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Viewing History Through a Lens:
The Influence of Film on Historical Consciousness

A Thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

by
Brittany P. Bales
May 2020

Dr. John M. Rankin, Chair

Dr. Henry J. Antkiewicz

Dr. Brian J. Maxson

Keywords: British History, Georgian England, Film Studies, Gender Studies

ABSTRACT

Viewing History Through a Lens:

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by

Brittany Bales

This thesis presents an interdisciplinary study of the significance of contemporary film in our understandings of gender, race, and sexuality in Georgian England. I argue that while films set in this period may lack the subtleties and depth of the realities that make up the Georgian era, they are still valuable in informing current discussions concerning race, gender, and sexuality. By examining such films, we learn not only more about the Georgian period and how it is presented and understood by contemporary audiences, but these films tell us much about our own biases, attitudes, and society.

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This thesis is the result of a long, difficult, and sometimes painful journey that has taught me more about myself and others than any research could. I genuinely could not have completed this work without the support, understanding, and help of the people I am lucky enough to have in my life.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“I am afraid there is more vice, more misery and penury in this country than in any other, and at the same time greater wealth... The contrasts are too striking, and such an unnatural, artificial, and unjust state of things neither can, nor ought to be, permanent. I am convinced that before many years elapse these things will produce some great convulsion.”

—Charles Greville, 1829¹

Media including films and television shows offer an important lens for investigating the past and has been used to present harsh realities, criticisms, and a vast array of social commentary. Of all the different artistic mediums, both television shows and films provide an accessible way for people to experience and immerse themselves in specific times, places, and situations beyond their own lives. For many historians, the questions remains: are television shows and films helping to properly inform the public of the past or offering a version that never existed?

Since its inception, film has been used as a response to current political and social trends as well as being used as a tool to spread cultural ideas and values. Early film had a crass reputation, especially among the upper classes and the educated, and was often regarded as somewhat lowbrow at best and threatening at worst. These films would often be shown in tents or at festivals and would sometimes feature nudity or violence. The spread of early film, “threatened the praetorians of culture and morality who intuited how these new ‘site[s] of cultural contagion associated with the “lower orders”” would one day destroy the iron control of church and school over the masses.”² In an effort to add more culture, art, and value to film and to appease the disapproving, filmmakers began to adapt famous literary works, biblical stories,

¹ Venetia Murray, *An Elegant Madness* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 266.

² Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

and historical events. Early historical films like *Nero and the Burning of Rome* (1908), *Cleopatra* (1910), and *Spartaco* (1913) were less about social commentary and more focused on creating a spectacle and highlighting the visuals like the sets and costumes.

D.W. Griffith saw the potential influence of film and undoubtedly utilized this new medium to create his version of a historical narrative in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).³ While the impact and legacy of this film is partly tied to its technical achievements, its connection to this particular time period is hugely significant. *The Birth of a Nation* was essentially the first substantial film to examine the relationship between history and film. Griffith retells his version of the Civil War, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and the Ku Klux Klan. The film centers around two families (one from the Union and one from the Confederacy) as they unite together to defeat the threat of other races. Black people, in particular, are the irrefutable enemies in the film and are shown being violent with women and trying to overtake the white population of the South. The Ku Klux Klan are the ultimate heroes and defend their country and “Aryan birthright” to quash the threat of these fictional black adversaries.⁴

The film garnered a great deal of attention at the time and incited controversy across America. While the making of this film was clearly inspired by historical events, it was also created and shaped by the rising racial tensions happening at the particular time. In that way, the current societal situation had a great affect on how Griffith, his film, and potentially the audience looked at these historical events. *The Birth of a Nation* had a tremendous impact. The film even allegedly impressed President Woodrow Wilson so much he is cited as saying the film, “is like

³ *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith, performed by Lillian Gish and Mae Marsh, (David W. Griffith Corp, 1915).

⁴ Richard Brody, “The Worst Thing About ‘Birth of a Nation’ Is How Good It Is,” *The New Yorker*, (6 February 2013), accessed 12 December 2019. <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-worst-thing-about-birth-of-a-nation-is-how-good-it-is>>

writing history with lightening. And my only regret is that it is so terribly true.”⁵ The film’s influence was so great that it also incited a resurgence of white supremacy groups and is often credited with the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915.⁶

The Birth of a Nation was the first film to reveal how a film could be influenced by the current political and social context while at the same time showing the power and the scope of film within a society and its affect on historical consciousness.⁷ The film’s inception, theme, and message did not exist in a vacuum but was likely influenced by a change in the dynamic of racial relations in America. The creation of groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People a few years earlier and President Wilson’s advocacy of racial segregation prompted Griffith to share his political opinions in the form a film. The use of history and the retelling of a national narrative added clout like nothing else could because of its relevance in that particular society at the time.

In the social and political climate today, historical films are often one of the most effective ways to investigate our current attitudes, society, and beliefs. For audiences, it is sometimes easier to look at complex societal issues with a bit of historical distance. While films that deal with heated issues in current society can be effective, the audience often has its guard up and is less open to considering different ideas or viewpoints on controversial subjects. However, when presented in a way that is not directly correlated to the current situation, these same basic ideas can potentially be better contemplated.

⁵ Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman, *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 1.

⁶ Unknown, “The Various Shady Lives Of The Ku Klux Klan,” *Time Magazine*, (9 April 1965), accessed 20 November 2019.
<<https://web.archive.org/web/20090806144942/http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,898581,00.html>>

⁷ Brody, “The Worst Thing About ‘Birth of a Nation’ Is How Good It Is.”

Exploring the past through the lens of film provides a more accessible way for many of today's population to look at these societies from the past and create relevance within their own lives. While today's society has a unique set of problems and circumstances, there are overarching societal issues that have remained significant throughout the centuries. Although new technology and access to information about the world has had a particular impact on the last two decades, many areas of contention that deal with things like gender, race, sexuality, and class stem from past attitudes and practices. It is easy to think that cultures and societies from centuries ago would have little affect on today's world, but the fact that these societies ultimately formed the basis for today's society means that it is crucial to understand the structure and ideas from the past to better understand the current time.

The Georgian era of history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is one of the most dynamic, critical, and influential periods of modern history, which lends itself to film very well. The events, ideas, and advancements produced from Georgian society still linger today or sometimes even have a direct consequence to current political and societal issues. This period continues to capture historians' attention because it was such a contentious and well-documented time period. Leading Georgians have assisted generations of scholars by keeping such detailed accounts, narratives, and documented reactions to what was going on around them. With such a variety of thoughts, opinions, and recollections, historians are better able to examine the complexities, subtleties, contradictions, and the depth of this society. Unlike previous centuries where generally only a small number of the population could read and write, the expanding middle class and upper classes in England, "were prolific correspondents, writing to their friends and families almost daily; they kept diaries and journals, commonplace books and albums, menus and account books. They voiced their opinions on current affairs, dissected the latest

scandal and described the characters of their acquaintance in acid detail.”⁸ While there was still a considerable amount of the population that could not read, the Georgian period produced numerous and varied accounts about a range of issues of what people, not just the clergy, royalty, or aristocrats, thought.

Over the last couple decades, filmmakers have produced an abundance of films set during Georgian England largely because of the appeal of such a dynamic and radical time period, because of the unique, individual stories stemming from a wealth of sources, but perhaps most significantly, because of the political, societal, and economical similarities between this period and today’s society that warrants both discussion and further examination. The Georgian period marked the beginning of an accelerated series of significant advances and changes in society including the Industrial Revolution and mass urbanization. Science and technology began to have a massive impact on human lives and the human experience. Faith in advancement, logic, reason, and hard fact began to dominate although myth, superstition, and the supernatural still played a large and significant role with the Georgian imagination. Because of the widespread, prolific writings common to this age, a trove of new information and ideas was more available than ever before and had a large influence on the general population. Pamphlets and journals now carried out theories, ideas, and new discoveries that had previously been only for the few. The discourse between the scholars and philosophers at universities, coffeehouses, and salons were now making rounds around England and Western Europe for larger discussion and consideration and had a large influence on English society.

The overthrow of the royal family and complete overhaul of the French society during the French Revolution shook the Georgian world. The general population of England now saw the potential and appeal of questioning who is in charge and encouraged some to demand change.

⁸ Murray, *An Elegant Madness*, xiii.

While the technology from the Industrial Revolution brought jobs to some and did create great wealth, for the lower classes, their status and overall wealth advanced very little.⁹ The divide between the classes was becoming more apparent and the general population was no longer blindly willing to accept the status quo. The French Revolution exacerbated tensions and inspired calls for reform.

Although analyzing history and current society through current films on the basis of economic, political, and racial examinations is considerable in itself, this thesis serves to examine under represented groups like non-white men and females. Both these groups played a significant role in Georgian society but their impacts are only beginning to be realized. Georgians wrestled with what equality meant and this is evident in modern films portraying this era. In film, there is a disproportionate amount of focus on men and male-driven stories. Studying the effects of the relationship between history and film with a focus on gender, race, and sexuality allows for a better understanding of particular parts of society that are sometimes ignored.

Over the past thirty years, film has proven to be an incredibly important and influential medium in understanding and communicating how ideas of past eras relate to contemporary society. Although film tends to lack the depth and complexity of other mediums, its impact is often larger. Over the past two decades, the general population has potentially learned more about history from historical films than any other medium. The appeal, the accessibility, and the pervasiveness of film makes for an easy, understandable way to study history. While film has been affecting how audiences view history, the current social and political context also has an affect on how history is portrayed, the films that are being made, and ultimately how the

⁹ Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, "Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution," *The Economic History Review* 45, no.1 (February 1992): 25.

audience understands these films. In this way, history continues to have relevance and value in today's society and brings significance and understanding to what has happened in the past while informing current attitudes and outlooks today.

CHAPTER 2

GENDER, RACE, AND THE RISE OF INTERSECTIONALITY IN FILM

*“Who of one blood didst form the human race
Look down in mercy in the chosen time,
With equal eye on Afric’s suff’ring clime:
Disperse her shades of intellectual night,
Repeat thy high behest—Let there be Light
Bring each benighted soul, great God, to Thee,
And with thy wide salvation make them free!”*
—Hannah More, 1788¹⁰

While the world becomes more globalized and interrelated in the twenty-first century, race and gender continue to play an increasingly vital role in understanding the experiences of different groups of people. The forces of globalization were not new to the people of Georgian England whose participation in both an expanding and shrinking world led them into deep discussions concerning race and gender. Of particular concern to many Georgian communities was how race and gender impacted their strict beliefs in rank and hierarchy. Although film in itself may not allow for the in depth exploration of a complicated topic, it is significant in introducing ideas to a wider audience. Because films tend to include many anachronistic ideas, they can be used as a catalyst for a deeper understanding of issues such as race and gender and how both concepts have evolved over the last three centuries. Film has proven to be one of the most popular, influential, and accessible ways to share ideas and stories over the last few decades. This chapter explores the interrelationship of race and gender in Georgian society through the medium of film.

Until relatively recently, feminism has traditionally treated gender and race as different forms of oppression that—while both significant—should be handled separately. In the late 1980s, the concept of intersectionality asserted that race and gender are both interconnected and

¹⁰ Hannah More, “The Slave Trade,” *The Works of Hannah More: Volume I* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1846), 30.

critical when considering either concept.¹¹ While a large portion of the general public may not understand the subtleties of intersectionality, the content of many recent films suggest an increasing awareness and desire for stories that deal with race and gender together. Films set in Georgian England such as *Belle* (2013), *Amazing Grace* (2006), and *The Governess* (1998) and television shows like *Poldark* (2015) and *Harlots* (2017) attempt to confront issues of the past and intentionally explore the racial and gender concerns and constructs of the time period.

Georgian England is a critical period for reevaluating ideas on gender and racial relations in the modern era. The ideas brought about by the Enlightenment called into question the very structure of society and its members. The American and French Revolutions also put the nation, nationality, and citizenship at the forefront. People of all different backgrounds were questioning who “the people” of a country were and what rights should they have. The restructuring and leveling of social classes promised by the French Revolution prompted Georgians to examine the idea of equality based on things like gender and particularly class. While inclusivity for all races, genders, and classes would still be a distant concept for most British subjects, the views from the Enlightenment allowed for a new conversation to develop as the framework of the country changed as well.

Intersectionality in Film and the Current Society

With the rise of Black Lives Matter, the Women’s March on Washington, and the 2011 England riots following the death of Mark Duggan, a black British man, the relationship between race and gender has become increasingly discussed within the media allowing for the idea of intersectionality to gain traction. Even before these movements began, stories that dealt with race and gender together were becoming more popular in film. While audiences began to

¹¹ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies,” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, (1989), 140.

consume these films and television shows, they may not have known the academic discourse taking place about these concepts. Nonetheless, viewers might be able to get a sense of the intricacies of race and gender in the past and find these films a good starting point for thinking about how such factors continue to affect modern people and society.

The idea of intersectionality developed decades before it was ever given a name. The second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s coincided with the civil rights movements. Many black women within these movements found themselves in supporting rather than leading roles and often had a difficult time finding support from either movement. Emerging black feminists described their experiences with terms like “interlocking oppressions,” “simultaneous oppressions,” “double jeopardy,” “triple jeopardy” without having a definitive term to rally behind.¹²

It was not until the late 1980s that law professor, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, came up with the term intersectionality and began a distinct academic conversation about the relationship between race and gender. Her essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersectionality of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989), came out of frustrations that Crenshaw had while studying law in college. She explained how:

Black women are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either “racism” or “sexism”—but as a combination of both racism and sexism. Yet the legal system has generally defined sexism as based upon an unspoken reference to the injustices confronted by all (including white) women, while defining racism to refer to those faced by all (including male) Blacks and other people of color. This framework frequently renders Black women legally “invisible” and without legal recourse.¹³

¹² Sharon Smith, “Black Feminism and Intersectionality,” *International Socialist Review*, (2014), accessed 5 November 2019. < <https://isreview.org/issue/91/black-feminism-and-intersectionality>>

¹³ Smith, “Black Feminism and Intersectionality.”

She created the concept of intersectionality in an effort to understand how race and gender fit together, not just in a legal perspective, but within wider society as well. Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how women of color are treated and viewed in society.

While general audiences may not be familiar with discourses upon intersectionality, the desire for more diverse, interesting, and unique stories and characters has been growing. Debates, petitions, and protests on the lack of diversity in films have increased over the last twenty years. The term “whitewashing” has been thrown around by the media to refer to the casting of a white person for a non-white character. Some of the bigger roles deemed to be “whitewashing” by audiences include Emma Stone as a Pacific Islander in *Aloha* (2015), Johnny Depp as a Native American in *The Lone Ranger* (2013), and Scarlett Johansson as an Asian woman in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). Rooney Mara’s casting as a Native American in *Pan* (2015) even prompted an online petition, “Stop Casting White Actors to Play People of Color!” with over 94,000 signatures.¹⁴

While these debates lingered on, one of the protests that garnered a great deal of the media’s attention came at the 2016 Academy Awards. In both the 2015 and 2016 Academy Award nominations, every actor and actress nominated was white. After the 2016 nominations were announced, online communities like Twitter immediately erupted with debates on diversity in films. With the amount of attention and protests the 2016 Academy Awards received, the Academy very deliberately responded with a change in membership and, “pledged to not only recruit but double the number of women and people of color in membership over the next four

¹⁴ Tom Brook, “When white actors play other races,” *BBC Culture*, (6 October 2015), accessed 29 August 2019. <<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20151006-when-white-actors-play-other-races>>

years and to make changes in its current membership.”¹⁵ They not only made changes to their membership but seven of the twenty actors nominated in the 2017 Academy Awards were non-white actors.¹⁶ The threat of potentially losing and alienating many film lovers was real enough to cause the Academy to take action when it had not in the past.

Notwithstanding the recent controversies, in the film industry, money is the ultimate decider of what films are being made. While a call for diversity may be felt in protests and petitions, if audiences still are not seeing films with a diverse cast, the less likely similar films will be funded in the future. In the Hollywood Diversity Report for 2019, researchers at the University of California in Los Angeles found that as far as the box office is concerned, it would appear that audiences prefer a more diverse cast. The study revealed that, “films with casts that were from 31 percent to 40 percent minority enjoyed the highest median global box office receipts, while those with majority-minority casts posted the highest median return on investment. By contrast, films with the most racially and ethnically homogenous casts were the poorest performers.”¹⁷ If the film industry follows the money, a more diverse cast tends to be more successful.

These financial successes are not solely based on a racially diverse cast, but also female-led casts. While men still outnumber women in roles, films with a higher female presence on screen have a tendency to fare better at the box office. One study sorted films by their budget

¹⁵ Laura Wagner, “Film Academy Votes to Increase Diversity,” *National Public Radio*, (22 January 2016), accessed 29 August 2019. <<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/01/22/464016379/film-academy-votes-to-increase-diversity>>

¹⁶ David Cox, “Did #OscarsSoWhite work? Looking beyond Hollywood’s Diversity Drought,” *The Guardian*, (25 February 2019), accessed 29 August 2019. <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/25/did-oscars-so-white-work-looking-beyond-the-diversity-drought-in-hollywood>>

¹⁷ Darnell Hunt, Ana-Christina Ramon and Michael Tran, “Hollywood Diversity Report 2019,” *University of California College of Social Sciences*, (21 February 2019), accessed 5 November 2019. <<https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/hollywood-diversity-report-2019/>>

sizes and found that in each budget bracket, the top ranked films with women as the leads earned more than male-led films. The study also found that every film that made at least \$1 billion passed an important component of the Bechdel test, which occurs if two female characters have a conversation about something other than a male.¹⁸ Women in these films are not just background characters, but have significant presence on screen and audiences are clearly paying to see them.

Female presence in historical films often reflects the focus on the male experience that has dominated general historical study. In learning about the history of the world throughout different times and places, the default viewpoints, focus, and perspectives revolve around men, while women are typically taught as a separate, distinct area of historical study. Likewise, women in historical film are usually pushed aside in favor of male-driven stories. In the historical films that do focus on women, they often highlight the fact that the film comes from a different point of view than the default and tells an “untold” story from the somewhat neglected female perspective. When examining the overall presence of women in historical film:

The worth of characters is suggested by their absence or abundance on screen and the quality of their portrayals. Female characters continually occupy a limited range of occupations, held lower-status positions, and wielded less power than men. Thus, when women are persistently placed in stock character roles or risk losing their femininity when challenging the status quo, [audiences] are learning a hidden curriculum of favoring the male point of view as the paradigm.¹⁹

Traditionally, because female characters in historical films are not given the attention, development, and depth of their male counterparts, they are reduced to somewhat static, side

¹⁸ Cara Buckley, “Movies Starring Women Earn More Than Male-Led Films, Study Finds,” *The New York Times*, (12 December 2018), accessed 30 August 2019. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/11/movies/creative-artists-agency-study.html>>

¹⁹ Cicely Scheiner-Fisher and William B. Russell III, “Using Historical Films to Promote Gender Equity in the History Curriculum,” *The Social Studies* 103, no. 6 (September 2012): 222.

characters. However, over the last couple of decades, some filmmakers have attempted to change this skewed focus on men by creating films with more complex, dynamic, or unique female characters.

Many filmgoers might not know everything happening behind the screen, but it is clear that audiences want films with more varied stories that focus on diverse characters with different life experiences. Since predominantly white men ruled Britain during the Georgian era, many of films and television shows about this era have centered around white male leads. Stories focused on women, especially black women, are regarded as a break from the norm. Considering the current diversity of English society, it is possible that many audience members want to see characters more like themselves on screen. At the very least, stories focused on black women in Georgian England present filmgoers with a fresh view from this time period. Seeing a diverse group of characters allows the audience to consider the experiences of all people in the past and initiates discussion on how we understand concepts like intersectionality in society today.

The Slave Trade and the Abolitionist Movement

Although there are a slew of films on the experiences of abolitionist women and black women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century America, the British experience with slavery and abolition has been largely ignored until the last couple of decades. Films like Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997), Jonathan Demme's *Beloved* (1998), and the 1977 miniseries *Roots* all brought widespread attention to the lives of black Americans during the Atlantic Slave Trade and its abolition. Though there are dozens of films set in the Georgian England that address gender issues, until recently there was noticeable absence of films on black women in Britain or films on women within abolitionist movement. This absence cannot be blamed on a lack of historical accounts or an inappropriate historical context to set up stories on race and gender.

There is ample evidence that shows many Britons were beginning to try to understand different races and cultures during this dynamic period due to increased contact with Africans brought on by the Atlantic Slave Trade and growing British imperialism.²⁰ The recent production of films like Amma Asante's *Belle* (2013) and Michael Apted's *Amazing Grace* (2006) break from the traditional Georgian film narrative by exploring the stories of Britons on the margins of a shifting society.^{21 22}

The 2013 release of *Belle* marks a distinct variation from most other films set in Georgian England in that not only does the film deal with race and gender issues, but these issues are placed at the forefront with the title character. This film tells a fictionalized account of the life of the historical figure, Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay, set against the backdrop of the *Zong* Massacre. In the film, Belle, as she is most often called, is the daughter of Captain Sir John Lindsay and an enslaved African woman he meets in his naval travels. After her mother's death, Sir John Lindsay leaves Belle in the care of Captain Lindsay's uncle, William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield. She is raised as a free gentlewoman and learns the same social manners and expectations as those of her white cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray. As the two girls come of age, Belle and her family become more aware of how her mixed-race background might affect her in society and choose to forego a formal coming out into English society.

Lord Mansfield, a prominent judge of English law, takes on an apprentice, John Davinier, who is charged with investigating the insurance claims of the incident on the *Zong* Massacre.

When the *Zong* slave ship began to run low on safe drinking water due to an unexpectedly long

²⁰ Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 13.

²¹ *Belle*, directed by Amma Asante, performed by Gugu Mbatha-Raw and Tom Wilkinson, (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2013).

²² *Amazing Grace*, directed by Michael Apted, performed by Ioan Gruffudd and Romola Garai, (Momentum Pictures, 2006).

journey, the crew decided to throw one hundred slaves overboard in order to save the drinking water for themselves and to collect the insurance money on what was considered to be their “property.”²³ As Davinier works closely with Lord Mansfield, he begins to interact with Lord Mansfield’s family, particularly Belle. Davinier and Belle connect as they discuss issues surrounding abolitionism in England and the *Zong* case. Having inherited her father’s fortune after his recent death, Belle is pushed by her family to find a husband and Belle argues that she will have limited options because of her mixed-race. Belle certainly occupied a unique position in Georgian society. Because she inherits a fortune of £2,000 a year, her wealth trumps many other gentlewomen at the time, including her own cousin, as Lady Elizabeth, like most women in Georgian England, was passed over for her inheritance in favor of her male sibling. This situation makes it crucial for women like Elizabeth to marry well, but does not necessarily put the same pressures on Belle. Belle’s uncle worries that no man of means would want to marry a free black gentlewoman and that Belle would be victim to a poor fortune hunter.

As Davinier uncovers the details of the case, he eventually convinces Lord Mansfield that the slaves on the *Zong* were killed in an effort to collect the insurance money. Impressed by Davinier’s brilliant mind, the judge’s newfound respect for Davinier allows him to see the affection between Davinier and his niece, and Mansfield agrees to let them marry. As the film ends, the victory of the *Zong* case as well as Belle’s secured future in society with an English gentleman with a promising future emphasize the changing attitudes of race and gender in Georgian society.

While *Belle* is clearly constrained to the limits of film in portraying a genuine, intricate Georgian society, it creates a starting point in understanding how this society understood race

²³ Jeremy Krikler, “A Chain of Murder in the Slave Trade: A Wider Context of the *Zong* Massacre,” *International Review of Social History* 57, no. 3 (December 2012): 394.

and gender. In a period influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment, new views of different cultures and races were also often shaped by conflicting industrial and business concerns to create a very complicated, convoluted mindset on race in Georgian society. Britons were very much at odds in pushing a more progressive, humanist view of the Atlantic slave trade with their very real economic dependence on the trade. The British economy was becoming increasingly reliant on economic benefits of slavery throughout the early Georgian era so much so that from 1698-1807, twenty percent of British overseas voyages were slaving voyages.²⁴

In the early eighteenth century, most Britons enjoyed the economic benefits of the slave trade with relative detachment. As the horrors of the industry took time to spread across the nation as a whole, the people who did see the realities of the slave industry often tried to assuage their guilt and justify their actions. One British plantation owner justified the use of slavery in the 1760s, writing: “I was shock’d at the first appearance of human flesh exposed to sale. But surely God ordained ‘em for the use and benefit of us: otherwise his Divine Will would have been made manifest by some particular sign or token.”²⁵ His justification demonstrates the common idea that the structure of this society was divinely set. Because he was confronting these uncomfortable realities by deeming them to be God’s will, it took his responsibility to act against slavery away.

As the slave trade began to take hold financially, white Britons had to come to terms with a growing number of slaves and free black Britons in England. In contrast to views in later eras, the color of a person’s skin tended to matter less than how well they adapted to the customs of British society. One scholar explains that:

²⁴ Madge Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in Bristol* (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 2007), 11.

²⁵ Richard Pares, *A West-India Fortune* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1950), 121.

“Race,” it seems, like gender and ethnicity, was a historically contingent construction that did not describe empirical, static or absolute conditions in societies, but positional relationships made and unmade in historical circumstances and manipulated in the pursuit of power. In the eighteenth century, “race” as a line of descent or group was identified and signified through religion, custom, language, climate, aesthetics and historical time as much as physiognomy and skin color (although certainly the latter two played important, if contested, roles).²⁶

While views on race were changing, many more factors of a person’s identity concerned the Georgians than physical appearance. Social position and parentage were crucial in this society. While black Britons, as portrayed in *Belle*, could adapt the manners, customs, and religion of the white British majority, there was a common mentality that it took “two or three generations” for Africans to completely become what they felt was assuredly British.²⁷

Although life for all black Britons was difficult, black women suffered from the limitations brought on by both their race and gender in Georgian society. When the physical appearance of black Britons was commented upon, black women tended to garner the most criticism. They would often be compared to their white counterparts and seen as, “thick lip’d, flat nos’d, squabbly, dumpling dowdies.”²⁸ The difference in appearance in black women to the white English woman clearly became a source of criticism and ridicule. Black women were also often portrayed in popular plays with exaggerated physical features.²⁹ The relative importance of appearance for women at this time seemed to matter twofold in black British women. For white women in Georgian England, fashion and appearance was often a determining factor in the social hierarchy. There was a lot of pressure to strive for what was regarded as beautiful or fashionable

²⁶ Wilson, *The Island Race*, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

²⁸ Robert Southey, *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey* (St. Clair: Michigan Scholarly Press, 1849), 41.

²⁹ Dresser, *Slavery Obscured*, 166.

at any given time. Black women, however, could never really physically attain these “ideals” because the standards at this time were based around white women and what was common, familiar, and established.

The image of a black woman was often highly sexualized in Georgian England. Displays and performances by people from distant countries were popular as a form of entertainment. One of the most well known performers, Sara Baartman (known by her stage name, Hottentot Venus), was famed for having a large buttocks.³⁰ Although she never performed nude, her image, with possibly exaggerated physical features, became a source of amusement for the British public. Her fame and image added to this sexualized idea of black women in Britain. The physical differences between white and black women proved to further ostracize black women in this society.

While the societal context of Georgian England is undoubtedly different from the current society in terms of common mentalities, perspectives, and situation, there are many similarities in the expectations and views on black women in contemporary society. Black women in the twenty-first century are still largely expected to conform physically, culturally, and socially to their white counterparts.³¹ Although the specific situation of the title character in *Belle* is difficult to relate to for modern audiences, the overall emotions and feelings brought out by her marginalized character allow valuable insight into similar attitudes today.

When *Belle* screenwriter, Misan Sagay was interviewed about her film, she said she was inspired to write this story when she came across a painting of Dido Elizabeth Belle and her

³⁰ Sadiah Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2-3.

³¹ Maura Cheeks, “How Black Women Describe Navigating Race and Gender in the Workplace,” *Harvard Business Review*, (26 March 2018), accessed 5 November 2019. <<https://hbr.org/2018/03/how-black-women-describe-navigating-race-and-gender-in-the-workplace>>

cousin, Elizabeth Murray, when she was on a tour of Scone Palace in Perth, Scotland [see Fig. 1]. While both women seem to be portrayed as gentlewomen, the difference between their statuses is obvious in the picture. The painting shows Elizabeth mostly centered with the light and focus on her in the foreground while Belle is in a slightly darkened area in the background, and although they are both wearing light colors, Elizabeth is much brighter in coloring and detail. Elizabeth also holds a book implying an education or a life that affords her the time to read as Belle holds tight to some food possibly indicating a kind of servitude. Their clothing, while both elegant and expensive, emphasizes Belle's different racial background since she wears a turban and Elizabeth wears flowers. Though this painting may have been uncommon in that it portrays a mixed woman as a gentlewoman, the differences between the two subjects are still accentuated.

Although Sagay did not know the story and specific historical context, she was drawn to this painting. Sagay explains that she was shocked when the description for the painting only listed Lady Elizabeth Murray and her housekeeper. This led the writer to look into the historical story behind the painting and create a script. Sagay explains, "what I went for in the script was truth. Even if it takes liberties with some facts, it doesn't take liberties with what people feel... We tried to not create anything that distorts the truth or takes anything away, but hopefully will illuminate."³² As a black British woman herself, Sagay used the historical story not only to connect herself and audiences to a different time but also to explore issues surrounding race, class, and gender.

Although *Belle* could not capture all the complexities of Georgian society, it does continue the conversation on the history of race and gender in contemporary society. The

³² Maria Puente, "Movie Inspired by a Painting, 'Belle' is a True Story," *USA Today*, (5 May 2014), accessed 5 November 2019. <<http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2014/05/05/movie-inspired-by-a-painting-belle-is-an-amazing-but-true-story/8174219/>>

disadvantages faced by Belle because of her race and gender are apparent. She is expected to conform, and one of her guardian's biggest concerns is getting her a good marriage. In this expectation of securing a good marriage, she is similar to all Georgian gentlewomen who were expected to marry well. While many films have explored issues on gender for white women in Georgian England, *Belle* presents a new way in understanding the historical context of the time and how it relates to contemporary society.



Figure 1. *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsey (1761-1804) and her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray (1760-1825) great nieces of Lord Mansfield, in the grounds of Lord Mansfield's house, Kenwood, in Hampstead, North London. This painting inspired the writing of 'Belle.'*³³

³³ David Martin, *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsey (1761-1804) and her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray (1760-1825)*, ca. 1778, Oil. Wikipedia Commons. Scone Palace: Perth, Scotland. <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Dido_Elizabeth_Belle.jpg>

Black Britons, Intermarriage, and Diversifying the Empire

Television series tend to allow for a more in depth, complex look at historical subjects and contexts. Newer streaming platforms like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime encourage audiences to skip the movie theater and stay home to consume countless shows and films. Although films often hold a certain prestige coming from decades of attracting bigger talent, budgets, and recognition like the Academy Awards, over the last ten years, television shows have come alongside film to attract audiences looking for varied, provocative, and compelling content. The structure of a series is set up to accommodate a much more detailed, diverse, and intricate story. Throughout the last decade, this boom in higher budget, more complex shows has created what the media has deemed, “The Golden Age of Television.”³⁴ In creating shows based on history, this format also permits more time to build upon new ideas, new viewpoints, and historical context often not found in film.

During the last five to ten years, there have been several television series set in Georgian England that approach this time period in drastically different ways. Shows like *Outlander* (2014-present), *Black Sails* (2014-2017), *Poldark* (2015-2019), and *Harlots* (2017-present) all span multiple seasons and provide a rich historical setting for their stories. While all of these shows feature a somewhat diverse cast, one of the central themes of *Harlots* is to explore the relationship between races in Georgian England by examining the social positions of free black Britons at the time. While many television series and films set in this time period introduce black characters as a fleeting or minor characters in the story, *Harlots* really focuses on the lives,

³⁴ Oliver Lyttelton, “TV Vs Film: Is This Really A Golden Age Of Television & What Can Film Learn From The Small-Screen?” *IndieWire*, (25 May 2011), accessed 5 October 2019. <<https://www.indiewire.com/2011/05/tv-vs-film-is-this-really-a-golden-age-of-television-what-can-film-learn-from-the-small-screen-118398/>>

stories, and relationships of these black characters navigating through a time of change and more open social mobility.

Harlots, as its name implies, follows the lives of two feuding brothel owners and the women who work for them. One of the owners, Margaret Wells, tries to create a better life for her two daughters in any way she can while also trying to take down her rival, Lydia Quigley, the owner of an elite, long-standing brothel. Throughout the series, the show examines the ways in which women could gain and hold power and influence in a time where women were often limited by their social positions.³⁵

Though both of the two leads are white, the show explores the lives of black men and women and their relationship with the white majority in London. One of the major characters, William North, is a free black man and the lover and confidant of Margaret. William's mother, who was a slave, left him at a hospital in England, promising that one day they would be reunited. Although she has yet to find him, William did at least benefit from being categorized as a free black man instead of being forced to work as a slave like his mother. He helps protect and run the brothel and is a crucial part of its success. Although he is often looked down upon because of his race, he is generally selfless, and puts the needs of Margaret, her two daughters, and the son he shares with Margaret above his own. His young son, Jacob, who is only occasionally seen throughout the series, works in the brothel as a pageboy. Throughout the show, the couple demonstrates the complexities of an interracial relationship within the expanding British Empire.

As one of the most diverse areas in Britain, London offers a perfect backdrop for exploring the issue of interracial relationships. *Harlots* portrays a relationship that was somewhat less common or less documented in that a white woman was with a black man. One

³⁵ *Harlots*, created by Alison Newman and Moira Buffini, (Monumental Pictures, 27 March 2017).

possible liaison between a white women and a black man was printed in a Bristol newspaper in 1751. An anonymous gentleman offered himself as a husband to the women of Bristol. The ad declares: “He is the Age of 32... He is a black Man, generally reputed comely; His Nose inclines to the Roman; His Teeth are White and even; His forehead is high; His Eyes are full of fire and the hopes of Sweetness; And his Beard as Sir Richard Steel says, when shaved, looks blue upon his chin.”³⁶ He goes on to propose a meeting place and promises discretion. While it is not clear what caused him to take out this advertisement, the tone of it suggests previous encounters with one or several women in Bristol, and the freedom and social power of white British men meant they did not have to be as careful as white women in Britain. The slave trade and the growing number of British colonies in the Caribbean and abroad made for increased instances of intermarriage.

Although life for any offspring of an interracial relationship was not without its challenges, for women, there still existed further restrictions that were not felt by their male counterparts in issues of inheritance. One publicized case was with Robert Duckinfield and his lover in Jamaica, Jane Enugson. Their daughter, Elizabeth, was treated very differently in his will than their sons:

But in case my Daughter should Intermarry with any but a White Man then I hereby declare the said Bequest of... One thousands Pounds and all and every the Lands and Slaves to her hereby Devised, Null, and Void. An in that case, tis my Will and Desire that my said Daughter shall only be Maintained out of the Annual Interest of the said sum of One thousand Pounds for and during her Natural Life. And that after her Decease... the said Principal sum of one thousand pounds as all the Lands and Negroe or other Slaves herein before Devised to her be equally Divided between my said two sons... and their Heirs lawfully begotten.³⁷

³⁶ Dresser, *Slavery Obscured*, 72-73.

³⁷ Dresser, *Slavery Obscured*, 73.

Though both his sons and daughter were the offspring of a black woman and a wealthy white man living in Jamaica, the unequal status of men and women meant exercising more control over the choices and marriage of their daughter. Since she is at a disadvantage being a mixed-race woman, Duckinfield's will implies that he wants to further legitimize his daughter by trying to ensure her place in society by marrying a white man.

Set in Georgian England, *Poldark*, is the story of an ex-war hero who returns to his home in Cornwall to find it changed after the years he spent in the war.³⁸ Throughout *Poldark*'s first four seasons, the show takes place largely in Cornwall where this small community is shown to be very homogeneous in terms of race and ethnicity. For most of the series, the title character, Ross Poldark, is seen advocating for the disadvantaged. In most cases, he fights for the economically disadvantaged by waging a kind of war on the wealthy and using his influence and mining business to support the local impoverished population.

In the series' fifth and final season, however, Ross takes his fight for disadvantaged to a bigger, more global stage in London. While earlier seasons were focused on Cornwall, in the final season, Ross moves to London to serve as a Member of Parliament, and it is here that he encounters the issues of the slave trade, racial prejudice, and problems with a growing British Empire. He finds a formerly close friend Colonel Edward Despard in prison and is determined to help the Colonel and Catherine, his black Jamaican wife living in London.

The first four seasons of *Poldark* are based on a well-known book series of the same name. In the final season, the creators decided to create an entirely new plotline that was not based on any of the books in the series. The creator of the television series explains the departure from the book series and how they came up with the plot for the fifth season. She describes how she was, "looking at the historical context (Napoleonic Wars, Act of Union, fast-

³⁸ *Poldark*, created by Debbie Horsfield, (Mammoth Screen Masterpiece, 8 March 2015).

approaching Abolition of Slavery) and using real events and real people to drive the narrative... Tracing Despard and Catherine's real life story, intertwining it with Ross and Demelza's [his wife] and seeing them deal with the consequences of that entanglement, forms the spine of series five."³⁹ While she admits that she could have chosen many other real-life events or historical figures, she does not fully explain why she chose to focus on Edward Despard and his wife, Catherine, other than that she believed it would serve as a fascinating backdrop. Whatever the reason, Ross's move to London and the inclusion of Despard and Catherine allows *Poldark* to examine the themes of race and gender in Georgian society.

The story of Colonel Despard presents an extreme figure but one determined to fight for social justice. He ignored convention by marrying Catherine, a black Jamaican woman. Together they, "were revolutionaries, a man and a woman consciously working with each other to change the course of history to obtain specific goals."⁴⁰ Frustrated with the injustices of Georgian England, Despard was executed in 1803 for the alleged plot to kill King George III and to foment a social and political revolution in England. Although Edward's alleged plot to kill the King and start a revolution might be polarizing in its extremeness, Catherine seems to have had an equally passionate, but calmer disposition. Despite the difficulties of being a black woman in Georgian England, she still managed to be, "the fearless abolitionist, the tireless prison reformer, the United Irish woman, is the hero of this story."⁴¹ Her legacy as a calm, caring figure against Edward's extreme and possibly violent actions really even out their cause to create a couple

³⁹ Unknown, 'Poldark' writer explains how (and why) final season isn't based on the books," *British Period Dramas*, (12 July 2019), accessed 5 October 2019. <<http://britishperioddramas.com/news/poldark-writer-explains-how-and-why-final-season-isnt-based-on-the-books/>>

⁴⁰ Peter Linebaugh, *Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons and Closure, of Love and Terror, of Race and Class, and of Kate and Ned Despard* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 7.

⁴¹ Linebaugh, *Red Round Globe Hot Burning*, 14.

ahead of their time. Because she is a black woman whose status in society is already much lower than her husband's, she potentially realizes the precariousness of her situation and employs a more subtle approach in achieving reform. In *Poldark*, Edward's constant, loud disapproval of the inequality in this society angers a group of businessmen invested in the slave trade. They set Edward up to look as if he was planning to overthrow the King. Edward is subsequently found guilty and is sentenced to death. While the exact actions and intentions of his real life counterpart are unknown, the court and subsequent historians found enough evidence to believe he was guilty of plotting to assassinate King George III.

The *Poldark* creator's choice to follow Edward and Catherine's story alongside Ross's struggles in Parliament hints at an effort to create a more diverse story and setting in this series. Edward and Catherine's fight for social justice and racial equality adds a kind of modernity that current audience might have an easier time understanding. The creators of *Poldark* present a more sympathetic, innocent version of Edward, and are also deliberately portraying him as a loving husband fighting for equal treatment for his wife. In a time where intermarriage was still a delicate subject, their characters throw older conventions aside in favor of more modern views.

Conclusions

The relationship between race and gender is a complex subject but one that current audiences want to see in films and television. The concept of intersectionality, while not always understood, makes for more interesting, relatable plotlines and characters. Over the last decade, plenty of protests, online movements, and diversity initiatives prove that audiences want and are watching films with more diversity. While films about Georgian England have often centered around white men in power, films like *Belle* aim to look at characters that have been ignored in

the past. The portrait of Belle and her cousin show that there was more racial and cultural diversity in England at this time than many of the films in the past portray.

Though current television shows present a similar format to film, they allow for a more detailed, complex look at history. Series like *Harlots* and *Poldark* introduce ideas like racial relations and intermarriage while sparking conversation about how history has evolved in these areas. The specific situations and historical context might be different for modern audiences, but the concepts can be understood and related to our current society. The complexities and intricacies of the social relations at this time might not be fully or completely accurately portrayed but using these stories as a starting point in understanding this time period is valuable because they allow for modern audiences not only to learn more about the Georgian period, but also to be more aware of similar injustices in their lives and in their society and hopefully to look on others with more sympathy and understanding.

CHAPTER 3

GENDER, SOCIAL MOBILITY, AND CLASS DIFFERENCES IN FILM

“How many honest gentleman have we in England, of good estates and noble circumstances, that would be highway men, and come to the gallows if they were poor?”
—Daniel Defoe⁴²

Films set in Georgian England often address or highlight class differences, which were a crucial part of society at this time. The overthrow of the monarchy, government, and wealthy citizens of France during the French Revolution made for stirrings of unrest from the lower, working classes in Britain. The Industrial Revolution also revealed the miserable living conditions and lack of opportunities for many of the impoverished population of England at this time. Though films and television cannot capture all of the complexities of wealth disparities and class formation, the treatment of wealth and class in films set in Georgian England allows for an examination of how these issues continue to affect modern societies. Films like *The Duchess* (2008) as well as television series like *Poldark* (2015-2019) are significant in their portrayals of class and class disparity in Georgian England and can serve to challenge assumptions and add valuable insight into current debates over class and economic inequality today.

Hedonism, Escapism, the Women of the Aristocracy

For many people who watch film and television, it can be used as a means of escaping their current situation and everyday life. Film, as a medium, allows for a more palpable look at certain lifestyles and places that audience members could never experience. The budget, talent, and resources used to create these works often immerse viewers in a specific time and place. For this reason, film (and increasingly television given the rise in budgets and production value) can

⁴² Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (New York: Walker & Company, 2006), 142.

be a way of escapism without having to deal with the realities and drawbacks to a given situation.

In the early 2000s, the economy in the West was experiencing a period of financial growth and prosperity. With an increase in spending, investments, and a housing boom, many people had more discretionary income much of which was spent up on conspicuous consumption. One analyst describes the house price boom in the mid-2000s:

It supported a boom in consumption, as people felt richer and borrowed more against the value of their homes. That in turn drove the long boom through most of the decade. But it also was associated with excesses in the banking industry, as banks scrambled to lend more and more to home-buyers and created all sorts of complicated financial instruments that they thought would spread the risks they were taking on. Everything was fine while prices continued to climb.⁴³

As people spent their money more lavishly during this time, there developed a general cultural desire and appreciation of luxury and affluence. While most people could not always afford the most ostentatious items, a more extravagant lifestyle seemed more attainable.

This general societal appreciation and aspiration of more luxurious lifestyles in the early to mid-2000s led to a widespread fascination with the rich and famous. Well-known public figures and celebrities who flaunted their wealth brazenly became cultural icons. There began a rise in the infatuation with socialites and It Girls who were unabashedly out of touch with the conventions of people in the middle and lower classes and were often celebrated for their willful ignorance. Celebrities like Nicole Richie, Rachel Zoe, and particularly Paris Hilton took advantage of the public interest in out of touch, wealthy celebrities who were living in their own reality of overindulgence. They happily paraded their obliviousness to the lives of middle and

⁴³ Hamish McRae, "The First Decade: Boom, Bust and Beyond," *The Independent*, (9 December 2009), accessed 5 November 2019. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/analysis-and-features/the-first-decade-boom-bust-and-beyond-1836570.html>>

lower class people while emphasizing their wealth and casually spending great amounts of money. While most cultural periods tend to have an It Girl, the personas of these It Girls and celebrities of this time, were predominantly associated with wealth and excess. They lacked the charm, talent, or flair common to most It Girls and relied almost entirely on the appeal of their extravagant lifestyles.

To filmmakers at this time, creating a film based on one of the most famous It Girls of Georgian England, Georgiana Cavendish, seemed somewhat self-evident considering the widespread fascination with socialites like Paris Hilton. They invested in *The Duchess*, a film that presented the audience with the lifestyles of the aristocracy in a time where flamboyance and lavishness was celebrated. Although the film was released in 2008 at the beginning of the Great Recession, the conception and production of the film took place during the financial boom of the mid 2000s. The filmmakers were undoubtedly hoping to capitalize on the appeal of opulence during this time to gain an audience.

Since the film was released at the beginning of an economic decline, the marketing for this film tended to focus less on the over the top indulgence of many of the characters in the film to drawing on a much more composed and reputable It Girl of the past. Because Georgiana was an ancestor to Diana, Princess of Wales, the marketing for the film very deliberately drew parallels between the two, and reminded audiences of the public life and former scandals of Princess Diana to promote the film. One poster for the film displays the tagline, “there were three people in her marriage,” almost a direct quote of a well-known interview where Princess Diana chronicled her marriage to Prince Charles by saying, “there were three of us in this marriage so it was a bit crowded.” Other posters were more blatant and featured pictures of

Princess Diana with the tagline, “two women related by ancestry and united by destiny.”⁴⁴

Although the ideas for marketing this film may have always included well-respected Princess Diana, the fact that *The Duchess* was released right when the economy entered into recession in late 2007 meant the filmmakers had to rely on a more distinguished, serious approach and less on the opulence depicted in the film.

For the aristocracy in Georgian England, pleasure, fun, and spectacle were often a priority. Since members of the aristocracy are born into a position that can almost never be taken away, they had less to lose than members of the middle and lower classes who could lose their status to a loss of income, a scandal, or an unfavorable reputation. Although balls and parties were also popular with the middle class, the aristocracy took these events to a new level. There would often be hundreds of people attending these parties which cost thousands of pounds to host. While the spectacle of each party was often strategically planned with ornate decorations like Turkish tents and Grecian honeysuckle, there was also plenty of decadent food and alcohol where attendees would often overindulge.⁴⁵

For women, fashion and beauty trends were also very elaborate and often difficult to keep up with as styles changed frequently. Because of a widening exposure to different cultures during the time period, imported or foreign styles were favored and popular. One fashion article describes the ideal opera dress as, “a Circassian bodice made of American velvet trimmed with Chinese cord, and was to be worn with an Armenian head-dress and an Eastern mantle.”⁴⁶ In an attempt to out do each other, styles became somewhat absurd. Hats, in particular, were an

⁴⁴ David Cox, “Keira Should Wear Di’s Tiara with Pride,” *The Guardian*, (8 September 2008), accessed 3 November 2019. <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/sep/08/keiraknightley.theduchess>>

⁴⁵ Murray, *An Elegant Madness*, 201-24.

⁴⁶ Murray, *An Elegant Madness*, 250.

important part of accessorizing with hats reaching gigantic and elaborate proportions. There was also a new focus on the female form harking back to Grecian art. Women would use bodices and thinner muslin to show off their forms. Some women would even dampen their dresses in order to expose their figures more noticeably—a style that would possibly verge on the indecent in public places in today’s society.⁴⁷ While film may try to capture the over the top culture of the aristocrats of Georgian England, the realities are more extravagant than even *The Duchess* portrays.

Although the filmmakers of *The Duchess* really tried to take advantage of the It Girl worship and fascination of the rich and famous common in the mid 2000s, there is something more enduring in Georgiana’s story. While she was still very much a woman of wealth, fashion, and extravagance, she used her position for causes she thought would help her country, and in particular, supported the more reform-minded Whig party, who she famously campaigned for. She may not be considered a feminist in the modern sense because she did not fight for the betterment of women particularly, but she did assume roles that were uncommon to women during this time. With the sudden downturn in the economy at the end of 2007, rather than celebrating Paris Hilton and others, their lives were now seen as somewhat empty and their appeal dropped dramatically to those who could no longer afford the basic necessities. These out of touch, wealthy lifestyles now appeared irresponsible. As *The Duchess* depicts the elaborate life of Georgiana and other aristocratic women at this time, it echoes the class disparity both in Georgian England as well as the class disparity further developing in the late 2000s society.

The People’s Hero, the Industrial Revolution, and Women in the Lower Classes

While the splendor of the aristocracy holds a certain appeal and escapism for many film audiences, the struggle of the lower classes might intrigue audiences by exploring more current

⁴⁷ Murray, *An Elegant Madness*, 246.

and relevant issues of the past decade. Though film and television are often used as a way to get away from the everyday and dream of more desirable lifestyles and circumstances, when the economy shifts on a larger scale, public opinion and taste tends to shift as well. It is evident that the economic downturn at the end of the 2010s changed the types of films being made and the way class differences are portrayed.

As the Great Recession hit in late 2007, many people across the world, and especially in the United States and Britain, were hit with the realities of economic hardship. During the early 2000s, the world economy was in a financial boom. Ultimately this led to a false sense of security for many people who were then shocked by the full-blown recession and the unemployment that followed. By 2009, over a full year after the housing bubble burst, the world had endured its first full year of recession since the end of World War II.⁴⁸ As people lost their jobs, their houses, and ultimately their prospects for their future, the anger and shock of this recession led many people to call for a change.

As a large portion of the population suffered from the recession, feelings of anger, resentment, and change in the current capitalist society steadily grew. While different political groups began to form all over the political spectrum, there was a significant upturn in groups centered on socialist ideas. One British journalist found a large resurgence in socialism in people under thirty years old. He explains that, “young people, in particular, are being proletarianised in droves. They struggle to find decent work, or an affordable place to live, or a minimum degree of material security. Meanwhile, elites gobble up a growing share of society’s wealth.”⁴⁹ One

⁴⁸ Sher Verick and Iyanatul Islam, “The Great Recession of 2008-2009: Causes, Consequences and Policy Responses,” in *Institute of Labor Economics*, (2010): 3.

⁴⁹ Zoe Williams, “The Return of Socialism: What Does It Mean and Will It Last?” *The Guardian*, (20 October 2017), accessed 7 November 2019. <<https://www.theweek.co.uk/89116/the-return-of-socialism-what-does-it-mean-and-will-it-last>>

Gallup poll found that 43% of Americans embrace some form of socialism in 2019 versus 25% in 1942.⁵⁰ While socialists and other left-leaning groups were not the only groups to grow after the recession, this ideology was gaining significant traction.

These growing socialist ideas, or at least, a growing skepticism of capitalism can certainly be detected in film and television shows after the Great Recession. For historical television, this emphasis upon questioning excess and even capitalism emerged. The BBC's television adaptation, *Poldark*, based on a book series of the same name, is one example of blatantly anti-capitalist sentiments released after the recession.⁵¹ The title character, Ross Poldark, becomes a "People's Hero" by rejecting his upper class upbringing to advocate for the lower, working classes. He marries his kitchen maid, Demelza, ultimately becoming an accepted, respected member of the lower class while still using his upper class connections to his advantage.

The main antagonist, George Warleggan, represents everything broken, greedy, and unequal about a capitalist system. George, in many ways, is the opposite of Ross Poldark's character. His grandfather was part of the working class and, over two generations, the Warleggan family moved up in society financially and socially. Like Ross, however, George rejects and tries to hide his background in order to be more accepted. He is ashamed of his lower class roots and flaunts his wealth. George is the antithesis to Ross who advocates for the working and impoverished population of Cornwall. Ross believes these people deserve fairness and can benefit and prosper through a more equitable sharing of wealth. George becomes a symbol for everything Ross hates as George hoards money, values societal position, and runs his

⁵⁰ Mohamed Younis, "Four in 10 Americans Embrace Some Form of Socialism," *Gallup*, (20 May 2019), accessed 7 November 2019. < <https://news.gallup.com/poll/257639/four-americans-embrace-form-socialism.aspx>>

⁵¹ *Poldark*, created by Debbie Horsfield, (Mammoth Screen Masterpiece, 8 March 2015).

banking business purely for profit without any regard to the dozens of people who rely on income from those businesses.

The creators of the show really make a point to emphasize the miserable, unhealthy environments for the lower class, particularly for miners in the Georgian era during the Industrial Revolution. Many characters in the working class are shown dying from sicknesses like scurvy. Scurvy is brought on by a lack of vitamin C and can be corrected by eating fruits and vegetables—resources that lower classes could not afford at this time. In *Poldark*, the workers in Cornwall are portrayed with few options to change their circumstances. One character, Ted Carkeek, poaches on a nobleman's property in order to feed his family. Although Ross gives Ted a job in his mine to prevent him from poaching, Ted complains that the income, though generous and higher than similar positions at other mines, is enough to feed him and his wife, but not enough to feed his widowed mother and sisters. Despite Ross's best efforts to help him, Ted continues to poach and is caught and arrested. At Ted's trial, Ross attacks the greediness of the nobility and upper classes of Cornwall, saying that they put on an air of humanity and civility but are fundamentally barbaric for sending a man, who was only trying to feed his family, to jail. Ted eventually dies in jail due to the unsanitary living conditions he is forced into while in prison. Ross feels the burden of trying and failing to help his friend, and partly blames himself for not working hard enough to get him freed during the trial.

To many audience members, Ted was ultimately stealing what was not his and might not gain much sympathy. In other films or television shows, Ted might be portrayed as a thief and an immoral character if shown from the nobleman's perspective. *Poldark* very specifically chooses to take a more socialist, left-leaning approach by creating sympathy for these characters and portraying the jury and men like George Warleggan as cruel and inhumane by not helping

the lower classes. During the Industrial Revolution, men like George Warleggan were able to capitalize on the new opportunities and financial growth of this era and raise their status in society, but while this time period created upward mobility for some, others were left with less opportunity and resources. While Ross paid the highest wages he could to his miners, it was still not enough for many people, especially those supporting families, to live on. Ted was unable to provide the basic necessities for himself and his family, which kept him in his lower status in society and prevented him from ever furthering himself and making more money. The show ultimately shows how, in cases like Ted's, it is the economic system and not he himself who is to blame for his circumstances.

Throughout the Georgian era, the landscape of the workforce changed significantly. For lower class, working Britons, there was a shift from more agricultural jobs to jobs in factories and mines in response to the creation of new and more efficient machinery. While the types of jobs available to the lower classes changed, it does not appear that they were able to benefit from the economic developments brought on by the Industrial Revolution. One scholar sums up the overall recent historical research that suggests:

England never experienced a period of commitment to industrial growth: the industrial revolution was a brief interruption in a great arch of continuity whose economic and political base remained firmly in the hands of the landed aristocracy and its offshoots in metropolitan finance. Gentlemanly capitalism prevailed and the power and influence of industry and industrialists in the English economy and society were ephemeral and limited.⁵²

Though the growth of industry would suggest those people running and working in industrial jobs would reap major profits from this new structure, it appears there was little change in wealth for the lower classes during this time. With the exception of bankers and others in finance, the overall political and economical power stayed with the nobility as it had for centuries.

⁵² Berg, "Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution," 25.

Recent research has traced where wealth created by the Industrial Revolution was distributed. The aristocracy and upper classes owned most of the land, houses, roads, and mines, which generated a great deal of income.⁵³ The inequality between the classes during this time continued, and in some cases increased, despite being a “revolution.” The actual growth and benefit of the Industrial Revolution did not, ultimately, profit most Georgian Britons because the financial growth took a while to set in and came later towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century.⁵⁴ Ultimately the “revolution” appeared for many Britons to be nothing more than the same old story of the rich getting richer.

Wealth disparity created animosity between the lower and upper classes. Food riots were common and were not only brought on by hunger but by the indignation of being deprived of a basic right to fair prices of grain.⁵⁵ The French Revolution furthered sentiments among the working class in England to stand up to the people in charge of the wealth and political future of the country and demand access to what they deemed were basic rights to fair prices. The context set by such a restless, changing, and dynamic time period really creates an ideal backdrop to reveal historical tensions between the classes. The working and living conditions of the lower classes compared to the extravagance of the aristocracy at this time emphasize the inequalities of that society. By highlighting this environment, it is easier to incorporate the ideas of socialism in film and television and to criticize wealth inequality.

⁵³ Gregory Clark and Neil Cummins, “Inequality and Social Mobility in the Era of the Industrial Revolution,” in *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 20.

⁵⁴ Joel Mokyr, “The European Enlightenment and the Origins of Modern Economic Growth,” in *Reconceptualizing the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 65.

⁵⁵ E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *The Past and Present Society*, no. 50 (February 1971): 79.

While Ross Poldark remains the lead of the story, the female characters are the most dynamic and ultimately reveal a real, substantive side to the affects of class differences during this time. Throughout the show, Ross is a somewhat static, impractical, and idealized hero while other female characters like his wife, Demelza, undergo changes and adapt to their situation and surroundings. The creators of the show really emphasize the restraints as well as the liberties available to women in their position during this time based on both class and gender.

The main female character, Demelza, occupies an unusual position in the story of *Poldark*. When she is first introduced, she is in rags, speaks in a heavy uneducated Cornish dialect, and is unaware of the manners of a gentlewoman from Ross's social class. She is from an abusive, lower class family of miners who have relied on her hard work to get by. Ross hires her as a kitchen maid, and she begins to try to adapt and learn the customs, behaviors, and speech of the upper classes. When Ross marries her, it is implied that he did so with the intention of distancing himself from the upper class society he hates. Demelza, however, wants to be a good wife to him and tries everything in her power to be accepted by his family, friends, and business partners that he needs to impress in order to keep his business going. Though she always has the mark of a working class kitchen maid to most of Ross's wealthier family and friends, Demelza does win many of them over with her caring, determination, and efforts to become a gentlewoman.

Once Demelza marries Ross, she is regarded with a great deal of skepticism from both the working class where she grew up and the upper class to which she aspires. While she does not try to show off her new, gentle manners to miners and other working class people she encounters, they are not sure what to do with her now that she occupies a higher social position than they do. In the upper classes, Demelza is able to conform to the manners expected of her

position but is set apart by her keeping her working class, Cornish accent. Her background is well known within that society as well and remains with her as she navigates various social situations. While complying with the basic customs of her new upper class position, she is never fully welcomed by everyone in Ross's class, which demonstrates how important a person's position at birth plays throughout his or her whole life during the Georgian era. Regardless of her social acceptance, her character still illustrates how women at this time took on the social position of her husband and not the other way around. Demelza's character really highlights the differences between classes and the strict social rules at play in Georgian England.

While the other major female characters are not from the lower class, their station in life is also largely determined by their class, gender, and the marriages they make. Ross's cousin, Francis Poldark, marries Ross's former intended, Elizabeth Chynoweth, which immediately changes her role and duties in society. Elizabeth's new sister-in-law, Verity, presents a stark contrast to Elizabeth despite both of them being from the same social and economic background. Since Verity is older than the average age of married women during this time period, her status is somewhat reduced and her duties very different than those of Elizabeth's. After Elizabeth first marries Verity's brother, Francis, she tries to help Verity sort eggs in the chicken coop on their estate. Verity is appalled and stops Elizabeth, telling her she can no longer perform these duties and should leave them to the servants or Verity herself. Elizabeth then asks:

“What may I do then?”

“There is much you may do, Elizabeth. You are the lady of the house. You may go out when you choose, pay calls, attend balls.”

“May you not?”

“I'm twenty-five. Unmarried. I spin and I bake, pick preserves. I take care of the servants when they are sick. My life is not your life.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ *Poldark*, “Episode Two,” episode 2, 25 November 2019 (originally aired 15 March 2015).

While Verity still has the backing of her wealthy father and lives on their family estate, the fact that she is unmarried reduces her position and role to one similar to the household servants. Verity has the fortune of being born into a wealthy, upper class family, but because she is a woman and unmarried, there are many restraints placed on her freedoms. As the women of *Poldark* demonstrate, the role of marriage in a woman's life during this time was crucial in her role and status in society. The way these female characters navigate the limitations and opportunities given to them by their status really helps in understanding Georgian women in relation to their class and gender and how those fit into this society.

For working and lower class women in Georgian England, the onset of the Industrial Revolution has left historical research split over whether women's reliance on marriages and male income and labor was more or less relied upon than before. The Revolution and the creation of textile mills and a few other factory-production sectors increased employment for women. However, it should be noted that these types of jobs were limited to specific geographic areas and were not typical of the overall job market and employment opportunities available to women during this period. As a result of the Industrial Revolution:

The vast majority of women continued to work in their homes, in small workshops, in the sweated trades and in domestic service. For these women, the technological advancements that underpinned the conversation of female labour in cotton textiles had little meaning [...] Moreover, although industrialization generated significant growth in textile factory jobs for women, at the same time it destroyed a stable by-employment for women in the form of spinning. This loss was devastating for rural women.⁵⁷

For lower class and impoverished women, their options were rather limited. While some rural Britons did move to cities with more factories and manufacturing facilities, those who stayed in rural areas suffered from the changing job landscape of this time. Many of the jobs previously

⁵⁷ Nicola Verdon, "Women, Work and Wages in Historical Perspective," in *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth-Century England: Gender, Work and Wages* (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2002), 11.

held by women were replaced by factory jobs. Some women found their options so limited that some women would dress and work as men for months before being exposed.⁵⁸ While dressing like a man in order to acquire and keep jobs that were usually only available to men seems extreme, it may have also been done as an effort to avoid harassment or segregation in the work area.

While most members of the lower classes may have felt helpless or angry at their position and limited opportunities in Georgian England, the women of the lower classes felt these restraints twofold. Class inequality during the Industrial Revolution was still great and the expectations of women were even greater. Their role in society was often strictly set by social mores, but for working class women, they sometimes had to walk a delicate line and sometimes cross the proverbial line in order to provide the basic needs for themselves and for their families. The intriguing and dynamic aspect of the female characters in *Poldark* is how they navigate all confinements of their positions. Demelza, Verity, and Elizabeth all have moments of conforming to what is expected of a woman of their status, but also moments where they are driven to break from these rigid roles. *Poldark* allows viewers to gain an understanding of the class, wealth, and gender inequality infused in Georgian society and how the effects of the customs of this time period might still linger today.

Conclusions

Throughout the past two decades, the world economy changed greatly. As people were experiencing a financial boom at the beginning and mid 2000s, the unexpected bursting of the housing bubble launched what is now known as the Great Recession in late 2007. Because its impact proved so large, the overall public appetite for stories of excess and greed diminished.

⁵⁸ Fraser Easton, "Gender's Two Bodies: Women Warriors, Female Husbands and Plebeian Life," *Past & Present*, no. 180 (2003): 137-38.

Films like *The Duchess* that were made during the period of economic growth tended to allow for more indulgence, extravagance, and an appreciation for a more luxurious lifestyle. As the recession hit however, the very serious loss of income and livelihood for many people made reveling in such out of touch figures and ways of living somewhat tone deaf. The anger and resentment brought on by the Great Recession that was now developing throughout the middle and lower classes caused many people to examine the current state of class and economic inequality. While many groups of people found different avenues of change, the ideas stemming from socialism became much more prominent. This shift in ideology is very deliberately expressed in the story of *Poldark*. One of the major focuses and plotlines centers around presenting the miserable and helpless circumstances of the lower, working classes and greediness of upwardly rising characters like George Warleggan. The women in *Poldark* also allow for a deeper understanding of the disparity of this time period because they demonstrate the restrictions placed on them by both their gender and class impositions that were common to the Georgian era. Because film taste and production often mirrors social, cultural, and economical shifts in a society, the differences in tone and content between Georgian stories like *The Duchess* and *Poldark* highlight the changing values and attitudes towards class and gender inequality present today. Though shown through the lens of a historical setting, historical television and film really allow audiences to get a deeper understanding of class and gender politics.

CHAPTER 4

GENDER, FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS, AND SEXUALITY IN FILM

“As mothers and mistresses of families, we possess so much influence, that if we were uniformly to exert it in the manner which the times require, we might produce a most happy change in the morals of the people; and in peril of being thought superstitious, I avow my firm belief, that such a change would conduce more to extricate us from our present difficulties, than the wisdom of our counsellors, or the valour of our fleets and armies.”

—Jane West, 1811⁵⁹

Although women make up roughly half the world’s population, film continues to promote male-driven narratives and actors. Over the last century, many films and television shows center around a male protagonist, especially ones based upon a historical theme. For female characters, however, their roles often revolve around romance, sexuality, and marriage. While the prominence of these clichés and stereotypes might be subjective, tools like the Bechdel Test aim to set a standard for evaluating female presence in film. The test measures female representation by passing a film based on three requirements: it must have at least two female characters, they must both have names, and they must talk about something other than a man. In 2016, of the twenty-five top-grossing movies of the year, only half the films passed the Bechdel Test.⁶⁰ While women in today’s society have varied, dynamic, and significant roles, most films suggest that women’s primary role is to secure and support a man.

For historical films, these tropes are incredibly prevalent, but there has been an attempt to shift from this narrative over the last couple of decades. Films like *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister* (2010), *The Governess* (1998), and *Becoming Jane* (2007) all still revolve around relationships, marriages, and sexuality, but those outside of traditional relationships. These

⁵⁹ Deborah Kaplan, *Jane Austen Among Women* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 40.

⁶⁰ Liz Calvario, “Nearly Half of 2016’s 25 Biggest Films Passed the Bechdel Test — But Plenty Failed,” *Indiewire*, (10 December 2016), accessed 7 November 2019. <<https://www.indiewire.com/2016/12/top-movies-2016-passed-bechdel-test-bad-moms-ghostbusters-1201756648/>>

filmmakers may have wanted to appeal to these traditional ideas of romance while also highlighting female characters that straddle the line between conforming to the societal expectations of this time period and rising above them. Women at this time were so limited in their positions that they were shunned to a separate, private “sphere” that revolved around domestic duties, family, and marriage. They were often kept confined to the household and unwelcomed in the public “sphere” where there were more varied and diverse positions in society.⁶¹ Films such as *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, *The Governess*, and *Becoming Jane* present an alternative to this idea of a romantic female lead centered around domestic life and marriage as a happy ending. By examining roles like the unmarried woman, the female homosexual, and the mistress, these films allow for a more dynamic look at female roles in Georgian society and how they fit within today’s society.

Sexuality, Cross Dressing, and Female Bonding

Over the last twenty years, the portrayal of gay, bisexual, and transgendered characters in film and television has evolved with the changing social politics and attitudes about sexuality. Films from the 1990s and earlier often reduce gay characters to stereotypes and usually fail to provide any significant contributions to the film besides being the “gay best friend.” Characters like George from *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997) and Stanford Blatch from *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) are very one-dimensional characters that only offer advice for the more dynamic main characters and to add comic relief. Examples of gay female characters are even sparser. Towards the end of the 1990s, however, there was a growing demand for more representation, and in a daring move in 1997, Ellen DeGeneres came out on national television, “heralding a

⁶¹ Kaplan, *Jane Austen Among Women*, 43-44.

new era of gay celebrity power and media visibility.”⁶² Although plenty of films and television shows still continued to present being gay or gay characters as a punch line, there was a deliberate effort to create more complex gay characters that were no longer sidekicks, but significant characters in stories. In the mid 2000s, there was an obvious change in the treatment and prevalence of films about gay, bisexual, and transgendered characters. The media gave a great amount of attention and interest to the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), which was potentially due to the two famous and popular male leads, Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal. The film gained widespread acclaim and suddenly:

Gay films [had] undergone a major shift, from the fringe to the mainstream, and the 2005 Academy Awards were dubbed ‘the Gay Oscars’ with gongs going to *Brokeback Mountain*, *Capote*, and *Transamerica*. Producers began clamouring to back big-budget, gay-themed movies, including, *I Love you Phillip Morris* with Jim Carrey and Ewan McGregor, and Gus Van Sant’s *Milk*, starring Sean Penn.⁶³

There not only was there an increase in the number of films about complex gay characters but there was also a demand for them with mainstream general audiences.

Because of this growing interest in gay characters in film and television in the mid to late 2000s, some filmmakers decided to capitalize on this new demand by exploring homosexuality in a historical setting. The appeal of examining the stories of gay or gender fluid characters throughout different cultures and time periods allows for a better understanding of homosexuality in modern society and the current issues with sexual inequality. While many films like *Brokeback Mountain* present a more complex look at male homosexuality and experience, female homosexuality occupied a much more uncertain place in film. In many cases

⁶² Bonnie J. Morris, “History of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Social Movements,” *American Psychological Association*, n.d., accessed 5 November 2019. <<https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/history>>

⁶³ Steven Paul Davies, *Out at the Movies: A History of Gay Cinema* (Harpender: Kamera Books, 2008), back cover.

of lesbians in film and television, the relationships are less overt and focus on female bonding, ambiguous female friendships, and female spectatorship, which “underemphasizes the sexual dimension of lesbianism.”⁶⁴ The concept of spectatorship is especially relevant to films about lesbians because these women are often objectified for the pleasure of the viewer without examining the depth and complex nature of these characters and relationships. Films like *All About Eve* (1950) and *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991) feature elements of female bonding and spectatorship, but fail to explicitly identify any of the characters as lesbians. In terms of female sexuality on film, the line between lesbians and female bonding is often left unidentified. While ambiguous female friendships might represent a certain aspect of the complexities of some female relationships, in the media, it often leaves audiences with an unclear or a less definite idea of lesbianism and gender fluidity.

In the historical film *The Duchess*, which takes place in the eighteenth century England, the relationship between the main character, Georgiana Cavendish, and her friend, Bess, is unclear.⁶⁵ Georgiana meets Bess after Bess has separated from her husband and has no place to go. When Georgiana takes Bess in to her household, she becomes the duchess’s closest friend and confidant. In one scene, Bess tells Georgiana that sex is not just for producing an heir, but can also be used for the pleasure and enjoyment of both partners. Georgiana is not entirely convinced since her sexual relationship with her husband is very emotionless, mechanical, and fleeting. Bess takes it upon herself to show Georgiana the pleasures of a physical, sexual relationship while Georgiana envisions her love interest, Charles Grey. Although the scene still centers around the idea of sex with a man, the women share a sexual moment between the two of

⁶⁴ Karen Hollinger, "Theorizing Mainstream Female Spectatorship: The Case of the Popular Lesbian Film," *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 2 (1998): 5.

⁶⁵ *The Duchess*, directed by Saul Dibb, performed by Keira Knightly and Ralph Fiennes, (Paramount Vantage, 2008).

them. In a reverse to many of the previous films on female relationships and lesbianism, there is a definitive sexual aspect to their relationship. However, it is still difficult to categorize this relationship as entirely homosexual or heterosexual. While Georgiana and Bess are close friends, they never pursue any type of romantic relationship with each other and tend to focus on their respective lovers. Their relationship crossed over into the sexual aspects of female homosexuality, but not as much into the emotional aspects, leaving the audience with another ambiguous female friendship.

In Georgian England, female homosexuality was just as misunderstood and undefined. While lesbianism was a distant or inconceivable concept for many Georgian men, the idea of homosexuality in general was treated rather flippantly as well and, “despite the execution of the Earl of Castlehaven, homosexuality was regarded as something of a joke.”⁶⁶ In this regard, homosexuality mainly refers to relationships between men. Most Georgian women at this time were kept isolated from men and forced into the domestic sphere where they interacted with one another. Predictably, some women would form close emotional bonds. While there are cases of lesbian prosecution around Europe at this time, female homosexuality was not really acknowledged or recognized at this time in England. Other forms of what was considered sexual deviancy like prostitution were given more attention.⁶⁷ Although the concept of lesbianism is more defined today, the ambiguity of certain female relationships and female bonding that was present in Georgian England is still often mirrored in the unclear portrayals of female relationships within modern media.

While these types of female relationships are prevalent in film and television, there are some instances of films intentionally exploring lesbian characters and relationships. Although

⁶⁶ A.D. Harvey, *Sex in Georgian England* (London: Phoenix Press, 1994), 131.

⁶⁷ Harvey, *Sex in Georgian England*, 113.

evidence on female sexuality in Georgian England is limited, the creators of *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister* based their film on a real historical figure.⁶⁸ Anne Lister was a landowner and industrialist in the nineteenth century and regarded as the “first modern lesbian.”⁶⁹ Her letters to her lovers were written in code and eventually decoded by historians to better understand her life and somewhat unique situation during this time period. In the film, sexual ambiguity is not an issue as Anne is portrayed as unabashedly in love with several women and refuses to take on a husband. She conducts an affair with a woman named Mariana, who eventually submits to societal expectations and marries a wealthy man to Anne’s great disappointment. Distraught, Anne eventually forms a relationship with another female member of her church. While the two never become serious, Anne uses this tryst as a distraction from the loss of her relationship with Mariana. Meanwhile, a local businessman, Christopher Rawson, asks Anne to marry him, but she refuses and tells him she will only marry for love. Angered at his rejection, he attempts to humiliate her by telling her she is called “Gentleman Jack” in local circles due to her somewhat masculine appearance. While Anne does not necessarily dress as a man, she wears very simple clothing that is often black or neutral in color, which is contrasted to most of the other women in the film who have more elaborate, colorful dresses in the style of gentlewomen of the time. Anne begins another affair with a woman of means, and they use their estates for business and industry. When Rawson tries to buy some land from Anne, she refuses. It is implied that a scorned Rawson then retaliates by spreading rumors about Anne and her lover hoping to ostracize the two women and ruin Anne’s family name. Anne chooses her relationship

⁶⁸ *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, directed by James Kent, performed by Maxine Peake and Anna Madeley, (The Oxford Film Company, 2010).

⁶⁹ Jonathan Brown, “BBC Unveils Drama About Gentleman Jack—‘The First Modern Lesbian,’” *The London Independent*, (16 October 2009), accessed 2 November 2019. <<http://www.sanfranciscosentinel.com/?p=46261>>

with her lover over her reputation and lives a somewhat open life with her. This film represents a departure from a lot of other films on female homosexuality in that the creators present a complex main character with an unquestioning understanding of her sexual preferences and desires. The relationships and way the story is filmed do not cater to a heightened sexual experience, but instead focus on the internal struggles of Anne and those around her.

Though Anne is very clearly portrayed as an anomaly during this time period, there is evidence that some Georgian women had similar lifestyles. While Anne never explicitly dressed as a man, there were women in Georgian England who did dress as men in order to carry out romantic affairs with other women. Cross dressing is often a form of self expression in modern society, but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it appears as though the women who dressed as men had varying and ulterior reasons for dressing apart from societal norms. In many cases, women dressed as men to get into places and positions where women were not allowed. There are several instances of women dressing as men in order to join and fight in the military and also to find jobs that were unavailable to women.⁷⁰ There are also instances of women dressing and pretending to be men so that they could marry another woman and carry on a façade of a heterosexual relationship. Since Britons at this time had no real concept of lesbianism, they dealt with these irregularities by grouping these relationships with other forms of identified deviancy. Though women who dressed as men to join the military or retain jobs were not fully endorsed by society, they still complied with the prevailing ideas on female identity because they strove to help their country or to take care of their family. The women who dressed as men to marry other women did challenge gender assumptions and were more likely to be ostracized and punished. When these women were discovered, they were often charged with similar punishments given to prostitutes, thieves, and other criminals that were associated with the

⁷⁰ Easton, "Gender's Two Bodies," 133.

poor.⁷¹ Although the intention of each of these women is impossible to discern, it would appear that the practice of women dressing as men in order to marry other women would be tied to female homosexuality in a time where that was not inherently understood.

Marriages, Affairs, and the Mistress

In recent films, the characters that do get plenty of attention tend to reinforce typical roles or tropes for women, especially in romantic comedies, dramas, and historical films. Common female roles revolve around love—the lack of it, the challenges with it, and the joy of attaining it. Typical romance films involve the guy getting the girl after a series of challenges, but they both put these obstacles aside and the story ends with the promise of their blissful futures together. The enemy of this type of story then is the single, unmarried female lead character. While the concept of bringing two characters together romantically is a staple in many stories, William Shakespeare popularized this type of narrative form, especially in his comedies. Shakespearian comedies usually conclude with at least one but often multiple weddings. The idea of marriage being the ultimate happy ending proves that:

Marriage is appropriate as a provider of closure for comedy because it focuses primarily on the experience of the group, as opposed to the individualist, isolationist emphasis of tragedy [...] Marriage both counters this element of separation by showing humans in a relationship which is, in theory at least, one of indissoluble bonding, and also holds out the promise of renewed life in the birth of offspring.⁷²

This trope is the basis for a majority of comedies and romances that has lasted for centuries and essentially solves the “problem” of being a single, unmarried woman.

In a time where the acceptance of different lifestyles is of high importance to many members of society, stories where the traditional mold is broken may have more appeal than the

⁷¹ Easton, “Gender’s Two Bodies,” 135.

⁷² Lisa Hopkins, “Marriage as Comic Closure,” in *The Shakespearian Marriage* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998), 17.

typical films of the past. One film journalist notes the changing dynamics and recent rejection of romantic comedies by explaining that, “so many conventions of the romance genre—for example, the lovelorn guy who won’t take no for an answer—have been analyzed and recast as misogynistic, which makes the traditional rom-com seem politically regressive.”⁷³ Filmmakers have opted to explore singleness both as a choice and an empowered way of living. Popular films such as *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010), *Frozen* (2013), and *Love Actually* (2003) establish singleness as a feature of modern film. These films show that movies do not have to begin with a female looking for marriage and often dating the wrong man and end with marriage to the right one. Freed from this narrative many recent female characters have become more dynamic and interesting to audiences.

In a possible attempt to capitalize on the changing attitudes on romantic films, the filmmakers of *Becoming Jane* (2007) take the somewhat celebrated unmarried historical figure of Jane Austen and add a romantic element to her story.⁷⁴ This film balances between the traditional romantic films of the past but introduces a dynamic female lead who, although looking for love, does not need marriage to improve her life nor is it presented as the only avenue for her to have a happy and productive life. The film is also different in that while the story centers around the romance between Jane Austen and her love interest, Thomas Lefroy, the audience knows that Jane never marries. Though the exact nature of Jane’s relationship with male suitors including Lefroy is actually unclear, the film turns their story into a full-fledged romance.

⁷³ Noah Gittell, “Why Moviegoers Are Tired of Romance on the Silver Screen,” *Esquire*, (13 February 2017), accessed 19 November 2019. <<https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a53106/love-is-dead-at-the-movies/>>

⁷⁴ *Becoming Jane*, directed by Julian Jarrold, performed by Anne Hathaway and James McAvoy, (Buena Vista International, 2007).

By looking at the historical context of marriage for Jane and this time period, it becomes apparent that the concept of marriage in Georgian England was a crucial component to women's lives and their overall situation in society. Although ideas on marriage and romance were changing during this time period, most people clung to the belief that marriage, above all, was for economic and social advancement. Romance, love, and affection were becoming a sought after asset of marriage for younger people. Although the older generations' marriages were almost exclusively arranged, the appeal of romance was spreading and heightened by the poetry, stories, and novels of the time. While this might have been an area of contention and reflection for younger people, "even the most enthusiastic advocates of domesticity generally disapproved of marrying into affection-filled poverty."⁷⁵ The idea of a happy and romantic domestic life was starting to become more popular, but in practice, most women married for social and financial security. Even women from wealthier backgrounds often had to rely on a marriage to secure their comfortable economic status. Women were often passed over in inheritance in favor of other male relatives or were unable to receive a monetary allowance from their family until they were married. Likewise, married women were also allowed a larger social network by taking place in activities like attending the theatre, making calls to other women, and throwing parties and balls of their own. For unmarried women, they were dependant on their families for most of their social interaction. While the choice to marry and who to marry were still ultimately in the hands of many Georgian women, the pressure to marry and marry well had a huge bearing on their lives and position in society.

In *Becoming Jane*, Jane Austen is portrayed as a young woman wanting to become a writer despite the disapproval she encounters from many of her family and friends. Jane insists that her marriage be based on love, but her mother is more interested in suitability and worries

⁷⁵ Kaplan, *Jane Austen Among Women*, 22.

that Jane's pickiness will lead to her becoming a penniless author. While Jane reads one of her literary pieces at a gathering, she is offended by the criticisms and lack of interest from a visitor, Thomas Lefroy. Their disagreements eventually lead to a growing affection for one another, and Tom begins to encourage Jane in her writing. The two fall in love and plan to marry but first seek the blessing of Judge Langlois, Tom's uncle. Langlois rejects the match and makes it clear to Tom that he would not support a marriage to someone with so little money. Unknown to Jane, Tom has been receiving money from his uncle that Tom depends on to support his parents and siblings.

Tom calls off the wedding without telling Jane the reason for his sudden change of heart. Tom and Jane are both emotionally distraught and, in an effort to ease their heartbreak, quickly agree to marry other people. Facing the reality of the situation of a life married to someone other than Jane, Tom asks her to run away with him. Jane, swept up in the romantics of the situation, agrees, but before they leave, Jane stumbles upon a letter from Tom's uncle. Realizing that the money Tom receives from his uncle sustains Tom's family and that running away with her would prompt his uncle to cut off all support, Jane refuses to run away with Tom. Unwilling to lose Jane, Tom tells her he will find some way to earn the money. She tells him she loves him, but it is not enough to justify ruining his family. Jane gets in a carriage and rides away without Tom. The story then jumps to twenty years later after Jane has become an acclaimed, well-known writer. Tom has married another woman and brings his eldest daughter, also named Jane, to meet her namesake. The younger Jane is a big fan of Austen's novels and asks her to read one of her works. After Austen realizes his daughter is named after her, she agrees to read from her novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. The film ends with Jane surrounded by her admirers and appearing content with her situation in life.

Becoming Jane combines many of the elements of a romantic film while still attempting to appeal to an audience that is tired of traditional romantic movie tropes. Though the film ends with both main characters happy and successful, Jane's happiness is not based on a marriage. Showing Jane's success in her own right arguably lessens the dread of the unmarried spinster character that haunts many romantic films. A film about Jane Austen's life that does not center around a romance could have also served a similar purpose in portraying a content, unmarried woman. However, by giving Jane the chance at romance and ultimately rejecting it for honorable reasons, the comfort of the traditional romantic narrative is still partly maintained but sufficiently different than the traditional trope.

During the Georgian period, a woman's position in society was heavily dependant on her husband's status. For unmarried women during this time, they would keep their father or brother's status. Although many unmarried women like Jane Austen often lived rewarding lives, after a certain age, their place in society becomes less clear. Clergyman, Thomas Gisborne attempted to explain the role of marriage and married women in England in the early nineteenth century by advising that, when dealing with unmarried women, "there is sometimes seen in families an inmate, commonly a female relation of the master or of the mistress of the house, who, though admitted to live in the parlour, is, in truth an humble dependant [...] Remember the awkwardness of her situation, and consult her comfort."⁷⁶ Because unmarried women continued to depend on their fathers, brothers, uncles, or another male family member and often lived in their households, many members of society regarded them as a kind of "inmate."

Not all unmarried women at this time found their lives as imprisoned as Gisborne described. Many unmarried women were crucial in the running of their families' households, especially when children were brought into the picture. Having a trusted and familiar female

⁷⁶ Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry Into the Duties of the Female Sex* (London: Luke Hansard, 1806), 291-92.

family member tend to the children was often cheaper and generally preferred over a lady's maid or a nanny unrelated to the family. In these households:

The contributions of labor by female members of their own family and status group won women with large families interludes of leisure or helped to ease their households through the domestic ills brought on by their periodic confinements or illnesses. For the unattached women such contributions provided the pleasures of company and, sometimes, material luxuries not available to them in their own homes. Most important, their lives became more purposeful (in terms, of course, provided by their culture) when they acted, in effect, as surrogate mothers.⁷⁷

These unmarried women helped carry the burden of the household management. During times of confinement or illness, which was very common in Georgian England, these women might temporarily run the household. This provided not only a degree of power, but freedom while granting these unmarried women the chance to contribute to the household.

Another somewhat undefined, but often portrayed role for women in film centers around the idea of the mistress. Since marriage is so often the objective in many Hollywood films, any barricades preventing the two characters from coming together is naturally the enemy. The mistress, then, becomes the direct antithesis to marriage, a happy ending, and the triumph of the main character. Though the concept of morality in stories in film and television varies greatly and is ever changing, there is an overarching moral compass that has shaped Hollywood film. The Hays Code, named after American politician, Will H. Hays, was a film production code under effect from 1932-68 that aimed to restrict and censor what was deemed immoral for major Hollywood films and television. Filmmakers were warned to "Be Careful" when dealing with, "morals, divorce, free love, unborn children, relationships outside of marriage, single and double standards, the relationship of sex to religion, marriage and its effect upon the freedom of

⁷⁷ Kaplan, *Jane Austen Among Women*, 32.

women.”⁷⁸ Though the enforcement of this code has not been in effect for several decades, there is a somewhat lingering moral compass that still exists when dealing with certain issues like marriage and adultery. While films and shows like *Unfaithful* (2002), *A Perfect Murder* (1998), and *Desperate Housewives* (2004-12) do tend to glamorize the mistress and affairs, they also often show the consequences and downsides to that kind of betrayal. Although some films have tried to present an unexpected or untraditional point of view towards marriages in the last couple decades, the trope of the mistress still seems overwhelmingly negative and antagonistic.

The idea of the mistress and the intricate relationship of married men and women is intimately explored in *The Governess* (1998), a film that follows a Jewish woman named Rosina, who recently lost her father and refuses to marry the man her mother has chosen for her.⁷⁹ In an effort to escape an arranged marriage and the cultural pressures for women in her Sephardic Jewish community, Rosina finds a job with a wealthy Scottish family by renaming herself Mary Blackchurch, and adopting the persona of a protestant governess. While Mary struggles to adapt to living with and working for the Cavendish family, she begins to take an interest in the head of the Cavendish family, Charles. His depressed wife takes little interest in either her husband or daughter and appears apathetic to most of what is going on around her. Charles seems unconcerned about his wife’s behavior as he is singularly focused on his scientific career and achievements.

Mary sets herself apart from many other women of this time period by becoming interested and learning about Charles’s scientific work. Charles wants to figure out how to take and retain a photographic image on paper, and Mary helps him by accidentally spilling salt water

⁷⁸ Stephen Vaughn, "Morality and Entertainment: The Origins of the Motion Picture Production Code," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (1990): 60.

⁷⁹ *The Governess*, directed by Sandra Goldbacher, performed by Minnie Driver and Tom Wilkinson, (Sony Pictures Classic, 1998).

on one of his photographic pictures. Their connection over their discovery turns into a full-fledged affair. Charles and Mary use this new breakthrough in photography to take nude, artistic photos of Mary. Although Mary is enamored with Charles, he seems fixated on publishing his findings before anyone else and attaining the wealth and prestige from the discovery. Mary tries to further their affections by photographing Charles nude while he was sleeping after they had made love. When she leaves the picture for him, he begins to scorn and distance himself from her and later explains that he views her as a hedonist. One of Charles's scientific rivals visits, and Charles takes all the credit for Mary's discovery. An upset and rejected Mary decides to return to England. She dresses in her traditional Sephardic Jewish attire and presents the nude picture to Mrs. Cavendish on her way out. Several years later, the story jumps to Mary's new life as a Jewish portrait photographer. Charles comes into her studio and sits for a portrait. When she is finished, Charles asks if they are done and she replies, "quite done," hinting at Mary's new future apart from her time spent as a mistress.

The Governess presents an unusual story in that it is shown from the point of view of the mistress. While mistresses are traditionally treated as villains, Mary is essentially the empowered female protagonist who regains her agency by choosing her own destiny, despite pursuing a relationship with a married man. The film is obviously centered around her and takes time to show her position, limited options, and the restrictions placed on her because of her gender and religion to create a sympathetic protagonist. The film also goes out of its way to show the unhappiness of an arranged marriage during this time period. Mrs. Cavendish is portrayed with little sympathy despite her potential mental illness, boredom, and helplessness with her life and position. She is contrasted with Mary's enthusiasm, intelligence, and sexual charisma to create a character that the audience has trouble feeling any affinity for. Mary's

betrayal of Mrs. Cavendish is lessened to some extent by her somewhat lifeless, stuffy character despite Mrs. Cavendish being shown as a vaguely moral person.

Characterization aside, the film does seem to condemn the concept of arranged marriages and the potential unhappiness they might cause for all parties. In Georgian England, arranged marriages were common in the aristocracy and upper classes. During this time, the idea of adultery and the role and expectations of marriage were complex and assuredly different than modern societal values today. Within the aristocracy and much of the upper classes, full-blown affairs and idle flings were common in marriages for both men and women. Since most marriages during this time were arranged, there was a more lax view on taking a lover. For women, they were expected to fulfill their role as a wife to provide an heir and were often given more freedom in their relationships after they produced an heir so as long as they were discreet. In one trial for a wife's infidelity in 1783, the *Monthly Review* addressed female sexual infidelity by declaring, "the less said, the better:—on *such* subjects."⁸⁰ Though such actions and betrayals could easily be condemned, especially considering a woman's lowered position in society next to men's, they were not explicitly censured.

In the early part of the Georgian era, the aristocracy and the upper classes were more lax in terms of affairs and scandals, but at the turn of the nineteenth century and after, a sense of propriety developed. The growing emphasis on a higher moral consciousness that would characterize the Victorian era could be seen in areas of late Georgian society:

High society during the Regency was caught between two very different sets of morality: between the licentious formality of the eighteenth century and the growing puritanism of the nineteenth. As a result it dithered between the two and conformed to neither. Although it was true that in most of the aristocratic houses adultery was taken for granted, a minor matter of no importance, always

⁸⁰ Sarah Lloyd, "Amour in the Shrubbery: Reading the Detail of English Adultery Trial Publications of the 1780s," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 4 (2006): 422.

provided the affair was conducted with discretion, in others the taint of sin could never overcome.⁸¹

Following the French Revolution as England took a more conservative turn, the tolerance and disregard commonly applied to extramarital affairs in the past century was starting to come into question. The hedonism and indulgence that characterized the aristocracy before the French Revolution was reigned in after the English aristocracy saw what happened to their French counterparts. The middle and lower classes were also paying more attention to the moral conduct of the upper classes. The shift between the two periods and the changing set of moral behaviors is evident in these views on infidelity, sexuality, and the mistress and would extend into a more conservative English society over the next century.

Conclusions

Although these films still focus on romance, marriages, and sexuality, the lead characters in these films present a more dynamic role for women and possible alternatives to societal expectations. In following the life stories of these untraditional female protagonists, the audience still acquires insights into the prospects for women of this time period while gaining a different perspective on concepts like homosexuality, infidelity, and the fears of being single. While Anne Lister's sexuality and position, especially as a property owner, challenged numerous Georgian assumptions, the film still offers great insights into Georgian life and the restrictions placed on females. In contrast to the traditional happy ending, *Becoming Jane* also shows the fulfillment and contentment that staying single can achieve, despite the illusion marriages are crucial to individual happiness. While mistresses are typically seen as villains, *The Governess*, without endorsing infidelity, constructs a more nuanced look at a complex character with unique motivations and desires rather than portraying the evil mistress as "the other woman." The role

⁸¹ Murray, *An Elegant Madness*, 145.

of women in society today is still constantly evolving and changing. While there are many more options and freedoms available to women, historical films like *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, *Becoming Jane*, and *The Governess* allow audiences to examine some enduring beliefs and expectations about women that were prevalent not only during the Georgian period but may still exist in some way today.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

“We tend to associate the Georgian era with tinkling tea cups and whispering silk dresses, an oasis of elegance and calm between the strife of the Civil War and the grime and class struggle of the Victorians. But this is a pallid vision of the 18th century. The period from the accession of the stolid Hanoverian in 1714, to the death of the florid bounder George IV in 1830, was not so seamlessly polite, or static.”
—Amanda Vickery, 2014⁸²

Over the past two decades, historical film has been directly responsible for shaping our understanding of the past. The Georgian period, because of its grandeur, class strife, and widening gaps in income, provides an ideal backdrop for filmmakers looking to explore a myriad of issues and concerns. Many problems that confronted the Georgians are issues modern society still deals with. This has provided Georgian films a unique opportunity to both offer insights into the past while dealing with current issues as well. While the “whispering silk dresses” and extravagant sets makes for a fascinating film in itself, this period also allows for the exploration of political and economic strife, race and class, and changing ideas on gender, relationships, and sexuality.

One of the most heated and biggest topics of the last decade deals with race, racial equality, and the treatment of different ethnicities within the current society. The idea of intersectionality stresses the importance of looking at not only how others are treated based on race, but also how gender shapes a person’s situation, circumstances, and viewpoints. A black man is treated very differently than a black woman. When looking at representation and treatment of race and gender together in film, the diversity overall in the media has been lacking.

⁸² Amanda Vickery, “Why We've Got The Georgians All Wrong,” *The Telegraph*, (15 April 2014), accessed 5 November 2019. <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/10757506/Amanda-Vickery-Why-weve-got-the-Georgians-all-wrong.html>>

By looking at the protests and box office numbers over the last decade, there is undoubtedly a demand for more diversity in film.

In historical film, there has been an attempt to change the status quo by the types of stories being made and the introduction of a wide variety of characters from different backgrounds. The film *Belle* follows the story of a woman from an uncommon background in Georgian England. Her status as a free, black gentlewoman of means in England at this time presents a unique point of view while also revealing the treatment of slaves and free black people in that society. Set against the backdrop of the *Zong* Massacre and the beginnings of the abolishment of slavery in England, the film presents a look at the changing society of Georgian England. The introduction of different races to an almost entirely white society makes for an interesting look at how the structure of this society has changed, and in some cases, been resistant to change.

In *Poldark*, a television series with almost exclusively white characters, a free black female character was introduced during the last season. While the motives of the creators of the series are unknown, this move definitely fits in with the recent demand for more diversity on screen. The title character, Ross Poldark and his wife, Demelza, did not necessarily deal with larger, cultural issues outside of Cornwall in the four seasons leading up to the final season. Ross's time spent in London during the last season introduces a worldlier point of view allowing him to confront an array of injustices and inequalities. *Poldark* is a series that tries to create a very political and timely historical drama that was true to what was happening Georgian times, and although the author of the original book series never really tackled the slave trade, the inclusion of a black character, Catherine, in the television series shows that the creators are trying to address historical issues that are still having an affect on society today.

In a similar vein, the changing economic climate after the Great Recession of the late 2000s, also had a significant impact on the films and television shows being made and how class differences are treated in film. For example, the glorification of the aristocracy in *The Duchess* is a point of view that would have been more popular and appreciated before the affects of the recession. The filmmakers were following the growing trend that showcased lavish and extravagant lifestyles that was popular in the early 2000s. As the recession hit, however, the realities of bleak economic situation meant that these types of films became almost inappropriate when some people were losing their houses and struggling to survive. Certainly, films that were uncritical of privilege, especially inherited wealth, were now out of vogue with audiences worried about their own economic futures.

The world after the Great Recession changed greatly in relation to the treatment and understanding of class differences. Similar to Georgian England, there was a lot of tension now between the classes, and the lower classes began to resent the excess and extravagance of the upper classes. The movement towards socialism found a stronghold in society and has recently started to become a more popular view of the economy. The language of class divide and the wealth gap have become commonplace after the Great Recession and today, terms like the one-percenters have become widely known and understood. The series *Poldark* rallied around the popularity of these more socialist views and created a kind of People's Hero in their title character. Ross Poldark is portrayed as a major advocate of the lower classes and defends them when they do not have the position in society to advocate for themselves. The wealthier character of George Warleggan represents the selfishness of the upper classes in his unwillingness to help others born into a bleak economic situation. The changing attitudes towards class and the economic structure in society from the late 2000s until today is mirrored in

Poldark and highlights the changing ideas about class after the French Revolution in Georgian England.

The longstanding attitudes and beliefs about marriage, relationships, and sexuality that have been so engrained in society for centuries has also been reconsidered over the last couple of decades. In film, the exploration of female homosexuality, the older, single woman, and the mistress has typically been very one-sided or even non-existent. These kinds of characters have not been presented with the complexity that is warranted in the unique situations of these individuals.

Portrayals of female homosexuals in film before the last decade were often based upon ambiguous female relationships and failed to address the depth of homosexual relationships. While male homosexual relationships have begun to appeal to general audiences over the last two decades because of a new crop of profound, critically acclaimed films, female homosexual relationships in films have been noticeably lower in number as well as in complexity. Although there have been female relationships with homosexual undertones in films for decades, there was an unwillingness to explore or fully designate these relationships as homosexual or the portrayals lacked depth. Likewise, because Georgian England generally did not acknowledge or have any kind of understanding of female homosexuality, the film *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister* shows the struggles of someone living in that society who was clearly misunderstood. While there are undoubtedly difficulties for female homosexuals in today's society, this film demonstrates that there has been a change and evolution in attitudes towards homosexuals since Georgian England.

Films centered upon the Georgian era allow for the centrality of marriage during this period to be explored. During this era, marriage was of utmost importance to women in this

society. Their economic and social position and success were almost entirely dependant on the marriages they made. Single women were often limited in their opportunities and usually stayed under the care of their male family members. Though single women in Georgian England were often restricted, they generally contributed to their families and households greatly, and in some cases like Jane Austen's, found success and contentment in other areas. In *Becoming Jane*, the traditional narrative of the main character ending up happily married by the end of film is challenged. One of the most well known, single women of Georgian England, Jane Austen, is portrayed in *Becoming Jane* as having a brief, but sweeping romance, but ultimately choosing to be single. In many Hollywood films, the main character remaining alone and unmarried in the end would not conform to common ideas of marriage being the ultimate happy ending. With this narrative existing for decades, *Becoming Jane* attempts to show the contentment and success of its lead character who has willingly given up a relationship with Thomas Lefroy for the wellbeing of himself and his family. Her selflessness and agency in her decision creates a strong female lead who is largely in charge of her destiny. This attitude towards celebrating singleness reflects a recent demand for a change in views towards single people in today's society.

Similarly, *The Governess* also examines the idea of marriage and a mistress in Georgian England and how society still views adultery and infidelity in today's films. For most of the Georgian era, mistresses were a common component of many marriages. Since most marriages were arranged or made under the pressures of families and society, marriage was largely functional while affairs were more about pleasure, love, and romance. Both men and women had idle flings and were generally ignored as long as they were discreet. Although attitudes about mistresses and infidelity would change at the turn of the nineteenth century to reflect more conservative, religious, and the high morals that characterized the following Victorian era, the

idea of the mistress was not as demonized in Georgian England as it often is today. In *The Governess*, the film's lead character, Mary, presents a more sympathetic view of a mistress. While the film does not celebrate mistresses, the limited options for women during the Georgian era are shown through both Mary's character and through the wife of her lover. They are both reliant on the success, fortunes, and moods of Mary's lover and the head of the household, Charles Cavendish. His wife's unhappiness is tied to her unhappiness and boredom of her arranged marriage and situation at home. Mary, on the other hand, is full of energy and intelligence, but her discovery of photographic prints was solely credited to Charles who was in a position to inhibit her voice and restrict her freedoms. Though Mary is first portrayed as sexually progressive and empowered, the film ultimately shows the dangers of this kind of relationship and a more nuanced look at the position of a mistress. While mistresses occupied a somewhat different role in Georgian England than in today's society, *The Governess* examines the changing societal views on marriage and infidelity that existed then and today.

While these films and television shows are all ultimately entertaining, some of the enjoyment of these films stems from the depth of the stories and characters and what they say about society. The current relevance of the events and ideas from Georgian England makes for an appealing historical film. The economic, racial, and social context of the Georgian time period reflects some of changes in society today as well. By examining these current issues in historical film, history continues to hold relevance and allows for a better understanding of the structure of society.

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