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Race and Racism in Austen Spaces: Jane Austen and Regency Romance's Racist Legacy

Abstract

Jane Austen is a master of genre, and her allusions and direct references in her *Juvenilia* and *Northanger Abbey* show that she is not just a satirist, she clearly understood and even appreciated the works she was often making fun of. So why then are people so reluctant to discuss Austen and Regency Romance, a genre directly tied to Austen's works? Deeper still, why is there avoidance to critically read Georgette Heyer's work?

The evolution of Regency-centered fiction cannot be discussed without looking at Heyer, an antisemitic and racist author whose abridged works have worked to overhaul her problematic writing, and someone who has been a gateway into the Regency fiction world for many. When talking about modern Regency-set romances, readers cannot ignore the influence of Austen or Heyer, and doing so would be akin to reading *Northanger Abbey* without looking up any information on the horrid novels. Certainly readers can enjoy the discussion, but they are missing the scaffolding of the work.

Tracing the beginnings of Regency romance as a genre, and plotting it through to today in the *Bridgerton* novels and the Netflix show, it becomes clear that understanding this modern genre and its history is as important to talking about Austen in pop culture as it would be to research the "horrid novels" in order to more deeply understand *Northanger Abbey*.

Along with that context, we must also look at the gatekeeping in discussions around romance and Austen in online spaces. Why are discussions so divided and who gets to dictate who we are allowed to talk about in conjunction to Austen? Why is there reluctance to critically read about the issues of the Regency era, but also the ones laid out in the fantasy world Heyer created?

Keywords

jane austen, georgette heyer, regency romance

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A new and expensive edition of Georgette Heyer's *Venetia* (1958) is being published by [The Folio Society](#), with lavish illustrations and bindings that visually echo the Regency world she creates in her works. Everything about the celebration of this edition in Stephen Fry's article for *The Guardian*, which is a preview of his Introduction for the edition, reflects the ways in which Jane Austen and Regency-centered communities protect perceptions of whiteness in these spaces by conveniently editing out the parts of history they do not want to see, namely the anti-Semitic references that are threaded through Heyer's original novels. Notably, Fry invokes Austen in his article on Heyer: "It is not, after all, as if Heyer is Hilary Mantel, or Jane Austen herself. Heyer did not write, or pretend to write, Literature with a capital L: she wrote entertainments" (Fry 2021). Mantel is known for her historical fiction, and she and Fry, who voiced the Harry Potter audiobooks, have both spoken out in support of author J.K. Rowling, who has been openly transphobic. The inclusion of Mantel in Fry's comparison is not shocking, though the trend of protecting white women doing harm is one aspect of the issues that we should take note of in this particular literary space (Guerrera 2021, Baska 2021). What I want to draw attention to here is a pattern of celebrating (and protecting) certain white women authors, while not recognizing how their work reinforces white supremacy and racism. Defending transphobia and Rowling is part of the same impulse in the attempt to rewrite the legacy of Heyer and to erase her own problematic past. What follows is a look at how an uncritical reading of Austen and Heyer can lead to an imagined idea of the Regency era, and of how comparing Austen to Heyer in equally uncritical ways, can serve to erase problematic issues and reinforce white fantasies of the time. Fry's comparison to Austen reflects what I often see in fandom spaces: a connection of Heyer to Austen, freeing her work from the critical eye that Austen herself put into her work and her vital, satirical observations of society.

Heyer may not have an immediate connection to Austen for some, but when we step back to the history of Regency romance and dip a toe into her problematic legacy, we see that Heyer's work contributes to modern constructions of the Regency era from novels to Netflix's *Bridgerton* (2020). The backlash to *Bridgerton* that saw viewers object to Black aristocrats based on "historical accuracy" is based on a skewed definition of "accuracy," one that reproduces whitewashed fantasy and protects, and even fetishizes, how to frame the era (Romano). Heyer did write "entertainments," but much like the "horrid novels" alluded to in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Heyer's novels need to be approached with a commitment to understanding how white supremacy is at work in her depictions of the Regency era, else we all end up sounding a bit like Catherine Morland extolling the virtues of a fictitious countryside she has never seen. It is precisely this kind of partial knowledge that Austen seeks to correct in her novels.

The romance plot has gone through many changes over the decades, especially since Regency romance exploded with Georgette Heyer, a prolific Regency romance author, with twenty-six books set in the Regency period, beginning with *Regency Buck* published in 1935 (Kloester). Her work is often recommended for fans of Austen, despite the fact that Austen was writing in her own time as a social commentator and Heyer is writing historical fiction that is firmly more romance-plot based, than social commentary of any kind. The genre, inspired by Heyer's war-time novels, later became synonymous with bodice-ripping covers in the 1970s, but in the 1980s the heroines inspired by Heyer's earlier work, began to change, moving from helpless lasses to stronger personalities as in *Love So Fearful* (1983) by Nina Coombs. There has also been more representation from authors like Beverly Jenkins, who writes stories centered on Black women and their needs (Luther 2013; Thurston 14; Haupt 2021). Even in historical subgenres there has been an emergence of heroines with feminist ideals, wanting more for themselves and standing up for their needs: "the hero isn't going to save you" said Vivian Stephens, a prolific romance editor and agent, about the changes in the genre (Haupt 2021).

That being said, for all the progress made since the 1990s, problematic work is still being published and lauded: a recent recipient of the RWA Vivian Award, *At Love's Command* (2020) glorified genocide (Bates 2021). The RWA finally rescinded the prize, saying "we cannot in good conscience uphold the decision of the judges in voting to celebrate a book that depicts the inhumane treatment of indigenous people and romanticizes real world tragedies that still affect people to this day" (RWA). It is very telling, though, that before an overwhelming response to this decision, the RWA had not understood the issue prior to awarding the prize: violence was absorbed into romance. Nevertheless, despite such lingering problems, there has been a distinct shift away from the "fairly narrow set of ethnic, cultural and aesthetic types" that has been the bread and butter of the genre, with books by authors like Helen Hoang going into multiple reprintings (Alter 2018).

Such changes in popular romance show that many writers are aware of the need for historical context even in their escapist narratives. Imagine reading Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* without knowing anything about the "horrid novels" she mentions, alludes to, mirrors, and sometimes pokes some fun at. Going beyond the contents of the gothic novels Austen satirizes, it is critical to know how they were fervidly consumed and when they fell out of popularity. Austen herself rewrote a frontispiece to explain that, between when she originally sold *Northanger Abbey*, known as *Susan*, for publication around 1803, and when it

was finally released from the original publisher in 1816, there had been a shift in what was popular: the gothic had fallen out of fashion. She writes:

The public are entreated to bear in mind that thirteen years have passed since it was finished, many more since it was begun, and that during that period, places, manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes. (Austen 343)

Even though Austen is celebrated for writing timeless stories, unhampered by too many overt historical references, *Northanger Abbey* is, in fact, grounded in a specific time. Austen herself knows this, not only because she deftly writes this satirical nudge to an entire genre and to popular consumption habits, but because she knew the urgency with which her novel needed to be published in order to hit on current references. Austen famously, or perhaps infamously now, wrote to that original publisher in 1809 as M.A.D., Mrs. Ashton Dennis, asking for an explanation as to why her manuscript hadn't been published as agreed upon (*Letters*, Austen 5).

Austen is a master of genre, and her allusions and direct references in her juvenilia and *Northanger Abbey* show that she is not only a satirist, but she also clearly understood and even appreciated the works she was often making fun of, the “horrid novels” written by Eliza Parsons, Francis Lathom, and Ann Radcliffe, in some way. Given that Austen was such a pro at reading genre and at making an entire novel revolve around a deep understanding of it, it remains surprising that, at the same time that readers link Heyer to Austen, often a discussion of Austen and Regency romance, a genre directly tied to Austen's works, remains contentious, and even looked down on. As we all know, Austen was a consumer and satirist of romance, so we cannot afford to dismiss twentieth-century and current reinterpretations of Regency romance if we are to fully understand how Austen is being read in modern spaces, and this includes the issue of who is being read alongside Austen. If we care not attentive, the risk is that an uncritical consumption of Heyer alongside Austen in ways that exclude historical context, invisibly confirms white supremacy.

This is a paradox in the Jane Austen reading circles I am in which comprise fandoms and book groups. In these spaces of popular reading, ironically, I see a fervor for digging deeper into those authors who influenced Austen, but a snubbing of the works Austen herself heavily influenced and that are popular today in much the same ways that gothic novels were popular: romance novels. I've brought this up a few times in Jane Austen discussion spaces on social media, from Twitter to Austen-focused Facebook groups, and the naysayers are very set

on maintaining a dangerously elitist wall between Austen and the current romance genre. In response, allow me to plot out why we do need to explore this popular genre, and Austen's influence on it. There are virtual spaces where fans of Austen can talk about their "slice" of what they enjoy about her works and legacy, from the text itself to movies, memes and more. When her legacy is edited to only include what is desirable to white people, mostly white women, who do not want to adjust their framework, these spaces can start cutting out historical context, and begin to look more like the fluffy confections that typify Georgette Heyer's skewed view of the Regency, than the multilayered one we know existed and that Austen reveals to us. While this is mainly focused on experiences online, this mentality is not limited to social media forums, and some of the gatekeeping to maintain Austen as more "academic," seems to be exuding from elitist, overwhelmingly white, circles. Not only does this kind of partial view detach Austen from genres she has influenced, but it also serves to reinforce white supremacy tendencies to limit the reading of Regency women to the mainly white heroines of Austen's work and protects those that have caused harm in the genre as a whole. Such a perpetuation only serves to allow harm to continue to percolate in romance spaces while invoking Austen as an inspiration.

Romance and Austen

Before looking at the emergence of Regency-set novels, let us take a turn about the genre as a whole, since that is also a point of contention in relation to Jane Austen. Popular Regency romance is a subgenre of the modern romance genre, which is focused on the romantic or love plot. Some in the social media Austen world, from Facebook groups to Twitter threads, feel it does a disservice to discuss the romance genre when in virtual or in-person spaces centered on Austen's works, even novels that directly reference her works. When romance is dismissed and disparaged, I think it's always worth digging into the internalized sexism in that dismissal. Historically, it is not uncommon for art, media, fashion, and books that women enjoy to be derided. Indeed, Austen herself shows us that exact form of sexism in *Northanger Abbey* through the character of John Thorpe who dismisses novels as if they were silly women:

Novels are all so full of nonsense and stuff; there has not been a tolerably decent one come out since Tom Jones, except *The Monk*; I read that t'other day; but as for all the others, they are the stupidest things in creation. (Austen 118)

Thorpe's reaction to his sister and Catherine discussing *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) is harsh and ultimately ill-informed. He starts off railing against *The*

Mysteries of Udolpho, but then professes an appreciation for Ann Radcliffe herself:

No, if I read any, it shall be Mrs. Radcliff's; her novels are amusing enough; they are worth reading; some fun and nature in them (Austen 118)

As with all of Thorpe's self-contradictions, this one reveals that, despite starting the conversation by attempting to be superior and by "correcting" Catherine, he reveals that he does not actually know much of novels or their authors. What is more important to Thorpe than being right is being loud and using his power to belittle Catherine and the novels she likes.

This is not dissimilar to the conversations that call romance trash, but then talk about the greatness of Jane Austen, while not fully acknowledging Austen's own investment in the romance plot. While not all romance is influenced by Austen, many in the genre, or working in relation to it, do still have major references to her, or are inspired by her work: Barbara Pym, Julia Quinn, Shannon Hale, Ibi Zoboi, Helen Fielding, Sonali Dev, Melissa de la Cruz are some of the most noteworthy. Ignoring the connections from Austen to romance, especially Regency romance, creates a very Thorpian discussion, where naysayers of romance cannot see the facts in front of them.

If Austen is concerned with finances in her world, let us now look at the finances associated with contemporary purveyors of romance books. The romance genre today is estimated to be worth \$1.08 billion dollars a year (Peterson 2019). It is consistently at the top of bestseller lists and is frequently adapted for cinema and TV. This is no small-time genre, nor is it as fleeting as it feels like the gothic novels were in popularity during Austen's time. Austen and her plots come up regularly in romance novels. From "enemies to lovers" stories that are thinly-veiled retellings of *Pride and Prejudice*, to diverse modernizations that center new perspectives, to even the meta-nature of Regency and Victorian heroines discussing reading Austen themselves, it does not take much to stumble upon Austen on a shelf of contemporary romance novels. It's not surprising when you look at her romantic plotlines, which inevitably work themselves out for the heroines to have a happy ending, or a HEA (happily ever after) in romance terms. On paper, Elizabeth Bennet would have never married Mr. Darcy, but part of the wit of Austen's social commentary is that they do come together, overcoming all obstacles. There are those who want to enforce a hard line between Austen and romance, evident in conversations on social media from recent Facebook comments, to well-known Austen blogs like [Bitch in a Bonnet](#) (Rodi 2009).

Whether this is because of lingering concern over Austen being confused with the Brontës, or because of some ingrained sexism around allowing women to enjoy things is hard to say. Yet it is undeniable when looking at Hallmark's yearly lineup of holiday films that *Pride and Prejudice* has set Austen firmly in the modern understanding of romance, even if the movies are just using the names "Pemberley," "Darcy," and "Elizabeth."

On-screen adaptations have done nothing to prevent that association either. The much-loved 1995 BBC miniseries *Pride and Prejudice* was known for turning up the steam after a producer who was discussing the miniseries was misquoted and ended up with a headline that read "Sex Romp Jane Austen" (Grimes 1996). Indeed, Darcy's bathing scenes are more reminiscent of a Regency romance than close to Austen's novel. Despite these apparently "inaccurate" scenes, they are possible in the world of a romance plot. This production is still heralded for its "accuracy" to the book, but I think part of its success hinges on the popularity of the Regency romance subgenre, which give readers scenes Austen herself would never have written. It's clear that the relationship between being praised for "accuracy" and being demeaned for "inaccuracy" depends on how uncomfortable certain audiences are made by the choices.

Georgette Heyer and Regency Romance

In the online world of Janeites, the conversation inevitably turns to how people can read more authors like Austen. In reading recommendation threads people often acknowledge that they read Heyer because she is seen as being foundational to the romance genre and even to defining the genre. Indeed, in *Georgette Heyer's Regency World*, Jennifer Kloester says Heyer is "the creator of the Regency genre of historical romance" (Kloester 2005). As Heyer's work set a precedent for a genre, and for research around the Regency era for some romance authors. Regency romance readers may pick up a book and immerse themselves in this space without realizing the foundational problems the genre has been trying to work itself away from, namely the problematic prejudices that Heyer brought to the table.

This critical view isn't just about Heyer or Austen; it's about the way all these issues meld together in how enthusiasts perceive and reproduce the whitewashed and fetishized idea of the Regency, and how that is weaponized to edit out discussions around non-white perspectives. This gatekeeping trickles down from skewed perceptions that partially come from the tradition of Regency romance. The evolution of Regency-centered fiction cannot be discussed without looking at Heyer, an anti-Semitic and racist author whose abridged works have worked to

overhaul her problematic writing, with certain new editions editing out choice passages. The current ebook available from Sourcebooks put the words right back in, including a disturbing passage about Mr. Goldhanger's "Semitic nose," and greasy hair, as well as Herbert's comment that his brother Charles is "as tightfisted as a Jew" (Ness 2013). In *The Grand Sophy* (1950), there are blatant anti-Semitic and bigoted passages even though this was written in 1950, after the Holocaust and after so much discourse around the atrocities would have been a mainstay (Weekes 2020). Heyer continues to be a gateway into the Regency fiction world for contemporary readers, as Stephen Fry's review, quoted above, exemplifies.

Heyer's problematic history recently came to the fore for me when someone submitted a post about her for approval on the [Jane Austen Universe](#), a Facebook group I created and help moderate with a team. The moderating team left it up to the FB Group to talk about how to handle this because there was concern that, without a context post about Heyer's background, more romance and Austen readers would be led to her without knowing about her racist content. The comments on that thread were varied, and some even very heated to the degree that a few white women left the group entirely over it. Besides the folks who wanted to exclude romance from any discussion in an Austen group, there were those who felt it unnecessary to make it required to add context to every Heyer-related post made in the group. I felt that the sheer volume of people in the comments who were startled at finding out that she was antisemitic was proof enough for needing educational materials for our community.

Heyer was recommended to me in many Jane Austen book clubs, and not one person mentioned her bigoted opinions. Once I realized Heyer's works had been abridged, conveniently editing out anti-Semitism (Ness 2013), I could see how so many readers would have never realized how deeply flawed her work is. Newer Regency romance readers who pick up her works might have no idea that the author was a bigot. In a community that prides itself on absorbing itself in Regency culture, such as knowing the historical details of dress and fashion, it is shocking to see so many firmly believe that facts about Heyer's problematic writing should be excluded. There can be endless threads about the issues to do with the fabric for costumes in Netflix's *Bridgerton*, but none about how Heyer's work is tied to conversations around racism and anti-Semitism in the community. This historical selectivity works along white boundaries.

Looking at The Folio Society's expensive reprinting of Heyer's *Venetia*, there is a lot of praise of a very edited version of the author. On the webpage she is heralded as a "literary legend" and her books are praised for "historical accuracy."

The publisher’s copy reads: “However, Heyer’s phenomenal popularity arises from her ability to elevate historical romance to the realm of literary fiction, placing her novels alongside those of Patrick O’Brian and Jane Austen” (The Folio Society 2021). We see an attempt to draw a distinct boundary between Heyer and romance, somehow making her more than romance. These framings of Heyer continue to shunt her more towards Austen, and away from popular romance (which is where you will find her in most bookshop shelves). Whether intentional or not, aligning Heyer with Austen also erases the former’s deeply flawed and whitewashed Regency period. Critical reading is necessary to parse out the differences between the authors, and their times, and to understand why Heyer’s anti-Semitism cannot be swept away but that Heyer is hiding her own unacceptable feelings under the guise of romance. For fans of Regency romance, the continued exploration of the era of Austen is often driven by an enthusiasm to learn about people of the time, but the downside is that not reading Heyer critically serves to excuse the problems she sets in place for the basis of a contemporary romance, and also ignores the strides others have made to create more inclusive romances. Trying so desperately to shift her to a “historical fiction” writer does a disservice, as it continues to protect false ideas of what the Regency was, as dictated by white people. The danger is having Heyer’s work read as history proper, when her work is more a reflection of her own era’s complex issues. Yes, there was racist, class and gender iniquity in Austen’s world, but her Regency world is more historically accurate, and Heyer’s is the escapism rooted in problems of her own time. It concerns me to see Heyer moved away from romance, which has recently made great strides to include more diverse voices, like Vanessa Riley’s. Even though romance promises escapism, readers are hungry for intentional works that, if they cannot fix the real issues of the Regency world, at least do not continue to reinforce modern bigotry.

This wrangling over what the Regency was and wasn’t, and what the romance plot is and isn’t, are reinforced by Fry in his article for *The Guardian* on Heyer. While espousing the greatness of Heyer, Fry still manages to make a point to put down romance as a whole, calling out the “absolutely appalling cover art that has defaced [Heyer’s] books since she was first published,” and even trying to spin her writing into something beyond the genre:

Her stories satisfy all the requirements of romantic fiction, but the language she uses, the dialogue, the ironic awareness, the satire and insight – these rise far above the genre. (Fry 2021)

Alongside these dismissive comments about the romance genre, Fry manages to claim that Heyer portrays a “recreation of an age faultless enough in setting” and

he insists that readers must “leave our 21st-century sensibilities behind” to police any potential criticism of Heyer’s racism. While I would not disagree that there was rampant sexism, racism, classism, anti-Semitism and much more during that era, this is incredibly dismissive of the fact that Heyer is not just painting a Regency that suits her needs; she is doing so in a biased format that reflects her own flaws and reproduces modern discrimination. The irony here, then, is that Heyer’s version of the Regency world is becoming more uncritically celebrated in ways that replicate the very (mis)reading of gothic fantasy that Austen was satirizing in *Northanger Abbey*.

Ironically, Fry is especially insightful regarding the contexts of Austen and romance. He writes, “in the matter of period dramas it is a truth universally acknowledged that a period film or TV show tells you more about the period in which it is made than the period in which it is set” (Fry 2021). Yet Fry does not want us to read Heyer’s through our own contemporary viewpoint. His attempts to present Heyer as transcending her genre, rather than being the foundation for a genre that has not only moved above her, but far beyond her, fit right into conversations centered in white fragility that wants to limit interrogations of racism. This serves to protect a false idea of Heyer’s work and legacy in a time when people from marginalized backgrounds are demanding that white communities recognize the legacies of racism and empire.

The argument that Heyer is “just a product of her time” ignores that she wrote antisemitism into her works well after World War II. *The Grand Sophy*, which contains multiple scenes of antisemitism, was written in 1950. World War II had been over since 1945, with cascading events like the Nuremberg trials (which took place between 1945-1949) prosecuting Nazi war criminals for crimes against humanity and documenting the atrocities of the regime (Nuremberg Trials Project). In the time leading up to the publication of *The Grand Sophy*, people of Heyer’s time were clearly rejecting the hate and violence of the war unveiled in these trials. The justification for her antisemitism being excusable for her time does not stand up to scrutiny unless those making that argument are alright with aligning her with the people who had those views at the time: Nazis.

And it is not so easy to glide over the fact that Heyer draws on Austenian plots and genre, however much many would wish to qualify that influence. Some argue that Heyer, though clearly inspired by Austen, is no more than a pastiche of Austen, which is reminiscent of a comment in *Eighteenth-Century Influences on Jane Austen's Early Fiction* that *Northanger Abbey* was also: “Austen's early pastiche on the Gothic novel” (Chishty-Mujahid; Fullerton). Layers of influence and mimicry, even mockery at times, between Austen, Heyer, and popular fictions

is critical to understanding modern representations and perceptions of the era, and even Austen herself. One watch of *Becoming Jane*, a 2007 film about Austen's life that took major liberties, shows how audiences, and certainly at least that production team, might see her as a romantic who had to give up her love after a whirlwind carriage ride for the sake of his family's survival. It is a film that, while claiming a biographical account, is often more like a romance novel than an Austen novel.

“One thing we need to keep in mind is that a lot of romance authors cut their teeth on Georgette Heyer's depiction of the era, and Georgette Heyer was a racist, and so her depiction of the era was deeply imperfect,” says Courtney Milan in a tweet from July 19, 2019 (@courtneymilan). If we can recognize the importance of context while reading Austen, surely, we can recognize that context in modern writing of her period is also important. Understanding the foundational issues in the subgenre is necessary when looking at the most popular piece of pop culture representing the Regency era in 2021: *Bridgerton*.

***Bridgerton* and Beyond**

Netflix's *Bridgerton* series is based on Julia Quinn's book series of the same name, a narrative that is firmly in the Regency romance genre. The books, published between 2000 and 2005, center on the *Bridgerton* family and the various trials and tribulations of their romantic lives in Regency society. It also features a fair share of Austen references (Matthew).

The books themselves do not feature Black characters, unlike the TV show, which made a point to cast diversely (Matthew). Regency London would not have been entirely white, so adding characters of color is a nudge toward historical accuracy that the books did not make. That being said, portrayals of Black characters, like Marina who is treated poorly by the Featheringtons for being with child in the show are far from perfect (Oliver). There was also the inclusion of a controversial rape scene, minorly altered from the book, that exploits racial dynamics. Showrunner Chris Van Dusen argued that the scene was “designed to ‘raise conversation’ around consent” (Konstantinides 2021).

But these are important topics to consider and trace backwards. Regency romance has not been without problematic plots and writing, but race and rape are also not wholly outside of the sphere of Austen. Willoughby and Wickham are both guilty of being predators and have shaky histories with consent. Moreover, the unfinished *Sanditon* featured a Black heiress, Miss Lambe, showing Austen's willingness to engage more explicitly with race and the proceeds of colonial

slavery in her world. These issues should not be walled off from being discussed side-by-side. It is quite difficult to believe that Austen readers will be shocked at the idea of romance being invoked beside Austen, and also believe that these same readers would not so much as blink at the knowledge that money to support Fanny is coming out of Sir Bertram's Antiguan plantations and the profits he made as an enslaver in *Mansfield Park*. While Austen may be subtle, the less polite, more exploitative parts of her world do come to light in her pages, and willfully ignoring and excluding discussion of those less sparkling parts of her worlds is one of the many ways fans of Regency romance and Austen can stay in a protective bubble of whitewashed history.

Even with these matters popping off the page in Austen's own work, I have seen online communities reject these truths, or even delete posts explaining Regency history and race as *Austen Authors* did on their group pages for being "too political" (Grant). Indeed, "political" in these online groups really starts to mean "anything that makes white people in these groups comfortable with white washing feel uneasy" and that often means there is no confrontation of white supremacy. Instead, these self-professed Austen-spaces whittle away discussion until it looks less like an Austen novel, and more like the whitewashed, sweet pastiche Heyer presents readers.

In Facebook groups like the Jane Austen Fan Club, there were even restrictions on posting about the *Bridgerton* series. Despite daily posts that definitely were not related to Austen but were centered on period dramas that reinforced the whiteness of perceptions of history, suddenly there was a fervor not only to delete posts about *Bridgerton*, but some members were eager to report posts and leave comments letting people know that posting about the show was a violation.

Many Austen and Regency groups find themselves in the historical accuracy fallacy cycle. They reject Netflix's *Bridgerton* for presenting Black people in Regency London and giving Black people wealth and power but embrace the whitewashed ideals of Heyer and shrug off accountability for wealth or a lack of racial equity. *Bridgerton* famously depicts Black people enjoying the world of the aristocracy and enjoying privileges the real Regency denied them. By erasing *Bridgerton* from the discussion of the era or Regency set fiction, communities further dig down into the fictional Regency world, one that Austen herself did not walk in, but that fans of Heyer would see as accurate. And while Heyer's Regency world does "slip into the sensibilities of another age" it is more from her age than Austen's. (Fry 2021)

Tracing the beginnings of Regency romance as a genre and plotting it through to today in the *Bridgerton* novels and the Netflix show, it becomes clear that understanding this modern genre and its history is as important to talking about Austen in pop culture as it would be to research the “horrid novels” in order to understand *Northanger Abbey* more deeply. If Austen was wise enough to know the evolution of novels when she rewrote her introduction to *Northanger Abbey* published in 1818, then why do her avid readers not want to stay on top of trends in genre that Austen herself was a master of? To understand and appreciate deeply the mocking and mimicking of gothic novels, readers would need some outside research and awareness of these works. Which is not too far off from researching and reading (even, enjoying) the Regency romance genre to trace the influence of Austen on a whole subset of popular fiction.

Certainly, readers can enjoy the discussion of *Northanger Abbey* without that context, but they are missing the scaffolding of the work. To understand modern Regency romances problems, the ones still present in the Netflix adaptation of *Bridgerton* despite best efforts to heavily revise and improve upon the source text, we have to look back to where it came from. Going further, we must also look at the gatekeeping in discussions around romance and Austen in online spaces. Why are discussions so divided and who gets to dictate who we are allowed to talk about in conjunction to Austen? As Austen herself shows in a cringe-worthy scene in *Northanger Abbey*: “Udolpho! Oh, Lord! Not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do” (Austen 118). When Catherine Morland asks if Mr. Thorpe has read *Udolpho*, he immediately dismisses it, making Catherine feel “humbled and ashamed” even feeling like she should apologize for the question. This is how it can feel to bring up romance, including *Bridgerton* and Heyer, in Austen spaces. Soon dismissed and made to feel ashamed for even bringing it up, told that the two have nothing to do with each other. Yet through even a basic assessment of the history of the genre, and even cracking open a modern Regency romance, it is clear where Austen’s influence lives on.

Readers of *Northanger Abbey* will recognize how Mr. Thorpe has open disdain for gothic novels, and for anything the women around him seem to enjoy. His actions show readers what the original mansplainer was: rude and ill-educated. Putting down Regency romance, and the pervasive influence of the romance plot, not only ignores Austen’s distinct influence on contemporary fiction, but it also can be as ill-mannered and sexist as Mr. Thorpe. Moreover, the ongoing marketing of Heyer as the definitive writer of Regency romance risks leveraging Austen to use romance while deliberately denying its present role in offering a white Regency world to fans.

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