

Bridgerton: Not alternate history, but anti-history

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The eight-part Netflix historical romance *Bridgerton* has been watched by 82 million households since it premiered on Christmas Day 2020, and 41 percent of the streaming giant's global audience. Unabashed in its admiration for a bygone world of wealth and privilege, *Bridgerton* presents an alternative history in which early 19th century Regency England (so called because the Prince of Wales, the heir to the throne, ruled as "Prince Regent" in place of his mad father, King George III) was racially integrated.

Described as a cross between a Jane Austen novel and the television series *Scandal* (producer Shonda Rhimes' prior hit which ran for seven seasons from 2012 to 2018), *Bridgerton* has none of the wit and social acuity of the former, yet all of the melodrama and soft-core sex of the latter. However, the real fantasy that *Bridgerton* peddles is one that emerges from an upper middle class layer today, no less nakedly ambitious than its Regency forebears, which advances itself not primarily through marriage but by means of the politics of race and gender.

The aristocratic rake Simon, Duke of Hastings (Regé-Jean Page) and debutant Daphne (Phoebe Dynevor) promenade arm-in-arm through ballrooms and formal gardens seemingly unconscious that he is black and she white. Indeed, the other elegant lords and ladies-in-waiting are equally diverse, all the way up the social ladder to Queen Charlotte (wife of George III) herself.

At first it is unclear whether this color-blindness reflects casting decisions by *Bridgerton*'s producers or represents a re-imagining of history. If the former, it would add greater interest to the tedious plot of Julia Quinn's 2000 novel, *The Duke and I*, from which the show was adapted.

Adjoa Andoh (*Fractured*, 2019; *Invictus*, 2009; and extensive theater, audiobook and television credits) makes a compelling Lady Danbury, Simon's elegant, outspoken surrogate mother. Page (*For the People*, 2018–2019; *Roots*, 2016) is suitably handsome as Simon and Golda Rosheuvel (*Lady Macbeth*, 2016; *Luther*, 2010; *Silent Witness*, 1996) has all the requisite regal hauteur of Queen Charlotte.

However, in the middle of the fourth episode, Lady

Danbury suddenly tells Simon: "Look at our Queen. Look at our King. Look at their marriage, look at everything it is doing for us, allowing us to become. We were two separate societies, divided by color, until a king fell in love with one of us. Love conquers all." What is one to make of that?

The series' producer Shondaland and show-runner Chris Van Dusen have hinged their imaginary version of history on the long-standing, and equally long-denied, rumor that Queen Charlotte née Mecklenburg-Strelitz was of bi-racial heritage, albeit eight generations back. They've done enough research to include little details—her love of Pomeranian dogs and addiction to snuff—for added credibility. But this doesn't count for much in a show that revels in anachronism and pretense, from the supersaturated lighting and garish costumes to the string quartets playing music by Ariana Grande and Billie Eilish.

Van Dusen told *Salon* that he did not consider *Bridgerton*'s "a colorblind cast. ... I think that would imply color and race aren't considered; color and race are a part of the show's conversation. Queen Charlotte, being a queen of mixed race, was able to open up the world for us and allow us to explore stories and characters of color in a way that makes sense."

It doesn't, in fact, make any particular sense, but this sort of opportunism and wishful thinking simply makes certain people feel better, as confirmed by innumerable comments along the lines of this one in *Vanity Fair*: "Being a woman of color, I don't get to see myself in Hollywood or U.S. shows in a certain way ... To be able to see this kind of inclusive look at that period and interesting, complicated women, I think it's really refreshing and very powerful." says Bela Bajaria, Netflix's newly minted head of global television.

It is understandable that wider audiences too would like to see integrated casts, with black actors and others given the opportunity to perform roles from which they are normally excluded. This occurs in opera and the theater at present. From that point of view, it would be far preferable if *Bridgerton* told its story without any reference to race at all.

No doubt audiences would become used to the unusual casting. But the creators, unfortunately, have bigger ideological fish to fry.

The end result is simply a mediocre, vapid mess, third-rate Austen hitched to “first-rate” identity politics. The effort to create an alternate universe in which race relations and other problems have been solved easily and without disruption is absurd. This is not a counterfactual, it is simply misleading and anti-historical.

A dramatic or comic series about the Regency period has great possibilities. The social reality of the period from 1811, when George III’s second descent into madness left him incapable of ruling, till his death in 1820, when his son assumed the throne as George IV, certainly speaks in important ways to the present.

Britain was dominated by immense social inequality, presided over by a corrupt and degenerate ruling elite, whose rampant licentiousness, crudity and stupidity were epitomized by the Regent himself, mercilessly parodied by cartoonist George Cruikshank as a windbag and “Prince of Whales” for his obesity.

Needless to say, one finds nothing scathingly critical of their “graces” in *Bridgerton*. On the contrary, the creators hardly conceal their admiration for and envy of these privileged circles. The unpleasant fact of the matter is that in *Bridgerton* one comes across what would have seemed inconceivable as recently as several decades ago: a layer of the African-American upper middle class projecting and reimagining itself essentially as part of an aristocratic European ruling elite! This is what tens of millions, and even billions, of dollars will eventually do.

Intriguingly, the outlook here jibes in certain ways with conceptions that underpin the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project. After all, that project contends the American Revolution of 1776 was not a revolt against the tyranny of monarchy and oppression, but a rebellion to preserve slavery in the colonies. According to the logic of the *Times*’ project, it would actually have been better for African-American slaves to have remained subjects of George III, a supposedly more progressive figure than Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington. *Bridgerton* presents itself as a celebration, obviously with certain criticisms and caveats, of British society under that very same monarch!

That *Bridgerton*’s producers/writers have consciously adapted 1619 Project-like arguments comes out in other details. Simon’s boxing partner Will (Martins Imhangbe) operates a pugilist establishment for wealthy clientele to gamble and refers to having been one of Lord Dunmore’s soldiers. Dunmore offered emancipation to slaves who joined his regiment to fight the colonists. However, Dunmore’s action was purely tactical and many of the

“freed” were re-enslaved after the British lost the war in 1783.

Much has also been made of the feminist views put forward in *Bridgerton*. Daphne’s cigarette-smoking younger sister Eloise (Claudia Jessie, *Vanity Fair*, 2018; WPC56, 2015) frets against having to marry instead of being independent to pursue her writing career, like her role model Lady Whistledown, the anonymous author of a tell-all scandal sheet (whose voice-over is performed by veteran actress Julie Andrews.) Eloise is presumably a nod to Austen (1775–1817) whose novels *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1816) were published during the Regency, as were *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* both published posthumously in 1818.

Instead of identifying with the more progressive currents within the Regency period, from its scientific, technological innovations to the artistic achievements of the early Romantic period (poets Keats, Shelley and Byron and painters Constable and J.M.W. Turner were all active in the Regency years), *Bridgerton* pays tribute to an “aristocracy of color.”

Like the films *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) by Quentin Tarantino, *The Favourite* (2018) by Yorgos Lanthimos, Sophia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette*, and the television series *The Great* (about Catherine the ...) (2020), *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018) and Ryan Murphy’s *Hollywood* (2020) about Hollywood in the 30s and 40s, this “alternate history” is supposed to encourage “marginalized” people by allowing them to see themselves in positions of power and privilege. Instead of changing the social conditions, this self-obsessed middle class layer simply changes the historical facts. The results, as in *Bridgerton*, are dreadful.



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