

From Biographical Text to Biopic: Adapting the Cultural Memory of the Eighteenth Century

Eli Løfaldli

Our conceptions of a past we have not experienced are greatly reliant on the images produced of it on screen. Historical films, documentaries, and literary adaptations contribute to forming our notions of what a bygone era was like. All the major films produced in the past decade that depict the eighteenth century share a remarkable set of similarities. First, all the films tell the life stories of women. What is more, the subjects of the films are all noblewomen whose lives share notable resemblances which are told in strikingly similar ways. Second, they are all biographical films, or biopics, rather than purely fictional accounts. Finally, these biopics are all also openly acknowledged adaptations of biographical texts. Changes in the representation of the subject matter are inevitable in any book-to-screen adaptation, but the changes made in these cases are also markedly similar and appear to affect a noticeable shift in how eighteenth-century womanhood is presented to a modern audience.

In what follows, three major biopics will be analysed: *The Duchess* (2009), *A Royal Affair* (2012), and *The Scandalous Lady W* (2015).¹ These films all represent the lives of eighteenth-century British women: Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire (1757–1806), Caroline Matilda of Great Britain, later Queen Caroline Mathilde of Denmark and Norway (1751–1775), and Lady Worsley, Seymour Dorothy Fleming (1758–1818). The main focus of the analysis will lie in the biopics' relationship with their acknowledged source texts: *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire* (1999), *Prinsesse af Blodet: En Roman om Caroline Mathilde* (2000), and *The Scandalous Lady W: An Eighteenth-Century Tale of Sex, Scandal and Divorce* (2008).² Particular emphasis will be placed on the thematic consequences of the creative strategies of adaptation – selection, (re)arrangement, omission, addition, marginalization, expansion, and alteration – that have been deployed as their stories have been transposed from biographical texts into biographical films.³ The effect that changes in the content may have on today's cultural memory of the eighteenth

century will also be addressed, as will the possible intrusion of present-day concerns in these representations of the past.

The Duchess, *A Royal Affair*, and *The Scandalous Lady W* all depict glamorous aristocratic and royal protagonists who were embroiled in scandalous love triangles in their day, and the analysis of the outcome of their adaptation processes shows that all three films single out this particular aspect of their lives and present it in the light of personal tragedy, impossible love, and the restrictions women faced in eighteenth-century society. This marks a distinct shift in the representation of eighteenth-century womanhood and sexuality as compared to that of the biographical texts upon which they are based. The women of the books may face difficulties throughout their lives, but still remain active agents who are able to express themselves sexually and otherwise in a society that revels in excess and the pursuit of pleasure of all kinds. The women of the films, however, live under a much more restrictive regime. Their innate moral goodness is foregrounded, and it is through romantic love and redemptive motherhood that they are able to express their inner selves and progress in life. This consistent representational shift not only has consequences for the nature of the cultural memory of the period, but also suggests that the images of the past are neither fixed nor completely separated from the present. Representations of historical lives may say as much about the cultural preoccupations of our own times as they do about those of the period they set out to depict. It seems that the scandal surrounding their lives is essential to why their stories are considered to be worth telling, but at the same time, many of the traits that have made them appear scandalous through the ages are noticeably absent from the films detailing their life stories.

Cultural Memory and the Biopic

The distant past can of course never be remembered in a concrete sense, and current impressions of a past period have therefore often been referred to as 'cultural memories'. Although innately distinct from individual memories, cultural memories nonetheless incorporate aspects that are central to how individual memory works, such as 'the selectivity and perspectivity inherent in the creation of versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs', to borrow the words of Astrid Erll.⁴ Cultural memories are shared by societies and inherently communal, but are also felt by individuals as they tap into, engage with, and contest stories and versions of the distant past. Alison Landsberg goes so far as to refer to many cultural memories as 'prosthetic memories', in other words, memories

that emerge as people interact with the past by reading its stories, watching films about it, or viewing its objects, and through which an individual 'sutures himself or herself into a larger history'.⁵ Cultural memories of the past are mainly produced by the stories that are told about it in the present, making the distant past only accessible to us in mediated form.⁶ Films that seek to portray a period have a particularly important formative function in this respect, and their importance in the construction of cultural memories can hardly be overestimated.⁷ The medium of film, which today can be taken to include material made for television, the web, or other outlets, offers the public the possibility to engage with the past in a way that other media cannot.

Biopics form the largest subgenre of historical films and constitute a very significant part of the manner in which history is conveyed to the general public.⁸ Because of the focus on the individual essential to the genre, however, the historical material itself is conveyed via the perspective and experience of the person portrayed rather than through a more inclusive lens. One of the effects of this is that individual agency often trumps the problems posed by complex social and cultural forces in biopics, and this has been viewed as problematic.⁹ This is not the only criticism commonly launched at the biopic; in fact, most commentary on the genre tends to devote much space to either attacking or defending various aspects of it. As Bronwyn Polaschek notes, biopics typically 'incorporate multiple, and possibly conflicting, values, motifs and conventions', since they are reconstructions of one period in history produced in another, and are thus inherently ideologically equivocal.¹⁰ The ambiguity connected to the biopic's typical content is coupled with its popularity among the general public, which in turn leads to criticism typically levelled at mass-cultural products, where the genre's association with the entertainment industry appears to signal that these are films that are made to supply lightweight enjoyment for undiscerning viewers.¹¹

However, the most common and persistent cause of criticism of the biopic was identified already by the genre's first theorist, George Custen. On the one hand, he argued, 'most biopics do not claim to be the definitive history of an individual or era', but on the other, viewers' expectations and filmic conventions nonetheless lead to the assumption that what they present are 'the true versions of a life'.¹² The contract between filmmakers and audiences in the case of the biopic is therefore severely flawed: audiences are led to expect and feel they receive something that filmmakers have neither promised nor attempted to deliver. Historians' typical criticism that biographical films lack historical authenticity is thus levelled into a void, since audiences do not agree and filmmakers never attempted to achieve it in the first place. An interpretation based on Robert Rosenstone's description of

the genre might make an alternative and more fruitful viewer contract, especially if it were openly signalled in the production, marketing, and reception of a biopic: 'Less than full-blown portraits', Rosenstone argues, 'they should be seen and understood as slices of lives, interventions into particular discourses, extended metaphors that suggest more than their limited timeframes can convey'.¹³ In addition, it is important to recognize that controversies connected to such issues have also surrounded other fictional and factual biographical works since their emergence.¹⁴ A biographical text can no more offer the complete or true versions of a life than can a biographical film. Biography in all its generic guises will always be mediated and constructed accounts of an individual's life in much the same way as the eighteenth-century satirical pamphlets or commissioned portraits were.

Dennis Bingham has argued that biographies of men and women are so different that they have become different genres, and his analysis has shown how biopics depicting women's lives have been 'weighted down by myths of suffering, victimization, and failure'.¹⁵ 'Female biopics dramatize, with proper Aristotelian pity and terror, the process of a woman's degradation', he continues with reference to traditional films of this kind, and among the typical story arcs he identifies are a rise-and-fall structure playing out in two acts and a three-act configuration which includes an eventual rehabilitation.¹⁶ While the tendency to dramatize women's lives in this way remains central to traditional biopics, counteracting trends have also emerged. Bronwyn Polaschek notes the arrival of new types of biographical films about women that have joined what she terms the paradigmatic female biopic, and both the overtly feminist biopic and the postfeminist biopic that she describes have the potential to add the perspectives that Bingham missed.¹⁷ In addition, viewers' ability to engage with the past via the biopic may have a further political function: 'Taking on prosthetic memories of traumatic events and the disenfranchisement and loss of privilege that such an experience often necessitates can have a profound effect on our politics', Landsberg argues, implying that by vicariously experiencing the wrongs of the past, the wrongs of the present may be righted.¹⁸

Due to the fundamental similarities between adaptations and biopics, biographical films have often been seen as a form of adaptation. Tom Brown, for example, argues that the biopic is essentially a form of adaptation, and Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia write that 'the biopic as a form appears to be the adaptation *par excellence*', noting especially the theoretical and pragmatic interests and processes of interpretation-based 'selection and (re)arrangement' that the two share.¹⁹ The main advantage of discussing biopics as adaptations and using terms and methods from adaptation studies when investigating biographi-

cal films in this context is the possibility this offers of teasing out the interpretive choices that have been made in the process of adapting material to the screen. The only guaranteed outcome of transposing material from one medium to another is that changes are inevitable.²⁰ Although much of the material is of course retained in the process, the transmedial shift necessitates a more sharply tailored version of characters, stories, and periods alike. Investigating the choices that are actively made by making changes, then, may lay bare how the cultural memory of a historical period is constituted and revised in representations of individual lives, since such choices are particularly revealing of the specific versions of historical lives and periods that filmmakers seek to put forward. Analysing adaptive strategies such as selection and (re)arrangement, which Minier and Pennacchia highlight, or omission, addition, marginalization, expansion, and alteration, which Richard Hand has identified as central creative strategies of adaptation, may tell us what is seen to be lacking or underplayed in a source text and the versioning of a period that takes place in a biopic.²¹

However, and significantly, discussing differences between source and target texts neither implies nor necessitates an evaluative stance: it is accepted that notions of fidelity (in adaptations) or authenticity (in biopics) are dated and inherently unattainable and understood that biographical texts and biographical films are different, but equal, art forms.²² The transference from one medium to another does not imply an impoverishment, and, as previously noted, biography in text is just as mediated as biography on film. Rather, the issue here is to investigate ‘what principle guides the processes of selection’ and to establish ‘the “drift” of these changes and alterations’, which Robert Stam holds to be essential to the study of adaptation processes more generally.²³

The Duchess (2009): *From Troubled Aristocrat to Tragic Lover*

The subject of *The Duchess* is Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire (1757–1806), arguably the period’s greatest celebrity. Georgiana was famous, then as now, for being a political player and proponent of Whig politics and a trendsetter and jetsetter extraordinaire and now, as the author of literary and private writings. Her unhappy marriage to the distant and unloving Duke and her unusual domestic arrangement was also common knowledge. The Duke, Duchess, and Lady Elizabeth Foster, his mistress and her friend, lived in relative openness together despite the scandalous nature of the arrangement. Georgina Cavendish eventually embarked on extramarital affairs of her own, the best known of which

was with the Whig politician Charles (later Earl) Grey, and it is these personal and domestic dramas that are narrated in the 2009 biopic.

The Duchess is a compelling example of the convergence between representations of the past and concerns of the present. It was marketed as ‘a very contemporary tale of fame, notoriety and the search for love’ and the parallels between the lives of Georgiana Cavendish and her Spencer relative Princess Diana were made very explicit, such as in the much derided use of the phrase ‘There were three people in her marriage’ to frame and market the film. Along with the emphasis on modern-day parallels to the lives of the Duke, the Duchess, and Lady Elizabeth Foster, the period setting of the film was also foregrounded. Although its focus on an individual’s life story marks its status as a biopic, *The Duchess* also incorporates features from costume drama and melodrama, such as elaborate and opulent costumes and settings and much emotion and external and internal drama.²⁴ Against this sumptuous and exotic period backdrop a feminist tendency is articulated, and the film is explicit in its thematization and problematization of the lack of freedom for women in the eighteenth century, but this tendency is at times undercut by its selection and presentation of the material of the biography.

As stated in the film’s end credits, *The Duchess* is ‘based on the book *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* by Amanda Foreman’, and Foreman also appears in the behind-the-scenes material, emphasizing the nature of the biopic as an adaptation and offering a stamp of approval of the film’s reworking of the material.²⁵ In her biography, which first came out in 1998, Foreman paints a picture of Georgiana Cavendish as ‘pre-eminently a woman of paradoxes’:

She was an acknowledged beauty yet unappreciated by her husband, a popular leader of the *ton* who saw through its hypocrisy, and a woman whom people loved who was yet so insecure in her ability to command love that she became dependent upon the suspect devotion of Lady Elizabeth Foster. She was a generous contributor to charitable causes who nevertheless stole from her friends, a writer who never published under her own name, a devoted mother who sacrificed one child to save three, a celebrity and patron of the arts in an era when married women had no legal status, a politician without a vote and a skilled tactician a generation before the development of professional party politics.²⁶

The 2009 film does not depart far from this representation, but it is significant that it is typically the darker sides to Georgiana’s character that are omitted or marginalized in *The Duchess*. Unlike the biography, for instance, there are no suggestions of possible affairs with other men.²⁷ Similarly, the extent of her massive debts to a great number of friends is significantly downplayed in the film, as are her inability or unwillingness to own up to her massive and ever-mounting debts

to her husband and failure to repay those who had lent her the money.²⁸ The biography represents her propensity for excess, be it in terms of gambling, drink, or drugs, both as part of the hedonistic lifestyle of the aristocracy in the period and as an outlet for internal and external pressures.²⁹ The film includes scenes where she gambles and drinks to excess, but leaves them largely uncommented and does not share the biography's focus on the degree to which her immoderate living characterized the life of both the Duchess of Devonshire and her set. Other class-bound aspects of her life from the biography are also altered in the film version. In *The Duchess*, Georgiana and her lover appear almost revolutionary and allude to recent events in France and America as positive developments, and the film does not share the biography's focus on her close friendships with Marie Antoinette and the Duchess of Polignac or her attempts to rescue them from persecution.³⁰

The main alteration effected in the transposition from text to screen consists of the selection and expansion of the thwarted love story between Georgiana Cavendish and Charles Grey, fellow Whig and later Prime Minister and Earl Grey, as the film's key plot. It becomes the core onto which other themes are attached, while it is the Duchess's contribution to high politics that serves the same function in the biography, where she is described as someone who was 'remarkable for being a successful politician whose actions brought about national events'.³¹ The book, *Georgiana*, also devotes much space to the well-known affair and its outcome, describing Grey as 'the love of her life', but their relationship does not have the same structuring function and thematic prominence as in *The Duchess*.³² The extrapolation and dominance of the love plot marginalizes Foreman's focus on her as a politician, and this is further amplified by the film's presentation of her political engagement as being motivated by her love for Grey. The love plot frames the content of the film: it starts with a scene where the romantic interest between the two later lovers is sparked at the same time as her marriage to the cold Duke is being arranged, thus anchoring what is to come in this central dilemma. The biopic also ends before Grey starts exhibiting traits that do not belong to modern romantic heroes, such as having serial affairs as a married man or attempting to seduce Georgiana's sister, which the biography mentions.³³

Despite its broad focus, Amanda Foreman's biography, at least in part, depicts the late eighteenth century as a time of romps and dalliances, especially among the men and women of the aristocracy. Saul Dibb's biopic paints a different picture of the same period, especially through its representation of the relationship between the two protagonists. Theirs is an alliance based on pure romantic love, not sex, and this is highlighted even in the film's sex scenes. Importantly, Grey's ability to see her as an individual is given particular prominence. He comforts,

psychologizes, and shows interest in her as a person, cutting through the surface and finding the individual underneath rather than assessing how she conforms to Georgian ideals. He is thus posited as a more natural and modern alternative to the mannered and abusive Duke. As their relationship has to end when her relationship with her children is at stake, so does the lovers' dream 'of a new world'. They are drawn back into a restrictive period that is especially oppressive to women. Choosing her children over self-realization in the form of a romantic union, Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, remains trapped in a loveless marriage while conforming to the expectations of good motherhood. Grey, at heart a romantic hero of the twenty-first century, does not manage to rescue her from the eighteenth.

A Royal Affair (2012): From Matters of the Body to Matters of the Mind

A Royal Affair tells the story of Caroline Matilda of Great Britain (1751–1775), who became Queen Caroline Mathilde of Denmark and Norway when her marriage was arranged with King Christian VII at 15. After her marriage, she went on her own to Denmark to live with the mentally unstable 17-year-old King. Her difficult and isolated existence there was eased by the arrival of the new Royal Physician, Johann Friedrich Struensee, who later became her lover. Their affair did not go unnoticed, and stark criticism was voiced both in Copenhagen and by Caroline Matilda's brother in London, King George III. The scandal was not only sexual: highly trusted by the Danish King, the eager Enlightenment reformer Struensee had become the de facto ruler of Denmark and Norway, and the Queen's role in this process was believed to be instrumental. The couple could not withstand the massive popular and courtly opposition to their political and personal liaison, and a palace coup culminated in the execution of Struensee and the enforced exile of Caroline Matilda. She died in exile in Celle, where she had led a quiet life after her banishment from Copenhagen and her children. She was 23.

The relationship between *A Royal Affair* and the biographical novel it claims to be based on, Bodil Steensen-Leth's *Prinsesse af Blodet: En Roman om Caroline Mathilde* [*Princess of the Blood: A Novel about Caroline Mathilde*], is far from straightforward.³⁴ In fact, it was another novel that the filmmakers had originally wanted to adapt: Per Olov Enquist's international bestseller from 1999, *Livläkarens Besök* [*The Visit of the Royal Physician*].³⁵ Since the film rights to Enquist's novel had already been sold to another production company, the filmmakers reluctantly turned to Steensen-Leth's novel instead, taking care throughout the process to exclude features that

could be identified as Enquist's intellectual property, while arguably still remaining closer to the tendency of Enquist's than Steensen-Leth's novel.³⁶ Although *A Royal Affair* is not a transposition of an acknowledged source text to the screen, however, tracking the intellectual debts that are *not* incurred to a source, or aspects that find a notably different thematic form in the film, can still reveal the thematic ramifications of alterations and modifications in much the same way as investigations of a more traditional and less tenuously formed source-adaptation relationship.

The dual framing of the narrative in *A Royal Affair* shows its indebtedness to perspectives from both biographical novels. The initial and final intertitles describe the arrival of Enlightenment ideas to a backward and oppressive Denmark-Norway, and thus retain Enquist's focus on the restitution of Johann Struensee's reputation as an Enlightenment thinker rather than a power-hungry despot. The story of the relationship between Struensee, the mentally ill King Christian VII and Queen Caroline Mathilde is told against a political rather than personal backdrop, and this is accomplished by using a biopic staple title cards and intertitles. As George Custen argues, such tools 'prepare at the outset the conditions under which the film will operate' by contextualizing and framing the material presented.³⁷ The second level with which the narrative is framed is the main import from Steensen-Leth's novel. The story is told from the Queen's point of view, as indicated by the voiceover reading of a letter to her children at the beginning and end of the film, and by starting the narrative with her arranged marriage to the young King as a 15-year-old English Princess and her consequent arrival in Denmark in 1766.

By offering this dual framing of the narrative, and by converging them in the final scenes where her children are shown to continue the political work instigated by Struensee, the Queen, and the King, the biopic aligns itself more closely with the 'serious' historical film than the melodramatic costume drama. This is also the generic identity that the filmmakers are eager to promote in the behind-the-scenes material released with the film. The movement away from the female biopic's generic allegiances to costume drama is partly what makes Steensen-Leth's biographical novel an unlikely starting point for adaptation. Although the novel arguably lies closer to the costume drama than the historical film in its focus and mode of representation, the 'woman's genre' of costume drama has been subject to much critical disapproval, mainly due to its apparent flouting of aspirations of precisely the historical authenticity that the filmmakers seem to want to highlight.³⁸ *Princess of the Blood* is a steaming, erotic novel that focuses on the personal drama of the young and insecure protagonist's arrival in Denmark and her con-

sequent erotic and emotional awakening in the arms of Struensee. In the novel, the Danish court is a scene of French-inspired libertinism and sexual exploration set in opposition to the pious British court of her brother, King George III.³⁹ The film, in contrast, represents the Danish court as a site rife with underhand manoeuvring and religious, political, and sexual repression.

Similarly, physicality and the satiation of physical needs are themes that run throughout the novel. This is not only related to sex: the queen overeats and frets over weight gain, while Struensee's desire for her ample thighs serves as an antidote to the constant negative commentary on her appearance from both herself and those around her.⁴⁰ The novel tends to describe the attraction that arises between the pair in sexual terms. The Queen is both sexual subject and object in such scenes; both her attraction to the Royal Physician and his arousal when observing her at a ball are described in a very graphic manner.⁴¹ In *A Royal Affair*, the burgeoning relationship between the Queen and the Royal Physician is portrayed as a meeting of minds and souls, and it is their shared intellectual curiosity that sparks their interest in each other. One of the young Caroline Mathilde's first questions upon her arrival in Denmark is 'Where are my books?' This simultaneously points to the strict censorship of the Danish court and her status as an already thinking being. The evolving romance and erotic tension between them are instigated by her discovery of Struensee's secret stash of books from which she can borrow, and further heightened by her covert public reading of books only he understands are the works of the Enlightenment thinkers they both admire.

The Queen of the biopic is an important agent for change and an eager proponent of Enlightenment ideas. She is a political being who offers astute political advice and takes an active role in their project of arriving at an order where she hopes that 'all our thoughts and ideas could be turned into reality'. In contrast, although she progressively evolves into more of an intelligent and perceptive political thinker in the course of the novel too, this happens through Struensee's instruction rather than an intellectual exchange between equals in the manner shown in the film.⁴² Rousseau is an important figure in both novel and film, and both versions highlight his significance for the ideals that inform their political project. However, despite the biopic's consistent political focus, it omits any mention of a significant aspect of Rousseau's influence to which the biographical novel devotes much space: the harsh upbringing of Crown Prince Frederik according to Rousseau's principles.⁴³ No reference to how Enlightenment ideas were put into practice in the Queen's childrearing is made in *A Royal Affair*. Instead, all scenes portraying her with Frederik and her daughter by Struensee are character-

ized by emotional and physical closeness, and in her interactions with them, she is more modern mummy than Enlightenment mother and thinker.

The Queen's distress at being separated from her children after the palace coup is retained in both versions of her life story, but the film omits all examples of childrearing practices or modes of parent-child interaction that do not conform to present-day expectations of motherhood. Indeed, instead of being damaged by his strict and unconventional upbringing, it is precisely the late Queen's mothering that brings Frederik to turn her and her lover's 'thoughts and ideas [...] into reality' at the film's close. *A Royal Affair* thus effects a re-visioning of the traditional story of the Danish Queen, King, and Royal Physician. Caroline Mathilde is shown as an important agent of much-needed change who is finally recognized for her capabilities and qualities by her German lover, and theirs is a union of love rather than sex and a bond of strong emotional affinity among intellectual equals. Her suffering is brought to the fore, and this, along with the omission of aspects of her life that may be alien or alienating to modern viewers, works to afford sympathy for rather than censure of her actions.

The Scandalous Lady W (2015): *From Sexual Exploration to Sexual Exploitation*

Seymour Dorothy Fleming, Lady Worsley after her marriage to Sir Richard Worsley in 1775, was born in 1758 and died in 1818. Her image may be well known today because of the famous Joshua Reynolds portrait of her in red riding attire, but it is rarely tied to the story of her life, which was the cause of much notoriety in late eighteenth-century society. Then, she was best known for the criminal conversation case her husband brought against her. Having left her unhappy marriage and her children to set up house with her lover, George Bisset, Richard Worsley sued Bisset for a staggering £20,000 in damages – a sum which nonetheless was well below the massive fortune that she had brought to the marriage and that legally still belonged to him. During the trial, two scandalous facts were revealed: first, Lady Worsley was disclosed to have had many lovers during the marriage, the tally varying from the low twenties to 28. This, it was argued, meant that her value as a wife was nowhere near the sum her slighted husband asked for. Second, Richard was shown to have approved and even encouraged her sexual relations with other men, thus contributing to her devaluation, and was therefore awarded a mere shilling in compensation for his wife's desertion. While both estranged spouses suffered severe consequences of the ensuing scandal, Seymour also en-

joyed the perks that a position as a scandalized woman could offer, and after an enforced exile in France during the French Revolution, she returned to England and was finally able to recover her immense fortune at her husband's death.

As stated in the BBC film's end credits, *The Scandalous Lady W* is based on Hallie Rubenhold's biography of Lady Worsley, and Rubenhold also appears in its explanatory and behind-the-scenes footage. The biography was first published in 2008 under the title *Lady Worsley's Whim*, but reissued on the film's release in 2015 with a 'Now a BBC Programme' caption with the same title as the TV film. A version entitled *The Lady in Red* has also been published. The title change is representative of the nature of the reworking of the material from book to screen as a whole: it signals a subtle shift in the representation of eighteenth-century aristocratic female sexuality from predominantly light-hearted hedonism to potentially notorious activity, incorporating both a sense of titillating shock value and the threat of social ruin. This is a slight modification rather than a wholesale reconstitution of the representation of the life of Seymour Fleming, but one that nonetheless has thematic consequences by promising a behind-the-scenes representation of the story of the infamous Lady Worsley.

In both written and filmic forms of *The Scandalous Lady W* the Worsley criminal conversation case serves as the thematic centrepiece whereby the injustices of the eighteenth century's unequal distribution of power between men and women are made explicit, but the biopic expands and emphasizes this aspect further by framing Lady Worsley's life narrative in explicitly feminist intertitles. The opening and closing intertitles sketch a life trajectory that moves from suffering to eventual triumph, which conforms to the pattern of many female biopics.⁴⁴ Seymour Fleming is presented as a figure rising triumphant and re-empowered from '[a] time when a man's wife was considered to be his property [m]uch like his home, his land or his cattle' like a Phoenix with money and a young, forward-thinking thinking man at her disposal:

When Richard died Seymour reclaimed what remained of her dowry and her maiden name, Fleming
She married again, a musician twenty one years her junior, but she didn't take his name
He took hers.

Richard Worsley personifies and vocalizes the constraints of eighteenth-century society throughout the biopic, and constantly reminds her that her duty is to obey him. He makes her sleep with others so that he can watch, and she only goes along with his bidding to make him happy. Against this backdrop of gendered injustice,

Lady Worsley is established as a victim, but as the film progresses, she becomes increasingly combative. When Richard says he does not want a divorce, for example, she stands her ground by saying that 'I may be your lawful property, but I will never be yours', effectively supplanting the period's view of a man's ownership of a woman with another understanding of what belonging to a partner means. The biopic's alteration of details connected to the criminal conversation case also serves to emphasize this tendency. For instance, in the film, she is the one who initiates the defence strategy because she wants to tell the truth. She also argues that the Fleming-turned-Worsley fortune is rightfully hers, and her defiance is further underscored by her presence in court. In contrast, Rubenhold leaves the question of whether she actually consented to the defence strategy open, and states that she did *not* appear in court.⁴⁵

Significantly, it is through the love of a good man that Seymour eventually finds her agency and the means by which she can oppose the restrictions surrounding her. Her sexual encounters with George Bisset are portrayed very differently from other sex scenes in the film. This is also the case in those instances where Richard eagerly watches them through a key hole, suggesting that this is lovemaking, not erotic playfulness or a clinical execution of a wife's duty. Much emphasis is also placed on George's express desire to live together 'as moderns'. Their love is of a new kind, he argues, one that is 'based upon liberty' and 'free will'. She eventually agrees, but although it allows her a space for self-expression, an emotion-based liaison turns out to have its own pitfalls. As her tally of twenty-odd lovers is revealed, Bisset's notions of freedom crumble under the pressure of romantic convention and notions of female sexuality, and Seymour recognizes this, commenting that he now sees her 'as a whore' rather than 'a modern'. The film addresses Rubenhold's suspicion that Bisset left her because her continued marriage to Worsley meant that she could not give him a legitimate heir, but argues that he left because he did not love her anymore and omits any mention of the claim that she was several months pregnant with a second child by him at the time.⁴⁶

This second of Seymour's and George's children is not the only one that the film omits from its narrative of Fleming's life. Only her first child by Bisset is mentioned in the film version of *The Scandalous Lady W*, and no reference is made to the fact that Richard and Seymour had a son from before her affair with Bisset. The biography, however, gives a very different impression of Lady Worsley as a mother. It lists a total of four children by three different fathers, two of whom she abandoned.⁴⁷ While furthering narrative clarity, the omission of the children and their fates also constitutes a form of moral whitewashing of Seymour's character.

Other omissions have a similar effect. There are few if any traces in the film of the young Seymour who is portrayed in the biography as 'headstrong and wilful', seen by others as 'possessing more forwardness than discretion', or of accounts of her drunken shenanigans as a young wife.⁴⁸ In the film, in contrast, her forwardness is depicted as a just reaction to the wrongs to which she has been subjected by her husband and by a patriarchal and oppressive society.

The structural alterations made as Rubenhold's biography has been adapted to the screen have a similar effect on the portrayal of the scandalous Lady Worsley. Instead of maintaining the largely chronological structure of the biography, the BBC biopic presents much of the material in flash cuts. Plot chronology often leads to an assumption of causality: what is mentioned first tends to inform the understanding of what follows.⁴⁹ When Richard Worsley's propensity for voyeurism is introduced early on in the filmic narrative, for instance, that serves to explain and redeem Seymour Worsley's many sexual escapades. Moreover, the revelation of just how many lovers she has had is left until late in the film, and only after her capacity for romance, love for her child, and obedience to an oppressive husband have been established.

As previously mentioned, the biopic ends at a point of triumph for Seymour Fleming. Having battled the strong prejudices and oppressive forces of her time, she is finally at a point where she can enjoy her independence. 'I belong to no man. And while it is my misfortune to live in an age of men, I will never belong to any man ever again', she says with satisfaction. The decision to cut off her life story at this exact point does have thematic consequences. By also including what happened later in her life, the biography depicts her triumph as a short-lived one, since what awaited Lady Worsley after the scandalous trial was a very tenuous and contradictory position.⁵⁰ By cutting the representation of her life trajectory at a triumphant point the biopic paints a different picture of both a woman's ability to overcome the restrictions inherent in eighteenth-century culture and the positive and negative consequences of having been publicly shamed and scandalized. One thing the two versions of *The Scandalous Lady W* share, however, is the final focus on the love, support, and reversed power balance that her last marriage afforded her. The young musician who took her name may have remarried after her death, but, according to the closing words of the biography, '[h]is final request was "to be buried along side" his "dearly beloved first wife, Lady Seymour Fleming", a woman of whom he had never been ashamed'.⁵¹ It is perhaps telling that much effort appears to have been made to ensure that today's recipients of her life story should not regard her chequered sexual history as a source of shame either.

Paradoxes of Gender and Class in a Revised Cultural Memory

The analysis of the biopics shows that it is not only the lives of Georgiana, Caroline, and Seymour that contain many of the same elements, also the manner in which those lives are represented on screen is very similar. The Duchess of Devonshire, the Queen of Denmark, and Lady Worsley are all portrayed as good women trapped in unhappy marriages to inadequate and bullying husbands. All three women rebel against the restrictive constraints of glamorous high society by entering into romantic relationships with good men who see them for who they are, thus enabling their self-realization. They are severely penalized for their breaches of convention, but all the biopics end on a note of triumph and moral restitution. The main features of these shared narratives are further amplified through the individual adaptation processes. The moral 'goodness' of the protagonists, for instance, is emphasized by the omission of information that could potentially temper such a status, or by accentuating the romantic nature of their 'scandalous' sexual histories. The structural alterations and rearrangements contribute to the same tendency: the selection of the main plotline in *The Duchess*, the narrative framing of *A Royal Affair*, and the (re)arrangement of the plot in *The Scandalous Lady W* all have similar thematic consequences and share the effect of rehabilitating the protagonists' tainted reputations for today's viewers.

There are also significant and consistent differences in how the eighteenth century is portrayed in the biographical texts and the biographical films. This has consequences for the cultural memory of the period, which can be seen to undergo a revision, or shift, as the material is transposed to a new medium. The works in both media depict an opulent and glamorous world of spending sprees and beautiful clothes. However, the focus on sex in the biographical texts contributes to an image of the period where sexual freedom and more or less open displays of erotic playfulness are key, and where men and women alike have multiple affairs and illegitimate children. They have room for political and other forms of self-expression, and theirs is a world of decadence and excess. By contrast, the films may retain a general focus on sex, but distinguish between what is portrayed as slightly sordid hedonism and its positive opposite, romantic lovemaking, which is the only form of sex that women are shown to fully enjoy. Eighteenth-century society is depicted as being oppressive to women, but they may achieve redemption and self-awareness through the love of a good man and/or fulfilling motherhood.

This notable shift in the portrayal of the period brings a number of inherent paradoxes to the fore. When noting how female biopics have tended to make use of reductive tropes, Dennis Bingham called for the application of a feminist point

of view to broaden the scope of how women's lives on film were being told.⁵² In many respects, these films answer Bingham's brief: they explicitly address the wrongs committed against women in eighteenth-century society and show the direct consequences of cultural constrictions on women's lives. This serves to anchor them to Polaschek's category of overtly feminist rather than paradigmatic female biopics and suggests that they may serve a political function of the kind that Landsberg described. However, and paradoxically, they simultaneously reveal and uphold *current* cultural constrictions for women through the consistent moral whitewashing of their characters, and this complicates their feminist tendency. The films also stay within the confines of storytelling that Bingham identified as being central to traditional biopics depicting women, with their focus on female suffering, victimization, and degradation and by following a three-act structure of rise, fall, and eventual rehabilitation.⁵³

It has been argued that the emergence of hitherto unknown and untold lives on the screen has been important gender politically by expanding the cultural memory of various periods to include more women's lives and experiences.⁵⁴ The selection of female objects of attention in the past decade's films about the eighteenth century counteracts the traditional tendency to focus mainly on men. However, the fact that all films concern women of the upper echelons of Georgian society points to further paradoxes related to class and gender. On the one hand, it is striking that the interest in this social group is assumed from a predominantly middle-class audience.⁵⁵ Given that many of the aspects that are altered or omitted in the adaptation processes are ones that have typically been alien to middle-class culture from the eighteenth century to today, it could be that these changes are made to suit specifically middle-class and not just specifically modern tastes, ideals and preoccupations. After all, television and film tend to 'cultivate the perspective of the social order from which they spring', and the biopics discussed here can be seen to exemplify portrayals of the aristocracy from a middle-class perspective.⁵⁶ On the other, it is also quite ironic that it is the lives of women of relative power that are used to illustrate female disempowerment.

In fact, all biopics of eighteenth-century women made during the past decade take aristocratic or royal women as their subjects: in addition to the three films dealt with here, *Marie Antoinette* (2006) portrays the young French Queen and *Belle* (2014) tells the 'inspiring true story' of a hitherto unknown adoptive daughter of the famous Chief Justice Lord Mansfield.⁵⁷ Although *Marie Antoinette* frames its narrative in a slightly different manner from the biopics of British women, it does follow a very similar storyline to *The Duchess*, *The Scandalous Lady W*, and *A Royal Affair* with its focus on the arranged marriage, an affair, and challenges

facing the protagonist as she matures and as the story progresses.⁵⁸ *Belle*, on the other hand, has different plot elements to the other four films, but the narrative mode is very similar to the films discussed in detail here. It includes the paradox of positing a political framework for the narrative that is at times subverted by the storytelling devices and tropes deployed, for instance by insisting that *Belle* is the result of a romantic rather than exploitative relationship between a black woman and a white man, which undercuts its recurrent criticism of colonial Britain and the slave trade. The close connections between all these historical figures is an indication of just how small this world actually was: Georgiana Cavendish knew Marie Antoinette intimately and belonged to a social set which overlapped with Seymour Fleming's. Moreover, Georgiana was portrayed together with Seymour in Sheridan's *School for Scandal*, and *Belle*'s adoptive father was the judge in the Worsley case and met Caroline Mathilde's husband during his stay in London. Eighteenth-century womanhood as recently depicted on screen, then, is not necessarily a composition of a representative selection of individuals and experiences. These critically acclaimed biopics are far from nostalgic revisitations of the eighteenth century, but their consistent focus on the lives of noblewomen also ensures that glamour, visual splendour, and sexual titillation remain integral to its cultural memory.

Aspects of the Past or Concerns of the Present?

Part of the reason why films have such an important function in shaping our conceptions of the past is their unrivalled ability to create an emotional connection to the past for their audiences.⁵⁹ As Murray Smith has shown, this emotional connection will predominantly have to be accomplished via viewers' ability to form an attachment to individual characters through recognition, alignment, and allegiance.⁶⁰ This is also very important for biopics, since they have such a prominent focus on the life of a historical individual. Smith's identification of a moral evaluative element in this process is particularly relevant in relation to the biopics discussed here: 'we may not form sympathetic allegiances just on the basis of the relative virtuousness of the various characters', he writes, but 'moral evaluation functions as a centre of emotional gravity when it comes to the sympathies we form with characters'.⁶¹ This may help explain the consistent cleansing of troublesome traits that is effected in the various adaptation processes analysed. It may also serve as an indication of how specific characteristics and experiences are valorized in contemporary culture. Based on the examples of these and similar

films, it seems that a modern audience is not expected to sympathize with women who are too political, too sexual, or too unmotherly, for instance. The substantial omission or alteration of certain features of these women's lives suggests not only that these are considered unpalatable today but also that identification and sympathy with these women may still be conditional and restricted.

Many scholars have pointed to the fact that films representing the past also simultaneously speak to the concerns of the present. They tend to address issues that are seen as relevant today and present the material of the past from a modern perspective.⁶² The subject matter can be used as critical commentary on contemporary questions or may be subject to exoticization by conveying a sense of distance – of the 'pastness of the past' – as a contrast to contemporary culture.⁶³ Moreover, irrespective of how the subject matter is handled thematically, it is always communicated via modern-day aesthetic conventions and standards.⁶⁴ Elodie Rousselot explains how representations of the past adapt it for a contemporary context by keeping only those elements that will fit the purposes of the present.⁶⁵ Even biopics engage in a complex interplay between the past and the present.⁶⁶ In addition, biopics have tended to combine their interest in the stories of the past with an implicit view of history as progressive, since they 'offer model lives for the purposes of admiration and emulation, and they communicate to us the vitally uplifting message that the times we live in are better – or are getting better', as Dana Heller argues.⁶⁷ In his discussion of the importance of biographies in cultural memory production, moreover, Max Saunders has also pointed to their function of upholding the values of the society in which they are made.⁶⁸

In biopics, then, exhibiting the past often comes with an implicit suggestion that it is inferior to the present and that the moral fibre of individuals and periods is under scrutiny. This is a tendency to which the three biopics in focus here conform. Moreover, by anchoring the oppression of women so firmly to the period itself, they also offer viewers a sense that history has progressed and that gender inequality is a thing of the past. There is not much time separating the written and screen versions of these eighteenth-century lives. Still, the consistency of the changes made in the book-to-film adaptations suggests a shift in the representation of eighteenth-century womanhood. Whether this shift predominantly has to do with medial, film generic, commercial, or cultural concerns is difficult to determine. However, and regardless of the causes of this shift, what is certain is that a new cultural memory of the eighteenth century is being constructed on the screen for new generations of viewers: one that paradoxically focuses on scandalous women while simultaneously attempting to purge them of traits that are seen as scandalous today.

Notes

1. *The Duchess*. Directed by Saul Dibb. 2009. (London: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2009). DVD; *A Royal Affair*. Directed by Nicolaj Arcel. 2012. (Oslo: Nordisk Film, 2012.) DVD; *The Scandalous Lady W*. Directed by Sheree Folkson. 2015. (London: Warner Home Video, 2015). DVD.
2. Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire* (London, 1999); Bodil Steensen-Leth, *Prinsesse af blodet: En roman om Caroline Mathilde* (Copenhagen, 2000); Hallie Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W: An Eighteenth-Century Tale of Sex, Scandal and Divorce* (London, 2008).
3. As will be discussed below, these strategies are identified by Richard Hand, in "'It Must all Change Now': Victor Hugo's *Lucretia Borgia* and Adaptation', in Dennis R. Cutchins and James Michael Welsh (eds.), *Redefining Adaptation Studies* (Blue Ridge Summit, 2010) and Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia, in 'Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Biopic: An Introduction', in Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia (eds.), *Adaptation, Intermediality and the British Celebrity Biopic* (Farnham, 2014).
4. Astrid Erll, 'Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction', in Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara Young (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin, 2008), 1–15 (p. 5). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262>
5. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York, 2004), p. 2.
6. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, 'Introduction: Cultural Memory and its Dynamics', in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (Berlin, 2009), pp. 1, 3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110217384.0.1>; Max Saunders, 'Life-Writing, Cultural Memory, and Literary Studies', in Erll et al. 2008, 321–331 (p. 324). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262>
7. Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden, 2008), p. 1.
8. Burgoyne 2008, p. 16.
9. Belén Vidal, "Introduction: The Biopic and its Critical Contexts", in Tom Brown and Belén Vidal (eds.), *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (New York, 2013), p. 3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203384572>
10. Bronwyn Polaschek, *The Postfeminist Biopic: Narrating the Lives of Plath, Kablo, Woolf and Austen* (Basingstoke, 2013), p. 51.
11. Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis/London, 1996), p. 151.
12. George Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, 1992), pp. 7, 8.
13. Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, 2012), p. 122.
14. Custen 1992, p. 6; Rosenstone 2012, p. 104.
15. Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives are they Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (New Brunswick, 2010), p. 10.
16. Bingham 2010, pp. 220, 218–19.

17. Polaschek 2013, p. 2.
18. Landsberg 2004, p. 3.
19. Tom Brown, 'Consensual Pleasures', in Tom Brown et al. 2013, p. 121. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203384572>; Minier and Pennacchia 2014, pp. 7, 11. However, this view is not completely uncontroversial, and has been criticized for not taking the differences between the two forms into account. See e.g. Minier and Pennacchia 2014, pp. 7, 9; Sara Brinch, 'Tracing the Originals, Pursuing the Past: *Invictus* and the "Based-on-a-True-Story" Film as Adaptation', in Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik, and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen (eds.), *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions* (London, 2013), 223–244 (pp. 226, 237). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472543349.ch-011> and Christine Geraghty, *Now A Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama* (Lanham, 2008), p. 171.
20. Robert Rosenstone, 'History in Images/History in Words', in Marnie Hughes-Warrington (ed.), *The History on Film Reader* (London/New York, 2009), p. 35; Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence, 2002), p. 1.
21. Hand 2010, p. 17.
22. Minier and Pennacchia 2014, p. 12.
23. Robert Stam, 'Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation', in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (eds.), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Malden, 2005), p. 34.
24. Julianne Pidduck, *Contemporary Costume Film* (London, 2004), p. 4; Bill Nichols, *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies* (New York/London, 2010), pp. 258, 262–3.
25. See Geraghty 2008, p. 171.
26. Foreman 1999, p. 401.
27. See e.g. Foreman 1999, pp. 130, 317–18.
28. See e.g. Foreman 1999, pp. 160–61, 353.
29. Foreman 1999, pp. 126–27, 168, 369.
30. See Foreman 1999, pp. 41, 279.
31. Foreman 1999, p. 405.
32. Foreman 1999, image caption p. 250.
33. See Foreman 1999, pp. 345–46, 395–96.
34. The novel has not been translated into English. The translation of the title is mine.
35. Per Olov Enquist, *Livläkarens besök* (Stockholm, 1999). The translation is the official English title of the novel.
36. Björn af Kleen, 'Slaget om Dr Struensees liv' [the battle over Dr Struensee's life], *Expressen*, 15 April, 2012.
37. Custen 1992, pp. 53, 51.
38. Pidduck 2004, pp. 5, 4.
39. See Steensen-Leth 2000, p. 37.
40. See e.g. Steensen-Leth 2000, pp. 106, 131.

41. Steensen-Leth 2000, pp. 108, 132.
42. See e.g. Steensen-Leth 2000, pp. 6, 109–10, 113–14.
43. Steensen-Leth 2000, pp. 206–9.
44. Bingham 2010, p. 219.
45. See Rubenhold 2008, pp. 149, 147.
46. Rubenhold 2008, pp. 17, 22.
47. Rubenhold 2008, pp. 224–25, 245, 263.
48. Rubenhold 2008, pp. 21, 35–37.
49. See e.g. Maureen Turim, 'Flashbacks in Film', in Marnie Hughes-Warrington (ed.), *The History on Film Reader* (London/New York, 2009), p. 96 for a discussion of this.
50. See e.g. Rubenhold 2008, pp. 173, 175.
51. Rubenhold 2008, p. 266.
52. Bingham 2010, pp. 218–19.
53. Bingham 2010, pp. 218–20.
54. Saunders 2010, p. 327.
55. Minier and Pennacchia 2014, p. 5.
56. Custen 1992, p. 16.
57. *Belle*. Directed by Amma Asante. 2014. (London: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2014). DVD; *Marie Antoinette*. Directed by Sofia Coppola. 2006. (London: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007). DVD.
58. Saunders 2010, p. 328; Pam Cook, "History in the Making: Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* and the New Auteurism", in Tom Brown et al. (eds.) 2013, pp. 212–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203384572>
59. Burgoyne 2008, pp. 1–2.
60. Murray Smith, "Engaging Characters: Further Reflections", in Jens Eder, Fotis Janinidis, and Ralf Schneider (eds.), *Characters in Fictional Worlds* (Berlin, 2010), p. 234. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110232424>
61. Smith 2011, pp. 244, 245.
62. Toplin 2002, p. 42; Burgoyne 2008, p. 11.
63. Landy 1996, p. 15; Toplin 2002, p. 48.
64. Burgoyne 2008, p. 4.
65. Elodie Rousselot, 'Neo-Victorian Experiments with (Natural) History in Harry Karlinsky's *The Evolution of Inanimate Objects*', in Elodie Rousselot (ed.), *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction* (Basingstoke, 2014), 120–137 (pp. 125–6). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137375209_8
66. Landy 1996, p. 160.
67. Dana Heller, 'Films', in Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (eds.), *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington, 2008), p. 46. This is also a feature of other historical films (see e.g. Rousselot 2014, p. 8.).
68. Saunders 2010, p. 324.

Summary:

From Biographical Text to Biopic: Adapting the Cultural Memory of the Eighteenth Century

The article investigates how recent biopics of eighteenth-century women can be seen to form and/or revise the cultural memory of the period, with a particular emphasis on how the individuals represented in biographical texts are portrayed as figures with which a modern audience can sympathize as the material is adapted for the screen. An analysis of changes that have been made in the adaptation processes of *The Duchess* (2009), *A Royal Affair* (2012), and *The Scandalous Lady W* (2015) shows some of the ways in which the concerns of the present are central to representations of the past. The cultural memory of eighteenth-century womanhood as constructed by and represented in biographical films of the past decade is inherently paradoxical: the almost exclusive focus on 'scandalous' women co-exists with consistent attempts to purge their life stories of elements that are regarded as scandalous today.

Keywords: Biopic; biographical film; biographical novel; biography; adaptation; cultural memory; eighteenth-century womanhood; *The Duchess*; *A Royal Affair*; *The Scandalous Lady W*