Mary Queen of Scots and *The Favourite*: The unimpressive recent results of "women in film"

Joanne Laurier
24 December 2018

Inevitably, predictably, the movie-going public now faces a steady stream of films supposedly "for" or "about" women. Various factors are involved, one of them being an effort by the Hollywood establishment to protect itself from future accusations and legal action. This is a pretty phony business for the most part, and does not speak to the lives and concerns of the vast majority of women in the US or anywhere else.

A number of articles appeared at the beginning of 2018 plugging this "much anticipated" crop of movies. A partial list of recent "women's films" or "female leading movies" includes *Proud Mary* (in which Taraji P. Henson "plays a skillful hitwoman for the Boston mob"), *Ocean's 8*, *Tully*, *A Simple Favor*, *Mama Mia! Here We Go Again*, *Tomb Raider*, *Red Sparrow*, *RBG*, *The Girl in the Spider's Web*, *Widows*, *Colette*, *Annihilation*, *Unsane*, *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* and *The Wife*. Several of these highly touted titles—and numerous others along the same "women-centric" lines—have deservedly disappeared without a trace.

The production of such films is presented in some quarters as a "progressive" and even "left-wing" development. But how many of these movies genuinely concern themselves with the lives of working-class women, whose conditions and social rights continue to come under attack? A quick glance suggests … none.

Indeed, it is also worth noting the recent coming together of two trends: films or television series about women and films or television series about royalty and such. The latter group no doubt includes a number of serious historical works, but there is a general tendency in the upper middle class, rooted in their increasing wealth and conservatism, to become fascinated and mesmerized by monarchy and aristocracy, to which they feel a natural affinity.

This leads us to the subject of two new films: *Mary Queen of Scots* and *The Favourite*.

The following is to a certain extent more of a sociological survey than a film comment. This is dictated by the nature of the two movies themselves and by the obsession of certain layers with their careers and self-advancement.

Mary Queen of Scots

Mary Queen of Scots, directed by Josie Rourke and written by Beau Willimon, based on John Guy's biography *Queen of Scots: The True Life of Mary Stuart*, treats the well-known 16th century conflict between Mary, the former Scottish queen, and Elizabeth, the English one.

This particular human and political drama has been written about and filmed numerous times.

Notable previous movie versions of the conflict include John Ford's 1936 *Mary of Scotland*, based on the play by Maxwell Anderson, with Florence Eldridge (as Elizabeth) and Katherine Hepburn (as Mary); Glenda Jackson and Vanessa Redgrave in *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1971, Charles Jarrott); and Cate Blanchett and Samantha Morton in *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007, Shekhar Kapur).

The rivalry between the two figures is innately intriguing. There is a natural curiosity about women in such positions in the mid- to late 1500s, obviously at a time when men generally ruled over countries. Unfortunately, for some of the reasons suggested above, this adaptation is not terribly gripping, despite a striking visual quality and interesting theatrical staging.

The movie commences in 1561. Mary Stuart (Saoirse Ronan) returns to Scotland from France following the death of her husband François II. She acceded to the throne at a few days old and, while she lived in France, a series of regents ruled in her place.

She is now a Catholic queen in a country where, following the Scottish Reformation of 1559-60, Protestantism has a large and ideologically aggressive following. Under conditions in which she is uncertain about the loyalty of her Protestant half-brother James, Earl of Moray (James McArdle), she faces opposition from the fiery preacher John Knox (David Tennant). The politically savvy monarch advocates religious tolerance, according to this movie.

England bankrolls Moray's thwarted rebellion against Mary, but she ultimately pardons her brother. (Moray's second attempted revolt leaves him without Elizabeth's support.)

To her cousin and future rival, England's powerful Queen Elizabeth I (Margot Robbie), Mary proposes that she inherit Elizabeth's throne if the English sovereign fails to produce an heir. The plan is opposed by Elizabeth's chief advisor, William Cecil (Guy Pearce).

English-born Lord Henry Darnley (Jack Lowden) woos Mary, but on their wedding night sleeps instead with David Rizzio (Ismael Cruz Córdova), a musician who is part of Mary's inner circle. Nonetheless, Mary succeeds in seducing the drunken "sodomite" and becomes pregnant with the future James VI of Scotland and I of England. Darnley is exiled and eventually killed. Mary then weds the man, James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell (Martin Compston), accused and then acquitted of killing Darnley.

In an overly long (and entirely fictional) sequence, Mary and Elizabeth meet. By this time, Elizabeth's face is ravaged by small pox and a brilliantly red wig covers her balding head. When the two women fail to come to a mutually suitable arrangement, Elizabeth stomps off. Mary is confined by her cousin, under quite luxurious conditions, for the next 18 years (during which time she plots with various forces against Elizabeth). In 1587, the former Scottish queen is beheaded for sanctioning an

attempted assassination of Elizabeth Tudor, who at one point admits, "I choose to be a man." The latter becomes the unchallenged monarch. All in all, the film is inordinately sympathetic to Mary.

Rourke's movie, while not the worst, is generally flat and mediocre. It reduces a deeply dramatic story to the small change of the director's attitude toward gender and personal relationships. Both Ronan and Robbie do their best, but are hampered by the fact they are less historical personalities than archetypal symbols of "womanhood." Rourke puts a lot of weight on their shoulders, more than they can reasonably bear (the close-ups of Ronan's visage become tedious). In addition, the two royal female powerhouses are encircled by conspiratorial half-men, totally out of historical proportion.

Even talented actors like Pearce are only allowed to operate as lesser adjuncts—his character, Cecil, was in fact one of the most influential figures in Elizabeth's court. In the movie, Darnley as Mary's second husband is a waster whose only value is to provide Mary with an heir. When he whines about not being made king, one cringes.

In an interview, Rourke lays it out: "There have been a lot of period dramas about this Tudor and Stuart part of history, but not a lot of those films have been directed by women. Almost all have been told by male directors. When I think about what it is to be those women, living through those moments, I think about my own body and experience and questions that instinctively and naturally arise as a woman and as a woman filmmaker." How can anything insightful emerge from such a subjective, petty viewpoint?

"Given today's political and cultural climate," Rourke goes on, "this film is incredibly relevant. If the film is underpinned by anything, it is the cost of power. And it asks us to look really hard at how challenging it is for women to lead and what demands—sometimes unreasonable—are put upon them when they try and do that. I hope there is a quiet but persistent argument for change, compassion, and humanity in leadership—and for understanding that we need to create better context in which women can succeed and thrive as leaders." In other words, more female big shots in politics, corporate boardrooms, etc…!

Deadline Hollywood sums it up: "Margot Robbie and Saoirse Ronan take on iconic roles and fiercely bring the #MeToo movement to the 16th century." It "is a crackerjack drama about two fiercely independent women making their strong voices heard in a world that was (and still is) manipulated by shady men. In its own way it brings aspects of #MeToo and Time's Up to play in a way we never thought possible." Awful.

The Favourite

Directed by Greek-born Yorgos Lanthimos and written by Deborah Davis and Tony McNamara, *The Favourite* is set in the early 1700s, when a gout-ridden and incompetent Queen Anne (Olivia Colman) is the reigning British monarch.

She shares her bedroom with 17 rabbits, representing the 17 children she lost due to miscarriages, stillbirths and early deaths. Britain is at war with France, and the real power behind the throne is Sarah Churchill (Rachel Weisz), Anne's backbone and clandestine lover. Sarah's husband, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough (Mark Gatiss), is leading the military campaign against England's continental enemies.

Abigail Hill (Emma Stone), Sarah's penniless cousin arrives caked in mud from being dumped at the castle's doorstep. One servant mocks: "They shit in the street around here. Political commentary they call it." The cunning Abigail works her way up from scullery maid to the sovereign's bed partner, outmaneuvering Sarah. ("As it turns out, I am capable of much unpleasantness.")

Whoever physically gratifies Anne apparently determines foreign and domestic policy (Abigail eventually takes Sarah's place as Keeper of the Privy Purse). The absurd narrative is packaged in elaborate costumes and décor. Much of the dialogue boils down to inanities and sex talk. When Abigail is pursued by the young Baron Samuel Masham (Joe Alwyn), the exchange goes like this: "Did you come to seduce me or rape me?" she inquires. "I am a gentleman," he replies. "So, rape then." Nicholas Hoult as Robert Harley, opposed to raising taxes to support the war, is an over-powered schemer, no match for the female triumvirate he is attempting to manipulate.

Director Lanthimos explains in an interview: "I wanted to make all that [the bigger picture] quite simpler so that it's a film that feels relevant to us today, so you could imagine this happening anywhere in the world or anytime or place. Pare down the politics so it's easier to understand the repercussions that come from the decisions that these three, or the actions that these three women take." Why then spend $15 million in part to recreate Queen Anne's court?

Lanthimos has become one of Greece's most internationally prominent filmmakers. However, his movies (*Dogtooth*, *The Lobster*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*) have made clear his supreme unconcern about the endless suffering of the Greek population and the perfidy of the Syriza government. *The Favourite* is a quirky, postmodernist jumble, flippant and salacious. It is socially indifferent and intellectually slovenly, dodging the "much bigger picture" of history and European power politics of the period. In other words, a "period piece" that has virtually nothing to say about the period in question.

Lanthimos ("fast emerging as one of the most exciting filmmakers out there," according to one breathless commentator) is clearly a director with his finger in the wind. It's no accident he made a "women's film" in 2018. It's also no accident the movie tells us virtually nothing about his female characters or the conditions of women in the 18th century—or the 21st.

In any event, there is not the slightest evidence that trading in male directors for female directors will fundamentally change anything, any more than electing female or African American politicians has meant any improvement in the lives of the mass of the population.

We have noted before that in recent years various film festivals and other institutions, including funding bodies, have boasted about their efforts to screen or encourage films by women directors. The results in general have been just as socially and ideologically limited as the work being done by men. The quality of film festival programs and cinema as a whole has not made any discernible progress.

This is nothing but a quota system for female directors. The purpose of art should be to express something meaningful about the world, not to advance the interests and careers of this or that section of the affluent middle class.