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Feminist Historical Fiction or Commercial Entertainment? (In)authenticity in Philippa Gregory's Portrayal of Catherine of Aragon

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Philippa Gregory claims to be a "feminist, radical historian" (Ágútsdóttir 2015, 144) who re-examines patriarchal historical discourse. This article explores Gregory's representation of Catherine of Aragon, placing Gregory within Britain's historical novel tradition and arguing for a joint analysis of three novels—*The Constant Princess* (2005), *The King's Curse* (2014) and *Three Sisters, Three Queens* (2016). Informed by Carr's model of feminist empowerment and Parkins' notion of agency as embodied practice, the analysis scrutinises aspects of characterisation and narrative technique in order to assess whether Gregory's texts portray an empowered woman endowed with (historical) agency. Drawing on Saxton's notion of "authenticity" as "verisimilitude of accuracy" (2020a, 128), it is argued that the texts under analysis seem to replicate rather than subvert the contradictions of the popular genres they are heavily indebted to, specifically romance and the erotic historical. While, in line with recent research, it is tempting to interpret Gregory's take on Catherine of Aragon as not being feminist but *post*feminist, this article concludes that the essentially inauthentic portrayal provided is more closely related to the author's unsuccessful attempt at replicating her trademark controversy-seeking literary formula than to her possibly postfeminist endeavours.

Keywords: authenticity; Catherine of Aragon; feminism; Philippa Gregory; historical fiction; popular literature

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¿Ficción histórica feminista o entretenimiento comercial? La (in)autenticidad del retrato de Catalina de Aragón en la obra de Philippa Gregory

Philippa Gregory, autoproclamada "historiadora feminista radical" (Ágútsdóttir 2015, 144), afirma re-examinar el discurso histórico patriarcal. Este artículo examina la representación de Catalina de Aragón en Gregory, para lo cual contextualiza a la autora dentro de la novela histórica británica, justificando el análisis conjunto de tres novelas—*The Constant Princess* (2005), *The King's Curse* (2014) y *Three Sisters, Three Queens* (2016). Partiendo del modelo de empoderamiento feminista de Carr y de la interpretación de Parkins de agencia como práctica corporal, se analizan aspectos de caracterización y técnica narrativa para determinar si los textos retratan a una mujer empoderada dotada de agencia (histórica). Basándose en el concepto de "autenticidad" de Saxton, entendido como "verosimilitud de fidelidad" (2020a, 128), se argumenta que los textos analizados parecen replicar más que subvertir las contradicciones de los géneros populares de los que bebe, como el romance o la novela erótica de época. Si bien, en línea con recientes estudios, es tentador interpretar los textos no como feministas sino *post*feministas, se concluye que el retrato esencialmente inauténtico ofrecido por Gregory está más claramente relacionado con el intento frustrado de la autora de replicar su característica y controvertida fórmula literaria que con una posible sensibilidad postfeminista.

Palabras clave: autenticidad; Catalina de Aragón; feminismo; Philippa Gregory; novela histórica; literatura popular

1. Introduction

In line with the "historical turn" identified by critics (Keen 2006, 167), "lay[ing] claim to the past" is central to contemporary British fiction (Arias 2014, 21) and has been noted as a defining feature of the literary production of such diverse writers as Maggie O'Farrell (Strehle 2017, 62), Sarah Hall (Vice 2017, 70), Alan Warner (Riach 2017, 94-95) and Ali Smith (Germanà 2017, 100). Interestingly, Smith and Jonathan Coe, among several other authors, have contributed to the birth of the Brexit novel (Shaw 2021), their latest works highlighting how conflicting perceptions of the past define the present and result in division (Self 2020). Crucially for the purposes of this article, the historical turn has also contributed to the ever-increasing popularity of historical fiction, helping it receive the critical attention that Beck, writing over a decade ago, considered unprecedented (2012, 4).

The historical novel has often been used to revise official historical narratives. Such is the case of women authors aiming to examine patriarchal historical discourse in order to vindicate the role played by women in history (Wallace 2005, 4). This is what

Philippa Gregory, a self-proclaimed "feminist, radical historian" (Ágútsdóttir 2015, 144), claims to do in her fiction. In this light, the present article inquires into the representation of Catherine of Aragon in Gregory's body of work.

The relevance of this research is threefold. First, Catherine has often been relegated to the fringes of official historiography (Martínez Alcorlo 2012, 254). Secondly, she has not been given her due in earlier fictional accounts, including early plays by Pedro Calderón de la Barca (*La cisma de Ingalaterra*, c. 1613) and William Shakespeare (*Henry VIII*, 1627), in which Catherine plays the secondary role of a mostly passive, highly exoticised woman (Bacigapulo 1974, 215; 223; Vallejo-Mateo 2015, 315-18). Such depictions, however, contradict the far from negligible power of queens consort in sixteenth-century Europe. In fact, Fernández Álvarez (2018) and Sowerby (2020) demonstrate that Catherine did exert her power in a very capable way. For Tremlett too, Catherine was an adept diplomat, ruler and strategist and thus so "much more than a passive victim caught in the tumultuous river of history" (2010, 15), involving herself directly in the design of the military strategy that would lead England to victory over Scotland at Flodden Field (1513). Thirdly, this research focuses on "popular" literary manifestations which, although influential, remain largely "beneath the critical radar" (Schneider-Mayerson 2010, 29). Indeed, as Bianchi and Zanettin have pointed out, most of the research addressing "the central role played by popular fiction in people's cultural life" has been produced by cultural studies practitioners, not literary scholars, which "should alert us […] to what is at stake when popular fiction is […] consumed" (2018, 794-95). Not surprisingly, then, critics have so far paid scant attention to Philippa Gregory's oeuvre.

This article will first place Gregory within Britain's historical novel tradition, which will also serve to introduce the theoretical and methodological framework informing the present study. Gregory's three novels in which Catherine is prominently featured will then be identified and the argument will be presented for a joint analysis which scrutinises aspects of characterisation and narrative technique to assess the extent to which Gregory's Catherine novels may be considered the work of a "feminist, radical historian."

2. Philippa Gregory and the British historical novel tradition. theoretical and methodological considerations

Historical novels typically set their plots in "crucial" or "foundational" times (Brantly 2017, 136) like the Tudor period, widely considered as central to English history (Beck 2012, 200). Lukács ([1955] 1963, 33) identified Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814) as the first in the genre. Although after Scott, historical fiction was cultivated by a host of prominent writers, by the end of World War I it was being "marketed mainly to women" (Wilson 2015, 146). As such it became the almost exclusive preserve of women writers, which contributed to its perception as a low-brow genre (Wallace 2005, 11-12).

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, however, and influenced by postmodern historiography (White 1973), renowned male writers began once again to cultivate

the historical. This literary comeback was related to the birth of a new subgenre, "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 1988, 93). Mixing standard historical fiction strategies with self-reflexive traits that drew attention to its own fictional nature, historiographic metafiction was widely used to denounce hegemonic historical narratives. In this sense, then, the historical novel has, arguably, begun to supersede the hitherto clear-cut distinction between history and fiction (Southgate 2009, 1). Accordingly, rather than being faithful to the historical record, historical novels are expected to contain "symbolic truth" (Russo 2021a, 67). As Saxton (2020a, 128) argues, historical fiction is not expected to convey "accuracy"—"the accepted facts"—but rather "authenticity," i.e. "the verisimilitude of accuracy," which "can be shaped intertextually, culturally, and subjectively." In this context, women authors also turned to historical metafiction, finally enabling a scenario where the woman's historical novel could garner critical acclaim (de Groot 2004, 218).

Simultaneously, popular historical fiction has remained as strong as ever (de Groot 2004, 218), being clearly dominated by women authors like Philippa Gregory (Kennedy 2016, 44), dubbed "the queen of Tudor fiction" in blurbs. Indeed, the Tudors are "ubiquitous" (Saxton 2020b, 107) and their numerous fictional representations in the new Millennium can be partly attributed to Gregory and the extraordinary impact of her 2001 novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* (Beck 2012, 200; Saxton 2013, 93; Barlow 2014, 2-3).

Philippa Gregory (born 1954) graduated in history from the University of Sussex and later received a PhD in literature from the University of Edinburgh, with a thesis that examined eighteenth-century popular fiction. Since the publication of her *Wideacre* trilogy (1987-1990), Gregory has developed an instantly recognisable style (Beck 2012, 208) that draws on popular genres such as the historical romance, the family saga and the erotic historical (de Groot 2004, 12; Wallace 2005, 186; de Groot 2010, 52; Beck 2012, 208). Her novels can therefore be related to those by earlier popular fiction women authors such as Ann Radcliffe and Georgette Heyer—whose influence Gregory has herself acknowledged (Beck 2012, 210). However, she has been said to crucially subvert the conventions of such popular genres—including Radcliffe's trademark use of romance tropes and a more than evident concern with the supernatural (Barlow 2014, 35)—in order to engage with history and portray female agency and (en)power(ment) (Wallace 2005, 186; 190-91), thus "re-apprais[ing] and reassert[ing] the role of the woman in history" (Cooper and Short 2012a, 3).

Carr understands feminist empowerment as a cyclical process involving six stages: (1) an initial position of "powerlessness" which does not simply involve the lack of "real-world" power but also, crucially, personal attitudes that lead to "alienation from oneself;" (2) consciousness raising through which "one begins to see one's position and move toward other possible positions;" (3) interpretation, which triggers the next stage; (4) a more appropriate identity, which in turn opens up "possibilities for agency;" and (5) action ultimately leading to; (6) change (Carr 2003, 13-16).

In this model, agency is a key element of empowerment. Parkins understands agency as the individual's "capacity to take up and transform a given situation," which should "offer accounts of embodied subjects which are both sexually specific and historicized" (2000, 60-61), as only this can balance out the structural obstacles of gender and the power—political or otherwise—of the female individual. Considering, however, that this current research looks into the realm of the historical novel, the concept of agency should also be provided with a historical dimension. In Clark's words, assessing historical agency involves the evaluation of "who was responsible for historical events, as well as [understanding] the societal [e.g. gender-related] factors that either constrained or enabled people's ability to act" (2013, 492). The historical novel is a useful locus for this task, as "[a] powerful [...] work of historical fiction [...] is one that brings the relationship between the structural forces and the historical actors to the forefront of the historical event" (Clark 2013, 493).

This article will thus assess whether Gregory's Catherine novels do portray an empowered character endowed with (historical) agency. This is a valuable endeavour, as Kennedy warns that Gregory's use of romance and eroticism may complicate reading her novels as feminist (2016, 48) when feminist historiography has "meant a radical shift in the way in which [...] agency and power were broached by historians," exploring instead "alternative avenues of power available to women throughout history" (Barlow 2014, 42-43). Kennedy's qualms have something in common with the contradictions that Radway finds in contemporary romance, including "a tendency to consolidate certain feminist agendas [...] while disparaging the women's movement itself" (1991, 35). Likewise, previous scholarship has highlighted the ambivalent nature of the so-called "bodice-ripper" tradition. Drawing on Thurston's (1987) research on romance, Barlow argues that explicit sex scenes in paperback romances and erotic historical novels in the 1970s and 1980s "played an [...] important role in the [...] exploration of female sexual identity," enabling women to escape their oppressive daily life (Barlow 2014, 53-4; 209-10). Consequently, by "depicting sexual desires and fantasies [...] in forums outside traditional 'male stream'" women authors like Philippa Gregory arguably "*do* sex-positive feminism" (Roach 2016, 82-83; italics in the original). However, for others Gregory's fiction is nothing but "genteel pornography" (Beck 2012, 221), evidence of the "raunch culture" that frequently accompanies not feminist but *post*feminist approaches to female sexuality (Cooper and Short 2012a, 9-10).

The term "postfeminism" has been used to refer to both young "third-wave" feminists who, already in the 1990s, had begun to draw attention to what they perceived as the need to free "women from the ideological straitjackets imposed by [earlier] feminisms" (Cranny-Francis et al. 2003, 69) and others who perceived that feminism was no longer necessary, "speak[ing] up against sexism" but proposing solutions that "tend to be individual and consumerist-based with an emphasis upon *personal* responsibility and empowerment" (Day and Wray 2018, 114; italics in the original). Postfeminism may thus be seen to foster the image of "a sexually liberated,

feminine young woman inheriting the promise delivered by [what are] now [wrongly presented as] anachronistic equality agendas," when this entails the very real danger of mistaking the consumption of, and active involvement in the "raunch culture" that neoliberalism actively promotes as the way to achieve true freedom in a gender-equal world (Hemmings 2014, 379).

Researchers have indeed interpreted Gregory's novels as ultimately delivering a postfeminist message, either that "domesticity is the only 'right' choice for a woman" (Russo 2020, 280) or that love justifies all actions, even if these only serve to reinforce "traditional gender roles, particularly with regard to motherhood and marriage" (Saxton 2014, 128). Readings aligned with such views have in fact been provided of Gregory's signature novel, *The Other Boleyn Girl*, by de Groot (2004, 12), Bordo (2013, 320) and Ágústsdóttir (2015, 148).

However, the "nuanced and complex" characterisation that Barlow identifies as characteristic of Gregory's novels (2014, 116) may complicate their interpretation. Drawing on Gregory's words, Saxton contends that Gregory's approach to her characters is based on her own speculations "as to the 'emotions, motives and unconscious desires' of those women about whom she writes," thus highlighting that affect is central to Gregory's literary style in that the way she imagines her characters' "motives and responses" serves to interpret their actions (Saxton 2014, 118).

Since affect also plays a key role in academic reading (Felski 2011, 216), my analysis of Gregory's take on Catherine of Aragon will be aligned with what Felski, inspired by Paul Ricoeur, calls "suspicious criticism," which explores "[t]he chasm between intention and effects, between surface and depth meanings, between what the text says and what it cannot admit or face up to" (2011, 224).

3. Philippa Gregory's Catherine

3.1. Some Notes on the Novels under Analysis

The study of Gregory's Catherine of Aragon requires the consideration of three different novels, namely *The Constant Princess* (2005)—which focuses principally on the figure of Catherine—and two later novels in which Catherine also prominently features, *The King's Curse* (2014) and *Three Sisters, Three Queens* (2016). Having previously suggested in *The Other Boleyn Girl* that Anne Boleyn may have been guilty of incest, Gregory infuses narrative tension into the Catherine story by putting forth two other equally controversial theses.

The first of these theories is that Catherine consummated her marriage to Arthur and therefore lies when she claims that she was a virgin when marrying Henry, which runs counter to mainstream historiography (Tremlett 2010; Fernández Álvarez 2018). The second places responsibility for the death of Edward, the elder of the so-called "princes in the Tower," and Edward IV's heir, on Henry VIII's grandmother, Margaret Beaufort, and not on Richard III. This thesis informs all of Gregory's

Plantagenet and Tudor novels: a curse, which gives *The King's Curse* its title, dictates that whoever was responsible for the death of Edward IV's heir will suffer the death of their male heirs, thus extinguishing their line. This proves disastrous for Catherine, the collateral victim of this curse: Henry VIII will not be given a male heir by Catherine. The reader knows this, but Catherine does not and nor does Henry. Wallace (2005) sees the magic in Gregory's plots as reminiscent of the mythical elements in Michèle Roberts's *The Wild Girl* (1984), which is presented as a lost fifth gospel written by Mary Magdalene and juxtaposes a realist first-person narrative with Mary Magdalene's oneiric visions in an attempt to "provide a mystical and poetic recovery of the repressed maternal-feminine" (184).

Gregory's main Catherine novel, *The Constant Princess*, deviates from the rest of her canon in two main ways. Firstly, she alternates her trademark first-person narrative—in this case, by Catherine and highlighted in italics—with a third-person omniscient narration. As Kennedy sees it, "rewriting history from a woman's perspective" can be an instance of "feminist resistance" in tune with E. P. Thompson's aim to write "history from below" (Kennedy 2016, 43-44). Since Gregory's focus "on the emotional experience of her subjects" is behind her standard use of "first-person, present-tense narration," which allows the heroine to relate events "from 'her own viewpoint'"—as Saxton (2014, 123) puts it, drawing on Gregory herself—it is noteworthy that Gregory should deviate from her first-person only narrative strategy on this one occasion.

Indeed, the alternation between first- and third-person narration in this novel may be seen as a narrative experiment that Gregory has not used since. This could be because her first-person narration—like that used by Eleanor Hibbert in her Victoria Holt modern gothics—fosters the reader's identification with the protagonist, while her third-person narration—as used by Hibbert in her Jean Pleady novels—conveys a sense of detachment, ultimately minimising the reader's identification (Wallace 2005, 136; Barlow 2014, 93-94) and empathy with the female protagonist.

The second difference in her approach is that, while Gregory's other fictional biographies address all the main events in the protagonists' lives, *The Constant Princess* only focuses on the period between Catherine's arrival in England in 1501—with some flashbacks to her childhood—and 1513, when England, under Catherine's regency, defeats Scotland at Flodden. Then the narrative fast-forwards to 1529, when a forty-four-year-old Catherine appears before the Legatine Court that is to decide on the validity of her marriage to Henry. Catherine of Aragon did not die until 1536, and nothing is said in this novel about what the future would hold for her. This narrative is, therefore, not only exceptionally incomplete but also inconclusive.

The lack of a proper conclusion is partly compensated for by *The King's Curse* and *Three Sisters, Three Queens*. These novels are narrated in the first person by their respective protagonists, Margaret Pole and Margaret Tudor. The former was Queen Elizabeth of York's first cousin and, as such, a prominent Plantagenet, while the latter, James IV of Scotland's queen consort, was the sister of both of Catherine's husbands. *The Constant*

Princess and *The King's Curse* have been adapted as a single television series (*The Spanish Princess*, Starz, 2019-2020), which suggests that a joint analysis is not only possible but convenient.

3.2. A Suspicious Reading of Gregory's Catherine

In line with Carr's model of feminist empowerment (2003), my analysis revolves around four situations of powerlessness that are clearly identifiable in Gregory's narrative, namely Catherine's fragile status upon her arrival in England, her widowhood, her difficulties in conceiving (and related marital problems) and, ultimately, her estrangement from Henry VIII. I shall look into the way Gregory's character confronts these aspects across all three novels. My aim is to assess whether the narrative span from the emergence of the first crisis to the resolution of the fourth can be considered to portray an overall process of feminist empowerment, paying particular attention to the notion of (historical) agency.

There is no doubt that Gregory's combined narrative indicates that Catherine recognises such situations as instances of powerlessness. What is not so clear is whether this recognition triggers a more appropriate identity for developing agency, that is, Catherine being involved in actions that result in effective change. Clearly alluding to Hall's dynamic perception of identity as a process (1991, 47), Gregory's young Catherine unambiguously acknowledges being "*certain that my way ahead in England is to become English*" (Gregory [2005] 2006, 124; italics in the original). This is because her initial position of powerlessness seems to stem from her foreignness.

The opening pages in *The Constant Princess* contain Catherine's childhood memories of Granada, which are used to suggest exoticism. Catherine's narrative voice makes plentiful references to the Alhambra, where she lived "*half drunk with sensual pleasure*" (Gregory [2005] 2006, 20; italics in the original). In this light, and considering that Orientalism has traditionally represented the Orient as sensual (Said 2003, 4), it is clear that Catherine is presented in an orientalised light which adds to the long tradition of such fictional portrayals that can be traced back to Shakespeare's Catherine in *Henry VIII* (Vallejo-Mateo 2015, 316). The first visible effect of her foreignness, however, is that Catherine misses her homeland, feeling lonely (Gregory [2005] 2006, 29) and alienated at court (57; 83-84). This elicits sympathy in Margaret Pole in *The King's Curse*, and she does everything in her power to make Catherine feel at home: "He [Henry VII] is not thinking of a young woman, missing her mother, in a strange land" (Gregory [2014] 2015, 23). Catherine's foreignness also has a powerful, though different, effect on Margaret Tudor. In *Three Sisters, Three Queens*, Catherine's heavily-accented speech and her "little foreign roll of the shoulders" irritate Margaret, in no small part because it all seems somewhat contrived to her—"I see that she understands English perfectly, just as I had always thought" (Gregory [2016] 2017, 25). [1]

[1] *Three Sisters, Three Queens* subtly hints at a sense of performance as being key to Gregory's character, which would make her remarkably similar to Gregory's Anne Boleyn in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, who chooses to play the role of a French *femme fatale* (Prieto-Arranz and Bastida-Rodríguez 2021), with serious implications regarding

However, the narrative does not provide any evidence pointing to true identity development. On the contrary, the reader perceives Catherine as a young woman who uses her—probably partly enacted—foreignness to elicit sexual attraction in the key actors with the power to help her move on to other possible positions, namely Arthur,[2] Henry VII[3] and Henry VIII.[4] Nor does any identity evolution transpire once Catherine, already married to Henry VIII, finally has within her grasp the power to do what she believes herself to be best at: "*Statecraft* […]. *I learned the art and the craft of kingship as I had learned about beauty, music, and the art of building*" (Gregory [2005] 2006, 276; italics in the original). She manoeuvres to keep Henry out of governmental business (286-87). However, on the rare occasions Catherine is seen actively influencing policy—she seems to be far more successful in her revisions of the court's accounts, very much like a housewife efficiently running her household (more on this below)—she uses her power to align England with Spain's international policy (128; 350). This not only contravenes her supposedly adopted Englishness but also evidences Catherine's inability to foresee the disastrous consequences such a strategy would have for both England—in terms of failed military expeditions, economic cost and the loss of human lives—and herself, as Henry will gradually free himself from his wife's influence. More importantly, her foreignness also complicates what Gregory no doubt intends to present as Catherine's moment of glory—England's victory over Scotland at Flodden—as Catherine is not aware of the unacceptable cruelty of the political use she intends to make of the corpse

gender, insofar as this performance is mostly conscious and thus substantially different from the Butlerian understanding of performative gender (Butler 1991, 179).

[2] Romantic overtones become apparent when Arthur finally succumbs to Catherine-cum-Scheherazade and her Moorish tales (Gregory [2005] 2006, 126; 130)—a powerful reminder that this is a historical novel operating "in a romantic *mode*" (Kennedy 2016, 52; italics in the original). Arthur's feelings are seemingly reciprocated by Catherine—"*I did not think it possible, but* […] *I have fallen in love with him*" (Gregory [2005] 2006, 87; italics in the original)—although one year after his death Catherine's memories of Arthur begin to fade, according to the omniscient narrator (188). In any event, her exotic charm clearly contributes to a period of married bliss which could have made her co-ruler of England were it not for her first husband's untimely death. However, Gregory presents Arthur and Catherine's marriage as initially loveless, although it is nonetheless consummated through Catherine making sure she is penetrated despite Arthur's lack of physical vigour (49). This move is immediately justified: "*I don't for a moment doubt that* […] *my brazen touching him and drawing him into me, is God's work*" (50; italics in the original).

[3] Catherine cunningly charms her father-in-law Henry VII in a desperate bid to put an end to her difficult economic situation as Arthur's widow. The third-person narrator has her voicing her frustration in a charming, coquettish way which the king—who feels attracted to her from the beginning of *The Constant Princess*—cannot obviate (Gregory [2005] 2006, 196-99). The numerous references to his being sexually aroused by Catherine further enhance Gregory's debt to the erotic historical. However, Catherine's efforts result in a marriage proposal on the part of Henry VII himself that Catherine finds unacceptable. As the autodiegetic narrator tells the reader, "*My vanity and pride in myself made me think that I could tempt him to do whatever I want. Instead, I have tempted him only to his own desires* […]" (213; italics in the original).

[4] The first-person narrator in *The Constant Princess* confesses to exploiting her exotic allure with Henry VIII when, once a widow, her future depends on her marrying him: "*Harry was attracted to me once, I know that.* […] *I have nurtured his liking, every time I see him I pay him particular attention*" (Gregory [2005] 2006, 254-55; italics in the original). Although Henry is not completely fooled by Catherine's self-proclaimed virginity (264), he proposes marriage to her as soon as his father dies, thus making her Queen of England at last.

of the Scottish king. As Catherine herself tells Henry in a letter, "I thought to send [the body] to you, but our Englishmen's hearts would not suffer it" (384).[5]

That Catherine's identity development is left unresolved is best illustrated in a scene in which she secretly receives a Moorish physician. By this time, Catherine is desperately striving to conceive a healthy male heir and believes that her miscarriages and stillbirths are God's punishment for the lie that has her sitting on the throne of England: "[*M*]*y conscience is not clear.* […] *I* […] *wait for a long time,* […] *in case my God, the God of my mother, chooses to speak to me in His anger.* […] *He does not*" (Gregory [2005] 2006, 317; italics in the original). She has already lost her mother, and shared with the reader the painful realisation that, throughout her life, she has been used as a mere pawn by her parents—"*She* [Queen Isabella] *leaves me in death as she left me in life: to silence and a sense of her absence*" (239; italics in the original). And even in the face of this, she adheres to the principles inherited from her mother, which translate as distrust and fear of the Muslim Other. Finally, the closing scene in *The Constant Princess*—the sitting of the Legatine Court—confirms that no real identity development takes place. Upon being called into court by the usher, the first-person narrator reveals that, although the whole country "*knows me as Katherine, the old Queen of England,* […] *inside, I am still Catalina, the young Infanta of Spain*" (388; italics in the original). Catherine's identity, therefore, remains unresolved, a poignant fact emphasised in the novel's final scene where she reveals her enduring sense of self as "Catalina" rather than the English "Katherine" she sought to become.

In light of this, the case may well be made that, if a more appropriate identity is not triggered, subsequent elements of the empowerment process may be at risk. I am here referring to the concept of agency as an instance of the individual taking actions that lead to change. What Catherine does in order to surmount her two earlier situations of powerlessness—her arrival as a young woman in a strange land and her vulnerability as Arthur's widow—has two common denominators, namely the use of her exotic(ised) sexuality to achieve her aims and her firm belief that her destiny is to become (a good) Queen of England. It is tempting to read Catherine's use of her own body as a form of agency as "embodied" practice although, as will be seen below, further textual evidence will render such a reading impossible.

Moreover, the actions Catherine takes to overcome her last two situations of powerlessness are also problematic. The first concerns her inability to conceive a male heir and the marital difficulties this results in. As stated earlier, what she does in this case is to have a secret consultation with a Moorish physician, who provides her with sound advice as to how to conceive. However, while this initiative shows that Catherine realises she has been wrong to idealise her parents—Queen Isabella "made a great mistake when she drove away their wise scholars along with their heretics,"

[5] This cruelty is congruent with Gregory's Orientalist portrayal since Orientalism has traditionally endowed the East not only with the quality of sensuality but also despotism and cruelty (Said 2003, 4).

she acknowledges to her confidante María de Salinas (311)—she pays no heed to the physician's advice, her reaction being to smile "at the reflection of her own prejudices" (314), according to the omniscient narrator. Confronted with this situation of powerlessness, then, there is no real action on Catherine's part.[6] Moreover, the magical elements in the narrative further complicate this. As mentioned, such elements have been seen to empower Gregory's female protagonists (Wallace 2005, 184). However, the magic in her take on Catherine—the curse on those behind the death of Edward IV's eldest son—does not empower the Queen as this is the main cause behind not only her inability to bear a healthy son but also her eventual estrangement from Henry, which is of course her fourth situation of powerlessness.

The Constant Princess, however, offers little insight into this situation, as it only shares Catherine's thoughts while attending the sitting of the Legatine Court. They convey her conviction that she "*will win*," as she tells the reader, because "*I know* [Henry] *better than anyone else in the world*" (388; italics in the original). The reader, however, knows that she will *not* win and has by now concluded that she does not know Henry as well as she believes she does. Catherine's final thoughts in this novel also suggest that she does not know herself either. Having shown little or no evidence of her practising governance—as mentioned above, the narrative provides a far more exhaustive and convincing account of Catherine's efficient management of her household than of her political skills—Gregory now has her grandiloquently thinking that "[*n*]*o one could have saved England from the Scots but me*" (389; italics in the original), to which she adds: "*I do not regret the lie*," that is, the one that made her Queen Consort of England, as "*Arthur, my beloved, asked me for an oath on his deathbed and I gave it to him*" (389; italics in the original). However, the third-person omniscient narrator has previously stated that Catherine could barely remember her deceased husband shortly after his death, and earlier in the narrative Catherine believes her inability to produce a male heir is God's punishment for what she considers a terrible sin. Nevertheless, the narrative concludes here and therefore does not contain any information as to what Catherine will do in the years ahead.

In this regard, Gregory's two other Catherine novels shed little light on the missing gaps in *The Constant Princess*. In *The King's Curse* Margaret Pole's narrative voice falls short of providing an account of Catherine as a ruler, pointing instead to her *potential* as one. By way of example, when the newly-widowed Catherine asks her to corroborate her claim that her marriage was never consummated, Margaret sees her "as the queen

[6] Apart from Catherine's loveless wedding night—"*I wait for Harry, as long ago I used to wait for Arthur. The only difference is the utter absence of joy*" (Gregory [2005] 2006, 261; italics in the original)—on which Catherine's priority is to pass herself off as a virgin, *The Constant Princess* provides no further evidence regarding Catherine's sexual encounters with Henry other than sporadic references to her pregnancies (288, 336, 385), miscarriages (298), deliveries (339) or premature deaths of her babies (345). It is therefore significant that, while the narrative clearly highlights Catherine's sexual initiative with Arthur, it does nothing of the sort once Catherine is married to Henry, the resulting effect being very much as if Catherine's pregnancies were completely unrelated to any kind of sexual activity.

she may become. She will be formidable" (Gregory [2014] 2015, 50). In terms of what happens at the Legatine Court's sitting, it is Pole's son Montague that provides her mother with a report. For him, Catherine's rising "to her feet and walk[ing] out" of the courtroom was the "finest moment" in the life of someone who "has been a great queen all her life" ([2014] 2015, 286). As a woman increasingly distanced from the centre of power, it is only fitting that Margaret Pole's fictional biography should provide only second-hand evidence, yet the fact remains that her assessment of Catherine as "a great queen" seems to rest more on her partiality than on fact and neither does she provide any insight into Catherine's actions between 1529 and her death in 1536.

As for Margaret Tudor, her brief account of Catherine's estrangement from Henry is marred by the contradictions that very much define *Three Sisters, Three Queens*. Margaret's narrative voice is shaped by her obvious inferiority complex, resulting from not only what she reluctantly considers her inferior lineage (Gregory [2016] 2017, 2) but also Catherine's superior skills. This ambivalent view will remain a constant throughout the novel, with a rather infantile Margaret divided between the admiration she reluctantly has for Catherine—"I note how she sits […] and I think: actually, that looks rather queenly. I think I will learn to sit like that" (5)—and the overall mistrust she feels for her. What is beyond doubt, however, is that in this fictional account, Margaret's perception is that Catherine does wield considerable power, supervising English policy behind the scenes while her influence over Henry lasts, and even placating his wrath, persuading him to grant clemency after the 1517 rebellion (325). However, Margaret's overall assessment is characterised by her aforementioned ambivalence and, while she sympathises with Catherine in the face of Henry's constant infidelities and the autocratic use he makes of royal power (325), she also blames her for England's alliance with Spain (which she considers a blow to Scotland's interests) (116-17) and, above all, the cruel political use Catherine intended to make of the corpse of James IV of Scotland, Margaret's husband: "[S]he wanted to pickle James in brine and send him as a gift. […] She is a barbarian, worse than a barbarian" (141-42).

As for the little light *Three Sisters, Three Queens* may shed on Catherine's final years, it is worth noting that, when Margaret hears of the Legatine Court sitting in London, her remarks on Henry are narratively inconsistent. She clearly despises his treatment of Catherine when earlier in the narrative she has sided with him, and she takes an ambiguous stance on Catherine's behaviour: "I think of Katherine, confronting Harry the liar […] and then curtseying and walking away. How did she dare!" (Gregory [2016] 2017, 509). Even more interesting is a short passage containing Margaret's musings on Catherine's last years: "It is easy to think of her fasting herself to the point of starvation, her hair shirt rubbing her fine skin into infected sores, dying of a broken heart. But then I think: not her […]. Harry would have to drag her from the throne, God would have to drag her to heaven; she will never willingly go" (523-24). This passage is of note because it makes reference—albeit in the most cursory of ways—to some of the aspects that may be taken to define Catherine's final years and which

are completely absent from the two other novels. However, it once again provides a contradictory picture, presenting Catherine's seemingly death-inducing measures as passive whilst finally concluding that letting herself die would never be an option for Catherine, precisely because of the passivity it connotes.

And yet, what Gregory's Margaret indirectly presents as passivity affords a dramatically different reading. In her final years, Catherine was moved to a number of increasingly uncomfortable, secluded houses. By May 1534, she had no control over her servants. Tremlett, however, clearly interprets Catherine's increasingly harsh imprisonment as anything but passive, the "fasting" referred to by Gregory's Margaret Tudor resulting from, as Tremlett puts it, Catherine's "own, self-imposed strictures," in that she would remain "bolted inside her room" and would "not eat or drink what the new servants provide," since these "served, in her mind, a non-existent woman called the princess dowager" (2010, 299). Crucially, and unlike the Catherine that Margaret Tudor perceives in *Three Sisters, Three Queens*, Tremlett sees that the increasing discomfort she brought upon herself was accompanied by a willingness to die: in her correspondence with Chapuys—the Imperial Ambassador—Catherine wrote that "martyrdom [...] will be [...] a meritorious act" (2010, 287). And she would later tell the Spanish Emperor that "I shall not fail [in this task] until death, as otherwise I should imperil my soul" (Tremlett 2010, 294).

It can, then, be suggested that Catherine's final years were all but passive. In fact, the Catherine that appears in the historical record bears more than a passing resemblance to the British suffragette Mary Leigh (1885-1978) whose activism Parkins (2000) analyses as an embodied practice of feminist agency. As a chastised woman, imprisoned under increasingly harsh conditions, Catherine was—like the suffragettes almost four centuries later—most definitely *not* a political subject but one who, arguably, "refigured political agency as based on performance rather than entitlement" (Parkins 2000, 63), crucially destabilising the fine line between the public and the private. With no access to the public sphere, Catherine's actions remained strictly within the private domain. Yet her voice was heard not only in the English court but also in the principal centres of power at the time. And she succeeded in this by using strategies that are remarkably similar to those later used by Leigh: through "self-imposed strictures" (Tremlett 2010, 299) that bring to mind the suffragette's hunger strikes, Catherine could be considered to have drawn attention to her "disciplined," "self-controlled" body, turning it into an effective tool with which to "communicate dissent, [...] courage and endurance, powerfully interpellat[ing] other [women] to identify with her commitment to the cause" (Parkins 2000, 68). Unfortunately, this interpretation is completely absent from both *The Constant Princess*, whose narrative is abruptly halted in 1529, and *The King's Curse*. And it is in fact only briefly referred to by Margaret Tudor in *Three Sisters, Three Queens*, and in that case it seemingly suggests passivity rather than vigorous, embodied feminist practice.

Needless to say, the case might be presented not for a feminist but a *post*feminist reading of Gregory's Catherine novels. In light of the above, however, I believe this

position is untenable. The autodiegetic narrator in *The Constant Princess* makes it impossible to interpret Catherine as a "a sexually liberated, feminine young woman" (Hemmings 2014, 379) when she believes that her difficulties conceiving are God's punishment for her having lied about the non-consummation of her first marriage, even if she contradictorily states that "*I do not regret the lie*" (Gregory [2005] 2006, 389; italics in the original) at the end of the novel. These regrets, together with the complete absence of scenes of marital intimacy following Catherine's wedding night with Henry in *The Constant Princess*, preclude any possible reading of the character's use of sex as a kind of embodied practice leading to power. It is also quite difficult to argue that the Catherine novels ultimately deliver the postfeminist message that love justifies all actions (Saxton 2014, 128), as Catherine clearly does not love Henry, and doubts are raised as to the depth and maturity of her feelings for Arthur, according to the third-person omniscient narrator in *The Constant Princess*. Similar problems emerge when it comes to interpreting the Catherine novels as vehicles through which to convey the idea that "domesticity is the only 'right' choice for a woman" (Russo 2020, 280). Admittedly, *The King's Curse* provides little or no insight into Catherine's experience as a ruler. Her power, especially that which she exerts behind the scenes, is slightly more clearly suggested in *Three Sisters, Three Queens*, although Margaret Tudor's ambivalent, contradictory viewpoint complicates its implications. Last but not least, it has been shown here that little, and contradictory, evidence is provided of Catherine's governance across the three novels under analysis. To further complicate matters, *The Constant Princess* comes to a close with the autodiegetic narrator making the reader party to Catherine's inner thoughts, revealing her self-congratulatory, and arguably self-deceptive, belief in her singular role in securing England's victory at Flodden (Gregory [2005] 2006, 389).

As I see it, to pursue a postfeminist reading of Gregory's Catherine novels crucially ignores the fact that Gregory has made her feminism abundantly clear. Yet my analysis raises serious doubts as to whether Gregory's fictional take on Catherine of Aragon provides a feminist re-examination of patriarchal historical discourse in order to vindicate the role she played in history. Indeed, Gregory's portrayal is marred by inconsistencies that go well beyond the "nuanced and complex" characterisation that Barlow praises as characteristic of her novels (2014, 116). Such inconsistencies can be found not only in the disappointingly inconclusive novel devoted to Catherine—*The Constant Princess*—but also in the other two where she has a role. When it comes to making sense of such inconsistencies, the reader is in no way aided by Gregory's narrative strategy in this first novel, as the constant shift between first- and third-person narrations severely reduces the reader's access to Catherine's inner motivations. As a result, affect in this novel is not successfully brought to the fore, potentially alienating readers and dramatically reducing their potential for empathy, which in the case of historical fiction heavily relies on the past being "told emotionally" (Saxton 2014, 122-23). The overall effect, I would argue, is that Gregory fails to provide a sense

of what Saxton calls "authenticity" or "verisimilitude of accuracy" (2020, 128): the third-person narration functions as an invitation for the readers to detach themselves from a story already plagued with inconsistencies which are not successfully resolved and which gravitate around Gregory's main thesis, namely that Catherine lied about the non-consummation of her first marriage. While successful historical fiction would have persuaded the reader that this, regardless of its actual truth value, is both an act of romantic love (towards Arthur) and an intelligent move that naturally leads to a demonstration of leadership skills, my analysis suggests that Gregory's fiction fails to deliver this "symbolic truth" (Russo 2021b), leaving the reader undecided as to whether Catherine is driven by love or excessive ambition; whether she really is, or simply believes herself to be, a capable ruler; and, ultimately, how much agency she had in shaping the many events she witnessed in her lifetime.

It might be argued that sustaining the thesis that Catherine lied about the non-consummation of her first marriage is an excessively ambitious endeavour. Indeed, Gregory is virtually alone in hypothesising that Catherine was not a virgin when she married Henry, yet in itself this is not a strong enough reason to hamper verisimilitude since Gregory's other fiction famously relies on similarly shocking theses, including the contention that Anne Boleyn committed incest, which she successfully uses in *The Other Boleyn Girl*.

What I am suggesting instead is that Gregory's contradictory and ultimately non-verisimilar portrayal of Catherine seems to replicate the apparently irresolvable contradictions inherent to both romance (Radway 1991) and the bodice-ripper tradition (Beck 2012, 221) which Gregory is indebted to. Gregory's portrayal of Catherine as a savvy woman that uses sex to achieve her aims does indeed have shock value and may well boost sales, but whether it empowers this female character or provides her with historical agency is highly doubtful.

In this light, the Catherine novels are not too dissimilar to those bestsellers from the 1970s with apparently "emancipated themes" that end up confusing "protest with entertainment" (Sutherland 2011, 83-84). Indeed, in line with Kennedy's overall reading of Gregory's oeuvre as being dominated by "commercial imperative" to the detriment of its "political subversiveness" (2016, 70), my analysis suggests that Gregory tried to replicate the enormously successful, controversy-seeking formula that catapulted her to literary stardom with *The Other Boleyn Girl*, but this time failing to demonstrate Catherine of Aragon's "capacity to take up and transform a given situation" (Parkins 2000, 60-61) as a sexually-specific, historicised individual.

4. Conclusion

This article has focused on fiction by Philippa Gregory, widely acknowledged as having contributed to constructing contemporary views on the Tudor period yet largely ignored by literary critics. More specifically, it has looked into three different novels in order to provide a suspicious reading (Felski 2011) of Gregory's fictional representation

of Catherine of Aragon, a historical character that has been widely neglected by historians and fiction writers alike. The aim of this work is to determine whether these three novels can be considered works by a "feminist, radical historian", as Gregory controversially presents herself, given that her debt to popular genres like romance or bodice-rippers has already divided critics in terms of whether the ultimate message she conveys should be seen as feminist or postfeminist. In order to do so, the article scrutinises aspects of characterisation and narrative strategy to identify four instances of Catherine's powerlessness, ultimately assessing whether an overall process of feminist empowerment (Carr 2013) can be detected in them and whether a sexually-specific, historicised embodied subject (Parkins 2000) is presented.

The first situation of powerlessness identified in the narrative seems to stem from Catherine's foreignness, which the character quickly detects, resolving to "become English." However, the analysis reveals that there is no evidence of identity evolution in Catherine, who uses her Orientalised charm to gain ascendancy over the key male actors around her (first Arthur, and then both Henry VII and Henry VIII after Arthur's death, her second instance of powerlessness). Neither does her foreignness leave her on the few occasions the narrative shows her as being involved in state affairs, where she naively favours Spain's interests over those of England and shows un-English cruelty in her handling of what should be her moment of glory, England's military victory against Scotland under her regency. In fact, Catherine, as the first-person narrator reveals at the end of *The Constant Princess*, sees herself as a Spanish princess rather than as Queen of England, her worldview, therefore, having remained unchanged.

While other critics might see Catherine's use of her sexuality as an instance of embodied practice—an interpretation that I have rejected—she embarks on no real action to address her third situation of powerlessness, derived from her inability to produce a healthy male heir. Instead, she adheres to her Spanish prejudice that makes her regard all forms of non-Christian knowledge with suspicion. Additionally, the fact that not even the slightest reference is made to Catherine's sex life after her wedding night with Henry reinforces this interpretation, as the reader is left wondering whether she actively seeks sexual encounters with Henry or, on the contrary, adopts a passive position and simply fulfils her wifely duty when Henry requests it. This, in turn, is further evidence that her sexuality is not systematically presented as embodied practice. Gregory's characteristic use of magical elements is a further complication, as Catherine is not the agent but the victim of the curse that will prevent her from producing a healthy son.

As for her fourth situation of powerlessness, her estrangement from Henry VIII, neither *The Constant Princess* nor *The King's Curse* shed any light on this aspect as the former ends abruptly with Catherine attending the sitting of the Legatine Court and the latter contains no information as to Catherine's actions once she is forced to leave the English court. For its part, *Three Sisters, Three Queens*, characterised as it is by the constant contradictions in Margaret Tudor's narrative voice, is far more effective in

revealing Margaret as a childish, selfish woman than in presenting a clear, convincing portrayal of Catherine. Curiously enough, however, this third novel provides limited, though stronger, evidence of not only Catherine's use of royal power but also her strategy between 1529 and 1536, clearly interpreting the latter as passive. This is a missed opportunity, as it would have been easy for Gregory to present Catherine's historically-recorded self-imposed condition as a clear instance of embodied action taken to draw attention to her complete rejection of the political power imposed upon her.

Similarly, my analysis rejects a postfeminist reading of the Catherine novels as the contradictions detected in the narrative—often within the same text—make it impossible to see Catherine as a sexually-liberated, love-driven woman who would have found happiness had she led a purely domestic life. Instead, I have highlighted the texts' inconsistencies in terms of narrative strategy and characterisation to argue that Gregory may well have aimed to provide a fictional portrayal of Catherine in line with her own feminist endeavours but the repeated use of her commercially successful, romance- and bodice-ripper-infused literary formula has, on this occasion, failed to result in an authentic, verisimilar character that readers can relate to and empathise with.[7]

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