

How Elizabeth and co. made history sexy

Jasper Rees

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Why are our cinema screens suddenly heaving with young women of historical importance? Jasper Rees investigates

[Video: Eric Bana on playing Henry VIII in The Other Boleyn Girl](#)
(<http://link.brightcove.com/services/link/bcpid1358314062/bclid1364243001/bctid1427295339>)

A year from now, at the 2009 Academy Awards, it is possible to imagine a scenario in which a quartet of young actresses are nominated for playing women from Britain's glorious past.

For the past few years it's been all Elizabeth, the queen famous for strategically guarding her virginity, but in the coming months the big screen will be crowded with history girls who operated a more open-door policy towards sex.

First up is an adaptation of [Philippa Gregory's novel, The Other Boleyn Girl](#) (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2008/02/23/sm_Boleyngirl123.xml), which tells of two sisters' rivalry for the sexual attention of Henry VIII. It really ought to be known as The Other Other Boleyn Girl, a previous adaptation having been made - on a shoestring budget - by the BBC in 2003.

The new film stars Natalie Portman as Anne Boleyn and, as her sister Mary, Scarlett Johansson, who will scarcely need to change out of her voluminous Tudor gown to play the lead in the upcoming Mary Queen of Scots. This is another remake of a television drama, Jimmy McGovern's Gunpowder, Treason and Plot, which was shown on Channel 4 in 2004.

[23 February 2008\[Arts\]: Philippa Gregory on the film adaptation of her novel The Other Boleyn Girl](#)
(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2008/02/23/sm_Boleyngirl123.xml)

[16 February 2008\[Arts\]: Costumes star in The Other Boleyn Girl](#) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2008/02/16/bfBoleyn.xml>)

But this new cinematic compulsion is not confined to the Tudor age. Last year Kirsten Dunst starred in Marie Antoinette. The Young Victoria, with a leading role for Emily Blunt, will attempt to sex up a queen previously associated with dourness and denial, not dissimilarly from the 2001 BBC drama Victoria and Albert. The script is by Julian Fellowes, who in Gosford Park revealed an Oscar-winning talent for locating the passions tightly buttoned inside posh English hearts.

And then there is Keira Knightley in *The Duchess*, adapted from Amanda Foreman's bestselling *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*, the biography of an 18th-century proto-celebrity who, inter alia, had a Sapphic liaison with her husband's mistress.

It's a surprising turn of events for an industry which traditionally puts women in second place. Foreman, whose father Carl Foreman wrote *High Noon* and co-wrote *Bridge on the River Kwai*, puts her finger on why Hollywood's leading ladies are going back in time.

"You look at your archetypal crowd-pleasing contemporary film. The female roles are ciphers. There's nothing for them to do. Hollywood has started to think, 'We have all these great actresses. In what way can we legitimately showcase their talents?'"

"Historical figures are a brilliant way of not stretching the bounds of credibility. You're not writing a movie about two female supercops saving the world. These are genuinely interesting stories about famous female figures who really existed."

That pays Tinseltown's movers and shakers a greater compliment than they necessarily deserve. In a marketplace for ideas where one hit instantly begets half-a-dozen copies, the success of Cate Blanchett's two stints as Elizabeth I has persuaded producers that queens and duchesses are box office. The new generation of actresses are only too pleased to fall into line, even if it means, in Johansson's case, serially suppressing her own nationality.

"People are very suggestible in terms of the projects they want to pursue," says Christine Langan, producer of *The Queen* and now of BBC Films, who are involved in both *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Duchess*. "One movie might suggest another. We have a great range of very powerful young actresses. They are very savvy and part of a good acting career is making good decisions."

It doesn't explain quite why the Tudors in particular are considered such a rich seam for plotlines. Henry VIII has now been on big screen and small four times in the past five years, while Mary Queen of Scots usually gets good billing alongside her nemesis, Good Queen Bess.

"It starts with the historians," says Peter Morgan, who wrote the screenplay of *The Other Boleyn Girl*. "Some characters have star quality and some don't. Henry VII was in many respects a better king than Henry VIII, but no one is telling Henry VII's story. Perhaps they should, but the fact remains that Henry VIII has captured the public imagination. And there is nothing more comforting to a cinema audience than a story they feel they already know." Morgan should know. Five years ago he was scriptwriter on ITV's series, *Henry VIII*, in which Ray Winstone played the king as a Cockney.

McGovern, who is also having his second crack of the whip with *Mary Queen of Scots*, suspects that these are in effect chick flicks. "Wasn't there some research that showed that when a young man and woman go the pictures together, it is usually the young woman who picks the movie? Well, Mary, Elizabeth and Anne Boleyn were all young women having to act brave in a hostile man's world."

Morgan and McGovern agree that it is the dynastic neuroses of the Tudors that make their narrative so recyclable and indeed open to dramatic interpretation.

"You could say a small domestic rivalry between two sisters sparked the feud which resulted in a country changing its religion and the Reformation spreading across the whole of Europe, the epic repercussions of which were very appealing to me," says Morgan.

"Hundreds of years of war had taken place between England and Scotland," adds McGovern. "How was it resolved? Mary got herself pregnant, that's how. A Scottish king took the English crown simply because his mother got pregnant whilst the English queen remained barren. So much for men and their wars - utterly insignificant."

Meanwhile, when *The Duchess* eventually opens, the parallels between the life of one young Spencer and another will no doubt be one of its fascinations. *Georgiana* was published in the year of Diana's death and has taken so long to materialise partly, says Langan, because "in the quest to find a very compelling single narrative from a sprawling book, you have to make some bold decisions." That narrative was eventually found with the author's hand evidently on the tiller.

"Initially the producers had an idea that didn't necessarily showcase the rather wonderful storyline of *Georgiana*," says Foreman, "about somebody who has terrific talent but also terrific talent for self-destruction and how she struggles with that."

Just as the Princess of Wales was a sort of Godot-like figure in *The Queen*, the offstage motor of the plot, so she will be a ghost in *The Duchess*.

And if these four films about women, sex and blue blood prosper at the box office, it will only hasten the day that Diana, in a bespoke biopic, will get to go to the Academy Awards under her own steam.

'The Other Boleyn Girl' is released on March 7. 'The Duchess', 'Young Victoria' and 'Mary Queen of Scots' will be released later in the year.
