

Why I hope that *The Favourite* does not win ten Oscars.

When we watch a film, my wife and I often remark to each other that the more we hate a particular character, the more we have to applaud the actor or actress responsible for doing a great job. So much so that a marvellous performance can make you want to rip the heart and lungs out of the person you believe you're watching. As a result, I am the first to admit that Rachel Weisz, Olivia Colman and Emma Stone all deserve golden plaudits for their roles in 'The Favourite': I hated all three of the characters they created. Bravo! However, as a historian, I found the film one of the most miserable cultural experiences of my life. So much so that I feel the need to explore that feeling and explain why.

As you will be aware the film is about Queen Anne, the last reigning monarch of the Stuart dynasty. It sees her as head of state in the years 1702-1708, when she was aged thirty-seven to forty-three. The focus is principally on the struggle between her and two women, the duchess of Marlborough (the queen's favourite until 1708) and Abigail Hill (who came to court in 1702), who will both seemingly stoop to any level to increase their hold on the queen and grovel even lower to avoid losing any ground to their rival. They are portrayed as horrible, nasty, conniving, conceited, driven by self-interest and ambition, competitive, manipulative and fundamentally cruel. The drama focuses on their rivalry and their manipulation of the unintelligent and self-pitying queen, who seems quite at sea without their direction, surrounded by a menagerie of seventeen rabbits, one for each pregnancy that ended in a miscarriage, stillbirth or child's death.

You can't have a queen without a court, and the men who populate it are portrayed as equally manipulative, self-interested, cruel and obnoxious as the women vying for the queen's affections. All the men wear over-the-top wigs that are even more extreme than the real articles of the time. Their behaviour is equally excessive and disgusting. One scene features gentlemen throwing oranges at a naked dancing man in the palace, which is unexplained in the narrative and so carries with it the implication that this is just what goes on at Anne's court. This makes out the political elite of the realm to be some sort of gang of immature, idiotically irresponsible, bombastic young prigs. Lord Harley, who actually is a kinsman of one of the rival favourites (Abigail), is portrayed as particularly cruel and oafish, acting like a spoilt rich brat, even though he was actually in his forties when Abigail came to court and indeed a little older than the queen. He was a responsible politician, a hard-working man who did not shrink from the greatest offices of state, and who collected many of the most important manuscripts of British history.

It is not so much that the film is not accurate. It is not even that it makes no attempt to be accurate. It is that it deliberately tells a scandalous story that has nothing to do with the past – and then misrepresents it as the events of Queen Anne's reign. According to the film, Queen Anne is a lesbian – both the duchess and Abigail perform sexual favours for her – and no mention is made of her husband, Prince George of Denmark, on whom she doted. True, he was in very poor health for the last two years of his life (he died in October 1708) but this only concentrated the queen's affections on him. He is not even mentioned. I could not believe that omission. It's a bit like someone in three hundred years making a film of my life, and only mentioning my closest male friends, and showing me indulging in homosexual affairs with them, and completely failing to note that I live with my wife and have three children. Likewise the nastiness and low morals of Anne's 'favourites': this too is something that is not rooted in the past but in the imagination of the film maker. Sticking a label on your fantasies and calling it 'the past' does not make it more real or justify doing it.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the period is not well known to the British people. The BBC even ran an article on their homepage for about three days entitled ‘The Favourite: who was Queen Anne, played by Olivia Colman?’ Thus film makers feel they can say what they want. No one will know better apart from the odd historian – and no one listens to odd historians anyway. Indeed, the film makers themselves did not listen to their own historical advisors. No eighteenth-century historian is unaware that the first Prime Minister was Sir Robert Walpole, who came to be addressed thus in the 1730s. But in this film the term is bandied about as if it was as formally established as it is in our own day. No! Queen Anne was her own ‘prime minister’. She was in command of her own government to a far, far greater extent than later monarchs have been. I cannot believe that the historical advisor did not make this point. And for all the talk about empowering women and giving them agency, this film actually depicts Anne as much *less* powerful than she was, playing to a narrative about female disempowerment that simply isn’t true in this case. As the author of the article on Anne in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* put it, ‘from her first close friendship, that with Frances Apsley (later Lady Bathurst), it is clear that the future queen assumed the dominant role, and that she did so in every subsequent relationship. By the time of her marriage in 1683 she was already her own woman.’ Exactly. But I fear that, forever more, the public will regard Queen Anne as the *lesbian* queen, which she was not, and not the hard-working stateswoman that she was. There is not a shred of evidence to support such a view of her sexuality and, ‘without evidence, there is no history’, as I constantly tell people. Now they’ll say, ‘oh, but the evidence was burnt - we saw Lady Marlborough put her letters from Anne in the fire’. And I will reply, ‘no you didn’t. You saw a film.’ But inside I will be thinking, what’s the point? People love stories and to be entertained – and in some respects, that’s okay. But it’s only okay as long as the film maker makes clear this is fiction, not historical fact. When you blur the two, you get into difficulties.

This is why this was such a depressing experience. It says to the public at large that the truth does not matter. The very things that historians pride ourselves on – such as fidelity to the spirit of the time, accuracy of description and careful dissection of the source material – are kicked to death and derided by someone who does not even know what he is doing. It creates a world in which women are nasty – a world dreamed up in the film-maker’s mind – and then that nastiness is permitted to be put on screen under the guise of it being a true story. It creates a world in which all the men are pompous and ridiculous, and again gets away with portraying such a jaundiced view of mankind on the grounds that it really happened. But it *didn’t* happen. It is all lies – and in the plaudits offered for the film lies the most depressing thing of all, namely that people all feel like this, and they want to see more of it. They don’t mind seeing the past shown as full of nasty and conniving, selfish, vicious, ambitious people – without a single likeable character. They don’t blame the film-maker for having a very bleak view of humanity but rather blame the past. And historians, well we can all go whistle. For we are odd.

For a historian, watching this film is like seeing Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony performed on a kazoo and penny whistle by naked prisoners in a sadomasochistic dungeon – and being told that that was how it was meant to be performed – and hearing that the public love it, that it should be given a pile of Oscars. And no, they don’t want to listen to an orchestral version. Because they can’t understand the sublime truth – or because of fears it would make them feel inferior, or that it would be boring. The result is to make the historian feel as if he or she is indeed odd – the only one who cares about the truth. The only one who wants to hear the music of the past as it was actually played.

Ian Mortimer, 24 January 2019