

The Favourite and Poor Things: Female Power and Desire According to Lanthimos

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The project of *Poor Things!* was already taking shape during the filming of *The Favourite*: Emma Stone first heard about Bella Baxter right on the set of the 2018 film. “The story that Yorgos Lanthimos was explaining to me was truly unique and deeply inspiring for a woman: imagining a world where your mind isn’t conditioned by the way you were raised and by the way you were taught to behave,” said the actress, who would later become the producer of *Poor Things!*, the movie that won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and is now nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture.

And the connections between *The Favourite* and *Poor Things!* do not stop there: many aspects link the two films, making them an especially interesting phase in Lanthimos’ filmography, centered on female power and desire.

The Favourite and Female Sexuality at Court

England, 18th century: *The Favourite* explores the ménage between Queen Anne, Lady Sarah, and the servant Abigail. The world of the three women is confined within the perimeter of the Royal Palace: the frames of Lanthimos’ film are flooded with tapestries, lavish rooms filled with mirrors and candelabras.

The young Abigail, played by Emma Stone, will try by any means to achieve social redemption by getting closer to power. Once she discovers the relationship between Sarah and Queen Anne—played respectively by Rachel Weisz and Olivia Colman—drawing a boundary between emotional dynamics and power dynamics becomes impossible.

In love and war everything is allowed, and Abigail knows this well: yet her hunger for prestige and status is destined to end in annihilation.

The wide-angle lenses—also dominant in *Poor Things!*—stage a carousel of unrestrained desires and irreparable absences that become the pawns in a power game where there are no real winners and the stakes are constantly shifting. The desire at the center of the dynamics between the three women flows through the deceptions, lies, and schemes enacted to maintain one’s position at court or to obtain a more advantageous one.

But while the action remains for the most part confined within the palace, nature still manages to slip inside the royal walls—its disturbing charge of unpredictable and uncontrollable force, however, is placed under control.

The 17 rabbits that symbolize the 17 children lost by Queen Anne are not free creatures but merely symbols imprisoned by their own meaning—captive beings now incapable of living outside the sumptuous cage.

In *Poor Things!* as well, nature is subjected to human control and manipulation through science: in the house of Godwin Baxter roam the results of various experiments, such as the dog-pig or the goat-duck, completing the array of “poor things” referred to in the title.

From Anne’s Reign to the Steampunk-Flavored Victorian Era

In *Poor Things!* the entire world depicted in *The Favourite* has already exploded, and Victorian England is struggling to gather the pieces of the wreckage. Yet even this world is already on the path toward extinction: the fantastical settings—cotton-candy skies—and the eccentric clothes worn by Bella Baxter are visual proof of this.

If in *The Favourite* the historical context mainly defines the frame—especially the aesthetic one—of the film, in *Poor Things!* the nineteenth-century setting becomes distorted, losing its contours in an explosion of colors and extravagant shapes more aligned with a science-fiction aesthetic than with faithful historical reconstruction.

Drawing on the novel by Alasdair Gray, Lanthimos does not stage Victorian society in its material reality but rather the ghosts and obsessions it produced—those that made it recognizable in the centuries that followed.

Steam-powered technological devices promising wonders, creatures that mark the boundary between human and nonhuman, and men who see science as the only possible path for humanity’s progress. But above all, an undergrowth of desires and impulses increasingly difficult to control and repress, ready to explode the intricate and rigid social fabric of the reign of Queen Victoria.

Bella Baxter is a product of science, but she is also—and above all—a symbol of all those desires that escape human control. If in *The Favourite* female sexual desire was subordinated to the pursuit of power, in *Poor Things!* it becomes an unstoppable engine that opens the path toward freedom and knowledge.

Bella has no conception of money, nor of authority: the creature brought into the world by the Godwin Baxter played by Willem Dafoe explores the world guided by a naive desire, unaware of the social structure within which she moves.

Poor Things! And a Power in Detonation

Bella's body moves within the Victorian world (the immediate ancestor of industrial and capitalist society) and with her mere presence she blows up the rules that define it.

The space around her undergoes an even greater deformation than the enclosed one of *The Favourite*: between fisheye lenses and chromatic saturation, the world of *Poor Things!* is marked by surrealism, as if we were discovering the streets of Lisbon and Alexandria through Bella's untainted gaze.

Just as the world of *The Favourite* is dominated by typically male power logics—even though the main roles are female—the world into which Bella is (re)born is also shaped by patriarchal structures. From the benevolent scientist father who gives her life again after her suicide, to the husband who attempts to force her back into the role of wife and mother, to the womanizer played by Mark Ruffalo who wants to take advantage of her naivety.

But from the moment she leaves the sanctuary-home of her "God," Bella is a free creature in the making, capable of defining her own path. She cannot be satisfied with the dark corridors of a palace: she needs the dazzling streets of European capitals and the boundless, dreamlike horizons of the oceans.

If Abigail becomes an integral part of the hierarchy of power—remaining effectively trapped in a golden cage—Bella does not seek a role within the dominant system. She does not want to possess the world; she simply wants to "taste" it and "circumnavigate" it.

For Bella, sex is not a game of domination, nor a tool, nor a prison, but a field of knowledge and pleasure, free of secrets and shadows, where a continuous process of transformation and renegotiation takes place.

It represents a step forward compared to *The Favourite*, where female desire now has the possibility to express itself and explore itself beyond social conventions and power games, in a "feast of changes" whose neural center is the body itself.

This is also reflected in Emma Stone's presence across the two films—similar yet different at the same time—as she transforms Abigail's desperate voracity into Bella's playful impetuosity.

Outside the palace, outside the father's house—free in the world.

