

## The Duchess

Among British film writers, they are known as “heritage pictures”: those earnest, well-dressed and atmospheric recreations of a beguiling or contentious part of the real English past, preferably before 1900. Think historical evocations of the Elizabethan era, with Helen Mirren or Cate Blanchett, or *Mrs. Brown* (with Judi Dench as Queen Victoria), or the recent drama *Amazing Grace*, but **not** filmic versions of Jane Austen or Dickens. The current entry in that category is *The Duchess*, a luxurious cinematic paean to the once famed Duchess of Devonshire, an eminent clothes-horse—and tragic figure--of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

This film carries the requisite sumptuous wardrobes, the toney accents, the grand homes that heritage pictures demand, and, in this case, it is that rare film whose drama crucially turns on the aristocratic rule of primogeniture.

In 1774, sprightly 17-year-old Georgiana (Keira Knightley) is duly promised to, by her mamma Lady Spencer (Charlotte Rampling), then married to the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire, William Cavendish (Ralph Fiennes) for—no surprise—the express purpose of providing the family with the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke. Though two girls result from the match (as well as some miscarriages), no male child results—to the total consternation of the dour and single-minded Duke—and the marriage languishes. (The Devonshire’s marriage was satirized in playwright Richard Sheridan’s great 1777 comedy “School for Scandal,” and the play receives a vignette in the movie.)

The Duchess comes to fill her days as the doyen of London fashion, a fervent campaigner for the Whig party, the belle of the ball circuit, and an inveterate gambler. She also comes to befriend a woman on hard times, Lady Elizabeth (“Bess”) Foster (Hayley Atwell), who is eventually invited to reside at the Devonshire manse.

Once there, however, Georgina feels betrayed when her Duke beds Lady Foster in return for favors granted: the rescue of her children from an abusive spouse. For her own part, she finds romance with the rising Whig politician, Charles Grey (Dominic Cooper), and hopes to escape her mostly barren life. But, when the Duke threatens to hold her own girls ransom if she leaves him, the outcome is a decidedly chilly *ménage à trois* with the Duchess a captive in massive Devonshire House. In bedding Charles she begets an illegitimate daughter that she is forced to give up, and in being raped by the Duke, she finally produces the longed-for boy heir.

Knightley is nicely cast, with a winsome presence that can change her from prim adolescent to effervescent campaigner to wounded nobility (and which must withstand several enormous and lingering close-ups). Sometimes I felt the ever-changing gowns and the hairdos might threaten to literally bury her character, but she comes through as a striver and survivor, yet a woman who could never get what she wants. The Duke, in the person of Ralph Fiennes, ultimately gets what he wants but is none the happier for it. It is not a showy role, but Fiennes succeeds in playing a dogged man of his time who would be the tale’s villain if he wasn’t so ungodly dull. Hayley Atwell, fresh off her role as Julia Flyte in *Brideshead Revisited*, is both comely and conniving as the best friend and the Other Woman.

The historic elements of the story are dutifully followed, the scenery and sets are appropriately opulent, and the wardrobe is—wow! There is plenty of heritage to spread

around, and fashion mongers especially will get an eyeful as the Duchess parades around in what must be dozens of different gowns and get-ups. *The Duchess* is a costumer's Valhalla.

*(“The Duchess” is rated “PG-13” and runs 110 mins.)*

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