



A luxed-up Keira Knightley as the Duchess at a ball, sporting the aristocrat's signature towering coiffure.

Duchess Treat

Move aside, Marie Antoinette, and make way for the enchanting Georgiana.

By Venessa Lau

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According to Amanda Foreman's Whitbread Prize-winning 1998 biography of the fifth Duchess of Devonshire, Georgiana Spencer Cavendish had a bridal trousseau consisting of 65 pairs of shoes, 48 pairs of stockings and 26 "and a half" sets of gloves, not to mention scores of incredible ballgowns, riding habits, wraps and hats. But none of these played as integral a part in her wedding night as a decidedly utilitarian pair of scissors. Or at least that's the way *The Duchess*, the film adaptation of the book, tells it.

The shears scene, not found in Foreman's profile, takes place relatively early in the Saul Dibb-directed film, out in September. Keira Knightley, who plays the blue-blooded lady in question, is standing in her lavish wedding gown while two attendants hover about, helping her undress. But they only get as far as stripping the Duchess of her jewelry before the Duke, William Cavendish, played by Ralph Fiennes, stomps into the bedroom with a singular demand: "Scissors!"

What happens next is slightly comic, mostly ominous and, when delivered in Fiennes's haunting tone, extremely creepy. Sending the servants on their way with a terse "You may go," he approaches his new bride, shears in hand, with all the romance of a wrench-wielding dentist. He slices at her dress, removing layer after elaborate layer. Off goes her petticoat; goodbye, boned pannier. She's eventually left naked, save for a pair of girlish beribboned socks. "There were discussions about whether he should take a knife to her [dress]," says Michael O'Connor, costume designer for the movie, "but we thought that was too menacing."

"For the life of me," remarks Fiennes's Duke, exasperated, in the midst of it all, "I don't understand why women's attire must be so damned complicated."

Indeed, 18th-century garb hardly rates high on the practicality scale. On celluloid, however, it makes for fabulous eye candy, helping to fuel the current yen for costume dramas. In the past few years, there were Kirsten Dunst's Marie Antoinette and Cate Blanchett's second Queen Elizabeth I. Next year Emily Blunt's on board to tackle Queen Victoria, and Scarlett Johansson will take on Mary, Queen of Scots. Though not a queen, Georgiana was dubbed the Empress of Fashion by the British press of her day, and in the film her style is essential to her story—one

http://www.wmagazine.com/fashion/2008/09/georgiana_cavendish?printable=true

rich with scandal, politics (she actively campaigned for the Whig party) and steamy sex (illicit affairs, ménages à trois), not to mention enough booze, drugs and gambling to put Las Vegas to shame.

“This is a duchess,” says O’Connor. “She spent fortunes on clothes. You’re creating a wardrobe for people who were noted for what they wore.” (Centuries later a distant relative would find herself similarly scrutinized: Georgiana was the great-great-great-aunt of Princess Diana.) In *The Duchess*, Knightley wears 27 costumes, ranging from the alluringly outré to the quite simple. Perhaps the most spectacular outfit is the one she wears as she goes into labor with her first child, an ice blue jacquard gown with gigantic crystal embellishments. Another dazzler is the dramatic velvet cloak she sports at a secret rendezvous with her lover Charles Grey, played by Dominic Cooper. On the plainer side, Knightley wears the kind of muslin chemise that Georgiana introduced to English society after her friend Marie Antoinette gave her one as a gift.

Yet Georgiana’s primary signatures were probably her hair and hats. She set the trend in England for showy, sky-high coiffures, some towering three feet. Her hair accessory of choice? Drooping ostrich plumes, a Duchess of Devonshire trademark. In one memorable ballroom scene, Knightley wears an enchanting gown and opulent pearls, but it’s the dramatic feathers that draw the eye. “What we see her wearing tonight,” an attendee at the soirée remarks to the crowd, “I look forward to seeing the rest of you wearing tomorrow.” And, to be sure, a few cuts later, when the Duchess is at the theater, the audience is filled with ladies in feathery updos.

The film’s millinery masterpieces (giant, sweeping wide-brim hats topped with ribbons, baubles, rosettes and lace) come courtesy of English hatmaker Jane Smith. “You wait—no, you live—to have something as gorgeous as this, 18th century [to design],” says Smith.

Still, nothing was made purely for visual appeal. Everything, right down to Georgiana’s cameos, was calculated. “I started her very innocent and fresh, not too fussy,” O’Connor says. “But then, as she enjoys the company of men and politicians...it’s almost like she starts to understand how clothing works, that she has a public duty to be on display.”

Part of Georgiana’s evolution was discovering that she could work her sartorial wiles to her political party’s advantage. Those fancy ostrich headdresses in blue and cream? They’re the Whig colors. And Knightley’s wardrobe includes numerous striped gowns and dresses. “[Politicians] tended to wear stripes in their waistcoats,” O’Connor explains. Then there’s the military-style getup she dons at a rally in support of party leader Charles James Fox. The matching hat is outfitted with four foxtails and a tiny pillow embroidered with Fox’s name.

But for all its fashion and political currents, *The Duchess* is ultimately about Georgiana’s personal saga: her loveless, strained marriage and her even more complicated friendship with BFF (and rumored lover) Lady Elizabeth Foster, known as Bess, played by Hayley Atwell. Foster would become mistress to the Duke—making for one very awkward threesome under the same roof.

“There’s a relationship between the two in terms of color,” notes O’Connor of the actresses’ costumes. Georgiana starts out in light hues; Bess, dark. By the end of the film, it’s the opposite. “It nods to what comes,” he continues. Without spoiling things, let’s just say Bess turns out to be a forerunner to Eve Harrington.

Regarding the husband-and-wife relations—which prove just as chilling as that initial wedding-night scene foreshadowed—the audience need look no further than the Duchess’s ever present neckwear for clues. It speaks volumes that after an incident of horrible abuse by her husband, she wears a velvet band tied tightly around her neck. “It’s a sort of suffocating moment,” the designer says. In contrast, when she’s with Grey, Georgiana wears a delicate pendant loose and low. Says O’Connor: “There are no accidents in costume.”

Keywords

Who, Keira Knightley, costumes, Georgiana Cavendish, The Duchess

Photo: Peter Mountain/Paramount Vantage/Paramount Pictures