

FILM

2 JANUARY 2019

Is *The Favourite* historically accurate in its depiction of Queen Anne's lesbianism?

The prudish queen may not have acknowledged her feelings for the women close to her, but others did.

BY OPHELIA FIELD



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Yorgos Lanthimos' new movie, *The Favourite*, opens in the UK on New Year's Day, having already swept up

major international awards and enjoyed the biggest success at the US box office of any recent British independent film. Its story, set in England during the first decade of the 1700s, is of how Sarah Churchill, 1st Duchess of Marlborough (played by Rachel Weisz) was usurped as the royal favourite of Queen Anne (Olivia Colman) by her lowly cousin Abigail (Emma Stone). The movie is no “straight” historical costume drama, however. It has been highly fictionalised throughout, in Lanthimos’ distinctively eccentric style. This does not mean that the film wears its history lightly, nor that it lacks ambitions to convey certain larger biographical truths. Indeed, where exactly it does and does not choose to stick to historical fact is particularly intriguing.

One of the film’s more subtly feminist ideas is, maybe ironically, the way that the leading ladies’ physical bodies are emphasised. Queen Anne has no fixed image in our national consciousness, but now – given the movie’s many scenes of Anne in a wheelchair, hobbling along palace corridors in a deranged state, or with poultices being applied to her painful limbs – it is unlikely that anyone will think of her without thinking of her semi-invalidism. At the time, the royal doctors considered Anne to be suffering from gout, severe myopia and the blighted womb of a “*mater infelix*” that seemed incapable of giving the nation a living heir. Modern medics now suspect her to have been suffering from a type of lupus (*erythematosus*), which can cause chronic arthritis, repeated miscarriages, red skin rashes, and joint pain in hands and legs. This

probable lupus was compounded by obesity in later life, a symptom more of her enforced immobility than of her appetite. Even at her coronation, Anne had to be carried in a sedan chair, which rather undercut the allusions that the text of the ceremony made to her as another great warrior queen like Elizabeth I.

Anne was also, probably, suffering from depression triggered by repeated bereavements: by the age of 16 she had lost her mother, a favourite governess and six siblings; in 1688, she had been forced to abandon her father James II because of his Catholicism; and between 1685 and 1700, she suffered the unimaginable loss of 17 pregnancies, stillborn babies, infants and children – all under circumstances of intense public scrutiny. After her last surviving and much adored child, Prince William Duke of Gloucester, died aged 11 from complications related to hydrocephalus, Anne always signed herself to Sarah as “your poor unfortunate faithful Morley” – Mrs Morley being one of their intimate nicknames – and she became even more emotionally dependent on Sarah.

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Which brings us to the next focus of physicality: the

question of what evidence there is for Anne's lesbianism. The film does not hesitate to show Anne repeatedly consummating sexual desires for both Sarah and Abigail; indeed, it contains the second most memorable on-screen British royal cunnilingus scene of 2018-19 (first prize going to the new *Mary Queen of Scots* film). On the one hand, there is no historical evidence for such carnal pleasures having been enjoyed, but on the other there is no way to rule them out categorically and that is the beauty of a fictionalisation. Lesbian love affairs leave notoriously fewer traces – such as illegitimate bastard children – on the historical bedsheets, and arguments along the line of “But she was happily married!” are beside the point. What exists in terms of hard archival evidence are Anne's hundreds of adoring letters to Sarah, and reports that a succession of people close to Anne – her father, her sister and others – discouraged her “unnatural” attachments to Sarah and other ladies, starting with a governess named Mrs Cornwallis and ending, after Abigail, with the red-headed Duchess of Somerset.

The 1670s Restoration Court, in which Princess Anne and Sarah had come of age, had been a place where intense, monogamistic, gender-bending relationships, and their attendant jealousies and betrayals, were the fashion among many of the young ladies, and Anne's formative adolescent years in this atmosphere seem to have permanently shaped her psyche. A long line of biographers and historians have been eager to discount the double meanings of words such as “inclination” and “passion”,

about which the young women were obviously self-aware. Ever since they were girls, they had played in the dangerous borderland between platonic and erotic love and, as a new generation of writers such as Valerie Traub and Emma Donoghue have argued, early modern lesbianism was effectively hidden in plain view by such language.



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In all probability, Anne, who was far more pious and prudish than Sarah (Anne prayed several times a day and once objected to the amount of shoulder showing in her portrait on a coin) would not have admitted such

homoerotic desires to herself, let alone acted on them. But that does not make this interpretation of her latent feelings, with the benefit of modern hindsight, fanciful or inappropriate.

Sarah, meanwhile, was probably playing a more cynical but understandable game: the only game, perhaps, that she could afford to play when faced with a besotted and insistent royal employer. Certainly, she was well aware of how her thinly veiled accusation that Anne and Abigail were lovers, with Anne having “no inclination for any but her own sex”, could raise questions about her own previous relationship with the Queen; indeed, it was this knowing self-implication that gave Sarah’s insinuations their unique power.

After being displaced by Abigail, Sarah wrote to Anne on several occasions to inform her of scandalous publications that accused the Queen of sleeping with her chambermaid. What made Sarah’s claims of concern for Anne’s reputation particularly dubious was the fact that Sarah herself had helped produce at least one of them. It was only the disapproval of Sarah’s husband, John, which put a stop to such letters.

The third striking episode of physicality in the film is the attempt by Abigail to murder Sarah, which leaves the Duchess wearing a pirate’s eye patch. This is an entirely imagined interlude, yet it carries within it several symbolic truths about the Marlboroughs’ fall from power,

which Sarah herself dramatised as a tragedy in her own memoirs, finally published in 1744. Even the eye patch is a kind of visible gauge of Sarah's power being eclipsed and the darker side of her personality, her indignation and her temper, rising in response. This symbol of her glory being eclipsed could have been even stronger if the film-makers had dared to turn Weisz blonde to play a woman who was famous for washing her golden hair in honey water and was described by another besotted young female admirer as a beauty "with rays about her head like a sun".



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Beyond its genre and gender defying physicality, the film is also of the *#MeToo* zeitgeist in terms of starring three actresses who interact in equally strong, central roles, with the male courtiers relegated to the side-lines or merely manipulated (metaphorically or lewdly) by the women. None of the female characters is presented as a fully edifying feminist – or queer – heroine, however, and that is perhaps one of the expectations most daringly subverted by the script. In this nuanced complexity of characterisation, the film is realistic. In terms of how far all three women – particularly Sarah – were able to act

independently of the men around them, and express themselves within early eighteenth century politics, it is less so. As Sarah herself put it in later life, perhaps with some bitterness:

“In the late Queen’s time, though I was a favourite, without the help of the Duke of Marlborough and Lord Godolphin [Anne’s Lord Treasurer] I should not have been able to do anything of consequence, and the things that are worth naming will ever [only] be done from the influence of men.”



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Sarah was too hard on herself. Her political influence was far-reaching, even if she could not always control the Queen’s Council directly. And it was largely Sarah’s outspoken opinions which would shape posterity’s views of Anne, and the incoming Hanoverians’ views of the Tory party, for the remainder of the century.

The Favourite is in UK cinemas from 1 January 2019. Ophelia Field is the author of **The Favourite: Sarah Duchess of Marlborough** (W&N, 2018 2nd edition, £9.99)



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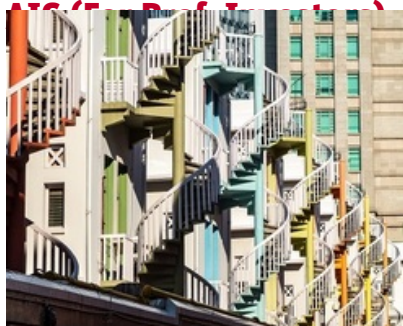
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