(CNN) &#8212; Sporting a wonderfully descriptive promo line in "Lust. For Power," "Mary & George" joins [*"Dangerous Liaisons"*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/06/entertainment/dangerous-liaisons-review/index.html) in the genre of costume dramas where sex serves as a weapon of war. Imbued with a historical kick, the new Starz limited series boasts juicy performances from Julianne Moore and Nicholas Galitzine and a level of debauchery that makes [*"Bridgerton"*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/24/entertainment/bridgerton-season-2-review/index.html) look like a Sunday-school romp.

Set during the reign of King James I in the early 17th century, the series introduces Moore's Mary Villiers and offers a taste of her ruthlessness in the early going, when her second son, George (Galitzine, who also combined royalty, sex and ampersands in [*"Red, White & Royal Blue"*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/10/movies/red-white-and-royal-blue-review/index.html)), is born in 1592.

"Second sons offer nothing, inherit nothing," she tells him.

Flash forward 20 years, and Mary, who married into money, is widowed and in danger of losing her estate, so much so that she begins plotting as to how she can leverage George's striking good looks to her advantage. Specifically, there are those rumblings about King James (Tony Curran) and his preference for men, prompting Mary to prod George to seduce the king to win them status and power.

Such a plan is fraught with peril, starting with the fact that the king already has a lover, the Earl of Somerset (Laurie Davidson), who has no intention of allowing anyone to loosen his hold over him. Still, armed with a few tricks he picked up while in France (naturally), George seems more than equal to the task. Scheming, backstabbing, violence, collateral damage and a whole lot of sex follow.

Coming off her role in [*"May December,"*](https://www.cnn.com/style/may-december-natalie-portman-julianne-moore-culture-queue/index.html) Moore finds another splendid showcase for her talents in this British production, adapted by playwright D.C. Moore.

Although there are factual underpinnings to the story (which is adapted from the nonfiction book "The King's Assassin"), there's surely a great deal of dramatic license in the details. That includes the central duo's interactions with other historical figures, such as Sir Francis Bacon (Mark O'Halloran), who rightly views Mary and George with suspicion. Indeed, with so much at stake, mother and son aren't even sure they can consistently trust each other.

The idea of using sex to exert control over a mercurial monarch has deep roots, including various tellings of Henry VIII's tale and the Oscar-winning movie [*"The Favourite."*](https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/27/opinions/the-favourite-fascinated-winston-churchill-galant/index.html) The historical record suggesting that King James was gay brings a welcome wrinkle to a genre referred to in literary circles as "bodice rippers," but whether it's bodices or ruffled collars being hastily removed, "Mary & George" stands rather deliciously on its own.