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MOVIE REVIEW | ‘THE PRINCESS OF MONTPENSIER’

Pawn, Prize and Beauty, So Submit She Must

By MANOHLA DARGIS

There are times when the lights are low and the bodices have been gently loosened that “The Princess of Montpensier,” a rousing amalgam of ambition, moods and genre conceits, looks like one of those old-fashioned diversions in which swords clang as bosoms heave with sweet passion. The pretty bosom of the title character played by Mélanie Thierry tends to swell rather gently, but it also rides so high in her dresses that it evokes the temptations displayed in the windows of Parisian patisseries. The French director Bertrand Tavernier deploys some smart ideas in this film, a period story about wars on the battlefield and those closer to home, but there’s something a bit goatish in his attention to some female charms.

The movie’s opening image — a traveling shot of dying and dead men scattered across a field — shows a darker, more somber side of Mr. Tavernier. It’s an eerily calm scene, at once ugly and visually striking, and almost too handsomely composed for the carnage. Immediately, however, Mr. Tavernier brings the horrors of war within ghastly close distance with a skirmish in a nearby barn that leaves a pregnant woman dead, a sword in her belly, and a soldier of God, Comte de Chabannes (Lambert Wilson, wonderful), renouncing the righteousness of a religious war. Dropping to his knees in wordless horror, he busily tries to clean a blade as bloodied as Macbeth’s.

Mr. Tavernier, whose earlier films include “Captain Conan” and “Safe Conduct,” wrote this one with François-Olivier Rousseau and Jean Cosmos, adapting it from the 1662 novel of the same title by Madame de Lafayette. Set against civil war — the Wars of Religion (1562-98) — the story turns on Marie of Mézières, an heiress who, while she loves the heroic Henri de Guise (Gaspard Ulliel), is married off by her father, the Marquis of Mézières (Philippe Magnan), to another, more politically expedient war hero, the Prince of Montpensier (Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet). The prince’s scheming father, the Duke of Montpensier (Michel Vuillermoz), clinches the deal with the marquis when he throws in a parcel of land.

Marie enters the story after her fate is sealed, a delay that reflects Mr. Tavernier’s oblique narrative approach and her true place — or rather her worth — in war-ravaged 1562 France. Like the country itself (“la France,” a feminine word), Marie de Mézières is contested territory.
in a conflict that as Roman Catholic fights Protestant on the battlefield, and cousin fights cousin in the bedroom, Mr. Tavernier brings to life with racing cameras, sweeping vistas, lofty words, bawdy deeds and some hard truths. When Marie learns of her father’s plans, she dares to defy him. “I’ve tamed worse than you,” he answers, slapping her hard. Her mother intercedes. “Control yourself, proud child,” she advises. “And submit.” And so Marie does.

“The Princess of Montpensier” is a story about submission: of man to God and king, and wife to husband and to other men of high rank. Yet while the larger backdrop is the religious war, the battle that consumes so much attention onscreen is that between wife and husband. Forced to yield to her father — and to the other men engaged in that transaction known as her marriage — Marie is handed from one player to the next in a struggle in which she is pawn and prize alike. Once married, the prince takes her to a family castle, one distant enough from the war to keep her safe but also secluded enough to keep her isolated. Almost shortly after, though, he departs again for the war, leaving his former tutor, Chabannes, to watch over her.

Like an action painter, Mr. Tavernier likes big, bold gestures, and he regularly fills the screen with slashes of exciting motion, the galloping horses streaking across the image with the camera in pursuit. But among the hard-ridden horses, the arriving and departing messengers, the smoke that wafts over the battlefields and the intrigues that race through the castles like a lethal virus, he makes room for Marie. A pouty, neo-Bardot beauty, Ms. Thierry is hypnotically transfixing, but she takes a while to warm to, partly because it’s some time before her character comes into focus. This isn’t her fault; as Jessica Rabbit would say, she’s been drawn that way: young, spoiled, only rudimentarily educated, Marie is a beautiful blur.

Eventually, a person emerges from the haze, but however agreeable, she never becomes the scintillating companion that so many men, Chabannes included, insist she is. It doesn’t help that Ms. Thierry is out-acted by the rest of the terrific cast, including by Raphaël Personnaz as the Duke of Anjou (and future king) and Judith Chemla as his mother, the queen, who with eyebrows as bushy as caterpillars, amusingly takes the story hostage briefly. This doesn’t diminish the film’s pleasures, yet it may explain why although it’s called “The Princess of Montpensier” Mr. Tavernier lavishes so much time on Chabannes, a dashing figure, a master of the sword and pen both, who can find medicinal herbs, read the stars and strum a lute. He’s strong enough for a man, but French enough for a woman.

THE PRINCESS OF MONTPENSIER

Opens on Friday in New York and Los Angeles.

Directed by Bertrand Tavernier; written by Jean Cosmos, François-Olivier Rousseau and Mr. Tavernier; director of photography, Bruno de Keyzer; edited by Sophie Brunet; music by Philippe Sarde; set design by Guy Claude François; costumes by Caroline de Vivaise; produced by Eric Heumann and Laurent Brochand; released by Sundance Selects. In French, with

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English subtitles. Running time: 2 hours 20 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Mélanie Thierry (Marie de Montpensier), Lambert Wilson (Comte de Chabannes), Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet (Prince de Montpensier), Gaspard Ulliel (Henri de Guise), Raphaël Personnaz (Duc d'Anjou), Judith Chemla (Catherine de Guise), Philippe Magnan (Marquis de Mézières), Michel Vuillermoz (Duke of Montpensier) and Anatole de Bodinat (Joyeuse).