

**FILM**  
**THE FAVOURITE**

# ‘Dark deeds at night’: in bed with the Queen

*In a new film, Queen Anne is manipulated by two female lovers. Was the truth any less shocking, asks **Ophelia Field***

**Q** ueen Anne (Olivia Colman) is strapped into a full-body leather brace by a trouser-wearing Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough (Rachel Weisz); Lady Abigail Masham (Emma

Stone) poisons the Duchess so that she ends up unconscious in a seedy brothel; both Sarah and Abigail repeatedly pleasure the Queen in the royal bedchamber... Yorgos Lanthimos’ new film, *The Favourite*, is unafraid to go a good way beyond known facts, yet the history behind the fiction is almost as surprising.

The real Sarah and Anne first became intimate around 1675 when the Princess was only 10 and Sarah a vivacious blonde 15-year-old maid of honour. The

Restoration Court in which they met was, for its adolescent girls, cloistered yet highly sexualised, with many forming intensely romantic same-sex relationships. Anne’s gushing letters talk of obeying Sarah’s “commands”, pledged lifelong fidelity, and pleaded for “mere pity and compassion to poor me (who you say you love)...” Their passionate correspondence continued well after Anne was married to Prince George of Denmark and Sarah to John Churchill, later first Duke

of Marlborough.

Their relationship was forged in adversity during the reign of William and Mary. After Sarah lobbied for the Princess to receive her own income from Parliament in 1691, Mary tried to break Sarah’s “unnatural” hold over Anne, demanding Sarah’s expulsion from Court. But Anne was so attached to Sarah that she didn’t contemplate obeying; instead, she and George moved, with the Marlboroughs, to Syon House, a friend’s estate in Richmond. Anne declared to Sarah: “I had rather live in a cottage with you than reign empress of the world without you.” When William briefly put John in the Tower of London on charges of treason, the bond between the two women, now young mothers, only strengthened.

Anne begged Sarah to always speak to her frankly, and they exchanged bourgeois nicknames (“Mr and Mrs Morley” for George and Anne; “Mr and Mrs Freeman” for John and Sarah), symbolising this spirit of equality. Sarah was therefore in the habit of speaking her mind by the time Anne was crowned in 1702. John became Anne’s Captain-General; Sarah gained all the most powerful posts in the Royal household – groom of the stole, mistress of the robes and

keeper of the privy purse – as well as valuable property and perks, including the rangership of Windsor Great Park and an annual salary equivalent to £24million in today’s terms. The outside world gossiped that “Queen Zarah” really ruled England.

There was just one problem: a significant difference in political and religious beliefs. Sarah mistakenly thought her emotional dominance would translate into being a de facto government minister and that Anne could be pushed towards Whiggery. In fact, while Anne continued to lavish gifts on the Marlboroughs – including the future Blenheim Palace – most of her political decisions were taken on the advice of her Tory ministers and male relations.

The price Sarah paid for pushing her Whig agenda was the loss of Anne’s love. Anne began to find Sarah’s frank talk insolent and bullying. Sarah grew increasingly frustrated by the constraints imposed by her gender, while Anne, who was by no means stupid, had a newfound sense of her own authority and abilities. By 1707, the relationship had become painfully strained. Sarah avoided Anne, now an invalid, as much as possible, and sneered at her behind



her back.

Some years before, out of charity but also the pleasure of making people indebted to her, Sarah had found a Court place for an impoverished cousin named Abigail. What Sarah didn't realise was that Abigail was also being supported by another cousin – one of the secretaries of state, Robert Harley, who wanted to oust the Marlboroughs. With Harley's coded guidance, Abigail was soon filling the void left by Sarah's withdrawn affection and presence.

Anne and Abigail kept their relationship hidden from Sarah. When she finally discovered it in the summer of 1707, Sarah felt a fool and rightly suspected Abigail's motives. Incandescent with rage, Sarah tried to make Anne eject this ungrateful "chambermaid". Just as when Mary had threatened Sarah in the 1690s, this only made Anne cling tighter to Abigail.

Sarah's attacks gained potency from the insinuation that Anne was a lesbian. She threatened to publish Anne's juvenile letters as evidence and hired a satirist to write a lewd street ballad against Abigail's "dark deeds at night". On July 22 1708, she wrote to Anne: "I remember you said... of all things in this world, you valued most your reputation, which I confess surprised me very much, that your Majesty should so soon mention that word after having discovered so great a passion for such a woman. For sure there can be no great reputation in a thing so strange & unaccountable... nor can I think the having no inclination for any but of one's own sex is enough to maintain such a character..."

Eventually Anne could handle no more conflict, either personally or politically. She rode a wave of public opinion that had shifted against the costly war, making a peace with France that allowed her to dispense with the Marlboroughs' services. Tory pamphleteers had a field day, flooding the streets

with misogynistic rants against the Duchess as corrupt and half-crazed – work continued by later figures such as Horace Walpole, who vilified Sarah through semi-apocryphal anecdotes about her cantankerous old age.

Most historians simply blamed Sarah's tactlessness for her husband's fall. Sarah, however, gave as good as she got to posterity: her 1744 memoir created Anne's enduring image as an infantile, insipid and "tedious" monarch. Abigail has not fared well either, presented first as hideously ugly by Sarah's sympathisers ("Abigail Carbuconcella") and then as an obsequious manipulator in 20th-century novels, plays and miniseries. The relative scarcity of Abigail's surviving letters means she has never spoken up for herself.

The Lanthimos film overturns all these caricatures. Sarah is given credit for being motivated as much by genuine political principle as by personal greed or ambition, while Anne's own steely pleasure in power is made as clear as her deep insecurities and physical disabilities. (Jonathan Swift wrote that no one was better able to "disguise her passions" than Anne, but Colman's crippled Queen is almost as deranged as Nigel Hawthorne's mad George III.) Abigail is also completely reimagined as an equal match for Sarah in terms of sex appeal, wit and intelligence. Her motives, if not honourable, are at least made comprehensible.

Perhaps the film-makers' most radical decision was to so diligently balance these three strong female roles, not only in terms of character faults and virtues but also in relation to one another. I suspect that the real Sarah, while happy to see herself largely vindicated in this retelling, might have preferred to be its unrivalled star.

**The Favourite is in cinemas on Jan 1. Ophelia Field is the author of *The Favourite: Sarah Duchess of Marlborough* (W&N)**

**The Restoration Court was, for young girls, cloistered yet highly sexualised**

## REAL TO REEL WHO'S WHO?



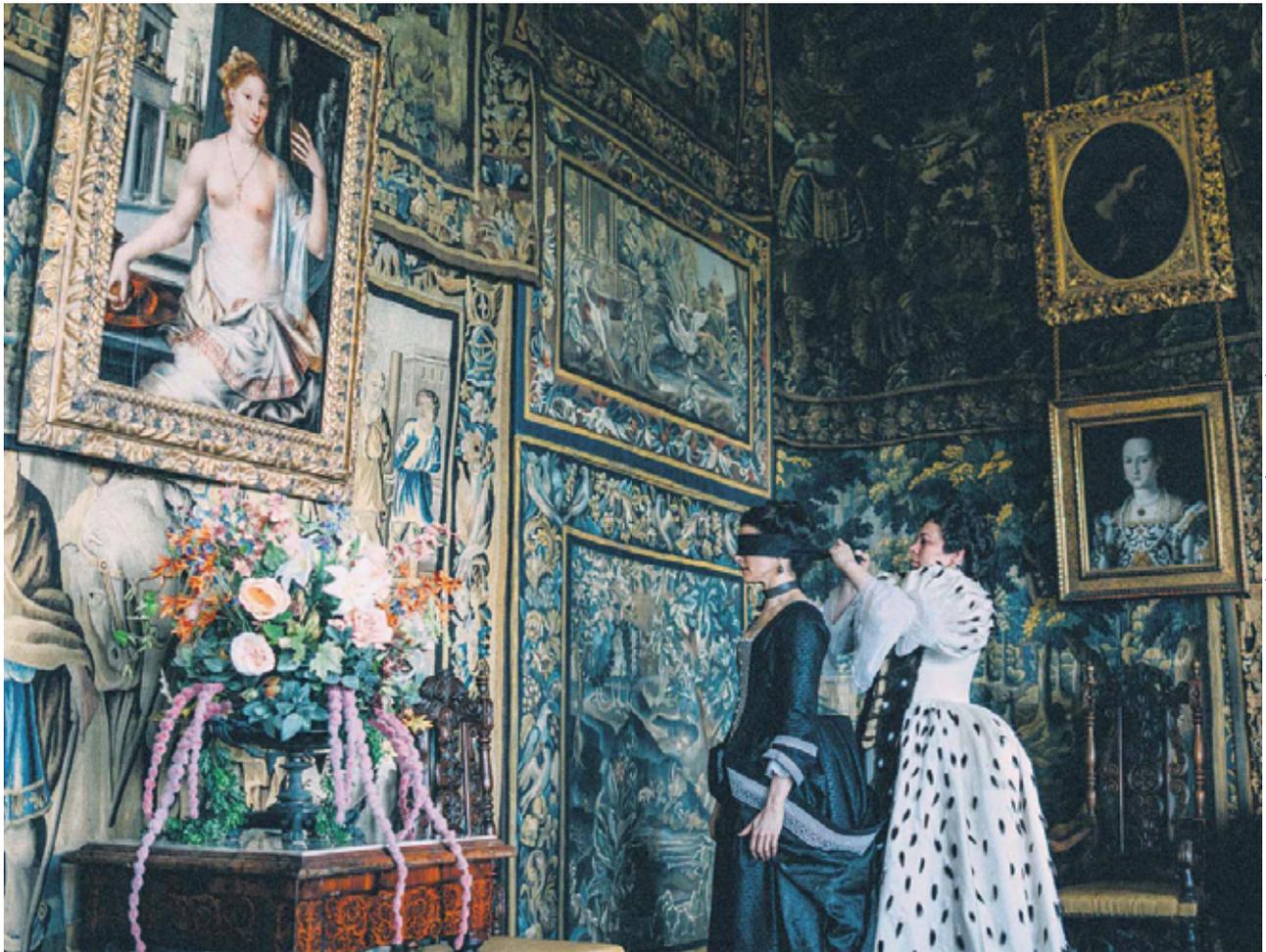
**THE QUEEN** Olivia Colman is being tipped as an Oscar contender for her performance as the deranged Anne



**THE DUCHESS** Rachel Weisz's Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, is motivated by political principle and greed



**THE RIVAL** As played by Emma Stone, Abigail Masham is an equal match for Sarah in beauty and wit



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**NO PEEPING**

Olivia Colman's Queen Anne blindfolds Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough (Rachel Weisz) in a scene from *The Favourite*