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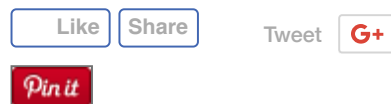


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Film Review: The Favourite

A bracing rethink of the historical costumer set in England's 18th-century court that features lush visuals, off-kilter humor and a trio of brilliant performances from Rachel Weisz, Emma Stone and especially Olivia Colman.

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Nov 19, 2018



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Among the many pleasures of this year's New York Film Festival were a couple of films that subvert expectations about genre. Far from a standard biopic, Julian Schnabel's *At Eternity's Gate*, an account of Vincent Van Gogh's later days, rethinks the portrait film. Similarly, Greek *auteur* Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Favourite*, though nominally based on events in the 18th-century English court, couldn't be farther from a historical costumer in the manner of "Masterpiece

Theatre." Rather, Lanthimos has radically reimagined the costume epic to foreground a primal conflict amidst the visual pageantry of court life. The Greek director's past art-house provocations have won him admirers but also sent viewers running from the theatre. *The Favourite* is markedly more audience-friendly, a bawdy, darkly funny entertainment centering on three compelling female characters, each in her own way bizarrely relatable.

Sarah Churchill, the Duchess of Marlborough (Rachel Weisz), has effectively become the power behind the throne of Queen Anne (Olivia Colman). The monarch, more or less gaga and disabled by gout, is more given to tending her ailments and playing with her pet rabbits—surrogates for the 17 babies she's lost—than ruling the country. Lady Sarah exploits the Queen's frailty to manipulate the political sphere to the advantage of her husband, Lord Marlborough (Mark Gatiss), commander in

chief of the British army in England's war against France. In an early indication of Anne's futility and self-absorption, she's surprised to hear that the war is not over and won. This detail mirrors the film's indifference to historical issues. The competing agendas of rival politicians on how to fund the war are no more than a MacGuffin serving as a pretext for a sexually charged fight for power.

The battle is joined when Lady Sarah's cousin Abigail (Emma Stone), a former aristocrat, arrives at the palace after her father has gambled away their estate. En route, she's tossed from the carriage and lands in a pile of *merde*. Lady Sarah, shrinking at the stink, dispatches her to work in the scullery. A quick study beneath her sweet features, Abigail adroitly maneuvers her way into Lady Sarah's confidence (conveyed in clipped exchanges while they shoot pigeons together—"Let's shoot something!" Sarah declares when in need of distraction) and endears herself to the Queen by providing herbs to soothe her raw skin.

The jostling to become the Queen's favorite enters a new, salacious phase when Abigail discovers one night that Lady Sarah offers Anne more than just counseling. Abigail conspires to usurp her rival's place in the Queen's bedchamber, at the same time enduring the attentions of a well-placed nobleman whom she distractedly services in a comic scene. It's an intriguing triangle: the dopey, gout-stricken Queen attended by two clever rivals determined to seize the reins of power, whatever the cost.

Part of the fun is the film's wickedly off-center tone, its displays of decadence in this 18th-century court according to Lanthimos. Gooseraces, anyone? The courtiers' wigs curl absurdly to their waists; men and women both are garishly rouged. The language is invariably racy—Queen Anne in particular tosses off outrageous asides regarding her two female "suitors." A period court dance erupts into a wild session of break dancing. The Tory leader Harley (Nicholas Hoult) tries to enlist Abigail as a spy, then, when she hesitates, shoves her into a ditch, saying, "No pressure." *The Favourite* often puts you in mind of Peter Greenaway's equally irreverent and raunchy *The Draughtsman's Contract*.

The film also plays like a fever dream unspooling in Lanthimos' mind. We're periodically yanked out of the story by title cards such as *This Mud Stinks, I Do Fear Confusion and Accidents* and *I Dreamt I Stabbed You in the Eye*. But this is of a piece with *The Favourite's* studied artifice. The rooms and corridors of the magnificent royal residence (Hatfield House, a Jacobean estate in Hertfordshire) are often distorted and bent out of shape by wide-lens shots, as if a character were hallucinating or his eyes were bugging out (a device that's over-used and wears out its welcome). Dialogue and scenes are sometimes deliberately out of synch, keeping the viewer as off-balance as the courtiers. Astute musical choices mark changes of tone, from a magisterial piece by Handel, works by Bach, Purcell, Schubert, and even an experimental composer like Olivier Messiaen. Periodically, discordant strings scrape at the surface.

Rachel Weisz, Emma Stone and particularly an astonishing Olivia Colman find a perfectly pitched acid tone in harmony with the director's edgy vision. I think it would be a mistake to read into Sarah and Abigail's battle for dominance some feminist message about women's "empowerment." That said, in focusing on a trio of dynamic women in a milieu normally dominated by men,

Lanthimos has created a film that feels very much of the moment. Some viewers may be less than amused by the sheer nastiness of this court, the gratuitous cruelties and abuse of privilege in which the director seems to revel. It's tempting to see parallels here with current political realities, but that may be reading more into Lanthimos' conceit than it wants or deserves.

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