IMPORTANT MOTHERS, SLANDERED QUEENS.
THE CONSORTS OF SHAKESPEARE’S CHRONICLE PLAYS

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1. Introduction

Focusing on the related notions of queenship, kingship, and royalty in some of William Shakespeare’s historical plays, this paper explores the peculiarities of Tudor historiography on the subject of the events related to the Wars of the Roses. The plays of the first tetralogy, Henry VI 1-3 and Richard III, are explored in terms of how monarchy before the Tudors was presented by the Elizabethan playwright, paying particular attention to the portrayal of the Plantagenet queens, female royalty being presented in the specific context of the 16th century, much of which, in England, was dominated by the rule of female monarchs.

Nowadays, a shift of focus from the mainstream approaches of history as a patriarchal narrative has determined chroniclers, fiction writers, critics, and theorists to wonder whether a tale of the role played by women in the making of history would be rewarding. Why write a history of medieval English queens? Why focus on female characters in Shakespeare’s histories? Does their absence from the records of their own time and their secondary role in the plays indicate they are no great loss to the history books and historical perception of today? Of course not, is the conclusion reached by Philippa Gregory, author of historical novels and biographies of English queens (Gregory, Baldwin, Jones 2011). They are absent from the records of their time because the letters, chronicles, and journals written then mostly told of public events, and as women, excluded from formal political power and military service, the queens and consorts were not primary actors. The interests of medieval chroniclers were different from those of modern historians. Scholars today look at the history of women both as a group and as individuals. The queens’ lives, as told by the fragmentary biographies offered by Shakespeare’s plays, their lives as prominent medieval women, can tell us much about court and elite life, about marriage and loyalty, social mobility, and survival. It is true that sometimes, to find such information, one has to read between the lines, but this proves as rewarding as other ways of reading and working with the Shakespearean
text. There has been until recently very little investigation carried about the lives of many of
these queens and even less that sounds realistic. But since there is no such thing as an
unbiased, unprejudiced history, Shakespeare’s histories are no exception.

2. The Plantagenet Consorts

Much has been written about the relation between the Plantagenet kings, whose lives
are presented by these plays and the Tudor dynasty, but surprisingly little has surfaced so far
on the similarly relevant involvement of the female leaders in these chronicle plays and their
connection with the Tudor dynasty. This is not surprising, argues French historian Philippe
Delorme in a recent book on scandalous European queens and princesses (2011), because
history has always been written by men, certain of their physical, moral and intellectual
superiority, misogynous, and biased. When women ruled with determination, he carries on,
they were considered cruel and ruthless; when they were persuasive, they were accused of
seduction or witchcraft; what was admirable and—the same word again—virtuous in men, was
despicable in women, causing shame, misfortune and chaos in one’s family and country.
Classical history, like Boccaccio’s *De casibus* model, teaches a clear lesson about the desired
roles to be played by famous men and women. Although he attempts some balance by
including both positive and negative female characters in his history, Boccaccio insists on
undertaking a patriarchal moral stance when he talks about the women who had political
power: while he is tolerant of those women who took over from their husbands or fathers
faute de mieux, ruling only in the name of absent men and under-age sons, he has no mercy
for those who, apparently, had no need to do such a thing and strived to rule in their own
right. History thus captures the splendour and ostentation of royal women, being critical of
what is traditionally considered a blatant statement of influence and affluence—good examples
in this sense are such infamous or controversial personalities as Messalina, Cleopatra, or
Lucrezia Borgia.

Recent exceptions to this tradition, with a focus on the English queens of the Middle
Ages, include the historical and literary biographies of queens, such as Helen Castor’s (2011)
captivating narrative about the English “she-wolves,” Kavita Mudan Finn’s (2012) tale of the
lives of English female consorts and the role they played in mapping a certain early modern
mentality about queenship in England, or the biographies of some English consorts signed by
Alison Weir (1999), Arlene Okerlund (2009), Philippa Gregory (2011). These are the
biographies of famous women, which were written before but now benefit from a fresh
outlook (Eleanor of Aquitaine, Margaret of Anjou), or the biographies of less famous women
who are almost absent from traditional historical records despite the great influence they had on English history at a given moment (Elizabeth Woodville, Jacquetta of Luxembourg, Margaret Beaufort). What such books of historical investigation offer is, in John Carmi Parsons’s words (1998:2), an attempt “to go beyond the limits of depicting queens as moral pendants to husbands or sons, and to dwell on their lives but not on their offices,” something which has not happened so far because of a “distaste for institutional history [which] has impeded investigation of queenship’s resources, its links to the king’s office and, most important, queens’ relationship with kingdoms and communities.”

To discuss female figures in Shakespeare’s chronicle plays in connection with Queen Elizabeth I (or, more generally, with Tudor women) is to remember, first of all, the English dynastic situation in the early and first half of the 16th century. No female monarch had ever ruled in her own right on English soil and those who had, temporarily, assumed power and the crown, such as Matilda, the daughter of Henry I, or Isabella, the wife of Edward II, had been vilified, punished, ostracized. So, for a young dynasty as the Tudors, having no male issue was more than a mere matter of paternal ambition. Henry VIII’s pains to secure a royal son for the throne of England, absurd and even criminal, are to be understood in this line of thought. He goes as far as to declare his first born (female) children bastards once his third wife gives him his son Edward. In his turn, Edward, feeling his death nearing, writes a testament in which he leaves the throne to his cousin’s yet unborn sons. Indeed, if Henry VIII’s England was at a loss during his first marriage because he only had a daughter, there was still a chance, while the king was alive, to secure succession in the male line (as it actually happened). If England during the Wars of the Roses was in a crisis because the crown was disputed by factions of the same big family, there was always a male pretender around whom the belligerent camps could organize themselves. But when Edward VI dies at the age of 16, with no male issue, all his lawful successors—siblings and cousins—are women. It is a premiere, which throws England into confusion and consternation. His three followers—Lady Jane Grey, queen only for nine days, Mary and Elizabeth—will be the first queens regnant in the history of the country and will change the dynastic course, the rules of succession and the mentality of the people. Nonetheless, throughout the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth, courtiers, commoners, foreign princes and diplomats expect salvation and security from the birth (or nomination) of a male successor. This finally happens with the ascension to the throne of James VI of Scotland. The Tudor dynasty is over, but no crisis emerges in 1603 because James is legitimate (Elizabeth’s cousin), Protestant, and, most importantly, male.
Apart from her own establishment as a female monarch, Elizabeth has to deal with the traditional preoccupations of Tudor kings, namely offering the English subjects the illusion of stability (after more than a century of civil war) and continuity (of a family at the head of the country with little genuine genealogical legitimacy–Henry VII kills the last Plantagenet king and crowns himself; then kills the last Plantagenet male, Edward Clarence, Richard III’s nephew; while his son, Henry VIII, kills the very last of the Plantagenets, Margaret Pole, in order to remove any chance of a Plantagenet come-back against the Tudors). This stabilization is effectively done during Elizabeth’s reign through a constant revisitation of English national history (Alessandra Petrina and Laura Tossi 2011:6), which justifies the popularity of the genre of chronicles–both narrative and dramatic–in the last decades of the 16th century. Elizabeth, as a Tudor, but also as a daughter once rejected and denied by her own royal father, needs constant reaffirmation and propaganda finds an efficient form of expression in historiography. The staged historiography is the most successful because “it proposes an indirect dialogue with established powers and offers the cyclical repetition of the past through its representation as an eternally re-staged present” (Petrina and Tossi 2011:8). Hence the interest in the traumatic effects of English civil wars and the promotion of historical events as an exemplum, but the same narratives are the very loci where the official representation of queenship is at work (Mudan Finn 2012:5).

Tudor historiography paid relatively little attention to the English queens and consorts of the past. When historians did evoke these women, they were presented as women with unnatural ambitions (such as Eleanor of Aquitaine), she-wolves and foreigners (such as Margaret of Anjou), women with demonic powers (such as Jacquetta of Bedford), vain beauties and upstarts (such as Elizabeth Woodville), arrogant devouts (such as Margaret Beaufort), vengeful matriarchs (such as Duchess Cecily of York). Except Eleanor of Aquitaine, all are contemporary, with a degree of involvement in the War of the Roses, related (by default) with the Tudors. Although Eleanor is not their contemporary, she seems to represent a prototype: on the one hand, she was involved in politics, fighting for her sons’ rights, making continuous efforts for diplomatic alliances; on the other hand, she was deemed unnatural in pride, ambition, independence; criticized for lack of humility and loyalty.

In general, women have been hidden from history: they were minor characters, excluded from formal political power and military service; only occasionally and accidentally did they come at the forefront, and then, the official reaction of chroniclers has been negative. When they did emerge into the historical record, their reception was highly controversial. The features acclaimed in male monarchs (courage, inflexibility, self-confidence, erotic vigour)
are criticized in queens consort, who should be meek, coy, and unassuming. This exclusion or criticism of women as historical characters is caused by the traditional view on the nature of women, innately incapable of major public acts since the Church provided only two possible models—Eve, the temptress, and Mary, the Virgin. Society thus viewed women as either pure, virginal or filled with carnal lust and deceit; in either case, the culture stereotyped them. And, despite later revisions, such stereotypes have proved some of the most tenacious. In fact, all the Consorts were women of high quality: well educated persons, born into the highest echelons of society, ladies of many accomplishments, from household management, childcare, religious devotion, social networking, “PR” and protocol, to the difficult role of seconds to their husbands in warfare and politics.

Starting from Kavita Mudan Finn’s observation that several Shakespearian histories feature women in prominent political and rhetorical positions, I would like to evoke these figures insisting on the ambivalent manner in which Shakespeare chooses to present them, sitting on the fence, as it were, about female power. Chronologically, the queen who sets the trend of controversy over feminine royalty is Eleanor of Aquitaine. The biography of a woman who lived eight hundred years ago is a challenge for any historian or literary critic. However, Eleanor of Aquitaine, wife of two kings (of France and of England), mother of other two kings of England, a duchess in her own right, a crusader, great diplomat, and ambitious matchmaker, is an exception. An inspirational figure for both chroniclers and men of letters, Eleanor of Aquitaine survives with the reputation of an exceptionally beautiful woman, a person with remarkable energy even at an old age, someone who has outlived husbands, sons and even grandsons. As Alison Weir points out (1999), Eleanor of Aquitaine has often been misjudged by historians, who criticized her frivolity and ignored her tenacity, energy, and political wisdom.

She can be regarded, up to a certain point, as a conventional royal wife and mother: a dutiful consort, giving birth to ten children (two kings and several queens in their adult lives). But she was also highly unconventional for the age: she was a great heiress, a true medieval magnate, endowed with an agile mind, qualities which transformed her into an unprecedented political actor. Her career includes such male offices as being an active negotiator for her son’s release during the Third Crusade, being a law-maker (as a result of her involvement in the government of England and vast territories of France and the years she spent in the high office of Regent of England, while Richard I was fighting in the Third Crusade). Last but not least, she was a reputed military campaigner, when she accompanied her first husband, the French king Louis VII, on the Second Crusade, or when she represented her son John in his
dispute for French territories. History remembers her as a woman of extraordinary resilience and exceptional longevity for that time: she becomes a duchess in her own right at 15, spends more than a decade in prison, following the orders of her husband Henry II, regains her freedom at the age of 60, launches herself in politics with more energy than a young boy, starts a military campaign at 77, and crosses the Pyrenees in winter at 80, covering more than 1,000 miles in a journey to Spain meant to secure a marital alliance.

In *King John*, which dramatizes the spectacular political career Eleanor of Aquitaine had in the latter part of her life, as advisor of her son John and kingmaker, she appears as a ruthless conqueror, ready to sacrifice two victims (her daughter-in-law and her grandson) for a military goal. The old queen is set in contrast with the young and ambitious Constance of Brittany, widow of her second son, Geoffrey, and mother of Arthur, a mere boy, trapped in the middle and ultimately sacrificed on the altar of warfare. Eleanor mocks the French “borrowed majesty” (I, 1, 5), but is aware that Arthur’s right is stronger, though John’s “hold” of territory is unquestionable: “Your strong possession [is] much more than your right.” (I, 1, 40) Shakespeare presents two strong women, fighting for their sons’ right, but their confrontation is presented as a grotesque, heated argument between two females, mutually offensive and slanderous, accusing each other of vanity and adultery. Most relevantly, of all personal qualities and social functions the queen has collected in an impressive life of more than eighty years, Eleanor chooses to present herself as a soldier, first and foremost, in front of her son, his knights, and her enemies: “I am a soldier” (I, 1, 150), a profession which implies all the features the Duchess of Aquitaine has been admired and criticized for—discipline, determination, stamina, endurance, cool mind, and cold blood. The queens and ladies presented in Shakespeare’s first tetralogy, the women who add a touch of romance to the Wars of the Roses, seem to emerge from the spiritual lineage of this early medieval female crusader.

3. **Margaret of Anjou in Henry VI Part 1, 2 and 3**

The woman who appears throughout Shakespeare’s first tetralogy is Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI. The playwright presents her as displaying the most masculine ambitions of all consorts, highly erotic, demonic, a she-wolf of France. On the other hand, she was a mere girl, married to an incapable, absent king, with no friends, defending her husband’s and young son’s rights. In each of the three plays of *Henry VI*, she is set in contrast with another character. She is introduced in *1 Henry VI*, with another controversial female figure of France, Joan La Pucelle. Shakespeare’s criticism of the Maid of Orléans, with nationalist overtones, is
mostly directed against a woman whose visions, charisma, success in battle and in her king-
making plans, political flair and patriotism are not the result of divine intercession—a quality
medieval historiography does attribute to virtuous queens—as she and the French claim, but of
witchcraft and evil doing. While the French warriors fall prey to the Amazonian allure of
Joan, a woman clad in armour, wondrous and invincible on the battlefield, comparable to
glorious female figures in Christian iconography (Deborah, Helen, Emperor Constantine’s
mother, or a female counterpart of St. Denis, the patron saint of France) and classical
mythology (the Amazon queen, Venus, Astraea’s daughter—a dangerous similarity with Queen
Elizabeth’s self-representation), the English cannot be fooled by the peasant girl’s antics.
They see her only as a “high-minded strumpet” (Talbot, I, 5, 12) and an “enchantress” (York,
V, 3, 42). To push the connection between the two-faced Maid of Orléans and Margaret of
Anjou even further, Shakespeare makes la Pucelle declare the paternity of the baby she
invents in order to save her skin being Reignier’s, The King of Naples, Margaret’s father.

In 2 Henry VI, Margaret’s cruelty, ambition and selfishness is announced from the very
opening of the play by a Lady Macbeth-like character, Elinor, Duke Humphrey’s wife, who
becomes responsible for her husband’s demise because she craves for what is not hers, the
English crown. She urges Duke Humphrey to reach out for King Henry’s diadem, offering her
own arm: “Put forth thy hand; reach at the glorious gold./What? Is’t too short? I’ll lengthen it
with mine” (I, 2, 11-12). The play presents the struggle for power between Henry VI and the
Duke of York, who wants the crown for himself on grounds of the monarch’s insanity and
therefore incapacity to rule. While the king remains distant and aloof, absent from the
battlefield, Margaret is the one who leads the battle and confronts York, giving him further
reason to claim kingship, since it is disputed between the sons of York (true Plantagenets,
“thy betters in their birth”, V, 1, 119, the Duke alluding to Henry VI’s poor choice for a bride,
beneath his station, a woman belonging to the lesser ranks of European nobility, with no
dowry) and “the outcast of Naples”, a foreigner who, therefore, cannot and would not act in
the best interests of England, turning, by extension, into the country’s “bloody scourge” (V, 1,
118). This exchange prepares the ground for 3 Henry VI, which abounds in bloody scenes of
spectacular deaths, performed as grotesque rituals. This is meant to emphasize the trauma of
war, especially one waged by brothers against brothers, but Margaret of Anjou is at the heart
of it all. While King Henry is aggrieved and would like to turn a pacifist, Queen Margaret’s
ambition knows no limit, the wife scolding her husband for his lack of action (“Art thou king,
and wilt be forced?/I shame to hear thee speak. Ah, timorous wretch!/ Thou hast undone
thyself, my son, and me” (I, 1, 230-2). She lectures him on honour and valour, which she
claims she possesses, while he, the king regnant, lacks: “Had I been there, which am a silly woman,/The soldiers should have tossed me on their pikes/Before I would have granted to that act./But thou prefer’st thy life before thine honour” (I, 1, 243-6). This is a clear inversion of gender roles, both in the domestic and in the public sphere, with the wife criticizing the husband’s decisions and the queen consort urging the king to choose another political strategy, more suitable to her own interests than his.

All the cruelty of war in this third play is concentrated in Margaret, who rules, heads an army, orders executions, while her patient, prudent husband entreats her to better judgment. In fact, history explains that Margaret of Anjou, quite young and inexperienced when she was crowned Queen of England, was a most unfortunate queen, married to a man who was a simpleton, unfit to rule, often prone to catatonic trances, who left the country exposed and the succession of the Lancasters to the throne of England uncertain. After giving birth to a son, the heir, Margaret, though alone and vulnerable at the English court, among male ambitions which did not coincide with the ruling family’s interests, felt bound to defend her only child’s life and rights. With domestic and foreign help from France, she replaced her son at the head of an army, because the boy was not yet of age (in fact, he died at the age of 16, during his first battle in the War of the Roses).

But Shakespeare chooses to present her in an utterly negative light, as “She-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France,/Whose tongue more poisons than the adder’s tooth!” (York, I, 4, 11-2), a foreign queen who will not act in the best interests of England, who, though noble by birth, is only an upstart, getting rich through the hard and honest work of her undeserved English subjects (“Yet not so wealthy as an English yeoman” I, 4, 123), who had no merit in men’s admiration for her, because, while beauty matters, “’Tis virtue that doth make [women] most admired” (I, 4, 130) and, in this respect, the queen finds herself “at the Antipodes”. This is part of her verbal duel with York, when he is captured and about to lose his life. Again, gender roles are reversed because, while Margaret shows only cruelty and mockery (she forces York to wear a paper crown and makes him wipe his face with a cloth imbibed with York’s son’s blood, remorselessly killed this child and then his father, her enemy, etc.), the duke does not find it beneath his male dignity to mourn his son and weep in front of his enemies. York, an experienced warrior and a most noble lord of England, cries, enumerating female qualities which “the false Frenchwoman” obviously doesn’t possess: “Women are soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible;/Thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless” (I, 4, 141-2). The Marian image of femininity as grieved maternity is turned grotesquely upside down, a reversed Pietà. York urges the ruthless queen to watch a hapless father’s tears:
“This cloth thou dipped’st in blood of my sweet boy./And I with tears do wash the blood away” (I, 4, 157-8).

A little later, after Margaret has York executed in a humiliating manner, the verbal duel continues with the duke’s sons, Edward, George and Richard, who carry the family tradition both in claiming the crown for the Yorkist faction and in confronting Margaret, as non-English, non-Plantagenet and non-womanly. Climactically, they put all the blame for the civil war on her shoulders: “Hadst thou been meek, our title still had slept,/And we, in pity of the gentle King,/Had slipped our claim until another age.” (II, 2, 160-2)

4. Jacquetta of Luxembourg in Henry VI, Part 3

No full biography of Jacquetta of Luxembourg has ever been written, despite her fascinating love stories and important position in the lineage of the Tudor kings and queens. Nowadays, she is better known from Philippa Gregory’s The Lady of the Rivers (2012), as a woman of great beauty, who became the second lady in the kingdom, as wife of the powerful Duke of Bedford, lived a wonderful romance with squire Richard Woodville and made her daughter queen of England. Historically (Gregory, Baldwin, Jones 2011), Jacquetta was a woman of exceptional intelligence, endowed with a refined education at the courts of Luxembourg and France, who shared with her husband–unusually for a woman in that period–scholarly preoccupations and alleged inclinations for alchemy. She was also a woman of passion–some moments in her life being remarkably similar with those of another slandered queen, Katherine of Valois. In Henry V, Shakespeare presents this French princess before her marriage to the English king as a superficial, childish and flirtatious beauty, this impression being generally accepted among chroniclers due to the outrageous choices this queen of England made in life: after a first marriage with a great king, came a second one, with an obscure Welsh shield bearer, a match of love, which, however morganatic, would later give Henry Tudor the right to claim the throne from the Plantagenets.

Similarly, Jacquetta, the Duke of Bedford’s widow, chooses to marry her late husband’s loyal attendant in a time of social convention when such faux pas could cost one their life. Despite her modest standing now, as the dowager she is, Jacquetta maintains her influence at the court, over the young couple of Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou, whose lady in waiting she becomes. Her loyalty with the Lancasters continues until her daughter’s second marriage into the House of York. In Henry VI, Part 3, Shakespeare processes some of the rumours and legends which circulated about Elizabeth Woodville’s mother, as a woman endowed with the gift of second sight. Reputed as the daughter of Melusina, the water goddess, who married a
mortal but eventually returned to her realm, Jacquetta allegedly uses magic to make Edward IV fall in love with her daughter and then put Elizabeth on the English throne. Warwick, the Kingmaker, then Richard III, both make accusations of witchcraft against Jacquetta, which are, in fact, meant to discredit the royal couple and undermine their authority.

5. Elizabeth Woodville in Henry VI Part 3 and Richard III

Better known as wife of Edward IV, the Sun in splendor, and mother of the Princes in the tower; a woman having experienced great tragedy and loss (twice widowed, her sons killed), but a great fighter—resisted twice in sanctuary with her daughters; removed from power but grandmother of the Tudors (following Elizabeth of York’s marriage to Henry VII); displaying unprecedented social mobility (a commoner, though daughter of once the first lady in France and the second woman in England, the Duchess of Bedford)

Marian iconography and demonic accusations flow again into each other in 3 Henry VI, as it happened in 1 Henry VI. Her hair let down, a picture of despair and vulnerability, Elizabeth Woodville waits for Edward together with her two small boys, fatherless as a consequence of the civil war. The mourning widow, standing by the roadside, appeals to the man’s power and the king’s influence to help her regain her husband’s lands and fortune, presenting herself as an embodiment of misery and destitution. Her vulnerability seems to be, however, charged with eroticism because Edward falls immediately in love and proposes to her. Although she evokes female virtue (translated as loyalty, submission, and piousness) in her plea (“My love till death, my humble thanks, my prayers-/That love with virtue begs and virtue grants”, III.2, 62-3), Edward’s brothers, mother, Warwick the kingmaker, Queen Margaret, the French and the English camp are all displeased with the match. An apparent Madonna with children, Elizabeth is presented as the daughter of Jacquetta, Duchess of Bedford, a woman with a bad reputation, as a sorceress.

Secondly, though their marriage is one of love, praised as such in 15th century English folk songs and tales, Shakespeare chooses to present their union as incongruous and morganatic, scorned by both Edward’s friends and by his enemies. Richard criticizes Elizabeth’s ambition, which made her rise far above her status, a commoner putting on the airs of royalty: “Since every Jack became a gentleman,/There’s many a gentle person made a Jack” (Richard III, I.3, 72-3), while Margaret comments on her vanity and on the wicked charms that caught a king: “Poor painted queen, vain flourish of my fortune!/Why strew’st thou sugar on that bottled spider?” (I, 3, 241-2). Her false beauty and dubious machinations to ensnare the sun in splendour, as Edward portrayed himself (quite rightfully, since he was
young, handsome and athletic, charismatic and very popular) are set in contrast with real virtue, embodied by Lady Bona of Savoy, the sister of the King of France, with whom Edward is expected to marry. Bona has everything female virtue may comprise of: she is “fair”, “gracious”, royalty, and a virgin, born and raised to be queen and lawful mother of kings. Besides, this marriage would satisfy the ambition of English lords, would be a successful diplomatic move in terms of international policy, in short, it would secure the Yorkist claim to the English throne. In contrast, Edward’s marrying a widower and a commoner is resented by his courtiers and allies, offends important international partners (such as King Lewis of France) and threatens to undermine the basic rules of royal marriages, performed with a view to dynastic succession (Elizabeth Grey is not a virgin and already has two sons of her own). A bad marital choice was a subject which rang a familiar bell to Elizabethan audiences: Henry VIII’s six weddings were notorious, while Mary Tudor’s unpopular choice of a foreign, Catholic husband contributed to her own unpopularity and probably influenced many of the tyrannical measures she took against her people, which brought her the nickname of “Bloody”.

Although, in reality, Elizabeth Woodville Grey was more slandered than Margaret of Anjou (she was herself suspected of witchcraft and evil deeds, she was regarded as an upstart who placed all her family members in high and undeserved positions at court, and, upon Edward’s death, she was called a whore and her sons were declared bastards), Shakespeare chooses to insist more on Henry VI’s wife and her negative traits, probably because she was not English and because she was at least indirectly responsible for some of the most gruesome episodes in the Wars of the Roses.

6. **Cecily Neville in Richard III**

Cecily, nicknamed the York Matriarch, was as formidable a woman as Eleanor of Aquitaine several centuries before, although she did not enjoy the fame and reputation of the latter. Mother of two kings, great-grandmother of the Tudors, her 11 children and their numerous offspring are proof of how successful she was as a consort of the Duke of York. She plays an important role in family decisions and decision-making in the administration of northern territories, managing the estate at Ludlow Castle on her own for years and raising an army on a yearly basis for her husband’s military campaigns in the South, during the Cousins’ War. Known as the “Proud Cis,” the Duchess earns this reputation with her pride and temper, her determination and single-mindedness in defending the Yorkist cause, putting up with the loss of her husband and first-born son with the courage and reserve of the most experienced
male warrior. As a landowner, she remains an independent manager even during her family’s exile to France. Her most notable exploit is the trip she undertakes to London, while in disgrace during the comeback of the Lancastrians, to plead her husband’s and sons’ cause in front of Parliament. Quite strikingly, Shakespeare chooses to present her, in Richard III, in the company of her grandchildren, Clarence’s orphaned children, to offer a powerful family picture. A widow and mourning mother, she redirects her energy, spent on administration and warfare so far, joining the wailing queens.

In Richard III, as the last play of the tetralogy, Shakespeare conveniently brings all the consorts together, giving them all the same part to play and having them all join (verbal) forces against a common evil, Richard, despite former divergences, conflicting interests, and radically different characters and backgrounds. In a way, they seem to return to a female province, as if to atone for their former trespassing; they are again (almost) helpless women, kept away from public life and decision making, after their former attempts to usurp men’s offices, duties and privileges. Henry VI accustomed the audience with Margaret’s persuasive strategies and her ability to talk men into action (e.g. her oration to the soldiers before the decisive battle against Edward IV). In Richard III, though, she no longer uses language for military purposes, but in a context more readily associated with feminine preoccupations. It is the domestic context, of home and family, where, alongside other women and children, she mourns the dead and deplores her current status. But this domestic context is still a negative one, since Margaret uses language to curse and her rhetoric has such an impact on her audience that she seems possessed by demonic power. Historically, Margaret was exiled in France after her husband’s defeat, where she died a year before Edward IV. Unhistorically, Shakespeare keeps her alive and on English soil during Richard III’s ascent for an increased dramatic effect. Although rivals initially, Margaret, Elizabeth and the Duchess will be one and the same voice towards the end of the play, when they predict the usurper’s demise and Richmond’s messianic arrival. If, individually, the effect of their words may be minimal, together, as an ominous ancient chorus, uttering implacable sentences, the women achieve as much as swords on the battlefield: “Queen Elizabeth: My words are dull. Oh, quicken them with thine!/ Queen Margaret: Thy woes will make them sharp, and pierce like mine. (IV, 4, 124-5)

And the Duchess concludes, like a trim conductor leading an apocalyptic orchestra: “The trumpet sounds. Be copious in exclaims” (IV, 4, 135) Female demonic powers are pooled together, the Duchess inspiring the other queens’ rage: “Queen Elizabeth: My words
are dull. Oh, quicken them with thine! Queen Margaret: Thy woes will make them sharp, and pierce like mine.” (IV, 4, 124-5)

Margaret accuses Elizabeth of being “a queen in jest, only to fill the scene” (IV, 4, 91). In fact, those female characters, who are only extras and spares in the economy of the play, are Anne Neville and Elizabeth of York. Their potential is dramatic and intense, given their bridging role. Anne, daughter of Warwick the kingmaker, a Yorkist supporter first, marries into the Lancastrian faction (she weds Edward, Margaret’s and Henry VI’s son) and then is used by Richard III, who makes her his own wife, in order to secure an alliance with the powerful English nobility. Elizabeth of York, desired by Richard in order to win back the trust of the Yorkist supporters faithful to the former King Edward IV, is won by Richmond (Henry Tudor), whose claim to the throne, as a secondary branch of the Lancastrian camp, would otherwise be glib. Despite their strategic importance, these two consorts are neglected by Shakespeare, who chooses to present them as mere puppets in the game for power, vulnerable targets and ideal victims. Anne, in mourning for her first husband at the beginning of the play, falls prey to Richard’s seductive machinations and remains a shadow until the end. Although she is Richard III’s queen, Anne feels closer to the cause of the queens in disgrace, Margaret, Elizabeth and Duchess Cecily, joining them in their grief and utter frustration. Her death, towards the end of the play, is almost unnoticed, a predictable outcome of a short life of victimization. Elizabeth of York is even more absent, physically and verbally, an unassuming pawn in the strategic negotiations between Elizabeth Grey and Richard, as well as a useful–and just as passive–instrument in Henry Tudor’s efforts to establish a new dynasty.

Previous rivalries are forgotten between all the consorts in Richard III, as the only competition consists of who displays grief and mourning more powerfully. The new rival, briefly mentioned in the play, but clearly profiled in history, is Margaret Beaufort, Countess Richmond, Henry Tudor’s mother.

7. Margaret Beaufort in Richard III

An example of sanctity and divine intercession–a quality medieval historiography attributes to virtuous queens–Margaret Beaufort, My lady, the King’s Mother, as she was known by the Tudors, would be perfect unless history did not record her as unnatural in both her ambition and in her piousness. Her official depiction, in portraits and chronicles, commissioned by Henry VII, her loving son, as a virtuous, thoughtful woman, who spent her life in meditation and prayer, seems now marred by subjectivity. Shakespeare briefly but
relevantly suggests in Richard III that, behind this façade of a religious devout, lies an arrogant, humourless, single-minded lady. Mentioned as Countess Richmond at the beginning of the play, Margaret Beaufort appears as Elizabeth Woodville’s subtle but formidable rival: “The Countess Richmond [..] To your good prayer will scarcely say amen. Yet […] notwithstanding [she] loves not me, be you, good lord, assured / I hate not you for her proud arrogance.” (I, 3, 20-24)

Revisionist history presents her as a woman with a meticulous business sense, brilliant political strategy, who dedicated her life to securing cool-headed, cold-hearted political alliances. Married into the Tudor family at the age of 12, after a first marriage had been dissolved when she was ten, mother of the future king of England at 13, she starts to put into practice her political plans while Henry Tudor is only a baby and she was already widowed. Married twice more into noble English families, Margaret Beaufort holds a unique record among important medieval ladies: four husbands and only one son, in an age when maternity among gentle ladies of quality was as important a career as that of a knight on the battlefield. To this only child, however, Margaret Beaufort dedicates her entire life, his victory against Richard III at Bosworth being less his personal accomplishment of valour and heroism—as most Tudor chroniclers, including Shakespeare, would have us know—and more the result of the countess’ diplomacy, determination, and strategic thinking. Indeed, Margaret Beaufort’s biography displays as much (if not, more) paradox and controversy as the other consorts: a modest, secluded, meditative, and religious woman with the initiative and adventurous spirit of a great political gambler.

8. Conclusions

The representation of royalty, more specifically of queenship, stands out in the historical plays, despite the consorts’ apparently marginal role and negative perception. Although much has been said about the connection between Tudor monarchs and the Plantagenet kings as presented in Shakespeare’s Plantagenet plays, less has been investigated about the connection between Tudor women and the women of the Cousins’ wars, the queens of the Middle Ages. However, even Queen Elizabeth’s figure is more present in the endless speculations about the consorts’ chastity, unnatural desires and political ambitions than in the martial body of Henry V, or even the biography /history of Richard II, with whom the Virgin Queen so liked to identify herself.
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Mame de carieră, regine calomniate. Consoartele din piesele istorice

ale lui Shakespeare

(REZUMAT)


Keywords: influență, putere feminină, regalitate, Războiul Rozelor
The paper attempts a double reading of Shakespeare’s chronicle play, the last in his tetralogy dedicated to the Wars of the Roses, or the Cousins’ War: on the one hand, it observes the dominant fairy tale pattern and investigates the connection between such motifs, the Tudors and what was false in the afterlife of a slandered king. 2. Richard the Crookback, Richard the Ruler of the North. While all the above-mentioned historians have a lot to say about Richard’s days after. In the play, previous rivalries are forgotten between all the consorts, as the only competition consists of who displays grief and mourning more powerfully. The new female rival, briefly mentioned, important role (for a woman in a historical play and a female who was not a queen), is her relationship with Gloucester. The histories, or chronicle plays, are more closely related to Shakespeare’s tragedies than to the comedies. They can be regarded as a profound and detailed treatise upon the nature of monarchy. In them Shakespeare shows us all types of autocratic rules. The best histories of Shakespeare are Henry IV and Henry V. In Henry IV the central character is Prince Hal, the King’s son and later Henry V. The king is grieved first by the opposition of some rebels led by the Percy family, notably Henry Hotpur, son of the Earl of Northumberland, and secondly by the dissolute conduct of his own son, who was Shakespeare’s contribution to theatre cannot be ignored. Shakespeare through his plays created new characters and each character had a role to play. His plays had been written to essay different themes and none of them had similar or common theme than the other. Thus, there was a variation of ideas and characters. Feelings like love, jealousy, sadness were all expressed in his plays.