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**The Power of Gossip: A Feminist Analysis of Julia Quinn's  
*Romancing Mister Bridgerton* (2002)**

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in Language and Culture**

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## Dedication 01

In the name of Allah, the most Gracious and Merciful, peace be upon His messenger,

I would like to dedicate this work:

First, to my beloved parents, whose unwavering love, support, and sacrifices have been the foundation of my journey and life. May Allah protect them always and grant them his mercy and guidance, just as they have always cared for me with love and devotion.

To my aunt, Mama **Warda**, with deepest gratitude for the love, care, and support. Her presence in my life is a true blessing. May Allah bless her and keep her safe.

To my wonderful partner, **Nada**. This journey would not have been the same without her.

To the companions of my path, and the eyes through which I see the world, my brothers **Abdo** and **Dhirar**.

To the person who holds a special place in my heart that no one else ever could, my one and only sister, **Jouhaina**.

To her husband, **Adem**, for his unwavering support and generosity.

And to their beloved children, **Tasbih** and **Chaith**, whose laughter and love continually brighten our lives.

To my cousins, each by name.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to you, dearest gentle reader.

## Dedication 02

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

All praise and thanks are due to Allah, whose boundless mercy, guidance, and blessings have carried me through every step of this journey.

Firstly, I want to thank myself for the strength and determination I showed throughout this journey. Despite the challenges and moments of doubt, I kept pushing forward and never gave up. This achievement is a testament to my hard work, resilience, and belief in my potential. I am proud of how far I have come.

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## Abstract

The growing prevalence of feminist narratives in historical romance fiction has served to complicate traditional depictions of gender power relations, especially within the framing of Regency romances. This study explores how Julia Quinn's *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* (2002) rearticulates gossip as a tool of female power, examining how the feminine and often trivializing practice of gossip can become a form of subversion against patriarchal authority. Previous critics have tended to dismiss romance novels' political potential, and the genre is often dismissed as mere escapist entertainment. In particular, few have looked at how gossip, as a plot device, can be a source of power and subversion for heroines. This research aims to rectify this by looking at the subversive role of gossip in Quinn's novel. Using feminist literary theory and close textual analysis, this study investigates how Penelope Featherington's secret self-designation as Lady Whistledown helps her to regain a voice, exert influence on social discourse, and contest the obligations of womanhood in her culture. Findings indicate that gossip does not function simply as a superficial social performance; it is recognized as a feminist strategy for voice, visibility, and autonomy. Quinn's account of the reclamation of gossip as an impactful form of gendered communication is an addition to the debates on female resistance, authorship, and re-imagining power in historical fiction.

**Keywords:** Feminism, *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, Gossip, Lady Whistledown, Society paper.

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## Introduction

Literature is an artistic mirror of the world, blending creativity with meaning to reflect the soul of society, where talented writers can express their thoughts and emotions. It has continuously developed and improved, marking the changes in the world around it. Over time, literature has evolved, reflecting the shifting values and ideas of different eras. Literature has granted its authors and readers the freedom from structured thoughts towards more liberated emotional, romantic, personal, and societal ideas. The Regency era (1811-1820) was a transformative period that played a significant role in shaping literary and cultural movements. This period is defined as a fascinating era in British history, which technically lasted from 1811 to 1820 when George, the Prince of Wales, became the "Prince Regent" because his father, King George III, was too ill to rule. The term is used in a very loose sense to encompass the years from 1795 to 1837, during which intense cultural, social, and political change occurred. According to this cultural and societal shift, many influential writers produced works that reflect their struggles, experiences, and values at that time.

Julia Quinn (1970) is a famous contemporary American author for her masterpieces set in the Regency era. There are several other authors who write about the Regency era, and their works are just as great as Julia Quinn's. Loretta Chase is well known for her Regency romances, such as *Viscount Vagabond* (1988), a novel in the Noblemen series. Another well-known author, Mary Balogh, with novels such as *A Summer to Remember* (2003), captivates readers with tales set against the backdrop of Regency England. Stella Riley's works, such as *The Black Madonna* (1992), also explore the same historical settings. Quinn, whose real name is Julie Pottinger, was born in 1970 and grew up mainly in New England. She graduated from Harvard Radcliff College with a degree in Art History before she decided to become a doctor and attended the Yale School of Medicine. However, due to her love of historical romances set in Regency London, she started writing her own novels and became full-time



writer. She began her literary career at the age of twenty-four with her first novel, *Splendid* (1995). She wrote more than forty books, including novels, novellas, and anthologies. But she is widely known for her master, *The Bridgerton* Collection, specifically *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* (2002).

Julia Quinn's *Bridgertons* is an eight-novel collection of Regency romances based upon one Bridgerton brother or sister's quest for family and love while trying to meet early 19<sup>th</sup>-century British society's expectations. The close-knit and aristocratic siblings of the family are Daphne, Anthony, Benedict, Colin, Eloise, Francesca, Hyacinth, and Gregory. Each novel reads the brother or sister's romance, yet also tracks their sibling relationships and the high society life in London. *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* is Julia Quinn's fourth novel in the Bridgerton series, and it features a romantic story between Colin Bridgerton and Penelope Featherington. Penelope, a society wallflower, has been dreaming about Colin, her best friend's brother, for years without Colin even having a suspicion. On the other hand, Colin, a cosmopolitan and daredevil who has spent many years on the road around the world, returns to London irritable and agitated with his self-image as the shallow, charming ladies' man. On his return to London, he is just starting to look at Penelope differently, catching fleeting glimpses of her wit and sense of humor. The play gets into motion when Colin finds out that Penelope has a huge secret to keep she is none other than the famous Lady Whistledown, the mysterious gossip author who has enchanted London's "crème de la crème". The news takes Colin by surprise at first, but soon makes him all the prouder of her.

As Penelope and Colin take the jump from friends to lovers, they have to overcome the weight of public opinion and internal fears to live happily ever after. The novel is about matters like acceptance of oneself, skin-deep love, and courage that is incidental to the act of existence itself. *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* has been praised for its humor, emotional

resonance, and the pleasure taken in the resolution of the long-hinted romance between Colin and Penelope.

Julia Quinn wrote this significant novel in contemporary times, setting the story in the Regency era. This allowed her to merge modern ideas and concepts with ancient structures, which also allowed readers of this time to read this novel by referencing themes of interest to readers of this contemporary era, such as female empowerment, self-acceptance, and the patriarchal society. Quinn presents the heroine, Penelope Featherington, as a sweet and intelligent woman. She is a strong and clever girl despite the societal expectations and traditional beliefs that women went through during that time. This method of mixing past and present makes the novel very important and attractive to readers, and it also highlights the role of both genders in society. The main objectives of this study are: to examine how gossip has power on society, and how the writings of Lady Wisdown influence society in terms of societal and romantic expectations, and their role in shaping the regency era's women. Thus, some of the questions to be answered in the present study are : Is women's role dictated by society? What is the role of Lady Wisdown in shaping social narratives? How does Julia Quinn use gossip as a tool of societal influence? How does Penelope Featherington represent women's resistance against the patriarchal norms in the Regency era ? Finally, how does she use gossip to reach her goal, to empower herself within her society?

Pamela Regis, in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel (2003)*, thinks about the possibility of romance novels as feminist novels. Regis examine how the genre has evolved, with feminist subversions, and demonstrates women exercising agency despite restrictive social pressures.

Laura Kipnis explores gossip as a weapon of empowerment in her book *Against Love: A Polemic (2003)*. This book investigates how ordinary speech can serve as a means of

resistance for women within patriarchal cultures. The author maps gossip as a powerful social modality of interaction that transcends traditional power structures.

Niko Besnier, in *Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics (2009)*, studies how gossip, often seen as meaningless or harmful, actually plays a significant role in shaping power, social rules, and everyday politics in a small Pacific Island nation of Tonga community. With the use of daily life examples, the book illustrates how people use gossip to influence others, enforce morals, deal with issues like inequality and outside influences, and argues that gossip is a fundamental part of how societies function.

Shallcross, Ramsay, and Barker, in their article *The Power of Malicious Gossip (2011)*, state that evil gossip is specifically prohibited within the workplace. This study explores how poisonous office gossip operates as a corrosive power practice, harming targeted workers and organizational performance. Through action research, it reveals gossip's role in workplace mobbing, which is systematic harassment through rumor-spreading, while simultaneously serving as an informal but damaging power practice.

Recent scholarly investigations, like Devoney Looser's *The Making of Jane Austen (2017)*, acknowledging the lasting significance of Austen on feminist discourse and contemporary popular culture. Looser contends that every new generation of readers and scholars has at once altered, shaped, and reconstituted Austen's reputation, calling attention to different parts of her novels in ways that align with formerly proposed feminist ideals. The constantly shifting evaluation of Austen's work depicts the complexity and richness of her literature, supporting its continued relevance with respect to gender and social norms.

Several earlier studies have repeatedly shown that gossip encourages various forms of helpful and cooperative behaviors (Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Shank et al., 2019) and acts of kindness toward others, along with mutual trust (Bozoyan and Vogt; Feinberg et al.; Fonseca

and Peters); People tend to act more generously and cooperatively when they know others might talk about their behavior.

Gelfand, Pan, Hsiao, and Nau, in *"Explaining the Evolution of Gossip" (2024)*, explain that gossip is the exchange of personal information about absent third parties. However, the evolution of this pervasive aspect of human societies remains a mystery. This present article proposes an evolutionary cycle of gossip and examines it with an agent-based evolutionary game-theoretic model.

Ana Simón Brumos, in her dissertation *"Jane Austen's Influence on Contemporary Romance Novels" (2024)*, looks at the direct and indirect impact of Jane Austen on modern fiction. Modern fiction often borrows from Jane Austen in either direct allusion to her established works or reinterpretation of her themes and Regency-era settings. Modern writers continue to experiment with her signature (astute marriages, social advancement, and city society satires) and supplement these timeless ingredients with their contemporary spin.

The present study is organized into three chapters. The first chapter is entitled Historical and Feminist Literary Context of Regency Era, which gives an overview of the history and the feminist literary context of this period, which is the Regency Era. This chapter is divided into two sections: historical context of the Regency era, which talks about the historical and cultural context, and feminist literary context, which explores how literature and female writers were in this period.

The second chapter is entitled The Regency Society's Views and Expectations of the Female Protagonist, and it is divided into The Society's Perception of Penelope, which is about how the society members see her, and Expectations from Penelope, which talks about how they expect her to behave in society.

The last chapter is Lady Whisledown Speaks: Gossip as Female Empowerment in

*Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, which is divided into *Lady Whistledown Speaks: From Silence to Authorship*, explores the emergence of Lady Whistledown as a powerful anonymous voice in Regency society. And *The Power of Malicious Gossip*, which talks about how Lady Whistledown's acerbic and salacious commentary functions as a lethal social weapon, laying bare how gossip, often casually dismissed as frivolous or harmful, can be intentionally wielded to challenge the status quo, expose hypocrisy, and exert agency in a world where women exercise little to no formal power.

In *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, Julia Quinn indicates the far-reaching role of gossip both as a tool of oppression and as a means to the personal empowerment of the lives of women. A feminist-oriented study would explore how gossip shapes expectations and reinforces patriarchal control, yet provides women a presence in the troublesome sphere of social existence that tries to deny them that right altogether. The analysis follows the channels of gossip exercised by the woman writing under the pen name Lady Whistledown. It explores the innate power that inspires Penelope Featherington's metamorphosis from a wallflower to one willing to enter society. Ultimately, the reading seeks to reveal how Quinn constructs an alternative narrative arc in her grand romance. At the same time, it becomes evident that gossip, in the way it is employed, emerges as a powerful means of self-definition and resistance to the many demands of traditional society.

## **Chapter I: Historical and Feminist Literary Context of The Regency Era**

This first chapter is theoretical and is structured into two main sections. The first section discusses the historical context of the regency era. And the second section examines the feminist literary context of the Regency era. It deals with the cultural and social landscape of the Regency period, as something of the hierarchical nature of everyday life is implied. It is an investigation of the unique fashion, the dominance of the social events (balls), and the literary environment that rendered novels into the key component of expression. It highlights the wave of women in the literary arena, which often defied the norm of the day, while launching marriage and female agency in their works. The work of women writers in this early period had an impact and continues to impact the literary tradition and the development of contemporary literature.

### **I.1 Historical Context of The Regency Era**

The Regency era in England takes its name from the period that comes after the Georgian era and before the Victorian era. The Regency went through an official period of nine years, with office commencing with George, Prince of Wales's formal appointment on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 1811, and ending with the proclamation of George IV on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January 1820. The word Regency, however, is generally used more flexibly to refer to the years 1780 - 1830, largely because the future George IV was a significant social and cultural force shared across the broader time frame. This use is also partly due to the long period of political uncertainty caused by his father, King George III's (The Mad King George) serious ongoing mental illness, which began in 1788, and led Parliament to consider introducing the Regency Bill of 1789. The King did eventually recover, and the Bill was withdrawn, but if it had gone forward, the Prince of Wales would have had a regent much earlier. Even so, this use shows how even after the formal Regency from 1811-1820, the relaxed use of Regency

commemorated George IV's lasting influence and the resulting and sustained political uncertainty caused by George III (Hovorková 15 ).

During the regency, the society was stratified into specific social strata determined by unyielding class hierarchies that determined most aspects of life on a daily basis and the individual.

### **I.1.1 Society Structure in The Regency Era**

There was a rigid social order during the Regency: the aristocracy stood at the top. The nobility, from highest to lowest, included dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons; each with his title and his domains. After the gentry came people who owned land but had no noble titles. The professionals and the merchants were growing in numbers, yet the middle class had relatively lower social power. At the bottom of society were made up of workers and those with insignificant incomes. This system was rigidly maintained, which made social advancement quite impossible. The impact that such rigid systems create in people's lives and communication is amazing after all (Toxigon)

### **I.1.2 The Art of Status: Nobility, Power, and Clothing in Regency Britain**

During the Regency period, British society was characterized by a strict and hierarchical peerage system. At the top stood the dukes, the most powerful members of the nobility, followed by marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons. Each title came with specific privileges, responsibilities, and forms of address, shaping both political influence and social rank. Knights and baronets, though lower in status, held honorary and hereditary positions of respect. According to Tiffany Thomas, these ranks were not only symbolic but were central to the functioning of political and social life in Regency England, reflecting a deep-rooted reverence for nobility and tradition. Alongside this rigid hierarchy, the era also witnessed a flourishing of culture and refinement, particularly in fashion. As Arora and Love highlight,

both men's and women's attire was marked by elegance and attention to detail. Beau Brummell set the tone for men's fashion with tailored coats, waistcoats, and accessories like cravats and canes, promoting a sophisticated image influenced by the Prince Regent. Women's fashion, as Kristen Koster explains, was highly structured and varied by time of day and occasion, with strict dress codes dictating styles from "undress" morning gowns to ornate "full-dress" evening wear. Together, these elements of peerage and fashion illustrate the deeply ceremonial and class-conscious nature of Regency society.

The fashion was changing to accommodate the modest clothes, which wouldn't need the ornate designs customarily part of the elite apparel. Fashion changed after the revolution to make clothing less elaborate, an attempt to avoid the lower classes from being dissatisfied with the apparent opulence of the upper classes, a cause among others which prompted the downfall and execution of the French common classes. When it comes to this, the women sprinkled their clothing with white and the subtle embellishments of embroidered, modest frill detailing on the hem and sleeves. In this way, women could maintain a modest garb, but still express a personal idea through garments (Love 22).

### **I.1.3 Regency Balls**

Dancing was much more than an enjoyable experience to members of Regency society. A quality young lady engaged in the round of dances and other entertainments during the London season would not have been under any false notion that she was there to merely enjoy herself. She was probably not a good idea and even less so in the case of her parents - her reason for attending the dances was for her to take advantage of the opportunity of making a good match (Knowles). The nineteenth century had two major types of balls to consider, public and private. The main difference was the expectations for social behavior. Public balls were public events usually held in Town Halls or similar local venue, and they were open to anyone who bought a subscription to attend all the balls within the season. While tickets were



available to the public, getting one was not always an easy task. These events drew a mix of locals and visitors unfamiliar with the local customs (Grace 32). In contrast, private balls were only open with a specific invitation. Women were warned against attending public balls or other public entertainments regularly in the early part of the nineteenth century, because there was a belief that too many appearances in public will diminish a woman's social worth according to James. At private balls, it was considered impolite for a woman to refuse a dance unless she decided not to dance the rest of the night (Böðvarsdóttir 7).

## **I.2 Feminist Literary Context of The Regency Era**

### **I.2.1 Women and the Rise of the Novel During The Regency Era**

English Literature of the Regency Period was revolutionary, with romanticism and realism rising. It was the time when novels gained popularity as a prominent literary form. The Regency Period saw the emergence of new literary trends and revolutionary developments in writing and content. The broader social changes influenced authors, and their writing expressed the tensions, ironies, and ambiguities of the day, away from sentimental fiction to newer social conventions such as class, gender, and morality.

In a wave of political, social, and cultural currents, the literature of the Regency period displayed a remarkable variety and complexity. Following the example of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and others, the Romantics condemned the formalized reasoning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and emphasized emotion, imagination, and appreciation of the natural world (Metzger 14). It was during this era that two great trends in literary history appeared, the rise in popularity of the English novel, and the transformation of detailed book-making processes (Eighteenth Century and Romanticism 1701–1836).

While the English novel had emerged earlier in the eighteenth century, it was during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that some of the most remarkable writers came to prominence. ( Eighteenth Century and Romanticism 1701–1836).

Although it was initially regarded as a highly sentimental and melodramatic form of reading that was not suitable for cultured readers, the novel began to earn mainstream acceptance after--in part--*the popularity of Sir Walter Scott's Waverley (1814)*, a novel about an English nobleman caught up in the 1745 Jacobite insurrection, and more explicitly blissful examples, such as *Ivanhoe (1819)* (also a Sir Walter Scott novel) which featured largely inescapable noble knights embroiled in sordid oppressions in royal family conflicts. The gothic novel, which included events such as those depicted in *Frankenstein (1818)*, along with violent, tragic maxims that were seasoned with horrific explorations like Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794)*, willfully exaggerated various horror themes. In other words, realistic novels and their plausible everyday characters arose as a reaction to the previous ornate and ludicrous world of Gothic fantasy literature. For instance, *Frances Burney's Evelina (1778)* offered comic representations of upper-class English sociality, while portraying life in working-class London as it was. It is also worth noting the advancement of printing technologies and a growing lower-class readership (especially women) made books affordable and more widely accessible, and their tastes were beginning to emerge in the trends of authors and the publishing industry (Metzger 14)

P.Guna Sundari, in her *The Theme of Love and Marriage in Jane Austen's Novels: Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility (2015)*, states that Jane Austen (1775–1817) is often referred to as the queen of the Regency novel (Metzger 14). Jane Austen composed *Pride and Prejudice* in a society where women's lives were restricted by societal expectations. live most of their lives at home, bear children, raise them, cook for them, and make a home. Women were also taught the art of sewing as one of their skills. sing, dance, compose poetry,

read, and acquire the knowledge of how one play the musical instruments. They only wanted to find a suitable husband, no matter how he was. man as long as safe and secure, they were well-pocketed with money and comfortable home. Her novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, is a very good example of beauty and reality (108).

During the Regency period, women did not have any property rights or rights that could be considered limited or few (Arora 230). In the early 1800s, women were often confined to the margins of the prevalent historical narrative. The mandates of society restricted women to the boundaries of domestic trespassery while men dominated the public and intellectual life of the time. In spite of this patriarchal structure, a type of quiet, revolutionary change was in motion. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813, reflects this quiet refusal, as it uses the more humble form of the novel to question social conventions and advocate for a more empowered position for women. *Pride and Prejudice* is considered one of the greatest achievements in English literature, noted for its incisive social commentary, careful construction of character, and its intricate representation of the time it reflects. At its heart, the novel offers a measured yet telling critique of the patriarchal system which boxed women into binding roles. The personal journey of Elizabeth Bennet allows Austen to continually pull at the threads of womanhood while troubling equality and independence to navigate a flawed and constrained social order (Chowdhury and Sofi 1817).

### **I.2.2 Women's Contribution to the Development of the Novel**

Jane Austen was an English novelist best known for her six novels, which implicitly read, criticize, and comment about the English landed gentry at the end of the eighteenth century. Women's dependence on marriage for the attainment of favourable social standing and economic security is a theme developed in Austen's storylines. Her works are an implicit criticism of novels of sensibility of the second half of the 18th century and part of the

transition to the literary realism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her mastery of social comment, realism, and sharp irony has earned her reputation with critics and scholars (Jane Austen).

During the Regency era (1811-1820) when class structures in society were very rigid, roles for the women were very few, and society placed rigid restrictions on behaviour and marriage, Jane Austen author's flourished. Women had little access to the law and were fairly valued on the prospect of marrying, and social mobility was hampered by the species of class distinctions. Conformity was essential, and nonconformity to social norms meant harsh judgment. In this context, Austen's novels are acutely sarcastic on issues of gender, class, and marriage. Her heroines are often transgressive of a patriarchal social structure: Elizabeth Bennet is eloquently famous in *Pride and Prejudice* for refusing a financially lucrative but personally unattractive marriage, particularly in favour of autonomy and emotional truth above monetary gain. The hand of class and wealth is also felt in *Sense and Sensibility (1811)* with the lives of the Dashwood sisters, whose plight of very scant resources, incurred as a result of the laws of inheritance that favoured male heirs, created a reliance on their male relatives and a moral dilemma for women subjected to economic insecurity. Furthermore, Austen criticizes the institution of marriage as a social contract which happens to precede love, a necessity more often than not. In *Emma (1815)*, the meddling of the main person in the lives of others romantically reveals a complex relationship between personal affection, social ambition, and class expectations. Using these themes, Austen both comments and inquires on the social realities of her own time (Angloshirts).

Louisa May Alcott (1832 – 1888) was an American novelist best known for her novel *Little Women*. She was from Pennsylvania but lived most of her life in Massachusetts. Alcott was brought up in a reform-minded family that experimented with abolition, women's rights, which informed her writing and values. To sustain her family, she was a teacher, seamstress,

and author. Her books usually reflect her experience and beliefs. Apart from writing, she was also a nurse during the Civil War (Smith).

Louisa May Alcott's writing, especially *Little Women (1868)*, is a sensitive form of mirroring the social behaviors of nineteenth-century American society, but also a gentle rebuff of it. In her depiction of the March sisters; especially the ambitious, unconventional Jo, Alcott offers readers of the time a picture of domestic life informed by conventionally feminized expectations, and inhabited by characters who challenge and defy such bounds. Alcott learned to navigate dominant ideologies of her day and placed messages on gender roles, personal freedom, and self-fulfillment in a traditional framework of family and morality. While Alcott was not an open denouncer of societal norms, her writing revealed restrictions that society placed on women and offered a challenge to the belief that intellectual ambition and independence were incompatible with womanhood. Doing so, however, Alcott's work not only served as a reflection of the values of her age, but also as an agent for change of a progressive nature (Midoun and Mebrek 22-29)

According to Joyce M.S. Tompkins, best known as a writer of novels and poems, Charlotte Brontë, a distinguished novelist and poet, is most famous for her novel *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte was born on 21 April 1816, in Yorkshire, England, as the third youngest of her brothers and sister; six siblings of the Brontë family. To fight the biases against women in the literary world, when she wrote, Charlotte published her works under the name Currer Bell. Working with her sisters Emily and Anne, she produced valuable works of writing that occupy prime positions in the literature of England. Morality, social class dynamics, and women's empowerment issues come out strongly through her novels. Charlotte died at the age of 38 in 1855, although her great influence on Victorian literature still influences today.

*Jane Eyre (1847)*, as analyzed in *Social Conflicts in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre*, is an insightful critique of the social traditions of Victorian England; this is the book by

Charlotte Brontë *Jane Eyre*. The study explores how Brontë uses the figure of Jane to discuss the themes of class differences, expected behaviour by society regarding women, and gender-specific limitations. By presenting the fight that Jane conducts against oppression and insisting on independence and equality for girls and women, Brontë challenges the expectations of her time, confirming her interest in overcoming barriers that were related to women's roles and social opportunities. Lacking nuances, but offering a devastating critique of the lack of justice at the level of structure in the society of the 19th century, Brontë's novel conveys her innovative perception and her refusal of the sequential promptness. (Djafri, Hachani 19.24).

George Eliot, born Mary Ann Evans in 1819, was a prominent English writer known for both her novels and poetry. Though best remembered for her fiction, her poems also reflect deep thought and moral insight. She challenged traditional beliefs, especially in religion, and her work often explores themes of human responsibility and legacy. One of her best-known poems, *O May I Join the Choir Invisible* (1884), expresses her hope to live on through the good she does in the world. (George Eliot).

Sonal Ahlawat's article "Moral Vision in Novels of George Eliot" revolves around the way Eliot's novels create and thwart the aspirational mechanisms of the society at that time. In her novels, *Middlemarch*, *Adam Bede* (1859), and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), George Eliot follows the lives of people whose existence is connected with the moral and social codes of Victorian England. Throughout her writings, Eliot focuses on characters struggling with their own right and wrong, head-on in the face of disparity between personal morality and societal conformity. Eliot is repeatedly concerned with the importance of moral decisions, the consequences of one's actions, and empathy in her works, thus giving an insight into her larger interest in the ethical foundations of a society. With vividly rendered characters and a true-to-life social landscape, Eliot captures the current norms of the society as well as

suggests the readers question those omissions inherent in it. This moral perspective places her novels as mirrors and critics of the moral ambiguity that characterizes her society (5100-5103).

### **I.2.3 Female Themes of The Regency Era**

Representatives of the literature of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Regency period, are remarkable in their thematic content, which reflects the cultural subtleties of the time.

#### **A. Satire and Social Commentary**

During this era, authors had resorted to satire to used to provide their sharp criticism of their society, many times in the form of vivid narrations. Literary figures skilfully observed the failings, pretensions, and self-indulgence of the upper structure of society, including the elite, aristocrats, and even the very monarchy. Writers applied satire in stories that could be considered innocent or even, mostly calling for a smile or a wink, satirical, but they wrapped up more serious social jokes behind the romantic or witty cover. As part of the key writers who used this method quite successfully, Jane Austen stands out. By writing *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen explores the marriage concept of how such a union was highly sought after for its status advantages, not because of love. Austen intensifies the characters of Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh to accent the savage impact of excessive class pride or rigid social regulations. Using the technique of satire, writers were able both to entertain their readers and to criticize the narrow and constrictive society of the period. (Brainly)

#### **B. Gothic Elements**

Gothic literature became popular in locating an unholy spirit atmosphere and dramatic storytelling, which attractively engaged readers. Many of these stories utilized moribund,

sinister backdrops, decaying mansions, empty lands, or reigning storms to discuss *The Psychology of Fear*, *Clandestine Desires*, and *The Supernatural*.

*Frankenstein (1818)* by Mary Shelly features an important place in Gothic literature. The novel addresses unanticipated risks of uncontrolled innovations and ethical conflicts that scientists find themselves in when they leave the fence. The sense of unease and the maelstrom of characters, as well as the consideration of monstrosity, present the principal Gothic concepts, uniting horror and searching the deepest philosophical questions about human nature and loneliness, selfhood. This genre of fiction allowed writers and readers to speak about their most troubling fears and concerns evocatively and in terms of metaphor: loneliness, selfhood. This genre of fiction allowed writers and readers to speak about their most troubling fears and concerns evocatively and in terms of metaphor (Brainly).

### **C. Political and Historical Context**

The literature during the Regency Period was greatly influenced by the political environment. The long-drawn-out Napoleonic wars, the scarring left by the French Revolution, and heightened concerns over national identity had a major impact on themes found in novels of the era. The effects of these events made patriotism, the evolution of social life, and serious deliberations about the national heritage, top topics. Sir Walter Scott was responsible for writing predominantly historical novels, utilizing storytelling to reveal complex relations between history and national identity. *Waverley (1814)*, by Sir Walter Scott, is a contextual study of Scottish heritage and a study of the challenges arising from tradition and progress. Verse writers of this era could capture the ambiance of a time beset by tremors and vagueness and provide a taste of how the political sparring in the age affected society at large (brainly).



#### **D. Realism and Domesticity**

At the same time, while Gothic and Romantic novels reigned, the writers of the Regency focused their interest on the true depiction of domestic life and realistic problems. The everyday realities of such women, and those of the middle class, were keenly depicted in their works by regency authors such as Jane Austen. Some of the regular themes involve family dynamics, courtship, transfer of estates, and placement in the social ranking scale. In her works, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Emma* (1815), Austen examines complex relationships between social status, expectations of society, and personal values in everyday life. By addressing everyday issues and human relationships, Austen provided deep coverture of the human condition and norms around society. Her very careful depiction of the domestic situation guaranteed that her stories focused on the individual and emotional, which opposed rather starkly with the grander, more fantastic concerns too frequently addressed by other authors of the time (Brainly).

#### **E. Love And Marriage**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jane Austen came to be one of the most appreciated women writers. Marriage and love are the major subject matter of the works by Jane Austen. She considers love and marriage to be a primary problem that shapes our lives. After Shakespeare, no writer has managed to achieve this. conveyed a completely real picture of love. She formulated love in relation to the larger social environment. She sees that Jane Austen's heroines take careful management of their romantic lives for granted. love. Outside Jane Austen's novels, there is no heroine who tells a lover of hers that intelligence is more important in her life than anything else. than for her good looks. Jane Austen's novels represent a realist version of life and the institution of marriage. She sees love and marriage as major topics that explain human life (Guna et al. 109). She has an honorable place among the English novelists (Guna et al. 107).

### **I.2.4 Influence of Jane Austen on Contemporary Romance Novels**

Novel at that period found great growth as a genre of literature, thereby entering its own phase, which was partly influenced by the broader Romantic movement ( Eighteenth Century and Romanticism 1701–1836). Although Jane Austen's novels primarily examine the misunderstandings between would-be lovers, other works from the Regency era, for example, the novels *Marriage (1818)*, *A Simple Story (1791)*, *Belinda (1801)*, and *Camilla (1796)*, spoke about women and men of marriageable age, often with romance and intrigue to one degree or another. The Regency Era is also the inspiration for many novels today that often claim to continue in the romantic tradition of Regency fiction but may reflect the etiquette and strict social conventions of the time, and the customs, fashions, and manners of genteel society. What we have come to know today as Regency romances has evolved into a subgenre of romance or even historical fiction in which some portray identity and intimacy as more extreme than acknowledged previously, and it seems that, like many trends, their popularity rises and falls in the literary world. Yet the most recognizably enduring and treasured Regency romances are those depicting the spirit of Austen, including specifically, Regency *Buck (1935)*, which is credited as establishing the subgenre of Regency romance. These books set a precedent which few writers can replicate, and while many authors have contributed to the genre of Regency romances, none with quite the same charm, entertainment, and detailed exposition of upper-class life as many novels by Austen's contemporaries (Metzger 15).

Many Regency writers, those who wrote in the early 1800s as well as those contemporary authors who reimagine this era, draw their works around manners, courtship, and social class. While Jane Austen wrote romantic domestic novels about the landed gentry, Georgette Heyer, influenced by Austen but writing over 100 years later in the early 1900s, created the Regency romance subgenre. Regency literature is more than gender and class

relationships, both period and contemporary, and reflects richness and variety of the period (Metzger 14).

Jane Austen (1775–1817), is one of the best-known and most-read writers in the history of English literature. Her novels are set within the context of the landed gentry and deal with the topics of manners, courtship, and marriage, based on her observations of everyday life. Austen's novels received little critical acclaim during her lifetime, although readers, including the Prince Regent, enjoyed many of them for their observations of human nature, social commentary, and wit. Today, the popularity of Jane Austen has grown tremendously, and she continues to engage and delight generations of readers while inspiring sequels, prequels, imitations, adaptations, films, television series, musicals, and a cookbook (Metzger 14-15).

Modern novelists have come to embrace the Regency period as a setting to craft their stories. It is in contradistinction to eras like the Tudor era, which has received some notoriety for intensity of historical drama with Henry VIII in the spotlight e.g., in Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001) or Margaret George's (1986) fictional autobiography of Henry VIII—but, the Regency era has generated more contemporary genre fiction than just historical fiction. It may not have the royal drama involved in direct royalty to the field, but "The Napoleonic Wars" had some appeal to authors of military fiction. The Regency charmed its way into authors' interest in supernatural themes. The Regency period offers itself most to a fixed genre of romance in the popular genre fiction and literary genre context (Metzger 14).

Jane Austen's use of irony and satire to examine love and marriage as vehicles for wealth and class mobility echoes nuances in nineteenth-century society. Many modern authors borrow this form of narrative and re-conceptualize Austen's novels to self-reflect the same narratives in light of contemporary social norms. While those themes have been written about in the past, they now incorporate social issues of gender identity, sexual identity, and

social deprivation by infusing Austen's social commentary that links and juxtaposes issues of their time to social structures relevant today. Where Austen, as a traditionalist, impeded the development of social identity and polarization for the sake of personal identity, is that many readers can access today's social metaphors, but now with a certain measure of possessive inclusion, connecting contemporary social issues with cast of characters, places, and events which lends the entire structure of Möbius strip of appropriate inter and intra texts. As a written form, Austen's novels capture women's experiences in the Regency period, but they move away from masculine ideals, narratives, and lives that dominated the 19th century. Austen's strong, complex women - Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and Emma Woodhouse from *Emma* (1815) - women finding their footing not only in romance, but as intelligent and independent women with integrity and growth. Modern writers, especially romance writers, such as Brigid Coady and Julia Quinn, rely on a socially critical connectedness structure. Gitana is an example of "Austenite" romance writers who highlight the evolution of connection and critique the relationship of contemporary issues to Austen (Brumos 3-4).

Itself is to be seen in modern romance literature across many parts of the world. Many modern writers emulate and borrow from Austen's iconic characters to create their own characters, inserting their own elements while maintaining the essence of the Regency Era. These writers effectively add credence to Austen by furthering their own original stories and characters with the historical period of their choice. Julie Quinn and Brigid Coady are models. Quinn sets her novels in the Regency period, but she also adds a contemporary perspective to make her stories relevant for today's authors. Coady adheres to her own version of both narrative and character but draws on Austen's characters and themes in the twentieth century. This embodies a literary consideration that ties to Adler's position, in that some themes in Austen are revisited, and in that sense, Austen is respected. Julia Quinn uses the female gaze

as a device to depict her characters through a female lens. Hence, women will be valued rather than objectified by male would-be patriarchs, like in tentpole romance narratives. Both Austen and Quinn write in a context of strong, intelligent, independent women thinking for themselves and dealing with social and political topics. The male characters appear through the female perspective as the ideal man of masculinity: supporting, sensitive, and never regarding women as mere objects. This reflects that, in both Austen's and Quinn's texts, men or masculinity are/or should be constructs to support female characters on their journey of resolution, rather than the central figure of the narrative (Brumos 29-30).

To sum up, this examination of the Regency age in the context of the historical and feminist context, it reveals how society pushed together with the female literary voice emerging. During this period, the dominant gender roles and classes of society modified the writing that came of them very deeply, often leading women authors to reflect it in neat, narrow, or sentimental terms in both their stories and in their own lives. Although the barriers of society were great, writers such as Jane Austen regularly mingled in their writings criticism of male-dominated values and established a new female voice. It helps us understand how Regency literature placed early 19th-century stories in a structural preset for more explicit feminist stories and molded our modern talk about gender, power, and self perception.

## **Chapter II: The Society's Views and Expectations Imposed on the Female**

### **Character**

This chapter examines the sociocultural views and expectations placed upon Penelope Featherington, the female protagonist in Julia Quinn's *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*. Namely, it will explore how Penelope is viewed by those around her: family, friends, and society. It will discuss the expectations of her as a woman living in society during the Regency era, including propriety, beauty, and marriageability. In navigating the correspondences of Penelope's self-image and sense of self to sociocultural narrations of how she is expected to be, this research aims to articulate the deep significance of gendered, external judgments on developing female selfhood and identity and agency in a constraining social structure.

#### **II.1 The Society's Views of Penelope Featherington**

*Romancing Mister Bridgerton* is a book about love in the old Regency era. The novel is set in nineteenth-century England during British high society in the 1800s (Book Review: *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* by Julia Quinn). It is the fourth book in Julia Quinn's Bridgerton series. The book tells the story of Colin Bridgerton, the third-oldest child in the family, as he falls in love with his neighbor Penelope Featherington (*Romancing Mister Bridgerton books*).

##### **II.1.1 Analysis of the Female Character in the Novel**

Penelope is the youngest child in the Featherington family. Her personality is remarkable in Regency-era London because she is humble and bright. Even though she belongs to a well-regarded family, she feels different because of her appearance and her family's reputation. A truly fascinating part of Penelope is that she is also the secret author of scandalous papers about society as Lady Whistledown (Chandler). Being a Featherington,

Penelope has often found her family holding her back by being contrasted with the Bridgertons (How Bridgerton Turned Penelope into Its New Leading Lady).

The female characters in Bridgerton personify various roles and positions of power as they navigate London's aristocratic circles. Penelope's transformation from a shy and reserved girl into a confident and self-assured woman is driven by her untapped intelligence, quick-witted personality, and unattainable love for Colin Bridgerton. Bridgerton highlights how individuals steadily overcome restrictions and discover their true selves. Eloise, the friend of Penelope and sister of Colin, offers a strong challenge to traditional mores. She supplies a source of resilience and inspires Penelope to reconceptualize the possibilities for a woman in this era. At the same time, Lady Danbury ignites change in Penelope and guides her toward growth by encouraging her while also pushing her out of her comfort zone. These characters represent the competing influences of personal ambition, social norms, and how people attempt to define themselves and gain power in London society (Quinn).

### **II.1.2 The Society's Perception of Penelope**

Penelope suffered both harshness and a lack of understanding from her mother, Portia Featherington. Throughout the story, Portia puts down Penelope by calling her a spinster and making her feel as though she does not matter, particularly in the shadow of her sisters. Rather than praising Penelope, she constantly criticizes how she looks and her options in life (Kuiper).

To make matters even less attractive, Penelope's mother refused to allow Penelope to choose her own clothing, and when she wasn't in the requisite white that most young ladies wore (and which of course didn't flatter her complexion one bit), she was forced to wear yellow and red and orange, all of which made her look perfectly wretched.

The one time Penelope had suggested green, Mrs. Featherington had planted her hands on her more-than-ample hips and declared that green was too melancholy. (8)

It describes that Penelope's mother was controlling and unresponsive to her child's wants, as she was mainly concerned with others' thoughts about the family. Regardless, there is a desperate mother underneath who wants to make sure her daughters are secure, as most women in this society face few choices. Although she often manipulates, deceives, and treats people unfairly, Portia aims to guard her family's reputation and keep them secure from any harm. She may not be perfect, but her determination and iron will reveal what it was like for women from the elite to live in the Regency period (Kuiper). Portia's attitude becomes even clearer when she says, "Anthony Bridgerton married that Kate Sheffield girl, and she was even less popular than you " (19). This quote creates a complicated reaction in Portia Featherington. This situation drills it into Penelope's mind, which could be seen as unattractive, yet it still leaves a little hope somewhere along the line. If Kate Sheffield is less popular than Penelope in Portia's mind, Portia will likely be very concerned, as she cares so much about status and reputation. Her attempts to elevate her social status and shape positive marriages for her daughters are made clear.

Colin, at first, describes Penelope as someone kind but plain and shy, a wallflower. He feels he ought to be polite to her, but not be interested romantically. When he talks with her, there is an awkwardness about it, and he recently said to his friends that he will never pursue her. Here we see that he is not romantically interested in her and often underestimates her (Krishna). Colin views Penelope as only a friend and does not consider her a potential romantic partner. As he once said to his brothers, "And I am certainly not going to marry Penelope Featherington" (13). His actions highlight that he's immature, has biased thoughts, and cannot recognize his behavior, making a clear difference for his later growth and maturity.



Yet, the key difference in Polin's ( Colin and Penelope) love story is that they were friends from the beginning. They have known each other for a long time, as most of the time they spend together is due to the relationship between Eloise Bridgerton and Penelope. Since they've known each other for so long, their bond is shaped by secure trust (Securely - Geolocation Sharing).

In the novel *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, the bond between Eloise Bridgerton and Penelope Featherington is considered one of the most important friendships. Because they have known each other for a long time, their friendship grows stronger as adults and provides them with both a sense of family and support (Quinn). this can be portrayed through this quote in chapter one:

And once again Penelope realized how lucky she was to have her as her closest friend. She and Eloise had been inseparable since the age of seventeen. They'd had their London seasons together, reached adulthood together, and, much to their mothers' dismay, had become spinsters together [...] But she thanked goodness for Eloise, too. Every day. Many women went through their entire lives without a close female friend, and here she had someone to whom she could tell anything. Well, almost anything. (25-26)

This quote shows that Penelope treasures her friendship with Eloise more than anything else in her shaky and limited society. Since she often lacks attention and feels like a wallflower, Penelope finds in Eloise someone she can truly open up to and understand. The trust they have makes it possible for them to talk openly and comfortably, which is rare for women in many societies. In fact, their relationship is so close that Penelope and Eloise seem to get along better than they do with their sisters. It proves how important friends are to them and reveals how their friendship guides their identities throughout the novel (Prahl).

In this book by Julia Quinn, Penelope Featherington is depicted as someone who is disregarded and not taken seriously by those around her. She is seen as a timid person who appears awkward and not very attractive. Because she is heavy, wears unattractive clothes decided by her mother, and suffers from self-doubt, she does not attract much attention from her peers. Consequently, Penelope is recognized as a person meant for life on the spinster shelf due to her neglect and unnoticed presence during the years of marriage celebrations (Danbury). This sense of invisibility is poignantly captured in her own words to Colin Bridgerton:

People never talked to me,” she snapped. “Half of the time, they didn’t even know I was there. How do you think I was able to keep up the ruse for so long in the first place? I was invisible, Colin. No one saw me, no one talked to me. I just stood and listened, and no one noticed. (218)

This shows how closeness to no one let her keep her true personality and position as Lady Whistledown hidden, having been forced into solitude by everyone.

## **II.2 Societal Expectations Imposed on the Protagonist**

### **II.2.1 Social Etiquette**

Social etiquette describes the unwritten rules and expectations of social behavior. This includes behaviors such as speaking politely, introducing people in a proper way, having good table manners, and respecting personal boundaries. These behaviors are valuable for building good relationships and creating a respectful atmosphere in any situation. To live and interact with others requires adherence to certain social norms, and an individual's behavior influences how they are viewed and treated by those around them. Etiquette is the defined, systematic set of rules and customs that dictate social behavior and reflect the systemic rules and customs that are accepted by a society as a whole (Dagný Böðvarsdóttir 3). The societal expectations

imposed on the nineteenth-century woman in England are reflected in the mannerisms of both Penelope Featherington and her mother in how they are confused by the expected social etiquette of their time, though each is confused by the quotidian rules of social etiquette in different ways:

To make manners even less attractive, Penelope's mother refused to allow Penelope to choose her own clothing, and when she wasn't in the requisite white that most young ladies wore (and which of course didn't flatter her complexion one bit), she was forced to wear yellow and red and orange, all of which made her look perfectly wretched. The one time Penelope had suggested green, Mrs. Featherington had planted her hands on her more-than-ample hips and declared that green was too melancholy [...] Yellow, Mrs. Featherington declared, was a happy color and a happy girl would snare a husband [...] Penelope decided then and there that it was best not to try to understand the workings of her mother's mind[...] So Penelope found herself outfitted in yellow and orange and the occasional red, even though such colors made her look decidedly unhappy, and in fact were positively ghastly with her brown eyes and red-tinged hair. There was nothing she could do about it, though, so she decided to grin and bear it, and if she couldn't manage a grin, at least she wouldn't cry in public [...] Which, she took some pride in, nothing she never did. (8)

Portia Featherington's treatment of Penelope illustrates the expectations women were subjected to maintain social conformities and appropriate manners of the era, the Regency. Penelope's clothing is paradoxically insensible, not because of Penelope's tastes but because her mother bought clothes in a color value that her mother believes will help her attract potential husbands: Penelope would not attract suitors in what her mother deems happy colors. These customs reinforce the sense that a woman's presence was to be taken seriously only in appearance, thanks to being merely a method of arranging her marriage rather than a

form of self-representation. By lacking agency over her clothing, Penelope symbolizes the imposed expectations of respectable femininity. Ultimately, no matter how hard she tries to conform, it only leaves her feeling more disenfranchised.

And when Lady Whistledown wanted to write about Penelope Featherington, she did.

Penelope's first appearance in *Lady Whistledown's society papers* went as follows:

Miss Penelope Featherington's unfortunate gown left the unfortunate girl looking like nothing more than an overripe citrus fruit. A rather stinging blow, to be sure, but nothing less than the truth. Her second appearance in the column was no better [...] Unfortunately, her mother once again insisted on yellow, orange, and the occasional splash of red. And this time, Lady Whistledown wrote: Miss Penelope Featherington (the least inane of the Featherington sisters) wore a gown of lemon yellow that left a sour taste in one's mouth [...] Which at least seemed to imply that Penelope was the most intelligent member of her family, although the compliment was backhanded, indeed. (9-11)

Penelope's appearance, thanks to her mother's unfortunate sense of style, did not meet the standards of Regency social propriety. Society quickly judged women by their conformity to the beauty ideal. Lady Whistledown's derision demonstrates the very public humiliation that any differences in propriety might lead to; "...but women on the hunt for husbands weren't supposed to exhibit anything more robust than a bird's appetite (40)". Other than women looking for husbands were to eat as little as possible because a small appetite was seen as fragile and ladylike. Eating modestly was part of the larger norms of social etiquette that focused on restraint and femininity. Low displays of a hearty appetite could tarnish a woman's reputation in the marriage market.

In nineteenth-century England, women were expected to act in a manner that conformed to the expectations of their time, courtesy manners influencing much of their daily

existence.

At the time, society had evidently stressed rigid customs concerning formal introductions, the rules in place relating to young women entering social life, and the manner in which they were expected to behave on a social visit. These expectations included actions and behaviors defined as appropriate, respectable, and indicative of good character, including the way she was expected to conduct herself in public as a lady. Etiquette manuals were regularly published, defining expected customs and behaviors for ladies and gentlemen. These manuals were both instructional and comprehensive reasoning of the expected social conduct and obligations they were to follow to be respectable members of society. Etiquette manuals were just instructional books that explained the expected etiquette based on certain codes of conduct. Notable ones include: *Sermons to Young Women (1767)* by James Fordyce and *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters (1767)* by D. John Gregory. Both manuals particularly showed how individuals (most especially women) should behave based on social norms (Dagný Böðvarsdóttir 3).

Proper social etiquette during the Regency period was an integral aspect of everyday life, acting as a form of invisible wheel, especially for the middle and upper classes. Essentially, etiquette encapsulated every point of social engagement - how someone greeted someone else, how someone danced, how someone dined, how someone made an introduction, etc. Manners transcended mere politeness; they were a performative reflection of social class, morality, and respectability. By following the unwritten rules of etiquette, one implied proper social training and knowledge, while breaking an etiquette rule would lead to gossip, acknowledging, and ostracism. Etiquette, particularly for women, connected virtue and social reputation to feminine ideals and self-control in public and private contexts.

### **II.2.2 Social Gatherings**

In Regency England, men and women attempted to surpass their social standing by

forming and creating close relationships. Balls, dinner parties, and trips to country estates were some of the most common social gatherings that occurred during the Regency. These social interactions provided vital opportunities for rural families, but more importantly, also played a role in creating relationships that bolstered the development of English society.

The next day was a Monday, which meant that Penelope took tea with the Bridgerton ladies at Number Five. She didn't know when, precisely, she'd fallen into that habit, but it had been so for close to a decade, and if she didn't show up on a Monday afternoon, she rather thought Lady Bridgerton would send someone over to fetch her.

(62)

Penelope's ritual of tea with the Bridgerton ladies every Monday is representative of the social expectations of Regency society, by maintaining social relationships and appearances as part of the rules that govern those relationships. Social calls were not merely considered friendly visits, but instead acted as rituals that reinforced one's place and respectability in the social sphere.

Women, in particular, were expected to follow the rules for social etiquette even in public, but it was paramount that they were dutiful when they were in these kinds of social situations. The representation of social functions in novels from this period reflects but also reinforces the importance of ballroom and conversational etiquette that affected the role and experiences of women living in the nineteenth century. During this period, a social gathering often offered the chance for people to watch and judge the behaviors of others, regardless of whether it was formal or informal; one was able to judge their manners based on their behavior and society's standards (Dagný Böðvarsdóttir 10).

women acknowledged their duty to observe such etiquette when in these kinds of social situations. The portrayal of social events in *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* and most novels of the time clarifies, the significance of dancing and conversational etiquette imposed

upon women in the nineteenth century. During this time, a social moment allowed people to view others and witness these behaviours for the purposes of judgement, regardless of whether the social moment was formal or informal; one could assess their manners in comparison to behaviour and societal standards from the past or present. Judgement via observation increased the responsibility of women to project an image of grace and appropriateness, which alleviated their ability to act freely and/or express their true self. Most of the novels contained female characters that either abided by such constraints or resisted them, expressing the tension between expectation and identity. When talking, it would be much better for a woman to keep her mouth shut as best she could than to talk with the manners in which Cressida Cowper tends to do:

Penelope shrugged. "She's always behaved quite badly toward me [...] Lady Danbury nodded knowingly. All bullies have a favorite victim. [...] she never could resist the chance to torment me. And people ...well. She shook her head. Never mind [...]" Penelope signed.... I've noticed that people don't often rush to another's defense. Cressida was popular at least with a certain set and she was rather frightening to the other girls our age. No one dares go against him. Well, almost no one. (180)

Penelope's comments show that Cressida's cruel and bullying behavior. Cressida's continuous abuse demonstrates a lack of a single grain of basic decency and kindness. Through Penelope's insights, we learn that Cressida's actions exceeded the bounds of proper social behavior and social etiquette. Her actions demonstrate that she does not conform to the conventions of social interaction, as her demeanor is consistently rude and arrogant, rather than the expected courteous and gracious. While engaged in conversation, a lady was expected to politely engage and pay attention, rather than show disinterest or act in a way considered impolite or disrespectful (Dagný Böðvarsdóttir 12).

The society of the Regency period was constrained by strict social conventions that regulated virtually all aspects of a woman's conduct. The conventions regulated how she dressed and spoke, to how she communicated and interacted with the people around her. These often-unwritten conventions were controlling in regard to a woman's reputation, and as such, governed her access to networks of individuals of social significance. A woman bound by conventions could welcome into "respectable" social circles and likely find access to significant social events, prospective partners, and endeavored family arrangements (don't forget to socially climb). Alternatively, simply exhibiting sloppy or loose conduct exhibited a woman's ability to be honest and upright, but also created an aspiring aspiration to behave within strict limits, minimizing that behavior on the public stage with gossip and a shortage of a lifetime set of possible marriage arrangements. A woman's value was often reduced to her attempts at engaging with the conventions and her success in "acting as" the conventions expected (this impacted her behavior in both public and private spheres so if she could engage in these strict conventions, due to the unregulatable attention of her being evaluated by others).

### **II.2.3 Society's Judgement**

Regency society had a strict set of social conventions that dictated a woman's behaviour, which played a critical role in determining how acceptable she was in society. Those who followed the conventions were often invited to respectable society, while those who did not obey them often found themselves shunned (Dagný Böðvarsdóttir 11).

First of all, no one really expected the spinsters to dance at balls, which meant that Penelope was no longer forced to hover at the edge of the dance floor, looking this way and that, pretending that she didn't really want to dance. Now she could sit off to the side with the other spinsters and chaperones. She still wanted to dance, of course she rather liked dancing and she was actually quite good at it, not that anyone ever



noticed but it was much easier to feign disinterest the farther one got from the waltzing couples. (40)

This passage reflects on how social expectations shaped Penelope's behaviors. Having become a spinster, she was no longer supposed to dance, which allowed her to hide her real feelings behind acceptable conventions. While Penelope enjoyed dancing and was a capable dancer, she was not encouraged to express such a desire as an unmarried woman, and like many other women of her time, had to feign disinterest.

A woman's compliance with social conventions in Regency society greatly shaped how others perceived her. Women who acted within expectations were typically accepted; women who deviated from expectations were sometimes condemned but most often exiled. Society enforced its ideals through very close lens of scrutiny on women who transgressed its written or unwritten codes. It goes without saying that the Regency period was not, for many women, a romantic time. There was no true mechanism for gender equality, women had few rights and women had to adhere to a patriarchal society's expectations, limitations, and norms (Dagný Böðvarsdóttir 11).

#### **II.2.4 The Social Role of a Woman**

Women were seen as lesser beings compared to men and expected to obey them unquestioningly. In fact, a plethora of manuals, guides, and etiquette books appeared in the late 18th and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century to educate women on how to act in order to be socially acceptable to the men who governed their lives. It is not unexpected that these documents were written by men with a male opinion on women's roles in society, which reinforced the subservient position of women in society (Martynková 21). As a result, these writings reinforced the idea that women should be submissive and limited in their behavior, keeping them in a lower social position. Essentially, the passage shows how social norms were shaped and controlled by men to maintain their dominance over women. As women

faced societal expectations of being the weaker sex, the vast majority of their futures were contingent on finding a suitable husband.

On the other hand, for men in Regency society, social standing was a complex mix of birth, wealth, and personal qualities. While noble titles were highly prized, a man's desirability and reputation could also be shaped by factors like fortune, attractiveness, and charm. This dynamic is well illustrated by Mr. Bridgerton, whose appeal goes beyond his lack of a formal title.

Although Mr. Bridgerton holds no noble title and is unlikely ever to do so (he is seventh in line for the title of viscount Bridgerton, behind the two sons of the current viscount, his elder brother Benedict, and his three sons) he is still considered one of the prime catches of the season, due to his fortune, his face, his form, and most of all, his charm. (18)

While a man might get social value from noble titles in Regency society, a gentleman did not need a title, or even the prospect of inheriting one, to be socially valuable. Mr. Bridgerton has neither a title nor the prospect of one, yet to many he is a highly valuable man because of his wealth, good looks, and charm, the very traits that made him a very good marriage match.

There were some independent-minded women who, with only friends and family, openly questioned the notion of marrying for security or for social standing, yet the realities of life and the times permitted this as an acceptable practice. From the time girls were little, they were taught that their primary purpose was to marry a man, reaching the social and economic norms set by their community. These teachings were taught not only by families, but there was an abundance of conduct books, guides, and etiquette manuals that described women's roles and expectations in society. While the Regency period is often romanticized as a time for men to show chivalry to women, there was more than one side to the story. Just as the Regency period was romanticized, there was a cruel and horrible side to the Regency

period. The Regency period and the society that existed within it lived under the idea that men were always inherently superior and always right, while women were expected to submit and follow. Under the law and in society, men were afforded privileges, freedom, and protections that even women could hardly conceive. In whatever relationship existed as wives, daughters, or sisters, women were subordinate and had little to no independence or authority. In the Regency period, women hardly had any legal right to own property. If they actually did own property, they had very limited control over it, and typically, it would pass to their husbands or male relatives at marriage. Jane Austen is a literary figure who fundamentally altered the novel form by credibly rendering the experience of the landed gentry during the Regency era. In this way, she articulates the plight of women encumbered by the patriarchal society, offering an alternative view of women whose dependence and opportunities are determined by marriage (Arora 231).

### **II.2.5 Marital Expectations**

Marriage during the Regency period in England was mainly an economic contract. For young women, particularly in the upper class, their future was dependent on marrying well. They were obliged to marry families of the same or higher standing, since marriage served to create alliances, maintain wealth, and preserve status. Single women were often shamed in society, viewed to be a burden on others or suffered pity and suspicions. The role of the unmarried woman was often as a supporter within the family, attending to or providing domestic and caregiving obligations for married relatives (Roubíčková 14).

This emphasis on status and alliances helps explain Porcia's excitement; her remarks reflect how marriage functioned not just as economic security but as a marker of achievement. In this context, marrying into a family like the Bridgertons wasn't merely desirable it was a social triumph that elevated everyone connected to it. This is evident in her own words, as the following quote demonstrates.

“ I know, I know,” Porcia grumbled. “ It's just that I so wanted one of my daughters to marry a Bridgerton. What a coup! I would be the talk of London for weeks. Years, maybe” (22). Portia's remarks demonstrate the level of social capital afforded to marrying into a well-known family, like the Bridgertons, or securing a husband from the upper class. Securing a husband from the upper class was not just about financial or social security, but prestige and pride. Not surprisingly, in the Regency marriage industry, marrying for these reasons was viewed as an accomplishment of sorts, and quickly circulating gossip in the community became prestigious in itself, enhancing a family's social standing and reputation.

If a gentlewoman had no means of her own, she had little choice, and in many cases, remaining unmarried would mean being dependent on her family's finances. If the family didn't have the resources to support her, the best-case scenario was to be employed as a governess (the only acceptable way to earn a living). Then the worst-case scenario was living in poverty and rags (Dagný Böðvarsdóttir 11).

In a world where an unmarried gentlewoman without means faced limited choices dependence on family, work as a governess, or poverty spinsterhood was often more burden than freedom. Penelope's mother saw her unmarried state as a form of security: someone to care for her in old age. But to Penelope, that vision felt suffocating. She'd made peace with never marrying, but she'd imagined independence perhaps a cottage by the sea, not a life of obligation. The thought made even the chimney sweep seem like an escape.

In truth, I'm glad for your spinsterhood. I am alone in this world save for my daughters, and it's comforting to know that one of you shall be able to care for me in my older years [...] Penelope had a vision of the future, the future as described by her mother, and she had a sudden urge to run out to marry the chimney sweep. She'd long since resigned herself to a life of eternal spinsterhood, but somehow she'd always pictured herself off in her own neat little terrace house. or maybe a snug cottage by the

sea [...] No, when Portia talked about being cared for, she wasn't referring to money. what Portia wanted was a slave (20).

In passages from *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, it becomes clear how emotionally laden Penelope is as a spinster in a family and society that defines her status as unmarried as simply utilitarian and not individualistic. For example, Penelope's mother, Portia, disguises her self-serving demands with an altruistic thought, with Portia relieved that Penelope will be there for her when she becomes old and weak, not out of some sense of love, but as a servant. Penelope's reaction, and her satirical daydream about marrying a chimney sweep simply to escape from a life of servitude, expresses her dire emotional need for her own agency, her own life, apart from her mother, as well as the idea of a life in some small terrace house or seaside cottage, represents a yearning to live alone; her desire for independence and serenity. In the end, these quotes provide a critique of society and family conduct whose context reduces unmarried women to mere caretakers, demonstrating the emotional weight of caretaking, and Penelope's silence regarding the desire to self-determine her own future.

In Austen's time, women often thought they had little choice but to accept the roles assigned to them by society, subjugated under male authority. To the degree that marriages were arranged within social classes, many middle-class families sought suitable matches for their daughters, despite any growing attachment to feelings of love. Women had few choices at their disposal, and those who had not married by age twenty were often viewed as burdens (Andrea 2).

Restraining societal expectations during the Regency period meant women had little independence and autonomy, and the expectation was for women to fully accept a life that was established by a man. The most important institution for women was marriage, and for the middle class, this relationship was considered especially relevant if it could be arranged through socially appropriate means for their daughters, regardless of personal choice or love.

With few acceptable alternatives to marriage, it was not uncommon for unmarried women, above twenty to be considered a burden as their single status was synonymous with failure for their obligation to reproduce and reproduce within socially acceptable means.

Porcia embodies the mindset of many Regency-era mothers who viewed marriage, not just as a responsibility but as a marker of esteem. She is fixated upon marrying off her daughters, not due to personal concerns, but because arranging a socially advantageous match for her daughters felt necessary to maintain her family's standing. Porcia fixates on age -she believes that women must marry while young to avoid being 'left to rot.' She sees marriage as a race, and if a woman has yet to be married she is 'late to the train.' Porcia's pressure is conveyed directly to her daughter, who she chastises for delay in securing a husband. Porcia fails to recognize her daughter's personal preference or draw potential for independence; instead she blames her daughter for recent missed opportunities, reinforcing her views about the temporality of finding a 'suitable' match.

“ Besides,” Porcia continued blithely, “he's she looked back down at Whistledown and scanned it for his exact age, “three and thirty! How is he meant to avoid a twelve-year difference between him and his wife? Surely you don't expect him to marry someone *your* age.” [...] Everything her mother said was true. Many tons of weddings, maybe even most of them, saw men marrying girls a dozen or more years their junior. But somehow the age gap between Colin and Felicity seemed even larger, perhaps because... (21)

Age played a significant role in marriage during the Regency era, particularly for women, who were expected to marry at a young age to be considered desirable and respectable. People wanted their daughters to be married young. Porcia's comment and the societal norms reflected in it indicate that a significant age gap was a common practice, with older men marrying younger women. Both Porcia and society placed great emphasis on youth, valuing a

woman in the marriage market primarily for her age, beauty, and fertility rather than her emotional or intellectual maturity.

Marriage for many women was a practical decision, taken to avoid shame and provide security. As Swords points out, women had the choice to become governesses; however, this was considered a bad option and humiliating for middle- and upper-class young women. A woman's life and future rested almost entirely on her parents' approval until she married. Poor women were treated as oppressed victims of the patriarchy - first under the control of their fathers, and then, usually, their husbands, who were chosen by their fathers (Andrea 2). Moreover, most women were legally prohibited from inheriting property. With marriage, they relinquished ownership of their belongings and control over their life, irrevocably merging with their husbands as another property. Once married, women were legally subservient (similar to a child or a slave) and could not own property or manage their income unless granted by overwhelming exceptions in law. Even after the death of a spouse, a woman was automatically not the legal guardian of their minor children. While widows were allowed a "dower" (the right to keep the property brought into a marriage, the right to one-third of her husband's estate for her natural life), again, it was not independent. Freedom was a male privilege. The principal means of financial security or independence for women was marriage, yet the status of widow was not recognized, leaving her open and vulnerable, and preyed upon by many the chance to financially plunder the widow. It was uncommon that women of families without substantial wealth for their renewal even faced the likelihood of a restoration and therefore access to marriage or a husband. Women, like men, enjoyed going to country balls and assemblies as they were genuinely entertaining social events, and much more. These events were significant for social mobility. They were perfect for matchmaking purposes. Another beneficial aspect of assembly balls was that for young women, who were entering society for the first time, the assemblies were important for making connections that would

lead to better marriage prospects. Social balls were considered a great opportunity for young women to meet suitors, and perhaps, find their true match. But even a social occasion such as this had boundaries to abide by. With so many limitations placed upon women's freedom and life choices in Regency England, it is not surprising that many writers from this time decided to engage with these constraints in their writing and use their writing as a way to depict and critique aspects of women's lives (Andrea 3).

While women of the Regency era were subject to a multitude of legal and cultural restrictions wherein many women's rights and responsibilities were dictated by their marital status and marital choice gave them a sense of security and autonomy women's lives were more than just their restrictions. Other social events such as country balls and assemblies were of great importance in limited women's lives, albeit in restrictive societies offering the one space where women could engage in a limited display of agency. Country balls and assemblies were did not just represent opportunities for social interaction; they were vital spaces for social connections to be made and social mobility to occur, particularly for young women newly entering society. For example, novels of the period (including those of Austen and more contemporary writers) show such assemblies to be more than stages for unheroic encounters, they are almost always a place where the competing and conflicting desires of individual characters collide with social imperatives and practices, and ultimately the limited freedom of women. Whether the authors chose to write about assemblies such as assemblies, or present them with rigour and diversity, we can see through these representations, how the barriers to women's freedom open with women on their own terms, and at the same time offer comment on the barriers of a world limited to women.

For a woman to attract a potential mate, she had to be seen as desirable in the marriage market. To upper-class women, looks were important; having white skin, small features, and thin frames were all features of beauty. Beauty alone wasn't enough, though. Women also had



to show refined social graces and a host of accomplishments, such as musical talent, language ability, and a liberal education. A woman who was well-read and could articulate her thoughts would be of more interest to the upper-class, wealthy and intelligent men who found education appealing. Reputation was also paramount; modesty and virtue were prized, and just one rumor, no matter how slight, regarding indiscretion or improper conduct could ruin a woman's marriage prospects (Roubíčková 14).

In many circumstances, the former was more common in Regency society. With the added pressures of marriage, a lady was expected to adhere to codes of etiquette when securing a husband, another point exposing the expectations of the nineteenth-century woman. It was noted by historians that marriage impacted women's lives much more than men's during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Women of those eras understood that their futures and their place in society depended to a great extent on the choice of a husband. Because of social limitations and little economic freedom, many women could not afford to marry for love. Instead, brides were often married off for convenience, putting aside romance for the sake of wealth, prestige, or security, rather than love. Such practical unions were typical of the Regency era (Dagný Böðvarsdóttir 17). Porcia's obsession with matchmaking captures the strain and worry which many mothers experienced in securing a "good" marriage for their daughters. Their emphasis on identifying pertinent factors such as age, status, and compatible matches, illustrates how embedded into social ideologies these factors were. Yet, with all the restraints and obligations confining women survey of their lives, instances such as country balls provided a brief sense of excitement and possibility. Although they served as mere entertainment, these events were also important for young women to find their way through the marriage market and occasionally resist the layer of social restrictions. Writers of the Regency period acknowledged their socially constructed confines by using such scenes to reveal their critique and distress women; a complicated choreography of obligation, desire,

and survival. The exuberance and urgency associated with advantageous matches is beautifully encapsulated in the following passage, as Porcia's excitement about Colin Bridgerton's return reveals her fierce determination to create a match.

“ Look at this!” Portia Featherington squealed. “ Colin Bridgerton is back!” [...] Matchmaking mamas are united in their glee, Colin Bridgerton has returned from Greece! [...] “ Of course not. She's a smart girl. Anyone can see that Colin Bridgerton is a better catch.” (19-22)

These quotes highlight the focus of matchmaking mothers and society on finding the best possible husbands, treating marriage as a strategic hunt rather than an act of love. The excitement around Colin Bridgerton's return emphasizes how much of a good “catch” he is, given his status and what he has to offer, highlighting social advantage over romantic sentiment.

## **II.2.6 Courtship, Conformity, and the Female Gaze: Reputation and Social Pressure in *Romancing Mister Bridgerton***

When a young woman reached a certain age, usually between fifteen and nineteen, she was considered out, which indicated she was now available for courting. This was an important transition, indicating she moved from girlhood to womanhood. A young lady's presentation into society could only occur with a parent or female accompaniment, and there were strict rules to follow to signify and acknowledge proper social etiquette. Courtship processes at this time were semi-public and already associated with established norms. For example, it was not considered proper for unmarried men and women to be alone together or engaged in an activity unless it was socially approved. There were norms of supervision of the couple. In fact, the couple was limited, or any way of engaging in what was socially acceptable, which was a dance or formal visit with an accompaniment or sightseeing with the

group and remain in sight of family and community. The courtship processes assumed decorum and propriety. This was only partly about what one felt for the other: love or emotional connection included being a structured means toward marriage. Socially defined formalities were important part of many circumstances also especially for preparing for the proposal. Normal societally defined sequence would be that the suitor would ask the father's permission in advance of the official proposal. This rule was also true of the proposal, and socially approved customs had to be followed (Roubíčková 14-15).

When a woman reached a certain age typically between fifteen and nineteen she was considered “out,” meaning she was officially available for courtship. This marked a major transition in her life, signaling her passage from girlhood to womanhood. Once “out,” she was expected to appear in society with a parent or female chaperone and follow a strict code of behavior that demonstrated proper decorum. Courtship during the Regency period was a semi-public affair, closely regulated by social customs. It was seen as highly improper for an unmarried man and woman to be alone together outside of approved circumstances. Interactions were limited to carefully supervised activities like formal dances, chaperoned visits, or group outings, all within view of family and community. Courtships followed a clear structure, emphasizing social decorum over personal emotion. While affection and love were not excluded, these were often considered secondary to status, reputation, and readiness for marriage. This is reflected in characters like Penelope Featherington, who, despite being “out” for many seasons, remains unmarried viewed by society as a spinster not because of lack of feeling, but because she has failed to secure a match within the prescribed timeline. In such a rigidly controlled environment, even love had to wait its turn behind societal approval. Typically, the final step in a courtship involved the suitor asking the woman’s father for permission to propose underscoring how personal desire was always filtered through the lens of tradition and family authority.

“Is there a reason why we should worry if people think we are courting?” [...] She let out a sad-sounding exhale. “I don't want to subject myself to that. Even Lady Whistledown would probably write about it. How could she not? It would be far too juicy a piece of gossip for her to resist.” [...] “I'm sorry, Penelope,” Colin said. He wasn't sure what he was apologizing for, but it still seemed like the right thing to say. [...] She acknowledged him with a tiny nod. “I know I shouldn't care what other people say, but I do.” (65)

These quotes show the rigid social conventions for courtship and how so much of it is based on perception. Penelope is worried about being perceived as courting, since that would carry scandalous gossip, especially from someone like Lady Whistledown. Penelope's concern shows that a person's reputation was heavily valued. She knows she shouldn't care about these things, but she feels the societal pressure. This shows how courtship is more about public perception and validation than about one's actual personal feelings and emotions.

In *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, Julia Quinn constructs a character of Penelope Featherington that poignantly embodies the social constraints placed upon women in Regency England. Penelope is repeatedly marginalized in the narrative based on her looks, age, and social standing, demonstrating how society diminishes the value of those who do not fit into its strict norms of beauty and desirability. During the Regency period, women had to comply with strict social expectations that prized propriety, obedience, and modesty. Women learned about how to conduct themselves around the courtship and marriage rituals, particularly through conduct books like *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, which reiterated women's secondary position in a patriarchal society. Education was directed toward accomplishments that emphasized grace, and the education was intended to mold women into obedient wives. A woman's marriage was seen as necessary for a woman's class status, while the unmarried women were seen as a burden to the family and were considered less than those who were

married.

### **Chapter III: Lady Whistledown Speaks: Gossip as Female Empowerment in *Romancing Mister Bridgerton***

This chapter, *Lady Whistledown Speaks: Gossip as Female Empowerment in Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, focuses on how Penelope Featherington uses gossip, in particular through her secret identity as Lady Whistledown, as a vehicle for asserting power and agency within the confines of Regency society. Although ultimately regarded as a quiet, unremarkable wallflower, Penelope's ambiguous writings permit her to shape social commentary, criticize the elite, and capture the attention of those who disregard her in the public eye. By writing as Lady Whistledown, Penelope attains a type of authorship and certainly influence unavailable to most women of her social standing, which reveals the subversive quality of gossip as a way to navigate and contest limitations on her gender. This chapter illustrates that, although Penelope's gossip may appear trivial or motivated by malicious intent, it serves a more complex purpose, acting as a commentary on the social norms of female propriety, voice, and visibility in a world that seeks to silence them.

#### **III.1 Lady Whistledown Speaks: From Silence to Authorship**

##### **III.1.1 Women Are Capable of Intellectual Achievement**

One of the most recognizable personalities associated with 20<sup>th</sup>-century modern feminism was Simone de Beauvoir, who introduced her existentialist feminist theory in her book, *The Second Sex* (1949). Beauvoir claimed that many women, both past and present, have pursued their liberation. She posited that they want to affirm their existence through immanence, which is achieved by attaining self-awareness or consciousness. Beauvoir notes that a woman may occasionally act in an attempt to motivate herself to turn her limited life into a worthwhile and noble enterprise, attempting to turn her captivity into an imagined freedom or glory. She argues that the restrictions of society permit, and even force, women

not to establish their aims without considering the male, and feel incomplete. In her concept, man is "self" and woman is "other." Since the "other" represents a possible threat to male authority, men maintain their freedom by limiting women to the status of "other". Beauvoir indicates that women can reject the classification of the "other" in four ways: by joining the workforce, by becoming intellectuals, by playing a role in the socialist restructuring of society, and by attempting to transcend this boundary. For Beauvoir, to be intellectual means the ability of humans to think, notice, and then make sense of the world. She suggested that women have the same capacity to be aware and conscious of themselves and their experience of their world. Women have the agency to become engaged in movements that enact change and should have the awareness and freedom needed to act upon their own desires. Beauvoir offered women authors like Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf, and Katherine Mansfield to read writers who adopt their craft with a seriousness that allows them to explore important themes such as life, death, and suffering. Women can reject the imposed roles by not defining themselves based on how they are defined by the dominant group in society (Ivana 17-20).

Simone de Beauvoir contended that women could attain liberation by engaging in self-reflection and rejecting all roles assigned to them by a patriarchal framework and system. Specifically, developing one's intellectual and self-identity is an important way women may reclaim agency and resist constraining stereotypes instead of being confined by societal definitions of them. In *Bridgerton*, Penelope Featherington engages in quietly resisting the external definitions forced upon her by the surrounding people. Though her self-identity hangs below the surface, she consciously learns to embrace her value, worth, and abilities. Penelope's private navigation of her self-identity and self-awareness corresponds with Beauvoir's claim that consciousness is the necessary first step to freedom.

Penelope was (in her opinion), at least, a bit more graceful than most people gave her credit for. She was a good dancer, could play the piano with her fingers arched

perfectly, and could usually navigate a crowded room without bumping into an uncommon amount of people or furniture. (238)

Penelope's increased awareness of her potential, although her family and society do not successfully acknowledge or tap into it. As her family loosely defines her as awkward and at times, invisible, Penelope has a clear self-identity as a poised, talented, and capable qualities that are expected of women of her social status. Beauvoir argues that women are trained to internalize society's definition of them as "the other", that is, a form of secondness to men. For example, Penelope begins to rebel against that voice by recognizing a calm, albeit fierce, sense of her self-worth beyond any expectations of society. The reality that Penelope sees herself as graceful and talented is indicative of the early phase of immanence, and that she is consciously moving toward defining her own identity and self-worth as opposed to simply accepting the dismissive views of others. This confidence is a quiet yet strong assertion of agency in a world that is constantly seeking to diminish it.

Deep inside, she knew who she was, and that person was smart and kind and often even funny, but somehow her personality always got lost somewhere between her heart and her mouth, and she found herself saying the wrong thing or, more often, nothing at all. (8)

Penelope's internal struggle is becoming even more evident. She has a clear conception of who she is: an intelligent, empathetic, and funny person; however, it is evident that there is a dissonance between this person inside of her and the person she presents to the world. This tension reveals a restricted social context analogous to the one Beauvoir describes, where women are taught to silence their voices and live in roles that force them into silence and secondary status. Penelope is not silent because she is incapable of thinking or feeling; she is silent because of the encumbrances these limitations place on her way in which she can



express herself without being penalized. For Beauvoir, women had not yet begun to realize their full humanity until they realized their existence as human beings, and all that this entails, including speech, action, and self-definition. Penelope's frustration also indicates that she has been made aware that she experiences this dissonance and wants to address it. Her consciousness reinforces the importance of internal clarity, either way, as a significant first step toward the self-liberation that Beauvoir describes, rejecting the take-for-granted passivity that society expects from women, and starting to build her identity and voice, even if she has not yet discovered how to articulate it.

Regents Professor of English at Arizona State University and author of *The Making of Jane Austen* (2017), Devoney Looser, points out that women were actively publishing in the early nineteenth century. Yet this does not mean their process was easy. Although a significant number of women were publishing in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, they faced similar challenges and barriers faced by women in society (Cohen). Devoney Looser, Regents Professor, explains that while many women were publishing books in the early nineteenth century, that path was available to them only reluctantly. Writing for pay was hardly acceptable or respectable work for women, however, given the limited public space available. Both Lady Whistledown and Jane Austen, as Looser discusses, were able to analyze and critique the social standards that loomed over them with their pens. For middle-class and respectable women, earning money by writing was frowned upon; selling one's thoughts was often viewed as a dangerous step toward compromising one's respectability. Beyond their backgrounds, Devoney Looser notes that both Lady Whistledown and Jane Austen share a deep interest in exploring the complexities and behaviors of so-called polite society (Cohen). In *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, society teaches women from an early age that their purpose is to marry off in a socially and economically expedient manner. Characters like Penelope Featherington are raised under this system, and are influenced by traditions within their

families and society that reinforce the idea that a woman's value is directly relevant to the marriage she makes. In this way, Penelope perpetuates her outward compliance with these societal and familial expectations, while at the same time doubting them privately, which highlights the dilemma that women may have faced between societal function and personal desire.

### III.1.2 The Pen Behind the Power: Lady Whistledown and the Voice of Resistance

In early 18<sup>th</sup>-century London, there was a boom in cheap print. One of the most common forms of cheap print was a literary periodical, which typically published once or twice a week and included only one essay. These essays shared the writer's thoughts on the periodical's focus, which could range from politics and culture to fashion, and quite often, gossip. People naturally read these magazines in coffeehouses and private clubs, places that inspired many of the contents we find in the most famous journals of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Richard Steele, for example, launched *The Tatler* in 1709 and sought to use the periodical to expose the pretenses of the world. *The Tatler* hoped to expose lies, vanity, and false character while encouraging simplicity and *Frankness* (1712) in manner of dress, speech, and actions (Smith). A hundred years later, the spirit of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century periodical endures not only in the volume of the weekly section and popular appetite for gossip but in the zealous advocacy for authorship, and, indeed, truth. Lady Whistledown is a contemporary version of Steele, using her pen to unmask society. However, whereas her male counterparts are free to unfurl their identity, Lady Whistledown must contend with the anonymity of her words and the opportunity of being unmasked. The moment another falsely claims Lady Whistledown's authorship, it's not merely her anonymity that's breached, it's the authenticity of her voice, her effort, and her agency. In a bold move to reclaim her authorship and expose a fraud, Lady Whistledown publishes the following declaration in her society paper:

Ladies and gentlemen, this author is not Lady Cressida Twombley. She is nothing more than a scheming imposter, and it would break my heart to see my years of hard work attributed to one such as her. (213)

Unlike the playful anonymity of early male essayists, Penelope's disguise is a protection against gendered expectations and social risk. Her response reminds us how important authorship is to her identity; she is not just a writer; she is the legitimate voice of a cultural force, and when her labor is stolen, it is a personal betrayal, as well as a public and political injustice.

When Lady Whistledown has something to say, everyone, in both Julia Quinn's beloved novels and the hit Netflix show, pays close attention in the glamorous Regency of the Bridgerton world, whether one is reading the books or watching the series. Lady Whistledown's tales have become essential reading for people worldwide. They give a glimpse into the joy and sophistication of elite life. But it became evident that life was indeed not just balls and handsome dukes. A person's entire life, from birth to death, navigating the marriage market and the application of questionable beauty products, was as complicated as the intricate dancing of the Regency era. Success in elite/mode would be rewarding; however, in a world of class and status, it came easily to even the best-mannered, most refined young woman to trip up (curazon 8).

The mysterious Lady Whistledown knows the world of Bridgerton better than anybody. If there is gossip, she hears it; if there is drama, she shares it, and all with a sweep of her genteel pen. In Regency Britain, after all, appearances were everything. Lady Whistledown observes all. She is no stranger to sophisticated scandals as well as the tiniest social faux pas. Lady Whistledown does not only report on the most splendid time among the ton; she catalogs the missteps and squabbles and the mundane fictions of self-importance to

lay bare the truth under the sparkle, using her quill as both knife and sword in a society that too often privileges the appearance of substance over substantive meaning.

Lady Whistledown's knack for turning even the most insignificant of events into something entertaining. By covering a mishap as small as a broken violin, instigated by Lady Danbury's famously blunt wave of her cane, Whistledown illustrates that we are never entirely safe in the elite world of riches and privilege. It is not just about romantic social season milestones and scandalous moments; part and parcel of Whistledown's sneakiness is that it makes even trivial incidents and events worthy of notice because she is such a sharp and observant writer. The absurdity of this moment also underscores how Whistledown's column provides gossip and satire, requesting readers to remember that nobody in the Bridgerton audience, no matter how eminent or reputable, is safe from her commentary. The moment Lady Whistledown's paper hit the streets, it fascinated the ton with its sharp wit and scandalous details, sparking a frenzy of speculation and obsession:

He single-sheet newspaper became an instant sensation. no one knew who Lady Whistledown really was, but everyone seemed to have a theory. for weeks, no, months, really, London could speak of nothing else. (9)

That it was a one-sheet newspaper and created such a stir shows the power of anonymous commentary and the extent of the public's obsession with gossip and identity. The ambiguity of Lady Whistledown's identity elevated interest levels, taking her from merely a writer to a cultural phenomenon. The sustained buzz--"for weeks, no months" -- that Whistledown's paper inspired means it dominated conversation. The public's hunger for scandal is revealed, but also the power of a woman who, despite staying hidden, chronicled the lives of the elite.

we might dismiss the effortlessly polite Lady Whistledown as a work of fiction, but she certainly had her counterparts in reality. Gossip-hungry readers of town and country

magazine flicked straight to the tete-a-tete section to read redacted reports of who was doing what to whom, and coffee houses buzzed with discussion of the latest drama. the same thirst for gossip propels characters to treat Lady Whistledown's paper as a necessary reading, often with urgency and a competitive edge. In the example of Portia, we can see that she gets frustrated because she misses her opportunity to read the most recent paper:

Portia frowned. She hated when someone, anyone, was aware of gossip before she was. How did you get to Whistledown before I did? I told Briarly to set it aside for me and not to let anyone touch". (19)

Lady Whistledown's gossip column has now entrenched itself into both the daily practices and the salient concerns of Bridgerton society. Portia's irritation at not having been the first to peruse the latest issue illustrates the competitive nature that surrounds gossip consumption and the social currency of being informed before everyone else is aware. Portia's possessiveness regarding the issue ("I told Briarly to set it aside for me") is indicative of the way Whistledown's paper is regarded as a coveted possession. The quote is whimsical, revealing that even the coolest of cats is occasionally flummoxed by such a trivial matter as an overdue gossip expose, revealing the suffocating power and reach of Whistledown's unknown quill.

### **III.1.3 Women Using Pseudonyms to Speak Out**

Anonymity blocks aspects about a person, and when writing, an altered or fictitious name hides their personal history and situation. Pen names, otherwise known as pseudonyms, have been used for centuries to mask a writer's true name. The actual word comes from the Greek word pseudonym, meaning "false name." Pseudonyms enable writers to display their work without the bias and notions that visitors may have of their real identity. A pseudonym may mask gender, their circumstances, or even provide anonymity as a writer. A pseudonym

simply gives control and creates a level of protection.

When it comes to women writers, if power seems to come from cultural distinction, then women have long been at a disadvantage. This is because the people who had the authority to create and judge literature, mainly educated men, often dismissed or looked down on women's writing. These judgments helped shape the social norms we still see today. In a society that has historically favored men, male writers were already accepted and respected by the time women began writing. Men's access to education gave them the upper hand, allowing them to set the rules for what counted as good literature. This created a cycle where women were excluded from literary power and therefore had little chance to gain recognition or influence. For many women over the years, writing anonymously was a way to avoid the unfair power structure that dominated the literary world. It gave them the freedom to create their own identities and control their own stories. By using pen names or signing their work as simply A Lady, women writers were able to get published and have their work taken more seriously, without being judged unfairly because of their gender (Finn 9). Writers don't have to be women to use a pen name many well-known male authors, like Mark Twain, Dr. Seuss, and Lewis Carroll, have written under pseudonyms for various personal or artistic reasons (Finn 23). In *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, the matter of the anonymity of who is Lady Whistledown even leads Hyacinth to tease: "Unless Colin were Lady Whistledown..." Hyacinth said with a devilish gleam in her eye (85).

Hyacinth's line is quite funny, but it also emphasizes the density of the fog of mystery obscuring Lady Whistledown's true identity. The fact that she could jokingly entertain the possibility that a man like Colin could be behind such audacious and astute social judgment underlies just how successful the real author has been at hiding behind a nom de plume. This instance of a pen name shows how an effective pen name can erase all assumptions about identity based on gender or social role. This shows the power of anonymity; heads are

,spinning ,pundits and readers alike yet authorship is entirely theirs! It shows a true freedom of expression. The quote showcases how authorship, when disguised behind a pseudonym, hopes to excite the reader's attention on the message rather than the messenger. Even more fundamentally, it challenges the idea that methods of writing (or critique) belong to particular women (and men) or categories of identity. However, the reasons behind women writers choosing pen names have often been quite different. For many women, adopting a pseudonym was not just a creative choice but a necessary step to avoid backlash or bias from readers and critics simply because they were female. A pseudonym is like an author's second self, coming from the Latin term meaning other I. This implies that the writer isn't just hiding behind a name, but is taking on a completely new identity. Rather than just serving as a disguise, a pen name can become a fully developed character on its own (Finn 23).

Throughout the ages, many women writers have used pseudonyms not only for artistic liberty but also as a buffer against the public's condemnation. In the discussion of anonymity in literature, a pseudonym can act as a figurehead, as an alternative identity that becomes equally valid, freeing the writer to express themselves freely and with authority in a way that might be silenced otherwise. *Bridgerton* captures this idea quite well through the mysterious persona of Lady Whistledown, whose identity can be anonymous and therefore grants her full power to critique and thereby stake her claim over the upper-class world. The pen name privilege afforded to her will be not just a cover, but a fully realized character that also allows her to create meaningful power and authority. Lady Whistledown's confidence in the strength of her hidden persona is revealed when she directly challenges her readers, daring them to uncover her true self. "Do your worst, ladies and gentlemen of the ton. You haven't a prayer of solving this mystery" (56). The audacity of her assertion as Lady Whistledown reveals the power of anonymity: she uses her voice to assert control over a society that marginalizes most women. Especially women like Penelope Featherington, who would never be taken seriously

as a participant in public discourse. In this instance of writing, she is free not only because she avoids her exposure, but also because she is directly confronting the elite. As the text suggests, an authorship created in anonymity may serve as an "other I", maintaining the author while subdividing agency. Lady Whistledown, as a disguise, becomes her most voluminous voice, giving Lady Whistledown a bureaucratic existence outside the constraints of gender prescriptions of Regency society. This mirrors many women writers' historical experiences, where their writing voice only became distinct after no longer existing in public selfhood but rather in the construction of a personal yet literary agent.

Overall, authors have used pen names for many different reasons. Some were influenced by philosophical beliefs that considered taking personal credit for creative work as too bourgeois or materialistic. Others simply wanted to distance themselves from their existing public identity or literary brand to try something new or different (Finn 24).

Before pen names became fashionable, authors who wanted to be anonymous simply wrote anonymously without any name whatsoever. This pre-pen name anonymity dates from the medieval period, when authors, who most likely would not comprehend our time's obsession with taking credit and being loved, had no use for taking credit for what they did. It was at that time that ideas like intellectual property, book sales, or originality were not matters of concern. The scenario changed with the passing of copyright laws. However, as Donaldson traces in *The Artist is Not Present: Anonymity in Literature*, there were good reasons for some writers to remain anonymous. One of the most important ones was the desire to print ideas that were dangerous or even taboo for the time. In these cases, anonymity served as an invisibility cloak, protecting writers from criticism or disgust by readers and critics (Finn 24). Nowadays, genuine serious publications that maintain true anonymity have significantly decreased. Anonymity has largely become associated with insider accounts related to government matters, as well as with comments on the Internet (Finn 25). The severity of



public outrage indicates how controversial and distorting she has been to the rigid social structure. For a long time, anonymity has proven to be an effective means of destabilizing the known order, allowing individuals to speak truth to power immediately without fear of retaliation. The concealed identity of Lady Whistledown gives her the ability to reveal a multitude of secrets and challenge the normative codes of an oppressive Regency society. Even though her words remain unsigned, their power is enough to induce rage, fear, and fodder for rumor to the recently disordered upper class. The overwhelming response speaks to how destabilizing an anonymous voice can be in a reputation-based culture:

Do you have any idea how many people that woman has insulted over the years? [...] I don't hate her [...] It doesn't matter if I hate her. Everyone else hates her [...] Whoever that Lady Whistledown is [...] when she is unmasked, she will not be able to show her face in London. (139-140)

This reaction represents the power of Lady Whistledown. Although her identity is disguised beneath her pen name, her words have disturbed the status quo, uncovered their secrets, and called into question their reputations. The original text observes that anonymity (particularly in the public sphere when critiquing systems of power) often generates a strong backlash. The character's fear of a time when she "will not be able to show her face in London" indicates just how powerful her anonymity is in a space where reputation and appearance are paramount. A power that has galvanized more sway than most celebrities, and it elucidates how unsettling it is for the elite to be called into question by a figure they cannot see or shut up. Similar to modern anonymous whistleblowers or internet commentators, Lady Whistledown's unknown authorship gives her a form of unaccountable power, although this will most likely change when it is revealed.

There are instances where male writers adopt female names that extend beyond mere

anonymity and verge on cultural appropriation. A notable case involves poet Michael Derrick Hudson, who submitted his work under the name Yi-Fen Chou, which is associated with a Chinese-American woman. After encountering several rejections while using his real name, Hudson thought that adopting a marginalized identity could enhance the appeal of his writing. When the truth was revealed, it sparked significant backlash in the literary community (Fallon), as many viewed his actions as deceitful and exploitative. The outrage surrounding Hudson's behavior was warranted since he did exactly what many marginalized writers struggle against he claimed identities from two marginalized groups for personal gain without genuinely understanding their experiences or challenges. In contrast to authors who use pen names to escape bias, Hudson's choice seemed like a calculated business strategy. While employing a pseudonym can often be a nuanced issue and isn't generally deemed unethical, Hudson's situation illustrated how even tools designed to create equity, such as pen names, can be misused for inappropriate ends. Putting aside concerns about appropriation and the misuse of pseudonyms, it is evident that women are not the only ones who have employed them over time. Writers from both genders have taken on pen names to explore different versions of themselves, creating a persona or role that their real names might not have allowed them to fully express ( Finn 27-28). Penelope Featherington does just this with the alter ego of Lady Whistledown. Whereas cases of pseudonym abuse often use aliases to profit, Penelope detaches her true self from her pseudonym, as opposed to appropriating her readers' public that public space. This distinction becomes apparent when Penelope's duality is challenged:

That Lady Whistledown will ruin you [...] you talk as if she were a separate person. well, excuse me if I still have a difficulty reconciling the woman in front of me with the harridan writing the column. (219)

This line illustrates the discomfort caused by Penelope's revealed authorship to those around

her. For her friends, the bold and critical diction of Whistledown does not align with the unobtrusive and quiet girl they have known. Yet, there is no intent to mislead here, as Penelope's pseudonym allows her to speak sincerely in a society that limits women's speaking. Her journey represents how a pen name can become a site of empowerment—in stark contrast to Hudson's lies perpetrated through a false persona, Penelope operates from a place of necessity (and even sincerity).

In her essay titled *Professions for Women*, Virginia Woolf discusses how women writers, both in her era and prior to it, faced the challenge of confronting the concept of the Angel in the House before they could genuinely pursue their writing. This term refers to an idealized female figure depicted in a well-known poem, one that embodies selflessness and devotion. Woolf characterizes this Angel as a constraining presence on women's creativity. She acknowledges that she had to "kill" this figure multiple times to write without restraint. While Woolf managed to break free from this constraint, the impact of such ideals continues to shape women's literature throughout history. From Jane Austen concealing her writing to evade recognition, to George Eliot using her partner's name, and the Brontë sisters publishing under male pen names to avoid gender discrimination, numerous female authors have confronted the limitations represented by the *Angel in the House*. For years, women have been compelled to mask their work in various ways to shield themselves from societal scrutiny and critical bias (Finn 31-32). When considering the ongoing struggle women face to assert themselves in a patriarchal world, Virginia Woolf's *Angel in the House* continues to resonate powerfully. Woolf's metaphor describes the internal and external forces that compel women to withhold themselves, be agreeable, and pose no threat to others, specifically men's qualities that can oppose the trait of boldness and courage necessary to claim our voice as our own and speak or write with authority. For centuries, female artists have lived in this paradox, and women have internalized this ideal to the extent that many have needed to adopt personas or

pseudonyms to be heard. It is in *Bridgerton* that we see Penelope Featherington and her predicament as Lady Whistledown in contrast to each other, a reference to the struggle between who a woman can be sanctioned to be in public, and who she is privately when she needs to claim her voice and power.

"Penelope may not know how to defend herself, but by god, Lady Whistledown did" (227). embodies the duality that so many women have faced in society throughout time. Penelope, reserved and in the background, is still dictated by the expectations of a woman of her specific class/gender, similar to the *Angel in the House* (1931), which Woolf refers to as the ideals of womanhood still influencing her decisions. When her secret identity becomes Lady Whistledown, she obtains a strong voice, able to express unimaginably powerful opinions, and influence society. This quotation conveys the need that many women have to create an alternative identity to circumvent women's societal limitations, similar to Woolf, Austen, and the Brontës negotiating their literary careers under the confines of womanhood.

Jane Austen was the first among her contemporaries to have her work published and was quick to step into the public eye, although she initially chose to release *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) under the pseudonym By a Lady. This decision reflected her awareness of her gender while also indicating a reluctance to reveal her identity. Despite receiving early acclaim and having familial support, her father even attempted to publish her writing as far back as 1797, Austen felt uncomfortable with her identity as an author. She often concealed her work by placing blotting paper over the manuscripts, making sure that even the household staff were unaware of her literary ambitions. Jane Austen's first novels were published anonymously; Jane Austen had published as just by a Lady with the first novel *Sense and Sensibility*, which is a clear indication of the expectations of women at the time - modest and eschewing public recognition. Her identity as the author had not been revealed until posthumously by her brother in a book that he published after her death. (Finn 33).

### III.1.4 Revealed: The Woman Behind the Pen Name

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife, woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, all was ashes. With them, she was promised happiness and power (Benítez-Alonso 20). The Regency era in England came with a variety of legal and social restrictions placed on women, many times making marriage the only acceptable and respectable way for women to gain financial security. Women were not allowed to vote, could not own property unless they were married, and if women did separate from their husbands, they lost custody of their children. Social etiquette also imposed rigid rules on upper-class women, as in the ton, who were often expected not to work, not to walk alone, and not to laugh too loud; this was to protect their reputations (Cohen). In this restrictive society, Penelope Featherington writes her Society Papers using the pseudonym Lady Whistledown. In a world where women's worth is determined by their piety, purity, and obedience, there is almost no chance for independence, self-expression, or ambition, especially for women of elite status. The societal pressures of True Womanhood and the social prescriptions of the Regency would likely place normal women under rigid constraints, leaving them little room for personal agency. For a woman such as Penelope Featherington, writing under a pseudonym was not only an act of rebellion but also an authentic disguise. In her guise as Lady Whistledown, she has authority and a voice unallowed by society. By choosing to be anonymous, however, she also embraces secrecy as both a form of protection and a survival strategy. In her role as Lady Whistledown, she lives in a world of decorum that devours scandal in secret. by saying "everyone has secrets. especially me" (102). Lady Whistledown identifies the hypocrisy of a society that requires women to be morally perfect, while being a society of hidden wrongs, and shows an

acute awareness of her separation and can understand her role both as chronicler and secret-keeper, who upholds social convention publicly but undermines it through writing privately. Penelope's dual identity as Lady Whistledown highlights the dual capacity for secrecy to serve women as both wall and weapon once decorum places limits on our actions and moves our own desires and talents to secrecy. Women too often find themselves running a shadow life to hide their thoughts, what they want, and who they are. Penelope is acutely aware: she sees all the lives being managed in her world, she understands the tension, but hers are special secrets because they are counter to the expectations of femininity and to be obedient. She writes freely depending on her invisibility. Yet invisibility invokes intrigue and disruption. The ton is so wrapped up in the enigma of Lady Whistledown that wanting the power to expose and regain control puts a price on her exposure. What began as a private rebellion erupts into a public defiance that showcases the horrifying threat the free thought of an anonymous woman presents to a society hellbent on silencing her. "Lady Danbury has offered one thousand pounds to whomever unmasks Lady Whistledown" (59). While society may find gossip entertaining, it is distraught by a woman wielding that kind of influence, untouched and unguarded. The fact that there is a bounty for revealing her identity indicates that the ton cannot tolerate a woman's unincorporated voice; it must be named, exposed, and put back in place. For Penelope, being unmasked may mean relinquishing her independence and perhaps being punished for being audacious enough to speak out, even under the hot iron of fiction.

Lady Whistledown is a secret pen name for Penelope Featherington, a popular, respected, and anonymous author of a social newsletter that publishes gossip about high society, the ton. Lady Whistledown appeared at the beginning of the 1813 social season and made a name for herself quickly, gaining popularity with many members of the ton, including Queen Charlotte. Lady Whistledown's newsletter kept members of high society updated on everyone's status, whether they were succeeding or failing socially, and what took place at

various balls and social events taking place this season (Lady Whistledown). More than just a fun diversion, the newsletter's success ultimately made Lady Whistledown a very mysterious and powerful figure, whose identity--and fortune--was fodder for speculation and envy. No society column had previously used real names with such fearless abandon, giving the paper distinction and making it not just a source of gossip, but direct threats to the tenuous reputations of the elites. What truly set Lady Whistledown apart from other society gossip writers was her daring decision to identify her subjects openly and explicitly, leaving no room for ambiguity or hidden identities:

Somewhere, some woman (or maybe, some people speculated, some man) was growing very rich indeed. what set Lady Whistledown's society papers apart from any previous society newssheets was that the author actually listed her subjects' names in full. there was no hiding behind abbreviations such as Lord P or Lady B. If Lady Whistledown wanted to write about someone, she used his full name. (9)

By using full names instead of ambiguous initials or titles, Lady Whistledown departed from the norms of subtlety in gossip columns and raised the ante of her observations. This controversial decision raised the stakes for those about whom she wrote and rendered her remarks hard to ignore or dismiss. It also added layers of intrigue on top of the mystery of her identity: readers discerned the intimacy of her knowledge and wondered if anonymity was a form of protection or weaponry. This kind of transparency helped boost the newsletter's popularity and established Lady Whistledown as an influential, if ambiguous, authority in Regency society.

Lady Whistledown's newsletter rapidly gained a reputation as the most trusted source of gossip, and her commentary began to shape the public's perception. She shared many bold opinions and observations about others, and her anonymous identity significantly fueled

interest in her work. Every member of the elite acclaimed her observations, despite no one knowing the true identity of Lady Whistledown. She is a newsletter that soon became an essential element of the ton's daily life, with members so eager for Lady Whistledown to reconcile sudden changes of workday accessibility:

The paper had been delivered for free for two weeks, just long enough to addict the to and then suddenly there was no delivery, just paperboys charging the outrageous price of five pennis a paper. but by then, no one could live without almost-daily dose of gossip, and everyone paid their pennies. (9)

The change from free to paid was evidence of how addicted the ton had become to her gossip. Even when faced with the unwanted cost, people willingly paid because they were getting something valuable: insider information and social currency, as Lady Whistledown eloquently put it. The change in ownership also emphasized the reach of Lady Whistledown's voice to steer public opinion and the degree to which she was bonded to her elite society. Ultimately, she proved that once you're addicted, it's impossible to go completely cold turkey.

Gossip has always been the lifeblood of the ton. Lady Whistledown's articles reveal rumors, spread secrets, and overall are a menace to society. And as in *Bridgerton*, it was not often that these authors protected their anonymity for long (in many instances, their identity was an open secret all along). However, this rarely damaged readers' affections for their idolons in the long term. So, even if we all now know who she is, long live Lady Whistledown (Smith). Throughout the story, Lady Whistledown's identity is an extremely closely held secret, which leaves the ton filled with wonder and conjecture. Her delightful quotes and activities, and her sometimes scathing actions of exposure, captivate the readers and the times as they await each issue, trying to guess who could be behind the pseudonym. The identities of Lady Whistledown, while enjoyable, also add to the tension of the story as



characters react with suspicion, admiration, or dread. Slowly throughout the story, clues reveal themselves, creating tension and laying the groundwork for when Lady Whistledown's identity is revealed. This revelation changes the dynamic within the ton and provides insight into the bravery and intelligence of the infamous gossip. In a surprising turn, it is Colin who ultimately exposes Lady Whistledown's true identity, shattering the mystery that had captivated the ton:

you might say that my wife has two maiden names [...] of course you all knew her as Penelope Featherington, as did I. but what you didn't know, and what even I was not clever enough to figure out until she told me herself [...] is that she is also the brilliant, the witty, the breathtakingly magnificent [...] I give you my wife [...] Lady Whisteldown. And then it came. clap. clap. clap. slow and methodical [...] it was Lady Danbury [...] and then someone else began to clap [...] Anthony Bridgerton [...] Simon Basset [...] the Bridgerton women [...] the Featherington women [...] the entire room was cheering. Tomorrow they might remember to be angry with her, to feel irritated at having been fooled for so many years, but tonight [...] all they could do was admire and cheer. for a woman who had had to carry out all of her accomplishments in secret, it was everything she'd ever dreamed of [...] Congratulations, Lady Whistledown.  
(408-409)

In this instant, we see a memorable reveal of Penelope Featherington as Lady Whistledown, an event that upends the entire social world. Colin's announcement not only affirms what many suspected, but also acknowledges Penelope's intelligence, wit, and bravery in a society that forced her to compartmentalize her talents behind a pseudonym. The slow, cascading applause - beginning with Lady Danbury and then expanding into notables like Anthony Bridgerton and Simon Basset - signified a grudging yet real acceptance and esteem from the same elite of society she has critiqued. Irrespective of any future gripes for being duped, the

ton's initial reaction is one of merriment, aware of Penelope's courage to operate within and violate the constraints of gender. This scene confirms that Lady Whistledown's voice is not just scandalous blather, but a smoke signal of awesomeness that deserves reverie and acclaim.

## **III.2 Power of Malicious Gossip**

### **III.2.1 Scandal as Social Currency**

In literature, scandal often serves as a dramatic element, showcasing characters' dishonorable or shameful actions, and revealing the moral shortcomings and social transgressions that challenge the social order. Scandal in literature typically involves behaviors that society perceives to be humiliating or otherwise unsuitable, and these acts usually become sites of conflict and tension for the narrative. Literary scandal not only presents on individual actors' perceived flaws or secrets, but also provides some critique of collective social standards by presenting what happens to infringe upon common public standards, resulting in potential harm, ostracism, or metamorphosis. By dramatizing publicly scandalous behavior, literature explores the precarious threshold between personal morality and public condemnation, exposing the techniques through which public life enforces conformity to collective norms and sanctions deviations from these norms through public shaming and discourse (Scandal Definition · LSData).

According to the article *The Real Regency Scandal Sheets?* by Bliss Bennet, scrutinizes the historical accuracy of the scandal sheets that commonly appear in Regency novels. In a number of contemporary novels, scandal sheets are often depicted as popular magazines with gossip about the elites that often had great influence on social standing. However, as Bennet points out, the term "scandal sheet" did not come into use until early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the Regency period, and in the early 1800s, there were no other newspapers concerned only with gossip, though there was some public commentary and satire

surrounding the behaviors of people in power. One early example of such public commentary is Daniel Defoe's 1704 column, *Advice from the Scandalous Club*, in which Defoe encouraged readers to submit stories with scandalous behaviors. Additionally, during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, satirical prints became a popular public commentary and critique. These printed illustrations, created by artists like James Gillray and George Cruikshank, critiqued political subjects and high society scandals that were illicitly informed by gossip, and in turn served as a printed visual gossip. In that sense they were not scandal sheets, but were similar in the ways that they spread rumors about the behaviors and antics of public figures their mutual influence in public culture. Bennet's post concludes with the idea that fictional scandal sheets are a figment of the imagination but have scant historical basis (Ellis)

Scandal is a central theme in *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, infusing tension and intrigue into the plot and allowing secrets to threaten reputations and affect connections in London high society.

"I'm fine," he repeated, probably a little louder than was necessary. "I'm just thinking about the scandal." She let out a beleaguered sigh, which irritated him, because he didn't see that she had any reason to feel so impatient with him. "What scandal?" she asked. "The scandal that is going to erupt when she is discovered," he ground out. (142)

In the passage, Colin's agitation over the potential exposure of Lady Whistledown's identity then reveals how social punishment aimed at women primarily integrates their social identity into the fear of scandal within Regency society. In Colin's case, calling the situation simply "scandal" signals not only concern about public humiliation, but also anxiety that expectations, specifically those expectations around Penelope, have been disrupted. Furthermore, the idea of scandal implies a great sense of impending social catastrophe,

reminding us that even the rumor of improper behavior had significant potential to destroy reputations. The beleaguered sigh of Penelope sharply contrasts with Colin's mounting anxiety, indicating her emotional exhaustion from years of living with the peril caused by her secret. Ironically, Colin's unnamed concern about "the scandal that is going to erupt when she is discovered" is aimed at the very person he is speaking to, which indicates a complex tension between public identity and the secret truth about it. Overall, this moment captures how scandal in the novel is operating as more than gossip; it is working for control and fear, especially on behalf of women, in which truth is always troublesome and dangerous when it exhibits ideas that create social change.

### III.2.2 Reputation and Its Fragile Nature

In the Regency era, propriety for young ladies reflected strict manners that could hold severe consequences for their reputations. One slip, like a girl falling from a carriage, could cost a woman her chance at a respectable marriage, and society at that time prescribed great affectation to the idea that a young woman should quite naturally be gentle and ladylike. To actively care for one's appearance demonstrated an education that was inferior. Not only did you need to have proper stance and movement, to slouching or leaning back was considered slothful. A young lady, unmarried, was never to be with a man who was not a small family member, and to always be accompanied by a woman chaperone at any social activity and protect ends with reputation. A formal introduction was required to even socialize with someone. Not acknowledging someone in public could be construed as a slight. Conversations were minimized, especially to avoid personal comments or recommendations to begin with. Although sexist and restrictive for a modern way of thinking, these basic expectations were required for a young lady's sense of 'status' and role within Regency society (Rendfeld). "Reputation strongly drives the characters and the course of their romantic and social lives in *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*.' Is nothing private in this world ?' 'Not in this family.'" (161).

The exchange succinctly distills how reputation and privacy are intertwined in *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*. The question, “Is nothing private in this world ?” captures the anxiety that characters have about personal exposure and the implications for their reputations, as their public reputations rely on their ability to protect their private lives. In Regency society, reputations are tenuous, susceptible to damage from rumor and scandal, and therefore discretion is paramount. The answer, not in this family, chips away at any delusion of privacy within the Bridgerton family and highlights the fluidity of reputation, with family gossip poised to soon influence even the best character’s good name. The absence of privacy amplifies the diligence that characters must sustain in order to safeguard their good names in public and society. Moreover, this implies significant concern about reputation as a family; damage to one family member's standing could attract significant repercussions for all of them. Consequently, the quote encapsulates a significant pressure on the characters to preserve their honor and how prominently reputation frames their public and private personas.

### **III.2.3 Gossip’s Influence on Public Opinion**

Gossip, perhaps initially thought of as trivial talk regarding the private business of other people while they are not present, is given a somewhat deeper definition in *Good Gossip*, a collection of essays edited by Robert F. Goodman. *Good Gossip* consists of multiple authors exploring gossip in many different ways and its long history of negative connotations. From a simple definition, gossip could be seen clearly to be thought of not only as a harmful or malicious act, but also as what could be seen as a potential good, and as having a more developed role in social life. Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, in his essay *The Vindication of Gossip*, argues that, although gossip has many good outcomes in a social context, it reinforces group norms and creates intimacy between people and even channels useful information. *Good Gossip* reframes the concept of gossip and compels the reader to reflect on the more

profound aspects of gossip and its complex roles in human relationships and in communities (Imada).

In this article, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B : Biological Sciences*, Gossip is defined as a sender communicating information about an absent third party to a receiver. Gossip is of considerable interest to social scientists because it influences social life in ways that include reputation formation, partner selection, and cooperation. Laboratory experiments have shown that people often gossip about others' cooperativeness, and also that people will utilize reported information in gossip to inform their cooperation. Thus, recent work has moved from the laboratory to exploring everyday gossip in real social networks, testing some predictions of indirect reciprocity and reputation-based partner selection. As a result of this expansive inquiry, this dissertation describes not only the normal content of gossip, but also how people use gossip to rethink and reclaim others' reputations. This wider scope of inquiry into everyday gossip underscores the important role of gossip in the maintenance of social order and collective cooperation (Dores Cruz et al.).

#### **III.2.4 Gossip as a Literary Weapon and Feminist Agency**

In the article "*Talking about Gossip*," gossip is presented as a complex and meaningful social practice. Rather than viewing gossip as simple idle talk or harmful, petty rumor sharing, it is positioned as a powerful form of communication that informs social relationships and the community. The article highlights how gossip features in social cohesion and the development of social ties, particularly among groups of women, in which women have a space to share personal experiences, concerns, and values. Gossip, as described in the article, is a means of fostering shared belonging and shared commiseration.

Furthermore, gossip is recognized as a way to reinforce or deviate from accepted social norms and expectations. Gossip serves as an informal kind of social control, exposing

community members' acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, thus regulating individual behavior and providing some measure of community-relatedness. Concurrently, gossip can be a subtle form of resistance to some larger, more dominant power structures, allowing for an often-ignored voice for those who typically find themselves in more marginalized positions to criticize authority or subvert it in ways that are not typically recognized by formal institutions.

The article also discusses the gendered aspects of gossip as it has a strong relationship with women's social lives and communication styles. By analyzing gossip across historical and cultural contexts, the piece shows how it has been sanitized and denigrated, and regarded as trivial in the course of everyday social connectedness. Ultimately, gossip is characterized not as trivial talk but as a cultural mechanism that articulates social identities, power relations, and communal bonding. Notably, it also informs the construction of female characters by providing a socially sanctioned avenue to socialize where they can say what they cannot say or do in their social lives, and to express what they think and feel and how they are resisting in ways that are often constrained in their public and formal lives (Ross 278).

The revelation of Lady Whistledown's identity disrupts the social hierarchies, demonstrating how an unseen voice can challenge established conventions. The disastrous power of scandal threatens to expose societal oppression, but can also mobilize and liberate the oppressed, especially women. The *Bridgerton* world illustrates the energetic discharge just below the barriers of social propriety, where power derives from secret narratives and gossip. Ultimately, the story embraces the valor it takes to define and claim one's voice, especially in a world that demands silence. Lady Whistledown exemplifies how disobedience and stalwart determination can shift characteristics of social boundaries.

## Conclusion

This thesis sets out to explore the narrative and social power of gossip in Julia Quinn's *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, with a particular focus on its role as a form of female empowerment, especially through the figure of Lady Whistledown. Drawing on feminist literary theory, the study examines how gossip, commonly regarded as frivolous or superficial, operates instead as a strategic means of resistance, authorship, and agency in a patriarchal social structure. The research engages with the ways women are positioned within and constrained by social expectations, and how alternative forms of communication can subvert these norms.

Chapter One lays the historical and literary groundwork of the study by exploring the rigid gender roles, class divides, and limitations on women during the Regency period. The chapter situates Julia Quinn's work in a broader feminist literary canon and offers specific connections to Jane Austen. It reveals how the early novel functions both as a product of, and subtle critique of, its time. Quinn continues this tradition of employing the romance genre to elevate the domestic and emotional contexts of women, rendering them cultural spaces rather than trivialities.

Chapter Two focuses on Penelope Featherington, who is portrayed as a socially meaningless character. What is perceived as Penelope's compliance, on the other hand, is a calculated move; and by celebrating and appropriating her marginality, she utilizes her invisibility to observe, consider, and then act through clandestine methods. Her emergence as Lady Whistledown demonstrates that invisibility serves as a mode of liberation. The chapter reveals the duality of Penelope's identity as she escapes the imposed role, which in turn makes visible how women utilize subversion and masquerading as means to retain some space of autonomy in a patriarchal framework.



Chapter Three continues with the analysis by discussing the dimensions of anonymity and authorship. Penelope Featherington, using her pseudonymous identity of Lady Whistledown, is part of the elite social stratum through her activities and the alliances she establishes. She rapidly becomes a regulating authority regarding gossip, able to use her powerful, published voice to make critiques not sequestered in idle leisure but directed at real social practices, exposing the indignity and hypocrisy of the elite and shaping public opinion, all the while buffering herself from social repercussions tied to her own identity. The chapter argues that gossip, which is often disparaged as frivolous or harmful, is repainted as a form of feminist authorship in the novel, forming a coded tool that women in the same social stratum as Penelope use as a strategic way to speak back, critique power relations, and resist the impositions of cultural silence.

The research findings demonstrate that Quinn's novel characterizes gossip not as frivolous conversation but as a mode of social agency and navigation. Gossip allows Penelope and other women to communicate information, create social structures, and resist hegemonic representations. Gossip takes on a modal form of subversive resistance that allows women to communicate their thoughts that cannot be verbally expressed in formal discourse. The findings further show that anonymous authorship offers essential space to rebel in taking on the persona of Lady Whistledown, Penelope breaks through her social limitations to critique the systems that contain her; she restructures herself into an actor in the same society that excludes her. Ultimately, the novel takes gossip and pseudonymous writing as a serious, legitimate, and forceful means of addressing silence, invisibility, and patriarchal dominance. The primary contribution of this thesis is that it reconceives *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* as a feminist text that engages important issues surrounding the politics of voice, visibility, and resistance.

This thesis's project reconstructs the aura surrounding romance novels as simply pleasure or entertainment, showing instead the important ways these narratives subvert, critique, and reimagine power relations. It revisits the issue of vanished female voices in historical depictions and looks at how Quinn allows her characters to reclaim those voices through unorthodox channels. This thesis aims to build momentum for the exciting feminist literary work that recognizes the agency of ordinary modes of resistance. It also fills a significant methodological gap in the scholarship because this thesis takes a serious academic approach to a popular romance narrative and considers it a site of political and cultural significance. By examining Penelope's journey, this study answers key questions about women's societal roles and subversion in the Regency period. The caricature of Lady Whistledown operates not just as a literary vehicle but as an agent for transforming social orders and undermining hierarchical values. Penelope's anonymous authorship seeks to bring credence to gossip often regarded as inconsequential as a conduit of power. Julia Quinn thus uses gossip as an intentional feminist 'gambit' by expanding on a previously imagined (often labelled as unnecessary) narrative with power and the opportunity for authenticity and growth. Penelope's authorship serves her both as her shield and sword, and offers her the opportunity to critique, survive, and actively challenge the misogynistic conditions levied against her. This research provides important insight into how Julia Quinn's *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* reclaims gossip and anonymity as feminist methodologies and further extends our understanding of gender, power, and voice within the context of Regency literature. This study begins to employ feminist methodologies on a popular text, and offers a new way to conceptualize the ways in which women create strategies to work through, or resist, societal expectations. While the specific case provides depth, it is necessarily limited in scope, and future studies can provide intersectional and historical contextualization to deepen these findings. All that said, the thesis makes clear the value of feminist theoretical perspectives in

examining the subversive possibilities of even the most conservative of texts. *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* encourages readers to consider the boundary between public and private, visibility and invisibility, truth and fictions and everything in between. Quinn indicates that while Penelope's transformation from a silent wallflower to a powerful social commentator is signified, a journey toward empowerment is not always (or ever) through an overt act of rebellion; it is often found in footnotes, scandal sheets, and the anonymity of a pen name. The purpose of this study is to show recurring elements of gossip and anonymous authorship, thought to be trivialized in both literature and social contexts as critical forms of feminist resistance. Quinn does not reproduce the romance genre as escapist fantasy ; she gives female characters space to realize the boundaries of themselves, navigate their identities, and assert their voices within the confines of the romance genre. Gossip reclaims the scene of what is silenced and imagines what is possible. Ultimately, *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* relates a deeper narrative of women navigating oppression not by sidestepping the rules; rather, they are the rules. When referring to future research, it is also beneficial to pursue how other female authors use gossip to reflect, respond to, or disrupt other socially normative behaviours, or how one author uses gossip to hijack socially normative behaviour across differing historical or cultural situations. Moreover, interdisciplinary studies among gender studies, media theory, or digital culture can investigate how gossip continues to work as an 'operational tool' for women, as in women's resistance to male ownership of narrative in real life, particularly around online and social media.

In closing, this thesis shows that *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* reclaims the traditionally devalued act of gossip as a means of strategic social authorship. In providing Penelope Featherington as the voice behind Lady Whistledown's paper, Julia Quinn portrays gossip as not just pernicious talk on the social margins, but rather a sophisticated act of commentary and potential quiet defiance. The novel conveys that, even in a society that

silences females in terms of visibility and authority, a document, even when cleverly crafted and narrowly distributed, speaks volumes. In and from that noise, the beginnings of the shifting of power begin to occur.

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## Résumé

À travers le temps, la littérature a constitué une opportunité d'expression pour les femmes malgré les normes sociales. Cette recherche va dans ce sens et cherche à analyser le rôle du commérage comme outil d'émancipation féminine dans le roman *Romancing Mr. Bridgerton* de Julia Quinn. L'objectif principal est de démontrer comment un acte souvent considéré comme accessoire peut s'avérer être un dispositif de pouvoir et d'affirmation de soi pour les femmes. La recherche s'appuie sur une approche exclusivement féministe et sur une analyse textuelle minutieuse de l'œuvre. C'est en passant par le personnage de Penelope Featherington, alias Lady Whistledown, que Quinn montre comment une femme peut, dans le secret de l'anonymat, contester l'ordre patriarcal, c'est-à-dire le pouvoir des hommes en matière d'information et d'opinion. L'analyse présente les résultats selon lesquels, dans le contexte étudié, le commérage devient un acte délibéré qui permet à l'héroïne d'exprimer sa propre opinion, de dénoncer des injustices sociales et de redéfinir une place sociale. Ce pouvoir de la parole féminine, dissimulée sous l'anonymat, est aussi ce qui la transforme. Pour conclure, cette recherche met en lumière comment Julia Quinn revalorise un outil narratif ignorant pour en faire un véritable moyen de résistance féminine dans un cadre historique rigide.

**Mots-clés:** Féminisme, *Romance avec M. Bridgerton*, commérage, Lady Whistledown, Journal



## الملخص

تتناول هذه المذكرة قوة النميمة كأداة سردية واجتماعية في رواية *رومانسية السيد بريدجيرتون* لجوليا كوين، من خلال تحليل أدبي نسوي يوضح كيفية عمل النميمة في سياق حقبة الريجنسي. تركز الدراسة على دور السيدة ويسلدون، وهي كاتبة مجهولة الهوية في صحيفة يومية تؤثر في المعايير الاجتماعية وتتحدى التوقعات التقليدية المفروضة على النساء.

تبحث الدراسة في تأثير النميمة على المجتمع وعلى العلاقات الاجتماعية والرومانسية، مع تسليط الضوء على الأدوار المحدودة المتاحة للنساء خلال تلك الفترة. وبالاعتماد على النظرية النسوية، تحلل هذه الدراسة كيف تعيد جوليا كوين تقديم النميمة كوسيلة للتعبير النسائي والمقاومة، خاصة من خلال شخصية بينيلوب فيذرينغتون التي استخدمتها كمحتوى لصحيفتها الاجتماعية آنذاك متخفية خلف اسم مستعار. يُظهر النتائج أن النميمة، التي غالباً ما يُنظر إليها على أنها تافهة أو مرتبطة بالنساء فقط، تتحول إلى وسيلة فعالة للتعبير والنقد والسيطرة. السرية التي تحيط بموقع بينيلوب ككاتبة خلف شخصية الليدي ويسلدون المجهولة تسمح لها بمراقبة المجتمع الأبوي وتحليله والتأثير فيه، مما يوضح كيف يمكن للنساء المهمشات أن يستخدمن اللغة لاستعادة نفوذ اجتماعي مغيب عنهن. من خلال إعادة تقديم النميمة كأداة للتمكين، تعيد كوين طرح الأدوار الجندرية التقليدية وتُسهم في النقاشات النسوية الأوسع حول الصوت والسلطة والمكانة في الأدب الشعبي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** النسوية، *رومانسية السيد بريدجيرتون*، النميمة، السيدة ويسلدون، صحيفة المجتمع