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Fantasies of Nineteenth-Century Romance

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Creating Space? Representations of Black Characters in Regency Romance

Who gets left out of Regency romance? Oftentimes, the answer is people of color. From Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* to Shonda Rhimes's *Bridgerton*, creators and authors have raised the particular question of Black subjectivity in romance. In novels, period pieces, and adaptations, some creators have made an effort to insert Black characters into otherwise white-dominated spaces, in an attempt to rectify the historical record and grant these characters the representation they might not otherwise have had. In doing so, however, these creators keep Black characters in secondary positions to white characters. This argument explores Heathcliff's racialization in *Wuthering Heights* in addition to Olivia Fairfield's intersectional discrimination in the anonymously penned novel *The Woman of Colour*. Transitioning into contemporary media adaptations, this argument examines the subordinate portrayal of Dido Belle in Amma Asante's 2013 movie *Belle* and the lack of attention toward Black characters in *Bridgerton*. As these various works demonstrate, even when Black characters are given agency (and, more so, a presence) in romance pieces, these characters nonetheless experience discrimination and ultimately remain secondary to white characters.

As literary critic Patsy Stoneman contends in her article "Rochester and Heathcliff as Romantic Heroes," Heathcliff emerges as a romantic hero in *Wuthering Heights* (116). Despite Heathcliff serving as the text's romantic hero, however—likewise holding status as a main character in the text—the white characters in *Wuthering Heights* racialize Heathcliff in

derogatory ways. *Racialism*, a term distinct from *racism*, refers to—in one of its many definitions—a socially constructed “unique hierarchy of values” that positions some races as “inherently superior” to others (Makonnen, Lecture [22 Feb.]). In the case of *Wuthering Heights*, the white characters render Heathcliff inferior due to his race, although Brontë leaves Heathcliff racially ambiguous. Heathcliff is frequently cast as other in the text; when he first appears in the novel, the characters refer to him with the pronoun *it*, erasing his identity as a human being (Brontë 51). Even Catherine, Heathcliff’s love interest, considers him a “savage” and a “devil” while pursuing a romantic relationship with him (246). This romance between Catherine and Heathcliff cannot be entirely balanced, for there is a “hierarchy” in which Catherine, a white woman, perceives herself as superior to Heathcliff (Makonnen, Lecture [22 Feb.]). Toward the end of the text, Heathcliff even begins to racialize himself, demonstrating his complacency with the racist, hierarchical system that holds him inferior. In his anger, Heathcliff states he has a “savage feeling” (Brontë 232). Although Heathcliff—in addition to the white Edgar Linton, of course—is Brontë’s “Romantic hero,” his racialization by the other characters and his racialization of himself ultimately limit his romantic heroism (Stoneman).

Heathcliff’s limited romantic heroism does, however, chime with the historical context from which *Wuthering Heights* emerges. The racialization of Heathcliff reflects historical attitudes toward people of color in nineteenth-century England (Makonnen, Lecture [22 Feb.]). Indeed, Brontë wrote *Wuthering Heights* during the Victorian period, infamous for the scramble for Africa and the racist implications of the East India Company’s increasing global influence (Makonnen, Lecture [22 Feb.]). Brontë wrestles with the racial politics of the time and space from which her work emerges. Indeed, historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes that “scientific racism, a growing but debated strain of Enlightenment thought, gained a

much wider audience [in the nineteenth century]. . . . The carving up of Asia and above all of Africa, reinforced both colonial practice and ideology,” of which scientific racism was a phenomenon (95). Brontë looks back on England’s historical treatment of people of color: the story is set in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when Liverpool, where Heathcliff is found as an orphan, “handled most of Britain’s transatlantic trade in enslaved people” (Makonnen, Lecture [22 Feb.]). Brontë applies Victorian-era racial discussion to her Regency-set novel to bring attention to issues like slavery. In spite of this attention, however, Brontë perpetuates the racialism pervading the Victorian period through her racialized depictions of Heathcliff that limit his romantic heroism. While *Wuthering Heights* is, to a certain degree, an example of abolitionist literature (Nelly does show sympathy toward Heathcliff, stating, “[Y]ou were kidnapped by wicked sailors and brought to England” [Brontë 67]), Heathcliff nonetheless reinforces the inferior position of people of color in the Western ontologies of the Victorian era.

While Brontë casts Heathcliff as inferior through racialization in *Wuthering Heights*, *The Woman of Colour*, published by an anonymous author in the Regency period, thinks about oppression intersectionally. The main character, Olivia Fairfield, a biracial woman, faces discrimination due to her race and gender. While Olivia, like Heathcliff, is granted representation as a main character in the text, she is limited by the opinions and actions of other characters. In August Merton’s letter describing Olivia, for instance, he states that Olivia, “though trampled upon . . . will yet retain the native dignity of her character” (*Woman* 51). Merton’s use of the word “native” here characterizes Olivia as other despite Merton’s love for her. Just as Heathcliff racializes himself, Olivia also takes part in racialization. In the opening passage of the novel, she tells the story of her mother, “who loved her master” (2). She exclaims that “the wild and uncivilized African taught a lesson of noble self-denial and self-conquest to the enlightened and

educated European” (2). While Olivia condemns racism in this statement by rendering her statement about “wild and uncivilized” African people satirically, she nevertheless defines her mother in racist terms. Like Heathcliff, not only does Olivia encounter racialism; using racialized language against her mother, Olivia also, in this passage, sustains the racial power imbalance of the Regency period.

In addition to the racialism in the text, Olivia is also a victim of what Laura Mulvey calls “the male gaze” (19). When Olivia attends a ball, for instance, the white men at the party exoticize her in a voyeuristic and gendered way. The men refer to Olivia as a “black princess” with “native elegance” and also call her a “sable goddess,” likening her to an animal (*Woman* 36). These comments come only from the men at the party; Olivia experiences “intersectional” discrimination, according to the framework legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw proposes. As Crenshaw argues, intersectionality refers to “the double bind of race and gender,” whereby the converging of identities, such as class and race, intensify the discrimination one encounters. While Olivia faces a distinctly racialized discrimination in the text, she also—unlike a character like Heathcliff, for instance—experiences the “male gaze,” which limits her power as a Black woman in the space dominated by white male oppressors. In this manner, the author renders Olivia inferior as both a person of color and as a woman.

In addition to her intersectional discrimination, Olivia, unlike the white characters in the text, does not get a romantic resolution. After all, the anonymous author suggests that rather than actually loving Olivia, Merton instead pushes a “white savior” agenda (Anderson et al.). As Merton’s letter states, “[I]t is I alone who must rescue her from a state of miserable dependence” of becoming a ward (*Woman* 51). Here, Merton establishes himself as a “white savior,” claiming the power in the narrative for himself (Anderson et al.). The anonymous author also presents

Olivia as a foil to Angelina, whom the author describes as having “dove-like eyes,” a “transparent complexion,” and “delicacy of her fragile form” (*Woman* 101). Not only are there frequent assertions of Olivia’s blackness in the text, but her identity as a Black woman juxtaposes with Angelina, who eventually defeats Olivia romantically. Although the anonymous author crafted *The Woman of Colour* as an abolitionist piece (indeed, the text’s goal is to teach a “skeptical European to look with a compassionate eye towards the despised native of Africa” [134]), Olivia encounters oppression through gendered racialization, while white characters ultimately hold the power and achieve greater romantic resolutions.

Both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Woman of Colour* are nineteenth-century novels that fail to positively represent the romances of fictional people of color. However, the problems of these texts persist even in modern attempts at representation in romance. In *Belle*, Amma Asante’s 2013 film about the nonfictional Dido Elizabeth Belle, Asante employs a sort of “critical fabulation,” a term coined by literary critic Saidiya Hartman in her groundbreaking 2008 article “Venus in Two Acts.” In her article, Hartman describes the process of “engag[ing] a set of dilemmas about representation, violence, and social death” (13). According to Hartman, critical fabulation entails taking the limited fragments of historically marginalized voices in the archive to produce a narrative based on what could have transpired, appealing particularly to the emotions of the experience. Critical fabulation forms the ethos of “speculative fiction” (Oziewicz)—in embracing what *could* happen and refusing to conform to historical facts, critical fabulation imagines a world beyond the archive, producing narratives otherwise unexplored. In *Belle*, Asante employs critical fabulation to tell the story of Dido Elizabeth Belle. Asante imagines what Dido’s quest for marriage in Regency England might have been like, despite the limitations of the historical record.

Asante built *Belle*, as a critical fabulation, around the 1778 painting *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay and Lady Elizabeth Murray* (fig. 1). This painting is one of the few existing archival traces of Dido Belle's life, and Asante incorporates this painting into the plot of the film. Dido is nervous about the painting throughout the movie, her fearful emotions toward the painting—particularly the fear of a subordinate portrayal—and the film's reworked replica of the art constituting this critical fabulation. Indeed, Asante plants throughout the film artwork depicting Black people in subordinate positions to the white subjects. The film also puts a lot of weight on the painting, thereby raising the stakes of the artwork. In a climactic moment near the end of the film—which the music builds to, reinforcing the apotheosis—the artist reveals the painting to Dido (*Belle* 01:23:54). The artwork, positioning Dido and Elizabeth as equals, attempts to rectify the trend of Black subordination in the movie's earlier paintings. Despite this corrective effort, however, the portrait—even the reworked film version, with its modifications from the original 1778 painting—renders Dido inferior to Elizabeth (fig. 2).



Fig. 1. David Martin. *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay and Lady Elizabeth Murray*.

1778, Scone Palace, Perth, Scotland. Source: *Wikimedia Commons*.



Fig. 2. Film still from *Belle*. 2013. Image provided by author.

While Dido and Elizabeth share the position of subject in the painting, this dual subjectivity renders Dido inferior and reinscribes the spirit of the other paintings in the movie. Dido wears exoticized clothing in the painting: she does not wear a turban with a feather as in the original 1778 painting, but she still carries a plate of fruits and wears a blue and gold scarf. Although the “culture” of this exoticism is unclear, Dido’s outfit and accessories noticeably contrast with Elizabeth’s. While Dido wears a shiny, straight dress, Elizabeth has a more feminine, European look, her large gown adorned in pink and lace. In the action of the portrait, Elizabeth’s hand grabs Dido’s arm, suggesting that Elizabeth holds Dido back, potentially from escape. While Dido does not point to her skin and gesture to her blackness as in the 1778 work, Dido, nevertheless, as a woman of color, highlights the whiteness of Elizabeth. Further, Elizabeth remains in the front of the painting and Dido stands further in the back. Despite the movie’s conviction otherwise, the painter does not depict the two women as equals; Elizabeth is more the subject of the painting than Dido. This climactic moment of the film attempts to render Dido on Elizabeth’s level through the artwork. The painting, however, is a physical

representation of Dido's inferiority to Elizabeth. Although *Belle* uses critical fabulation to grant Dido better representation than the historical record allows, a closer look at the reworked movie painting shows that the racialized Dido, much like Olivia against Angelina, is nonetheless secondary to her white counterpart.

Instead of working from the limited historical record of a real person of color, Shonda Rhimes's *Netflix* series *Bridgerton* attempts to insert people of color into a Regency romance, imagining a world beyond the limitations of the historical record. The program—which the title, of course, reinforces—centers primarily on the white Bridgertons, a wealthy family, the type that might have profited from the transatlantic slave trade in real life (Makonnen, Lecture [14 Apr.]). Arguing that *Bridgerton* “clumsily” grapples with race, journalist Aja Romano points out that the show does not develop the Black characters it does feature as much as the white characters. In fact, *Bridgerton* plays into negative stereotypes: it presents the Duke of Hastings, for instance, a Black man, as someone angry and standoffish. In some ways, *Bridgerton* is a critical fabulation gone wrong. Romano states that “*Bridgerton* is almost—but not quite—an alternate historical universe, one where a colorblind view of society prevails.” Rhimes therefore imagines a “colorblind” world free from the realities of racism in Regency England (Romano). To create this colorblind fantasy, *Bridgerton* incorporates colorblind casting, which “asks the decision-makers to ignore the factor of race throughout the casting process” (Makonnen, Lecture [14 Apr.]). While colorblind casting likely had a hand in the lack of development for Black characters—indeed, if a Black man had been cast in the role of Anthony Bridgerton, the story might be different—Black characters, nevertheless, do not get as much attention in *Bridgerton* as white characters.

In works like *Wuthering Heights* or *The Woman of Colour*, the inferiority of the Black characters is a product of the time period in which the works were written. *Bridgerton*, a contemporary reimagining of the Regency period, effectively ignores the historical context of the work. Through this colorblind approach, *Bridgerton* fails to acknowledge the contentious racial discourse pervading the Regency period. Instead, as journalist Kamala Thiagarajan contends, Rhimes creates “a fantasy realm where no racial digs are heard.” While the critical fabulation Rhimes creates through colorblind casting attempts reconciliation, this “deliberately skewed fantasy” ultimately presents limitations to Black representation in this fictional, speculative landscape and reinforces the lack of inclusivity in the romance genre (Romano).

From the Regency era to contemporary adaptations, authors and directors have attempted to craft inclusive stories by writing Black characters into romance. Despite these inclusivity efforts, however, these Black figures encounter discrimination and often remain in secondary positions to white characters. The racialization of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* and intersectional discrimination against Olivia in *The Woman of Colour* are representative of the racism present in the Victorian and Regency periods. *Belle* is a critical fabulation of the Regency period and the story of Dido Belle, granting Dido some agency in her story. The film, however, through the painting it focuses on, still renders Dido as different and less important than her white cousin. Likewise, in *Bridgerton*, the Black characters have less character development than white characters, and the series effectively ignores the racism prevalent in the Regency period. The problem of inclusive representation in romance has yet to be solved, though creators of various forms of media continue to try. NBC’s 2022 series *The Courtship*, for instance, centers on a Black woman, Nicole Rémy, and takes place in “Regency-style England” (“Courtship”). However, adding characters of color to the narrative, or telling the stories of nonfictional people

of color, must be done correctly: it is necessary to create space for, while also acknowledging and demonstrating sensitivity to, the actual, lived experiences of people of color in the Regency era.

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