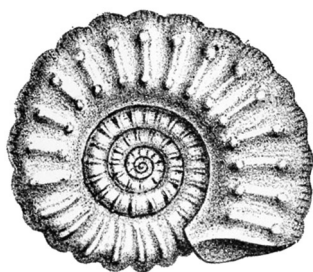


PHILIPPA  
GREGORY  
ROYAL WITCH



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*. . . a myrmayde  
Ressemblyng vn-to a chaunteresse,  
Of face lyke a soreceresse,  
Vppon a toure with a gret route  
Of wychches . . .*

‘A Complaint for my Lady of Gloucester  
and Holland’, attributed to John Lydgate

STERBOROUGH CASTLE, SURREY,  
WINTER

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1420

I KNEEL BESIDE my mother's bed, her cold hand in mine. My father and my brother are speechless with grief at the foot. The priest goes round and around, anointing my mother's body with holy oil, reciting the office for the dying in a low throbbing monotone like a spell.

'Lady Mother,' I say, my voice trembling a little. 'Don't leave me!'

The eye nearest to me opens a slit for one last critical scrutiny of my face and then closes, as if she has seen more than enough.

'What will I do without you?' I whisper. A tear rolls down my cheek, and I blot it with my sleeve. 'Is it your wish that I go to court?' I quaver, gambling that she is too far gone to sit up and declare that I should be bundled into a nunnery rather than waste my precious brother's inheritance.

My mother opens her gummy mouth, struggling to speak.

'I obey!' I interrupt her. 'Of course! A deathbed request: I obey you – I am bound to obey you.' I break down in sobs loud enough to muffle any croaked last-minute contradiction. Her eyes widen as she struggles to deny my freedom; my older sister raises her head to protest as I grasp my mother's hand and crush it. 'I will go,' I promise. 'You will be proud of me. You will look down from Heaven and see me, as happy as a girl in a fairy tale.'

She is struggling to refuse, but my loud sobs drown her out. Even now, on her deathbed, she is trying to confine me to a nunnery; but

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no one can hear any word of hers over my sobbing promises, and with one last effort, she pulls her hand from mine, turns her head away and dies.

Dies, just like that! The priest starts a low-voiced chant; the wise women step forward and cross her limp hands across her wasted body, put pennies on her closed eyelids. My older brother – her favourite, Reynold – bursts into racking sobs as I bury my face in my hands to hide my triumph.

WESTMINSTER PALACE,  
SPRING

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1421

THREE MONTHS LATER and I am free from mourning, free from my home, enriched with the spoils from my mother's treasure box, which my brother did not have the wit to lock, finding my way through the jumble of courts, offices, pantries, chapels, houses, and gardens that is the sprawling village of Westminster Palace, the greatest royal court in England. Every courtyard is springing green; every tree is in bud; there are daffodils blowing all along the banks of the River Thames. My childhood, as the middle child of a not-very important family at Sterborough Castle, is far behind me: my life – my real life – is about to start. I was born a poor girl with everything to win: the poor beautiful girl of all the stories, hidden in my home like a goose-girl at the palace gates, waiting in Surrey through long dull years to enter this world of wealth and royalty.

Of course, I have to begin in service. I would have preferred to serve the newly arrived, newly crowned Queen of England herself: Queen Catherine. But her court is run by the king's sister-in-law, and she does not know that I am destined for greatness. Instead of the queen I will have a countess: not even a countess of England

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but of Hainault, which is somewhere between northern France and the Netherlands. It does not matter where; I shall be married to a wealthy nobleman before my first year is out.

‘I can introduce you to Her Grace now,’ says Lord Mountfalcon, the head of the queen’s household, gesturing towards the royal rooms. He steals a glance at me, taking in my blonde hair, modestly plaited under my headdress, and my clear grey eyes. We walk together; I have to stop myself from dancing at his heels like a puppy. ‘You will have your bouche at court, two gowns a year, a salary and a maid and a horse, as long as Her Grace stays in the kingdom.’

‘No, wait! Stays in the kingdom?’ I forget to keep my eyes modestly lowered and my voice sweet. ‘I thought she’d come here for refuge? I thought she was here forever?’

‘She’s not here to stay,’ he says. ‘She’s come for help to get her lands back. The poor lady has been betrayed by the very men who should guard her.’ He looks quite indignant on her behalf. ‘Betrayed by her own husband in league with her own cousin! Have you ever heard of such a thing?’

I widen my eyes and look up at him. ‘Oh my Lord! I’ve just come to court, I know nothing about anything.’

‘I’ll tell you. Her own husband has taken her lands – vast lands, northern France and all the Lowlands – with the support of her cousin the Duke of Burgundy. No wonder she’s come to our king. Philip of Burgundy is our ally in the war against France. We will intercede for the poor lady.’

I nod as if I am listening, but now I see how my father got me this place – nobody else wanted it. My countess is not a great woman at the queen’s court; she is their pensioner. Chances are they’ll get bored of her, and then she’ll turn me off, and I’ll have to start all over again or end up back at Sterborough.

‘This way then, Mistress Eleanor.’ He smiles kindly and leads the way through the great presence chamber, where a few unimportant people stare as I sail past them, my new gown swishing and my veil streaming. The double doors are thrown open by the guard of

honour, and there before me, in colours as bright as a newly woven tapestry, are Queen Catherine of Valois, her guest Jacqueline of Hainault, and a court of women.

A pair of ladies are marking out dance steps in a half-hearted rehearsal; two are seated beside Queen Catherine, stitching priceless French lace on vestments. Another woman, big with child, is opening a book on a lectern, preparing for pious reading. They are all dressed in gowns so brightly embroidered that they look like enamelled flowers on a silver cup. They all wear ornate headdresses; I feel dowdy in my own, my very best – newly made and worn for the first time today. My gaze goes to their feet. They all have exquisite leather slippers, dyed in bright colours, some with embroidery in gold thread. I smooth down my gown to hide my ordinary boots.

I make a deep curtsy to the queen, who is unmistakable, her blonde hair showing under her high headdress, fair-skinned, and blue-eyed. She is about the same age as me – around twenty – with a little doll's face of perfect features.

Her blonde prettiness makes me glad not to be her maid-of-honour. I will look better beside Jacqueline of Hainault, who is brown-haired and dark-eyed, her skin as tanned as a woman who works in the fields. She's no older than me – but she has lost any soft girlishness she ever had. Her jaw is square, as if she is gritting her teeth, and her mouth is a hard straight line. She looks grim, almost manly, standing out among these ladies amusing themselves with nothings. She looks at me with a direct stare, raking me with her brown gaze as if she is measuring my worth.

She rises to greet me as if I am an equal, not her inferior, and I curtsy gracefully and kiss her hand.

'Mistress Eleanor Cobham,' the chamberlain introduces me.

'I'm glad you have come to keep me company,' she says in French. 'You can teach me English.'

'I shall be delighted,' I say. 'I can write letters too.'

'And can you read aloud?'

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‘Oh yes, in English and French,’ I say confidently. ‘But I have no Latin – I am sorry, my lady.’

‘We all speak French here.’ She smiles at the French-born queen. ‘What else? But why are you not married at your age?’

I maintain my polite smile though I think her rude. ‘Alas, my betrothed was killed,’ I lie easily. ‘These terrible wars, you know . . .’ No one here will know that I was promised to a nunnery from my cradle and that I have only escaped because my mother died before she could make me go.

Countess Jacqueline shrugs. ‘Some marriages are lost by wars, and some end them!’ she smiles at the queen. ‘Her Grace’s marriage will bring peace.’

Everyone murmurs how wonderful this is, as if the queen’s father, the King of France, is not quite mad and her brother is not waging the war that she was supposed to end. She is no peacemaker; we must hope she does not think herself made of glass like her father and demand that no one touch her for fear of shattering.

‘And as for me,’ Jacqueline continues, ‘I don’t want peace; I want victory.’

I try not to look as appalled as I feel. ‘I’m so glad that you have found safety,’ I flounder, and offer a pretty little extra bob to the queen.

‘Safety doesn’t interest me,’ the terrible woman insists. ‘I’ll go to war to get my lands back from my false husband. The king will help me.’

I allow myself a quick glance at Queen Catherine, who must think her husband the king has done enough fighting and should come home to England and make a son and heir on his new bride; but she is admiring her friend.

‘I’ll show you to our rooms myself.’ Jacqueline takes me by the hand, curtsies to the queen, and leads me from the privy chamber through the presence chamber and along a gallery, into her grand suite.

I have a small bedchamber looking towards the river, with shutters to keep out the draughts from the leaded windows. The gildings

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on the beams and the paintings on the wooden panels are old and faded. Someone has scratched their name above the wainscotting, as if they were a prisoner carving into a sandstone wall, and this gives me an odd, superstitious shiver. It is far smaller than my bedroom at home but better than a nun's cell. That is what I have to keep in mind: that I have escaped a nunnery, and now my future can find me. He could be walking through the gardens even now.

'I'll leave you here,' the countess says. 'You know how to find your way back to the privy chamber? This place is like a coney warren. We eat supper at about six o'clock, after Vespers. You'll attend me to church.' She gives me a warm, easy smile. 'You won't find me hard to serve; I don't like fuss.'

'Oh, I do!' I say, which makes her laugh.

'Don't fuss over me,' she commands.



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