

The Changing Faces of Regency Romance in Netflix's *Bridgerton* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*¹

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the parallels Netflix's show *Bridgerton* has with Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The implication of Austen's novels and style in the Netflix adaptation targeting regency romances has been widely discussed as well as the shallowness of both contributions (News par. 5, Morrison par. 1, Flanagan 30). I argue that a more literary-focused perspective may be taken to establish the parallelisms between both works in terms of settings, argumentative topics, narrative choices, male characters and speech styles. To do so, the analysis will gradually turn to the general common similarities and the contribution made by both male characters and their discourses. Drawing on Terry Eagleton and Rober Macfarlane, this paper examines *Bridgerton's* manoeuvres in its Romantic production and its profound connection to Austen's novel.

Keywords: Jane Austen, *Bridgerton*, *Pride and Prejudice*, parallelisms, regency romance, discourses.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, it must be considered impossible to speak about the so-called period drama without ever mentioning the proposal that Shonda Rhimes brought to our screens for the first time some years ago. The revival of the Romantic canon with its never-ending and thoroughly deep speeches, its characteristic 19th Century garment and its clouded-

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mindful characters cannot be said to have taken place so recently, as successful adaptations for Jane Austen's and Charlotte Brontë's novels took place in the late 1990s. Nonetheless, such films may be accused of having found a very strict section of the audience, whereas *Bridgerton* has reaped the benefits of an astounding conquest of people from all of the public's scope. Discussing its groundbreaking triumph in the media surpasses the literary limit, as the contribution of fashion and styling, music production and merchandising machinery is clearly responsible for it as well. Nevertheless, the similarities that can be found between the screen adaptation of Julia Quinn's novels and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* exceed the superficial level.

There have been several -mainly online- discussions pointing at Netflix having looked closely at what made the 2005 modern adaptation of Austen's literary production so successful. Imagery is a powerful tool being widely used by authors during Romanticism and both film directors—*Bridgerton's* and *Pride and Prejudice's* 2005 adaptation—were not oblivious to this detail. In fact, there is no doubt that the hand-grabbing scene between Mr Darcy and Elizabeth, which filled the audience with yearning, was directly copied by the platform in some of the scenes starred by Kate and Anthony in *Bridgerton* in an attempt of evoking the same kind of feeling: "One of the most famous moments from that film is a close-up of Darcy's hand after he touches Elizabeth, and this season of 'Bridgerton' contains many close-up shots of Anthony and Kate's hands" (Edel).

However, although the discussion on imagery and evident features has been addressed, not so much attention has been brought up regarding the literary aspects of *Bridgerton*. Being the series a regency romance it is undeniable that producers, screenwriters and directors were bound to look into the characteristics of Romantic novels such as the ones produced by Charlotte and Emily Brontë or Jane Austen. Yet, in literary terms it would be difficult—if not almost impossible—to deem any of the Brontë's as the source of inspiration for this TV series as they do not share the humanist discussions, the terribly tormented characters with a redemption arc and a sense of unbearable suffering throughout all the narration among many other aspects. Therefore, in spite of the fact that everyone seems to be convinced of Austen's doing in

this onscreen success, when strictly speaking in terms of literary standards, a thorough research on the matter may be conducted.

In this article, the second season of Netflix's TV series *Bridgerton* will be analysed by paying close attention to the literary parallelisms that it shares with *Pride and Prejudice*. First, both productions will be broadly compared in regard to their main themes and the criticism they have received in relation to the absence of discussions about fundamental issues. Afterwards, in a literary revision, specific characteristics regarding narrative techniques, the development of characters and tropes and the female gaze will be accounted for in an individual part. Following this general analysis, a more detailed investigation will be carried out by comparing the similarities existing between the male characters Mr Darcy and Anthony Bridgerton. Finally, the last section will consider whether it should be labelled as a copy or an inspirational source.

2. What *Bridgerton* takes from the 19th Century novel

"In its first 28 days, *Bridgerton* was watched by an astounding 82 million member households. That means roughly 40% of Netflix subscribers decided to give it a try" (Kramer 4) which must be undoubtedly read as a clear success. Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility* achieved a similar amount of attention when bearing in mind the audience that books could reach in the 19th Century. In fact, the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813 did not include Austen's name, yet it advertised itself under the label "By the author of *Sense and Sensibility*" (Austen 1) as publishers were already aware of the impact that her previous work had had in English society. However, in spite of the fame that both the first season of *Bridgerton* and Austen's first novel achieved, these two phenomena definitely broke the literary and media barriers with their "second editions". Not only that but, if everyone had perceived the similarities between both elements, those only grew bigger once Katherine and Anthony were displayed and, literary speaking, the audience saw the revival of *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth and Mr Darcy.

When inspecting both creative works, it would be necessary to go from the most general sense to the most detailed aspects. Yet, no one should consider the similarities

labelled as general as less relevant in their resemblance, given that those resemblances are the ones which make it difficult at times to tell one apart from the other. To begin with, location both temporal and physical are intrinsically the same. Not only “both Austen and the Netflix series are drawn to Bath” (News 5) placing them in a very specific piece of land within the vast space that England occupies, but when the series starts, the audience learns through the narrator—a figure who will be discussed afterwards in detail—that it is set in 1813. Choosing such a specific year stands as a conscious choice as “it is a deliberate nod to Austen, who in that same year published the most famous Regency romance of all: *Pride and Prejudice*” (Morrison 1). Once those witnessing the story have been placed in time and space, the discussion, or better said, the apparent absence of it regarding several topics stands as the next trackable common factor.

Ignoring the ongoing political events for the sake of a romance—driven plot in which the focus was set on discovering the characters’ minds and their intricate relationships—was neither a common practice nor one particularly acclaimed. This, which *Bridgerton* does identically, gained Austen a great deal of criticism back in her times. A criticism that also came from her fellow writers such as Charlotte Brontë who accused her of being shallow and underestimating human’s depth (Sánchez Hernández 185-96). Later literary critics have tried to contextualise her novels, but also by enlightening readers with a more insightful look at the writer’s narration. In his analysis of the English Novel, Eagleton defended the author from this generalised complaint that had been disregarding her work for a great amount of time. Firstly, he stated that “Austen’s novels concern the social history of the landed gentry, and it is hard to find a topic more central to English history than that.” (83) pointing at the misreading that many critics had made of her novels. To this, he added that Austen had been misunderstood because her style was indeed not understood, as she chose to create an intricate and hidden criticism that very frequently, especially in *Pride and Prejudice*, supported new ideals of the French Revolution and even advocated for Feminist proposals (Fowler 55-63). The fact that readers, experts, and fellow writers expected her to reproduce a narrative method similar to that of her contemporaries in which a deep discussion over morality and historical changes took place was the main cause of these

biased thoughts. Eagleton states that “Unlike Scott, she does not think in historical terms. It is a commonplace that her novels have few comments pass on the great social and political events of the day” (83) as her ultimate intentions to utilise the confinement that the reduced subject of the English family provides to create the ideal environment for specific discussions. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who viewed family gatherings as a restrained environment for broader discussions (Flanagan 30), also rejected this uncommon choice, which allowed her to gradually construct a significantly transformative novel. “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (Austen 3) is the famous opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*. This quote, which has been regarded as infamous by some critics, encapsulates a sense of irony that trespasses 19th Century conflicts, and directly lands on *Bridgerton*’s feet.

As has been mentioned, Netflix’s production has been accused of similar behaviour as some have considered that looking too closely at love matters has made the series lose the opportunity to criticise slavery, colonialism or more national-wise issues. Notwithstanding, as it was done with the literary piece, *Bridgerton* can be defended likewise as focusing on the restrictive and privileged class provides a warrant—used by both the TV series and the novel—for elaborating a world simultaneously filled with inconsequential matters and isolated from injustices of Regency society (News 8). Nonetheless, this isolated reality still has space for raising awareness over important topics. Perhaps not in an exclusively feminist way as Austen did with her novel -it is undeniable that Elizabeth stands as a self-made woman who dares to reject two marriage proposals as well as she has a mind of her own which she illustrates continuously throughout her speech- but the TV series did include fundamental social issues. “Shondaland shows are known for being not only female-fronted, but diverse as well. The decision to adapt Quinn’s books with diverse casting, Bajaria said, is another undeniable reason for its success” (Robinson) as well as it is one of the main arguments against those who dare accuse the production of being not profound enough. Purposely casting diverse actors to portray the characters enables “passionate discussions about racial stereotypes, social injustice, colonialism,

Eurocentric narratives, and multiracial relationships” (News par. 11) and allows the audience to witness a racial discussion that Austen never ended up addressing as she died before finishing *Sanditon*; a novel which featured Miss Lambe and opened the door for a multiracial perspective.

Narrowing down the analysis to literary specific aspects, *Bridgerton* mimicked several of Austen’s style traits when developing its story. The series revolves around the figure of Lady Whistledown, an unknown but witty writer who periodically publishes a pamphlet fueled mainly by high-class gossip. The character itself and also the written publication of these mundane discussions intrinsically connect both Romantic productions. On the one hand, the wit exhibited by Lady Whistledown—also known by the audience as Penelope—and her style when revisiting events and closely judging people’s personalities carefully creates an omniscient narrator that resembles a great deal Elizabeth’s own discourse and the narrator’s in *Pride and Prejudice*.

In the novel, aligning with Hume’s philosophical viewpoint (Dadlez 235), the protagonist wires her opinion—often biased—upon close inspection and constructs her own pride. Although the narrator chosen by Austen is not Elizabeth herself, the readers find themselves often perceiving the similarities between both. The narrator very frequently acquires a sense of humour and criticism that can only be explained for her sympathy towards Lizzy and her judgement of the world (Moses 101-109). Just in the same way, Penelope does not get to voice her opinions in the TV production, but it is through the voice of Lady Whistledown both in the pamphlets and her role as an omniscient narrator how the audience gets to know what she really thinks of the world. Thus, it is undeniable that there is a common choice in both products of piercing irony as the preferable style and the omniscient narrator as a way of allowing their protagonists to speak their minds freely.

On the other hand, the secretive writer chooses the famous local pamphlets as her way of spreading rumours and, even though such practice is nowhere to be found in any of Austen’s novels, there is a significant factor there. *Pride and Prejudice* was initially called *First Impressions* (Dillon) and not only that changed throughout the development of the novel, but also the epistolary style after which it was initially

modelled (Bender 10). In spite of the ultimate preference for an indirect free style mixed with an omniscient narrator, the author was still fond of letters as a mode of expression and thus, they made the final cut. Letters are not only present in it, but they are crucial as they represent triggers of significant plot twists—such as Elizabeth’s discovery of Darcy’s real self—and one of the only available instances for characters to unveil their sentiments. Both male and female protagonists find letters a safe space where the truth of their feelings and personalities can be displayed just like Penelope considers the pamphlets and her pseudonym her chance to develop her character and vision of the ongoing events.

Additionally, there is also an undeniable force of the female gaze that influences these stories alike. As Katy Fabrie commented in her review of to what extent had *Brigerton* taken after Austen, “The women’s stories underscore the sexist realities even the most privileged “diamonds” face, despite their gleaming potential.” Both artistic productions feature a female structure: a female writer, a female point of view and female main characters. Lizzy, Daphne, Penelope or even Kate, in spite of the intersectional force bending her existence—shall race never be ignored—, are initially portrayed as rather privileged women who do not have to face the tormentous momentum that England is facing at the time. Yet, the creators never cease to imply that reading these in such a simplistic way is undermining the possibilities that a presumably sallow and pretty carcass can be hiding. It cannot be ignored that judging a nineteenth century novel and a regency romance inspired in the same century from today’s feminist perspective is unsuitable if one were not to bear in mind the discrepancies that having advanced 211 years ultimately poses.

However, it has been numerously implied in this paper that deeming Austen as a too conventional author is failing to observe her core self. Including tropes such as societal ambitions or marriage proposals could be perceived as superficial and inconsequential if they were treated just as that, tropes. *Brigerton* and *Pride and Prejudice* do not leave this opportunity unattended and it is by mentioning the importance of escalating in society, marrying properly and dedicating yourself to your family—standards that are nowhere to be found in men’s social contracts—how they

manage to criticise them in front of the audience. Not in vain did Austen stressed at the beginning of her novel how the decision of marrying, and most importantly marrying well, was in hands of men (3), just like Robinson focused on continuously presenting female characters who were threaten to lose their dignity if found in the arms of their not-yet-married-to lovers while they, ever so not-gallant “rakes”, were never endangered by their behaviour.

3. Anthony Bridgerton takes after Mr Darcy

Bearing in mind the recently mentioned male characters, it must be stated that they stand for another of the clear similarities between these two ideas. Generally speaking, they represent a sort of Romantic hero very frequent in the regency-era romances, but the resemblance between Darcy and Anthony could be only referred to as homage. To begin with, they share a very prominent personality trait that closely speaks to a sense of familiar duty. Eagleton pointed out that during the 19th Century “the class which these families composed was morally failing, and it is part of the business of Jane Austen’s writing to recall it to its traditional sense of duty” (83) and so it seems it was Brigerton’s duty as well. Anthony and Mr Darcy both carry an unmeasurable burden as the oldest in their families and having lost the paternal figure.

They regard themselves as those who must be in charge of restoring any kind of disturbance over their families’ reputation—Mr Darcy’s sister incident with Mr Wickham or, in Anthony’s case, Daphne’s affectionate encounter with the Duke of Hastings—and the responsible for setting an example that others could look after. They are fully aware of this rampant deteriorating society which is morally questionable and they see themselves at fault for it as well. Thus, throughout their developmental arc—although thanks to the aid of the female characters—they try to restore that lost morality or lack of proper judgement.

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that a generous analysis of other common preoccupations could be made, literary speaking, it is their discourses and, again, the resemblance between them that ushers in a closer inspection. It is possible to analyse key moments in the novel and the second season of the series in detail to properly

account for the parallelism that exists between their speeches. To begin with, Mr. Darcy's most famous personality trait "My good opinion, once lost, is lost forever" (Austen 58), one that is influenced by his conviction of having the most sharp and trustable instinct and judgement, is something that he shares with Anthony. Notwithstanding, considering just the male characters as those being influenced by *Pride and Prejudice* would be insufficient as both female characters, Elizabeth and Kate, in spite of her reluctance to admit their ill judgements and mistakes, exhibit a very similar if not the same kind of view.

Making these couples soul mates is what makes it possible to compare their first arguments as they rely on prejudices and share the contempt being used to speak about one another and the unstoppable force of two people who want to have the most respectable opinions. In order to do so, it would be useful to start the analysis by comparing a fragment from the episode 2 of the series and one from Austen's own novel:

Your defect is a propensity to hate everybody.

"And yours," he replied with a smile, "is willfully to misunderstand them."
(Austen 58)

[Kate Sharma:] Now you question my judgement.

[Anthony Bridgerton:] Only because you question mine.

[Kate Sharma:] I have never met a man as brazenly presumptuous.

[Anthony Bridgerton:] You do not even know me- . . .

[Kate Sharma:] There's not much more I need to know. ("Off to the Races"
29:19–29:34)

The similarities this time are intrinsically related to that shared attitude and the topic of conversation. In an all-hands-on-deck attempt to openly disregard the other's opinion they accuse each other of not judging properly the events that take place in front of them, ignoring that that is exactly what they themselves are perpetuating. The

Cambridge Dictionary defines “presumptuous”, the word chosen by Kate to define Anthony, as “a person who . . . shows little respect for others by doing things they have no right to do.” (“Presumptuous”). This definition seems directly connected with the “propensity to hate everybody” (Austen 58) which Elizabeth considers that Darcy has, even when she is not in possession of the whole picture. That begins to build a clear connection between the novel and the series, given that both female characters have a similar initial impression of their future husbands, to which is immediately added to the male’s own connection. While Anthony places the blame on Kate by suggesting that she does not know anything about him, Darcy implies exactly the same to Lizzy but in his case he labels that lack of information as a willing intention to misunderstand him.

In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you. (Austen 191)

Do you think there’s a corner of this Earth that you could travel to far away enough to free me from this torment? I am a gentleman. My father raised me to act with honour, but that honour 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. (“An Unthinkable Fate” 43:11–43:41)

A regency romance could not fail to provide a grandiloquent declaration of love and the men in these pieces of work gladly fill that requirement. Both Anthony and Mr Darcy confess their love by resulting in a sense of physical suffering that is supposedly mirroring their emotional one. Writers often use such mechanisms to make physically evident the pain that characters endure in their psychological torment. While one struggles, the other is asking someone to free him from this torment, but it is clear to both of them: that is not enough. Neither of them considers the possibility of maintaining this suffering and they eventually succumb to the need of breaking free from the shackles that their silenced passion is torturing them with. Using passion is not unintentional. In fact, it is extremely surprising that Mr Darcy, a character directly

written in the nineteenth century, uses the adverb “ardently” to refer to the sentiments that Lizzy evokes in him. Speaking boldly about sexual attraction was not a possibility for a 1813’s novel yet, consequently, Austen refers to Darcy’s admiration and love as one that ardently consumes him. Very similarly, Anthony—who is lucky enough to be granted the chance to speak freely about his desires as a product of the 21st Century—refers to Kate as the centre of them which, just like the flame that is ardently consuming Darcy, is becoming the reason and end of his existence.

By you, I was properly humbled. I came to you without a doubt of my reception. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased. (Austen 370)

I want a life that suits us both. I know I am imperfect but I will humble myself before you because I cannot imagine my life without you, and that is why I wish to marry you. (“The Viscount Who Loved Me” 1:01:42–1:01:55)

Finally, both protagonists succumb to a truthful declaration of love as it is common in romances. However, the discourses quoted above do speak about love, unlike the previous extracts where the characters were clouded by desire. As has been previously mentioned, it seems too much of a coincidence that *Bridgerton* chooses to focus on desire in Anthony’s first truthful approach to Kate at the same exact moment in the plot when Mr Darcy dares to confess Lizzy that he has been reflecting on her in a way that infuriates him and fills him with tormented feelings. However, even though it may be dismissed as a mere coincidence, the two cultural products under analysis share parallels in that they present a cathartic confession of physical attraction being followed by another of a true love. Indeed, the use of the concept of one being “humbled” and the admission of a never-ending attempt to match their partners’ progress brings *Bridgerton* and *Pride and Prejudice* impossibly close.

Mr Darcy and the Viscount, once the undeniable truth has nested in their prejudiced minds, not only beg their lovers to accept them, but they make further promises. Firstly, they recognise themselves as “imperfect” or “insufficient” in comparison to Kate and Lizzy, as they are acutely aware of what they perceive as their

superior reasoning. Secondly, at this point in both the novel and the TV series, both men know that it is the female protagonist's ultimate decision whether or not to accept these wronged men as their husbands. Finally, being driven by pride and prejudices has led them to judge the world inadequately. Being with these women makes them imply that they have been "humbled" and will continue to be so in the future.

4. Did *Pride and Prejudice* serve as an inspiration or was it blatantly copied?

Given the undeniable similarities that these two products exhibit, insofar as possible, it ought to be considered to what extent *Bridgerton's* parallelism with *Pride and Prejudice* should be deemed as the series having taken the novel as a source of inspiration or having blatantly copied it. It is not the main concern of this article to elaborate an accusation or defence of Netflix's product since, as it has been reviewed, *Bridgerton* has—if something—helped to restore *Pride and Prejudice's* reputation and stress the value of "a lucrative fandom that has, for as long as it has existed, been mocked, marginalized, and dismissed" (Robinson).

Yet, it would be insufficient not to pay attention to possible plagiarism allegations that the TV series could suffer. When revising the distinction of "creating" and "inventing" George Steiner came up with a fundamental difference: while inventing requires the elaboration of something absolutely new, creating it only requires the rearrangement of something already existing (16). By noticing such a significant difference, Steiner also enables the acknowledgement of *Bridgerton* not having invented anything, but having created a new product by collecting pieces of an already successful production. Thanks to the emphasis that the author gave on focusing on the mastership that both actions require and the creative process of the former, *Brigerton* may be regarded not only as an intricate work of art, but also as one that could elude to a certain extent plagiarism.

Whether plagiarism could be accounted for—some would say that without explicit use of uncited quotes of Austen's novel such an accusation has no funding, while others would consider the similarities between speeches as too bold—originality is still open to debate. Imitating a product that has had a significant amount of success is not

foreign to literature—as it has not only come from the media establishment but also from within as Linda Hutcheon (229-239) and Harold White (3-38) investigated themselves for previous literary periods—neither is judging it on its originality. In his revision of plagiarism and originality concerning authors who published after Austen's period, Robert Macfarlane extensively contemplated the limitations that the concept of a work as "original" would inevitably impose. He argued that a literary piece could only be considered original if it was unexpected or uncommon (3).

It is perhaps his intention of evaluating these works “in terms of what [they] might have in common with other works, or in how its writer might be trying to communicate with other writers across historical periods and genre boundaries” (3) where innovation could be found and where *Bridgerton* may find a sound backup for its inspiration: it establishes a flowing conversation with Austen's work, it expands the genre beyond its boundaries and it makes the problematics of the time travel to another historical period.

5. Conclusion

This paper has analysed the second season of Netflix's TV production *Bridgerton* in comparison to the worldwide acclaimed novel of Jane Austen *Pride and Prejudice*. In this analysis, attention has been paid to several matters going from the more general parallelisms, those targeting location, context and historical references, to more literary specific similarities such as the use of certain narrators, physical formats or female-centred narratives. In addition, a comparison of both male protagonists was also conducted with the objective of determining to what extent their discourses were similarly built. Finally, the possible discussion of whether this series could be deemed a copycat of the nineteenth-century novel or whether it makes use of it to perpetuate a successful genre in a new historical era was also considered.

By finding out that the geographical location and the temporal setting was identical in both cases, the analysis could begin looking into the most general yet significant similarities between the products. These also enabled the possibility of comparing as well the well-known criticism that they received and how, this accusation of not being feminist and multicultural enough was mostly based on a generalised misunderstanding. Figuring out the reasons for *Pride and Prejudice*'s harsh judgement

made a more socially-aware reading of *Bridgerton* possible and brought both pieces of work closer.

Afterwards, conducting an investigation on their literary parallelisms again reinforced the idea of one taking after the other. The use of the omniscient narrator that aligns with the protagonist's mind, the significance of letters and pamphlets in the plot or the female structure used as a conductive thread were found in both creative products. Such resemblance gave the analysis the opportunity to look closer into the male protagonists and, by dissecting not only their most prominent personality traits, but especially their discourse choices, *Bridgerton* was again proven to be exceptionally close to Austen's novel.

To conclude, the objective was never the comparison of the literary productions, one would not dare speak of Austen—as has been proven—as a simple air-headed writer and it would be unfair to judge Quinn's productions over the shadow of what is considered to be one of the greatest contributions to literary history. Yet, a brief consideration of plagiarism, creation, invention and originality was made with the objective of rather than judging the series, weighting its contribution. This analysis has demonstrated the similarities that *Bridgerton* and *Pride and Prejudice* exhibit in discursive or conversational terms. Having looked at discursive aspects, narrative techniques, characters' building and plot resemblances indicates that this could result into a productive field of study for further researches which could take into account more specific traits as well as provide information about matters which were not observed in this paper, such as thorough analysis on female characters.

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Notes on contributor

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