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Sex and Gambling in Eighteenth Century England

By Francine du Plessix Gray
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By 1779, the year Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, turned twenty-two, she was the most talked-about woman in Great Britain. Her novel "The Sylph", which depicted the sexual license and callousness of her fast set of friends, had gone through four printings, and she had served as the model for Lady Teazle in Richard Sheridan's "The School for Scandal". Wax casts of Georgiana, "intended as ornaments to mansions", were for sale alongside likenesses of the Prince of Wales; milliners made fans decorated with her portrait; she was nearly crushed by crowds when she appeared in public places such as the pleasure gardens at Ranelagh. Her extravagant costumes and her outlandish hats and hairdos which might rise as much as three feet above her head and feature a ship in full sail or a pastoral scene with sheep and trees were more assiduously chronicled than those of any other aristocrat in England. She was a confidante, and perhaps a lover, of the country's most charismatic politician, Charles James Fox, and was the closest friend of the debauched, hysterics prone Prince of Wales ("Prinny" to his pals, "dearest brother" to her). The vivacious Duchess of Devonshire, in sum, was "the glass and model of fashion" and the uncontested leader of that early form of cafe society called the "ton" an amalgam of writers, actors, politicians, racy aristocrats, and assorted libertines which, although it may not have included more than a thousand persons, set all standards of taste in Great Britain in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

As we learn in Amanda Foreman's riveting new biography, "Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire" (Random House; $29.95), the willowy, russethaired charmer not only was a great beauty in every sense superb except for her somewhat bulging eyes but was also considered the most warmhearted woman in the realm. She was noted for her generosity to charities and friends alike, and famous for her capacity to make those she addressed feel as if they were the center of the world. So it seems all the more odd that the only man who did not appear to be smitten by the Duchess was her indolent, taciturn, prodigiously self-absorbed husband, William Cavendish, fifth Duke of Devonshire. He was one of the wealthiest nobles in the nation, the owner of a magnificent art collection and many mansions (including Devonshire House and the legendary Chatsworth), yet his idea of a

good time was to drink and play cards with his cronies at Brooks's, the exclusive club where he dined nightly, year in, year out, on a broiled bladebone of mutton.

Devonshire, one of twenty-eight English dukes who were superseded in rank only by royalty, had been a great catch, although the genetic credentials of Lady Georgiana Spencer, the oldest child of the Earl and Countess Spencer, were almost as estimable. Like her great-great-great-great-niece Diana, Princess of Wales, who would share with her a love of risk, a deep insecurity, a magical rapport with crowds, and the tendency to eclipse a chilly husband, Georgiana was brought up at the family seat of Althorp, where the Spencers had lived since the sixteenth century. Her parents were a highly cultivated and unusually faithful couple who instilled in their children that cult of sentiment which burgeoned in Europe in the wake of Rousseau and Sterne. They encouraged Georgiana's love of performance, and she grew up anxiously striving to please, delighting her mother and father with her natural grace and her swift talent for mastering Latin, music, foreign languages, and the intricacies of court etiquette.

Aged sixteen when she was affianced to the monosyllabic twenty-four-year old Duke, Georgiana naively assumed that her marriage, like her parents', would offer bonds of shared emotions and intellectual pursuits. No such luck. The Duke, whose milliner girlfriend, unbeknownst to his wife, was suckling his newborn daughter in a country cottage as he took his wedding vows, looked on Georgiana merely as good breeding stock. His notion of marital affection was to barge into his bride's room after his stint at Brooks's was over and make a determined effort to produce an heir. Faced with such conjugal frustrations, a woman of Georgiana's temperament and resources tends to find ways to rechannel her energies. Georgiana found solace in gambling, and particularly in the popular game of faro, which became her favorite diversion. She turned Devonshire House into London's most exclusive gambling club, even charging professional faro dealers fifty guineas a night, illegally, for the right to set up tables there.

Foreman puts this passion of Georgiana's in a historical perspective, reminding us that gambling was to the eighteenth-century British aristocracy what gin was to the lower classes: the yearly ruin of thousands of families, and a frequent cause for suicide. Moreover, the Duchess's entourage was notably devoid of any role models who could have kept her from the gaming table. Her parents had hired instructors in order to learn winning tactics for faro; her beloved sister Harriet, Lady Duncannon (later Countess of Bessborough), a great beauty and wit in her own right, was also a compulsive gambler, as was the Prince of Wales. Georgiana's friend Charles Fox had been known to spend thirty-six consecutive hours at the gaming table, but was fortunate in having an excessively indulgent father, Lord Holland, who covered a whopping hundred and forty thousand pounds (nearly fourteen million contemporary dollars) of his son's accumulated debts. Georgiana had no such support. Religion had replaced gambling in the life of the loving but stifling Lady Spencer by the time her daughter married, and she had little to offer except sermons.

Within two years of Georgiana's marriage, her arrears amounted to three thousand pounds (two hundred and ninety-seven thousand dollars), almost the equivalent of the

yearly allowance given her by her husband. The Duke grudgingly covered these debts, but he was under constant pressure from his siblings, the rapacious Cavendishes, to rein his wife in. Too gentle, too genial, and too cowardly to endure confrontations, Georgiana began to entangle herself in a network of lies and mounting debts (often owed to fraudulent bankers), which plagued her for the rest of her life. Foreman notes that the anxieties and depressions caused by these debts may well have been linked to the extreme manner in which Georgiana alternated eating binges with bouts of total starvation, and also to her very frequent miscarriages. It was evident that the Duke, to whom the continuance of the Cavendish dynasty was a form of religious obsession, had married her for two simple reasons: to maintain his family's interests and to produce an heir, and five years into their marriage she was proving incapable of fulfilling either goal.

It is in the context of this anguish that one must see the ascendance in Georgiana's life of the ambitious Lady Elizabeth Foster. The Devonshires first met Lady Foster (Bess to her intimates) in the summer of 1782, while taking the cure at Bath. She was the second daughter of the notably avaricious Earl-Bishop of Bristol, and had made a rotten marriage, in her teens, with a dissolute Irish M.P. After Bess learned that he had seduced her maid, the couple had separated, and she had found herself, according to the laws of the time, without a penny (her indifferent father refused her any material support), and without any visiting rights to her two sons. Frail, with dark hair framing a tiny oval face, fluent in French and Italian, and displaying a cultivated air of feminine helplessness, she emanated such sinuous, coquettish charm that no man, according to Edward Gibbon, "could withstand her."

For the sentimental, magnanimous Georgiana, it was love at first sight. Poor Bess, so sensitive, so vulnerable, so mistreated! Georgiana readily persuaded the Duke, whose milliner had recently died, to be equally smitten. Within a few months of their meeting, Bess part best friend and confidante, part paid companion moved into the Devonshire household. With the Duke, who loved to have two women competing for his attention, she was submissive and flirtatious; with the Duchess, whom she both envied and revered, she was endlessly attentive, offering a passionate emotional relationship of a kind that Georgiana had never enjoyed with men. The three had a coded language of their own, in part taken from the patois of the London ton ("How do oo do"), in part devised by them: the Duke was Canis because of his great love of dogs, the Duchess and Bess were Rat and Racky, Charles Fox was the Eyebrow. And Bess not withstanding frequent trips to the Continent, where the Devonshires often sent her to improve her health and to care for the Duke's illegitimate daughter, apparently enhanced the spouses' domestic functioning. For in 1783, after nine years of marriage, the Duchess finally brought a child successfully to term. It was a girl, alas, but at least she heightened the Duke's hopes for a male heir.

The threesome's mutual devotion grew apace, and two years after Georgiana's first daughter was born both women were pregnant by the Duke. Bess, bitterly aware that she and the Duchess must have conceived within days or hours of each other, was sent off to France by the Duke. "Oh Bess," the blissfully ignorant Georgiana wrote upon being separated from her "dearest, ever ever dearest" friend, "every sensation I feel but heightens my adoration of you." Were Georgiana and Bess lovers in a homosexual sense?

The women's correspondence has been so heavily censored by their descendants that the question will never be resolved. Foreman emphasizes that our more rigid notions of gender relations should not be imposed upon a culture whose expressions of sexuality might have been considerably more androgynous than ours.

But to dwell exclusively on the psychosexual machinations of the Devonshires' ménage, which many readers may find the most fascinating aspect of Foreman's biography, would be to overlook that sizable portion which offers a panorama of British politics in the age of William Pitt the Younger, and focuses on Georgiana's activity in the Whig Party. It is one of the few constructive activities that the Duchess could trace to her husband. The Cavendishes, who regarded themselves as divinely appointed protectors of British constitutional liberty, had been leaders of the Whig Party ever since they had helped to overthrow the Catholic James II and secured the British throne for his Protestant daughter and son-in law, Mary and William of Orange. It was at the urging of the Duke's friend Charles Fox, the rotund, blustering star of the Whigs' liberal wing, that Georgiana was persuaded to enter into the thick of politics.

In the election of 1784, when the Whigs hoped to return to power, Georgiana campaigned vigorously for Fox`s election as M.P. for the district of Westminster. She used populist tactics unheard of for a member of her class and gender, chatting with merchants over pints of ale and tipples of gin, hugging women and children in the streets, and becoming godmother to dozens of infants in return for political support. Although Foreman may be exaggerating when she claims that her subject was "the first woman to conduct a modern electoral campaign", the warmth and intimacy of Georgiana's manner did cause her to be lampooned in dozens of cartoons hinting that she was exchanging sexual favors for votes.

Still, Georgiana's political prominence was hardly a remedy for the Devonshires' dynastic anxieties. The issue of a male heir became all the more pressing for the Duchess in 1788, fourteen years into her marriage, when Bess went abroad again, to give birth to a Devonshire-sired son, Augustus Clifford. This time, she travelled with the serene acquiescence of Georgiana, who had fallen in love with the rising political star Charles Grey. The following year, Georgiana, too, became pregnant by the Duke, and she must have sensed that the stakes had never been so high. By now, even Bess was cheering for a legitimate male heir, knowing full well that her future depended on the survival of the Devonshires' marriage. Georgiana, terrified that pressure from her British creditors might cause her to miscarry, decided to have her baby in France, the turmoil of the French Revolution notwithstanding.

In May, 1790, as revolutionary fervor was mounting across the country, the family awaited the child's arrival in a friend's house outside of Paris. So brilliantly does Foreman build up the suspense that even the most heartless reader will cheer with relief at the appearance of the Marquis of Hartington, the future sixth Duke of Devonshire, who would inherit all his father's glorious estates and remain a bachelor. Like Georgiana, he became a much beloved host and patron of the arts and enjoyed close friendships with members of his own sex, maintaining a lifelong attachment to one of the century's distinguished architects and gardeners, Joseph Paxton.

Georgiana's last decade was her darkest. In 1791, both she and Bess were exiled by the angry Duke when he learned that Georgiana was pregnant with Charles Grey's child. She gave birth to a daughter in France, with Bess in loving attendance. His Grace's displeasure lasted nearly two years. It was a difficult time for both women, who suffered greatly from not seeing their children. Soon after coming home, Georgiana learned, with immense sorrow, that the future Earl Grey, who as Prime Minister would expand the voting rights of Britons through the Great Reform Act of 1832, was planning to marry the young heiress Mary Ponsonby. (The couple eventually had fifteen children.) In characteristically amiable fashion, Georgiana found no better way of consoling herself for the loss of her lover than to turn his wife into one of her closest friends. She continued to write voluminously – verse, essays, dramas – and composed a song for Sheridan's play "Pizarro", which ran for an unprecedented thirty-one nights. She also took up chemistry, attended lectures at the Royal Academy, and became a gifted amateur mineralogist.

Then, in the late seventeen-nineties, Georgiana suffered dreadful eye infections. They left her half blind and disfigured, and she ventured far less into society. In the first months of 1806, she enjoyed a last, shining moment as the darling of the Whig Party, having played an important role in the formation of a new Cabinet, which included several of her intimates: her brother George Spencer as Home Secretary, Charles Grey as First Lord of the Admiralty, Fox as Foreign Secretary and Sheridan as Treasurer to the Navy. She died later that year, at the age of forty-eight, after a brief, painful bout of jaundice, ever tortured by her creditors and by a long list of debts that she had never confessed to her husband. "The best-natured and best-bred woman in England is gone," the Prince of Wales lamented.

Few of Georgiana's friends mourned her more deeply than Bess, whose future at Devonshire House the Duchess had thoughtfully secured in her will by making her the sole guardian of her papers. When, three years after Georgiana's death, the Duke of Devonshire took Bess as his wife, he proceeded to give her a taste of what Georgiana had endured by immediately taking on a new mistress. However, he died two years later, before the mistress could pose a threat. And the second Duchess of Devonshire, having tried, but pathetically failed, to emulate Georgiana's success in London society, moved to Rome, where she became involved with a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church. The principal difficulty of this scholarly, serious, and marvelously diverting book is that the bloodlines criss-crossing throughout the narrative are further confused by the insane pace of the main characters' coupling. Upon learning, for example, that perhaps only one of the five children of Lady Melbourne, Georgiana's rival as doyenne of London's fast set, was conceived by her husband, or that Georgiana's sister Harriet, shortly after concluding a tryst with the rakish Richard Sheridan, became impregnated, at the age of thirty-nine, by a lover twelve years her junior, who then proceeded to wed her niece, Harryo, Georgiana's second daughter, readers may feel as if they were visiting a kennel of purebreds run amok.

But such extravagances are among the vicarious pleasures of the book: the opulence of libido, the Olympian sense of privilege, the sheer scale of the physical appurtenances (the

thousands of acres landscaped by “Capability” Brown, the four ships it took to carry the Devonshire’s personnel and possessions when they crossed the Channel, the paintings and drawings by Tintoretto, Veronese, Rembrandt, and Rubens and, notably, Poussin’s “Et in Arcadia Ego” hanging on the walls of Chatsworth and Devonshire House). Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, had her misfortunes, but reading about her life might make many twenty-first-century Americans feel like sad little Puritans who’ve missed out on a great deal of fun.

Surely, Georgiana’s intelligence, wit, and angelic magnanimity made her amply deserving of every ounce of fun she had.