boleyn all but invisible to history, when the story of her life and her family was so extraordinary? And why is Anne of Cleves almost forgotten, or remembered only as the fat, smell one?

I believe that women are excluded from medieval history as historical characters because of the traditional view at the time of the nature of women, which was that women were innately incapable of major public acts: "The Church provided two models for women: Eve the temptress and Mary the Mother of God; thus, society viewed women as either pure and virginal or filled with the carnal lust of the deceitful Eve. In either case the culture stereotyped them."

We can see the consequences of viewing women as Eve the temptress, or Mary the Virgin, when we look at women who have entered the historical record and been firmly categorized as one or the other. Later historians revise in vain; some stereotypes are very tenacious. For instance, Katherine Howard, the young fifth wife of Henry VIII: "She was beheaded on February 13, 1542, only nineteen or twenty years old. The drama of her execution lends gravity to a brief life that would otherwise pass unnoticed."

Actually, I think that Katherine Howard's brief life is very worthy of notice, and her beheading is not the only interesting thing about her. But of all of the Henry queens, she is the one most likely to have been promiscuous, and this ruined her reputation in her own times, and even today inspires a sort of smug tolerance:

Then there is the question of her sensuality. The long withdrawing roar of Victorian morality inhibited generations of historians from treating this with anything other than disapproval and distaste. But we are past that now. We can confront sex as a fact, not as a sin. We can even, if pushed, see a sort of virtue in promiscuity.

Katherine benefits enormously from this shift in moral values. True, she was a good-time girl. But like many good-time girls she was also warm, loving and good natured.

It seems extraordinary to me that I should be stepping up to defend the reputation of a young

woman who was executed in 1542. But new research indicates that—born between 1524 and 1528—she was even younger at her first sexual experience than was previously thought. So, since her first so-called sexual encounter with her music teacher took place when she may have been a little girl of just eleven years old, this incident cannot be regarded as evidence of female promiscuity. More likely, it is evidence of coercion. Then, at the age of perhaps twelve, in an ill-chaperoned household she made a secret betrothal with an older, sexually experienced, man—Francis Dereham—who may have seduced her for his sexual pleasure and to promote his social advancement. At fifteen years old she was placed in an arranged marriage to the forty-nine-year-old Henry VIII. It is unlikely that her affections were engaged by this bad-tempered man, old enough to be her grandfather. And then she fell in love with Thomas Culpepper and perhaps became his lover. She wrote to him: “It makes my heart die to think what fortune I have that I cannot always be in your company.”

Surely, these are not the words of a good-time girl seeking a romp? These are the passionate words of a very young woman in love for the first time. So her well-recorded “promiscuity” amounts to inappropriate behavior by her teacher when she was eleven years old, one incident of grooming at the age of twelve, and one possible love affair. This hardly makes her a “good-time girl.” Executed at seventeen, she had no time to establish her own style or morality as a woman.

The reputation of Anne of Cleves, the king’s fourth wife, is also a slander, but the source of it is the king himself: “I liked her before not well but now I like her much worse. She is nothing fair and have very evil smells about her. I took her to be no maid by reason of the looseness of her breasts and other tokens, which, when I felt them, strake me so to the heart that I had neither will nor courage to prove the rest. I can have none appetite for displeasent airs.”

One glance at the Holbein miniature of Anne shows a pretty young woman, not particularly dark or slack-skinned. It is unlikely that she carried “evil smells”—the ladies of her bedchamber would not have allowed her to go unwashed to the king’s bed on her wedding night, and no one but the king ever mentioned this. But on that wedding night, when the king found himself impotent, he was quick to blame her.

At this time Henry VIII was grossly overweight, painfully and regularly constipated with outbreaks of wind, and with an ulcerous sore from an old wound on his leg that had to be kept open to allow the pus to drain. There was indeed a fat, stinking, unsexy person in the Cleves/Henry VIII bed; but it was not the twenty-four-year-old woman who knew that her future depended on pleasing her forty-nine-year-old husband—a sick man, old enough to be her father. Henry VIII’s tyrannized court had no option but to take his word against the evidence of their own eyes, and to agree that the new young queen was so ugly as to prohibit sexual intercourse. Interestingly, historians have blindly followed this line, taking the word of the divorcing man against the evidence of his wife: not for the first time; nor, I expect, the last.

Very few women escape this powerful stereotyping. Great queens like Elizabeth I and Victoria receive a huge amount of positive attention, and are cast in the role of the “Mary the Virgin” character. Indeed, admiration of Elizabeth is such a rule that historians are uncomfortable when they want to challenge the heroic myths; as the editor of a collection of essays on Elizabeth discovered: “I encountered several versions of the startled response of one scholar, ‘Oh!’ he exclaimed. ‘I really wouldn’t want to say anything bad about Elizabeth.’”

The disadvantage for historians celebrating the chastity of historical women is that, just as they cannot see Anne of Cleves or Katherine Howard for the young women they were, because they are dazzled by their bad reputation, they also cannot understand the women they overly praise. Such

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