

The Duchess

A review by Heather Craig

There is a moment early on in **The Duchess** in which Georgina (Keira Knightly), the new Duchess of Devonshire, looks around Chatsworth, her new home, with awe. It reminded me of a moment in **Pride and Prejudice** in which Elizabeth looks around Mr. Darcy's impressive home, Pemberley, and realizes that all this could have been hers had she accepted his proposal. Keira Knightly played Elizabeth in one of the many adaptations of Jane Austen's work, so perhaps the reference was natural. But **The Duchess** is no Austen romance, nothing to make one sigh for the quiet dignity of a bygone era. **The Duchess** is a story about what happens to those poor girls Elizabeth and Jane don't want to be, the ones who don't marry for love, the ones whose husbands are not kind.

Georgina married the Fifth Duke of Devonshire, the most powerful peer in England, when she was only 16. She naively believed that he had offered for her because he had feelings for her, but she is quickly disabused of this notion, not the least of which by his habitual and obvious infidelity. He makes no secret of preferring the company of his dogs to hers (in one scene, we see him in one coach with his dogs, her in a different coach altogether), or that he wants only one thing of her: a male heir.

Georgina was an actual person in history, and much of her life is a matter of public record. I remember reading a novel once in which everyone was waiting to see what the Duchess of Devonshire would wear. In one scene of the movie, Georgina stumbles against a candle, and it lit her wig on fire. It takes her a moment to realize why people are screaming, and finally someone steps forward and knocks the blazing wig from her head. It startled me to see how much of her hair was not her hair.

But the Duchess of Devonshire was far more than a fashion plate. "Everyone loves the Duchess of Devonshire, except her husband," cracks one observer in the film, and it certainly seemed to be true. Georgina led the way in the fashion of both clothes and wigs, yes, but she was also highly interested in both politics and politicians. This, in an age over a hundred years before women were allowed to vote. She supported the French Revolution and the American, and was a friend of Prime Minister Edward Fox, and became the temporary lover of Prime Minister-to-be Charles Grey, for whom a famous tea was named.

This was a woman before her time. Beyond unhappy in her marriage to a man who was not her equal in intellect, social grace, or common decency, she threw herself into gaining fulfillment, and yes, love, from societal admirers. The public loved her, her fellow aristocrats adored her, and her husband tolerated her.

Ralph Fiennes plays the Duke of Devonshire as a man who knew he held all the cards in life. A serial cheater who even moves one mistress into their home, he sees absolutely no double-standard in threatening to see that his wife never sees their children again if she too is unfaithful. Keira Knightly, casting off the romantic roles of a few years ago, here plays a woman with real depth, a woman who must at all times appear composed, but whose eyes often give her away, a desperately unhappy woman

who was never a wallflower, never a shrinking violet, who gives new meaning to the phrase “for the sake of the children.” This movie rises and sets on her portrayal and she is riveting. However, while she is a lovely woman, the camera lingers on her face far too many times. I realize this is to show the viewer some hidden emotion, but it is very overdone.

I found myself truly respecting Georgina, and did some online reading about her. The movie did not make up any wild stories here. It’s all true, clear down to the child she had with Earl Grey, and sharing a home and even a friendship with the Duke’s long-term mistress.

It’s a fascinating portrait. The plot is the characterization of how a woman handles with dignity lifelong domestic adversity, and it does not disappoint. The costumes here are sumptuous, making one realize why the gentry had to have help getting dressed. The sets are lavish, showing us the extravagance in which some aristocrats lived. The contrast of the very unhappy rich couple is as old as time, but it isn’t a tired one here. I think Georgina would have liked Elizabeth Bennett and envied her, and this made me sad for her. Realizing this, I knew the movie had done what it had set out to do.

DVD extras include a “making of” featurette, a piece on costumes, and one on the real Georgina.