



The
LADY of the
RIVERS
PHILIPPA
GREGORY

A GUIDE FOR READING GROUPS

INTRODUCTION

The life of Jacquetta is extraordinary. She is born into the St Pol family, the rulers of the Duchy of Luxembourg, and witnesses the fate of Joan of Arc while still a girl. Married as a matter of policy to the great Duke of Bedford, it is only when she is a young widow that she can begin to shape her own destiny. Though she has the Sight, at once a blessing and a burden, she still has to navigate the waters of the English court and attempt to build a stable future for her growing family in a time of great change and increasing danger. Her longed-for marriage to Richard Woodville is a deep and abiding love match but comes at a great cost, and their rise in the world is followed by yet further twists in fortune. Yet Jacquetta Woodville, Lady Rivers, is a unique and powerful character and one who manages to place her family in a key position to survive the forthcoming wars.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jacquetta's first main influence is her great-aunt, Jehanne of Luxembourg, who tells her: 'A woman who seeks great power and wealth has to pay a great price' (page 20). Why do you think she says this to her niece? Was she right, and what sorts of power would she have been referring to? Do we see the women in the story exercising other kinds of power?
2. Joan of Arc is absolutely certain that her voices come from God. Jacquetta is much less sure where hers are from, saying, 'I never think of it as a gift coming from God or the Devil' (page 6). What sort of voices do you think they are hearing, and do their different beliefs affect the future of either character?
3. As the story opens, England is ruled by the boy king, Henry VI, as his father has died following his famous conquests in France. Was Henry V an impossible act to follow? What kinds of pressure were there on the young Henry VI? And how might things have been different if his father had not died when he did?



4. 'The whole of France is ours by right' (page 62), says the Duke of Bedford. Would most people have thought that at the time and how does that idea seem to us now? Why did England want lands in France? Jacquetta has a strong vision that 'it won't be him [Henry VI] who loses Calais' (page 115); what is the significance of this? Is this the author giving a nod to the actual (but far later) historical event of the loss of Calais?

5. The Duke of Bedford surrounds himself with alchemists and astrologers, in his search for the philosopher's stone. Do you think this makes him a man of science or superstition, and is Jacquetta just another scientific instrument?

6. How does this search for knowledge compare to the women's practice of witchcraft, for example Margery Jourdemayne and her planting by the stars? Jacquetta later says, 'Every woman is a mad ugly bad old witch somewhere in her heart' (page 391). What does she mean by this and do you agree?

7. Both Jacquetta and Margaret d'Anjou leave their native country as very young women, never to see their mothers again. Compare the way they cope with this and in what ways it affects their later lives. What sort of mothers do they themselves turn out to be?



8. Henry V's judgements are often inconsistent, for example on his summer progress when nobody can be sure if they will be punished or pardoned. He and Margaret are also known for the lavish rewards heaped on their favourites. So was Jack Cade right to rebel? Should a subject always be loyal to the monarch?

9. When Jacquetta and Richard Woodville finally get together, she says, 'I have become a woman of earth and fire, and I am no longer a girl of water and air' (page 122). How has the author used imagery of the elements throughout the book?

10. Even though Jacquetta realises Elizabeth has the Sight, she is reluctant to pass on the knowledge of how to use it to her daughter. Yet, she does so. Given the danger if they were discovered, should she have done this? And was she right to lie to Elizabeth on her wedding, when she felt there would be no real future for the marriage?

11. Jacquetta and Richard are drawn together by their passionate love and dare to marry against the odds. But what keeps them together, through their many separations, the birth of so many children and the frequent turns in their fortunes and status? Do you think their relationship changes?

12. After the battle of Blore Heath, Jacquetta takes shelter with a blacksmith and his family, and realises 'these are the people that we should be fighting for' (page 419). What does this night on the flea-ridden mattress teach her? What do you make of the blacksmith's comment, 'It's a good day already, the best we've ever had' (page 422)?



13. Jacquetta fears that she has almost come full circle, and that she'll find herself in 'a country that is like that of my childhood, with one king in the north and one in the south, and everyone forced to choose which they thought was the true one and everyone knowing their enemy and waiting for revenge' (page 449). Do you think this comes true? And how did those early days prepare her to survive and even thrive with her family?

14. When Margaret abandons Jacquetta to potential danger, she tells her, 'They won't hurt you, Jacquetta. Everyone likes you.' Do you feel she's right?

15. The Lord Mayor of London sends for Jacquetta to act as an intermediary between the aldermen of the city and the queen. This is a recorded historical event, one of the rare times that Jacquetta is acting as a principal in a major event. How different is this to anything she's attempted before? And is Richard right when he says 'No other woman could have done it' (page 477)?





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