

“It is fun to be Queen sometimes”: The competitive sport of winning royal favour

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Review of: *The Favourite* (2018) Film

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Sharp and witty, Yorgos Lanthimos’s *The Favourite* (2018) is a darkly humorous study in spinelessness.



Figure 1

How far should one go to please a monarch who has the personality of a petulant toddler?

Farther than any reasonable parent would, if you want to remain in favour.

So argues Yorgos Lanthimos’s aptly titled new film that hangs self-respect out to dry when power is so imbalanced as to make a Queen decide the most important aspects of one’s life. In *The Favourite*, two very capable and ingenious women battle it out for royal approval in a delicious chain of lies, opportunism and (fleeting) triumphs. The film is based on real-life characters but enjoys a great deal of creative liberty in imagining their actual personalities and relationships, and strictly steers clear of any flattering portrayals.

Take for instance the monarch at the centre of the film about whom Alexander Pope once wrote:

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*"At length great Anna said, 'Let discord cease!'
She said! the world obey'd, and all was peace!"* (Pope 1713).

Pope would find his sycophantic tribute greatly challenged by the depiction of 'Anna' in *The Favourite*.

Set in Eighteenth-Century England, Olivia Colman plays a suicidal and self-pitying Queen Anne who is suffering from gout, sore-covered legs and self-doubt. In a constant state of grief over her still-born and dead children, her only joy seems to come from the seventeen rabbits she keeps in her bedroom and the hotly-demanded attention of Lady Sarah Churchill aka Lady Marlborough (played by Rachel Weisz), who is her lover and political manager.

Churchill puts up with the Queen's demands in a manner akin to an overworked parent. She's often very terse and tough because she believes it is for the good of the Queen and the country but ultimately, she must give in when the Queen's tantrums take over.

Churchill handles the day-to-day of running the country, only referring to the Queen when she absolutely needs it. Unfortunately, the Queen is exceedingly capricious and, depending on how she feels about Sarah on the day, more than willing to upend any progress or previous decisions. Sarah, spread thin but always shrewd, has known the Queen long enough to press the right buttons to usually get what she wants - much to the chagrin of the male officials around her.



Figure 2

“You look like a badger”: The price of honesty and duty

England is at war with the French and that greatly distracts Sarah from attending to the Queen to the latter’s satisfaction. She must deal with other officials in the court (such as the excellent Nicholas Hoult who plays the first Earl of Oxford with obvious cruel joy and deep-seated resentment) and doesn’t fully realize that the biggest threat to her mission is brewing right under her nose. That would be her newly turned up and long forgotten cousin, Abigail (played skillfully with wide-eyed naïveté and unparalleled manipulation by Emma Stone). In a moment of patronizing compassion, Sarah allows her a position amongst the maids. This is a mistake to remember.

Abigail quickly sets her sights on establishing a firm foundation for herself in the Queen’s court - one that isn’t dependent on her cousin’s puny generosity or affected by her (correct) suspicions. She quickly senses all the problem points in the Queen’s relationship with Sarah, and eagerly fills the cracks with her own soothing presence. Watch as Abigail tells the Queen how beautiful she is or pretend to be interested in the names and personalities of her prized pets. Compare it to Sarah telling the Queen she looks like a badger earlier. The latter was perhaps sincerely trying to help but the Queen wants magic, as they say, and not realism.



Figure 3

“I am on my side always”: Shifting loyalties

Pursued by the handsome and respectable Masham (played by Joe Alwyn, none other than the subject of Taylor Swift’s “Gorgeous”), Abigail is quick to seduce him but smart enough to blue ball him all the way to (and even half-way through) their

wedding night. Masham seems to believe he has an upper hand at the beginning. However, on their wedding night, it is fully revealed to be an absurd notion. She is playing a game that outstrips him by leagues.

In her fiercely duplicitous and no holds barred race to the top, Abigail also sets up an uneasy alliance with her former tormentor, the Earl of Oxford. He is so full of spite for Lady Marlborough that there is nothing he would be opposed to doing in taking her down. Sarah, slightly late to the uptake, had not realized how much she had taken the Queen's support for granted until Abigail begins to illustrate how easily it is swayed. Soon enough, the two are out for blood and, at the very least, a complete and decisive win.

The witticisms and barbs form a significant part of the battle but there are also actual physical assaults aplenty, some that land better than others. Sarah eventually receives the brunt of the abusive actions and words, but she does not shy away from reciprocating them either. Watch Abigail deftly duck and swerve as Sarah throws a torrent of library books at her. Her mental agility is on display moments later when she takes one of those very books to cause actual injury to herself for stellar effect and long-term benefit. Physical comedy often turns into physical assault, but intelligence asserts itself as the top weapon of choice for these women.

It is a 'winner takes all' theatrical game, even when the winnings themselves are of a dubious quality. Along the way, there are plenty of laugh-out-loud quips at nearly everyone's expense, resembling the satiric bite of eighteenth-century playwrights such as John Vanbrugh and Thomas Southerne.



Figure 4

“I wish to make a statement to the Queen”: An unusual English court

Lanthimos has made some very interesting films leading up to *The Favourite*: in the world of *The Lobster* (2015) (which also starred Weisz and Colman), single people are transformed into animals in a surrealistic version of our society and, in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017) a couple is tasked with choosing one of their children for sacrifice in order to save the rest of the family from a curse. If you’re wondering how Lanthimos’ dark, uncomfortable and often surprisingly humorous sensibilities translate to the English monarchy, *The Favourite* has a few scenes that stand out: consider the childish grotesque faces of the English courtiers while egging on their ducks in a racing competition, the bizarre dance moves of the rich and well-heeled in the court, or the pelting of an semi-naked man with tomatoes. Yet, somehow these borderline-absurdist visuals still sit comfortably besides the familiar visual conventions of a period drama. We may have seen enough Jane Austen adaptations to think of period dramas as all English politeness and decorum but *The Favourite* is a timely reminder that things were never that great or lovely. The characters here are coarse, in full command of the c-word and never opposed to the crude, distasteful or vulgar. The competitive gameplay between the characters and their individual agendas provides the foil for the otherwise silly theatricality of societal rules and rituals, and the consequent repulsive behaviour seen on screen constitutes for what *The Columbian* accurately describes as a “comedy of ill manners” (Hornaday 2018).

The rivalry between the cousins is reminiscent of a film by another director: Justin Chadwick’s soapy drama, *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008). Chadwick’s film depicts the Boleyn sisters (played by Natalie Portman and Scarlett Johansson) vying to be “the Favourite” of King Henry VIII (played by Eric Bana). Lanthimos’s *The Favourite* couldn’t be more different in tone with less melodrama and more caustic one-liners, but it still plays up female rivalry for all its worth.



Figure 5

“I’m capable of much unpleasantness”: A Feminist Critique

The Favourite may be an enjoyable caper for many but, as noted above and as I realized in my conversation with a female friend, there has been an uncomfortable and stereotypical pattern of women in depictions of abuse and humiliation in several of Lanthimos’ films (see Nicole Kidman’s disturbingly groveling plea for her children’s lives in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), for another instance). The women clearly have agency and intelligence, and the men are often shown as weak pawns (and, in *The Favourite*, in plenty of silly makeup and wigs) or eye candy, there are still some undeniably tired gender tropes at play: women are shown to be jealous and sly when they are not being pushed into the mud or threatened with rape. While an argument can be made for why the situations were warranted in the context of the storylines, it still doesn’t necessarily take away from the actual images on screen. It may be time for Lanthimos to flip the script and perhaps switch up the genders when he’s looking for his next target for on-screen mortification.

Admittedly, this is an unpopular opinion and you have to only look so far as to the *New York Books Review* of the film to find an argument for how the treatment of, for instance, rape in *The Favourite* is not gratuitous but “suggest instead the reality for women” (Serpell, 2018).

Also, for a film that keeps its balancing act so finely-tuned for much of its running length, the ending sequence is surprisingly weak and on-the-nose. The film lands so many finely calibrated punches leading up to the finale that the simplistic depiction of Abigail living out a demeaning scenario, akin to the rabbit she cruelly

squeezes under her foot only moments before, closes the film with the weakest of whimpers.



Figure 6

“How goes the Kingdom?”: Quite well, really.

If not for the uncomfortable treatment of women and the wisp of an ending, this would be a near-perfect film in Lanthimos’s oeuvre.

The soundtrack is a welcome collection of baroque and modern classical pieces including concertos by Handel and Vivaldi, some Bach and Purcell and more recent works by the likes of composers Anna Meredith and Olivier Messaien. Elton John appears via the ballad ‘Skyline Pigeon’ over the closing credits.

Costume and production design are top-notch thanks to the work of Sandy Powell and Fiona Crombie et al.

Powell, in a risk that pays off, largely restricts the colour palette for the costumes to black and white, which make for a visually pleasing contrast against the opulence of Hatfield House. The silhouettes are in line with the period but, as the designer tells *Vogue*, “fabric-wise, artistic license was taken” (Newbold 2019). As the fashion bible is quick to note, the kitchen servants’ uniforms were made from thrifted denim!

The fact that Lanthimos is able to move the camera around so freely and swoop into some interesting details (like the micro-world of the rabbits with their miniature

jugs) or pan out for a glorious shot of the court, and change perspective while still not losing visual richness is thanks to the work of Crombie who was able to have a free creative rein in choosing the details for the production design. As Crombie mentions to *Town and Country Magazine*:

“Yorgos was involved in the big conversations, like palette—deciding to strip out color and to really be very concise with our palette. But he just let me run with how I decorated the rooms, and what the elements were that we brought in.” (Foussianes 2019).

The performances from the cast are all-around stellar. Stone has the showier character of the two rivals, but Weisz brings a believable restraint and a deep sense of integrity to her character. It is clear she would shoot you straight up in an honourable duel but is unwilling to lower herself to the level of her brown-nosing cousin. Unfortunately, such high-mindedness would be to her own apparent detriment. As it stands, besides a direct appeal to the Queen, she doesn't ever take her gloves off in this battle. Weisz embodies her character so well that this behaviour seems to naturally flow from a life lived vivaciously, and not merely in the service of a plot device.

Olivia Colman does her best trying to balance the Queen's genuine ethos while still allowing for the ridiculous streak that would enable the behaviour we see most often on the screen. And yet, watch her as she glows up talking about her rabbits. Lady Marlborough would have been wise to be kinder to the little furry beings if she were to truly serve her country.

The Favourite has picked up ten Oscar nominations for the 2019 ceremony, including Best Director (Lanthimos), Best Supporting Actress (for both Weisz and Stone with the former currently having a small edge), Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay, while Olivia Coleman took home the Oscar for Best Actress. The 91st Academy Awards took place on the 24th February, 2019.

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Editor's note: This review is available with gifs on the STAAR website as originally intended.

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