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Princess Diana and the Duchess of Devonshire: Striking similarities

Young, beautiful and in ill-fated marriages. The Spencer girls, two centuries apart, shared tragic similarities, finds Chris Hastings.



Diana and Georgiana, both Spencers, were born at the family home at Althorp. Both also suffered ill-fated marriages. Photo: IAN JONES

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The trailer for the new film *The Duchess* contains two shots of Diana, Princess of Wales, in her prime and the very familiar strapline “There were three of them in their marriage.”

Anyone unfamiliar with the new movie, which stars Keira Knightley and Ralph Fiennes, might be forgiven for thinking that the duchess of the title was Camilla, and that this was yet another distasteful take on the ill-fated Charles and Diana marriage.

But in fact *The Duchess*, which opens on September 5, tells the story of Georgiana Cavendish, the Duchess of Devonshire, who died more than 200 years ago – and the film’s use of Diana to sell tickets is not quite as controversial as it may seem.

For Diana and Georgiana, both Spencers born at the family home at Althorp, shared striking similarities. Both were shy teenagers who blossomed after being catapulted to fame by marrying older, wealthier men. Both became fashion icons, with the Duchess sitting for artists such as Gainsborough and Reynolds, just as her great great great great niece would for Mario Testino, two centuries later.

And, like Diana, Georgiana found consolation in the outpouring of public affection when it became obvious that her marriage to William Cavendish, 5th Duke of Devonshire, would never deliver her longed-for dream of happy-ever-after.

Georgiana suffered the humiliation of being trapped in a very public ménage à trois, seeking an escape through alleged eating disorders as well as near-ruinous addictions to gambling, drink and drugs.

Amanda Foreman, whose best-selling book, *Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire*, was the inspiration for the new film, says: "You can't deny there are extraordinary comparisons. Like Diana, Georgiana had that ability to make people feel special. But she had a dark side which became all-destroying."

Lady Georgiana Spencer was just 17 when she married the 26-year-old Duke. The Spencer and Cavendish families were Whigs, but William's position as one of the nation's most important dukes made it impossible for him to dabble in politics. So Georgiana became the public face of the family's political ambitions.

She became the first woman to appear on political platforms, and during the 1784 election campaign famously traded kisses for votes on the hustings.

While her handling of her public image was masterful, her control over her private life was less impressive. She and her husband had little in common besides a desire to produce an heir, which after two daughters, Georgiana finally did, in 1790. But then came heartbreak, when her best friend Lady Elizabeth "Bess" Foster engineered her way into the Duke's bed.

Georgiana decided to tolerate the situation and found herself at the centre of 18th-century England's best-known love triangle. Amanda Foreman says: "She had such low self-esteem that she allowed the situation to continue. She was desperate to please. That meant she was quite easily victimised."

Georgiana found solace in the arms of a string of lovers, including Charles Grey, the 2nd Earl Grey. But while the social mores allowed William to produce a number of children out of wedlock, when Georgiana gave birth to Grey's daughter, the Duke insisted that the child (an ancestor of the Duchess of York) was handed over to Grey's parents.

"Against all the odds, she managed to regain her reputation and her social position while in her late thirties," says Foreman.

"She suffered an eye infection and the doctors who tried to cure it scarred her face. Those scars released her from her fears. All the inhibitions about whether she was beautiful enough or whether she was up to the job left her."

This is where the two women's stories diverge: Diana's tragic end denied her the chance to rebuild her life.