

Glorious Bitchery: Yorgos Lanthimos and “The Favourite”

Film Review

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Yorgos Lanthimos likes his subjects deranged and troubled. He likes seeing queens in the slap, servants in the lurch, and women in mud. But that is just one side. The Favourite is a film of exotic, exorbitant bitchery, filmed with aesthetic relish. It has been [dubbed](#) by Peter Bradshaw of The Guardian “punk Restoration romp”. It is women seeking to main, kill and attain positions at court. And he, for the most part, pulls it off. The subject matter was promising, given the lack of gravitas Queen Anne exerts in the history books. The result is a portrait of women in power, in a fashion.

The film purports to be based on Sarah Churchill, the Duchess of Marlborough (Rachel Weisz), and her competitions with fallen cousin Abigail, Baroness Masham (Emma Stone), for the queen’s favours. The battle, shaped by the fine script from Deborah Davis and Tony McNamara, is untidy, baroque, poisonous and desperate, with Queen Anne played to supreme dysfunction by Olivia Colman. (It was a role that netted an Academy Award.) This monarch is broken by her position and life, discouraged from thinking with independence, manipulated by courtiers, even bullied, by members of Parliament. Her sense of helplessness is further accentuated by her need to be ferried about in a sedan chair or wheelchair. When she does walk, she does so with pain and difficulty.

The court, with its functions of power, its hypocrisies of appearance, is grotesque, as it always has been. Queen Anne herself layers it with her own contributions. She has seventeen rabbits, each a reminder of her lost children, a picture of antenatal grief. She has a fondness for racing lobsters and ducks. She is perennially vulnerable. She throws tantrums. She overeats in depressive fits.

What is delightful is the merciless portrayal of bitch land. Lady Marlborough is delicious and atrocious, a true bitch of valour for queen but mostly country, married to Lord Marlborough, hero against the French during the War of the Spanish Succession. She comes across as determined to keep her monarch happy in the bedroom but compliant in acceding to higher taxation, favouring her preferred political faction, the Whigs. After Anne’s accession to the throne in 1702, the Duchess managed to [occupy](#) virtually every grand post in the household: Groom of the Stole, Mistress of the Robes, Keeper of the Privy Purse and Ranger of the Windsor Great Park. As Lady of the Bedchamber, she also had charge of what was fed to the queen, and all that it entailed.

She has ensured, at least till cousin Abigail’s arrival, that this universe will be kept in place, the monarch satiated and babied when required. The Duchess will fuck the Queen (the queerness of sexual manipulation converges with that of the mother-child) but also do what

is right by her country.

Necessarily cold when required, Weisz's Lady Marlborough, a girlhood friend of Anne, is suitably exercised in her role before the prying and mutilating advances of Abigail. Abigail woos the queen with her knowledge of medicinal herbs, assisting her in one of her attacks of gout. It is a short way from herbal wooing to the bed chamber and becoming Keeper of the Privy Purse. Sarah, in turn, resorts to blackmail over years of intimate correspondence. Favourites can be displaced.

There are scenes that are worth remembering. The optical tightness of the shots and distortive efforts of cinematographer Robbie Ryan leave their mark. In the kitchen, the viewer is left somewhat disoriented; the spits rotating, the staff milling about, the food arranged. The generous use of shots in corridors illuminated by candle light serves this broody effect as well, along which the queen is moved by her respective admirers. Outside, there are waterlogged fields, country riding, mud and manure.

There are also acts of splitting violence and spontaneous exploitation in the scheming. Statements abound, such as, "Would you like a bite of my new maid before you leave?" This was also an age of abuse, rape and viciousness. Blood flows readily – the shooting, of which the Duchess is an expert, serves as a good meeting point for teacher Sarah and future usurping pupil, Abigail.

Amidst the court intrigue come arrangements. Abigail is asked by the Tory leader of the opposition, Robert Harley (Nicholas Hoult) to conduct surveillance and gain access to the queen when he can. She complies, if only because her self-interest converges with his. She otherwise makes it clear that she is on the lookout for only one person.

How rich is Lanthimos in depicting this, refusing to lecture, or hector his audience; what interests are the struggles of three women in power. Watch this, and be enthralled. As for the fact checking monsters who come out in droves at the release of any period drama, hoping to spot historical howlers and cross-check the history books, Lanthimos has the ideal answer. "Some of the things in the film," he [says](#) with contentment, "are accurate and a lot aren't."

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