

MAIDS, MERMAIDS, WITCHES – INSTANCES OF POWERFUL WOMEN IN PHILIPPA GREGORY'S THE LADY OF THE RIVERS

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Abstract: The mythical world has always been a rich and challenging source of inspiration for artists of all times. Painters, sculptors, writers, poets, musicians, choreographers and film producers have developed a taste for exploring and exploiting to the fullest every possible myth and/ or image of mythological creatures, if they had the chance. The book of fiction that has brought to my attention yet another mythical creature not enough analysed and exploited so far is the first book in Philippa Gregory's Plantagenet and Tudor series, The Lady of the Rivers. In my paper, I intend to start from the mythical figure of Melusina, a mermaid or snake-related goddess, whose love and life story has been told in various forms throughout Europe, and then discuss the way it is used in the development of Gregory's historical fiction. Since the novel is constructed around the figures of the Queen of England and, especially, her first lady-in-waiting, the paper may easily focus on the idea of powerful women as drawing their energies from magical sources. In the end, we will attempt to identify the perfect ingredients that contribute to the novel's success, most likely a combination of a grain of magic, will and intelligence.

Keywords: maids, powerful women, Melusina, historical fiction, witches

Introduction

We live in a world of perpetual wonder, with modern devices and gadgets that, no earlier than a few decades ago, would have been seen and rejected as the devil's work. People nowadays have got used to thinking that 'magic' is merely a concept translating a higher level of technological progress, with sounds and images instantly popping up on smartphones, tablets and laptops when prompted by the magical touch of a finger. It is understandable, then, that many games that are played on these devices, as well as very popular movies and series have exploited myth, magic and historical characters in narratives whose plots are meant to seduce the player/ viewer and ensure the success (and the sequel) of the product. Dragons, wizards, witches, fairies, satyrs, gods, legendary heroes, saints, fantastic creatures, kings and queens – those are all favourites on top of the list of any writer, producer or toy manufacturer who wants to succeed and get to the consumers' hearts (and pockets). In other words, if one strives to become somebody, they need to master fully the winning recipe.

Indeed, my first encounter with Philippa Gregory's characters from her Plantagenet and Tudor book series was through the television screen, where the historical novelist's fictional work has so far been picturised in the first three parts (*The White Queen*, *The White Princess* and *The Spanish Princess*) of a larger series, which gives us a complete and challenging picture of England's troubled times during and after The Cousins' War or, as the majority know it, The War of the Roses. The thing that prompted me to search further for, and, eventually, to read Philippa Gregory's books was the fascinating – and all the rage – picture of the women trying to take, understand and maintain power in those times, when the concept of gender equality or, even more unconceivable, that of women in a position of power and authority was something unheard of.

In Philippa Gregory's *The Lady of the Rivers*, women are depicted and categorized as either ordinary or exceptional; in the former category, we have women who are more or less happily married, with children, whilst in the latter we can notice the unfortunate, special ones, who are desperately trying to break boundaries: the Queen Margaret d'Anjou, the visionary Jacquetta de Luxembourg who is the descendant of the water goddess Melusina, and the maid warrior Joan/ Jeanne of Arc. In this paper, I will focus on identifying and discussing the mythical creatures pervading the fictional world, especially the water goddess Melusina, while, at the same time, attempting to explain the particular challenges that the three feminine characters were facing in that male-dominated world. The analysis will begin with the description of the mythical creatures and the stories that have planted the seed of superstition in people's minds during those foggy, mystical times, then it will move on to the introduction of the personae, namely the three historical characters whose destinies are intertwined in the demonstration of the women's failure to be acknowledged as the mistresses of their own destinies, and then draw its conclusions.

I. Mythical creatures in *The Lady of the Rivers*

Renaissance is widely viewed as the historical period when everything, from the arts to the sciences experienced a boom, and "man" – as a concept – started to occupy its rightful position at the centre of the world (*l'ombelico del mondo*), with God's will. Actually, the divine, either in the actual form of the Trinity, or merely symbolized by the image of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, stands at the very heart of the Renaissance, and the multifarious manifestations of artistic genius give ample proof of that.

Still, all cultural historians and critics have agreed on describing the period as the moment that favoured the rediscovery of classical philosophy, art, and literature, after the gloomy Middle Ages. And, with the majority of the population still illiterate and depending on the institution of the Church to mediate through its representatives, the priests, their relationship with God in Latin (a language very few understood), the local legends and mythical figures served as reliable sources for feeding people's minds with the fantastic stories they craved for, especially during the dark months of winter. The very few who knew how to read and write, and in more than one language, including Latin and Greek, were the rich noblemen and their wives and children. If any of those could trace their origins to a legendary, mythical figure, then they would have gained the people's trust and love – or their fear, since it worked both ways. From the mythical creatures in Philippa Gregory's *The Lady of the Rivers*, I will dwell mostly on the water goddess Melusina, and the unicorn.

I. 1. Melusina, the water goddess

In many cultures, one may come across a recurrent figure – that of the fascinating (sometimes dangerous or even life-threatening) young woman who is half-fish or snake and half human, and who gets married to a mortal man, only to be betrayed by him later on in the story. In some parts of the world, the selkie folklore tells readers of its most common theme, that of a cunning young man who acquires, either by trickery or theft, a selkie girl's sealskin. This prevents her from returning to the sea, and leaves the seal-maiden with no option but to marry her captor. The tales generally end sadly, with the selkie wife's children returning her sealskin. Irrespective of one's way of reading the selkie story, or of the 'justice' done to the character, the ending is always felt as the opposite of catharsis.

If we look for other possible instances of half-women / half-snake or fish, we may find a most interesting association in Spanish folklore. In Basque legends, a Lamia (plural *lamiak*) is a water sprite that lives in caves and in the region, one may find many places named after these creatures, which, sometimes, take the form of beautiful women who attract men. In some other legends, they are half human and half fish, and, most of the time, such a

figure is perceived as related to the image of “a water-nixie, or melusine, or Lorelei, a cold-blooded fairy who entangles men to drown them, and has no soul.” (Byatt, 2001: 162)

The idea that a water fairy may strike a bargain with someone in order to get legs instead of a fish/ snake tail and, more importantly, a soul, has become an obsession deeply rooted in the Christian folklore; that is why readers may easily identify the water-nixie’s mythical figure as the familiar version known as Little Mermaid. Though originating in the Greek myth of the sirens deluding sailors and making them drown, the Biblical version offered in the shape of fiction by Hans Christian Andersen is preferred by the Christian reader who understands that mythical creatures – pagan, without a soul – have to renounce their tails – the symbol of freedom – for the sake of domestic bliss.

In her book, *Melusine the Serpent Goddess in A.S. Byatt’s Possession and in Mythology*, Gillian Alban pursues the fairy Melusine’s snake-woman image throughout the plot and poetry of A.S. Byatt’s novel *Possession*, into medieval legend and beyond, into her antecedents in ancient myths of all origins, from Sumerian to Greek or Semitic. Alban draws parallels with goddesses such as Lamia (present in both Greek and Basque mythologies), Ishtar or Inanna (in Sumerian myths), Isis (the mother-figure goddess in Egypt) and Asherah (Semitic mother goddess, also appearing occasionally in Akkadian or Hittite sources). She also identifies Melusine’s creative dynasties and constructions, in a detailed account of her avatars and accomplishments.

In France, the legend goes back to the deep root of the half-woman/ half-fish problem, and as far in space as Albania. It appears that Elinas, a widower king of Albania, used to go hunting as a means to forget his loss; on such a hunting day, he went to a fountain to quench his thirst: as he approached it he heard the voice of a woman singing, and on coming to it he found there the beautiful Fay Pressina, who agreed to marry him on the condition that he should never visit her at the time of her lying-in. Together, they had three daughters at a birth: Melusina, Melior, and Palatina. Happy to see his new-born daughters, the king forgot all about his promise and Pressina was forced to leave him, “taking up her three daughters, she disappeared” (The Fairy Mythology: 480). At fifteen, when she is told about her absent father, Melusina incites her sisters to punish Elinas and together they do just that: by a charm, they enclose him in a high mountain, called Brandelois. The consequences following the three sisters’ deed against their father are brutal:

On telling their mother what they had done, she, to punish them for the unnatural action, condemned Melusina to become every Saturday a serpent, from the waist downwards, till she should meet a man who would marry her under the condition of never seeing her on a Saturday, and should keep his promise. [...] Melusina now went roaming through the world in search of the man who was to deliver her [...] and at last she arrived in the forest of Colombiers, in Poitou, where all the Fays of the neighbourhood came before her, telling her they had been waiting for her to reign in that place. (ibidem: 481).

And, since history (real as well as fictitious) repeats itself, Melusina meets her knight riding through a dark forest who has lost his way, after having accidentally killed his uncle during a hunting session. They fall in love and get married, but she also spells out the prohibition that every Saturday he must leave her alone to bathe. Raymond, or Raimondin keeps his promise and, for many years, the two live happily together. They six sons, all with strange defects, that make them monster-like, in the spitting image of their mother; among those, Geoffroy à la Grande Dent plays the most important part in the story. Though, one Saturday, Raimondin spies on Melusina and learns that, from the waist down, she is a fish or a serpent, he says and does nothing, till Geoffroy, mad at one of his brothers, Fromont, kills him; at that moment, Raimondin reproaches Melusina with the tragedy: ‘At which the afflicted father, count Raymond, when his wife Melusina was entering his closet to comfort

him, broke out into these words against her, before all the courtiers who attended her : —" Out of my sight, thou pernicious snake and odious serpent ! thou contaminator of my race!" (ibidem: 482). Retold in Philippa Gregory's *The Lady of the Rivers (TLR)*, Melusina's story becomes the story of an exceptional woman, whose greatness cannot be accepted by the small world she lives in:

The husband cannot bear to know that his wife is a strange being. She cannot forgive him for spying on her. She leaves him, taking her beautiful daughters, and he lives alone with the sons, heartbroken. But at his death, as at the death of every one of our house, his wife Melusina, the beautiful woman who was an undine, a water goddess, comes back to him and he hears her crying around the battlements for the children she has lost, for the husband she still loves, and for the world that has no place for her. (Gregory TLR: 31)

I. 2. The unicorn

The fantastic creature, shaped as a horse with one horn we call unicorn never goes unnoticed and, nowadays, there is an overwhelming quantity of products that sell better if they have a label or an image with a pink/ violet/ white one-horned creature on it. Since many scientists believe that the water creature known as the narwhal is in reality the animal with the closest resemblance to the mythical unicorn, we may have a dilemma here; still, the fact remains that, originally, the meanings and significance the unicorn inspired were in close connection with the concept of purity, or the divine.

The artistic world has taken an interest in the theme of the unicorn, especially since the image of the creature was associated with another symbol of purity, the maid (or maiden). European legends of the Middle Ages tell the story of shy, fantastic, one-horned creatures that can heal wounds, bring peace to tormented souls or bring back to life wasted lands and countries, but which are so sensitive and pure that can only be approached and touched by virgins with pure hearts. The same theme, with variations, is exploited and developed in a similar manner all over the world, with the unicorn as a peace symbol.

Interestingly, we may find out about the obsession of the Middle Ages with the mythological unicorn from the famous tapestry commissioned by the Le Viste family *The Lady and the Unicorn (La Dame à la licorne, in French)*, which inspired British writer Tracy Chevalier to write about its presumable manufacturer, Nicolas des Innocents, and the making of the six tapestries woven in Flanders from wool and silk, from designs (or cartoons, as they were called) around 1500 in her own 2003 novel *The Lady and the Unicorn*. Although the coat of arms suggests Jean Le Viste was the official sponsor, it appears that the superposition of colours would suggest the probability of the intervention of Antoine II Le Viste, the descendant of the younger branch of the family, in ordering the tapestry (Decu Teodorescu). Irrespective of the name of the actual sponsor, the beauty of the tapestry and its message stay with the viewer a long time after they see it. The tapestry portrays the lady standing in front of a tent, across the top of which is inscribed her motto "À Mon Seul Désir", one of the deliberately obscure, highly crafted and elegant mottos, often alluding to courtly love, adopted by the nobility during the age of chivalry.

With its various interpretations, ranging from "to my only/sole desire", "according to my desire alone", to "by my will alone", or "love desires only beauty of soul", the motto definitely speaks of passion and will or desire. What is to be noted here is that John of Lancaster, 1st Duke of Bedford, who is the husband of Jacquetta of Luxembourg, the main character in *The Lady of the Rivers*, had the motto "À Vous Entier", French for "(Devoted) to you entirely" – comparably similar to that on the famous tapestry. There are many instances in the novel that explore the mystery of the maiden and the unicorn, with the

heroine playing the part of the virgin who captures that mythological beast, to be analysed later on in the paper.

II. Powerful women – between history and myth

“Biology is not destiny – but, like the sea, it is a beginning.” (Sjöö: 37). It is entirely possible that, with a similar thought in mind, as a powerful motto, the three women whose life stories are told in *The Lady of the Rivers* began their journeys that brought them immortality – and gave rise to heated historical debates long after their deaths. Whether it was love, power, or the love of God that stirred those women into action, the result was, beyond all historical (reasonable) doubts, a notable one; this paper will dwell upon three instances of women power, easily identifiable in the book: the mystic, the witch, and the predatory queen.

II.1. The mystic: Joan of Arc/ Jeanne d’Arc

The Lady of the Rivers starts with the image of the imprisoned Maid of Orléans, Joan of Arc (in French, Jeanne d’Arc), captive in the Castle of Beaufort, near Arras, in 1430. Jacquetta of Luxembourg, the character that is also the designated narrator of the whole story, recounts the final months of the Maid, as well as the trial where the latter had to defend herself against the accusations of witchcraft and heresy brought by the Church, and the final act, the burning at the stake of the Maid.

History records facts, and those are indisputable: on 23 May 1430, Joan of Arc was captured at Compiègne by Anglo-Burgundian forces commanded by John of Lancaster, 1st Duke of Bedford, to be later handed over to the English and put on trial by the pro-English bishop Pierre Cauchon on a variety of charges. These ranged from the Maid’s habit of wearing man breeches (very convenient when riding a horse or when, in prison, she had to defend herself against the guards’ attempts to rape her) instead of a dress or gown, to her hearing the voices that instructed her to help the prince become a king. After Cauchon declared her guilty, she was burned at the stake as a witch on 30th May 1431, dying at about nineteen years of age. Still, what can be disputed – and what, eventually, led to the Maid’s official canonization as one of history’s greatest saints in 1920 – is the way the prosecutor interpreted facts during the trial:

They harass her with erudite questions, query her replies, double back on her answers, write down things she says in moments of weariness and bring them back to her later, define their terms in the most learned ways and ask her what she means, so that she does not understand the question and tells them simply ‘pass on’ or ‘spare me that’.
(Gregory TLR: 41)

Indeed, the Maid’s unforgivable sin is that of being a powerful woman/ girl in a world that is owned by men. “Every woman should be overwhelmed with shame at the very thought that she is a woman,” said St. Clement, the 4th Catholic Pope, before the end of the 1st century (quoted in Sjöö: 165). More than a thousand odd years later, Thomas d’Aquino stated clearly, “To be fully developed as a human being is to be born a male” (ibidem: 165-6). An interesting fact is that, although the teenager helped her prince get crowned as King Charles VII, when she expected her King to save her, he was nowhere to be found. The explanation may be either that he was not powerful enough to do so, or that he simply needed the Church more than he needed the Maid, with her humble origins and strange angels’ voices speaking to her, at that particular moment. Sjöö is clear about the reasons the Maid had to be killed – she was a force to be reckoned with:

Witchcraft was why the church allowed Joan of Arc to be burned: She could not only lead France against its secular enemies, she might also lead the people against the

oppressive dominance of the French church-crown. For Jeanne D'Arc was a native European witch, resonating to the needs and dreams of the peasantry. (ibidem: 170)

In *The Lady of the Rivers*, the presence and influence of the Maid is strongly felt and, later on, meditated upon by the main character, Jacquetta of Luxembourg with regard to the role of strong, influential women in the world of men, especially when the latter are found wanting. Indeed, in more than one of her historical novels, Philippa Gregory resorts to the figure of Joan of Arc, the Maid of Orléans, as a role model, a powerful woman/ girl many of her female characters measure themselves against. Thus, Margaret Beaufort, the main character in *The Red Queen*, is obsessed with the idea of being inferior to Joan of Arc, whom, she claims, she strives to emulate her whole life, while, at the same time, serving her own interests and plotting to put her own son, Henry, on the throne. The unfortunate, terrible ending of Joan of Arc is recounted by Jacquetta as a lesson she was forced to learn against her will, a violence to be endured for everybody's best interest to prevail. She is to be seen beside Anne the Duchess of Bedford, the first wife of The Duke of Bedford:

We have to play our part in this scene as witnesses, as women who walk inside the rule of men. I will be there to show how girls should be: virgins who do not hear voices, women who do not think that they know better than men. My aunt and the duchess and I represent women as men would like them to be. Joan is a woman that men cannot tolerate. (Gregory TLR: 46)

The question that remains to be answered is, with the death of the mystic, is the world of men safe from the threat of powerful women?

II. 2. Jacquetta of Luxembourg: goddess or witch?

The real life story of Jacquetta of Luxembourg is fascinating, and earns her the attention of writers and readers, even if one chooses to disregard the rumours of her possible connections with any supernatural forces, such as a goddess as an ancestress or her alleged witch's skills. The historical character Jacquetta of Luxembourg was the eldest child of the French Count Peter 1st of St Pol, and her ancestry was enough to single her out from birth as exceptional: her family descended from Charlemagne and were cousins to the Holy Roman Emperor. She grew up during the war between France and England, and learned how to play her cards in those challenging times. Philippa Gregory admits in her "Author's note", to having been attracted by the character and consequently trying to find (and imagine) more:

Why she [Jacquetta] has not been studied is a mystery to me. But she belongs to that large population of women whose lives have been ignored by historians in favour of the lives of prominent men. Also this period is relatively neglected compared to – say – more recent times, or even the Tudor period. I expect more historians will work on the fifteenth century, and I hope there will be more research into its women, including Jacquetta.

I suggest that she was inspired by her family legend of Melusina, the water goddess, whose story is beautifully described in Luxembourg Museum as part of the history of the county. To this day the city guides point out the rocks through which Melusina's bath sank, when her husband broke his promise and spied on her. Certainly, the legend of Melusina was used in the art and alchemy of the period, and Jacquetta owned a book that told the story of her goddess ancestor. I think it very important that we as modern readers understand that religion, spiritualism and magic played a central part in the imaginative life of medieval people. (ibidem: 486)

Jacquetta's first husband, John, Duke of Bedford was the youngest son of King Henry IV, who, according to Gregory's plot, is obsessed with alchemy and finding the Stone, which will help him end the war between France and England. His first encounter with Jacquetta takes place as if under a spell, at Joan of Arc's trial, with him behaving as if possessed and

demanding to know if she is still a maid. At that time, he was still married, but, in 1432, when he loses his wife to plague, he arranges to marry the seventeen-year-old Jacquetta, who is his social equal by her birth.

Far from desiring her for her beauty and fertility, the Duke of Bedford intends very much to keep Jacquetta a virgin with “the pure touch” (ibidem: 76), which will help him with his alchemy projects – as he confesses, “When I first met you they had just told me that they could go no further without a young woman, a virgin, who could see the future. In short, I needed a girl who could capture a unicorn.” (ibidem: 64). Here and elsewhere in the novel, the image of the unicorn, the maid, and the water goddess go hand in hand, weaving a web of enchantment in which the characters live and breathe magic. Although married for two years, John and Jacquetta do not accomplish his goal and, at the moment of his death, he still sees the descendant of a goddess in her, a copy of a divine work of art, instead of a woman to be loved and cherished for herself:

I wanted you the moment I saw you. Not as a wife, for I was married to Anne then. I wanted you as a treasure. I believed you had the Sight, I knew you were descended from Melusina, I thought you might bring the Stone to me.’ [...] ‘A girl of flame,’ he says quietly. ‘A golden maid. I am glad to have seen such a thing before I died.’ I stand obediently still, though I can feel sobs shaking my slight body. At this moment of his death he sees me as an object transmuted into gold; he does not see me, he does not love me, he does not even want me for myself. (ibidem: 122)

Widowed so early in her life, Jacquetta Duchess of Bedford has, legally, one year to mourn for the death of her husband, and then she is to be married to some lord of the King’s choosing. For that purpose, the King instructs Jacquetta to come to England and orders Sir Richard Woodville, a squire loyal to the late Duke of Bedford, to arrange it. When Jacquetta and Richard fall in love, in spite of his being a poor knight, far below Jacquetta in social status, they marry secretly – a morganatic marriage, where one of the partners is socially inferior. The outrageous deed is actually planned by Jacquetta, who drinks some fertility potions in order to become pregnant with the baby that will grow to become Queen Elizabeth Woodville. Tempted at first to use a charm for solving her marriage problem, Jacquetta resorts to her wits instead and succeeds in achieving her goal: “I put the charm bracelet away in the purse and return it to my jewel case. I don’t need a spell to foresee the future; I am going to make it happen.” (ibidem: 131).

On reading Jacquetta’s letter that informed him of the marriage as a ‘fait accompli’, King Henry is enraged, fines the couple £1000, but allows their heirs to inherit, which was unusual for morganatic marriages in England. The success of Jacquetta’s strategy, the result, some say, of witchcraft, is remembered later in the form of a lesson she tries to teach her eldest daughter, Elizabeth – that magic and determination, combined with intelligence, will take one a long way:

I believe that a desire and a prayer and a spell are all the same thing,’ I say. ‘When you pray you know that you want something, that’s always the first step. To let yourself know that you want something, that you yearn for it. Sometimes that’s the hardest thing to do. Because you have to have courage to know what you desire. You have to have courage to acknowledge that you are unhappy without it. And sometimes you have to find courage to know that it was your folly or your wrongdoing which lost it; before you make a spell to bring it back, you have to change yourself. That’s one of the deepest transformations that can be.’ (ibidem: 238)

A descendant from the water goddess Melusina, Jacquetta plays her cards wisely and only resorts to charms or spells when she is at her wits’ end. Devoted to her queen, Margaret d’Anjou, she tries with all her might to help the latter without resorting to herbs, cards, potions or spells, as she knows that the world of men, led by King Henry himself, is against

women who exert their power; in that respect, she reminds Queen Margaret of the unfortunate fate of her sister-in-law, Eleanor Cobham, tried as a witch and punished for it:

Your Grace, every woman is a mad ugly bad old witch, somewhere in her heart. The task of my life is to conceal this. The task of every woman is to deny this. [...] The world does not allow women like Eleanor, women like me, to thrive. The world cannot tolerate women who think and feel. The world we live in will not tolerate things that cannot be understood, things that cannot be easily explained. In this world, a wise woman hides her gifts. (ibidem: 387)

A remarkable woman, Jacquetta is so loyal to the Queen she serves, that she tries very hard to help her every time the latter is in need, in spite of her own better judgement. At one point, the Queen, who is finally expecting a child, becomes so distressed by the news about an important defeat, that she allows her presumable lover to comfort her in the presence of her first lady, Jacquetta; at that very moment, the King finds them together and, in shock, takes Jacquetta's advice not to look and see the love scene, and falls into a deep sleep, for more than a year. In Philippa Gregory's interpretation of historical events, the Queen's transformation from a romantic girl into a she-wolf happens under the very eyes of Jacquetta Rivers (the family name she chose when her husband became a baron, as a reminder of the water goddess), who is at her side until Edward York becomes King.

II. 3. Margaret d'Anjou: the predatory queen

In *The Lady of the Rivers*, narrated in Jacquetta's voice, the story and figure of Margaret d'Anjou, Queen of England, are easily sketched: she became the wife of King Henry VI, when she was very young, and, frivolous by nature, was a poor match to her pious, unstable and recluse husband, who, following the advice of his religious councillors, almost never visited her bedroom. With her own favourites at Court, she gradually undermines York's ascendancy, and fights against this king's cousin for all her life.

Desperate to produce an heir to the throne, Queen Margaret eventually achieves her purpose, but has to give birth to her son while her husband is sleeping, after falling into in a catatonic state at the shock of finding her in the arms of her lover (most likely, the prince's biological father). Even though she demands to be recognised as the actual ruler/ regent, during her husband's sleep, she fails to do so, which embitters her even more:

Those lords who have loved her as a queen dare not imagine her as a regent. [...] They don't like to think of women in power, women as leaders. The ability of women is not acknowledged; indeed, it is concealed. [...] The queen's mistake is to claim the power and the title. The lords cannot bear the thought of a woman's rule, they cannot bear to even think that a woman can rule. It is as if they want to put her back into the confinement chamber. It is as if the king her husband, by falling asleep, has set her free, free to command the kingdom; and that the duty of all the other great men is to return her to him. If they could put her to sleep like him, I think they would. (ibidem: 329-330)

The King, although partially restored in health, and his entourage are slowly removed from power, which is not something Queen Margaret would accept easily. Fights begin and, after the Yorkists capture King Henry at Northampton (July 1460), the parties agree that Henry should remain king but recognize York, and not his (own) son Edward, as heir to the throne. Margaret, though, is unhappy with the arrangement, so she upholds her son's claim to the royal succession and refuses to accept the compromise. No longer interested in pretending she is merely the King's spouse, she resorts to all weapons in the arsenal in order to ensure her son's succession to the throne; in other words, she becomes the enemy of the country she is supposed to be the Queen of:

The queen, a woman in armour, leading her own army, with a son conceived by a sleeping husband, a woman who uses alchemy and possibly the dark arts, a French

princess in alliance with our enemies, has become an object of utter horror to the people of her country. With the Scots behind her, she has become a winter queen, one who comes out of the darkness of the north like a wolf. (ibidem: 445)

It seems that the story of a promising Queen ends badly, with the beautiful rose she was when she married the King now turned into a she-wolf, a predator enraged at life and its wheel of fortune.

III. Conclusion

Without pretending to be a feminist study, this paper has tried to analyse the typologies of powerful women present in Philippa Gregory's novel *The Lady of the Rivers*, starting from the magical elements therein. Although the novel is constructed around the figures of Jacquetta of Luxembourg, who becomes, first the Duchess of Bedford, then the wife of the Baron Richard Rivers, and Margaret d'Anjou, Queen of England, the study also pays special attention to the figure of Joan of Arc, a powerful Middle Age figure that helps the interpretation and the evolution of things. In my demonstration, I have tried to identify and introduce the mythological figures that are illustrated in the novel as powerful magical sources for some of the characters, the water goddess Melusina and the unicorn.

The main conclusion to the study would be that, far from drawing its powers from mythological or mystical sources alone, the recipe that gives the novel and its characters their force is the combination of magic, will and intelligence, which make the reading both appealing and entrancing at the same time.

Joan of Arc, the maid to be eventually sanctified after her being burned at the stake as a witch, Margaret d'Anjou, a glamorous Queen who kept fighting till there was no one left to support her claims for power, and Jacquetta of Luxembourg, the ancestress of powerful queens (the mother of Queen Elizabeth Woodville, the grandmother of Elizabeth or York, the wife of Henry Tudor, and the great-great-grandmother of Queen Elizabeth I) – they are three instances of powerful women who took their chances in a time that was not yet ready for them. For such women, at that time, with men their commanding superiors, the only solution was, in the words of the book, the unknown, the mystery:

Men command the world that they know [...] Everything that men know, they make their own. Everything that they learn, they claim for themselves. They are like the alchemists who look for the laws that govern the world, and then want to own them and keep them secret. Everything they discover, they hug to themselves, they shape knowledge into their own selfish image. What is left to us women, but the realms of the unknown? (ibidem: 33)

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