How the Television Series “Foxton Hall” continues the recent trend that reinterprets the Regency Romance Genre for a Modern Audience

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Bio:

Emily Joshua is an award-winning, disabled and neurodivergent screenwriter crafting inclusive genre stories across television and film. With years in theatre plus experience in research and broadcast at the BBC, she brings performance-trained character instincts to emotionally driven drama.

In September 2025, she earned a Distinction on the MA Writing for Script & Screen at Falmouth University and was selected for the New Writers’ Network SW cohort (Screen Cornwall and the BFI). Her Regency romance pilot script *Foxton Hall* has gained multiple competition wins and her produced micro-short Olympian (dir. Simon Jenner) explores disability through a darkly comic metaphor.

(99 words)

Abstract:

This paper examines how *Foxton Hall* contributes to the continuing reinvention of the Regency romance drama for contemporary television. Using the series as a case study, it argues that the script’s originality lies not in rejecting established genre conventions, but in

reworking them through modern production practices and contemporary forms of representation. While *Foxton Hall* retains the familiar concerns of Regency romance, including courtship, femininity, desire and social hierarchy, it reshapes these conventions to appeal to modern streaming audiences.

The paper explores how the series adapts the genre to subscription video on demand (SVOD) storytelling through features such as the cold open, shorter scenes, character-led narrative arcs and central dramatic questions (CDQs) designed to sustain viewer engagement. It also considers *Bridgerton* as an important point of comparison, arguing that Shondaland's production helped establish a contemporary model of the Regency romance through anachronism, inclusive casting, the female gaze and a more overtly feminist framing of women's lives.

Building on this trend, *Foxton Hall* extends the genre's modernisation while retaining a stronger attachment to the historical tone and visual style of the Regency setting. In particular, the paper highlights its treatment of disability, mental health, outsider figures, and female subjectivity as significant developments within the genre. These elements are presented not as token additions, but as integral to the emotional and narrative stakes of the series.

Ultimately, the paper argues that *Foxton Hall* demonstrates how the Regency romance can continue to evolve for contemporary audiences while preserving the emotional appeal, social tensions and romantic structures that define the genre.

(257 words)

Keywords:

Regency romance, period drama, adaptation, representation, anachronism, inclusion, subscription video on demand (SVOD), Central Dramatic Questions (CDQs), cold open, title sequence, Intellectual Property (IP), brand creation, proof of concept, racial inclusion.

Paper:

As Jane Austen's famous opening suggests: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that…" a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife (Austen, 1813). Today I would argue that it is a truth universally acknowledged that a screenwriter in search of a commissioning editor must start with a 'hook'.

Whilst the Regency romance does not readily lend itself to opening sequences that generate shock and suspense in the manner of the thriller and horror genres, the rise of subscription television has increased the expectation that it will start with a 'hook'. Klika advises using an inciting incident, or "catalyst" which "forces the protagonist to act" (Klika, 2021, p. 213). Using subscription video on demand (SVOD) conventions, the writer must present the audience with an opening that piques their interest within sixty seconds, to avoid them switching to another programme (Jenner, 2018).

Indeed, this presents challenges, for the Regency romance is not known for jump scares.

In the 1990s, during the era of terrestrial television, Regency romance series such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) typically unfolded at a gentler pace, without an opening hook. TV series typically followed a title sequence by explanatory dialogue-heavy scenes, culminating in predictable outcomes, with little or no threat to the regular cast. Even though terrestrial TV has developed over the decades, it still allows for scriptwriting with a slow start and longer, more dialogue-based scenes.

For example, the first season of the Regency romance *Sanditon* was commissioned by ITV for terrestrial television (2019). It begins with a title sequence.

However, Sanditon's second season, having captivated the American audience, was co-produced by PBS Masterpiece and BritBox before airing on ITV. Season 2 embraces the SVOD convention and starts with a cold open (a few minutes of live action footage before the titles):

a funeral procession in a foreign land intercuts with a barn dance where our main protagonist is interrupted from festivities with the news of an important death (2022).

The shift towards SVOD platforms has significantly influenced the structural and narrative choices made during the development of *Foxton Hall*, including the use of a cold open, shorter, action-driven scenes and more complex character-led narrative arcs (Ianniello, & Batty, 2021, p. 67).

Embracing the new conventions, *Foxton Hall* creates its initial spark of intrigue by opening inside the main protagonist's dream: Phoebe, an entitled young woman of colour, on the verge of becoming a debutante, has a recurring dream: tantalisingly, only the lower part of the face of a handsome man leans in to kiss her lips. Phoebe's heartbeat and the breathing of both characters form the soundtrack as she touches the young man's neck, revealing a long scar beneath his ear. Rudely awoken by her best friend, the housekeeper's daughter, Amelia, the girls innocently wonder whether Phoebe has the power to foretell her own future.

Both the characters and audience are invited to consider whether this recurrent dream is prophetic. After all, Phoebe is poised to make her debut in London. Could she already know who she is destined to marry? (Joshua, 2026).

Within the opening moments, *Foxton Hall* creates a hook, but rather than a dead body being discovered by a dog walker in drizzly woods, it arises through the posing of a Central Dramatic Question (CDQ) (Ianniello, & Batty, 2021, p. 67). As the sole heiress, the fortune of the entire estate, shipping and trading business and all the staff rests upon Phoebe's choice of husband.

Like the opening hook, the development of "multiple Central Dramatic Questions" that "resolve or are redefined over time" is another formal feature of the SVOD serial (Ianniello, & Batty, 2021, p. 67). The modern audience likes to solve mysteries, decipher codes and predict outcomes, which helps to foster audience engagement. As Finnegan points out, complex involvement will inspire "underlying feelings of sympathy and empathy" through an imaginary connection "in the audience" (Finnegan, 2016, p. 3).

The audience's desire and ability to solve CDQs is not because they have superior memories to the 1990s audiences, but because of technology: audiences can rewind if they miss a detail and watch more than one episode at a time by "binge-watching" (Jenner, 2018, p. 24). Viewers can now follow more complex story threads across the episodes and work to draw their own conclusions with every twist of the plot. As Cattrysse, Bordwell and Thompson point out, audiences now develop a relationship "with the value systems expressed in the narrative" (Cattrysse, 2010, p. 83), becoming "active spectators" like detectives, who constantly interpret narrative gaps (Bordwell and Thompson, 1997, p. 73).

Having adopted the streaming format, *Foxton Hall* is set to build a modern interpretation of the period drama. But first, it must recognise the groundbreaking Regency romance produced by Shondaland: *Bridgerton* (Van Dusen, 2020). *Foxton Hall* builds on several of the choices adopted by Shondaland, such as exploring inclusion, diversity and relatability in a genre that can easily appear antiquated.

Season 3 of *Bridgerton* attained an audience of "82 million and counting" (Jones, 2023). Following Philip Parker's blueprint for the "Dramatic Romance" genre (Parker, 2006, p. 32), Shondaland's reinvention lies not in breaking with genre conventions, but in reinterpreting how those conventions are presented on screen and in departing from earlier production traditions.

Like many precursors, such as *Pride & Prejudice* (Austen, 1813*), Emma* (Austen, 1816*),* and *Poldark* (Graham, 2019*)*, the series is based on a set of novels (Quinn, 2020). However, unlike the previous Regency romances, Shondaland rewrote the narratives and changed character arcs to maximise the medium of television; "The books and television series tell the *Bridgerton* love stories in different orders," as Julia Quinn notes (Brabham Nolan, 2024).

Foxton Hall, however*,* was developed first as a television series and is now being written as a series of novels. As Batty points out, "creating a compelling and convincing world is one of the most important elements" and a novel can describe details of the locations in greater depth than a script (Batty, 2014, p. 45). Novels also help to establish intellectual property (IP), brand creation and proof of concept. Producer Tom Verica notes that Quinn's novels already

generated audience awareness before the television adaptation was released, “and the fact that this show is in the Bridgerton-verse, it already has that built-in audience.” (Verica, 2023).

Foxton Hall aligns with some of Shondaland’s anachronistic approaches for the portrayal of the 1800s but will not break with a more traditional interpretation of the era stylistically. Because *Foxton Hall* is grounded in an English understanding of the Regency setting, its costumes, locations, tone and style can remain closer to the historical period. The dramatic content of the scripts provides sufficient challenge to audience expectations.

However, *Bridgerton*’s anachronistic changes affect costume, hairstyles, music, sexual intimacy, the portrayal of women, attitudes to the rise of feminism as well as inclusion and diversity (Brownell, 2024). These updates create a more relatable text that broadens the audience to include racially diverse women, younger viewers, and wider family audiences (Robinson, 2021). Because *Bridgerton* has introduced this new audience to the Regency romance, *Foxton Hall* can also choose where to break with production traditions and where to push the boundaries, given the demonstrated audience appetite for inclusive and relatable Regency romance.

*Foxton Hall’*s costume and hair choices will be more subtle and natural than those in *Bridgerton.* Shondaland’s costume and hair choices were used as a way of conveying personalities (Gibson & Hemmert, 2024), whereas *Foxton Hall* allows the drama itself to reveal characters’ personalities, with only subtle anachronistic costume and hair changes.

In both television series, the style reflects elements of a modern ‘coming-of-age’ drama for certain characters, using a notable romance transformation technique: ‘the makeover’. Whereas a young lady of high status, Penelope, is transformed in Season 3 of *Bridgerton, Foxton Hall* has a lower-class servant, the housekeeper’s daughter, Amelia, reinvented to masquerade as a lady:

Phoebe’s father, Lord Edouard, has no control over his daughter. Daunted by the upcoming trip to London, he devises a plan that paints him as generous, whilst alleviating the problem of dealing with Phoebe’s poor etiquette. He elevates Amelia to the status of a lady, to be a

companion for Phoebe. She accompanies his daughter to be presented at Court, her common sense keeping Phoebe's flighty nature in check. Initially, Phoebe is delighted not to leave her valued advisor behind. However, the ruse of Amelia pretending to be Lord Edouard's ward suddenly has a dramatic effect upon Phoebe. She suffers a pang of regret and jealousy at how beautiful Amelia becomes after her makeover. The envy does not last, but it does prompt a recognition of an uncomfortable emotion.

An important part of *Bridgerton*'s anachronistic tonal vision lay in its musical score (Nilles, 2021). Besides orchestral and harpsichord pieces that conventionally accompany a Regency romance, the Shondaland team included something new, which helped to engage a younger segment of the audience: "To see not only original instrumentals, but also what existed as far as orchestral covers" (Patsavas, 2021). It was Beers's inspiration during season one to re-create modern pop hits like Ariana Grande's "Thank U, Next" and Maroon 5's "Girls Like You" (Valentini, 2022). This "Modern Musical Spin" (Greene, 2021) contributed to *Bridgerton*'s "relatability" for audiences. As Kris Bowers, the composer, explained, "'I immediately feel like I can empathize with these characters in a different way because I relate to how this song feels to me.'" (Greene, 2021).

Foxton Hall likewise adopts these modern musical choices by using hit pop songs given a Regency cover. This is not to deny Mozart his place, for music of the time is still employed, but during particularly emotional and romantically intimate moments, modern music transposed for harpsichord and strings will continue to foster engagement with younger audiences.

The Regency romance is *her story***,** not history. As Wallace concurs, "historical romances centralise female subjectivity, desires and apprehensions" (Wallace, 2003, p. 82). The feminine gaze is equally important to the male viewpoint, yet it remains underrepresented, particularly in relation to what matters for female success and survival within what Wyatt et al. describe as "a glittering, though highly restrictive, social backdrop" (Wyatt et al., 2007, p. 121).

Shondaland explores the portrayal of women in this era through the lens of today, with a feminist viewpoint casting its eye over the past (Murphy, 2022). Underlying the female

character arcs is what Conn describes as “the exploration of what… is an independent, powerful woman” (Conn, 2022). Shondaland explores attitudes to the rise of feminism, whether through the unjust matchmaking decisions imposed on Daphne by an older male sibling (Blake, 2020), the independence of women who earn money through their own work like the seamstress, Madame Delacroix, or the more obvious characterisation of intellectual, feminist desires in Eloise. As Phoebe Dynevor states, the characters are “navigating the patriarchy” (Wheeler, 2022).

Foxton Hall follows the female viewpoint while enabling the audience to empathise with women’s disempowerment and disappointments just as much as with their excitement and successes. Not every outcome guarantees a happy ending; some characters must work hard to achieve contentment.

For example, once it is discovered that Amelia is really a servant, the debutantes ruthlessly exact their revenge and injure her. The shameful revelation of her status and injury could be enough, but instead, *Foxton Hall* uses them as the inciting incident for the discovery of Amelia’s ‘invisible’ disability - a level of hypermobility that indicates that she must never bear children, in this era meaning that she should never marry. This takes the exploration of the consequences of lying much further than other Regency romance stories. It also displays the ruthless way in which ‘outsiders’ are treated by the hierarchy. Amelia must undergo a series of difficult obstacles, but as she begins to navigate them, support from others helps her develop a more positive sense of self-worth.

Just as *Bridgerton* presents a realistic 19th century obstacle as women deal with a lack of education about sex until their wedding night (Blake, 2020), so does *Foxton Hall*. The trials faced by women of the period, including limited knowledge of courtship, marriage and sex, contribute to a degree of social realism. *Foxton Hall* keeps that level of sexual naivety at the forefront of the young protagonists’ minds. They seek romance; a match based on love, personality and, if forced to consider it, financial benefit. However, the promise of romance coupled with elevated hormones can seduce them into bad decisions and let physical attraction override common sense. In *Foxton Hall*, once Amelia has been sent back to the

country estate, Phoebe finds herself in compromising intimate situations that could ultimately ruin her if she is discovered.

One area in which Shondaland breaks with tradition is its portrayal of sexual intimacy on screen. Filmed expressively and, unusually for period drama, from the woman's perspective, these scenes examine sexuality through the lens of the female gaze (Brech, 2020). Sexual awakening is an important aspect of some of the female characters' development (Miller, 2020), and it is carefully filmed with the support of an intimacy coordinator (Maskell, 2022). The sexual encounters in *Foxton Hall* will also be from the female point of view but will not just be for the young upper-class ladies of the series. People of all classes, races and abilities will explore intimacy, romance, love and sex.

In its characterisations, *Bridgerton* departs from convention by positioning characters often regarded as outsiders or 'misfits' as central protagonists, such as Penelope the intellectual in season 3. This has been described as "Julia Quinn's take on the outsider theme" (Brabham Nolan, 2024).

Foxton Hall embraces diversity, both through external appearances and internal states of mind. In addition to physical disabilities, some characters also experience mental health difficulties that they must learn to manage. These difficulties are presented as trials, but the narrative maintains a positive emphasis on seeking help, improving self-worth and achieving better outcomes over time. Self-knowledge, courage and stoicism are rewarded. For example, as Amelia allows the new Estate Manager, Tom, to fashion a comfortable gig to help her travel about the estate, his compassion also elevates her low mood and helps her see beyond the limitations of her disability.

Perhaps the most important part of Shondaland's successful reinvention of Regency romance is its inclusion of people of colour in high-status roles: "*Bridgerton* is poised to redefine the Regency romance genre… with its commitment to a more inclusive and colourful portrayal of history" (Kessler, 2024). As Galpin points out, the sensitivity of *Bridgerton*'s racial inclusion is "colour conscious" (Galpin, 2024) and has opened doors for people of colour to elevate their societal position.

Lord Edouard and Phoebe Foxton are high-status people of colour at the heart of *Foxton Hall*. This confirms the text's commitment to racial inclusion, while the narrative arc concerning Amelia's class and disability puts her at the centre of the outsider theme. Both girls have obstacles before them in their quest for love and matrimony.

Foxton Hall continues to explore the relatable, timeless challenges and intricacies of womanhood, whilst ensuring that its inclusive and anachronistic approach does not disenfranchise the long-standing period drama audience. It further extends the inclusion of marginalised figures and emphasises the central message shared by the main protagonists: that friendship, loyalty and love help outsiders survive within a hostile society.

(2552 words)

Filmography

Bridgerton (2020) Created by Chris Van Dusen. Netflix

Pride & Prejudice (1995) Written by Andrew Davies, Dir. Simon Langton. BBC One.

Sanditon Series 1 (25 Aug 13 Oct 2019) Written by Andrew Davies, Dir. Olly Blackburn et al.

Sanditon Series 2 (2022, March 20 PBS March 21 BritBox UK) Writers led by Justin Young & Andrew Davies et al. Dir. Charles Sturridge and Ethosheia Hylton PBS (US), BritBox/ITV (UK).

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