
Rewriting Her Story: Historical Reimagining of Women in Period Drama Adaptations**Swayantika Das Chowdhury**

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Abstract

While traditional adaptations prioritized linear historical accuracy and contemporary retellings, ranging from Jane Austen's works to the 2026 revival of *Wuthering Heights* and *Frankenstein* frequently employing anachronism, inclusive casting and revisionist narratives, actually changed the course of literary adaptations on screen. These retellings of period Dramas in modern times serve as a bridge between collective memory and modern identity. In today's retellings, the role of female protagonists has transformed from being the 'moral center' to an agent of narrative change. The hallmark of these alternative retellings is the transition from the male gaze to the female gaze, from being the desired to the 'desiring subject'. The focus now has shifted to their internal desires, ambitions and even having their own sexual agency. Modern show-runners often employ 'Historical Fan-fic' agenda to give women power, which they lacked in the world of the past. The post 2000s wave of period dramas have moved towards more diverse and complex portrayal of women, moving away from the 'morally pure' heroine. This paper will explore the evolution of historical storytelling on screen focusing on the shift from factual legitimacy to blending aesthetic nostalgia and subversive storytelling, especially while adapting women characters like Elizabeth Bennet, Catherine Earnshaw and Elizabeth Lavenza, who are not only just navigating the restrictions of their time but also actively deconstructing them while transforming the screen space where history is reinterpreted for a diverse, global audience. These retellings bridge the gap between historical constraints and contemporary feminist ideals.

Keywords: Period drama, screen adaptations, revisionist history, historical fan-fic, adaptation studies

Introduction

The 'Period Drama' has transitioned from an exercise of historical preservation to an inclusive medium of cultural transaction. Modern retellings focus on current social debates, using the past to interrogate today's issues of gender, class and racial identity. Traditional female leads were defined by how they were seen by suitors but in today's adaptation the focus shifts to their internal desires and agency. Characters like Elizabeth I, portrayed by many actors over the years shows distinct personal appetites - for power, knowledge and physical pleasure. Elizabeth I, famously known as Gloriana in Spencer's *The Fairie Queene*, which played a key role in cultivating the cult of *The Virgin Queen*, representing Elizabeth I

as a semi-devine figure of purity. In recent years Margaret Irwin's Trilogy based on the life of the queen and Philippa Gregory's fiction, has depicted her navigating a patriarchal society, often using the 'mask of youth' in her later years to maintain her image, a trope that has become a staple of her portrayal on screen. Perhaps the most defining modern portrayal of her evolution from vulnerable young woman to the hardened virgin queen, has been portrayed by Cate Blanchett in *Elizabeth* (1997) and *Elizabeth, the Golden Age* (2007). Margot Robbie played the pock marked aging Elizabeth focusing on her rivalry with Mary Stuart in *Mary, Queen of Scots* (2018). While the historical Elizabeth often used traditional, gendered approach to maintain power, modern depiction portrays her as a powerful, cynical and commanding leader who sacrifices her personal life for the state, directly navigating and conquering a misogynistic court, highlighting the strength needed to rule as a woman. Many royal personalities depicted on screen henceforth were portrayed with the same approach, from *Catherine the Great* and Queen Victoria in *The Young Victoria* (2009) and fairly recently Queen Elizabeth II in the Netflix series, *The Crown*. Even bestselling Fantasy series like *The Game Of Thrones* adapted from *A Song of Ice and Fire* is based on the royal history of Scotland, England and Wales, were altered while delegating characters like Daenerys Targaryen, modeled after Joan of Arc, Henry Tudor (vii) and Cleopatra, while elements of Alaxander the Great and Napoleon, particularly for their swift military rise and rule over foreign lands were taken into accounts. Parallels were also drawn to various mother goddesses, while others saw similarities with mythical journey of Milton's Satan. No longer confined to the static, polite tea-table world of 19th century drawing rooms, recent portrayal of women on screen has shifted towards a gritty, self-aware and intersectional brand of feminism. From the 2024-25 surge in diverse narratives to the much appreciated releases like *Sense & Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudices*, *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights*, the cinematic 'Period woman' has moved from being an object of history to an active architect of it. Historically, screen adaptations of period novels often focuses on the 'marriage plot', however, modern interpretations have prioritizes professional abortion over marital prospects. Greta Gerwig's interpretation of *'Little Women'* (2019) set the tone for this era, by framing Jo March's struggle not just as a choice between suitors but as a choice between suitors but as a fight for the ownership of her intellectual property. Shows like *Dickinson & the recent Emma* (2020) use contemporary music, sharp witty dialogues & even anachronistic attitudes toward bridge the gap between the past & the present. By giving characters like Anne Boleyn or the Dashwood sisters a modern psychological depth, we move towards a new trend of the 'unlikable' or morally complex Period heroine. Characters are now allowed to be angry, ambitious & even raunchy to which some critics calling it 'Raunch Feminism'. From adapted novels to pure licensuous historically beyond simple 'girl power' tropes to a more complex and sometimes inaccurate yet massively hit shows like *'Bridgerton'*, we have come a long way, as it has moved controversial, exploration of female agency, being lauded for its female gaze, the series showcases the female pleasure and internal thought over the male gaze, here the men are often the subject of aesthetic appreciation, while women are active observer and decider of the Romantic pace.

The Re-Enactment of Women Centric Period Dramas

The recent surge of Jane Austen adaptations on screen dive deep into the limitations placed on 19th century women while simultaneously going through a feminist makeover to resonate with modern audience. Feminist director Greta Gerwig's influence on this genre focuses on the economics of womanhood. This transition can be traced through the 2005 portrayal of Lizzy Bennet as far more active and rebellious, reflecting a tomboyish modern feminist ideal. Netflix's *Persuasion* (2022) attempted a controversial take where Anne Elliot often broke the fourth wall, aimed to make the subverted female suffering more relatable. As Austen herself said in *Persuasion*, "I hate to hear you talk about all women as if they were fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives." These recent adaptations strip away the patriarchal 'mystique', placing the female perspective in the front seat by deconstructing the male gaze and prioritizing female interiority. Jane Austen's screen adaptations have transitioned from faithful bonnet dramas to an active dialogue with the present. By emphasizing economic stakes, granting heroines more physical and vocal agency, and diversifying the landscape, filmmakers ensure that Austen remains a feminist icon for the 21st century. In the 2024-26 cinema culture, 'New Gothic' wave has aggressively reinterpreted the female archetypes of 19th century literature, most notably Guillermo Del Toro's *Frankenstein*, Emerald Fennell's *Wuthering Heights* and Robert Eggers' *Nosferatu*. The new Elizabeth is the moral compass, holding Victor accountable for his unnatural creation while the new Cathy and Heathcliff's pair is a toxic, animalistic force constrained by the shackles of the landed gentry.

The Female Gaze through Corset drama

There's a plethora of reasons why the modern audience is gravitating towards period adaptations, but it is quite safe to say one of them is WOMEN; they consume this genre particularly well. As more and more media coming out catering to women as their target audience, we must critique these adaptations from what we now call as the female gaze. Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of the male gaze in her career defining essay '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*', where she argued that women are objectified on screen from the perspective of a heterosexual male viewer. This denies women of their agency and reduces them into an object of male pleasure. In response to this a female gaze is a feminist theory term associated to the gaze of the female viewer, where women are the subjects having agency, this often comes to fruition when the perspective of a female filmmaker or actor brings to the table which is different from a male view of the subject matter. By prioritizing the female gaze, the wave of period dramas tell a woman's deepest, darkest, forbidden desires, changing how the story is seen and felt through cinematography. This is achieved in multiple layers of the storytelling process, by ditching the salacious framing of the body, more focus is given to subtle foreshadowing- the heat of the look, a shared secret, an intimate conversation etc. The controversy over feminist dialogues and diverse casting on period dramas are quite understandable but coming from the perspective of the female gaze, these choices are often taken on the account of corrective measure. We must understand that history was never as homogenous as 19th century literature suggested, by infusing these liberties, these films are correcting the gaps where female and marginalized voices can be

recognized. Director Celine Sciamma of the movie *Portrait of a Lady on a Fire* (2019), argues that the female gaze is about shared subjectivity and space. She argues that history was almost always written by men and to counter that and find authenticity of a woman's life, we must subvert these set of norms. This movie is an ultimate thesis on the female gaze where the painter and the subject reciprocate their admiration of one another, "To be a muse is to be a silent objet of someone else's gaze. To be a subject is to be seen as you are, and to see back." The female gaze in period films isn't only about "looking at handsome men in linen shirts", it's a monumental shift in history where the narrative focuses on giving the female protagonist the power to observe and voice her opinion on the matter. Perhaps the most relevant film which supports this argument is Joe Wright's *Pride and Prejudice*, where we see Darcy through the heroine Elizabeth's eyes- a cold, calculating figure yet a man struggling with his own vulnerability whereas Elizabeth herself is constantly on the move, emphasized in the film to exemplify her sensory reaction to her surroundings. Director Joe Wright uses tactile cinematography to make the viewer feel the world of Longbourn. The details showcased by the director ground the story in a sensory female experience rather than a plot driven historical reenactment.

Summary

The rise of the female gaze on screen reflects a cultural shift where women's space in history is validated through the lens whereas in reality it has often been ignored by the official historical record on page. This shift is far more than a stylistic trend; it's a fundamental reclamation of the historical narrative. Film scholar Iris Johnstone rightfully articulates, "The female gaze is not about the gender of the person behind the camera, but about the quality of the attention being paid to the bodies on screen." In summary, the recent portrayal of women in period novel adaptations is less about looking back with nostalgia and more about looking back with a mirror. By reclaiming these narratives, modern cinema is proving that while costumes may change, the female agency has always been part of the historical record. Ultimately, the female gaze functions as a bridge between the past and the present. It acknowledges the rigid social scaffolds of the regency era while validating the women navigating through time.

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