Senior Capstone Experience

Pride and Prejudice and Porn: Examining the Effects of Female Desire in Romance

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

Julia Quinn's *The Viscount Who Loved Me*

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I pledge my word of honor that I have abided by the Washington College Honor Code while completing this assignment.

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Introduction

Women are judged harshly for the things they enjoy, including music taste, television shows, hobbies, and books. The consumption of media by women is a hot topic nowadays. If a girl was to say she liked a band such as One Direction or a movie franchise like *Twilight*, pieces of pop culture primarily aimed at engaging a female audience, she would be ridiculed for liking "girly" things. But, if a girl were to say she liked superhero films or ACDC, pieces of pop culture primarily aimed at engaging a male audience, she would be praised for doing so. The reason for this praise of masculine traits is because Western society functions under the rule of a modified patriarchy. This means that while women have been granted formal gender equality in the eyes of the law and in most social situations, the patriarchal norms associated with men as being better than women, remain a daily part of everyday life (Ferre and Wade, 132). Pieces of culture historically now favored by women that used to be favored by men have become undesirable, such as high heels, which were historically worn by men (Ferre and Wade, 3-4). This term, known as male flight, also applies to the famous author Jane Austen. She was very popular with male readers when her books were first published in the early 1800s and continued to delight male readers up until the First World War, as seen by Rudyard Kipling's *The Janeites*, where "Jane lies in Winchester-blessed be her shade! Praise the Lord for making her, and her for all she made! And while the stones of Winchester, or Milsom Street, remain. Glory, love, and honour unto England's Jane!" (Kipling, 124). However, the latter half of the 20th century saw a shift, with Austen being deemed "a chick-flick author," most likely thanks to the number of film adaptions popping up based on her beloved novels causing male readers to shun her work.

The first of Austen's novels to be adapted to the screen was *Pride and Prejudice,* which details the rocky love story of Elizabeth 'Lizzy' Bennet, the second eldest sister of a family of

five daughters and the abundantly rich, anti-social Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. The first film adaption of this esteemed piece of literature aired on television in 1938. Only two years later, a different adaption of the novel made its debut on the silver screen. *Pride and Prejudice* has had over twenty film (both television and movie) adaptions since the made-for-television movie first aired and has served as a basis for many other different forms of inspired media, including books, television shows, plays, musicals, and an Emmy-award-winning interactive YouTube series. One of the most beloved of the *Pride and Prejudice* adaptions is the 2005 film of the same name directed by Joe Wright. Screen adaptions often attract a larger audience than its written source material, thanks to accessibility. Streaming services ensure that various films and shows are easily available for anyone to watch, and when it comes to historically based screen adaptions, a movie contains language that is easier for people to understand.

The same can be said for the popular Netflix show *Bridgerton* created by Chris Van Dusen, based on a book series of the same name that was published in 2006. Season two of the hit series is based on the second book of the series written by author Julia Quinn, *The Viscount Who Loved Me*, which details the love story between Viscount Anthony Bridgerton, and Katharine 'Kate' Sheffield (Sharma in the show). Historical romance, especially ones set in the Regency era, tend to draw readers in. The allure of different time periods and romance confined by societal expectations of the time makes for an entertaining love story. The Regency romance genre is also a signal to the reader that the story will end in a happy marriage since that was the expected norm of the time and an expected ending for books that are part of the romance genre.

Both the adaptations and their respective books are also used as tools by men to maintain their hold on a patriarchal-run society to put women down for simply liking things. "...women feel guilty about spending money on [romance] books that are regularly ridiculed by the media,

their husbands, and their children." (Radway, 54). However, despite the criticism both works face for being deemed nothing but love stories, Austen and Quinn's work deals with themes such as social hierarchy, gender norms, and class rigidity. Even if their works had not contained such issues and were simply Regency love stories, what is wrong with that? Thanks to hypermasculinity, men are encouraged to engage in the more aggressive and violent tendencies that are associated with masculinity, such as consuming heavily violent and misogynistic content while facing little to no consequences. These ideas have been pushed into mainstream media, encouraging others to participate in watching this kind of content and praising pieces of media containing gratuitous violence and the sexualization of women as being "good" (Ferre and Wade, 144). This is a trend people on social media have become more aware of, with Twitter user @vnbrkl tweeting "can't stop thinking about how women are ridiculed for enjoying romance novels and movies (where actual good things happen to women) and are told that they should enjoy other genres (where women are often not mentioned or killed to serve as a plot device for the male lead)."

Though Quinn's name does not carry as much weight as Austen, who has carved out a place for herself in pop culture and has defined genres, both share in the fact that their work is criticized for appealing to and being enjoyed by a mostly female audience. So, what in their work is so appealing to female readers? What is it about the Regency romance genre, that captivates the female audience? Desire. Female readers seek out tension and heightened desire plots in fiction as a form of escapism from a patriarchal society, first demonstrated in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* and can be later seen in the contemporary regency romance genre through the more modern book, *The Viscount Who Loved Me.* Though some would argue that a woman who must be forced to marry a man to ensure her livelihood (a driving force in many

historically written and based novels) enforces patriarchal ideals, the idea that women can still find joy, love, and fulfillment in a society that actively works against them, serves as a beacon of hope and encourages women to ignore societies judgments for having the courage to take control of their own pleasure.

Context

Pride and Prejudice has become synonymous with the enemies to lovers trope. This popular romance trope is when at the start of a book two characters do not get along or start as "enemies" until they eventually overcome their differences or misconceptions about each other and fall in love. The Denton Public Library's website is home to an enemies to lovers book recommendation page. The first book on the list is *The Viscount Who Loved Me* and two books down is *Pride and Prejudice*. 111,556 stories include some variation of the #enemiestolovers tag on the fanfiction website Archive of Our Own (ao3), but what makes the trope so popular? According to therapist and relationship expert Marisa Peer, "The intensity of emotion between two individuals who view one another as enemies or rivals… creates a dramatic tension. The thin dividing line between love and hate means both emotions conjure up similar reactions, which ensures a powerful interaction from the start… It provides each an insight into the other's psyche and an almost visceral understanding of ways to push buttons" (Bond). The enemies to lovers trope forces characters to see the worst of one another before they fall in love. "They learn to uncover the positive within someone and recognize that the sum of that person's 'parts' creates more of a positive force than they had given them credit for…In the situation, all the issues are out there and dealt with at the beginning, so they really know the person they are choosing to get emotionally involved with," (Bond). Many people find this idea comforting, with multiple TikTok users creating videos to express their appreciation for the trope. User @cpycatkiller posted a video saying, "Not understanding why I love the enemies to lovers trope so much…" before transitioning into "the idea of someone seeing my worst traits and still loving me." The TikTok garnered over 700,000 views and over 5,000 comments with users commenting "THIS

IS THE ONE" or "real" to show their agreement with @cpycatkiller's statement. Other videos including the #enemiestolovers hashtag on TikTok have a combined total of 4.8 billion views.

Social media, and TikTok in particular, has become a safe space for people to share their wants, desires, and feelings about pop culture. Both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridgerton* have carved out communities in the space with the former's hashtag having 1.1 billion views and the latter having 13.5 billion views. The two pieces of media are also beloved on more fandom-specific sites such as Archive of our Own (Ao3), a fanfiction website. On Ao3, the tag Pride and Prejudice - Jane Austen, contains 2,669 works, meaning there is a large amount of fanfiction about Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. There are 547 pieces of inspired work based specifically on the 2005 film, distinguished with the tag Pride and Prejudice 2005. Even *Bridgerton* has hopped on the fanfiction train, with the Bridgerton - TV tag containing 6,464 works with Bridgerton Series - Julia Quinn having 5,087 pieces to boast. However, it seems Austen's name still holds sway over Regency-inspired fanfiction with the alternative universe tag. An alternative universe fanfiction is when characters are taken from the universe of their story, and placed in another one, whether it be taking the characters from *Star Wars* and placing them on contemporary earth or, in the case of Alternate Universe - Pride and Prejudice Fusion works, a Harry Potter fanfiction about Fleur Delacour and Hermione Granger falling in love in early 1800's England called "A Truth Universally Acknowledged" written by user perfectly_random. There are 743 works under the tag compared to Alternate Universe - Bridgerton (TV) Fusion tag which only has 277 works. Even though *Bridgerton* is more popular when it comes to work directly based on it, the iconic nature of *Pride and Prejudice* leads to more works indirectly taking and citing inspiration from it.

Desire also plays a very large role in not just the enemies to lovers trope, but the romance genre as a whole. Even though many romance novels are dismissed as smutty trash (Lee, 1) they are one of the most steadily growing fiction genres (Radway, 19). Even 2016 presidential candidate Hillary Clinton had negative things to say about the romance novel genre, simplifying romance books to "women being grabbed and thrown on a horse and ridden off into the distance" (Kleypas.) In response, romance author Lisa Kleypas said, "It's a misleading cliché about the genre," and that the industry has changed. She claims readers like romance novels because "[they are] empowering, [they are] an escape, [and they] explore the complexities of relationships in ways that cause them to reflect deeply on their own lives." 21st-century romance novels written by female authors intended for a female audience and created safe spaces for readers because they do not normalize abuse against women and usually contain consent regarding sex with the female heroine.

The Genre Establishing Power of *Pride and Prejudice*

A large criticism of Austen's work involves the lack of sex, even with famous author Charlotte Brontë claiming that "what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study, but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of Life and the sentient target of Death — this Miss Austen ignores," (Shorter). Similar sentiments about Austen's work are still present in our modern society, which is generally regarded as being quite sex positive. There is a modern misconception that old literary classics were devoid of sex, we assume due to social rules concerning marriage and religion that sex was not discussed, but that is not the case, especially when it comes to Austen's work. While Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* does not involve the main heroine and her romantic interest engaging in physical sexual activities, sex is not missing from the story. It is a driving, cleverly concealed, factor that is moving the story forward. One of the younger Bennet sisters, Lydia, runs off with Mr. Wickham, whom she later must marry to save her reputation. The word sex is never used because it does not need to be. The characters all know what Lydia and Wickham have done, just as the readers do. Austen dances around the subject to benefit the audience of her time, but it is not ignored entirely. "My youngest sister has left all her friends - has eloped - has thrown herself into the power of - of Mr. Wickham… *You* know him too well to doubt the rest. She has no money, no connections, nothing that can tempt him to - she is lost forever" (Austen, 244). Lydia is "lost" in Wickham's power, manipulated by him, believing they would elope when she was unaware Wickham never had any intention to do so. Like the heroines of romance novels of the past, Lydia's agency and life are taken away from her by a manipulative sexually driven man, and she, like the romance novel heroines of the past, "...has no understanding of her sexuality and no power of consent" (Andresen).

Lydia's doomed fate seems especially unfair when one looks at the similarities between her fate and that of Heather, the female heroine in *The Flame and the Flower* a romance novel from the 70s written by Kathleen Woodiwiss. At the start of the book, Heather runs away after killing her attacker before being kidnaped by a pirate named Brandon, who rapes her multiple times. Finding she is pregnant with his child, the two are forced to marry, and eventually, they fall in love. Both girls are forced into marriages and claim love for their spouses ["If you love Mr. Darcy half as well as I do my dear Wickham, you must be very happy" (Austen 346).] which leaves a bad taste in the reader's mouth. Lydia and Heather are punished for falling victim to the sexual prowess of the older, more experienced men who invaded their lives; the same cannot be said for Lizzy who never succumbs to Darcy. However, Lizzy is older than Lydia and more knowledgeable, not as prone to her younger sister's "high-animal spirits" (Austen, 39). Lizzy and Darcy's sexual chemistry is kept simmering under the surface, not allowed to escape because the two are adhering to the proper social norms of the era. "Simply because desire is not expressed, it does not cease to exist…Instead, it is symbolically displaced, returning with repetitive insistence in a concealed form" and this repressed desire manifests via walks, glances, and dancing (Dennis, 426). These types of subtle actions are more difficult for readers to catch in a written format unless specifically stated by the narrator as to what these subtle glances mean to the character and are even harder to gauge when the character is unaware of another character's romantic inclinations towards them. A perfect example of this is when Lizzy and Darcy share their dance in chapter eighteen of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Dancing is a powerful tool used in all forms of media to bring two characters closer together under the watchful eye of an entire ballroom. Despite being observed by a myriad of onlookers, it allows the two characters to converse privately and serves as an opportunity for the

characters to learn more about one another. The many different “accounts” (Austen, 84) Lizzy has heard about Darcy from others contradict one another. Lizzy, who knows very little about Darcy’s character at this point in the book uses the dance to try and learn more about him but, due to his shy nature she learns very little which feeds into the enemies to lovers trope. Throughout the exchange Darcy is seemingly irritated with Lizzy, initially refusing to engage her in conversation and avoiding her attempts in trying to get to know him better. Right before the dance comes to an end, Lizzy teases Darcy, claiming if she does not learn about his character now, she never will have the opportunity to do so. Her lighthearted mood in comparison to Darcy’s curt language helps to convey her teasing tone. Darcy replies to Lizzy “coldly” (Austen, 84) and afterward both parties walk away “dissatisfied” (Austen, 84).Lizzy is disappointed by Darcy’s lack of engaging conversation, and Darcy is seemingly “dissatisfied” due to Lizzy’s insistent curiosity but, this is not the case. Although each side is dissatisfied it is “not to an equal degree,” and Darcy begins to develop a “tolerable powerful feeling” (Austen, 84) directed toward Lizzy. The word “tolerable” is defined as something capable of being put up with, that may not be particularly enjoyable. Darcy is putting up with these powerful feelings he is developing for Lizzy. Her insistent curiosity and teasing affects him, and even if he does not wish to feel something for her, he now finds that he simply cannot help himself.

Their dance leaves both sides unsatisfied, thinking they know exactly where they stand, but also leaving the characters wondering why they are both so drawn towards one another. Even the character's natures, cannot keep them away from each other for long before they are inevitably drawn back to one another. However, this dynamic with all the subtleties used in the characters’ language and lack of physical description of the dance may leave ordinary readers thinking nothing of the conversation. The impact dance scenes are more easily conveyed via

film. Where “books can provide the clarity of a character’s innermost thoughts,…film presents the opportunity to interpret emotion through facial expressions. A book might offer a mesmerizing turn of phrase, but film can set a scene or a mood in under a second” (Quinn, Tatler).

Fig. 1 from the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* movie Darcy and Lizzy dancing at Netherfield Ball.

The above image is from the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* film and showcases Darcy and Lizzy sharing their first dance, similarly to the scene from the book. Many of the same pieces of dialogue from the book are used, but now the audience has access to something not offered by the book: body movement. Within the book, the dance is not named, the movements are not detailed, and the way the characters interact physically with each other is absent from the scene. However, the film helps to fill these blanks in via the actors. Keira Knightly as Lizzy and Matthew Macfadyen as Darcy takes the readers’ imaginary conception of the characters and provides something real; they fill in the blanks. This image shows the moment when the two break away from the dance and stand in the middle of it all to rapidly converse.

Darcy stops to ask, “’And why do you ask such a question?’

‘To make out your character Mr. Darcy,’ Lizzy replies.

‘And what have you discovered?’ he asks.

‘Very little. I hear such different accounts of you as puzzle me exceedingly,’ Lizzy retorts.

Darcy regains momentum, continuing the steps of the dance he paused, and turns around Lizzy, ‘ I hope to provide you more clarity in the future.’”

Fig. 2 from the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* movie Darcy and Lizzy dancing at Netherfield Ball.

The two resume the dance perfectly in time with the music, only this time they are alone. The two were dancing in a ballroom full of people and with one turn, they suddenly find that they are the only ones in the room, or that they feel as if that is the case. The tension in the dance is amplified tenfold without the presence of other bodies in the way to block out movements and fill space on the screen. The lack of people adds to Lizzy and Darcy’s movements, each step, each bow of the head, each turn becomes something more, an intimate moment just for them to share.

These small moments speak volumes, contributing to a slow-burn romance that leaves watchers on the edge of their seats. When the characters stare at each other or dance (one of the few times they are allowed to touch) it makes when the characters finally get together all the

more satisfying. Film editor for the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice,* Paul Tothill said in an interview with Insider "Over the last 15 years, I had forgotten how much that ruled the edit [of the movie.] It's all those subtleties," referring to the famous Mr. Darcy hand flex scene.

Fig. 3 from the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* movie Darcy clenches his hand after helping Lizzy get into a carriage.

Darcy helps Lizzy into a carriage, using his bare hand to assist her ungloved one. This is when the two make physical contact for the first time. Before Elizabeth registers the gesture, Darcy has turned to leave. There is a close-up shot of his hand, and his fingers flex and "you can feel the tension resonating through the screen. It's electrifying and (dare we say it?) rather sexy" (Bond). TikTok user @tori.hoover agrees, posting a video of the scene and voicing along to an audio that says "This right here is my favorite thing ever, in the history of forever. I think about this every day, I think about this all night long, I stay awake not sleeping because I'm thinking about this." While there is no such scene in Austen's work, this moment keeps the spirit of the book. The tension built up when Darcy walks with Lizzy or when she feels his eyes on her is kept in this scene, but contemporary audiences want to see physical contact. Modern conceptions of romance are very much associated with the idea of touch, and seeing touch be so restricted

makes it even more impactful when it happens. “The initial erotic contact awakens the heroine’s consciousness of her sexuality and signals that the hero is the one, the man on whom she can safely bestow her sexual desire and attentions” (Lee, 60).

Fig. 4 Photoshopped image of the 10th Doctor’s hand mimicking Darcy’s hand clench from “A Life I Could Never Have” by @thesuperwholockchronicles on Archive of Our Own.

This scene has become so well associated with *Pride and Prejudice* that a user on Ao3, @thesuperwholockchronicles, posted a series of photoshopped images of The Doctor and Rose Tyler from *Doctor Who* as Lizzy and Darcy. The above image is an edited photo of The Doctor’s hand in a position to mimic the hand-clench scene from the *Pride and Prejudice* film. The collection of photos is called “A Life I Could Never Have” and contains relevant tags including #PrideandPrejudiceReferences #AlterativeUniverse-PrideandPrejudiceFusion and #UnresolvedRomanticTension. The post contains no tags specific to the *Pride and Prejudice* movie, yet recreated this iconic scene from it, which shows how it has bled into the pop culture mindset to become something synonymous with the book on which it was based.

Fig. 5 Darcy and Lizzy conversing in a sketch from an 1885 edition of *Pride and Prejudice.*

A sketch of Lizzy and Darcy from an 1895 edition of *Pride and Prejudice* shows the two sitting together. Both characters are angled toward each other, twisting their bodies to face one

another while they converse. Darcy is giving Lizzy his full attention while she speaks and has his hand resting just behind her arm, while she declares “Now be sincere, did you admire me for my impertinence?” (Austen, 382). The almost contact makes the moment more desirable, playing off the moments the film adaption uses to illustrate the characters’ connection. “Novels by Jane Austen… do offer film opportunities for presenting women in cumbersome situations, striving to avoid the uniformity imposed by their domestication and indiscriminate objectification,” (Despotopoulou, 115). The reader can see the tension between the two characters and how Lizzy interacts with Darcy. She is not a passive figure but an active one. Austen grants her heroines “narrative space for exploring their perceptions, consciousness, and individuality…” (Despotopoulou, 115) which appeals to readers and prompts them to keep reading and devouring the book because they want more, they want to be satisfied, which is where *Bridgerton* comes into play.

The Expression of Female Desire in *Bridgerton*

Romance novels, which used to be referred to as "bodice-rippers," (Lee, 56) are infamous for their lack of consent, often having the male love interests rape the heroine before the two end up together. Professor Emerita of English at Duke University Julia Andresen Tetel wrote an article for Salon, examining the changing norms of romance novels over the years. According to Andresen, it was typical for the young heroine to be a virgin, with minimal to zero sexual experience versus the older male hero, whose experience when it came to sexual encounters was high. This dynamic is still seen in many of Quinn's books, due to the time in which they are set (nearly all of Quinn's books, not just the *Bridgerton* series, are set in the English Regency period). Anthony is a rake, a man who beds women constantly and has had several mistresses compared to Kate, who has had no sexual encounters of any kind until she meets Anthony. The key difference between Quinn's romance compared to the bodice rippers of the 70s is that Kate is not forced into sexual situations with Anthony. She instead has desires that she explores with him. In an interview with *Time* Magazine Quinn said "People who don't read romance novels still have the perception that they are what they were in the 1970s or '80s. The heroines were doormats, with all these alpha males bossing them around. I can't imagine a romance novel published today where the hero rapes the heroine and she falls in love with him" (Grossman). While a little forceful in the book, Anthony respects Kate and stops when she asks, creating a safe space for readers.

Regarding her romance books, Julia Quinn said "I can't think of anything in my books that any feminist would find objectionable. And I consider myself a feminist" (Grossman). While some aspects of Quinn's books may be dated now when it comes to issues revolving around consent, at the time she claims they were well accepted and even a bit encouraged. A scene in the

first book in the *Bridgerton* series *The Duke and I* which was published in 2000, shows the female heroine Daphne taking advantage of her husband's intoxicated state to bed him so she can fulfill her dream of being a mother, after finding out he lied to her regarding his ability to conceive children. Regarding the scene in an interview with Tamron Hall, Quinn said "When [*The Duke and I*] came out, over 20 years ago, there wasn't a peep about that scene, nobody said a word. In fact, the reaction was more 'you go girl!' So, I think it's really fascinating kind of from a historical perspective to see the difference in how we now view our actions, and I think there are a couple of things at work there. I think one is that the #metoo movement and just general awareness have kind of honed our understanding of what consent is and that's a good thing, but also I think that even though we're not remotely where we need to be in terms of gender power balance we have moved in the last 21 years and what it means is that it's more difficult for women of today to identity with Daphne's utter powerlessness in her society." Many romance readers and writers view the genre as "chronicles of female triumph," (Radway, 54). So, while contemporary readers can recognize the scene as inherently problematic, they can still see that Daphne has taken control of her sexual desires and she is not the victim, a large departure from romance stories of days past.

When speaking about season one of *Bridgerton*, Quinn said "When you watch this first series of *Bridgerton*… you finish it I think you have the same emotional sense as when you read a romance novel, in my case a historical romance novel, which is, you know your heart's pounding a little bit and you're so excited for them, then you get a happy ending and when you're done, you're happy" ("'Bridgerton' Author Julia Quinn on How Shonda Rhimes Unexpectedly Discovered Her Book Series"). The phrase "heart's pounding" is reminiscent of Brontë's use of "throbs" and "blood rushes through." While Brontë is not referring to the heart,

but rather one's sex organs, it cannot be denied that the literal heart is another vessel that manifests physical symptoms of desire in the human body. After all, in *The Viscount Who Loved Me* when Anthony moves closer to Kate, there was nothing she could do "to quell the frantic beating of her heart" due to the pricks of desire she begins to feel (Quinn, 127-128). The character's physical reactions help shape the readers. "To qualify as a romance, the story must chronicle not merely the events of a courtship but what it feels like to be the object of one," (Radway, 65). If Kate is breathing heavily or finds her heart rate increasing, it will stimulate the same reaction in the reader, who is using Kate as a vessel to experience desires of their own.

"Scholars have argued that in positioning woman as sexually active rather than passive, romance authors create a female subject of desire" (Lee, 54). Female readers want to see characters that are in control of their desires. Erotic scenes in romance fiction reflect what readers from that period want to see (Lee, 55). "What they enjoy most about romance reading is the opportunity to project themselves into the story, to become the heroine, and thus to share her surprise and slowly awakening pleasure at being so closely watched by someone who finds her valuable and worthy of love," (Radway, 67-68). Female readers deserve to see strong female leads with sexual desires, they want to see themselves reflected in fiction, to imagine that they can one day find the fairytale romance they read about when they were young while also experiencing the sexual pleasure many women are denied.

Fig. 6 Side-by-side photo of Anthony Bridgerton from season 2, episode 5 of *Bridgerton* and Mr. Darcy from episode 4 of the *Pride and Prejudice* miniseries, both clad in wet white shirts.

The presentation of the subject of desire for female viewers can often be more visually appealing on screen than in written format. The written word is a wonderful opportunity to fall in love with one's character, but unless containing explicit sex scenes, it makes it harder for one to fall in lust. The BBC *Pride and Prejudice* miniseries that premiered in 1995 became quite popular for its infamous "wet shirt scene." This scene from episode four, shows Darcy (played by Colin Firth) who decides to take a dip in a pond on his lands near his estate Pemberley, to cool down from the warm weather. Still dressed and dripping in his clothing he emerges from the pond when he bumps into Lizzy touring his gardens. His state of undress is uncommon for the time, especially for one who is outside. Lizzy, confronted with the wet man, cannot help but have her eyes dart toward his visible chest, despite knowing the improprieties of it all. Season two of

Bridgerton sees the leading man, Anthony (played by Jonathan Bailey), take a tumble into a lake and emerge completely soaked. The erotic sight is too much for the ladies to handle, and while Kate encourages her younger sister Edwina to look away, her own eyes are trained on Anthony. The inclusion of the scene is for the enjoyment of the female viewer, just like the *Pride and Prejudice* miniseries scene in which it was based, with the camera tracing Anthony's figure as he angrily removes his soaked layers and pulls himself out of the lake. Edwina and Kate observe the sight, and both act as a conduit for the viewer, voicing their reflections on the scene as both parties' watch. It is as Edwina remarks "refreshing indeed" ("An Unthinkable Fate").

The *Bridgerton* Netflix series has been reduced to pornography by many viewers. Common Sense Media is a website that allows parents and children to review pieces of media to deem what is suitable for children to watch. Many described the show as "Pornography hidden as Romance," One user said: "If I want to watch porn, I'll watch it. This overrated show is ruined by unnecessary sex," and "PORNOGRAPHIC, LEWD & EXTREMELY R-RATED." Another said, "There's too much nudity and porn that's totally unnecessary and doesn't advance the story in any way." Both parents and children rated the show as being 18+ compared to the HBO hit show *Game of Thrones* which has a parent and child rating of 15+. A show that depicted gruesome deaths, multiple sexual assault scenes, and extreme violence and abuse towards women is deemed more fitting for children to watch than a show with a few sex scenes. Part of the reason for this shift may be due to *Bridgerton's* use of the female gaze when portraying on-screen female desire. Quinn noted: "One thing I just found fascinating was you know, how often the media will call it, you know, like 'Netflix's raunchiest show' or 'Boinkertoin' or something like that or 'Bonkerton,' and I'm just thinking like there actually isn't more sex in this than in so many other things. The difference is that it's done from the female gaze and thus we don't even

have like, the media just doesn't even have the vocabulary to deal with it" (Quinn, Interview). The female gaze differs from the male gaze in that it seeks to emphasize the emotion and feelings behind one's actions and tries to evoke specific reactions in the viewer based on what occurs on screen.

Bridgerton is a piece of media created by a female author with a female audience in mind so, it makes sense that in its adaption the show would appeal to a primarily female audience. Quinn deems herself a feminist (Grossman) and her female characters tend to exhibit some of these feminist ideals, even when still confined by the era, and the fantasy world of the *Bridgerton* Netflix series expands on this. While most loudly displayed via the character Eloise (who complains about women having to marry and later involves herself in political scandal to seek an opportunity to improve societal conditions for her sex), each female character displays some 21st century feminist tendencies. This can be seen in Daphne's acknowledgement of her being confined to certain roles in society, Penelope working secretly as Lady Whistledown to earn a living for herself, and Kate's refusal to stand down to anyone including higher-ranking men. The female audience is being catered to because, "…contemporary film with feminist concerns does seem to try hard to address the real woman spectator and… to provide us with an alternative version of female subjectivity" (Despotopoulou, 115). Watchers are being provided content that speaks directly to them, their experiences, and what they want to see via the female gaze.

A prime example of the female gaze occurs in episode five, "An Unthinkable Fate." Anthony and Kate are having a private conversation, and throughout it he slowly decreases their distance, his fingers just barely brushing against her hair and face, their lips almost touching. "I am a gentleman," he says. "My father raised me to act with honor, but that honor is hanging by a thread that grows more precarious with every moment I spend in your presence. You are the

bane of my existence and the object of all my desires. Night and day I dream of you, and what I- Do you even know all the ways a lady can be seduced? The things I could teach you." The two are surrounded by dim candlelight and speaking in low tones to not be overheard, but it all lends a seductive quality. The almost kiss leaves watchers on the edge of their seats, leaving them begging for more.

Fig. 7 Anthony in "An Unthinkable Fate," speaking to Kate in private.

Fig. 8 Kate in "An Unthinkable Fate," listening to Anthony's speech.

Fig. 9 Kate and Anthony about to kiss in "An Unthinkable Fate."

The camera moves with a flowy quality, never remaining still as it lingers on the actors' faces, but even when focusing on Anthony, Kate is in each shot. She is an ever-present figure, the focal point of the scene. Anthony may be the one speaking, but it is Kate's reaction that matters most. She maintains direct eye contact, the slightest tilt of her head betraying nothing till Anthony moves in closer, face hovering just before hers. Kate follows him, her movements mirroring his own as the two move together perfectly in sync. "I did not ask for this," Kate breathes heavily. "To be plagued by these feelings. Hiding from my sister. Being driven to distraction every time *you* enter the room." When Kate speaks, the camera is focused on her alone, not moving to Anthony to gauge his reaction. The female perspective is emphasized.

The desire the two feel for each other comes out in full force once the two are alone but the desire is lacking, it is "the absence of satisfaction. As such, desire seeks pleasure," (Allen, 435). Their lips hover over one another as Anthony's fingers barely brush Kate's hair aside, the sound of their "heartbeats thumping" as they both agree they cannot desire one another the way

they do. Anthony shakes his head and exhales before he backs away from Kate. “If I wed your sister, it will bind me and you together for eternity, and I will spend every day of my marriage wanting you. Dreaming of you. Dreading the day when my last thread of honor finally snaps. Is that the future you want for us? For your *sister*?” Even the mention of Edwina is not enough to snap the two out of their desire-fueled haze, rather the clatter of somebody outside the room draws both to attention, Anthony leans into Kate as if going for a kiss, before pulling himself away and exiting. Unable to give into the parts of their bodies that “throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through,” (Shorter), they let the tension build and build until it all comes to a climax.

Season two of *Bridgerton* contains plenty of moments full of lingering touches and long stolen glances. The inclusion of these “series of reiterated actions” that represses the physical manifestations of desire (Allen, 426) emphasizes the importance of these small moments to feed off what people adore about *Pride and Prejudice*, and this is seen in Anthony’s reaction to smelling Kate’s perfume in episode seven, shown in the image below.

Fig. 10 Anthony and Kate alone together in the garden in season 2, episode 7 of *Bridgerton*.

This is not the first time Anthony is shown being affected by Kate's scent, but it's the first time he has an intense physical reaction that he can direct at her that she notices. Similarly, to how Darcy clenches his hand after assisting Lizzy, that subtle not-touching moment is what leads to them having sex for the first time shortly after. They are drawn together, colliding with one another in a passionate state as they both grab at one another hungrily. The release of both of their pent-up desires is as satisfying to the viewer as it is for the characters. It provides the viewer the opportunity to revel in the ecstasy experienced by those on screen and receive pleasure in a way that is safe to experience. Female audience members see things from the perspective of a female figure and where both of the characters are seen as subjects, rather than objects.

Austen & Quinn

The strict social rules and expectations of the Regency era dictated by one's gender, age, marital status, social class, and financial situation make it a popular setting for modern romance books. This allows for the success of Quinn's story, where the two main characters come from completely different backgrounds. Katherine 'Kate' Sheffield is in her early twenties and is thought too old to marry. Her family, while respected, has no titles and very little money, and for her and her family's future to be secured, they are hoping her beautiful younger sister Edwina will marry well. Viscount Anthony Bridgerton is nearing his thirties, is the head of his family, and is ridiculously rich. He has finally decided to set his rakish tendencies aside and settle down to marry and produce heirs to continue the Bridgerton lineage and has his eye set on the young and beautiful Edwina Sheffield. Both characters are put in the seemingly perfect position, Anthony wants to marry Kate's sister, and should he do so Kate would be set for life without ever having to marry herself, except she does not want Edwina to marry the Viscount and she makes that very clear to him. Although Anthony outranks Kate in every possible way, she is not afraid to challenge him in a conversation of wits and barbs, seen in not only her conversation with the Viscount but also her first dance with him.

Kate is already seen as approaching spinsterhood due to her witty demeanor and plain looks compared to her sister. She is in no position to take risks, yet she decides that if the Viscount "could be direct, well then, so could she" (Quinn, 52). The Viscount is allowed to be direct because, after all, he is the Viscount. He comes from a rich household and carries an important family name. Kate meanwhile is the daughter of a Baron's second son, in the social hierarchy she ranks very low, yet she is not afraid to bring herself up to the Viscount's level. She speaks to him, the same way that he speaks to her, "'Probably,' she answered with a wicked

smile, ‘because you know that had it occurred to me to step on your foot on purpose, I would have done so’” (Quinn, 52). She teases him with a “wicked” smile, not appropriate behavior for a young lady on the dance floor. On the other hand, Anthony being a Viscount means that he possesses a large amount of influence and power in social settings, a weapon he is unafraid to yield. He speaks honestly with Kate, insulting her when it would not serve him well to do so. “It’s not often a man such as I dances with a woman such as you” (Quinn, 53). He can say and do almost anything he wants and still be considered the most eligible bachelor in the room due to his social standing, which is what makes Kate’s actions so bold. They feel like something out of the ordinary for the period she lives in, but infinitely familiar and comforting to a contemporary reader, who seeks more active rather than passive female characters. This first interaction between the two establishes a precedent for how they will address one another throughout the story, similar to *Pride and Prejudice.*

Lizzy and Darcy’s first meeting, just like Kate and Anthony’s, does not strike one as inherently romantic in nature but sets up the “enemies” part of the story for the enemies-to-lovers trope. While Anthony’s slights to Kate are direct, Darcy’s toward Lizzy are indirect as he thinks “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me…” (Austen, 9). This famous dig leaves Lizzy with “no cordial feelings” for Darcy (Austen, 9) and immediately sets up the tension between the two. Darcy is unaware that Lizzy overheard his conversation with Bingley, but the readers are well aware. Twice the work must be done on Darcy’s part, not only to win over Lizzy, but to win over the reader. This is a monumental task as Lizzy is quick to let her negative feelings regarding Darcy cloud her judgment. Later turning down a proposal from him that would have meant security, not just for herself, but for her whole family.

Like Lizzy, Kate is strong-willed, a trait that has become increasingly popular in beloved female heroines. Quinn has remarked: “I hate the word feisty, but she's feisty, she's spunky. She stands up for herself and yet underneath it all, she's very, very real and human. She's not annoying. She's not a Mary Sue. People can relate to the fact that, just like Anthony, sometimes she does stupid things, but it's because she loves the people around her so much. Readers love a romance heroine who brings the hero down a peg, and she totally does” (Willen). Even though in this instance Quinn is talking about her own heroine, these same traits apply to Lizzy. She is not a dull character and stands up for herself and the people she cares deeply for, traits she shares with Kate. The two not only share traits but given circumstances. Both characters push away their desires to focus on their sisters’ happiness. When Lizzy rejects Darcy’s proposal, she cites her sister as being of the reasons. “...do you think that any consideration would tempt me to accept the man who has been the means of ruining, perhaps forever, the happiness of a most beloved sister?” (Austen, 169). The reason Kate spends as much time around Anthony is that she refuses to let her sister be trapped in a marriage with him, even when it would benefit her and her family financially when Anthony makes it abundantly clear he had no desire to remain a faithful or loving husband to Edwina despite his desires to court her. To this, Kate responds: “I won’t let you make her unhappy. I won’t let you ruin her life… She is everything that is good and honorable and pure. And she deserves better than you’” (Quinn, 136).

The Viscount Who Loved Me mentions Austen by name when it says “Edwina has a novel to read. The latest by that Austen woman” (pg. 102). Historical inconstancies aside (Austen published all her works anonymously) Quinn said this was an intentional choice. “She’s sort of the author I would think my characters would be most excited to read then. You know what she was doing in many ways… nobody else was doing it. She was writing about the people [my

characters] knew in their lives, in you know, sort of in a very witty and knowing way. You know for her they were contemporary novels. It's like… when we read a novel that's a sort of contemporary novel examining… contemporary life now. That's what she was doing" (Quinn, Interview). Austen's normalization of life during the Regency era paved the way for the Regency Romance era, and Quinn's contribution to the genre has not gone unnoticed.

On the Netflix-inspired book cover for *The Duke and I*, Jill Barnett, a *New York Times* bestselling author, said that Quinn is "Truly our contemporary Jane Austen." This is most likely due to the fact that Quinn's stories contain the same long drawn-out love affairs, the social and economic struggles faced by characters of different classes, and family drama that are essential to Austen's plots, but adds one thing Austen never had that a contemporary audience wants to see in a romance: direct representations of sex. However, there can never be a contemporary Jane Austen. Contemporary writing is the way it is now because Austen paved the way. Stories we consider to be normal tales of people during their time living their lives are all thanks to her. Even Quinn herself said, "I'm not going to draw comparisons to myself to Austen" (Interview). Quinn, unlike Austen, is not pushing the boundaries of writing and society, but reaping the benefits because Austen did.

Both authors wrote about women in ways that, for the era, were empowering. Austen showed that women were people and Quinn showed that women can be sexual beings. Neither can be properly credited as the first to do so, but their impact on the romance genre makes them stand out to those invested in likewise communities. Both are responsible for the creation of well-loved, often relatable, characters, whose book and screen presence encourages female readers and watchers to take control of what it is they desire from their everyday lives, so they too can experience a happy ending of their very own.

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