

The Duchess (dir. Saul Dibb)

The latest slice of period drama to grace our screens is this biopic on Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, who during the 1770s was patroness of the Whig party and prisoner of a marriage which made her, among other things, suffer the indignity of having her husband's mistress living under the same roof.

These heritage dramas are an industry all by themselves; the armies of prop hirers, wig and costume makers, researchers, production designers, location scouts and (mostly) British actors who go to make them must find themselves in almost permanent employ. The BBC does them, the Americans have a go at them, and the public can't seem to get enough of them.

The Duchess is a superior example of the genre, though nowhere in the league of Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*, and combines the spectacle of Keira Knightley looking glamorous in a range of frocks and wigs, while at the same time honing her acting talents (no more those rictus grins), with the guilty pleasure of following the uncomfortable parallels between the fortunes and indiscretions of the ancestress of Lady Diana Spencer with those of the Princess of Wales herself.

Lowering over the whole proceedings is the truly superb presence of Ralph Fiennes's Duke of Devonshire, Fiennes an actor who can convey polite discomfiture or threatening ire with slightest twitch of the mouth. In his hands the Duke becomes far less a melodramatic villain than a product of his time, and you almost feel sorry for him.

Go and see *The Duchess*; only those who have had children will baulk at the liberties taken with childbirth and breastfeeding. But not even that will spoil the fun.