

66.02 Princess Cecylle

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Princess Cecylle was mother of two kings of England, Edward IV and Richard III, granddaughter of John of Gaunt, and great-granddaughter of Edward III. Through Gaunt she had connections with the Chaucer family. Her brother Richard married Elinor Montague the daughter of Alice de la Pole's second husband the Earl of Salisbury and became earl himself. Richard of Cambridge, a great-grandson of Edward III and son of Richard Earl of Cambridge, first Duke of York, resided at the Castle of Raby in 1423, living with Westmorland's younger children. Richard's uncle the Earl of March, the last of the male line of the Mortimers, had died in 1425; March's lands and his strong, but overlooked, claim to the throne should have passed to Richard, his sister Anne's son. However, Bishop Beaufort received custody of the lands and Baynard Castle went to Queen Catherine. Richard's father had been attainted, but Richard was allowed to style himself duke. The Yorks had a better legal claim to the throne than the Lancasters, not least because although an Act of Parliament legitimised John of Gaunt's children by Katherine Swynford, it denied their succession to the Crown. The challenge to Henry VI's right to the throne became the Wars of the Roses: Yorkists chose white roses as their emblem and Lancastrians red.

Sometime before 18 October 1424 Richard, aged fifteen and a ward of the Crown, was married to nine-year-old Cecylle; Neville had purchased this highly desirable marriage at a cost of 3000 marks (£2000). Cecylle bore Richard thirteen children and lived to be nearly 80; the marriage appeared to be happy and the duchess went with him on all his tours of duty; some of their children were born abroad. But a shadow has fallen across the birth in Rouen of her eldest son Edward, born when she was 27; recent research in France has shown that her husband was away for a good eleven months before the baby was born. Rumours abounded about a liaison with an English archer, and Cecylle herself threw doubts on Edward's legitimacy. As if to confirm this, Edward's baptismal ceremonials were suspiciously low key, quite unlike the splendid and ostentatious celebrations that would be expected to welcome the son and heir to such an illustrious family, and positively shabby compared with the welcome afforded later to his siblings who were not heirs to the Crown. It seemed that Richard was prepared to accept the child – in medieval times foretelling the date of birth was an imperfect art. However, the discrepancy, along with the continuing rumour about his fatherhood, was large enough to nourish lingering misgiving.

Cecylle's children, eight boys and five girls, were all born within a relatively short time, the seventeen years between c 1438 and 1455. Two sons became kings: Edward IV and Richard III. Her daughter Elizabeth Plantagenet was born in 1444, also at Rouen, and married Alice de la Pole's son John, later Duke of Suffolk; their son Edmund inherited the dukedom, but failed to retain La Grava (Goodall 2001).

In 1478 Princess Cecylle attended the wedding of her grandson, Richard Duke of York, aged four, to the great heiress Anne Mowbray, a five-year-old:

there was an imperiall of cloth of gould, in manner of a canopie; and under the saide canopie was the King, the Queene, and my Lord the Prince, and the right high and excellent Princesse and Queene of right, Cicelie Mother to the Kinge.

This demonstrates that her husband was considered to have been a rightful king, and therefore Cecylle was accorded the rank of queen, and honoured as such by her son. She was present at another family occasion in November 1480 when her last grandchild, Bridget, was christened, the same year that she became lady of the manor of Grovebury, aged 65.

Edward IV died on 9 April 1483, and Cecylle's grandson became Edward V. Richard moved fast; as Protector he took possession of the young king, and Elizabeth, once more taking sanctuary at Westminster, was persuaded to give up the young prince. Both were lodged in the Tower of London, not as a threat, but as a place of safety according to their high rank (Goodall 2001).

The rumour of Cecylle's unfaithfulness was resurrected as a means of destroying the young princes' claim to the throne; this was quickly abandoned because of the huge offence against Richard's own mother. The tack changed, using the substantial obstacle to the marriage of a pre-contract to Lady Eleanor Butler. It is surprising that this impediment had not been raised at the time Edward's marriage to Elizabeth had been made public; nevertheless, such a contract was almost as binding as a formal marriage ceremony. In the light of the mystery surrounding Edward's birth it is perhaps surprising that Richard did not move before; rather, he was completely loyal to his brother, campaigning on his behalf. Perhaps to take second place to the children of Elizabeth Woodville was a step too far. All Edward's children were proclaimed illegitimate; Edward V was deposed and the Duke of Gloucester crowned Richard III. Cecylle was once again the queen mother.