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Scott Romo  
*CSUSB*

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## Review of *The Favourite*

By Scott Romo

The *Favourite*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, is a historical dark comedy about Anne, Queen of Britain, and her private relationships with Abigail Masham, and Duchess of Marlborough, Sarah Churchill. Queen Anne, mostly remembered for being sickly, unassuming, and manipulatable, was known to have a close and suspicious friendship with Churchill. The film focuses on how individuals manipulate one another to raise their own status, and the futility of their attempts to climb these political hierarchies. Lanthimos provides a perspective of royalty which counteracts the representations of regal superiority provided by most period pieces for the sake of humanizing royal characters. He exaggerates and alters what is historically accurate in order to tell a story about hubris, manipulation, and classism. These characters constantly lie and trick each other to rise in status, but in the end, it is futile.

The story's plot revolves around a love triangle between two women with power and a new servant of the castle, Abigail Masham. In this movie, Churchill and Masham both compete for the Queen's attention sexually whilst manipulating her to reach their ulterior goals. Churchill tries to convince the Queen to continue the war with a rebel alliance, while Masham merely wants to rise in status out of her servant's role. The manipulative games escalate until Abigail Masham eventually non-fatally poisons Sarah Churchill, causing her to be absent for days and subsequently banished by the Queen. The film ends with Abigail, now a married lady, drunkenly stumbling into the Queen's room, followed by the Queen demanding her to get on her knees and massage her legs.

Lanthimos's goal is to humanize these characters to expose the imperfections beneath the facade of regality which populates

the common narrative of royalty. The film gives the audience a cynical, exaggerated representation of the less-than-noble actions of these famous high-class figures. Those who are near the top of the hierarchical status of this time period are shown to be cruel to those beneath them in the form of Harley, the opposition leader, pushing Abigail Masham down a steep hill for not directly obeying his orders, kitchen staff tricking her into sticking her hand in lye, and a startling scene of Tory parliament members pelting a naked man with rotten fruit. The Queen is terribly insecure and therefore easily manipulated with flattery. Abigail uses a constant flow of compliments to win Queen Anne's affections away from Duchess Churchill, who is very blunt and honest to a rude degree until she needs Queen Anne to take her side. Characters are constantly lying to one another to get what they want. Most of the characters handle matters of national importance in an entirely selfish way.

The selfishness is justified though, because we empathize with Abigail Masham's struggle with overcoming the oppression placed on her by being in a lower class than the other characters. In her first scene, she is packed in an cramped carriage with a man masturbating, then she is thrown out into the mud. In another early scene, she is tricked into dunking her hand in a bucket of lye by her coworkers. The audience is inclined to root for Abigail because of these scenes. We want to see Abigail rise out of her low-class difficult life to one of higher status. At this time, the power dynamics were very steep with royalty in supreme control of anyone in the lower classes. The struggle for status as a major theme of the film is also made clear by the screenplay's original title, "Balance of Power."<sup>1</sup>

The need for the characters to maintain their status and power causes massive ripple effects down the hierarchy which Lanthimos directly chooses not to show. Throughout the film,

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Grobar, "Screenwriters Deborah Davis & Tony McNamara Break Down Their Long, Gratifying Journeys With 'The Favourite,'" *Deadline*, January 13, 2019, <https://deadline.com/2019/01/the-favourite-deborah-davis-tony-mcnamara-oscars-screenwriting-interview-1202520990/>.

Queen Anne must choose whether to end an unpopular war with France or double the taxes for more war funding. Robert Harley, a Tory member of Parliament portrayed by Nicholas Hoult, and Duchess Churchill are in direct conflict about whether or not to end the war, and they both manipulate the queen in order to get their way. It becomes increasingly clear that the decision of whether or not to continue the war rides solely on the interpersonal relationships of the characters, and the movie only focuses on what that choice means for those relations. The Queen herself is very easily swayed on the political decisions in the film, ultimately making her decisions based on her interpersonal relations and her public image. Out of an entirely personal need to rise out of her own personal status, Abigail Masham ends up tearing through the ranks of the royal hierarchy, and greatly altering the governing of an entire nation in order to rise in social status. The actual war decision is never resolved, and the war itself is not ever shown on screen. The war is just a plot device to set up the story the director wanted to tell.

The humor in this film comes from this dysphoria of nobility and irreverence. The characters are presented as vain, narcissistic, insecure, hedonistic, and manipulative. The film operates solely as a parody, insinuating these people are inherently all bad, but instead shows that these people are just human beings. The overblown egos make for a lot of humor, especially in scenes where certain characters show anger, as when Harley, fully adorned in heavy makeup and massive, powdery white wig, becomes furious after failing to convince the Queen to end the war. We are so used to seeing characters like this be restrained and regal, but their emotions would nevertheless still be human. Seeing aggressive anger expressed in a place where it is typically repressed makes a mockery of the British royal stereotype.

The last minute of the film has a very odd yet effective way of exposing the theme. In the last scene, The Queen calls Abigail Masham, now a married lady who spends her days drinking and partying, into her room. Abigail stumbles in and makes idle conversation with the Queen, then traps one of the Queen's rabbits

under her foot until it cries and tries to squirm away. Abigail has become heartless with her new power and takes pleasure in harming those beneath her, like the rabbits, who in an earlier scene she adored. The Queen sees this and becomes angry, as she realizes that Abigail had only been such a loving friend to rise in status. She demands Abigail rub her legs as an act of vengeance, but also as a reminder that even in the new position she occupies she is still a servant to her queen. As Abigail rubs Anne's legs, it cuts from her face to the face of the Queen, which is slightly disfigured from a recent stroke. Even the Queen is not above disease and disfigurement. The two faces begin to fade into one another along with footage of a mass of rabbits running around and between one another. These people might believe that their role in the hierarchy gives them some sort of objective value, but in reality, they are just animals living out their existence like any rabbit.

Lanthimos wants to show how the ego of royalty is a facade which is as dangerous as it is undeserved, but he does not necessarily want to mock them. These characters' egos are so overinflated they do terrible, regretful things in order to get what they believe they deserve. This is a timeless theme which exposes the powers-that-be in our time just as much the royalty of eighteenth century England. Typically, representations of royalty are refined and regal, but *The Favourite's* goal is to humiliate the characters for humility's sake. Our view of royalty is that they are somehow superior people, but Lanthimos is trying to show that they are just people too.

The film is more interested in telling an engaging story than portraying the history of the events accurately. Much of the picture has no actual basis in historical fact. The most obvious of these are the sexual acts portrayed. Ophelia Field, a biographer of Sarah Churchill says, "The evidence of Sarah Churchill's life suggests that the Queen did love her closest friend in a way that we would

classify as romantic, though perhaps not erotic.”<sup>2</sup> An even more drastic exaggeration is the completely fictitious part of the film where Abigail poisons Sarah.<sup>3</sup> The amount of general secrecy and manipulation happening between the characters is not something that can ever be confirmed by historians, and, since these elements make a core part of the movie, the plot cannot be seen as an accurate historical representation. All of these elements are added as a way to flesh out the story. The relations between the real people were not as overtly sexual or violent, but there were elements of emotional manipulation taking place in the form of romance and flattery. The sex in the film acts as a way to visually represent the closeness of these people, and the physical attacks do the same for the likely non-physical confrontation which happened between characters. Harley never likely pushed Abigail Masham down a hill, but it acts as a good visual representation of the brutal heartlessness in British royalty.

The filmmakers might not have researched everything, but the number of elements which are accurate shows that there was a general understanding of this historical moment. Some factors are accurate, such as Queen Anne’s sickness. Queen Anne had terrible gout which caused her intense attacks of pain and kept her partially immobile.<sup>4</sup> The first scene with Queen Anne has her on the floor wailing in pain from a gout attack. She also mainly gets around by being pushed in a wheelchair. Towards the end of the movie, Queen Anne loses control of half of her face. It is never said

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<sup>2</sup> Ophelia Field, “Queen Anne’s Ladies,” *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 11 no. 3 (2004): 21–23. <http://libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=12922384&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Saunders Webb, “The Duke’s Decline,” in *Marlborough’s America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 212-26. <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/stable/j.ctt32bg80.19>.

<sup>4</sup> Henry L. Snyder, “The Last Days of Queen Anne: The Account of Sir John Evelyn Examined,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1971). doi:10.2307/3816703.

directly in the film, but Queen Anne did suffer from frequent strokes, which was her actual cause of death.<sup>5</sup>

Queen Anne was also likely subject to manipulation by the people around her; especially the Duchess, who would often ridicule and embarrass her in order to influence her decisions. In a letter to Duke Marlborough written in 1709 she even admits to this subjugation, “I beleeve no body was ever soe used by a freind as I have bin by her ever since my coming to ye Crown. I desire nothinge but that she would leave off teasing & tormenting me & behave herself with the desensy she ought both to her freind & Queen.”<sup>6</sup> Queen Anne really did exile the Duke and Duchess. The film’s plot claims that Abigail manipulated Queen Anne into demanding the resignation of the Duke and Duchess, and while the exact details are imagined, it is believed that Harley and Abigail Masham did indeed somehow convince Queen Anne to make this decision. In the book, *Marlborough’s America*, Stephen Saunders Webb writes, “[Duke Marlborough’s military influence] was precisely the problem, both in Queen Anne’s eyes and of ‘those behind the curtain.’ Harley and [Masham] prompted Anne to curb her overmighty subject.”<sup>7</sup>

The film is very well-made on a technical level as well. Yorgos Lanthimos has become well-known for films with beautiful, memorable cinematography and very dark comedic tones. His last two works were *The Lobster* (2015) and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017) both of which were far more surreal and therefore less accessible. Nonetheless, the bleak yet humorous tone of his films continue, and he is finally acquiring recognition for his work. *The Favourite* was nominated for ten Academy Awards and rightfully won Best Actress for Olivia Colman. Lanthimos is likely on his way to becoming an internationally recognized director. While marginally based on historical knowledge, *The Favourite* stretches what is known in order to tell an impactful story with

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Gregg, *Queen Anne* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 293-294.

<sup>7</sup> Webb, “The Duke’s Decline,” 213.

human themes. Lanthimos is trying to tell a story that transcends historical fact to reach a human truth. Mankind tends to believe that those in power have an objective superiority. Lanthimos made this movie to try and alter this narrative, and bring royalty back down to the human level in the collective consciousness.

*The Favourite*. Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos. Hertfordshire, UK: Fox Searchlight Films, 2014. 120 minutes. Available digitally via Amazon Video, \$9.99.

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### **Author Bio**

Scott Romo is an undergraduate Communications major concentrating on Media Studies at CSUSB. He is also a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow conducting research on digital right-wing radicalization. Mellon Mays is a research fellowship which gives undergraduate students the opportunities to get experience and assistance conducting research and preparing for graduate school. Scott plans to use these opportunities to enter a Media PhD. program to study media structure and its effects on culture, as well as pursuing his life-long interest in film and film analysis. He has written, produced, and directed short films since high school, assisted in local filmmaking efforts, served as president of the CSUSB Film Club, and runs a film and media review channel on YouTube called TheYoungPanda, in which he gives insights into different forms of media.

