‘There is more to the story than this, of course’: Character and Affect in Philippa Gregory’s *The White Queen*

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Abstract: Philippa Gregory has critiqued gendered representations of Elizabeth Woodville and has stated that her 2009 novel *The White Queen* fictionalises Woodville’s history with the aim of challenging such depictions. The reimagining of Elizabeth’s affect drives her narrative and is integral to reconsidering this past, yet these emotions do not differ from those characterisations that Gregory has criticised; lust and love are key motivators for Elizabeth who is vengeful and proud, and she is defined in terms of her familial relationships. Utilising a postmodern perspective, this paper will analyse the characterisation of Elizabeth Woodville in Philippa Gregory’s novel *The White Queen* and argue that the novel does not diverge significantly from contemporaneous accounts of Woodville’s life. In suggesting that the novel resembles rather than challenges representations found in texts contemporaneous to Gregory’s own, the paper will contextualise Gregory’s characterisation using two biographical accounts published shortly before the release of *The White Queen*: Arlene Okerlund’s *Elizabeth Wydeville: The Slandered Queen*, and David Loades’ ‘The Queen As Lover: Elizabeth Woodville’ in *The Tudor Queens Of England*. 
Philippa Gregory’s 2009 novel *The White Queen* takes as its heroine Elizabeth Woodville who was queen of England from 1464–1470 and again from 1471–1483. It is the first in Gregory’s series that fictionalises the Wars of the Roses from the imagined perspectives of prominent women of the period and, as in her earlier ‘Tudor Court’ series, she aims to bring to the fore women whom she argues have been marginalised by traditional histories. Promotional material for the novel describes Woodville as ‘almost–unknown’ and Gregory has argued that her heroine has been the subject of ‘only one reliable biography’, or that the ‘existing’ biographies were out of print when she began writing. Historical fiction offers an apt medium with which to critique the exclusion of women’s voices and experiences from history; its association with women writers and readers means that there exists an established tradition of historical novels telling women’s stories, while its imaginative capacity allows authors to invent unrecorded details omitted from the historical record. Gregory has embraced the genre’s potential for offering new interpretations of historical women. She has argued that it allows her to speculate as to the ‘emotions, motives and unconscious desires’ of those women about whom she writes and, in turn, consider how they may have experienced and perceived significant historical events. Affect is thus fundamental to Gregory’s novels; it is not sufficient to reconsider the actions and experiences of women without considering possible motives and responses.

*The White Queen* narrates the Wars of the Roses from Elizabeth Woodville’s imagined perspective, however it does not challenge existing representations. A fictionalised Elizabeth narrates the novel yet, as in the histories which Gregory has criticised, she is defined by her familial relationships; the novel is concerned with her relationship with her husband, England’s Edward IV, and her role as the mother of the disappeared Edward V and Richard, colloquially known as the Princes in the Tower. Affective interactions are thus integral to Gregory’s portrayal and the
tragedy that befell her sons means that her later years are defined by grief, while her marriage is depicted in terms of genuine affection and desire. As an author of fiction Gregory is granted much licence in writing the emotional experiences of her heroine and she has argued that this is an important aspect of women’s history. Yet in choosing to emphasise the love shared by Edward and Elizabeth, her characterisation closely resembles those which are found in nonfictional histories which are contemporaneous to Gregory’s narrative. The novel’s focus on the intimate relationship between Edward and Elizabeth also means that, rather than acting as a feminist interjection into traditional representations, the novel adheres to the conventions of a historical romance.

This article will analyse the characterisation of Elizabeth Woodville in Philippa Gregory’s novel *The White Queen*, arguing that the novel resembles rather than challenges representations found in contemporaneous texts. Adopting a postmodernist perspective which holds that all historical narratives contain elements of fictionalisation regardless of genre, it offers a comparative textual analysis of Gregory’s novel alongside two biographical accounts published shortly before the release of *The White Queen*: Arlene Okerlund’s *Elizabeth Wydeville: The Slandered Queen*, and David Loades’ ‘The Queen As Lover: Elizabeth Woodville’ in *The Tudor Queens Of England*.9 These three texts share a concern with Woodville’s gender and its influence on the manner in which her history has been recorded and represented. Although each author offers divergent interpretations of particular episodes, there are distinct similarities between the respective characterisations and each text relies on gendered characterisations of Elizabeth Woodville’s affect. The characterisation put forward by Gregory is thus consistent with that which is evident in Loades and Okerlund’s respective narratives. This paper seeks not to question the accuracy or authenticity of the characterisations that are to be found in these texts, but rather to contextualise Gregory’s claimed interjection into patriarchal histories using a critique
of each author’s depiction of gender, sexuality, and power. The twenty-first-century
texts examined thus form the primary source materials for this analysis. Affect,
which here refers to emotions, motivations and the reasoning which informs actions,
is an essential element of these depictions in spite of the inherent difficulties
associated with identifying and interpreting this intangible aspect of the past: the
Woodville that emerges from these texts is motivated primarily by the feminine
considerations such as love and lust, rather than personal ambition or self-
 preservation. By critiquing these gendered characterisations of Elizabeth Woodville,
this paper will suggest that it is essential to interrogate not only the exclusion of
women from traditional narratives, but also the gendered representational
conventions at play in historical narratives.

‘THERE IS AN UNTOLD HISTORY OF WOMEN’

Postmodern interrogations of the narrative structure of histories have, in recent
years, led to reconsiderations of the historical novel. Critiques of the ethics and
implications of fictionalising the past continue to surround the genre, with accuracy
and authenticity being integral to the perceived success of a novel. This critical
reconsideration of the historical novel has, in part, been informed by an
interrogation of the literary qualities of historical writing and its ability to relate
truth. History is a representational practice; as Alun Munslow has argued, history is
the means by which the past is understood, it ‘is not the [past] itself’ nor can the past
‘be transported as it actually was onto the page’. In representing the past in the
present, writers of both fictional and nonfictional historical narratives must imagine
how the individuals and societies whom they describe, experienced the events of the
past; historians investigate the actions of people who once lived and novelists invent
the actions of persons who are often, but not always, imaginary, yet both deal
primarily with human actions and affect. The majority of historical narratives do not
simply put forward a chronology but attempt to explain why and how events took place and affect is fundamental to such analysis.

Hayden White stands amongst the key scholars to have contributed to this debate. Critiquing the demand for objectivity which once defined the discipline,\textsuperscript{12} he has suggested that a concern with individuals, events and places that were at one time observable and can thus be considered as having been ‘real’ should not render history as the antithesis of fiction: ‘the study of the real versus the study of the merely imaginable’ (p. 121). This is because the two disciplines share significant commonalities in their production of stories, particularly with regard to the capacity of historians to dictate both the style and form of their narratives; a process White refers to as ‘emplotment’ (p. 83). The historical record, as it exists outside of the influence of historians, consists only of congeries of vaguely related pieces of information and it is the historian’s role to create order and meaning amongst this chaos (p. 125). Emplotment is the process by which historians select those fragments that they consider to be of importance before arranging and describing these items in a manner that adequately reflects their own interpretation of events. This exercise is one that can be considered entirely subjective, with imperatives ‘that are generally extra historical, ideological, aesthetic, or mythical’ being fundamental to how an historian believes a particular episode can be emplotted (p. 85). Such considerations influence both the direction of research and the interpretation of any evidence that is uncovered; historians seek to find answers to those questions that they find intriguing and that are compatible with the narrative they wish to produce (p. 85). This does not imply fictionalisation or falsification. The same chronology can, however, be represented in a multitude of ways, each with its own meaning, as historians employ individual plot structures to document their findings, privileging certain aspects of the past above others (p. 92).
In formulating such stories using figurative language, authors regularly engage in the act of characterisation. Aspects of an individual’s persona — including their affective interactions, motivations, personality and intellect — are often described by historians, despite the intangible nature of such characteristics, thus transforming agents into ‘the kind of intending, feeling, and thinking subjects with whom the reader can identify and empathize, in the way one does with characters in fictional stories’. Similarly, the way in which key players are rendered can influence the style or tone of the narrative in a way that can resemble literary genres, such as romance or tragedy. Hence it is the author of the narrative and the conventions of the discourse within which they operate, and not the episode they describe, which determine the style and form of any given representation.

The capacity of writers to dictate the shape of a representation is pertinent to a consideration of affect in historical narratives; as Barbara Rosenwein has argued, ‘what medievalists — indeed all historians who want to get their history right — must worry about is how historians have treated emotions in history’. Affect is intangible and the task of extrapolating emotions and motives from historical sources and deciphering their meaning is problematic. This task only becomes more complex when the historical record lacks conclusive evidence to demonstrate how an individual perceived his or her own world. Rosenwein postulates that emotion is performed and read within groups that recognise and adhere to norms, conventions and vocabularies of emotional expression and labels these groups ‘emotional communities’. She differentiates between ‘unfocused’ studies of emotion that describe emotion in order to add colour to a narrative (p. 1), and ‘focused’ studies which contextualise emotives — the expression of emotion — in relation to other emotives from that same community (p. 26). Thus focused studies contextualise the affect that they describe. In contrast, historical novelists must construct a narrative that resonates with their reader and, while an engagement with the past itself can be
integral to a text, this necessity means that affect must reflect modern understandings of emotions and their meanings. The present and the past are of equal importance in historical fictions; to resonate, historical fictions and the pasts that they represent must either reflect contemporary concerns or encourage a perception of shared humanity across vastly different societies and cultures. Empathy is thus fundamental to the success of a novel and readers must recognise the motivations and anxieties of characters; hence, in historical fictions, ‘the past is made and told emotionally’. In The Women of the Cousins’ War — the non-fictional text that accompanies the fictional series of the same name — Gregory positions her work in the context of women’s history: ‘women were excluded from medieval history’, she argues before asserting that her own writing contributes to the ‘ongoing process of seeking and describing women in history’ (p. 31). The capacity of historical fiction to imaginatively explore affect is, she maintains, central to her ability to write histories of otherwise neglected women. The ‘emotions, motives and unconscious desires’ — here defined as affect — of her heroines went unrecorded and thus ‘have to be imagined’ (p. 11). It is this emphasis on the emotional experience of her subjects that underpins her preference for first-person, present-tense narration because it allows the heroine to relate events from ‘her own viewpoint’ (p. 13). Moreover, the specific research questions that she outlines for The White Queen relate not only to Woodville’s actions — ‘did she really release her second son into [Richard III’s] care when he had kidnapped her first?’ — but, importantly, to the affect that informed and accompanied these actions — ‘did she really believe that Richard III had murdered her sons and yet bring herself to reconcile with him?’ (p. 33).

This reconsideration of Woodville’s alleged actions in light of the affect that may have formed their basis is thus a fundamental objective of Gregory’s work. The necessity of such reconsideration is predicated on her belief that the way in which
women including Woodville have been remembered by history has been defined by ‘the traditional view at the time of the nature of women’ (p. 19). ‘Very few women’, she argues, have escaped the ‘powerful stereotyping’ that defined them in terms of their sexuality (p. 21), or purely as the ‘supporters’ or ‘victims’ of powerful and prominent men (p. 29). Yet Gregory is not alone in considering how Woodville’s gender has influenced the ways in which her history has been received, particularly with regard to her sexual behaviours. Gregory, Okerlund and Loades each address the conflation between the private and the public at play in historical representations of women. In his introduction to *The Tudor Queens of England*, Loades argues that a medieval queen consort was ‘primarily a wife’ who held ‘a status but not an office’; her role was to act ‘discretely’ and respect ‘the perceptions of those around her’, thereby supporting her husband’s kingship ‘ideologically’ and ‘politically’. Like Gregory, he asserts that women were regarded in terms of the Biblical models of the Virgin Mary and Eve, and that such judgement was informed by perceptions of women’s sexual behaviours. Both Gregory and Okerlund address the role of sexual behaviours in shaping the way in which women are remembered in historical narratives: Gregory argues that women have been defined ‘in relation to [their] sexual activity with men, and this is private activity, not a public or historical act’ (p. 23), while Okerlund argues that ‘history (or more accurately, historians) has maligned [Woodville] mercilessly’ because she reportedly refused to have premarital sex with Edward.

Historiography is a prominent theme throughout Okerlund’s text and she identifies negative depictions of Woodville as having been key to her decision to write the book; the opening chapter of her biography provides a historiographical survey of writings about Woodville, identifying perceived inaccuracies in the accepted narrative. Criticising ‘defamatory attacks’ (p. 20), she posits that that ‘the story of Elizabeth Wydeville embodies a quintessential warning about the power of
propaganda to pervert truth’ (p. 21). Loades does not share Okerlund’s redemptive project, but nevertheless references a ‘black legend’ that ‘gathered around the queen and her kindred’ after her death.21 Similarly, Gregory argues that Woodville ‘steps in and out of myth and legend’ and was, like many of her kin, ‘a victim of the powerful Tudor propaganda machine’.22 Woodville, she suggests, is ‘often slandered’, characterised as ‘a social climber, as an abuser of power and as morally corrupt’ (5).23 Refuting such depictions is key to Gregory’s stated ambition and she, like Okerlund, aims to offer a representation of Woodville that does not conform to facile stereotypes of powerful women.

‘IS THIS LOVE THEN?’

Woodville’s relationship with her husband is fundamental to the way in which her history has been remembered in historical narratives. The circumstances surrounding her marriage to Edward IV has seen the union identified as having been distinctly unlike that enjoyed by Edward’s predecessors and the majority of his successors; Woodville was the first commoner to become Queen of England, and the couple married in secret. This secrecy combined with the limited dynastic or monetary advantages that Woodville, a widow, could offer has led Okerlund, Loades and Gregory to each depict this as a romantic union. That Edward seemingly accepted that this marriage would cause controversy and thus kept it secret has also been put forward as evidence of the couple’s genuine affection for one another. The choice to marry, it is argued, was politically motivated only insofar as it was an opportunity for the young king to assert his authority: ‘would he, as King, make his own decisions or must he defer to others?’24

These considerations have been a significant influence on perceptions of the marriage, Woodville herself and, in turn, the events of Edward’s reign.
Acknowledging the diplomatic and economic disadvantages of rejecting, to borrow Okerlund’s phrase, an ‘appropriate wife’ (p. 37), these authors each position Edward’s choice to shroud the marriage in secrecy as an indicator that he recognised the news would receive an unfavourable reaction: Loades writes that Edward ‘knew perfectly well that if he asked the advice of his council’ the idea would have been rejected as ‘unacceptable’ and it was for this reason that ‘he did not ask them’, while Okerlund asserts that Edward ‘well understood’ the ramifications of his actions. Loades’ and Okerlund’s emphasis on Edward’s possible motivations for making this choice — and the choice always belongs only to Edward, not Elizabeth — frames Elizabeth, for the most part, as a passive actor in this episode: Edward ‘knew enough about Elizabeth to know that he wanted her’ thus he had ‘torn up the rule book insofar as it applied to royal marriages’, yet it was his secrecy that was ‘his mistake’ when he ‘chose Lady Elizabeth’ Woodville (p. 32). Indeed, Okerlund dedicates a chapter, entitled ‘Edward’s Decision to Marry Lady Elizabeth’, to the topic (p. 24). Here Woodville’s affect is not considered, and she is instead depicted as merely the object of Edward’s desire.

Amongst these authors, Gregory alone explores the (imagined) perspective of Elizabeth and the reasons that may have informed her choice to accept Edward’s proposal. Although Elizabeth does not reject ambition or power, her marriage is grounded in love. From their first meeting, the couple are infatuated with one another; when Edward kisses her palm, she reflects that ‘this gesture has made me melt … I will keep my hand clasped until bedtime when I can put it to my mouth (p. 13). Despite openly acknowledging her feelings for Edward, she resolutely refuses his forceful sexual advances, stating that she ‘cannot be [his] mistress’ (p. 24). At their next meeting they openly declare their love for one another and decide to marry:
'I can’t sleep,’ he says so quietly that only I can hear.
‘Nor I.’
He sighs a deep sigh as if he is relieved. ‘Is this love then?’
‘I suppose so.’
‘I can’t eat.’
‘No.’
‘I can’t think of anything but you. I can’t go on another moment like this, I can’t ride into battle like this. I am as foolish as a boy. I cannot be without you, I will not be without you. Whatever it costs me…marry me. There is nothing else for it’ (p. 36).

Here Gregory’s Elizabeth willingly accepts Edward’s proposal, although she remains deferential to him throughout their courtship; it is she who, when they are parted, ‘cannot help but wait’, desperate that she will see him once more (p. 30), and who must later trust that he will not deny their marriage and leave her ruined (p. 54). When Edward proposes marriage, however, he responds to her favourable answer with the question, ‘do you want to?’(p. 37). With this, the proposal is explicitly positioned as a choice that she is able to make of her own accord and one that, due to the first-person narration, is recognisable to the reader as a favourable course of action.

Here Gregory offers a fictional interpretation of Elizabeth’s emotional response to Edward’s advances and the reasons that may have informed her acceptance of his proposal. The relevance of this approach is highlighted when this representation is contrasted with Okerlund’s and Loades’ representations that only consider Edward’s outlook despite being biographical accounts of Woodville’s life. The positioning of Gregory’s novels as women’s history is not, however, limited to reconsiderations of past events from a feminine perspective and Gregory argues that she grants the women whom she writes about — an often fictitious — agency. Her books, she argues, are ‘pro-women’ and act as ‘advocates for women’s power’.31 Although her depiction of the betrothal and marriage does narrate the episode from
Elizabeth’s fictional perspective, the portrayal invites interrogation as to the degree to which it can be considered to reconceptualise Elizabeth’s history. By emphasising Elizabeth’s ‘choice’ to enter into marriage, and positioning this choice as having been motivated by love, Gregory offers a distinctly post-feminist characterisation. In presenting the marriage as having been favourable to Elizabeth because she loved Edward, Gregory’s narrative exhibits the often-contradictory conceptualisations of gender typical of post-feminism; a celebration of the potential for women to independently make choices about their own lives sits alongside neo-conservative notions of sex and gender which preference traditional gender roles, particularly with regard to motherhood and marriage.32 This perspective is evident in Gregory’s decision to depict Woodville as having been in love with Edward and choosing to marry him for this reason. Her interpretation is consistent with the other texts examined in this paper: Okerlund writes that theirs ‘was a love that persisted through nineteen years of trauma and tragedies that would have destroyed less devoted relationships’ (p. 19),33 while Loades contends that their ‘coming together was much more typical of the way in which ordinary young people met and fell in love than it was of a royal marriage’ (p. 43).34 It is not then unreasonable that Gregory’s text reflects this consensus. It is, however, of interest that she adheres to the generic conventions of romance in spite of the complexities of the courtship and the possibility of her character exhibiting equally complex emotional responses to the prospect of marriage.

In *The White Queen* Edward, captivated by Elizabeth, asks her to secretly meet him and, although she agrees, she is wary of his intentions. As she waits for him, she is ‘relieved to hear the sound of only one horse’ having feared that he would not come alone and that her ‘safety’ would be in danger (p. 21).35 Her fear is partly alleviated when he arrives alone, however she reflects on the contradiction between his reputation as the leader of an army who ‘rape women and murder their
husbands as a matter of course’ and her own feelings toward him: ‘however heart-stopping his smile and however honest his eyes…I cannot trust him’ (p. 21). Indeed, Edward quickly becomes forceful and although Elizabeth desires him, she resolutely refuses his advances, mindful as she is of her own honour (p. 23). The scene is framed in terms consistent with sexual assault — ‘he is pulling up my gown as if I were a whore’, she narrates, ‘he is pushing his knee between my legs as if I have consented’ — and Elizabeth only defends herself by threatening suicide with a dagger should he come near her (pp. 23–24).

Gregory’s choice to depict the scene in this manner is consistent with the accepted narrative, as is demonstrated by Loades who states that ‘the story that Elizabeth defended her honour with a dagger is credible’ (p. 43).36 However, it is not only these actions, but also their emotional responses, that suggest violence; Elizabeth articulates her own ‘sudden rush of anger at the realisation that he is no longer embracing me but forcing me’ (p. 23), before observing Edward’s ‘dangerous mix of temper and lust’ (p. 24). This scene does not, however, impact Elizabeth’s feelings for Edward; she does not express any fear or anger toward him following the encounter and Gregory’s narrative quickly reassumes the form of a romance. He begs ‘her to forgive [him] for [his] force’, yet asserts that Elizabeth will never see him again (p. 25) leading her to regret that she refused his advances (p. 27). She pines for him, desperate that she will see him once more (p. 30) and it is during their next encounter that they confess their love and become engaged (pp. 35–37). The anger and fear that she experiences during the assault is quickly excused by their love and the violence of the age in which they live; these are ‘not chivalrous times’ (p. 21) and Edward is, as Elizabeth’s mother reminds her, ‘a man going off to war’ unable to resist ‘the opportunity to make the most of it’ (p. 27).

Gregory not only depicts Elizabeth as physically vulnerable, but she is also dependent on Edward’s ability to provide security for her and her sons. The novel
Laura Saxton, ‘Character and Affect in Philippa Gregory’s The White Queen’ opens as Elizabeth prepares to beg Edward — whom she has not yet met — to secure her deceased husband’s lands and fortune in an attempt to ‘piece [her] life together like a patchwork of scraps’ (p. 5). The Woodville family’s support of the Lancastrian cause — John Grey, her first husband, had died a captain of the Lancastrian army — meant that the widowed Elizabeth’s ‘future under the new Yorkist King could not have looked more bleak’ (p. 14). She considers him to be ‘her enemy’ yet acknowledges that she has no choice but to beg for his help because ‘neither kinsman nor friend can make any headway for me’ (pp. 4–5). In spite of the vulnerability of Elizabeth’s position at the beginning of the novel, when Edward proposes she does not consider the security the marriage could offer nor expresses any relief at her newfound security. As such, Gregory does not explore the possibility of a disenfranchised widow with little choice but to accept an advantageous proposal that grants her security, and instead solely focuses on the romantic dimension of the relationship. Hence, her post-feminist celebration of ‘choice’ does not interrogate the patriarchal structures that limited the avenues of opportunity for women such as Woodville.

The historical Woodville’s reasons for marrying Edward are unknown, thus Gregory is granted significant scope in writing her emotional responses to the prospect of marriage. In spite of this imaginative freedom, she only briefly considers the fear and uncertainty that Elizabeth experiences as a widow and the relative stability that an advantageous marriage would offer. When Elizabeth, dressed in her finest and with her sons in tow, stands by the roadside aware that her security is reliant on the king noticing her and stopping, she reflects that ‘I would give all that I am to be, just this once, simply irresistible’ (p. 3). Thus the only means with which Elizabeth is able to secure her inheritance is to use her physicality to gain the king’s attention before asking him to intervene in the matter on her behalf. In spite of explicitly positioning Elizabeth’s predicament as precarious and her actions as
desperate, when she is successful in her endeavour and Edward shortly thereafter proposes marriage, Gregory represents the marriage in wholly romantic terms.

Similarly, Gregory does not explore the possibility of an ambitious heroine, enticed by the prospect of becoming queen, particularly when faced with wealth, power and status. She is conscious of her suitor’s status, yet her passion for Edward is her primary motivation; during the wedding ceremony, as ‘the King of England himself’ places the ring on her finger she reflects, ‘I am his wife. And Queen of England’ (p. 38). Yet Elizabeth never questions her own intentions in marrying Edward, nor is the reader encouraged to do so. She tells her brother:

it’s not a question of wanting to be queen … I am mad for him, I am madly in love with him … I don’t care for my pride any more. As long as I can have him once more that’s all I want, just to love him; all I want to be certain of is that I will see him again, that he loves me. (p. 53)

Once married, the couple’s intensity of feeling remains unabated and they build a strong partnership through which to govern England. Having undertaken a ‘long process of marriage and ennoblement’ for her family, Elizabeth reflects that, ‘neither Lancaster nor York’, her own ‘Woodville family ennobled as Rivers…stand behind the king like a wall of water’ and that ‘when he loses all other allies we will still be his friends, and now we are in power’ (p. 83); as Loades posits, ‘there was a lot to be said for a queen whose kindred were unpretentious and could be used or not as the King might decide’ (p. 46). 38 This new dynasty is described by Gregory in terms of power and privilege as she uses her ‘great position as queen to put [her] family into power’ (p. 82), 39 yet the love shared by the royal couple is essential to the family’s influence: ‘we are loyal to him and he cleaves to us. I swear to him my faith and my love and he knows there is no woman in the world who loves him more than I do’ (p. 83). Although she embraces her active role in the political sphere, this manifestation of ambition is not positioned as being in Elizabeth’s personal interests but is rather borne out of loyalty to her husband. Framed in terms of protection, she
becomes a politician because she is queen to a vulnerable monarch and her intervention is required in order to secure his safety. In spite of her own power being wholly dependent on his position, her sole motivation remains her love for her husband.

Gregory’s Elizabeth is endowed with the capacity to influence events in a profound way, the significance of which becomes evident when compared to the respective narratives of Loades and Okerlund which associate Woodville’s influence with her physicality. For Loades, the sexual dimensions of Woodville’s relationship with her husband is her avenue to power: her sway is limited to ‘pillow talk’ (57) and, when discussing her resentment against the Earl of Warwick, Loades writes that in spite of there being no evidence that she spoke against Warwick, it is likely that she was involved in the episode because ‘she was a good hater’ and her pregnancy soon after these events demonstrates that ‘she was spending time in her husband’s company’ (p. 52). Okerlund rejects such assertions that Elizabeth primarily offered Edward sexual gratification (pp. 46–47), arguing that ‘it was not lust, but love, that compelled Edward to marry Elizabeth’ as ‘Edward IV easily and frequently satisfied his lust elsewhere’ (p. 19). She does, however, mirror Loades’ focus on Woodville’s physical appearance, arguing that she was ‘among the most fortunate of women’ because her ‘assets’ included ‘her beauty, her charm and her cultured background’ (pp. 14–15).

Gregory’s depiction extends Elizabeth’s role beyond being either sexy or beautiful, but her depiction is no more empowering than that of Loades or Okerlund. Rather than acknowledging alternate avenues for feminine power, Gregory imbues Elizabeth with magical abilities inherited from a mythical ancestress. The main narrative of The White Queen is interspersed with the mythical tale of the water goddess Melusina, from whom Elizabeth and her mother Jacquetta are descended. Woodville’s ancestry is a recurring theme throughout the novel as
the nobility question her suitability as queen. She does not possess either the royal or the aristocratic pedigree to become an advantageous wife for the King of England, yet Gregory provides Elizabeth with a mythical ancestry, seemingly to justify her appeal to Edward and her role as Queen. She remains a focus of discontent amongst the nobility who resent the growing influence and wealth of her family and believe that because she was ‘a poor widow from a family of unknowns’, she is thus ill bred to be queen (p. 80); as her father tells her, the family must ‘play at being kings and queens. You are the newest and most unlikely queen to a new and unlikely house … we have to be more royal than royalty itself or nobody will believe us’ (p. 63). Yet her secret ancestry means that she is presented to the reader as deserving of her newfound rank; when she argues that she ‘would love [Edward] if he were a nobody’, her brother disagrees, telling her ‘you don’t have the blood of a goddess in you for nothing. You were born to be queen’ (p. 53). Elizabeth believes that she is endowed with a strength of character that mortal women do not possess; ‘I bear myself as more than a silly girl’, she remarks, ‘I am a daughter of a water goddess. I am a woman with water in her veins and power in her breeding. I am a woman who makes things happen’ (p. 25).

The productivity to which she here refers takes the form of magical powers that allow her to directly engage with the battles that are the site of many of the key events of her husband’s reign. The historical milieu of the Wars of the Roses means many of the novel’s pivotal moments see Elizabeth waiting on news of her husband’s military campaigns whilst she makes provisions for the safety of their children. The fortunes of women during this period were largely dependent on battles in which they were unable to partake; by fictionalising the history of prominent women of this period, Gregory creates a world in which her heroine is able to directly influence this inherently masculine arena. This is demonstrated in *The White Queen* as Edward’s enemies sail to France in an attempt to muster support
for their rebellion, and Elizabeth observes that the traitors ‘must not enter Calais; we have to prevent it’ (p. 119), before she and her mother bring about a storm using their powers:

I rise to my feet and lean out of the open window into the sunshine. It is a warm day. The River Thames below me sparkles like a fountain, it is calm. I look to the south-west. There is a line of dark clouds on the horizon as if there might be dirty weather at sea. I put my lips together and I blow a little whistle ... I keep my eye on the line of clouds and I let my breath hiss like the wind of the storm ... Slowly but powerfully the dark clouds pile up, one on top of another, until there is a great thunderhead of threatening cloud, south, far away, over the sea ... I shiver in the sudden chill and ... close the window on the first scud of rain.

‘Looks like a storm out at sea,’ I remark. (p. 119)

This intervention is successful and Elizabeth soon learns that her enemies ‘were blown off the coast of France and then nearly wrecked in terrible seas off Calais’ (p. 119).

In the endpapers that accompany the novel, Gregory addresses her decision to include supernatural elements in the narrative, arguing that Elizabeth’s ability to manipulate the weather is ‘imaginary’ but ‘seemed to [her] to be what one would do in such circumstances — especially if one thought it might work!’ (p. 427) Arguing that ‘faith in magic and trust in what we would now call superstitions’ was an important element of medieval life, she suggests that the individuals about whom she writes may have believed ‘the legend of Melusina’ to be ‘literally true’ (p. 427). Yet Gregory does not only represent Elizabeth and Jacquetta as having believed in their mythical ancestress thereby commenting on the possible superstitions of the Woodville family, but also creates a scenario in which Elizabeth is permitted to engage in the arena of war in an inherently feminine way. Okerlund and Loades also argue that Woodville possessed agency that reflected the expectations of her gender; Okerlund writes that Woodville used ‘intelligence and persistence against men who
used swords, power and propaganda to annihilate their enemies’ (p. 21), whilst Loades, writing about queenship more broadly rather than Woodville in particular, suggests that the queen consort’s role was primarily that of a wife, yet she was both ‘ideologically and politically integral to the proper deployment of her husband’s authority’ (p. 3). In contrast, Gregory’s representation of Elizabeth’s feminine power, based as it is in myth, disregards the possible power and influence of the historical Woodville who, as Theresa Kemp has argued, ‘creatively manipulated’ the societal constraints imposed on women in order to achieve ‘a kind of agency, rather than utter passivity’. Gregory’s depiction of Woodville’s agency is thus problematic given her claims that the text is a reinterpretation of the period and its women.

Yet it is not only Elizabeth’s actions, but also her motivations and intentions that are integral to this project. Her use of (magical) power to protect her husband and family is at odds with the ‘chilly and unamiable creature, very much wrapped up in her own affairs’ described by Loades (p. 50). He depicts Woodville as having been motivated by self-interest, rather than love, and argues that ‘she traded her body for the status of queen’ (p. 43); a commodification of Woodville which is refuted by Gregory’s Elizabeth who declares ‘I don’t propose to sell myself at all ... I am not for sale to anyone’ (p. 21), and Okerlund who argues that Woodville has been maligned by historians because she ‘refused to sell her virtue to please a King’ (p. 18). Although Okerlund’s narrative is not fantastical and does not touch upon the legend of Melusina from which Gregory’s Elizabeth gains much of her power, the depiction of the relationship between Woodville and Edward IV in The Slandered Queen is not unlike that found in The White Queen. Okerlund’s narrative, like Gregory’s, represents the marriage as a partnership, citing ‘the nineteen harmonious and loving years that Edward and Elizabeth shared’ (p. 31). She consistently describes the couple as ‘devoted’ to one another and their family, and presents this love as Woodville’s primary motivator (p. 19). Indeed, Okerlund criticises imagery
like that which can be found in Loades’ text; she posits that the dominant representation of Woodville as a ‘conniving, grasping, overreaching female, who was manipulative at best, greedy and ruthless at worst’, has been largely informed by her pre-marital refusal of Edward’s sexual advances (p. 18).

Gregory contends that Elizabeth Woodville’s history ‘has been told largely in terms of her second husband … and son’ and that ‘almost nothing’ has been written about ‘her ambition’ (p. 5). Yet The White Queen does not challenge the characterisation which she critiques and instead adopts a familiar narrative, relating this in the form of a historical romance; it is both familial and romantic love that is emphasised throughout this text for which the Wars of the Roses appears as a mere backdrop, and ambition, fear, desperation or vulnerability with regard to Elizabeth’s relationship with Edward are fleetingly explored. The magical elements of the narrative further accentuate its formulaic nature, rendering the text (and Elizabeth’s power within it) as distinctly unreal, whilst employing motifs common to fairy tales — a trend which Linda Lee has identified as a recurrent feature of romance novels.

Gregory’s adherence to the tropes and representational techniques of historical romance is unrelated to the capacity of The White Queen to offer a reconsideration of Woodville’s character and her place in medieval history. Historical novels, including historical romances, have been an important avenue through which to explore women’s histories that often went unrecorded, and fictional histories have significant potential to contribute to our understandings of the past. The presumption that historical romance is a women’s genre means that it offers a unique avenue by which to critique the gendered nature of historical representations of women. This capacity becomes particularly pertinent in light of postmodern historiography with its rejection of the previously held disjuncture between fictional and nonfictional histories. The postmodern reconsideration of the singularity of historical truth and ‘refocusing on the marginal and marginalized’ not
only invites renewed consideration of historical fiction, but also complements gendered reconsiderations of the past.\textsuperscript{53} This should not suggest a shared politics, yet postmodern and gender history each challenge essentialism and empiricist epistemologies.\textsuperscript{54} Both discourses hold that one account of a past cannot encompass a multitude of experiences and also suggest that identity is fluid, provisional and socially constructed (p. 26). The power of representation is thus interrogated. Where women’s history critiques patriarchal structures that saw women largely excluded from historical narratives, postmodernists question the structures by which we convert the chaos of the past into historical facts, asking how these structures are created and by whom (p. 57). Hence, despite the significant differences in politics and approach of the respective discourses, they are both concerned with the limitations of representation (p. 12).

‘Telling the true story of Elizabeth Wydeville’, writes Okerlund, ‘is important not merely to disprove the slanders and retrieve her from obscurity, but to explore how history happens’.\textsuperscript{55} Gregory succeeds in making Elizabeth — and, in the series’ later books, other prominent women of the period — the central figure of her narrative. It is Elizabeth’s affect that drives Gregory’s narrative, yet these emotions are not unlike those described by Loades and Okerlund; lust and love are key motivators for Elizabeth who is often vengeful and proud. As a fictionalised narrative about a woman who, it has been argued, has been maligned and marginalised by canonical histories, \textit{The White Queen} can be considered an interesting, if flawed, example of an historical romance that reconsiders women’s histories in a form that is regularly associated with women readers and writers, yet it does not offer an alternate affective history of Elizabeth Woodville.
Laura Saxton, ‘Character and Affect in Philippa Gregory’s The White Queen’

Notes

4 ‘The White Queen: Behind the Book’ [http://www.philippagregory.com/books/the-white-queen/behind-the-book> [accessed 21 January 2014]. The biography to which Gregory refers was written by David Baldwin, one of the co-authors of her non-fictional text The Women of the Cousins’ War.
7 For an analysis of Gregory’s alternative history of Mary Boleyn in The Other Boleyn Girl and its deviation from the metanarrative of Tudor history, see Saxton ‘The Infamous Whore Forgotten’, 92–106.
9 Although released in the same year, Loades’ text was released in the January of 2009 while Gregory’s novel was released in August.
24 Okerlund, Elizabeth Wydeville, p. 31.
25 Loades, ‘The Queen as Lover’, p. 46.
26 Okerlund, Elizabeth Wydeville, p. 29.
27 Loades, ‘The Queen as Lover’, p. 46.
28 Okerlund, Elizabeth Wydeville, p. 32.
33 Okerlund, Elizabeth Wydeville, p. 19.
34 Loades, ‘The Queen as Lover’, p. 43.
36 Loades, ‘The Queen as Lover’, p. 43.
38 Loades, ‘The Queen as Lover’, p. 46.
39 Gregory, The White Queen, p. 82.
40 Loades, ‘The Queen as Lover’, p. 57.
41 Okerlund, Elizabeth Wydeville, p. 19.
42 For a discussion of the myth of the water goddess Melusina, and her role as the legendary ancestress of the House of Luxembourg, from which Jaquetta was descended, see Sabine Baring-Gould, Curious Myths of the Middle Ages (London: Rivingtons, 1884), pp. 471–523.
43 Gregory, The White Queen, p. 119.
44 Okerlund, Elizabeth Wydeville, p. 21.
45 Loades, ‘The Queen as Lover’, p. 3.
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47 Loades, ‘The Queen as Lover’, p. 50.


49 Okerlund, Elizabeth Wydeville, p. 21.


55 Okerlund, Elizabeth Wydeville, p. 21.