

Reading Club Guide

*This teaching guide for **The Women of the Cousins' War** includes an introduction and discussion questions for enhancing your book club. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

INTRODUCTION

The Women of the Cousins' War is a three-part biography of the heroines of Philippa Gregory's Cousins' War books. Together with the historians David Baldwin and Michael Jones, Gregory re-creates the extraordinary lives and times of Jacquetta, Duchess of Bedford; Elizabeth Woodville, queen of England; and Margaret Beaufort, the matriarch of the House of Tudor.

In her introduction, Gregory writes revealingly about the differences among history, fiction, and historical fiction. She looks at why women have been excluded from the production of history and from history itself. How are fictional and historical narratives shaped by their authors? By turning her attention to three women, whose remarkable lives have gone largely unexamined by scholars, Gregory restores them to the historical record and raises important questions about the responsibility of the historian and the significance of women in medieval English society.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Philippa Gregory studied history at the University of Sussex and received a Ph.D. at the University of Edinburgh. She is a recognized author 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.

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*.

Dr. Michael Jones did his Ph.D. on the Beaufort family, and subsequently 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*, a highly praised biography of Margaret Beaufort, which was shortlisted for the Whitfield Prize.

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For Discussion

1. What are some explanations for the notable absence of women from the historical record of the medieval era?
2. In her introduction, how does Philippa Gregory differentiate between history, fiction, and historical fiction?
3. To what extent can the series of skirmishes that later became known as the Wars of the Roses be traced to a specific triggering event? What explains the enduring conflict between the houses of York and Lancaster?
4. How does Jacquetta of Luxembourg's marriage to John, Duke of Bedford, propel her into the political arena? How does her second marriage to Richard Woodville affect her political ascent?
5. What role does the legend of Melusina play in Jacquetta's reputation as a seductress with magical powers?
6. Discuss the role of the supernatural in the medieval world, especially as it relates to the rise of witchcraft trials in this era.
7. Why does the controversy that surrounds Jacquetta in the aftermath of the secret marriage she facilitates between King Edward and her daughter Elizabeth come to define her historical persona?
8. Discuss how scholars play a part in selecting and shaping the information they include in what Gregory calls the "created narrative" that they reveal to the reader as "history."
9. Discuss the culture of arranged marriages among the aristocracy of medieval England. How did the contractual nature of these marriages establish loyalties and political allegiances?
10. Why does King Edward's secret marriage to Elizabeth Woodville anger those loyal to him? Why might such an unlikely alliance be considered suspect?
11. Discuss the concept of "loyal opposition" as it relates to the Earl of Warwick's behavior in the Robin of Redesdale's rebellion in Yorkshire. Why did the earl in particular object so strenuously to Edward's marriage to Elizabeth?

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12. How does King Henry respond to the emergence of the young Lambert Simnel, an impersonator of Edward, Earl of Warwick? How do the Irish lords react to Simnel's story? To what extent does Elizabeth of Woodville's involvement in a conspiracy to force Henry from the throne seem plausible?
13. Discuss the mystery surrounding the princes in the Tower. How does their disappearance complicate Elizabeth Woodville's relationship with her brother-in-law, Richard III?
14. What does Elizabeth Woodville's will reveal about her relationship with her daughter the queen and what does it suggest about her relationship with her son-in-law King Henry?
15. Discuss the rise of the merchant class in the late Middle Ages. How did a rise in social mobility and the transformation of English society from a land-based economy into a land-and-cash economy impact the aristocracy?
16. How does John Beaufort's failure as a war commander and his eventual suicide affect his daughter, Margaret? What do her reactions to these potentially devastating social circumstances suggest about her character?
17. What do Margaret's exchanges with her confessor and spiritual adviser, John Fisher, indicate about her piety and religious awareness, even at a young age? Do you accept these stories completely?
18. At twelve years of age, Margaret Beaufort finds herself widowed, pregnant, and living in an unruly region of Wales. Discuss the series of events that lead to this. To what extent does Margaret bear responsibility for the unfortunate situation in which she finds herself?
19. Discuss the significance of Margaret's joining the confraternity of the Abbey of Croyland and the Order of the Holy Trinity. What do these organizations offer her and her family?
20. How does Margaret's marriage to Thomas, Lord Stanley, enable her to secure a place for her son, Henry Tudor, in the Yorkist realm led by Edward IV?
21. If Jacquetta of Luxembourg, Elizabeth Woodville, and Margaret Beaufort were given the same opportunities as their male peers, how might their lives have differed?

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22. In the medieval era, physical beauty was believed to signify goodness. How did this belief both help and harm the three women profiled in this book?
23. How might the many uncertainties that characterized this era—a high infant mortality rate, a short life expectancy, the spread of the Black Death, near-constant political strife, and government unrest—have contributed to a rising belief in the supernatural?
24. How do the individual experiences of Jacquetta of Luxembourg, Elizabeth Woodville, and Margaret Beaufort compare? Of the three women, which do you feel was most powerful in her own right, and why?