

Bridgerton: Season 3 of the anti-history

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In June, the Netflix series *Bridgerton* returned to first place on the streaming platform's Top 10 list after the debut of part two of its third season. The soap opera cum historical drama clearly remains immensely popular.

As the WSWS explained in a 2021 comment, "Unabashed in its admiration for a bygone world of wealth and privilege, *Bridgerton* presents an alternative history in which early 19th century Regency England (so called because the Prince of Wales, the heir to the throne, ruled as 'Prince Regent' in place of his mad father, King George III) was racially integrated."

Bridgerton, as we argued, offers not so much an alternative history, as an anti-history, aimed above all at an upper-middle class audience fixated on the politics of race and gender. For millions of others, the series speaks to dreams of a more elegant, refined and sumptuous style of life, as well as a change from ultra-violent action or empty-headed superhero films. It also indicates the cultural vacuum that exists and the general lack of more intriguing, richer material.

The current season if anything goes further than previous ones. A fantasyland of glittering pastel colors inhabited by a racially and ethnically integrated coterie of the super-rich insulated from all care by their dutiful, likewise diverse corps of servants, it is a world sanitized of social reality. If it were a satire, it would be welcome, but, alas, it is not. The make-believe world of *Bridgerton* stands in for actual present-day conditions, with their immense and unrelieved pressures, in which, according to myriad researchers, young people in particular are having less sex than their parents and grandparents.

The *Bridgerton* franchise, created by Shondaland Productions (based on a series of novels by US author Julia Quinn), is carefully calibrated to appeal to its target demographic, which is 80 percent female and 70 percent under age 31, an audience supposedly fixated

on romance (perhaps troubled by its absence from their own lives)—which today includes female-gratifying sex—along with flamboyant fashion, ornate houses and scandalizing gossip.

In this respect, *Bridgerton* bears some similarity to the Taylor Swift phenomenon—largely vapid and self-centered—but above all a creation of the music or, in this case, the wider entertainment industry. Indeed, the series is heavily marketed across social media with videos on TikTok and Instagram of the debutantes suggestively hip-hopping to rap music. A puff piece in the *New York Times* profiles the actor who plays Colin Bridgerton (Luke Newton) and the value of the estates featured in the show—the list topped by the queen's \$5 million townhouse—reflect the obsessions of the better-off portion of its audience.

The plot is tediously like that of the previous seasons. It opens with a new social whirl involving London's highest echelon, the "ton," bringing forward its latest crop of debutantes to a bored Queen Charlotte (Golda Rosheuvel) for her to pick out her "sparkler." The fancy of the queen, nodding under the weight of her characteristically extravagant headdress, falls this time upon Francesca Bridgerton (Hannah Dodd). In cahoots with the powerful Lady Danbury (Adjoa Andoh), the queen pairs off the favored girl with her wealthiest, hence most eligible bachelor, an eccentric naturalist Lord Debling (Sam Phillips).

Of course, nothing goes according to plan, but the season continues for eight episodes of promenades in gardens in outrageously elaborate costumes, rides in carriages, tea drinking and dancing to modern pop music rendered by string quartets mixed by music production company BMGPM, including among other pieces, music by Swift herself.

Amidst a wearying number of side plots, the central drama revolves around the socially awkward Penelope Featherington (Nicola Coughlan), from previous

seasons of *Bridgerton* known secretly to be the scathing “pen” of Lady Whistledown, whose scandal sheet (read by veteran actress Julie Anderson) keeps the “ton” on tenterhooks from week to week. Penelope’s pairing up with her childhood friend Colin Bridgerton (Newton) to overcome her shyness blossoms predictably into a passionate romance, and panting sex in the back seats of carriages, followed by a sumptuous wedding.

Bridgerton is full of clichés and hackneyed dialogue. But the sentiments expressed with such banality are meant to be taken seriously, particularly the pseudo-feminist ones. Penelope’s social-climbing mother (Polly Walker) ruefully cautions her daughters that “Women don’t have dreams, they have husbands for that.” Eloise Bridgerton, the Jane Austen-like character, declares “Why must our only options be to squawk and settle or never to leave the nest? What if I want to fly?”

And Alice Mondrich (Emma Naomi), the wife of the boxer turned club owner ennobled through an inheritance left to their son, reproaches her husband: “I want to see you watching our children as they grow up, not poring over your ledgers.”

Less conscious historical fiction, since the mid-19th century, has had the damaging habit of “modernizing” its dramas, transposing contemporary characters—generally petty bourgeois ones, like the author and his or her readers—with all their historically and socially determined traits into previous historical periods. Instead of shedding light on the past or present, this approach reinforces and appeals to the prejudices of its modern-day audience. “See, things have always been like this! Nothing changes, people have always acted in the same greedy, selfish or noble manner as we do!”

By the time of *Bridgerton* and modern-day “historical fiction,” that retrograde tendency has degenerated many times over. *Bridgerton* is quite unabashed in this regard, and indeed relishes its historical charlatanism to such an extent that the choice of Regency England (1811-1820) as the setting for this costume drama seems at least as much due to its fashions—with 7,500 *bespoke costumes* (clothing cut from a pattern drafted from scratch, as opposed to ready-to-wear) commissioned *just for season one*—as anything else.

Other aspects of the Regency are also called up for the show’s purposes: Queen Charlotte, rumored to have been of mixed racial heritage, is on the throne because

King George III, the king against whom the American Revolution was fought, was deemed insane. Following a series of revolutions in the late 18th century in America, France, Haiti and elsewhere, and in the wake of the defeat of Napoleon and the reactionary Congress of Vienna in 1814-15, the Regency was a period of social and political regression and stagnation. The restoration of aristocratic privilege and the creation of a new wealthy elite on the basis of bourgeois property relations hold a definite appeal for today’s top 10 percent, especially as it envies the even greater wealth of the top 1 percent.

In *Bridgerton*, the appeal of aristocratic sensibilities and autocratic rule is made plain in such ironical remarks as Lady Danbury’s warning that the only rule the “ton” does not like to see broken is the one against working for a living. And even though the only thing the queen seems to rule over is the marriages of her “ton,” she exercises absolute power in this arena, and everyone fears crossing her.

However, behind this escapist fantasy, played with a broad wink-and-a-nod, *Bridgerton* seems like an increasingly desperate and outmoded attempt to double down on identity politics, at a time when young people, in particular, are being galvanized against the excesses of wealth, social inequality and imperialist war. It’s worth noting that Nicola Coughlan (known also for her performance in the far more interesting series *Derry Girls*, about a group of teenagers coming of age during the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland) was among the thousands of actors to sign protests against the genocide in Gaza earlier this year.



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