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Presentist Anachronism and Ironic Humour in Period Screen Drama

John Shanks

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Introduction

“Period screen drama” here refers to any dramatized presentation for cinema or television which is set in a past time. I consider as examples four period screen dramas—two cinema films and two streaming television series.¹ The films are *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS* (UK/US 2018) and *THE FAVOURITE* (UK/USA/IR 2018). The streaming television series are *Bridgerton* series 1 (Netflix 2020) and *The Great* series 1 (Hulu 2020). I suggest that the four examples demonstrate in different ways departures both from conventional codes of produc-

tion for historical screen dramas and from traditional expectations of the academic written historical narrative through the systematic and intentional use of presentist anachronism in selected aspects of the production. Each of the four historical dramas displays very clearly the present attitudes and interests of its production era. The postmodern academic historian would recognise this type of presentism as an admissible and acceptable element of a serious historical narrative, both on the page and on the screen.² The “traditional” academic historian would object to most varieties of presentism as a major fault in any serious account of the past.³ This disagreement amongst historians is important to an assessment of period screen dramas because the historical narrative written by a professional academic historian is still often taken as the measure of historical truth against which a period screen drama should be judged for its fidelity to the past.⁴

One of the example films, *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS*, is based on a historical narrative of this traditional type, a historical biography of Mary, written by an academic historian and promoted as the true story of Mary’s life. The other three example dramas adopt a more humorous ironic slant to the presentation of their historical narratives. The differing levels of critical and commercial success achieved by the four example productions suggest that anachronism can be engaging to critics and audiences but is not always so; the use of ironic humour may render anachronisms more acceptable.

“Anachronism” according to Herman Ebeling is derived from the ancient Greek root word which means “an error [...] which implies the misplacing of persons or events in time.”⁵ As used here “anachronism” indicates any element of the dramatized presentation which the audience would recognize as belonging to an era different from the historical period in which the drama is set. The term “presentism” or “presentist anachronism” denotes a specific variety of anachronism, the intrusion of elements or attitudes from the present day, here the production era of the drama. Within the discipline of history and its related fields of study, anachronism and presentism have mostly been used as pejorative terms. Margreta de Grazia comments that in the field of literary studies “nothing could be worse than to be accused of anachronism.”⁶ This persistent taboo against anachronism in literary studies comes from its close relationship to the discipline of history. Despite this, many acclaimed historical literary works such as Virgil’s *Aeneid* introduce anachronisms in the spirit of poetic license,⁷ as do some period screen dramas in their adaptations of historical events.

“Irony” in a dramatic context implies the presentation of something which is significantly different to what is expected. “Verbal irony” is traditionally taken to be equivalent to “antiphrasis,” saying the opposite of what you mean, the use of words to convey a meaning which is the antithesis of the literal meaning of the words. For instance, in *The Great*, the Emperor Peter asks his new wife Catherine if she is happy, Catherine replies: “You presented me with a bear and recently stopped punching me. What woman would not be happy?” “Situational

irony” refers to the presentation of the unexpected by non-verbal means: in *Bridgerton*, set in England in 1813, Eloise (Claudia Jessie), the younger daughter of the aristocratic Bridgerton family, casually lights and smokes a cigarette. Hutcheon draws attention to the multi-layered nature of irony, “a complex process of relating, differentiating and combining said and unsaid meanings,” and to the way in which irony can offer an evaluative commentary on events.⁸ In an ironic period screen drama the element of the unexpected necessary for ironic humour is often provided by the sudden juxtaposition of present-day language, attitudes or behaviour against a contrasting aspect of the historical period situation. Catherine’s reply to Peter depends for its irony on the contrast between a historical situation in which violence in marriage was accepted and common and the contemporary context where domestic violence is prohibited by law but still occurs. Eloise’s cigarette in *Bridgerton* links her with the era about one hundred years later when women in England were campaigning actively for the benefits of equality and the right to vote at about the same time as it was also becoming socially acceptable for a woman to smoke and experience the adverse health consequences formerly limited to men.

Dramatized Entertainment, Historical Fiction, Popular History, or Historical Account?

A dramatized presentation on screen set in a past era may aim to entertain as drama with little or no regard for the historical record of events in the era of its setting as in *The Great*. Or it may aspire to offer a historical account of a past era, supported by academic historical research, as in *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS*. Somewhere between these two extremes are the realms of historical fiction and popular history, openly mixing documented fact with creative invention as in *Bridgerton* and *THE FAVOURITE*. A period screen drama may also belong to other screen genres such as comedy. Some period screen dramas advertise in advance what level of importance they attach to historical accuracy. Others leave it for viewers to deduce for themselves how seriously they should take the presentation on screen as a historically accurate account of events. A period screen drama combines multiple elements of performance, drama, historical fiction and factual historical account; the screenplay may be an adaptation from an earlier source, such as a novel or a biography. Each of these elements of the production has its own distinctive approach to reconciling the demands of past and present time. Critical and audience assessment of a period screen drama judge it against the prevailing standards at the time of viewing.

The film and television industry production codes and conventions, developed partly through the custom and practice of past successful productions, set out the standards of what is considered appropriate for period screen dramas. There is a widespread emphasis on ensuring

historically-correct visual elements such as costume and locations as part of a general assumption that period screen drama should aspire to historical accuracy.⁹ Hollywood's "history films" privilege meticulous reconstruction of surface detail and focus their stories on well-known historical figures who shape events.¹⁰ Current conventions of period drama on television and cinema screens include: authentic period settings either on location in historic buildings or in studio sets constructed to replicate these, convincing replica period costumes with hairstyling, dialogue and music appropriate to the era. The presentation should display beautiful photography and high production values with a historical "look."¹¹ Eminent cinematographer Néstor Almendros (1930–1992) suggested that historical productions require lower levels of lighting.¹² If actual historical figures are represented, there will usually be some effort to select or style the actor to resemble either period depictions of that character or portrayals in earlier successful screen productions. Referring to UK "heritage films" made in the 1980s and 1990s Monk draws attention to what she terms their "museum look" — "apparently meticulous period accuracy but clean, beautifully lit and clearly on display [...] [the] characteristic attention to fine visual and material detail [...] the goal of period verisimilitude." She cites critical complaints about the apparently obligatory use of stately home locations — "the theme park of the past."¹³ Period drama series on TV were stereotypically aimed at a predominantly older and female audience, depictions of sexuality were usually repressed and "smouldering" rather than explicit, with a narrative featuring aspirational female characters juxtaposed against conventional representations of gender, including dominant masculinity and women framed as objects. Monk proposes that some later "post-heritage" films made at the start of the 21st century reacted against and sought to distance themselves from the norms of these older-style heritage films through an overt concern in the narrative with non-dominant gender and sexual identities: gay, bisexual, active female heterosexual, non-masculine, mutable, androgynous, ambiguous. But she noted that the visuals of these post-heritage films remain conservative, preoccupied with achieving authenticity in their reconstruction of homes and costumes. It is this visual aspect of the productions which seems to be most highly valued and conserved in current period screen drama even where the style and tone of the overall production is humorous or ironic. In contrast, there appears to be greater opportunity for innovation on the musical soundtrack and in the use of "colour-conscious casting"¹⁴ to place actors of colour in leading roles, particularly in period drama on television.

Sources of Presentist Anachronism

Each one of the constituent parts of a period screen drama will tend to import presentist anachronisms from the production era.

Performance A performance is always of the present moment in which it is given,¹⁵ no

matter how old the historical text on which the performance is based. Every period screen drama therefore includes presentist anachronisms which are characteristic of performance in the era of its own production, perhaps visible as details of costume or hairstyling, which become more clearly evident as time passes and the production era itself recedes into history. Theatre performances of historical drama, such as Shakespeare, now routinely adopt anachronistic contemporary styles of presentation in terms of setting, costumes, dialect and casting as a means of highlighting the continuing relevance to the present-day of the historical text.¹⁶ A similar updating effect occurs in the performance of older music even when the declared intention is quite the contrary. Within the tradition of Western art music, the influential movement for “historically-informed performance” seeks to replicate historical performance practice from the era of the music’s composition and often uses special replicas of musical instruments from the historical period. Nevertheless, the resulting performance style always reflects the stylistic preferences of the performance era.¹⁷

Adaptation The adaptation of a screenplay from an earlier text, such as a novel, has been compared to the process of translation from one language to another. The adapter must first interpret the precursor text in order to create a new adapted text for presentation on screen; this interpretation takes place in the time and style of the production era. Transposition to the new medium implies change or “reformatting” and there are always gains and losses. Adaptations have traditionally been subject to criticism on the basis of “fidelity” —how faithfully and completely the adaptation recreates the precursor text. More recent appraisals of the nature of adaptation increasingly favour instead an assessment based on how successfully the adaptation accommodates the different demands and possibilities of performance on screen. Historical screen dramas face the additional complication of which text functions as the precursor to which they can legitimately be compared. The precursor text could either encompass the entire relevant primary source documentation currently available from the era in which the drama is set or could be limited to the secondary source contemporary historical novel or biography from which the screenplay has been directly adapted. Hutcheon suggests a possible resolution of these dilemmas by proposing a new standard of “belief” or “conviction,” rather than fidelity to any particular source: to what extent does the screen adaptation convince the audience that it conveys something believable, valid or truthful about the events it portrays?¹⁸

Historical narrative A historical account was traditionally expected to provide an accurate and objective description of the past. Current historians, particularly in the United States, are still influenced by the expectations articulated by eminent 19th century German historian

Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) that the historical account should describe the past “wie es eigentlich gewesen” (as it really was). The subsequent promotion of a strictly scientific and objective methodology of history was especially strong among American historians because of the (mis)understanding prevalent in the USA of what Ranke intended. In contrast, German historians adopted a more nuanced and flexible approach to historical narrative based on a fuller understanding of the philosophical principles behind Ranke’s methodology.¹⁹ The result was that, for many historians especially those of the American tradition, any evidence of the intrusion of contemporary anachronisms from the historian’s own era was regarded as one of the worst sins in producing a historical account.²⁰

Later American historians recommended a move away from the unachievable “Noble Dream” of a historical account which is objective and free from presentist influences²¹ but the Rankean legacy continued to exert an influence.²² All of the traditional expectations of the professional historian related to the historical narrative as a written account on the page. Nowadays historians increasingly recognise that there has always been an inherent tension between the demands of the past and the present in any historical narrative—the need to give a fair and accurate account of past events but in way which is engaging and comprehensible to a contemporary audience.²³ Historians are always influenced by the attitudes of their own era, some presentist anachronisms are therefore inevitable and may be necessary and beneficial to create a historical account which is engaging to and understood by its intended contemporary audience.²⁴ There is a greater acceptance of alternative forms of historical narrative—oral history, cultural history, visual images and the moving images of cinema, television and the internet. The aspiration of past historians towards complete objectivity now seems like an illusion, created by an image of Ranke which was always incomplete but which shaped the professional discipline of the historian as we know it and which is still influential in historical thinking.²⁵ The most valuable legacy of Ranke today may be a sceptical, critical attitude towards historical sources of information.²⁶

Historical fiction Producers and consumers of historical fiction generally accept that some elements of the story, such as dialogue, must be creative inventions but they also expect the story to respect certain established historical facts such as the broad chronology of events.²⁷ Saxton distinguishes between “accuracy,” the extent to which a historical fiction is consistent with available historical evidence and “authenticity,” the extent to which the text conveys the impression of accuracy and respect for the historical era represented. She notes that audiences tend to place greater value on “authenticity” —the feeling that the fictional account has taken care to be true to the spirit of the past era.²⁸ This type of “authenticity” is quite different from the traditional expectations of the professional historian that a historical account should be comprehensively accurate.

Comparing Reception of Film and TV Period Dramas

Measures used to judge the success of the period screen dramas here will include representative samples of critical reactions, awards received, box office returns relative to production budget and, for first season TV series, whether a subsequent season has been commissioned. As a convenient summary measure to facilitate comparison of the reception of the four period screen dramas considered here, scores from the US review-aggregation website *Rotten Tomatoes* are quoted, where available, for each production as “RT score.” *Rotten Tomatoes* calculates a “critics” score using the proportion of positive online reviews by writers who are certified members of various writing guilds or film critics associations. A score for audience reception is calculated similarly from the proportion of positive ratings by registered users.²⁹ Creative artists and academics may complain that a numerical index such as *Rotten Tomatoes* is too simplistic, reductive or even insulting to the artistic endeavour of a screen drama. Creators of elite art forms have sometimes claimed that the response or even the existence of an audience is irrelevant: “Who Cares If You Listen?” is the famous title of an article by Milton Babbitt, composer of a rigorously technical style of modern classical music, which he regarded as too advanced and complex to be understandable by the public.³⁰ Such apparent contempt for audience opinion would be inconceivable for artists working in mainstream cinema or television, particularly for lavish period screen dramas like the four examples considered here which require financial backing by Hollywood production companies or their equivalents. In mass media cinema or television audience numbers and favourable response from critics and viewing public are determining factors in whether a big budget production is viable in the first place and whether a television serial is re-commissioned to allow further development of the narrative through a subsequent series. More recent development of performance theory also regards audience reception as intrinsic to the process of performance itself.³¹ Academic and critical evaluation of period screen dramas needs to respect what the audience thinks of the production not just for practical and financial motives but also because audiences have long been able to make sophisticated judgements about the value of presentist anachronism in a historical narrative which professional historians have taken much longer to understand.

Bridgerton Series 1 (Netflix 2020)

The first series of *Bridgerton* had the second highest viewing figures of any Netflix streaming TV series to date³² (RT score: audience 72%; RT Critics ratings were also predominantly positive but insufficient numbers of reviews were submitted by critics to permit calculation of the standard aggregate critics’ score). A second series was commissioned. The screenplay for series 1 of *Bridgerton* is based on the first of the Bridgerton Family novels by US author Julia Quinn, written in 2006 but set in Regency England c1813.³³ Characters in *Bridgerton* are most-

ly fictional with the exception of the real historical personage Queen Charlotte (1744–1818) consort of English King George III.

At first glance, *Bridgerton* appears like another TV adaptation of an early 19th century literary classic such as a Jane Austen novel. But it deploys a complex mix of presentist anachronisms alongside authentic period details. Locations include recognisable period-appropriate English Regency-era buildings and interiors but the exterior flowering shrubs look artificially bright and colourful. “Colour-conscious casting” depicts leading characters Queen Charlotte (Golda Rosheuvel), Lady Danbury (Adjoa Andoh) and Simon, Duke of Hastings (Regé-Jean Page) as people of colour.³⁴ (Fig. 1) Ladies wear period high-waisted gowns but the colours are synthetically brilliant and there are no bonnets. Gentlemen wear Regency-era tightly fitted breeches but the Duke of Hastings grooms with 21st century “designer stubble.”

The soundtrack features period-appropriate compositions by Mozart and Beethoven, performed as written, but the excerpts of other historically-appropriate music, by Vivaldi and Bach, are rearrangements, contemporary “recompositions” in modern style by 21st century composers Max Richter and Peter Gregson. Some viewers may experience a tantalising sense of familiarity with the authentic-sounding string quartet music which plays at various points in the drama. These are “classical covers”—contemporary rearrangements made by Vitamin String Quartet in period style of 21st century popular songs by well-known artists such as Ariana Grande, Shawn Mendes and Taylor Swift. The unheard lyrics of the original song provide a sort of Greek chorus on the action, a message which knowledgeable (probably younger) viewers will be able to “decode” when they recognise the source of the melody and recall the original words of the song. When Simon and Daphne dance together in public for the first time, each insisting that their evident affection for each other is merely a convenient pretence to avoid family pressure to find a suitable marriage partner, the melody of the string quartet which accompanies them tells a different story—it is from the song *In My Blood* (2018) by Shawn Mendes. James Curtiss of Vitamin String Quartet describes the motive behind the subliminal messages of the “classical” covers as follows: “we wanted to hit the nail on the head but be a little bit subtle about it.”³⁵ Surrounding publicity and interviews with cast and production team make it clear that the anachronisms are strategic and deliberate. The production was intended to be “classic but modern”; interviews with leading actors in the series explained that the intention was to “bring in 21st century conversations” and “a different perspective on stories we think we know.”³⁶

Initial audience reactions to *Bridgerton* suggest that at first it provoked some confusion and unfavourable comparison with the many previous “historically authentic” cinema and television literary adaptations of classic novels set in the Regency era. One viewer commented on what seemed to them to be a careless accidental anachronism—a character ate a grape which was evidently a seedless variety, something which would not have existed in 1813.³⁷ It takes

time for viewers to learn the newer conventions of intentional systematic anachronisms and accept them as entertaining, something arguably in keeping with the source document for the series—the witty contemporary re-imagining of Regency England in Julia Quinn’s novels. Viewing figures suggest that the deliberate foregrounding of 21st century elements contrasted with early 19th century attitudes and settings was successful and attracted a younger demographic than is usual for TV period dramas.³⁸ The “classical covers” were favourably commented on and became independently successful as streaming albums. The music seemed to work on distinct levels—older viewers could accept the sound as unidentifiable but apparently period-appropriate background music, younger viewers who recognised and recalled the 21st century lyrics of the originals were gratified and entertained by an additional “Easter egg” secret message just for them.³⁹

The visible presentist anachronisms of dress fabrics, female headwear and male grooming, apparently trivial in themselves, represent a significant departure from conventional production codes for period screen dramas. Costume and other aspects of visual detail are usually highly conserved in appropriate period style even where systematic presentist anachronisms are admitted to non-visual elements such as dialogue, music or narrative plot. Monk mentions that in the subversive post-heritage films which react against the earlier traditions of heritage screen dramas, costume and sets are generally carefully replicated in conservationist “authentic” style.⁴⁰

Paradoxically, the presentist anachronisms of *Bridgerton*’s contemporary details in costumes and grooming may actually have an authentic historical precedent in the practice of early 19th century authors of some of the literary classic novels which form the basis of more conventional screen adaptations. English author William Thackeray (1811–1863) published his novel *Vanity Fair* in 1847–1848 but set it in the Regency period (1811–1820), in the same era as *Bridgerton*. Thackeray confessed to his readers in a footnote to an early edition that he preferred the mid-19th century fashions of his own era to Regency styles and it was these later 19th century fashion styles which were depicted in the illustrations to the novel. The author Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855) may have held similar views: her novel *Jane Eyre* (first published 1847) was set in the early 19th century but her descriptions of the clothing of characters in the novel places them in the later more Romantic style of the era in which she wrote it.⁴¹



Figure 1. Colour-conscious casting in *Bridgerton* places people of colour at the top of English society in 1813. Lady Danbury (Adjoa Andoh) and Simon, Duke of Hastings (Regé-Jean Page) are principal characters in the drama. *Bridgerton*, Netflix © Original copyright holders

The colour-conscious casting in *Bridgerton* goes further than in most other period screen dramas. Not only are actors of colour placed in leading roles but their heritage forms part of the character's story. Executive producer Shonda Rhimes and showrunner Chris van Dusen imported this idea to the screenplay generated from Julia Quinn's novels, drawing on the real-life speculation that Queen Charlotte may have been of mixed heritage.⁴² Slotkin and Mantel each point out how historical fiction can allow the exploration of alternative possibilities which existed in the past even if they were never realized and can pose the intriguing challenge: "consider this" rather than the possibly less convincing instruction "believe this."⁴³ In the case of *Bridgerton* the challenge to viewers includes considering how English society might have been different if in 1813 the Queen had been recognised as a person of colour and thus facilitated the acceptance in elite English society of other people of colour like the characters of Lady Danbury and Simon, Duke of Hastings.⁴⁴

***The Great* Series 1 (Hulu 2020)**

Streaming TV series *The Great* had an enthusiastic reception for its first season (RT ratings: critics 88%, audience 84%). A second series has already been streamed to even more enthusiastic reviews and a third series commissioned. It is nominally based on the rise to power of Empress Catherine the Great of Russia (1729–1796) following her progress from a young outsider at the Russian court through into the longest reign by any female ruler in Russia's history (1762–1796). It was extensively announced as very different in concept from a conventional TV period drama series. Hulu advertised it as “anti-historical,”⁴⁵ the opening titles announce it as “an occasionally true story” and it was critiqued as “a satirical, comedic drama” and “historical fiction.” The series was created by Tony McNamara, who wrote the screenplay for most of the ten episodes in series 1. Actress Elle Fanning who plays Catherine is also one of the Executive Producers as is Tony McNamara.



Figure 2. *The Great* is anti-historical and ironic but conserves period-appropriate visuals in costumes and set. *The Great*, Hulu © Original copyright holders

Many of the characters who appear in *The Great* were real historical personages and some real historical events are referred to or depicted but the series as a whole is obviously fictionalised for entertainment. In *The Great*, Catherine arrives at the Russian court from Austria as a young single woman to marry the depraved and dangerous Emperor Peter III (Nicholas Hoult); the real Catherine was 35 years old and already a mother when she came to Russia.⁴⁶ Location, studio reconstructions and costumes for *The Great* look historically-authentic and

appropriately impressive. (Fig. 2) Dialogue is 21st century casual with occasional comic use of more period-appropriate words such as “Huzzah.” Sexual activity is frequently depicted, usually with comic or grotesque features, and is often female-led. The female protagonists dominate and drive the drama—Catherine, her wily maidservant Marial (Phoebe Fox) and Elizabeth (Belinda Bromilow), the eccentric aunt of Emperor Peter. Male characters can be dangerous and brutal but are generally foolish comic such as Emperor Peter, the Archbishop (Adam Godley) or General Velementov (Douglas Hodge) who can be outwitted by the women. Serious issues, such as slavery, torture, domestic violence and sexual assault, are frequently dealt with in a tongue in cheek, ironic fashion: in order to achieve their goals, Catherine and Marial are each obliged to deal with sexually predatory men. After one such set of encounters, they discuss their experiences:

Catherine: How was your night?

Marial: Avoided rape. You?

Catherine: Same. If anyone ever invents something easier than buttons, we are all in trouble.

The soundtrack supports the signposting of *The Great* as essentially a contemporary black comedy drama in period dress: there is newly-composed music by Nathan Barr which mixes electronic instruments with traditional orchestral strings and Russian instruments in a style which is sometimes contemporary and at other points a pastiche of 18th century classical music. The most striking musical anachronism is that each episode plays out over a 20th century popular song which comments on the action. Episode 1 has shown Catherine as a naive young girl, horrified by the barbarity of the Russian court, physically assaulted, threatened and imprisoned by her new husband Emperor Peter. Catherine is at the point of suicidal despair when her maidservant Marial points out to her that, if the Emperor should die without an heir, the throne would pass to her as his wife. The episode closes to the song *Everybody Wants to Rule the World* originally written by the group Tears for Fears in 1985 but performed here in a cover version from 2007 by Patti Smith. Both the content of the lyrics and the choice of the version by Patti Smith (b1946), veteran performer, “the punk poet laureate,”⁴⁷ political activist, feminist icon and great survivor, signals that there is more to Catherine than we have seen so far and prepares viewers for the direction in which her ambitions will take her. The final episode of series one concludes as Catherine initiates the revolutionary coup which will bring her to power—the closing credits roll over the song *New World Coming* (1970) in the original version sung by Mama Cass Elliot.

The character of Catherine has been previously depicted in screen drama several times. The role has attracted a succession of leading movie actresses since the days of silent cinema including Pola Negri (1924), Marlene Dietrich (1934), Elizabeth Bergner (1934), Tallulah Bankhead (1945) and Jeanne Moreau (1968). More recently the Empress has featured in a

succession of TV miniseries played by Julia Ormond (1991), Catherine Zeta-Jones (1995) and Helen Mirren (2019). Most of the screen versions have not been particularly well-received—criticisms have included narrative problems due to compressing such a long complex story into the time available, the predominance of lavish spectacle over drama, static exposition and historical inaccuracy. Productions which have at least partly overcome these problems may provide clues as to the challenges of historical drama on screen and which strategies are successful. *THE SCARLET EMPRESS* (Josef von Sternberg, USA 1934) starring Marlene Dietrich is now generally thought of as a masterpiece (RT ratings: critics 86%, audience 85%), but for cinematic rather than historical or dramatic motives. The film was a commercial disaster when released but has acquired critical lustre with time. Present-day viewers see it as a uniquely individual collaboration between a gifted, eccentric director, Josef von Sternberg, and his favourite actress, Marlene Dietrich, both of whom subsequently acquired star status in the Hollywood pantheon.⁴⁸ Von Sternberg himself described it as “a relentless excursion into style,”⁴⁹ later critics have rated the film highly as entertainment but concluded that historical accuracy was sacrificed.⁵⁰ Evidently, star performance and direction can salvage an otherwise unsuccessful period screen drama but anachronisms are still regarded as a failure of historical accuracy in a production which presents as a serious historical drama.

THE FAVOURITE (Yorgos Lanthimos, UK/USA/IR 2018)

THE FAVOURITE has been described as a “deliciously nasty satire of royal-court intrigue.”⁵¹ It is set in England around the year 1711 in the reign of Queen Anne when Britain is involved in the War of Spanish Succession. The film centres on the relationships between three women: Queen Anne (Olivia Colman) and her courtiers Sarah Churchill (Rachel Weisz) and Abigail Masham (Emma Stone), two cousins who become rivals for the Queen’s favour. It was directed and co-produced by Yorgos Lanthimos from a screenplay by Deborah Davis and Tony McNamara. The film has been highly successful both critically and commercially. It achieved “universal acclaim” on *Rotten Tomatoes* (RT ratings: critics 93% and audience 70%). It has won numerous awards including a Best Actress Oscar for Olivia Colman and was ranked in the Top Ten best films of 2018 by the American Film Institute. The film grossed around \$95 million worldwide on a budget of \$15 million.

Interviews given by the director and other members of the team made it clear that historical accuracy was not a central concern of the film. Lanthimos commented: “Some of the things in the film are accurate and a lot aren’t.”⁵² The three women in the central triangle are real historical personages. The Queen’s poor health, her multiple miscarriages and the rivalry between the two cousins for her favour are factual. But there are multiple anachronisms and creative elements in the narrative. There is no evidence that the Queen kept pet rabbits as

substitutes for her lost babies or that the two rival favourites were physically intimate with her. Queen Anne's husband was still alive at the time of the narrative but is completely erased from the story and other male characters are relegated to decorative or comic roles.

One critic commented that Lanthimos and his screenwriters demonstrate that “all historical reconstruction is a game and to pretend otherwise [...] is merest folly.”⁵³ Lanthimos commissioned Tony McNamara to co-write the screenplay after seeing his work on the “anti-historical” period screen comedy drama series *The Great*. The screenplay for *THE FAVOURITE* started out in 1998 as a draft written by Deborah Davis which drew on primary historical sources in the letters between Queen Anne, Sarah and Abigail and it also used as a secondary source the historical account of the period written by Winston Churchill, himself a descendent of the Marlborough family, to which Queen Anne's favourite, Sarah Churchill, belonged. The original draft written by Davis had trouble attracting finance; backers were concerned that in the context of a historical drama, the “lesbian love triangle” and the lack of any male characters might not work. Ten years later, another producer, Ed Guiney, saw Deborah Davis' script and approached Yorgos Lanthimos to direct it. Lanthimos was enthusiastic, had seen the pilot script for *The Great* written by Tony McNamara and approached him to “freshen up” the script. This became the screenplay for *THE FAVOURITE*. Actor Nicholas Hoult, who played Emperor Peter III in *The Great* was also cast in *THE FAVOURITE* to portray the character Harley.



Figure 3. The central female characters in *THE FAVOURITE* have natural-looking hair, no make-up and wear monochrome costumes. *THE FAVOURITE*, Fox Searchlight © Original copyright holders

The visual aspects of *THE FAVOURITE* at first sight appear like those of a conventional period movie. The locations and interiors feature period-appropriate historical buildings in UK. But the cinematography distorts historic interiors with the use of exaggerated high angles and a wide angle or fish-eye lens which often creates the effect of the human figure dwarfed by and isolated in a cavernous interior space. Director of photography Robbie Ryan explained: “By showing you the whole room and also isolating the character in a small space [...] you get a feeling of no escape. [...] like a playground, that turns into a battleground that turns into a prison.”⁵⁴ The film plays on the sense of isolation and alienation of the characters, particularly Queen Anne herself, who is presented as a needy, childlike, psychologically fragile individual.

The costumes look period-appropriate, but it is really only the outline and styling of the costumes which suggest the early 18th century. The colour palette is restricted, with black and white predominating, a theme which also runs through the decoration of interiors, inspired by the black and white chequer marble floors which are a feature of Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, one of the principal filming locations. Queen Anne spends much of the time in a white nightgown but when she dresses formally to address her Ministers, she wears a robe not just trimmed with black and white ermine fur, as would have been customary in the era, but completely covered in it. Costume designer Sandy Powell points out that Abigail’s rise from servant girl to Queen’s favourite is reflected in her gowns which become “bolder, showier [...] that vulgarity of the nouveau riche [...] trying too hard” and feature eye-catching design including black and white stripes. Some costumes also include contemporary fabrics such as recycled denim.⁵⁵ The women have natural faces and hair (Fig. 3) but male fashions and grooming are exaggerated to comic effect with towering wigs and theatrical makeup, which emphasises the male characters as essentially decorative elements, peripheral to the drama. (Fig. 4)



Figure 4. Male characters in *THE FAVOURITE* wear exaggerated artificial wigs and make-up; Queen Anne's wheelchair is an anachronism. *THE FAVOURITE*, Fox Searchlight © Original copyright holders

Sexual activity is female-led, whether lesbian or heterosexual. Dialogue is 21st century casual with ironic explicit references to sexual activity and domestic violence. The film's Director of Sound, Johnnie Burn, said that "there is no composer on this film."⁵⁶ All of the soundtrack is extracted from existing compositions, mostly classical in style. The music generally sounds historically-appropriate and it does include some excerpts of period-appropriate compositions by Handel. But much of the music is anachronistic and of later composition—19th century Schubert, 20th century classical music by Olivier Messaien, the 20th century popular song *Skyline Pigeon* by Elton John rearranged in period style for harpsichord, and some 21st century modern classical music by contemporary British composer Anna Meredith.

MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS (Josie Rourke, UK/USA 2018)

The film *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS* is a historical drama with high production values, authentic-looking locations and interiors, lavish costumes, stirring music and sweeping photography. The film has received mixed reviews (RT ratings: critics 62%, audience 41%). On a reported budget of \$25 million, it took \$46.7 million in box office receipts. It features two leading young film actresses of the day as the two queens, Mary of Scotland (Saoirse Ronan) and Elizabeth I of England (Margo Robbie). Publicity photos for the film juxtapose the two protagonists under taglines including "Two Queens. One Future" and "Born to Power. Born to Fight." The screenplay is based on a biography of Mary by Cambridge historian John Guy

which won the Whitbread Award for Biography when it was first published in 2004.⁵⁷

The production of *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS* was in planning for at least twelve years prior to its release, with Scarlett Johansson originally set to play the role of Mary. The film was the cinematic debut of director Josie Rourke who is best known from the world of theatre as the artistic director of the Donmar Warehouse, London, an informal small theatre which has over the years acquired a reputation for productions which present the viewpoint of women, the LGBTQIA+ community and marginalised groups. Rourke is described as having “a feminist eye.” In an interview with Charlotte Higgins, she confessed that she had to fight to “put a period in a period movie” by including in the narrative issues such as menstruation and female sexual pleasure.⁵⁸ Her policy of colour-conscious casting is still less common in the cinema than in theatre or television and reportedly provoked opposition at first.

Two important supporting roles are played by actors of colour—Elizabeth’s ambassador Thomas Randolph and her friend Bess of Hardwick. Rourke presents Mary and Elizabeth as equals within a context of what the DVD denotes as “Tudor Feminism”: two women who would have been natural allies are forced into rivalry by circumstances and male advisers, two female leaders who each have to struggle to achieve and maintain their authority, both subject to detrimental manipulation by the power-hungry men around them. In their emotional confrontation scene, there is more shared regret than recrimination, more tears than tirades, a sense that each understands the other as no one else can. Mary opens her heart to Elizabeth and offers to kneel before her, the Virgin Queen removes her rich red wig to show Mary that smallpox has left her real hair thin and patchy.

The most favourable criticisms have been those which have recognised and accepted the feminist element of the narrative and the two central performances—“communicating strength, vulnerability and isolation as two monarchs ruling in a man’s world [...] a case for re-examining the patriarchal historical truths we’ve come to accept.”⁵⁹ The screenplay was criticised for presenting Mary as a fresh-faced “woke underdog princess” who displays 21st century values, supports religious freedom, is fertile, sexually fulfilled and encouraging to her gender-nonconforming friend in contrast with an Elizabeth who is a less attractive, over made-up, childless, unhappy spinster with a prosthetic nose.⁶⁰ (Fig. 5)

The film attracted adverse comment for the historical inaccuracy of its obvious contemporary anachronisms and a theatrically-staged encounter between Mary and Elizabeth which is inconsistent both with the historical record and with the biography on which the screenplay is based. One critic dismissed the film as “history porn for the Instagram generation.”⁶¹ Jays has earlier drawn attention to the heritage movie convention that a Tudor/Elizabethan period setting is particularly favoured for a screen presentation of the romantic “history of the heart” type.⁶² Another critic commented that *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS* is essentially an

old-fashioned costume drama of this type. It was compared unfavourably to *THE FAVOURITE* as another female-centred historical film which appeared about the same time but which adopted a more innovative and humorous approach and was more successful critically and commercially.

MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS won awards for period hairstyling and for the musical score. Most of the music was commissioned from contemporary classical composer Max Richter (b1966) who is known, among other things, for his acclaimed “recomposition” of the iconic 16th century instrumental work *Le quattro Stagioni* (*The Four Seasons*) (1723) by Vivaldi. The only musical composition from the historical period of the drama is the church anthem *If Ye Love Me* (1585) by English composer Thomas Tallis (c1505–1585) which is performed by an all-female choir under the supervision of early music expert William Lyons. Richter’s own score takes its inspiration from the musical style of the period and has been described by him as

a kind of wandering border between contemporary and period authenticity [...] based on a kind of geometry and a set of gestures which come from Renaissance music [...] a musical language which could be dramatic and contemporary but [has] a shared DNA with the music of that period.⁶³

The composer wanted the voice of women to be prominent musically in the film—a 12-voice women’s choir is heard at various points, alongside a large 100-piece orchestra with prominent strings and drums and a period-appropriate instrument, the clarsach Celtic harp.

To express the voice of Mary herself, Richter chose a period string instrument, the viol, which he then processed electronically post-production to give a richer sound, plus a modern wind instrument, the *cor anglais*, which he felt had a reedy, Renaissance-like timbre and also offered a little “Easter egg” as an instrument with a French name which refers to England playing the melody of Mary, who was herself raised in France and then came to Britain. Richter’s music for *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS* won awards from the International Film Music Critics Association for best drama score of 2018 and the Hollywood Music in Media award for Best Original Score in a Feature Film.

Most screen depictions of Mary are within the context of a drama in which Elizabeth I also appears, and sometimes dominates the drama.⁶⁴ The famous official portraits of Elizabeth I made during her reign, particularly those by artist Nicholas Hilliard (1547–1619), have been a powerful influence on how the character of Elizabeth is styled on screen—the high forehead, artificially white complexion and elaborate red wig above an extended stiff collar are features of almost every screen Elizabeth including Margot Robbie’s portrayal. Costume designer Alexandra Byrne used a contemporary fabric—denim—for many of the costumes in the film, including dresses for Mary.⁶⁵ Elizabeth’s outfits look more historically-appropriate. Most screen versions of Elizabeth show her as a serious character within a serious historical

drama: two (highly successful) exceptions are Miranda Richardson's broadly comic character, the spoilt child-like "Queenie," in the TV historical comedy series *Blackadder* (BBC and Australian Seven Network, 1983) and Judi Dench's mature Elizabeth who shares the knowingly anachronistic and ironic tone of the movie *SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE* (John Madden, UK/USA 1998). The portraits of Mary created during her lifetime are less emblematic than those of Elizabeth, offering directors more freedom in how to style the character Mary.⁶⁶



Figure 5. In *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS*, Mary is shown as fresh-faced and natural, Elizabeth I is artificially wigged and made-up. *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS*, Universal Pictures © Original copyright holders

One of the most influential dramatic recreations of Mary has been on stage, in Friedrich Schiller's five-act verse drama *Maria Stuart* (1800) which provided the basis for the opera *Maria Stuarda* (1835) by Donizetti. Both play and opera remain in the contemporary performance repertoire. The lasting influence of Schiller's play is evident in the climactic face-to-face confrontation which takes place in *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS* between the two queens, Mary and Elizabeth, a fictional event for which there is no historical evidence at all, but which now has its own historical provenance and has proven irresistible to screen dramatists ever since Schiller staged it and Donizetti set it to music.

John Guy's biography of Mary, which was adapted for the screenplay, is the work of an academic historian and highlights his extensive research into historical documents, particularly those written by Mary herself. The book has appeared under various covers and titles since its first publication in 2004 which gives differing emphases to the status and angle of the

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information they contain. A US first edition published by Mariner Books in 2004 carried the title *Queen of Scots. The True Life of Mary Stuart*, which implies an unusually high degree of historical accuracy, aspiring to the status of the definitive account. The book attracted reviews consistent with this impression: “without a doubt the definitive biography of Mary Stuart of all time.”⁶⁷ It appeared on the page of the Historical Novel Society which reviews works of historical fiction.

A different edition of Guy’s book was published at about the same time but carried the title *My Heart is My Own. The Life of Mary Queen of Scots* which might suggest a more romantic slant. The adjective “true” has disappeared from the second line of the title in this edition but it is still “the” life, not just “a” life, implying a degree of historical accuracy. A later media tie-in edition issued in 2018 to coincide with the release of the film carried cover photographs of the two lead actors and taglines from the cinema publicity: “Two Queens. One Destiny” and “Born to Power. Born to Fight” which together give the book more of the appearance of a historical novel. The source biography of Mary in its different editions appears to occupy a frontier zone somewhere between historical fiction and factual account.

Discussion

The challenges of presenting an entertaining historical drama on screen are essentially the same as those facing a historian who aims to produce a historical account of past events. The issues addressed, whether by a drama or an academic historical account, must be of sufficient interest to the contemporary audience in order to engage their attention. The importance of historical accuracy, in the sense of fidelity to events documented by historical research, is more complex. The assumption that any historical account, whether dramatized or factual, could ever be completely accurate, “the whole truth and nothing but the truth” is not supported by evidence. All historical accounts are selective in which documented evidence they include and how they construct a narrative from that selected evidence.⁶⁸ What the public seek seems to be a convincing account which conveys something meaningful about the events and the era described, whether in a period screen drama or a written historical narrative. This is different from the criteria of accuracy and comprehensiveness which preoccupy historians; a highly accurate and detailed chronicle of events may fail to convince on screen or to convey anything which feels valid or important to a reading public.⁶⁹

Joseph Roquemore’s guide to historical movies gives prominent attention to the issue of historical accuracy, posing the question “Did That Really Happen?” but also considers the movie’s entertainment value.⁷⁰ Self-confessed “postmodern historian” Robert Rosenstone was ahead of most of his professional colleagues in accepting the value of period screen drama as a valid form of historical narrative but with its own stylistic conventions distinct from those

of the written form.⁷¹ Robert Burgoyne endorses that view that in a historical film the past is always interpreted from the perspective of the period in which the film was made.⁷² Pierre Sorlin highlighted that traditionally marginalised communities may need to develop a historical narrative which is quite imaginative in its representation of possible versions of the past, in order to develop a sense of identity.⁷³

Specifically in relation to the community of African-American women Julia Erhart draws attention to the importance of “visual richness” in the movie *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST* (Julie Dash, USA 1991) which tells the story of a mostly poor and oppressed population by showing the richness of their culture rather than the poverty of their circumstances. Director Julie Dash described her approach as “speculative fiction.”⁷⁴ More than twenty years later, in the era of the Black Lives Matter movement, *Bridgerton* took forward the same challenge by showing a woman of colour on the English throne in 1813. The enthusiastic acceptance by critics and public of *Bridgerton*’s imaginative use of colour-conscious casting in a period screen drama suggests a willingness to accept a more creative and innovative type of historical narrative. By comparison, professional historians have adopted a more cautious approach to the possibility that introducing certain types of inaccuracy or anachronism in historical narrative may actually improve the product.

An ingredient shared by the three more successful period screen dramas, but absent from *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS* is humour based on verbal or situational irony. The use of humour, particularly irony, for serious purposes as an element of satire and moral criticism has a long tradition⁷⁵ which may partly account for its appeal in “alternative” period screen dramas interested in exploring alternative versions of the past where traditionally marginalised groups such as women or people of colour could play a more equal part. Irony can be considered as a response, something which the audience “makes” to happen from the conjunction of spoken and unspoken messages. Ironic humour draws the audience to participate in deciphering the underlying relevance to the present day and gives the drama a critical edge to comment sceptically on contemporary assumptions of progress.⁷⁶ It places the drama in a playful context where alternative possibilities of past reality can be more readily entertained (and entertaining).

In the case of *The Great*, much of the humour is broad and knockabout, if black at times, but the dialogue includes examples of verbal irony which have been collected and ranked in a blog by viewers who found them not just amusing but also “inspirational about love and what it means to be great.”⁷⁷ Catherine’s ironic remark on the protection against rape provided by buttons on clothing leaves it to viewers to draw the unspoken comparison with the precariousness of contemporary legal protection against sexual assault, given the evident difficulties in securing a successful prosecution for rape even in countries with well-developed legal systems.

In *THE FAVOURITE* the tone of the humour is darker and more cruelly satirical of the political intrigues in government. Examples of verbal and situational irony flow from anachronisms of dialogue which make it clear that influence at court depends on sexually pleasuring the ruler and invites viewers to draw parallels with contemporary politics. *Bridgerton*'s irony is more discreet, more arch and knowing, in keeping with the context of the series' sophisticated and widespread use of subtle, contemporary anachronism in costumes, grooming, music and narrative, all of which stimulate the viewers to find their own present-day parallels with the historical situations depicted. For all three of these ironic period dramas, it is the anachronisms which create the ironic humour which in turn encourages the audience to active participation in drawing a sceptical comparison with their own times.

The familiarity of younger viewers with humorous "memes" constructed from factual news images combined with a verbally ironic tagline may make the younger section of the cinema and TV audience especially receptive to a similar use of irony in period screen drama, a genre whose spectatorship has previously been drawn from an older demographic. Baker describes the effect of the current wave of ironic period dramas on screen as "forcing bygone times up against today's standards [daring] to examine the past under the magnifying glass of the future"; she points out that all have what she describes as "a feminist streak."⁷⁸ All four of the period screen dramas considered here have a feminist angle to the narrative and also a female "gaze" in the way the camera frames objects of sexual desire.

The early 21st century is a (post)postmodern age: there is a widespread awareness of "fake news" and the implication that historical accounts of all kinds are relative and can be revised, challenged and sometimes flatly contradicted by later versions. A historical drama which acknowledges that it represents just one possible version of events may be regarded as more honest than one which claims to be the definitive, completely true or uniquely accurate account of how things really were. An explicit declaration that some or all of the narrative is fictional is one way of indicating the provisional nature of the account. A clearly humorous or ironic tone to the presentation signals the imaginative aspect of the narrative and allows the audience to perceive the creative process in an enjoyable way.

Bridgerton, *The Great* and *THE FAVOURITE* all do this by the different ways in which they use anachronisms. *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS* seems to belong to a different tradition—a serious, even tragic, drama based on a serious historical biography which itself explicitly claims to provide the (newly) established truth about how things really were. Presentist anachronisms do not fit easily into such a tradition; when they appear, they are liable to be interpreted as incongruent or accidental errors. *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS* most closely resembles the genre of the post-heritage cinema—it appears to have taken great care with detailed historical accuracy in terms of locations and styling, while its narrative explores non-dominant sexual identities including LGBTQIA+ and female-dominant heterosexuality. *MARY QUEEN OF*

SCOTS has been less successful than other three period screen dramas in terms of critical and audience reviews.

The varying identity, status and genres of the source documents for each of the four screenplays may partly account for the differing style and impact of the screen adaptations. Three screenplays come from sources which are clearly fictional. Julia Quinn's novel *The Duke and I*, the source for series 1 of *Bridgerton*, appeared under a cover which labelled it "A Bridgerton Family Novel" and carrying the review "Julia Quinn's witty Regency-set romantic comedies are the next best thing to Georgette Heyer."⁷⁹ Georgette Heyer (1902–1974) was a popular author of historical fiction, credited as the originator of the Regency-era romance which often featured a woman with 20th century attitudes, confronting other characters of more conventional early 19th century views. Julia Quinn's novel is thus clearly situated in the same realm of historical romantic fiction, with the addition of a comic touch, where the historical events of England of the Regency era are largely a background setting.

The Great and *THE FAVOURITE* were written as screenplays from the outset. Both share a common author, Tony McNamara, both share a darkly humorous tone, at times sexually-explicit for comic effect. The status of the historical biography which is the principal source of the screenplay for *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS* seems to have changed confusingly over time. Some of the adverse criticisms of the film suggested that it seemed unsure to which cinematic genre it belonged. The shifting and ambiguous identity of Guy's published biography of Mary may partly underlie this uncertainty.

A selection of four period screen dramas cannot hope to be completely representative of the whole field of such productions. But the proposed category of "ironic period screen drama" does represent a larger body of current productions than just the three examples discussed here e.g., *Dickinson* (Apple TV+ 2019), *Sanditon* (ITV 2019), *SHIRLEY* (Josephine Decker, USA 2020), *SHERLOCK HOLMES* (Guy Ritchie, UK/USA/DE 2009), *EMMA* (Autumn de Wilde, UK 2020). There have been earlier instances of ironic period screen drama such as *MARIE ANTOINETTE* (Sofia Coppola, USA/FR/JP 2006). In their time, these earlier examples appeared as isolated exceptions to the general style of period screen dramas but may now be seen as innovative forerunners of what was to follow. The current proliferation of ironic period screen dramas suggests that this category could become the mainstream for the genre. Perhaps a 21st century audience can more readily accept serious commentary on the contemporary situation from the playful approach of an ironic humorous period screen drama than one which purports to replicate accurately and definitively how things really were in a distant past.

Some supporting evidence for this hypothesis emerges from the coincidence that a serious period screen drama about Catherine the Great was released on streaming television at al-

most the same time as the humorous and anachronistic take which appears in *The Great*. The historical miniseries *Catherine the Great* streamed by Sky Atlantic and HBO UK/USA in 2020 was lavishly set and costumed and starred Helen Mirren as the mature Catherine after she achieves power. Helen Mirren was widely-acclaimed for her screen portrayals of two long-reigning British monarchs, Elizabeth I in the TV miniseries *Elizabeth I* (UK Channel 4, 2005) and Elizabeth II in *THE QUEEN* (Stephen Frears, UK/USA/FR/IT 2006). Mirren's performance as Catherine was well-received but the production as a whole was not, negative comments centred on the complex exposition necessary to make the history comprehensible to an English-speaking audience. The ratings for this historically authentic version of the life of Catherine the Great were much lower (RT rating: critics 68%, audience 34%) than for the irreverent "anti-historical" alternative of *The Great* (RT rating: critics 88%, audience 84%), an irony in itself, and a reminder that ironic period screen dramas can leave a more vivid and lasting impression of a historical character than a depiction which is more serious and historically accurate.

Every period screen drama includes anachronisms from its production era. Professional historians of the postmodern age now increasingly accept presentism as a legitimate ingredient of the serious written historical account also. The earlier "traditional" historian attempted to avoid or minimise detectable anachronisms and this informed the production and critique of period screen drama. The innovation of today's ironic period screen dramas is to embrace presentist anachronism, announce it, deploy it strategically and exploit its humorous potential to make the drama more engaging to a contemporary audience and to encourage comparisons between past and present situation on issues of current interest. Our current evaluation of ironic period screen drama must be informed by their different intention towards presentist anachronism and by evolving opinion amongst professional historians. Tests of success for the new wave of ironic period screen dramas might include to what extent anachronisms are truly systematic, contribute pertinent comment on issues of contemporary relevance and are accepted by viewers as intentional and dramatically purposeful rather than irritating accidents. In turn, historians stand to learn from the way in which the more successful of the ironic period screen dramas can interrogate serious contemporary issues such as the position in society of women, people of colour and LGBTQIA+ individuals through creative depiction of a possible past in a humorous way.

Conclusion

Period screen dramas always contain presentist anachronisms from the era of their production, as do all other types of historical narrative. The conventional production codes for this genre aimed to minimise anachronisms. Some recent period screen dramas take an alterna-

tive approach which highlights the presentist anachronisms in the narrative and uses them strategically to create ironic humour and thereby invite the viewer to find the contemporary relevance of the drama. Three of the example productions considered, *Bridgerton*, *The Great* and *THE FAVOURITE*, adopt this alternative approach of ironic period screen drama and have achieved high ratings from audiences and critics. The other example, the film *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS*, follows a more conventional pattern of period screen drama and has been less successful with critics and audience. The newer alternative approach of ironic period drama may encourage more active participation by viewers in the construction of meaning, a greater willingness to consider alternative depictions of the past and a more sceptical evaluation of progress in contemporary society which resonates with a younger 21st century audience. Critical and academic analysis of ironic period screen drama should reflect these distinctive intentions and draw on relevant experience from the related fields of adaptation, performances, historiography, historical fiction and stage production of historical drama. The successful use of presentist anachronism in ironic period screen drama endorses the views of those historians who reject earlier views of presentism as an abomination to be avoided and instead acknowledge the value of including in any historical account elements contemporary with the intended audience in order to create a historical account which is comprehensible and relevant.

Notes

1. I am most grateful for the encouragement and advice of my supervisors Dr Lauren Redhead and Dr Daniel Taylor and the thoughtful comments of the referees. Their combined input helped to make this article a more concise account of the ideas in which we share an interest.
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