

Adaptations and the Neo-Regency for a Contemporary Audience:
The Representation of Women and Sexual Relations in the Screen Adaptations
of Jane Austen's *Sanditon* and Julia Quinn's *Bridgerton*

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s1061022

BA Thesis in English Literature

June 15, 2023

Word count: 9956



Abstract

Through the neo-Regency, there is a resurgence of the Regency period in popular contemporary media. Audience expectations greatly influence such popular media, and Regency-set narratives thus have to keep up with modern ideologies while simultaneously holding on to some period-accurate aspects. The first seasons of the series *Sanditon*, based on Jane Austen's unfinished novel, and Netflix's *Bridgerton*, originally a book series by Julia Quinn, can shed light on the changes made in neo-Regency texts for a modern audience. In these texts, the protagonists, side characters, and antagonists all reflect complex, real experiences within a Regency setting. They depict various female identities and sexual relations, representing a broad audience that wants to see relatable reflections of themselves on screen, but also seeks entertainment in the beauty of the Regency period. The female gaze and desire are centred to create a safe space for women's voices, which returns their stories and the power to them.

Keywords: neo-Regency, adaptations, *Sanditon*, *Bridgerton*, audiences, female gaze

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Introduction

The Regency is, according to Simon During, one of the few historical periods still actively present in British popular memory.¹ However, the reality of Regency London differed greatly from the romantic image described by novelists, he explains, and this forms a problem for the academics trying to define the Regency and Regency literature. Although historically we mean the period from 1811 to 1820, Tilar J. Mazzeo argues that defining the Regency is difficult because of the many social, political, and cultural changes.² Scholars debate its characteristics and objectives, and even discuss whether there was a literary Regency at all. Furthermore, the Regency shares many aspects with the Romantic period, and thus has different and overlapping genres within the Romance fiction, such as traditional and historical Regency fiction.³ Such traditional Regency narratives, especially of authors like Jane Austen, have been incredibly popular and are now returning as historical fiction, both through adaptations as well as brand-new stories.⁴ Dianne F. Sadoff describes how screen adaptations have adjusted Austen's novels, and its current widespread film products and franchises were created for both an existing audience and a new, younger female audience.⁵ With the rising popularity of such adaptations as a genre, adaptation theory has emerged and

¹ Simon During, "Chapter 14 – Regency London," in *The Cambridge history of English romantic literature*, ed. James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 335.

² Tilar J. Mazzeo, "Some Caveats about Postulating a Regency Literature," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 61, no. 1 (2012): 57-60.

³ Neal Wyatt, Georgine Olson, Kristin Ramsdell, Joyce Saricks and Lynne Welch, "Core Collections in Genre Studies: Romance Fiction 101," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2007): 120-126.

⁴ Dianne F. Sadoff, "Marketing Jane Austen at the Megaplex," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 1 (2010): 83-92.

⁵ See note 4 above.

leads debates of fidelity, media, and audiences.⁶ In turn, academics analysing Regency adaptations focus on changes made for modern audiences, such as switches of medium or discussions of gender, race, or sexual relations.⁷ The term neo-Regency emerged, describing narratives that utilise characteristics of the Regency, while expanding on the combinations made by earlier women writers of history and fiction by including modern themes and ideals.⁸ Similarly, newly written historical fiction also includes modern themes to reflect social changes, like Georgette Heyer's Regency-set novels.⁹ The popularity of this sub-genre of romance fiction in the Regency setting is connected to its audience, but there seems to be a lack of research on newer popular media and its audiences.¹⁰

I aim to discuss this combination of recent neo-Regency narratives on screen and contemporary audiences with two case studies of the first seasons of the series *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon*. The recent interest in the Regency period has created a surge of newly created stories that take place in this historical period, but with modern, period-inappropriate themes.¹¹ Since series like *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon* are not directly adapted from Regency novels but have been written fully or largely in modern times and are set in the Regency period, they fall outside of current research. I intend to look at the issues scholars face when

⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁷ Sadoff, "Marketing Jane Austen at the Megaplex," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 1 (2010): 83-92.

⁸ Samantha J. Rayner and Kim Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction* (London: UCL Press, 2021): 9-12.

⁹ Lee O'Brien, "Telling Gaps and Domestic Tyranny: Georgette Heyer's Regency Romance," *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 11, no. 1 (2022): 2.

¹⁰ Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction* (London: UCL Press, 2021): 9-12.

¹¹ Anamarije Šporčić, "A Metamodernist Utopia: The Neo-Romantic Sense and Sensibility of *Bridgerton* Series," *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 22, no. 1 (2022): 124-26; Gill Ballinger, "Representing Bodies and Bathing Machines: Jane Austen's *Sanditon* and Andrew Davies's 2019 ITV Adaptation," *Humanities* 11, no. 4 (2022): 2-4.

defining the Regency and how this period influences the current neo-Regency trend in literature and film.¹² By analysing how adaptations change their narratives and characters for modern audiences, specifically regarding the portrayal of women for women, I aim to fill this gap in the research.

Using a combination of critical theory and close analysis of the first seasons of the series *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon*, I am looking to answer my research question: how have recent neo-Regency texts adjusted their portrayal of women and sexual relations for a contemporary audience? In the first chapter, I cover the theoretical framework relating to my research. I focus on adaptation theory, feminist criticism, and their connections to modern audiences to find an answer to the sub-question: how do contemporary audiences and their expectations change the contents of adaptations? Through this, I also discuss modern themes of feminism and sexual relations within neo-Regency texts. In addition to this, I look more closely at Regency literature and the neo-Regency, and answer: what are the characteristics of Regency literature, and how has neo-Regency revived some of these aspects? In the second chapter, I start analysing and comparing the first seasons of the series *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon* with a focus on the female characters. I answer the sub-question: how do these series portray different female characters and their femininity? First, I compare the main characters of the series and their relations to these themes. Subsequently, I analyse female side characters who are portrayed positively as powerful and independent, and then women depicted as antagonists for their goals, cleverness, and self-reliance. In the third and final chapter, I address the sexual relations and nudity shown in both series. The sub-question I dive into here is: how do the series portray sexual relations and nudity for both male and female characters? I once again analyse the female main characters and various side

¹² Mazzeo, "Some Caveats about Postulating a Regency Literature," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 61, no. 1 (2012): 57-60.

characters, who are often seen as innocent and oblivious. Then, I examine women who use their experience with sexual relations to reach the goals described in chapter 2, as both victimisers and victims themselves. Finally, I contrast these characters to the portrayal of men and their sexual relations and nudity on screen. I will refer to the theory discussed in the first chapter throughout my own analysis to keep these case studies relevant regarding the general research of neo-Regency and adaptations.

Chapter 1: Audiences and the Neo-Regency

1.1 Adaptations and Audiences

Adaptations are inescapable nowadays and can be argued to be at the heart of storytelling, since they show that stories are constantly born from each other.¹³ Defining the adaptation and its limits, however, proves to be difficult because of this. Timothy Corrigan describes three different perspectives on a definition, namely as a process of adjustment, a product produced by this change, or an act of reception by the reader.¹⁴ All of these approaches deal with a source text, and according to literary theorist and critic Linda Hutcheon it is often seen as primary and superior to the adapted text.¹⁵ Within the emerging studies of adaptations various terms have emerged to describe this relationship, ranging from “fidelity,” faithfulness to the source, to “fields of ‘intertextuality’ and ‘transtextuality,’” in which different texts connect to and shape each other.¹⁶ Corrigan explains that adaptation studies has grown as the field and corresponding media have expanded, and academics are still adding new theories and definitions that fit these rapid developments.¹⁷

Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* attempts to reinvent the adaptation genre as second, but not secondary, to the original work, by laying out the many different aspects of adaptation theory and discussing the importance of things like media type, adapters

¹³ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2012): 2.

¹⁴ Thomas Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 23.

¹⁵ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2012): 2.

¹⁶ Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 31.

¹⁷ Leitch, 32-34.

themselves and audience.¹⁸ Especially this last factor is important when looking at how texts are received. Hutcheon suggests the reason adaptations are made is closely connected to the fact that they bring the audience pleasure, through a combination of repetition and difference.¹⁹ The familiarity of the source text brings comfort, but adapters also have to creatively reinvent narratives to intrigue the audience.²⁰ A more specific audience of devoted “fans” also emerged with adaptations, and Hutcheon explains that “the community they constitute is consciously nurtured by adapters” who use familiarity and pleasure to their advantage.²¹ Similarly, Corrigan adds that fan cultures blur the spaces between texts and platforms, and the contemporary process of storytelling is focused on creating franchises and immersive story worlds, all to please audiences.²² A successful franchise or story means a dedicated audience, which in turn means making more money. However, to satisfy the fans, adapters must understand audiences and the expectations set by them. Fans who know the source text have expectations and demands, argues Hutcheon, and thus not only influence the contents of adaptations but also become more than just passive spectators.²³ Groups of audiences interact with and interpret texts differently, almost becoming participants in the creation of media.²⁴ On the other hand, an unknowing audience also influences adapters. More context might have to be given within a text, or there will be a risk of losing the

¹⁸ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2012): 9-12.

¹⁹ Hutcheon, 114.

²⁰ Hutcheon, 115-16.

²¹ See note 20 above.

²² Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 33.

²³ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2012): 123-25.

²⁴ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2012): 124-26.

audience entirely.²⁵ When an adaptation aims its narrative at multiple groups of people, this becomes even more complex.

One of the audiences that has recently become more prominent in media, especially in film, is the female audience. Vicki Callahan describes how historically, the portrayal of women on screen largely reinforced a secondary status that alienated the female audience and their feelings.²⁶ This male-dominated industry only changed when feminists criticised film and voiced their concerns about the existing limited gaze. Then, during the 1920s, mass production and entertainment emerged along with a new femininity of the modern woman, which made its way to Hollywood.²⁷ As film developed and female audiences grew, the concept of the femme fatale emerged. These character types posed as a threat to men, as such women know their own value within the system that sees women as property, and “negotiate and, even more significantly, aggressively participate in the business.”²⁸ Some of these aspects are still part of film nowadays, and the concepts of the ‘fallen’ woman, whether she is a victim or a victimiser/femme fatale, remain revolved around sexuality, objectification and the male gaze.²⁹ As the industry grew, the world of film slowly started changing and allowed for more women and narratives of their agency on screen. Women were no longer only portrayed as innocent, asexual beings in heterosexual and domestic relationships, but now

²⁵ Hutcheon, 127.

²⁶ Vicki Callahan, *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010): 9-10.

²⁷ Callahan, 22-23.

²⁸ Callahan, 32-33.

²⁹ Callahan, 42-45.

had various representations.³⁰ This shift allowed for contrast and range that fitted the female audience.

Likewise, women also greatly influenced and criticised genres and thus the contents of media. Caroline Franklin argues that feminine stereotypes were visibly present in media, primarily because male authors wanted to capitalise on the large female audiences.³¹ She explains that the literary romance genre was seen as feminine, while the historical was masculine.³² The two genres later combined to form a unique space: the historical romance, in which women were free to imagine both adventure and love without a patriarchy to restrict them.³³ Franklin similarly describes a transformation of female characters in historical romances, from the passive, sexually ‘pure’ virgin to a sexually active, powerful woman.³⁴ While there was often still a preference in these texts, the looser narratives opened up the space for women. These classical romance narratives have now returned as a trend, according to Michele Schreiber, in both contemporary romance texts as well as historical romances.³⁵ Once again, this has everything to do with the freedom to imagine romance and sexuality on women’s own terms, focused on their perspective.³⁶ In combination with the effects of feminist criticism and female audiences in the film industry, these new genres and narrative

³⁰ Callahan, 62-64.

³¹ Caroline Franklin, “‘At Once Above – Beneath Her Sex’: The Heroine in Regency Verse Romance,” *The Modern Language Review* 84, no. 2 (1989): 274.

³² See note 31 above.

³³ Rayner and Wilkins, 78.

³⁴ Franklin, “‘At Once Above – Beneath Her Sex’: The Heroine in Regency Verse Romance,” *The Modern Language Review* 84, no. 2 (1989): 284.

³⁵ Callahan, *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010): 368-70.

³⁶ Callahan, 369.

themes show how women have impacted the contents of stories and media. Women's roles in these spaces nowadays are still actively growing, especially in regard to the representation of their desires and sexuality. Newer subversive texts, such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* or Shondaland's *Greys Anatomy* were wildly popular and opened up the floor for, as Daisy Buchanan calls them, "horny women", to read and write about the female gaze.³⁷ Previous stories about female desire did exist but were usually hidden away behind obscure book covers or titles. Buchanan explains: "When sex is weaponised and stories of sex are so often accompanied by stories of violence, it felt as if there was nowhere for us to express desire freely or safely."³⁸ Historical fiction and brand-new releases of steamy series such as *Bridgerton*, however, have changed this, and their "horny heroines" have created a space where "horny women can see themselves in print, and embrace and celebrate their urges in a place of safety."³⁹

1.2 The Regency and Neo-Regency

Turning to the Regency Period and its literature, it becomes clear that finding a precise definition or outline of what they entail is challenging. Academics still heavily discuss what the literary Regency is, and if there even was one, looking to identify a specific culture or

³⁷ Daisy Buchanan, "The return of the bonkbuster: how horny heroines are starting a new sexual revolution," *The Guardian*. Guardian News & Media Limited, March 31 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/mar/31/the-return-of-the-bonkbuster-how-horny-heroines-are-starting-a-new-sexual-revolution>

³⁸ See note 37 above.

³⁹ See note 37 above.

moment that distinguishes the period.⁴⁰ However, Mazzeo explains, Regency literature is connected exclusively to British domestic texts, regardless of the fact that works of classic authors of this period such as Lord Byron and Jane Austen were written within a transnational context.⁴¹ The reality of this period and its literature was often overlooked by the descriptions of balls, fashion and courtships. The historical and political Regency in the 1820s nevertheless influenced cultural products of the time and their contents, which reflected the way British society functioned, descriptions of the environment, life, and culture in general.⁴² Yet according to During, the existing images of duels, gentlemen's clubs, balls, and neo-classical townhouses are just romanticised versions that represented a middle-class readership with more interest in a "Regency immortality" than dull reality.⁴³ Wyatt et al. likewise describe traditional Regency romances as "graced with sparkling dialogue; intelligent, well-turned phrases; a glittering, though highly restrictive, social backdrop; and a preoccupation with the importance of social consequence and behavior."⁴⁴ Once again, whether these characteristics match up with the reality of the historical Regency is difficult to infer. They do, however, say something about literature and the influence of women writers. Sutherland argues that while authors like Jane Austen seemed to write old-fashioned narratives of society and romance, their "particular brand of fiction was a point of orientation for the woman

⁴⁰ Mazzeo, "Some Caveats about Postulating a Regency Literature," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 61, no. 1 (2012): 57; Sonia Hofkosh, "1816 as Literary Year: Three Ways of Looking at a Literary Regency," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 61, no. 1 (2012): 49.

⁴¹ Mazzeo, 61-64.

⁴² Mazzeo, 60-61.

⁴³ During, "Chapter 14 – Regency London," in *The Cambridge history of English romantic literature*, ed. James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 335.

⁴⁴ Wyatt et al., "Core Collections in Genre Studies: Romance Fiction 101," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2007): 121.

writer in search of a distinct female style.”⁴⁵ This paved the way for women’s fiction in the years to come, and the popularity of the genre both during the Regency and nowadays prove that the literature should not be dismissed because of feminine features.⁴⁶ Similarly, Wyatt et al. explain that the Regency romance is one of the earliest classic romance subgenres, and provides a foundation to the entire romance genre.⁴⁷ While characteristics of Regency literature in general might be hard to define, the Regency romance has certainly differentiated itself from other genres and is still popular today.

As such, the evolution of the Regency romance and the role of female authors continued past the nineteenth century. While the popularity of the traditional Regency decreased, the new Regency-set historical narrative emerged and took its place.⁴⁸ This ‘neo-Regency’ revived aspects of the Regency period and literature in a modern age. Firstly, the new genre built on and reimagined the novels created by authors like Austen, describes Sutherland, and added more detail to the Regency world, its settings, glamorous costumes, and props, as well as the heroines and their suitors.⁴⁹ Additionally, the contents took on more modern aspects to reflect the contemporary times and interests. Wyatt et al. compare it to the traditional Regency romance, describing the Regency-set historical as “bolder, sexier, more adventurous, and less restricted.”⁵⁰ This returns in more recent authors like Georgette Heyer

⁴⁵ Rayner and Wilkins, 26-27.

⁴⁶ Rayner and Wilkins, 27-28.

⁴⁷ See note 46 above.

⁴⁸ Wyatt et al., “Core Collections in Genre Studies: Romance Fiction 101,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2007): 121.

⁴⁹ Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction* (London: UCL Press, 2021): 29-30.

⁵⁰ Wyatt et al., “Core Collections in Genre Studies: Romance Fiction 101,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2007): 121.

who push against the constraints of the historical romance and the traditional Regency, and play with different character types, complicated sexual relations, and continuous themes of conflict and violence.⁵¹ As such, the romantic relationships portrayed in such Regency-set novels are more realistic, yet often retain a ‘happily-ever-after’ aspect to satisfy audiences. Sadoff explores these audiences and their interests further, especially in connection to the booming Austen franchise. While women were the primary market of both Austen’s Regency stories and the modern film industry, as previously explored, the newly emerged megaplex aimed to provide for both male and female audiences.⁵² Furthermore, Austen franchises needed to please an existing fanbase of Austen’s work, while also adjusting her narratives to include updated characters and narratives for the new generation of younger, modern women and their ideologies of femininity and desire.⁵³ This way, the many adaptations that were released played directly into the expectations and hopes of various audiences. Similarly, Sutherland argues that there is an escapist element to these romance genres that give women “a glimpse of possibilities beyond the private sphere.”⁵⁴

Amy Street, too, describes an interest in the aesthetics and romantic themes of the Regency, but argues that there is a collective sense of guilty pleasure that comes with fantasising about such relationships and romance.⁵⁵ Yet, despite the shame brought upon

⁵¹ Lee O’Brien, “Telling Gaps and Domestic Tyranny: Georgette Heyer’s Regency Romance,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 11, no. 1 (2022): 1-19; Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction* (London: UCL Press, 2021): 36-50.

⁵² Sadoff, “Marketing Jane Austen at the Megaplex,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 1 (2010): 86.

⁵³ Sadoff, 86-89.

⁵⁴ Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction* (London: UCL Press, 2021): 31.

⁵⁵ Rayner and Wilkins, 240.

women by society, these stories allow them to enjoy the true love and perfect men “of childhood fantasy that our grown-up selves have abandoned long ago.”⁵⁶ This can be seen in the popularity and multitude of Austen adaptations, such as Julian Jarrold’s franchise-creating *Becoming Jane*, Joe Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice*, *Emma*’s modern translation *Clueless*, and even Bollywood-style *Bride & Prejudice*.⁵⁷ These successes recently came to a new height when the Regency romance *Bridgerton* broke all viewing records on Netflix in 2020, and was engaged with in 82 million households in its first 28 days.⁵⁸ Joanna Robinson offers an explanation to the sudden success, as the show was released at the end of a tough year of living with the coronavirus, “offering a lush and soapy escape to a touch-starved, isolated audience that [...] was watching more TV than ever.”⁵⁹ But she agrees that there is more to it, especially with the lasting excitement for upcoming *Bridgerton* seasons, and the earlier successes of Shondaland, *Bridgerton*’s production company. As explained earlier, women have always found safety in books, especially historical romances, to seek representations of their desire and pleasure, and these safe spaces are growing.⁶⁰ Robinson argues that Shondaland “embracing Regency romance has validated legions of (largely female) readers who used to hide their steamier titles away behind other, more “acceptable” books.”⁶¹ These

⁵⁶ Rayner and Wilkins, 246-48.

⁵⁷ Sadoff, “Marketing Jane Austen at the Megaplex,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 1 (2010): 83.

⁵⁸ Joanna Robinson, “How *Bridgerton* Officially Became Netflix’s Biggest Hit Ever,” *Vanity Fair*, Condé Nast, January 27, 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/01/bridgerton-netflix-biggest-hit-highest-ratings-female-audiences-romance>

⁵⁹ See note 58 above.

⁶⁰ Buchanan, “The return of the bonkbuster: how horny heroines are starting a new sexual revolution.”

⁶¹ Robinson, “How *Bridgerton* Officially Became Netflix’s Biggest Hit Ever.”

contemporary versions of Regency romances show a new side to female desire without stigma, that makes women into powerful, complicated heroines that speak to and reflect a diverse audience.⁶²

All in all, it seems there is a general desire of women to fantasise about romance and pleasure that seems unachievable or shameful in reality, while maintaining their modern ideologies of feminism and equality. Neo-Regency texts play into the wishes of this audience by including powerful female characters, but also passionate romances within the alluring aesthetics of the Regency that highlight the female gaze.

⁶² See note 61 above.

Chapter 2: Representations of Femininity

Today's Regency-set romances take many shapes and forms. Brand-new stories have gained popularity rather than original Regency novels, like Julia Quinn's *Bridgerton*. Its Netflix adaptation was also a great success, and while the story takes place in the Regency era, the makers of the series have mentioned it is supposed to "reflect the world that we live [in] today" so that "modern audiences [are] able to relate to it."⁶³ The ITV series *Sanditon* is a similar combination of Regency and contemporary, but seemingly because of other reasons. The source of the series, Jane Austen's final but unfinished novel, only had twelve chapters and a total of about 23,500 words.⁶⁴ In order to successfully create an entire season of content, Andrew Davies and the other screenwriters had to add a great deal to the incomplete story. However, Davies comments: "I choose and perhaps build up elements of the book that I think are most likely to appeal to a modern audience and soft-pedal the rest."⁶⁵ As such, there is much to be said about the similarities between these series and how they were created. For example, both chose for colour-blind casting and discuss themes of racism and imperialism, befitting modern discussions, but perhaps not Regency times. Additionally, the female characters that represent this audience portray Regency-like qualities while reflecting contemporary women with depth, emotion, and personalities.

⁶³ Šporčič, "A Metamodernist Utopia: The Neo-Romantic Sense and Sensibility of *Bridgerton* Series," *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 22, no. 1 (2022): 124.

⁶⁴ Ballinger, "Representing Bodies and Bathing Machines: Jane Austen's *Sanditon* and Andrew Davies's 2019 ITV Adaptation," *Humanities* 11, no. 4 (2022): 1-2.

⁶⁵ Ballinger, 2.

2.1 The Main Characters

The main characters of *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon* contrast each other in many ways yet share a common thread within the elements adapted from Regency literature, and their modern themes make the characters relatable for a modern audience. First, both main characters' roles in society are established from the moment the first episodes start, setting the stage for the side characters. In *Bridgerton*, the series opens with a bird's eye shot of London and introduces two households, including the Viscountess Bridgerton, and their luxurious homes.⁶⁶ There is absolutely no doubt that eldest daughter Daphne Bridgerton, who is later shown nervously leaving the house in an elegant white dress and tightly braided hair, is part of an important, high-class family. Charlotte Haywood's first appearance is the opposite of this. *Sanditon*'s main character is first seen laying in a field with a gun, hair loose and ruffled, in a plain dress that she holds up only to run towards and climb on a crashed carriage in an unladylike manner.⁶⁷ The couple she helps, the Parkers, visit her cramped house and are introduced to her poor family of 16, before inviting her to their own home in the seaside resort Sanditon.⁶⁸ These contrasting introductions already show a great difference between the characters. Daphne is part of high society and is immediately depicted as a pretty, gentle, well-dressed girl, while the much poorer Charlotte opposes those softer feminine qualities with loose hair, bad manners, and a gun.

⁶⁶ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, "Diamond of the First Water," 56:00, directed by Julie Anne Robinson, written by Chris Van Dusen, featuring Phoebe Dynevor and Regé-Jean Page, aired December 25, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80232398>

⁶⁷ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, "Episode 1," 00:55-2:00, directed by Oliver Blackburn, written by Andrew Davies, featuring Rose Williams and Theo James, aired August 25, 2019, https://www.npostart.nl/sanditon/POW_04645198

⁶⁸ *Sanditon* season 1, episode 1, "Episode 1," 2:30-4:00.

However, there are still many similarities. Not only are they both stereotypically beautiful young ladies, but the series also depicts them in similar ways. Both characters are always centred on screen, with light hitting their faces, and gentle, light music accompanying them. They even share a scene in their introductions, in which they are shown riding a carriage and looking expectantly through the window towards their new futures, Daphne on her way to the Queen and Charlotte to Sanditon.⁶⁹ Additionally, both stories revolve around romance. Daphne's romance is mainly connected to her duty as a woman in society. This becomes clear in the first episode as, explained by the narrator Lady Whistledown, "today is the day London's marriage-minded misses are presented to Her Majesty the Queen."⁷⁰ Daphne turns out to be the diamond of the season, and most of the first season of *Bridgerton* focuses on her balls, dresses, and suitors. On the other hand, Charlotte only leaves for Sanditon because the charms of the resort promoted by Mr. Parker excite her, not because she seeks love. She even explicitly mentions to Lady Denham that she is not looking for a wealthy husband in the town.⁷¹ It is thus unexpected that, just like Daphne, Charlotte's story is about love. Just as Daphne and her eventual husband, Simon, the Duke of Hastings, Charlotte has a fluctuating relationship with her love interest Sidney Park from the moment they are introduced. Both fit the elements of the traditional Regency romance earlier discussed as focused on dialogue, society, and social consequence. As Anamarija Šporčič describes, "Bridgerton does [...] generally follow in the tradition of period romances, with the rather unoriginal storylines, shallow dialogue and the constant pursuit of yearning for true

⁶⁹ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, "Diamond of the First Water," 55:05-54:25; *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, "Episode 1," 05:05-08:30.

⁷⁰ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, "Diamond of the First Water," 53:50-53:40.

⁷¹ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, "Episode 1," 11:50-12:10.

love.”⁷² Similarly, *Sanditon* retains Austen’s focus on the protagonist’s place in society, this time within the developing Sanditon, as well as some of her satiric comedy and exaggeration in characters and dialogue.⁷³

Nevertheless, there are some clear aspects that do not fit the typical Regency narrative. As previously mentioned, Charlotte’s character is not a typical upper-class romance protagonist, and seeks adventure and experiences rather than a partner. While she does fall in love, Sidney ends up engaged to another woman in the last episode, despite wanting to make Charlotte an offer.⁷⁴ Charlotte does clearly grieve the love she must give up on, despite not initially wanting it. Thus, unlike Daphne, Charlotte does not get a happy ending in her first season. Yet, Daphne’s romance also does not fit within traditional bounds. Not only does her relationship with the Duke start in aversion and continue as a pretence, but she is also highly aware of her role as a woman. In a conversation with her eldest brother Anthony, she says: “And what of *my* duty? You have no idea what it is to be a woman... What it might feel like to have one’s entire life reduced to a single moment. This is all I have been raised for. This... is all I am. I have no other value. If I am unable to find a husband, I shall be worthless.”⁷⁵ When he comments that she is a Bridgerton, she replies: “It would be easier if I were not.”⁷⁶ This clearly shows that she did not grow up in a perfect environment, and the series points

⁷² Šporčič, “A Metamodernist Utopia: The Neo-Romantic Sense and Sensibility of Bridgerton Series,” *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 22, no. 1 (2022): 125.

⁷³ Linda V. Troost and Sayre N. Greenfield, “Filming/Filling in the Gaps: *Sanditon* on Screen,” *Adaptations (Film, TV, Stage, Video)* 42, no. 1 (2020), <https://www.jasna.org/publications-2/persuasions-online/vol-41-no-1/troost-greenfield/>

⁷⁴ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 8, “Episode 8,” 37:00-38:00, directed by Charles Sturridge, written by Andrew Davies, featuring Rose Williams and Theo James, aired October 13, 2019, https://www.npostart.nl/sanditon/POW_04645198

⁷⁵ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, “Diamond of the First Water,” 25:50-25:10.

⁷⁶ See note 75 above.

this out as a struggle rather than glorifying it. Being ‘a Bridgerton’ just means there is more pressure to uphold the family reputation, which reveals a flaw of the Regency high society.

Additionally, both series return power and knowledge to their female protagonists rather than keeping them the ideally passive, gentle, and helpless virgins Franklin describes in traditional Regency romances.⁷⁷ Daphne was raised by a single mother, and both women prove throughout the season that they have great influence on their surroundings, despite being financially and socially dependent on men. When Daphne seems to be stuck courting the appalling Lord Berbrooke, for example, Daphne punches him when he tries to harm her and her mother spreads rumours to make him leave London.⁷⁸ Similarly, Charlotte befriends the influential Lady Susan Whistler and unintentionally helps put Sanditon on the map.⁷⁹ She also uses knowledge from her education and experience to treat Mr. Stringer’s father when he is injured, and does paperwork for Mr. Parker.⁸⁰ The female leads in these series are shown to have both knowledge and power in their patriarchal society. They are additionally portrayed

⁷⁷ Franklin, “‘At Once Above – Beneath Her Sex’: The Heroine in Regency Verse Romance,” *The Modern Language Review* 84, no. 2 (1989): 284.

⁷⁸ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, “Diamond of the First Water,” 08:40-08:20; *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 2, “Shock and Delight,” 14:50-12:45, directed by Tom Verica, written by Janet Lin, featuring Phoebe Dynevor and Regé-Jean Page, aired December 25, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80232398>

⁷⁹ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 7, “Episode 7,” 15:50-16:00, directed by Charles Sturridge, written by Justin Young, featuring Rose Williams and Theo James, aired October 6, 2019, https://www.npostart.nl/sanditon/POW_04645198

⁸⁰ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 3, “Episode 3,” 26:30-29:10, directed by Oliver Blackburn, written by Andrew Davies and Justin Young, featuring Rose Williams and Theo James, aired September 8, 2019, https://www.npostart.nl/sanditon/POW_04645198; *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 2, “Episode 2,” 9:00-9:30, directed by Oliver Blackburn, written by Andrew Davies, featuring Rose Williams and Theo James, aired September 1, 2019, https://www.npostart.nl/sanditon/POW_04645198

as having passions and emotions, which not only depicts a more realistic side to being a woman in this time, but also gives them depth.

2.2 Eloise, Penelope, and Esther

The combination of Regency and modern themes also continues in the many side characters of the series. Both Eloise and Penelope in *Bridgerton*, as well as Esther in *Sanditon*, are seen as protagonists and are portrayed with power, knowledge, and some independence. First and foremost, Eloise is part of the Bridgerton family and has her own book in Julia Quinn's *Bridgerton* book series, meaning she will likely get her own Netflix season in time.⁸¹ Consequently, while Eloise is merely a side character in the first season, she automatically gains extra attention and screen time. Likewise, Penelope is set to romance Colin Bridgerton in the upcoming third season and has the important second role of Lady Whistledown that ties the storylines together. The significance of their characters is, like the main characters, immediately shown in their introductions. Eloise is the first Bridgerton to speak as she stomps down the stairs, complaining about her dress and then screaming, loudly, for her sister Daphne to hurry down.⁸² Besides her behaviour, Eloise's dress and hairdo also make her stand out, as there are just a few too many frills and bows that completely oppose her character. These remain throughout the entire season, and the girl does not hesitate to complain about them herself. Furthermore, Eloise is always lazily sitting, walking, or reading, usually without any music in the background, which sets her apart even more. Penelope Featherington, on the other hand, initially stands to the side as her sister's corset is

⁸¹ Quinn, Julia, "The Bridgerton Series by Julia Quinn," Accessed May 21, 2023. <https://juliaquinn.com/series/bridgertons/>.

⁸² *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, "Diamond of the First Water," 56:54-56:10.

laced before they are all presented to the Queen. She immediately goes against her mother by asking if her sister is to breathe but is only met back with a jeer, which happens repeatedly throughout the season.⁸³ Penelope, too, wears an unflattering dress with jewels and gold, which opposes her withdrawn character. She makes her dislike for attention clear when she tells her mother: “I should gladly sit this season out. [...] Should you allow me to delay only a year, just as Lady Bridgerton has done for Eloise, I may remain dedicated to my studies, perhaps.”⁸⁴ Unfortunately, she is blatantly refused, yet usually still stands to the side rather than actively partaking in conversations. Altogether, both *Bridgerton* characters immediately stand out from the others and resist what is expected of them as young ladies.

In *Sanditon*, Esther’s introduction completely contradicts this. As she enters the screen for the first time she is immediately behind her stepbrother Edward Denham, dressed in black, not talking at all, and only looking where Edward looks.⁸⁵ She speaks to him during a walk afterwards in a cold, indifferent voice and tells him to “focus on the task in hand,” meaning securing Lady Denham’s inheritance.⁸⁶ When strolling with Charlotte, Esther also speaks straightforwardly, sarcastically and meanly about the other characters, advising Charlotte to be on her guard and going as far as to say: “I think you’ll come to regret ever setting foot in Sanditon. I know I do.”⁸⁷ Thus, Esther certainly does not fit the passive, gentle stereotype of young ladies either, but at the same time always disappears into the background when she shares a scene with her stepbrother. However, as the season continues, her tight

⁸³ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, “Diamond of the First Water,” 57:15-57:05.

⁸⁴ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, “Diamond of the First Water,” 46:10-45:40.

⁸⁵ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, “Episode 1,” 14:30-15:05.

⁸⁶ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, “Episode 1,” 14:30-15:05.

⁸⁷ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, “Episode 1,” 26:00-28:00.

personality and appearance slowly become looser, especially with Lord Babington fighting for her hand.

Parallel to the main characters, Eloise, Penelope, and Esther's stories are also closely connected to society and how they are viewed. Eloise, as part of the Bridgerton family, bears the same responsibility as her sister Daphne. When Eloise expresses her fears about marriage and children, however, it seems Daphne's felt responsibility to keep up appearances is greater than that of her sister.⁸⁸ Earlier in the episode, Eloise already had a conversation with her brother while smoking outside, which shows exactly how she feels about her future. She says: "Suppose I desire something different. [...] I watch Daphne prepare for these balls, with all of those dresses and the many suitors, and I am exhausted. Suppose I want a different life Benedict, that I truly believe I am quite capable of something more, even when I am not allowed to have anything else."⁸⁹ Regardless of society's view on unmarried women, Eloise dreams of a different life, and might even be able to afford it because of the family she belongs to. Penelope, unfortunately, cannot do the same. She is dependent on her father, who has bankrupted their family with gambling, and Lady Featherington, who must make sure her daughters marry well. Penelope even tells Eloise that she must marry, unlike Eloise: "I cannot expect you to understand. Not everyone can be a pretty Bridgerton."⁹⁰ Ironically, Penelope is also Lady Whistledown, who Eloise sees as her great example of independence and defiance. Esther, too, depends on the male characters around her. Money seems to be the source of her and Edward's problems, but throughout the season Esther seems undecided whether she truly

⁸⁸ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 2, "Shock and Delight," 11:10-8:30.

⁸⁹ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 2, "Shock and Delight," 21:35-20:15.

⁹⁰ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 4, "An Affair of Honor," 19:20-18:15, directed by Sheree Folkson, written by Abby McDonald, featuring Phoebe Dynevor and Regé-Jean Page, aired December 25, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80232398>

desires an inheritance or just her own stepbrother. It also becomes clear that Edward is manipulating and stringing her along, especially when other men like Lord Babington show interest in her. This reflects their patriarchal society in general, as Esther must be passed from one man to another in order to survive. Babington will eventually give her the most freedom, but she is still stuck in this dilemma for a while.

The three characters are stuck in a Regency-accurate society, with Eloise actively wanting to break out, Esther caught in its' structures and Penelope somewhere in between. As both seasons come to an end, Esther and Penelope follow Eloise's footsteps and also start defying society in their own way. Penelope finally decides to take fate into her own hands and uses her power as Lady Whistledown to influence society, even though it puts her own family at risk.⁹¹ Likewise, Esther ends up detaching herself from Edward after he conspired with Clara, which she confesses at her aunt's deathbed.⁹² She not only ends up being Lady Denham's sole heir, but also marries Lord Babington, who clearly wants her to be free. He tells Esther: "Your brother is not going to make a victim out of you. I will now allow it," returning the power to her hands.⁹³ Finally, she tells him she does not want to be his property after his marriage proposal, he replies: "Good, because I have no wish to own you."⁹⁴ Whether it be through family, writing, money, or marriage, Eloise, Penelope, and Esther eventually get a few steps closer to independence and self-reliance. They live in a Regency

⁹¹ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 6, "Swish," 5:48-3:40, directed by Julie Anne Robinson, written by Sarah Dollard, featuring Phoebe Dynevor and Regé-Jean Page, aired December 25, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80232398>

⁹² *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 7, "Episode 7," 07:10-09:20.

⁹³ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 7, "Episode 7," 44:00-45:50.

⁹⁴ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 8, "Episode 8," 25:00-26:35.

world and fit into traditional stereotypes yet find ways to defy them and represent the individuality many women seek nowadays.

2.3 The Antagonists

On the other hand, these series also show female empowerment in a negative light, namely through the women who ‘misuse’ their independence and oppose the main characters. Both Marina and Clara are first introduced as innocent, oblivious girls, but are revealed to be the opposite. Marina Thompson’s first appearance in *Bridgerton* takes place right after her aunt, Lady Featherington, condescendingly describes her as a poor girl resembling the animals on her farm.⁹⁵ Marina, however, turns out to be a beautiful girl. *Sanditon*’s Clara Brereton, too, is presented by Lady Denham as her poor ward, but stays silent in the background, later holding a civil conversation with Charlotte.⁹⁶ These passive characteristics fit what many women in Regency narratives were depicted as, and their poor backgrounds in a typically upper or upper-middle class Regency environment fit their resigned positions.⁹⁷ Furthermore, their underlying motives fit the harsh Regency society too. Marina is revealed to be pregnant at the end of the first episode and must marry to not be cast out of society. She clearly feels she does not belong in London and tells Lady Featherington: “You shall never understand! Someone like you, living this ridiculously charmed... Did you think I wanted to come here, to be around people like you, so out of touch, so superior?”⁹⁸ As she starts to understand her

⁹⁵ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, “Diamond of the First Water,” 45:30-44:40.

⁹⁶ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, “Episode 1,” 11:25-14:30.

⁹⁷ Callahan, *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010): 62-64.

⁹⁸ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, “Diamond of the First Water,” 9:35-9:20.

position and urgency to marry, Marina changes her passive role. She uses her manners and beauty to attract suitors, even unwanted ones like Lord Rutledge, to find herself a future. Similarly, Clara's character is revealed to have much depth. Esther tells Charlotte not to have sympathy for poor Clara, as she lives a luxurious life with Lady Denham and wants everything for herself, likely meaning both the Denham inheritance and Esther's stepbrother.⁹⁹ Clara's innocence is indeed disproven when Charlotte sees her and Edward in the forest, doing something which Clara describes as Edward's forced attentions to manipulate and ruin her. Nonetheless, as the season continues, it turns out that Clara does return Edward's favours and intends to manipulate him with it. Both Marina and Clara are thus often seen in light and centre in society, but in the dark with deep, cunning music when they are alone, revealing their complicated positions.

Although they are partly portrayed as victims, they both use beauty to seem innocent while having ulterior motives, and fit the complicated, morally grey characters of modern times. This topic plays into their search for independence. As described, Marina must learn how to survive in a new society, mainly through marriage, but remains attached to her former lover George. She only fully accepts her fate when she receives a feigned letter in George's name, saying he wants nothing to do with her and their baby. She takes her future into her own hands and seduces Colin Bridgerton to trick him into a marriage, despite Penelope's protests. Marina makes her worries about her future quite clear to her: "Well, should I perhaps entrap a bad man, then? Perhaps you would find it acceptable for me to live my life with a man who treats me like a mere beast? [...] I will be a good wife to Colin, and he a

⁹⁹ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, "Episode 1," 26:25-26:50.

good husband and father.”¹⁰⁰ While she ends up betraying Penelope by continuing with her plan, other characters understand her actions, like Daphne, who places the fault with George for leaving her. “Why should he be the one to choose your future when he clearly cares not for the outcome. He is at fault here. [...] Why should you be left all alone to bear the punishment for his crime?”¹⁰¹ As a result of Daphne’s help, Marina eventually finds George’s brother and is taken in by him. Contrastingly, Clara does not get such understanding. *Sanditon* continually hints at Clara’s history with men and abuse, to a point where Clara directly says: “Oh Esther, you have no idea what I endured before I came here, and you have no idea what I am prepared to do to ensure I stay.”¹⁰² She, however, pretends innocence to remain close to Lady Denham’s side, in the hopes of securing her fortune. She also continuously tries to set Esther and Edward up against each other, eventually siding with Edward but losing the inheritance. Yet, even at the end, Clara keeps the upper hand against Edward: “...I had nothing to lose. You lost everything. Look at you, alone and unloved. Trust me, that is not any easy place to find yourself.”¹⁰³

All things considered, Marina and Clara are depicted as the villains for taking their future into their own hands. Both were partly at fault for their own demises, but also fell victim to their circumstances. This shows a gloomy, realistic side to the period that conventional Regency literature would have left out in favour of the romanticised, more

¹⁰⁰ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 5, “The Duke and I,” 25:30-25:00, directed by Sheree Folkson, written by Joy C Mitchell, featuring Phoebe Dynevor and Regé-Jean Page, aired December 25, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80232398>

¹⁰¹ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 7, “Oceans Apart,” 08:40-08:20, directed by Alrick Riley, written by Jay Ross & Aby McDonald, featuring Phoebe Dynevor and Regé-Jean Page, aired December 25, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80232398>

¹⁰² *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 3, “Episode 3,” 33:30-35:00.

¹⁰³ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 7, “Episode 7,” 42:20-43:20.

appealing duels, balls, and clubs.¹⁰⁴ The portrayal of these stories on screen is a new and significant step for historical romances, bringing the stories to life and touching upon sensitive topics that a modern audience can relate to.

¹⁰⁴ During, “Chapter 14 – Regency London,” in *The Cambridge history of English romantic literature*, ed. James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 335.

Chapter 3: Sexual Relations and the Female Gaze

The representation of modern female audiences in these neo-Regency texts has foregrounded discussions not only on femininity, but also on the closely connected depiction of sexual relations. Robinson explains that the Regency-set romance has validated readers, mostly women, who used to hide their steamy books away, and she adds: “without the stigma, these relatable stories of men and women trying (and often failing) to find love have hit new nerves.”¹⁰⁵ Historical romances helped transform stories about the male perspective into a female-focused one, returning both social and sexual power to women.¹⁰⁶ Both *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon* highlight the female gaze on screen, showing women’s desire and sexual relations openly. Ballinger draws a comparison between *Sanditon* and earlier Austen adaptations, arguing that “[*Sanditon*] offers a much franker treatment of sexual relationships and their outcomes,” and represents and dramatizes bodies in innovative ways.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, *Bridgerton* does not shy away from nudity and sexual scenes, especially when displaying male bodies, and “unashamedly targets female and gay audiences.”¹⁰⁸ Analysing the various portrayals of sexual relations in these series will shed light on how real experiences and situations of women that belong to the audiences of neo-Regency texts are represented. It can also reveal how contemporary views on sex and nudity are shown in the series from a female perspective, while staying within the bounds of a Regency society.

¹⁰⁵ Robinson, “How *Bridgerton* Officially Became Netflix’s Biggest Hit Ever.”

¹⁰⁶ Franklin, “‘At Once Above – Beneath Her Sex’: The Heroine in Regency Verse Romance,” *The Modern Language Review* 84, no. 2 (1989): 284.

¹⁰⁷ Ballinger, “Representing Bodies and Bathing Machines: Jane Austen’s *Sanditon* and Andrew Davies’s 2019 ITV Adaptation,” *Humanities* 11, no. 4 (2022): 2.

¹⁰⁸ Šporčič, “A Metamodernist Utopia: The Neo-Romantic Sense and Sensibility of *Bridgerton* Series,” *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 22, no. 1 (2022): 125.

3.1 Innocence

First and foremost, both the main characters of *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon* and the side characters Eloise, Penelope, and Esther reflect a more old-fashioned innocence and purity in regard to sexual relations. These characters fit the earlier descriptions of women historically being portrayed as pure, asexual virgins that belonged in domestic relationships.¹⁰⁹

Nonetheless, there are modern additions to this initial depiction that show their desires and perspectives, reflecting a broad audience that wants to see both period-fitting characters as well as complexity and realism. Despite their contrasting introductions, both Daphne and Charlotte are similarly characterised as innocent and oblivious to anything sexual. Daphne Bridgerton's focus throughout the season is on her duty as a woman to marry and have children, but she does not know what exactly this entails. On her wedding day, it becomes clear that she has been taught nothing by her mother, who tells her: "I suppose I have put this conversation off for as long as I can."¹¹⁰ Even when Violet Bridgerton assumes her daughter might know some things, Daphne scoffs: "I know nothing, I assure you."¹¹¹ After they discuss it, Daphne is still left with more questions than answers. When Daphne and her future husband, the Duke, discuss marriage and intimacy, he also comments: "I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at the absurdity of how little mothers tell their daughters."¹¹² Simon explains some details to a confused Daphne, who does not even recognise what he means

¹⁰⁹ Franklin, "'At Once Above – Beneath Her Sex': The Heroine in Regency Verse Romance," *The Modern Language Review* 84, no. 2 (1989): 284; Vicki Callahan, *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010): 62-64.

¹¹⁰ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 5, "The Duke and I," 19:00-16:15.

¹¹¹ See note 110 above.

¹¹² *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 3, "Art of the Swoon," 25:25-23:00, directed by Tom Verica, written by Leila Cohan-Miccio, featuring Phoebe Dynevor and Regé-Jean Page, aired December 25, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80232398>

with “what happens at night” or touching herself.¹¹³ Likewise, Charlotte has no knowledge of anything sexual in *Sanditon*, which is revealed after she is oblivious to what the not-so-innocent Clara and Edward were doing in the park. While she dances with Edward, he seems to make fun of her unawareness: “Of course, you are altogether too good, too pure... In heart, to gossip.”¹¹⁴ Charlotte is not once confronted with sexual relations after this instance, keeping the innocent image up.

Nevertheless, Daphne is intelligent and aware of some things, especially when they influence her social standing. After punching Lord Berbrooke unconscious, she notices she is alone with him and the Duke, close to ‘the Dark Walk’, which is insinuated to be a dangerous place for women. While she fears for her social image, Simon wonders why a lady would even know of such a place.¹¹⁵ Additionally, Daphne is portrayed to have her own desires and needs. After her scandalous conversation with the Duke, she starts to explore her own body. Later, after the couple marries, an entire episode is dedicated to their activities together, highlighting Daphne’s perspective and needs.¹¹⁶ She is not helpless or asexual, despite her initial innocence. Charlotte, on the other hand, never marries or gets that close to Sidney, and thus does not get to experience that in season one. They only kiss once, and there is one brief moment where they are rowing together and Sidney touches body, clearly making Charlotte feel something she does not fully understand.¹¹⁷ Both protagonists largely stay within the bounds of that pure, innocent, Regency-fitting virgin, who only discovers more after

¹¹³ See note 112 above.

¹¹⁴ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, “Episode 1,” 38:50-39:30.

¹¹⁵ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, “Diamond of the First Water,” 8:10-7:45.

¹¹⁶ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 6, “Swish.”

¹¹⁷ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 7, “Episode 7,” 24:35-27:20.

marriage. Daphne, however, does cross those lines every now and then, showing a more complex side to her character that perhaps unexperienced audiences could also relate to.

The female side characters mirror this innocence, but question and resist it more directly after regular confrontation with sexual relations and its consequences. In *Bridgerton*, Lady Featherington manages to scare off her daughters by claiming Marina's pregnancy is catching. Penelope later discusses this with Eloise, who wonders: "How did she become with child if she is not married?", and worries it could happen to them.¹¹⁸ Minutes later, Eloise loudly inquires to her family: "How does a lady come to be with child?"¹¹⁹ Penelope also indirectly writes about sexual relations as Lady Whistledown, but does not need to know details to discuss the topic on a vague, socially acceptable level. Furthermore, Esther similarly has a strange relation to this subject in *Sanditon*. She obviously had romantic encounters with Edward, some of which are even shown on screen, but none explicitly sexual. Finally, Clara questions what the audience has been wondering too: "Could it be that you have never given yourself to him?"¹²⁰ Despite Edward's manipulations and Esther's clear knowledge about sexual relations, she has never actually engaged in them herself. This all shows exactly how these female characters largely fit the aforementioned innocent and pure standard, but have either attempted to explore the limits, or have already touched upon them. The women once again represent an audience with different experiences, some nonconforming or curious, like Eloise and Penelope, and others less pleasant, like Esther.

¹¹⁸ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 2, "Shock and Delight," 55:45-54:10

¹¹⁹ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 2, "Shock and Delight," 53:35-53:00.

¹²⁰ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 7, "Episode 7," 04:00-05:50.

3.2 Experience

Contrary to these other female characters, the antagonists of *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon* have already crossed the limits of what was socially acceptable and use their experience and knowledge of sexual relations to manipulate others. Although the consequences of their actions fit Regency times, the depiction and discussion of their characters on screen fits the complexity modern audiences seek. In the bolder Regency-set romances, the femme fatale described by Callahan breaks the societal standards of marriage and courting by actively participated in the business of trading women as property.¹²¹ These modern ideologies of female empowerment in Regency times are additionally translated through the concept of the fallen woman, in which such female characters were deemed impure by the objectifying, male gaze, and could both fall victim to this or become a victimiser themselves.¹²²

Indeed, both Marina in *Bridgerton* and Clara in *Sanditon* are made out to be antagonists when they use knowledge on sexual relations to seduce and manipulate others. Marina's experience originates from her former relationship with George, who left to fight as a soldier. Initially, Marina seems to be a heartbroken girl who fell victim to her circumstances. Yet, she is often blamed for her situation by those around her, like Lady Featherington who tells her: "If it were guaranteed that my own ladies would not be affected by your revolting recklessness, I would be [happy]! Do you even know who the father is?"¹²³ Once Marina realises her future depends on finding a husband, however, this perspective shifts, and she starts fitting Callahan's description of a femme fatale. She judges men as

¹²¹ Callahan, *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010): 32-33.

¹²² Callahan, 42-45.

¹²³ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, "Diamond of the First Water," 9:50-9:35.

potential husbands, rather than being the one judged, thus actively taking part in the trade of women as wives. Eventually, she attempts to seduce and trick Colin Bridgerton into sex so he cannot refuse marriage, using the experience from her previous sexual relationship to her advantage. She has fallen in the eyes of society but does not act as a victim.

Clara's story, on the other hand, unravels in the opposite direction. She is initially shown to be a cunning, manipulative girl who feigns innocence to get close to Lady Denham and her inheritance. She attempts to victimise and seduce Edward to set him up against Esther and the other characters, while Edward simultaneously tries to ruin her. Their game continues to the very end, with Clara partaking as aggressively as Edward. As a femme fatale, Clara indeed proves to be fatal to Edward as he is disowned by Lady Denham and loses everything, including Esther. Clara is unfortunately also fatal to herself and is sent home. However, Clara slowly reveals more about her experience as a victim. She warns Charlotte about and dangerous men like Edward, and later tells Esther she has suffered through much. She even tells her: "Men can be so artful in their persuasion, can they not? And it is so much harder to resist when you are sleeping under the same roof. For me it was an uncle".¹²⁴ Whether this was true, or a lie to manipulate Esther, Clara clearly has a history with sexually abusive men, which explains her experience and distrustful nature. While she uses her experience to empower herself and victimise Edward, Clara has also been a victim herself.

Both Marina and Clara's experiences make them fallen women in the Regency society, even if other people and influences were involved in their downfall. Nonetheless, both of them step away from the role of the victim and actively take part in the bargaining for their futures, using their experience and knowledge of sex to persuade others. This adds to their ambiguous characters, showing a different side to these 'impure' antagonists that

¹²⁴ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 4, "Episode 4," 39:00-39:40.

modern viewers can relate to. Additionally, topics of sexual abuse and exploitation are discussed more than ever with movements like #MeToo, like Buchanan says: “as reported by newspapers in this period, sex acts were something “done to” professionally beautiful women, [...]; assaults, rather than expressions of mutual desire.”¹²⁵ Characters like Marina and Clara not only represent real stories, but also return power to victims.

3.3 Men

The focus on the female gaze and experience rather than the male one, also considerably changes how male characters are portrayed on screen. Both male leads of *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon* fit the patriarchal Regency society of their series, yet their relationships with the female leads fit more modern standards. Moreover, the series show off the male body from a female perspective to satisfy their audiences. The bolder, sexier, and less-restricted Regency-set romances also depict complicated and realistic sexual relations, with conflict and sometimes even violence.¹²⁶ These stories allow for a space in which women can freely embrace and express their desires and recognise themselves both in the “horny heroines” and complicated relationships shown on screen.¹²⁷

In *Bridgerton*, the Duke of Hastings, Simon, is introduced as a charming duke who wants to avoid ladies and courtship in general to prevent his father’s bloodline from continuing. This immediately creates a rift between him and Daphne, who tells him: “Unlike

¹²⁵ Buchanan, “The return of the bonkbuster: how horny heroines are starting a new sexual revolution,” *The Guardian*.

¹²⁶ Wyatt et al., “Core Collections in Genre Studies: Romance Fiction 101,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2007): 121; Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction* (London: UCL Press, 2021): 36-50.

¹²⁷ Buchanan, “The return of the bonkbuster: how horny heroines are starting a new sexual revolution.”

you, I cannot simply declare I do not wish to marry. I do not have such a privilege.”¹²⁸ The pair makes an arrangement to pretend to court each other, bringing them closer as friends and allowing for discreet conversations usually deemed uncivil. For Daphne, Simon is a gateway to discovering herself and her desires, while the Duke is often tempted by her. Despite loving her, he refuses to marry her because he believes he cannot give her the life she wants: “I can never give you children. [...] You deserve everything your heart desires. I cannot provide it for you.”¹²⁹ Simon considers himself a rake and wants the pleasure of sex, but not the consequences of it. However, after he marries Daphne, he gives up on his intent to never have children, gaining both pleasure and a family. Regardless of their happy ending, their steamy relationship is certainly not without conflict, mainly because Simon’s experience opposes Daphne’s innocence. When it is revealed that Simon withheld that he can have children but does not want them, Daphne reacts: “I may not know much, as you have made abundantly clear, but I do know one thing... I know *that* is not love.”¹³⁰ Sidney and Charlotte’s relationship is very similar to this. Sidney also does not wish to marry and is rude to Charlotte during their first encounter, which is explained by Mrs. Parker: “He’s inclined not to think very highly of our sex. He’s had some bruising experiences in the past. I should like to see him settled, but I fear it is not in his nature.”¹³¹ It later becomes clear that this ‘bruising experience’ was a near-marriage with Eliza Champion. After their separation Sidney went to explore the world, returning to Sanditon and believing himself the opposite of Charlotte: “I shouldn’t have expected so much from a girl with so little experience and understanding.”¹³²

¹²⁸ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 1, “Diamond of the First Water,” 7:40 -7:25.

¹²⁹ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 4, “An Affair of Honor,” 5:10-4:00.

¹³⁰ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 6, “Swish,” 6:00-5:55.

¹³¹ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, “Episode 1,” 29:40-30:10.

¹³² *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, “Episode 1,” 47:05-47:25.

As their relationship advances, there is little more than fleeting looks and smiles, opposing their many conflicts. They only kiss once but stay within the bounds of civil Regency literature. Andrew Davies has thus filled in the gaps of Austen's unfinished novel with some modern experiences and values, without breaking the Regency atmosphere.

In both *Sanditon* and *Bridgerton*, the surprising number of naked bodies do stand out more distinctly against the classic Regency elements. *Bridgerton* contains countless sex scenes, and not just between the main characters. *Sanditon* on the other hand, has none of those, yet does have plenty of nude scenes, justified by the continuous sea bathing on Sanditon's beaches. Unsurprisingly, both series continually show off the bodies of their male leads to please their female audiences. The Duke has taken up a hobby of shirtless boxing, which perfectly shows off his toned muscles, and *Bridgerton* makes a spectacle out of Daphne seeing him rolling up his sleeves while cheering for a match, adding a dramatic slow-motion effect and sensual music.¹³³ Daphne fantasises about Simon multiple times, and after the couple marries their sex scenes together also show their bodies almost fully on screen, especially the Duke's. Likewise, *Sanditon* only ever shows its male characters without clothes. When everyone goes sea bathing together, the men strip naked on the beach itself, walk towards the shore and swim freely with everything on display, while Charlotte and Clara use bathing machines to change to another set of clothes, and bathe with the help of maids for barely a minute.¹³⁴ Ballinger indeed notes this difference, and explains that the series does not entirely follow the historical bathing etiquette, in which "women wore flannel dresses and caps in the sea; usually, men were naked from the waist up".¹³⁵ Therefore,

¹³³ *Bridgerton*, season 1, episode 4, "An Affair of Honor," 50:10-49:50.

¹³⁴ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 1, "Episode 1," 21:30-23:40.

¹³⁵ Ballinger, "Representing Bodies and Bathing Machines: Jane Austen's *Sanditon* and Andrew Davies's 2019 ITV Adaptation," *Humanities* 11, no. 4 (2022): 3.

although taking some real elements, *Sanditon* exaggerates the scene to create an eye-catching moment. It seems they take every opportunity to show off the naked body of Theo James, who plays Sidney, as one episode later Charlotte stumbles upon a naked Sidney emerging from the water.¹³⁶ When Sidney addresses the accident, Charlotte says: “Why should I be embarrassed? I was fully clothed.”¹³⁷

As both seasons continue, so does the trend of nude men seen through the female eye. Nude scenes in *Bridgerton* contain both men and women but focus on the female gaze and experience. Contrastingly, *Sanditon*’s female characters show not an inch of skin, but there are several scenes of the fully naked figures of men. Ballinger argues that this is a necessary shift from the exposure of the female body to the depiction of the male one, as women have been the object and erotic property of the male gaze for too long.¹³⁸ By showing various female characters with complicated connections to sex and relationships, *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon* directly involve and represent their complex audience. Additionally, women can see versions of themselves on screen and feel unashamed of their desires and experiences, whether they are positive or negative. These Regency-set romances add such modern values to realistic characters and their complex relationships, while staying within the bounds of the historical period.

¹³⁶ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 2, “Episode 2,” 46:15-47:40.

¹³⁷ *Sanditon*, season 1, episode 3, “Episode 3,” 31:30-31:50.

¹³⁸ Ballinger, “Representing Bodies and Bathing Machines: Jane Austen’s *Sanditon* and Andrew Davies’s 2019 ITV Adaptation,” *Humanities* 11, no. 4 (2022): 5.

Conclusion

There is much to say about the initial aim of this research, namely to discuss recent neo-Regency narratives on screen and their contemporary audiences. Recent adaptation studies research has proved the importance of audiences, especially fans, who are more than just passive spectators and actively interact with the material through expectations and demands.¹³⁹ Similarly, women have influenced film and fiction throughout history and constructed new representations and spaces of female passions, both as creators and audiences.¹⁴⁰ For neo-Regency stories, this meant that characters and narratives had to be updated to keep up with modern ideologies, while following traditional Regency literature that in return also romanticised its own historical period.¹⁴¹

This leads us to the analysis of *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon*. All of the women reflect and represent experiences of real people in contemporary audiences but are moulded to fit the Regency setting. Despite contrasting introductions, the main characters are generally portrayed as stereotypically gentle, beautiful young ladies, without knowledge of sexual relations until their romantic interests come along. This befits the ideally passive, innocent female protagonists of traditional Regency romances.¹⁴² Nonetheless, both women are shown

¹³⁹ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2012): 114-25; Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 33.

¹⁴⁰ Callahan, *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010): 62-64; Buchanan, "The return of the bonkbuster: how horny heroines are starting a new sexual revolution."

¹⁴¹ Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction* (London: UCL Press, 2021): 29-30; Sadoff, "Marketing Jane Austen at the Megaplex," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 1 (2010): 86-89; During, "Chapter 14 – Regency London," in *The Cambridge history of English romantic literature*, ed. James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 335.

¹⁴² Franklin, "'At Once Above – Beneath Her Sex': The Heroine in Regency Verse Romance," *The Modern Language Review* 84, no. 2 (1989): 284.

to have passions and desires, both in life and sexually or romantically, and are highly aware of their imperfect environments. Their characters and relationships are imperfect, have conflict, and in *Sanditon* do not even end happily. The other characters step away from this ideal even further, but must deal with the Regency society they live in. Although they are stuck in a society unforgiving to nonconformity, their passions and independence give them power. The antagonists misuse their independence and knowledge but are also shown to be victims of their situations who simply aim to protect their own futures.

Finally, this leads me back to my research question. Neo-Regency texts have adjusted their portrayal of women and sexual relations for a contemporary audience by portraying various characters with complex identities and experiences, instead of clinging on to a set Regency femininity and sexuality. Audiences want to see reflections of themselves on screen and be able to relate to the characters while also being entertained. Thus, women look for female characters with minds, desires, and opinions, but simultaneously want to get lost in the balls, duels, and romance of the Regency. The texts portray multiple identities and experiences of women to be able to reach a broad audience and live up to their expectations, and make every character a ‘real’ person in their own way. The female gaze and desire are centred and celebrated in a beautiful historical period, placing women in a position of power over their own stories. All of this can shed light on the positions and passions of women in real life, and directly influences the spaces in which they can act and feel freely. Their experiences of femininity and sex are represented and normalised on platforms like *Netflix* and *NPO* and give room for their voices and gazes. The stories that were previously told *about* them, are now told *by* them and *for* them.

As I researched and wrote, I spent most of my time watching *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon* to analyse characters, behaviours, and conversations. Although selecting topics came easily, I quickly realised how much content the seasons had, and how many interesting women and

stories they depicted. Eventually, I chose the characters I felt had the most prominent relation to femininity and sexual relations, but therefore I missed out on other fascinating analyses. I could have distinguished my topics more specifically, which could have left room for other characters and discussions. Additionally, I found theoretical sources on adaptations and audiences that helped me form a base for my analysis, but struggled to find texts on the literary Regency and its neo-Regency counterpart. Unexpectedly, defining the Regency turned out to be nearly impossible, which made figuring out its influences on Regency-set narratives equally challenging. Academic sources on feminist criticism regarding film and historical romances thankfully cleared up much about narrative changes for modern audiences. I believe the source materials for these series, *the Duke and I* by Julia Quinn and the *Sanditon* manuscripts, could have further helped me fill in the gap of Regency characteristics, but I unfortunately did not have the time nor the words to discuss them.

Additionally, I have barely touched upon the neo-Regency and modern audiences as academic topics. While the resurgence of the Regency has been largely researched with relations to the Austen franchise, or later Regency-set novels such as Heyer, the research on new neo-Regency texts is next to nothing.¹⁴³ With the whole world watching *Bridgerton* in 2020, hopefully there will be a peak of interest in this subject soon. There is much left to be discovered about why this genre is popular, and how it compares to other historical periods. Moreover, *Bridgerton* and *Sanditon* contain many modern topics that should still be explored, both in their first seasons and their other ones, released or not. For example, both of their directors used colour-blind casting, and the series contain discussions on racism and colonialisation through characters like *Sanditon*'s Georgiana Lambe, or Queen Charlotte in

¹⁴³ Dianne F. Sadoff, "Marketing Jane Austen at the Megaplex," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 1 (2010); Rayner and Wilkins, *Georgette Heyer, History and Historical Fiction* (London: UCL Press, 2021).

Bridgerton's newly released mini-series. There are also representations of the lower classes, homosexuality, and more. Furthermore, there are many other female characters left unexplored, such as mothers like Mrs Parker or Violet Bridgerton, women with powerful positions like Lady Denham or the Queen, and women stuck in horrific marriages or even brothels. The content of these series seems endless and is immensely popular with audiences, so it would be no surprise if there is a sudden increase in similar texts in the future. All in all, the neo-Regency genre is a brand-new fan favourite that is only growing and gives a unique look into the minds of an enormous, diverse contemporary audience.

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