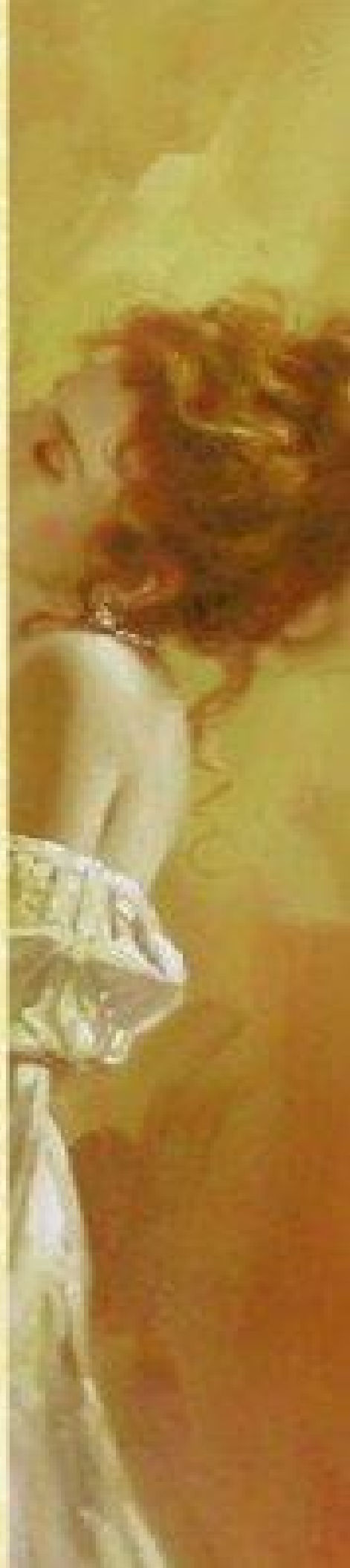


New York Times bestselling author of  
*Pleasure for Pleasure*

ELOISA  
JAMES

Desperate  
Duchesses

"ELOISA JAMES  
IS EXTRAORDINARY."  
Lisa Kleypas



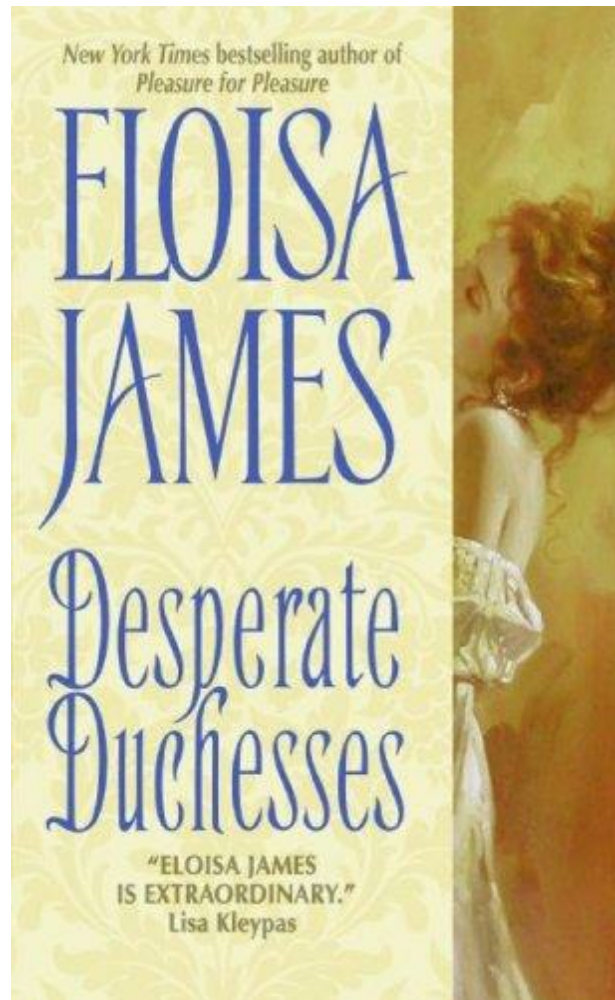
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# ELOISA JAMES

## Desperate Duchesses

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## **Desperate Duchesses 01: Desperate Duchesses**

**Eloisa James**

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# ELOISA JAMES

## Desperate Duchess

This book is dedicated to my father, Robert Bly, winner of the American Book Award for Poetry. There were times in my adolescence when he embarrassed me by the fierceness of his love and the sheer exuberance of his joy for life. That is the extent of any resemblance between the poetic marquess of this book and my father, whose poetry—and brains—far exceeds that of the writer I depict here.

So my second dedication is to the poet Christopher Smart (1722–1771), who unknowingly offered up his poetry to be sacrificed in the name of fiction. As with any quotation pulled from its context, Mr. Smart’s poetry appears here to be far more unintelligible than it truly is. In particular, “For My Cat Geoffrey” is a cheerfully exuberant love poem to a cat; in Mr. Smart’s honor I am putting the entire poem on my website. Visit [www.eloisajames.com](http://www.eloisajames.com) and enjoy Geoffrey in his full splendor.

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## **A Prelude**

November 1780

Estate of the Marquess of Wharton and Malmesbury

Knowing precisely why no one wants to marry you is slim consolation for the truth of it. In Lady Roberta St. Giles's case, the evidence was all too clear—as was her lack of suitors.

The cartoon reproduced in Rambler's Magazine depicted Lady Roberta with a hunched back and a single brow across her bulging forehead. Her father knelt beside her, imploring passersby to find him a respectable spouse for his daughter.

At least that part was true. Her father had fallen to his knees in the streets of Bath, precisely as depicted. To Roberta's mind, the Rambler's label of Mad Marquess had a certain accuracy about it as well.

"Inbreeding," her father had said, when she flourished the magazine at him. "They assume your physique is affected by the sort of inbreeding that produces these characteristics. Interesting! After all, you could have been dangerously mad, for example, or—"

"But Papa," she wailed, "couldn't you make them print a retraction? I am not misshapen. Who would wish to marry me now?"

"Why, Sweetpea, you are entirely lovely," he said, knitting his brow. "I shall write a paean on your beauty and publish it in Rambler's. I will explain precisely why I was so distraught, and include a commentary about the

practices of hardened rakehells!”

Rambler’s Magazine printed the marquess’s 818 lines of reproving verse, describing the nefarious gallant who had kissed Roberta in public without so much as a by-your-leave. They resurrected the offensive print as well. Buried somewhere in the marquess’s raging stanzas describing the peril of walking Bath’s streets was a description of his daughter: “Tell the blythe Graces as they bound, luxuriant in the buxom round, that they’re not more elegantly free, than Roberta, only daughter of a Marquess!” In vain did Roberta point out that “elegantly free” said little of the condition of her back, and that “buxom round” made her sound rather plump.

“It implies all that needs to be said,” the marquess said serenely. “Every man of sense will immediately ascertain that you have a charmingly luxurious figure, elegant features and a good dowry, not to mention your expectations from me. I cleverly pointed to your inheritance, do you see?”

All Roberta could see was a line declaring that her dowry was a peach tree.

“That’s for the rhyme,” her father had said, looking a bit cross now. “Dowry doesn’t rhyme with many words, so I had to rhyme dowry and peach tree. The tree is obviously a synecdoche.”

When Roberta looked blank, he added impatiently, “A figure of speech in which something small stands for the whole. The whole is the estate of Wharton and Malmesbury, and you know perfectly well that we have at least eleven peach trees. My nephew will inherit the estate, but the orchards are unentailed and will go to you.”

Perhaps there were clever men who deduced from the marquess’s poem that his daughter had eleven peach trees and a slender figure, but not a single one of those men turned up in Wiltshire to ascertain for himself. The fact that the original cartoon remained on display in the windows of Humphrey’s Print Shop for many months may also have been a consideration.

But since the marquess refused to undertake another trip to the city wherein his daughter was accosted—“You’ll thank me for that later,” he added, rather