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Party Girl

By Patricia T. O'Conner
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"Women of fashion in London are accountable to nobody after they are married," Lady Teazle says in Sheridan's "School for Scandal." But accountability wasn't the half of it. The real-life model for Lady Teazle, the subject of Amanda Foreman's penetrating and enormously entertaining biography, inhabited a world more fevered and eventful than any comedy of manners.

Stardom comes cheap in the digital age, but in 18th-century England, when the "media" were mostly ink-stained broadsheets and fame really meant something, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806), was a bona fide celebrity, a force to be reckoned with in politics as well as society. Everything she did, said and wore became news, and the tattletale press claimed the only man in England not in love with her was the duke.

A power couple if ever there was one, they lived on a scale scarcely imaginable today. Their marriage in 1774 united two of the richest families in Britain, the Spencers (yes, those Spencers) and the Cavendishes. Georgiana's father had inherited not only the Spencer wealth but also that of the Duke of Marlborough, and she grew up in a series of palaces that changed with the seasons. Her husband's family, though, had real money, with estates so vast that for all practical purposes it owned the electoral boroughs controlling 23 seats in the House of Commons.

At a time when the social life of the aristocracy revolved around its political duties (the annual "season" began and ended with the opening and closing of Parliament), Devonshire House, the couple's London home, became the center of the universe for Britain's fashionable opposition party, the Whigs. These were the great landowners who contested the power of the crown – then sitting uneasily on the head of the demented George III – and supported the American War of Independence. Whig society was worldly, artistic, gossipy, liberal and not always polite. There were glittering balls and lavish, boozy dinners, after which the women withdrew and the postprandial toasting went on for so long that chamber pots were provided. (The man with occasion to use one, a French visitor observed, "does not even interrupt his talk during the operation.")

Georgiana's crowd included titled ladies who, it was rumored, sold their bodies to pay off their gambling debts or to promote their husbands' political careers. Some, like Georgiana, quietly disappeared abroad to give birth to illegitimate children, or adopted those of their wayward husbands. For the most part, a noblewoman was free to do as she

pleased – once she had produced an heir, of course. To that end, early in her marriage Georgiana consulted a celebrated fertility quack, Dr. James Graham, whose Temple of Health and Hymen catered to the childless nobility. "Infertile couples," Foreman writes, "paid an exorbitant £50 a night to make love on the 'electro-magnetic bed' in his 'celestial chamber' to the strains of an orchestra playing outside, while a pressure-cylinder pumped 'magnetic fire' into the room."

The Devonshires' domestic arrangements were irregular even by the profligate standards of the day. For more than 20 years, until the duchess's death, she and the duke maintained a ménage à trois with Lady Elizabeth (Bess) Foster, Georgiana's close friend and the Duke's live-in mistress (later his second wife). Eventually the household's ducal offspring would include three by Georgiana, two by Bess and one by a former mistress.

Juicy subplots tumble off the page. When Georgiana became pregnant by the Whig politician Charles Grey, the duke banished her to the Continent for two years and Grey's family brought up the child. Later, Grey betrayed Georgiana by dallying with Sheridan's wife, who had long resented Sheridan's affair with Georgiana's sister Harriet, who had two illegitimate children by Lord Granville Leveson Gower, who ended up marrying Georgiana's daughter Harryo (Harriet's niece), who thereby became stepmother to her two cousins, while another cousin, a legitimate one, went on to become the notorious Lady Caroline Lamb, mistress of Byron. Clearly, the footnotes alone would have upstaged a lesser woman than the Duchess.

Like her descendant Diana, Princess of Wales, Georgiana endured periods of loneliness and depression, punctuated by cycles of starvation and binge eating. "Nobody can think how much I am tired sometimes with the dissipation I live in," she wrote in 1778. She was always in hot water for one reason or another, always inciting the wrath of the tightfisted, tight-lipped duke. She became addicted to opiates and indulged in all-night bouts of drinking and gambling, a vice that cost her many thousands of pounds and taught her to lie and cheat to fend off creditors (as her friend Sheridan said, "paying only encourages them"). She turned her drawing room into a virtual casino, with a commercial "bank" and professional croupiers. "I do assure you it is innate," she said of the habit, "for I remember playing from 7 in the morning till 8 at night at lansquenet with old Mrs. Newton when I was 9 years old and was sent to King's Road for the measles."

For all her faults, however, Georgiana was also smart and funny and charming. A patron of both the sciences and the arts, she was an amateur chemist and mineralogist of note, as well as an accomplished musician, poet and novelist who enjoyed poking fun at herself and at the social set that slavishly imitated her. Some of her escapades were hair-raising in more ways than one. In an era already known for big hair, she created a sensation by wearing hers in an elaborate three-foot tower, padded out with wads of horsehair and embellished with, say, a ship in full sail or a still life with waxed fruit and stuffed birds. Fashionable ladies followed suit, teetering beneath stacks of hair so tall that they had to ride seated on the floors of their carriages.

Her first love, though, was politics. “She devoted herself to the Whig Party,” Foreman writes, “campaigning, scheming, fund-raising and recruiting for it right up until the day she died.” One of her most enduring friendships was with the Whig leader Charles James Fox, a prolific betting man who once gambled straight through most of a week, drinking coffee to stay awake and pausing only to dash to the House of Commons for a debate on the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England.

Georgiana enraged the king by wooing the vain, idle Prince of Wales into her inner circle, a move that later enabled her to save a fragile Whig coalition government from collapsing. “No one in England knew that the fate of the government rested on a woman's influence with a spoilt youth,” Foreman writes. Not all the Duchess’s maneuvering went on behind the scenes, however. She had a gift for hoopla and sponsored extravagant political spectacles, even launching a hot-air balloon decorated in the Whig colors of blue and buff in the big election year of 1784. She stood beside Fox on the hustings and waded among rowdy crowds to canvass for the party, and when an important parliamentary vote was at stake she wasn’t above tracking down lazy M.P.’s and carting them off to Westminster in her own coach. They don’t make duchesses like they used to.

Foreman, a researcher at Oxford University, combed libraries, archives and personal collections across England to find missing pieces of Georgiana's story, and the result, the author's first book, is biography at its best. “Georgiana,” winner of Britain's 1998 Whitbread Prize for biography, seamlessly merges a life and its times, capturing not just an individual but an age, a world entire. The duchess was a woman peculiarly made for her time. She was a celebrity just when the newly flowering British press needed an icon to tease and adore. She was a canny political operative just when the fractious Whigs needed one. And during what Foreman calls “one of the most sexually integrated periods of British history,” when “male and female relations were robust, multi-layered and contradictory,” Georgiana was equally at home in the masculine and feminine spheres.

Not that she didn’t feel the constraints of her sex. “Would I were a man,” she complained in 1798. But in the grand scheme of things, it’s probably just as well she wasn’t. What’s another male politician, more or less, compared with Georgiana?

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