

## THE DRAMATIC INTERPRETATION OF AN IMAGE OF A HISTORICAL CHARACTER: DUCHESSE DE POLIGNAC IN FICTION AND BIOPIC

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### ABSTRACT

This research studies the transformation of a historical personality into an art image in biopic and historical novel, and the peculiarities and interrelation of these genres. The possibilities of creating plausible images of historical figures in biographical films (biopics) are contemplated. The object of study is 18th century French aristocrat Duchess Gabrielle de Polignac. Historically, her depictions in various arts were either obscure or stereotypic. Comparing and analysing the latest works of written and visual art featuring this historical figure (the 2002 novel *Farewell, My Queen* by Chantal Thomas and the 2012 film based on it) we discover that owing to (rather than in spite of) the authors' use of imagination we get a better understanding of the character. A historical figure invariably goes through the author's perception before turning into a fictional character bearing a new image of the person it stands for. There are no ultimately "true" images neither in fiction, nor in cinema. Nevertheless, creating believable characters can be achieved. The special devices used in the novel and the film are juxtaposed and analysed.

**Keywords:** *Polignac, Marie Antoinette, biopic, historical novel*

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, intermedial studies are becoming ever more popular. Many research works are dedicated to the relations between visual arts and fiction (Giddings & Sheen 2000, Conway 2001, Fay 2010, Golikova & Pomortseva 2014). However, studies of historical / biographical genres in different art forms remain few (Seeger 1992, Rosenstone 1995, 2007; Bingham 2010). In this research we aim to trace the transformation of a historical personality into an art image in biopic and historical novel, and the peculiarities and interrelation of these genres. Using the method of comparative analysis we study the possibilities of historical fiction and biopic in establishing the historical truth.

The materials for our research are the 2012 biopic *Farewell, My Queen* and the novel of the same name by French historian Chantal Thomas. The choice of the object, Duchess Gabrielle de Polignac, Queen Marie Antoinette's notorious favourite, is prompted by contradictions and obscurity that becloud her name, even more than that of Marie Antoinette's .

Yolande Gabrielle de Polignac is one of the most ambiguous and mysterious figures in European history. Today after two hundred odd years there's no unanimity regarding her character and disposition. Her background was common enough for her times: coming from an old noble but impoverished family, she married a similarly noble and poor count Jules de Polignac. Her fortune changed dramatically when in 1775 she was introduced to Queen Marie Antoinette and immediately won her friendship. Gabrielle de Polignac became famous for her unprecedented role in French monarchy: she was not the king's, as was customary, but the queen's favourite. In history and fiction there came to be two opposing views on the

duchess' person. Wicked, egotistical, greedy and scheming angel, guilty of monarchy's fall leading to the Revolution, and, on the other hand, a guileless victim of greedy and ambitious friends and family. To these days her name stands for the exclusiveness, arrogant unawareness and extravagance of the decaying world of Versailles. However, despite an extraordinary epoch in which she happened to live and an extraordinary queen whose friendship she won, there was nothing, it seems, particularly extraordinary about the duchess herself. She didn't reveal any talent except but one: fascinating beauty.

Till the end of the 20th century historical writings and fiction presented a rather one-sided view of Gabrielle de Polignac. The film *Farewell, My Queen* (2012) based on a historical novel of the same name by Chantal Thomas offers a curious and quite plausible interpretation of the image of the duchess.

## **BIOPIC**

In western criticism biopic is often called undeservedly overlooked and largely unappreciated, "a respectable genre of very low repute" (Bingham, 3). According to Robert Rosenstone, the cause lies in the activity of Hollywood while independent films and films made in other countries are usually disregarded. (Rosenstone, 2007: 11) The attitude towards history films is firmly established in the public mind: they are usually seen as entertaining lies that have very little to do with historical or biographical truth. This view is justified by most of the earlier examples of this genre and some of the modern ones. However, it can be noted that in recent years the situation has been improving. More of serious and thought-provoking films appear every year. In his recent work *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* Dennis Bingham insists on the biopic's authenticity, importance and dynamic. According to Bingham, biopic strives to "demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of a personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person. <...> The appeal of the biopic lies in seeing an actual person who did something interesting in life transformed into a character. At the heart of the biopic is the urge to dramatize actuality and find in it the filmmaker's own version of truth" (Bingham, 10).

The work of a shrewd and insightful director can recreate a life that we strive to understand. It should be agreed that there cannot be a single "true" version of a life. Therefore, sometimes it is through art, not facts, that we can better understand the past. Reconstructing the most dramatic and characteristic episodes of a biography, the filmmakers succeed in finding the truth through imagination that, contrary to a common belief, doesn't necessarily disrupt the historical truth. "Through invention, film summarises vast amounts of data or symbolises complexities that otherwise could not be shown. We must recognise that film will always include images that are at once invented and true; true in that they symbolise, condense, or summarise larger amounts of data; true in that they impart an overall meaning of the past that can be verified, documented, or reasonably argued" (Rosenstone, 1995, 71).

Biopic is an artistic interpretation of a real person's life. Selection, sequence and highlights play an important part and are challenging to carry out, for "a life defies cinematic neatness" (Seeger, 49). Like biographer, the director must determine the essential in his object, and, like novelist, he must carry his perception to the audience in a dramatic form.

Nowadays special attention is devoted to films about famous women. In literary and biographical criticism women's biography is considered a separate genre that has conventions and patterns of its own, distinct from traditional paradigm of the biography (Bingham, 22). Bingham also notes that films about men have undergone an evolution, "have gone from celebratory to warts-and-all to investigatory to postmodern and parodic. Biopics of women, on the other hand, are weighed down by myths of suffering, victimisation, and failure" (Bingham, 10). It is universally acknowledged that biography needs a hero who did something of consequence in the public opinion. Women rarely could become the heroines of their own stories. That is why biopics about women usually depict them in confrontation with the public

opinion, in conflict between their wishes and expected behaviour, that is, when they step out of the traditional limits imposed on them by the society.

Today there is some small amount of innovative films that have stepped away from the usual canon. Farewell, My Queen (*Les Adieux à la Reine*) 2012 by Benoit Jacqueau may be included in the list. Diane Kruger cast as Marie Antoinette created a bizarrely twofold image of the notorious queen. The resulting picture may seem odd, however, it is doubtless psychologically true. A serious mind in conjunction with shockingly careless behaviour, according to many historical sources, characterised Marie Antoinette from an early age. In her last years there was little left of her earlier carelessness. Taking this into account it becomes clear that a girlish light-heartedness in a mature queen is feigned, a rudiment of her younger self, a reminder of the older days kept up in a futile attempt to escape the dreadful reality closing in on her. Besides, the director actively plays with the audience, making suggestions, leaving hints here and there that spectators may interpret as they wish. The ambiguity is the most pronounced in the case of the character of the Duchesse de Polignac and her relationship with the Queen. Throughout history it has always been suggested that Marie Antoinette shared more than a friendly attachment with her favourite. Accusations of immorality and licentiousness could be certainly exaggerated. Modern historians (A. Fraser, A. Foreman) agree that the young Queen and her favourite were probably following the fashion of romantic friendships established by Julie and Claire from *La nouvelle Héloïse* by Rousseau which was the rage at the time. As it is, Benoit Jacqueau actively makes use of the popular assumptions, implying nothing, playing with the spectator in a most postmodern fashion.

#### **DUCHESS DE POLIGNAC IN THE NOVEL AND ON SCREEN**

The film is based on the 2002 historical novel by Chantal Thomas featuring three crucial days of the French Revolution - July 14th through 16th, 1789 - from the fall of Bastille till the mass flight of the courtiers from Versailles. Chantal Thomas is a French scholar and biographer, author of several history works on Marie Antoinette, 18th century France her main domain. She skilfully weaves a novelistic form with scholarly precision. Helen Falconer remarked that *Farewell, My Queen* can hardly be called a novel in a strict sense, calling it instead “fictionally embellished slice of history” (Falconer).

The author relates these cataclysmic historical events from the perspective of a woman occupying an insignificant place in royal court life – a perspective both limiting and revelatory to the understanding of an important historical event. The narrator Agathe-Sidonie Laborde is unsophisticated and politically naive. She describes the events she witnessed in minute detail, trying to put down “all the remembered fragments of a wrecked world” (Thomas, 17). Thus, the novel is a memoir, like numerous others written by refugees, though, in this case, a mock one, relating the story first-hand, but the accuracy of “remembered” things is impossible to establish: “My mind takes up the same facts again and again, changing them to fit my changing daydreams, while other, possibly more essential, facts have been obliterated”, - muses Agathe-Sidonie, adding: “I do have this excuse: I speak of a time long ago, a time leading nowhere”. This narrative solution permits the author, without contradicting the evidence, to give dimension to it, to add a single colourful piece of the puzzle to the large monochrome picture. The last words that Agathe-Sidonie Laborde puts down convey the idea: “It’s so little, yet so everything” (Thomas, 233).

Disregarding the differences in some details and the story development, the screen version echoes the novel’s structure and its eerily phantasmal atmosphere. France is on the verge of Revolution, vague fear is haunting the halls and passages of Versailles while once established routine of the court life continues to be wilfully maintained by the oblivious inhabitants. Speaking details scattered throughout the narrative and skilfully replicated on the screen create a picture of splendour and squalor of the palace and the life in it. Crumbling under the gilt, the world of Versailles is long doomed, however nobody seems to be able to shake off the blissful insouciance. The palace inhabitants are far less shocked by the triumphant storming

of Bastille than by an outrageous fact that the king had to be woken up in the middle of the night to be informed about that. The last moments of desperate oblivion before the outbreak of panic produce a haunting effect both from the novel's pages and even more forcibly from the screen. The effect of verisimilitude produced in the novel with the help of a memoir form is dubbed in the film by special camera work: slightly shaking, documentary-style, the camera closely follows the protagonist's movements. The novel's rich detailing finds its analogy in the film's intimate close-ups.

The image of the duchesse de Polignac created by Chantal Thomas accords with the 18th century memoir chronicles. From the first appearance on the pages of the novel Gabrielle's extraordinariness is brought forward: she is the only one with an ever radiant face among stiff and forlorn mummies (the courtiers). An uncanny charm that she possessed is subtly described by the book's narrator:

The favourite possessed a natural beauty, as well as a freshness of complexion that took on surprising lustre in such a setting as Versailles, where makeup and sophisticated lighting prevailed. Compared with her, the other women at Court were like automatons, gesturing stiffly, walking mechanically, speaking sharply and imperiously. Her voice, in contrast, was soft, and her bearing did not impose. Everyone noticed her, precisely because she made no effort to be noticed. Her light-coloured eyes did not linger on any one person. There was about Gabrielle a characteristic elusive quality, and the paleness of those eyes – made paler still in the contrast with her dark hair – enhanced this “indefinable” effect (Thomas, 160).

For the queen the attraction was Polignac's free and nonchalantly candid manner, and the more important, her lack of ambition and jealousy. “Majesty, I am perfectly satisfied with my lot. I believe it was ever thus. It is a trait of my character. But thanks to His Majesty's generosity, my contentment now is beyond measure” (Thomas,163).

In the film Polignac is played by Virginie Ledoyen who in looks doesn't quite correspond with the contemporary descriptions and paintings. But the actress is a relative element, an artistic conventionality needed for creating a cinematic image. Ledoyen's olive complexion and dark eyes isn't quite Polignac's paleness and violet eyes. But her small doll-like face with delicate features, a slight figure and a serene regard with a devilish twinkle in them succeeds in delivering some of Polignac's air and spirit to the spectator .

In the film the image of duchesse de Polignac impersonated by Virginie Ledoyen is dubiously in accord with that created by Chantal Thomas in the book. It doesn't contradict the text, but it is not identical either. In the novel, Gabrielle being independent and mildly unconcerned about anything at all, still seems, at times, convincingly sincere and sensitive of heart. Agathe-Sidonie Laborde's observations are rather impassive, but they cannot be considered “reliable”, because they are often coloured by the feelings of her own. So the image of Polignac in the novel remains suggestive even considering the freedom that is possible for works of fiction.

In Ledoyen's acting Polignac's nonchalant manner borders on cold arrogance. She confidently moves through the halls of Versailles in a sweeping steady gate, deliberately unaware of her surroundings. In the novel, through the narrator's observations of Polignac, the idea of softness both inner and outer is constantly suggested. In the film, Ledoyen's acting imparts an impression of iron clad in a velvet glove.

As in the book, Polignac doesn't reveal herself until much later. The scene for her full appearance is set up gradually. Before appearing in a psychologically wrought scene in the queen's parlour, this elusive and the most beguiling character of the Versailles universe can only be caught in glimpses, whisperings and pieces of gossip.

Gabrielle de Polignac's independent spirit is revealed in Marie Antoinette's soulful outpourings to her faithful lieutenant Sidonie Laborde: "Gabrielle de Polignac is not the type to be handled like a pastry. It's what thrilled me when I saw her at Trianon. She seemed so at home. She came and went as if she'd always lived there. She was never consumed with the need to please me. It's that freedom of hers that I like in her."

In the novel the story is narrated by one of the ladies in the queen's service. The character is present on the screen as the film's protagonist. However, here Sidonie Laborde is a young girl in her early twenties in contrast to the book's elderly woman looking back to her years of service to the queen when she was middle-aged. Apparently, Jackeau hinted at Marie Antoinette's notorious tendency to surround herself exclusively by courtiers from the younger generation, a preference that outraged the old nobility and earned her many enemies. "You know what I find charming about you, Sidonie? Not so much the prettiness of your features, as the youth you radiate at all times". The spirit of eternal youth is an inherent feature of the queen's favourite. "Let me inhale one last time the scent of your youth!" - exclaims the Queen in desperation before Gabrielle leaves her forever, fleeing the revolutionary France. In this climax marked episode Marie Antoinette urges her friend to leave the country. Polignac demonstrates poorly hidden egoism. She doesn't need persuading, but instantly seizes her chance of an excuse. She abandons her friend with a heavy heart but unhesitatingly.

## SUMMARY

The image of Gabrielle de Polignac in the screen adaptation doesn't contradict that created by Thomas in the novel, but it has acquired a new shade. The director offers his own interpretation which is more defined and straightforward. Being narrated from first person by one of the characters, the novel leaves a space for the reader to make up his mind about the character of Gabrielle de Polignac that remains obscure. In the screen adaptation the twofold nature of Gabrielle de Polignac is transformed into a blander two-facedness. It is suggested that she is a courtier just like any other, no better and no worse, superior only in charm and luck. Despite the sincere affection that she certainly feels for the Queen, like everybody else she flees the ship "the moment the timbers begin to creak" (Thomas, 17). This image is realistic enough and may be considered probable.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, a historical figure invariably goes through the author's perception before turning into a fictional character bearing a new image of the person it stands for. There are no ultimately "true" images neither in fiction, nor in cinema. Nevertheless, creating believable characters is possible.

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