Bridgerton Was Made To Empower White Women

This is your last free member-only story this month.

There is a reason your Black friends are sighing about it

Image of Daphne and Simon from Bridgerton, a show on Netflix. (Liam Daniel/Netflix)

TW: Discussions of rape, coercion

Bridgerton was was made for white women who like historical romance, but are open to some diversity. It is Pride and Prejudice, with a bit of an edge. Although the show is set in 1813, it does something a bit different by allowing Black people to hold positions of social power within the world. However, it also awkwardly ignores racial dynamics, giving us a show that caters to the white

woman gaze.

The show tries to carefully craft a color blind world where Black people are part of the nobility. However, it falls hard on old tropes of race that elevate white women, their sexuality, and positions of power within society. It is a show that does not challenge white women's view of the Regency era, it caters to their interests. It is in this way, that the show is not groundbreaking.

It is a show that empowers white womanhood without exploring any consequences.

Bridgerton Places White Women on a Pedestal

In the show, white women have privileged problems. Their dowries have been squandered by their father, they aren't engaged to the wealthy man, or they don't have a nice enough dress for the upcoming ball. They pine over unrequited love and the flakiness of undeserving men. Their honor is constantly protected by older brothers. Their mothers try to set them up with good social matches, and they spend their days nibbling cakes. Their issues are the troubles of rich white women, but they are allowed to be interesting.

Bridgerton gives the white female characters room to lead enriching lives and grow. For example, Eloise begins the show not knowing where babies come from and by the end, is someone who carries doubts about entering society. She is allowed to be a character with self-agency

and interests. Even Daphne is given a narrative of purpose, where she learns about her role as a duchess, sex, and the ways of the world. The white women of Bridgerton change through the show and it makes them the characters we want to become; The women who are crafty with their words, know how to play society, and do not suffer.

Its not a Regency era romance without tea and gossip. Image from Pixabay (JillWellington)

The Black women of Bridgerton?

They deal with raising someone else's child, pregnancy, and dealing with a mentally unstable husband.

Lady Danbury raises her late friend's son (Simon Basset, Duke of Hastings) and protects the boy from his abusive father. She offers him love and support, but beyond the

role of arranging his nuptials and being a social connector for white women, she does not have a purpose in the story.

Marina Thompson is the classic [tragic mulatto](#) trope character being the only woman in the show who is faced with an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. The character of Marina transforms into a cold-blooded woman who will lie to get out of her pending destitute situation. She also serves as a warning for the young white women who learn of her condition and are warned to not associate with her.

The Queen is a woman of high rank, which makes it all the more interesting that she is tasked with the heart wrenching task of watching her husband's mind fade away. She waits eagerly for him to be lucid, all the while mucking about in the affairs of society, bored and bitter at the world. She becomes key in solving the Bridgerton/Hastings marriage, but she herself is left waiting for her ill husband to die.

Three light-skinned Black women do not change as characters over the course of the miniseries. This is one of those deep sigh moments. By centering white women as the pure and interesting, Bridgerton caters to white women who are looking for a show with a sprinkle of diversity, but not enough diversity to distract or challenge their Regency era fantasies. As white women are held on a pedestal, Black women are side characters who make

the white women's lives more interesting. In short, Black women in Bridgerton are the Black best friend characters, but this time they are wearing pretty dresses and dance at balls.

Bridgerton carries discomfort beyond how Black women are treated. It does more then make white female viewers feel witty, desirable, and smart; It also glorifies the power of white womanhood.

Bridgerton and White Womanhood

Bridgerton portrayals an unhealthy relationship. More specifically, it centers the actions taken by a white woman to control a Black man. While the story takes place in a colorblind world that attempts to ignore issues of race, the audience cannot.

Simon Hastings, a Black man, does not want to get married or have children. Even when he openly tells Daphne about his preferences and boundaries, she announces to the world that they are to be married, sealing her fortunes. Daphne forces his hand and ends up with a nice wedding, honeymoon, and title of duchess. In episode 6, Daphne forces Simon to complete a sexual encounter so she may have a child. The moment is calculated, planned, and carried through with the purpose of impregnation. After it is complete, Daphne, instantly frames the unconsenting action as punishment for being lied to about the biproduct of sex (she did not

know how sex led to children). While the show tries to unpack this, it is done in an awkward manner. Daphne is framed as having been wronged. Watching this scene is massively uncomfortable because it gaslights viewers who just watched a white woman rape a Black man so she could have a baby.

What does this mean for contemporary viewers?

Image for post

Daphne and her mother, from Netflix's Bridgerton, Image found here (MSN).

It means that Bridgerton reinforces something that many already know: whiteness makes you more powerful than a Black man, even if he is a duke.

Bridgerton is viewed by audiences who have the context of white sexual violence. This is what makes the relationship between Daphne and Simon so

uncomfortable. It is not simply two toxic individuals, it is a white woman exercising power. From her tears, pleads, and simpering smiles, Daphne is upheld as a Regency era heroine. She is the person we should feel empathy towards and identify with. However, Daphne gets what she wants through coercion, rape, and disregarding boundaries. This is the heroine presented to viewers, and the saddest part is how close to reality that historical portrayal is.

Historically, white women have been some of the cruelest instigators of racial violence. As Dr. Stephanie Jones-Rogers' work has shown, they strategically bred slaves and were instigators of in sexual violence during slavery. The legacy does not end there. Cases like Joseph Spell, portrayed in the 2017 film *Marshall*, were the result of white women telling lies to protect their reputation after desiring a Black man. In short, white women have not been innocent through history, they carry as much guilt as their male counterparts. (This is a topic I have discussed in my essay about the show *Lovecraft Country*.) The problem with Bridgerton is that it ignores this history and instead presents Daphne as a White woman being wronged because she could not have a child. She is the victim because she doesn't get what she wants from a Black man.

Although Bridgerton wishes to erase issues of race, the audience is watching the show with history as their background noise. It is within this context that Bridgeton

feels uncomfortable. While Bridgerton can pretend it is post-racial, viewers live in a world where a few months ago the streets were filled with protests against racial violence. We do not understand a "post-racial world" so the idealization falls flat. When we watch Daphne manipulate a marriage, title, and baby... its not just twisted tactics, it also carries a racial weight. It demonstrates the full power of white womanhood, even if the audience tries to ignore it.

The problem with Bridgerton is, ultimately, a problem with historical romances. The genre often fails to center Black women in empowering roles and address historical issues of white womanhood. All of this can be easily resolved, but the genre has been heavily marketed to white women. If the story is about a dashing duke in Victorian England, it must be an white, blonde, thin beauty who entices him to give up his rakish ways. It could not be a Black, Asian, Indigenous woman because white women would not be able to identify with those characters.

That is what results in shows like Bridgerton. The desire to not alienate (or anger) white women gave us a show where the main female characters are all white (and in future seasons will probably stay white). As a result, the show does nothing revolutionary. It does not question Daphne's privilege, her deceptions. It does not give the Black women agency and interesting stories. It stays focused on the interests of the white women, not asking them to be critical of Daphne or her actions against a

Black man.