Contemporary Women in Romantic Contexts:
Time-travel Period Dramas as Didactic Cultural Productions

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Introduction

In 2011, Palace: Lock Heart, a Chinese television series based off of popular Internet novellas about modern women who travel into the glamorous imperial courts of the past, dominated audience shares across China. During January and February, when the show was aired, it consistently held over 10% of the audience share, making it the most watched show in all of China during the Spring Festival holiday season. In those months, on Baidu, the Chinese equivalent of Google, the show had more than ten million searches in one day as well as millions of views on Youtube-like Chinese video sites. Time-travel period dramas, as defined by much of the popular discourse, refer to a kind of costume drama that entails a modern character traveling into the past and taking up a dramatic journey of both romance and personal growth. In Palace, a contemporary woman named Qingchuan accidentally enters a time portal and travels into the Qing dynasty (circa 1709). In the process of finding her way home, she learns important lessons about love and life.

The immense popularity of Palace has generated great controversies both on and offline. Certainly, there is an army of devoted, genuinely appreciative fans who get into flame wars over the love triangles and political conspiracies in the show. At the same time, there is also a great deal of negative remarks splattered across the Internet. While some commentaries remain innocuous banter about the naocan (mind-cripplingly stupid) plot of Palace, major media outlets have also begun speculating that the time-travel theme is negatively influencing young people in China, leading to obsessive fantasies about traveling into the past. In 2012, two elementary school girls committed suicide together, leaving behind a note that expressed a

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1 Internet novellas are a popular form of online literature in China. The closest Western analog to that would be fan fiction.
2 Baidu. “Gong Suo Xin Yu” (Palace: Lock Heart).
   http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=vHd3UfgEvweZU_ev54wnZ67ySdHLx60CkTd1xpYIYFjMe13uiziSM9BbwPKV3j1-
   ROzTeQ66QDx_N0ZPG_
   UsrOSfscdE2TLq3A&hvem=bw.65397613.d.daww
desire to travel across time. The controversy is further fueled by the subsequent banning of future productions of any time travel-period drama by the Chinese State Administration of Radio Film and Television, the reasons for which remain unknown to the public.

Most of the viewers of *Palace* are young Chinese women. According to statistics compiled by Baidu based on search terms and forum activities, over 70% of the individuals who are interested in *Palace* are women; of all those who engage with all time-travel period dramas, over 65% of them turn out to be women as well. With the populations that search and discuss time-travel period dramas online overall, around 76% of them are under the age of 30. This general demographic makes *Palace* a female-oriented cultural product that directly engages with and cashes out on the fantasies and desires of young women.

It is in the midst of such a vast, perplexing cultural discourse that I grew curious about time-travel period dramas and *Palace* in particular. Given that *Palace* has been viewed by millions of women all over China and at least known to those who do not watch it, I am particularly intrigued by the intersection between time-travel period dramas and gender. I have three questions that motivate me to study *Palace* as a cultural product. First, I want to better understand how such a popular television show employs or possibly carelessly makes use of its power to influence conceptions of gender. Second, I am interested in learning how time travel as an important theme in *Palace* may affect this conception of gender. Third, I am interested in how such structures of gender representation in *Palace* address women’s concerns in the present. In order to achieve these goals, I have to first establish the pre-condition that whatever happens on television—even shows ostensibly having to do with a long-gone past—can relate to the present concerns of the audience. Then, through the rest of this project, I will try to study how the television show *Palace* addresses those concerns.

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4 Time travel novellas and shows generally invoke time-threatening events as a way to transcend time, devices like car accidents, coma, etc. are consistently used. “Xiao Xue Sheng Zi Sha, Zui Zai Chuan Yue Ju” (Elementary School Students Commit Suicide, are Time Travel Dramas to Blame)? Tencent. Accessed September 20, 2014. http://view.news.qq.com/zt2012/cyj/index.htm

Whatever we willingly consume, and with pleasure, is certain to relate to us immensely.

In terms of time travel, my intuition brings up two additional questions:

(1) how and why the past relates to the present; (2) how *Palace* uses a device of transgressing temporal spaces to express specific relationships between the past and present. In *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, Ien Ang elucidates that any serious investment into or capacity for deriving pleasure from a television show requires that the spectator relate to the characters in one way or another.\(^6\) While we might find characters on television quite removed from our own reality and their personalities overly exaggerated, Ang’s suggestion still holds in the sense that we connect to the emotional, subjective experience of the characters given their circumstances.

I find this framework useful and consistent with other studies of period dramas as well as time travel schemes. In a study about the time-travel American television series, *Quantum Leap*, Robert Hanke deals with how a time travel device, through which contemporary and past subjectivities are made to clash, creates a renewed sense of historical consciousness. At the same time, the past also functions as a new way to interpret problems of the present, as

> “most episodes don’t contain representations of the ‘real’ past. They take present dilemmas and vicissitudes of male friendship, romantic relationships, marriage, family, and career and displace them into a fictional past. At the same time, story guidelines advise writers to juxtapose contemporary information or attitudes with earlier times and places. In this way, the past is used to rehistoricize the present.”\(^7\)

In this sense, television and cultural products that are supposed to be about the past, so long as they are commercially marketed products, must rely on a serious relationship with the present. This concept fits well with Ang’s suggestions about viewer empathy. While the contexts and events of time-travel period dramas may be foreign to their audience, the characters, circumstances, and emotional experiences are by no means alien. Thus, when millions of young women all over China tune in to watch *Palace* or log on to discuss the show, whether favorably

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or unfavorably, they must share an intimate relationship with the characters on screen, relating
to their struggles and pains as well as reveling in their joys and triumphs. Furthermore, they do
so because Palace, though a historical fictional product, seeks to address modern issues in much
the same manner as Quantum Leap does in Hanke’s article. By placing the thoughts, desires,
and wants of an average contemporary woman against the backdrop of a completely different,
much more conservative culture of the Qing dynasty, Palace engages with those problems of
love and self-reliance denotatively and rhetorically. By digging deeper into what Palace really
conveys about the protagonist’s path to happiness and romance, we can unveil how this
engagement between Palace and the audience takes place.

A brief search into the existing literatures shows that scholars have paid little to no
attention to how Chinese time-travel period dramas relate to gender. The closest recent studies
on relevant topics have to do with the broader genre of Chinese period dramas and especially
emperor dramas. In Mainstream Culture Refocused: Television Drama, Society, and the
Production of Meaning in Reform-era China, Zhong Xueping devotes an entire chapter to
emperor dramas, examining how different portrayals and representations of the imperial past
negotiate contradictory messages embedded in the Chinese historical consciousness.8 In an
anthology edited by Ying Zhu, Michael Kane, and Rouyun Bai, TV Drama in China, Janice Hua
Xu argues that serious emperor dramas also function as a force in reforming or providing
nuance in the historical understanding of Chinese people. These dramas renew a sense of
appreciation for Chinese traditions and put on display a sense of uncertainty towards economic
progress and social change.9 Both these studies, and others in the genre, elide issues of gender in
Chinese period dramas, and, by default, Chinese time-travel period dramas.

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8 Zhong notes that while costume dramas are often sympathetic towards emperor figures, they are usually characters of tragic fates,
displaying a uniquely Chinese ambivalence towards interpreting the structural, personal forces behind an emperor’s success.

9 Xu, Janice Hua. “Yongzheng Dynasty and Totalitarian Nostalgia.” In TV Drama in China. Edited by Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and
Rouyun Bai. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008. 21-32
The only devoted analysis of time travel as a filmic device in understanding gender comes from Diane Negra’s study of Western films and television in *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postmodernism*. Here, Negra argues that time travel is used to “cheat” time, a means to extend an aging female protagonist’s ability to find love before she grows old or falls behind the feminine life cycle. In other words, Negra starts off on the premise that our present culture forces women to live their lives in conformance with certain roles that are realized during different moments in her lifecycle chronologically. Thus, time travel is concocted as a way to save those women who have become old without growing to fit the feminine roles ascribed to their age. She states that those women who have failed to become mothers or wives as they age are lost physically and literally in time travel films, because “one of the consequences of the heightened ritualization of milestones in the normative female lifecycle is that the lives of women without these experiences are temporally unmapped.” While I find this interpretative move insightful and useful in understanding American time travel films like *Kate and Leopold*, I find it unlikely that it would map on well to works like *Palace*. Furthermore, even with those Western cultural productions, I find Negra’s analysis too narrow to obtain a panoramic or comprehensive understanding of time-travel period works, especially *Palace*.

*Palace* is uniquely positioned at an intersection of culture, history, and politics both in general and in terms of feminist studies. Any cursory account of time travel in a Western context can overlook those Chinese and Chinese women’s specificities. More so than any other narrative, the Chinese historical consciousness emphasizes that of revolutionary transformation. Since the Communist Revolution in 1949, history books are filled with stories of the people’s liberation from 3000 years of ruthless, unceasing oppression, with the feudal landlords denounced, the farmers and women victimized at every turn. This story of the past also interacts with a desire to take pride in China’s past civilizations, when the Chinese were leaders in technology and culture, far ahead of their European contemporaries. Within such centrally packaged and mass

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indoctrinated images of history in mind, *Palace* places a “liberated” modern Chinese woman into its reviled yet carefully celebrated past. In accordance with this historical narrative, one would expect such a modern character to experience violent cultural clashes during her time-travel experience. However, the main character in *Palace* actually thrives under the patriarchal, imperial regime, serving happily as a palace maid and eventually finding her way to marrying a prince, engendering her own kind of fairy tale as a refugee in time. This puzzling treatment of time travel and temporal culture clash are compounded by the politics of transnational feminism that complicates any attempt to study *Palace*.  

Because of a unique history and cultural heritage, gender relations in China and “women’s issues” differ a great deal from those in the United States and elsewhere in the West. A long lineage of the Confucian family culture, which focuses on patriarchal power and hierarchy, has often prevented women from developing any sense of clear gender solidarity. More specifically, the post-Revolutionary woman’s consciousness is much different from that of the Western woman. Li Xiaojiang, a famous founding mother of feminism in China and critic of “Western feminism” noted in reflections on attending the 50th anniversary of the publication of *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir that women in China did not need reminders of their oppression from writers like Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. The post-Revolutionary narrative preaches and reiterates a past of oppression to Chinese women over and over again. What is more problematic, for many Chinese feminists, is the neutralization of gender during the various Maoist movements, when women were stripped of anything and everything traditionally feminine. In this light, it almost appears more urgent to re-gender women, away from the Iron

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11 In general, “transnational feminism” refers to “third-world” feminists’ critique of Western feminism as one that is overly focused on the concerns of privileged Caucasian women, failing to account for those women in other countries who have different sets of issues and stand at different intersections of oppression.


This point is best elucidated to me through courses and conversations with Professor Zhou.

Girl factory uniforms, rather than to deconstruct the woman as scholars do in the West. Chinese women today grapple with the tension between a myth of complete liberation and the lived reality of confusion, oppression, and double standards. While I fail to do justice to the various nuances in an East-West exchange in studying women, I hope I have made clear that it remains a challenge to study gender in China due to the vastly different context and the worry of evaluating gender performances based on a standard set by Western feminism.

To deal with these concerns about a cross-cultural project, I have two strategies: (1) I will contextualize my analyses within the cultural discourses and practices of each show. Contextualization will prevent me from jumping to preliminary conclusions about the representation of women on television based on my geopolitical, personal biases; (2) I will adopt a comparative study with a time-travel period drama from the West. This approach will help me see the significance and meaning behind the genre itself based on the commonalities shared. More importantly, it will shed light on what is unique to *Palace* and the Chinese mode of engendering time-travel period dramas.

As a counterpoint to *Palace*, I have chosen *Lost in Austen*, a British mini-series about a contemporary young woman who finds a portal to travel into the world of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. Both *Palace* and *Lost in Austen* focus on female subjectivities that are dissatisfied with their lives in the present and long to escape. While *Lost in Austen* also takes on an element of fiction, as the universe of *Pride and Prejudice* is a place imagined by Jane Austen, I do not think this will seriously impede my project. Because once Amanda travels into *Pride and Prejudice*, she deals with the same struggles of love, romance, and personal happiness as Qingchuan does in Qing China. The fundamental principles behind the use of “travel” in both shows appear basically the same. My analyses of both shows, while mainly focused on understanding how *Palace* engages present issues of gender in China, will also help us understand general fantasies of escape and romance in the Western context.

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#Footnotes

My methodology will focus mainly on narrative structure, dialogue, content, and the social contexts of both television shows. Because they are televisual products, I will sometimes also include analyses of mis-en-sène and cinematography. Mis-en-sène refers to what is usually seen or set up in a frame, including acting, lighting, make-up/ costume, setting, and movement. Cinematography has more to do with the camera itself, which sometimes also includes lighting. Movements of the camera, close-ups and panning, are generally included in analyses of cinematography. In general, my treatment of both Palace and Lost in Austen as cultural productions implies that I will be focused on conducting rigorous readings of gender dynamics and scenes, choosing and teasing out those moments I find most meaningful to the project at hand.

In the following three chapters, I will separately focus on the themes of escape, female homosocial spaces, and feminine successes. In chapter 1, I discuss the theme of escape as central to time-travel period dramas. The desire of the contemporary woman to escape functions as a critique on women’s conditions in the present and offers a way to leave behind the unsatisfying lifestyles led by the protagonists. Escape also symbolizes a form of exile, a compulsory means to punish and educate. The protagonists’ exiles present opportunities for them to undergo journeys that promise the resolution of problems with which they struggle at the beginning of the shows. In chapter 1, I set up the didactic nature of time-travel period dramas by virtue of its promise to present “solutions” at the end of the shows. In chapter 2, I define feminine success in each of the shows and what these versions of success really offer to the protagonists and audience. To complete this task, I first explore the competitive female homosocial space in Palace and argue why it creates a kind of feminine success that requires “beating” other women in a game for the best man. This conclusion is drawn in comparison to the cooperative and friendly female homosocial space in Lost in Austen, in which the protagonist’s path to happiness is not mutually exclusive to the romantic trajectories of the other female characters. Ultimately, I hope to show that an important mode of feminine success in Palace has to do with the manipulation of men,
whereas feminine success in *Lost in Austen* revolves around internal struggles of self-understanding. In chapter 3, these analyses culminate in an examination of the endings of the shows, which present the dilemma of staying or leaving the ideal mate/ the past. Chapter 3 is where I will account for most of the tension in studying “feminism” across cultures and societies by diving into a deeper exploration of different strategies of interpreting cultural productions. With regard to the Western cultural production, *Lost in Austen*, I believe that its solution to women’s problems in modern society takes on a radical postfeminist message, preaching the freedom of choice without moral and social-historical qualification. In turn, I will argue that the ending of *Palace* presents a kind of socially subversive narrative by breaking out of the Chinese post-Revolutionary liberation narrative and confronting the continuity of women’s oppression.

Studying cultural productions that appear to be superficial forms of entertainment, rapidly disseminated and forgotten in a matter of years, still holds relevance in its reflection of the societies in which it is consumed. In attempting to understand the massively popular Jane Austen nostalgia in the West, which I find comparable to a Chinese fascination with time travel and period dramas, Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield suggest that the project is much more than an examination of history in and of itself.\(^\text{15}\) Rather, the scholarly pursuit is to unpack those cultural products as holders of our desires, longings, and sense of our own inadequacy. Far from those cultural cynics who proclaim that television and media engage in a top-down, mechanized process of brainwashing its audience, I know that what is made, screened, and seen must both seek to capture and elucidate our own concerns. By subjecting these television shows to inquiry, what I really try to study is how contemporary Chinese women (and Western women) struggle to realize their dreams and hopes. I try to understand why they (as well as I) take joy in escaping with the protagonist of each show, what concerns motivate such a desire to get away and what we hope to derive from the experience. In answering these questions, I—and I hope those

reading this thesis—will gain insights into how women, both in China and the West, already do think about their lives and how they continue to be taught to do so.
Chapter 1

Escape or Exile? The Fantasy of Escape in Time-travel Period Dramas

In the pilot episode of Palace, the main character, Qingchuan, is persuaded by her mother to marry a man she has no interest in, staging a modern Chinese version of an arranged marriage. It soon becomes apparent that the marriage plot is merely a glimpse into a myriad of Qingchuan’s struggles, as she is constantly denigrated and dismissed throughout the rest of the episode. A similar set of events take place in Lost in Austen, pushing its protagonist, Amanda Price, into profound disillusionment and self-doubt. By openly acknowledging and wholeheartedly focusing on the misogyny of contemporary society, these shows cast women’s modern lives in a negative light. It is also through such explicit critique of the present that these television shows highlight the desirability of time travel, which allows the protagonists to escape to another, more ideal temporal space.

In this beginning chapter, I will explore how the present is depicted as a place where women like Qingchuan and Amanda are isolated and misunderstood. Such examination will allow me to understand how this narrative of the present makes time travel appealing for both of the protagonists. Through these analyses, I will argue that while a terrible present creates compelling motivations for each protagonist to run away into an alternative realm, it also puts on display the fatal flaws of each female lead that prevents them from happiness, making the adventures a necessary means of a gendered education. While escape serves as a common fantasy in both shows, the divergences in the exploration of this theme in the pilot episodes foreshadow differences in the nature of the education in question. While Lost in Austen presents with duplicity and irony the desire to escape, using the protagonist’s voice-over as a preemptive device against possible criticisms from the audience, Palace negotiates the twin roles of escape both as getting away and as forced exile. In Palace, the lack of exposition of the protagonist’s thoughts and desires invokes a will for retribution from the camera and its gaze, foregrounding her journey as a much harsher path of education compared to that of the main character in Lost.
In this way, the pilot episodes prove prescient of how *Palace* focuses on the suffering of the body, invoking harsh realities of poverty and physical abuse as evidence for why the protagonist needs to accept and navigate the world as it is. In contrast, *Lost in Austen* presents no such flagrant corporeal cruelty. It instead focuses on suffering at the internal and existential level, leading to a realization of personal transcendence as means of success and happiness. By diving deeper into how a Chinese and a British show set up such fantasies of escape, I assert that each show operates through a rhetorical impulse, often depicting the salient, hostile problems faced by modern women in their respective cultural environment. Furthermore, the differences uncovered will guide us in understanding the role of escape as a means of mediation between a modern culture that renders “womanhood” an impossible project and its simultaneous promise of freedom and pursuit of happiness. Ultimately, escape is a device that leads to a gendered education on how to navigate womanhood both by yielding to and problematizing forces of oppression against women.

Both appealing to the audience’ sense of sympathy for the main character and invoking an unfavorable judgment of her, *Palace* sets up the path of escape as simultaneously liberating and punitive. In the pilot episode, Qingchuan wakes up from a strange dream and learns that it is the day of her engagement party. While her mother urges her to get ready for the party, Qingchuan asks, “mom, you’re really making me marry Lin Feifan?” Without hesitation, her mother goes off on a rant about Feifan’s many virtues, narrating to the audience how Feifan rises to the occasion after Qingchuan’s father passes away to save the family business. Thus, Qingchuan is indebted to Feifan. Marrying him would not only repay the emotional and material debt, it would also ensure that Qingchuan’s family can count on Feifan’s financial contributions in the future.

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16 These topics of suffering as means of learning will be addressed more in-depth in chapter 2 and 3.
In terms of Chinese social and historical contexts, the scene here is highly evocative of China’s much denounced feudal system of marriage. This antiquated form of matrimony is often presented as a commodification of women and a threat to individual freedom with respect to the modern, revolutionary perspective. This shared ideology finds its roots in much of the writings from the May Fourth Movement, Communist Revolutionary propaganda, and revisionist interpretations of classical Chinese folktales. For instance, in 1919, Mao Zedong wrote a series of ten essays decrying the injustices of arranged marriage and calling for women’s emancipation. In these essays, he specifically singled out a story about a Miss Zhao who slit her throat while en route to the house of her future husband. The story behind this narrative is supposedly that Miss Zhao disliked her fiancé and dreaded marrying him. However, her parents had already agreed to the arranged marriage and refused to change their decision. Forced onto her marriage palanquin, Miss Zhao brought with her a razor and ended her own life. The actual details of Miss Zhao’s life remain unknown and how she interpreted her own suicide is obviously beyond speculation. However, in the politics of the May Fourth era, when Chinese intellectuals were eager to abolish those old customs that chained China to its fate as the “sick man of the East,” Miss Zhao’s act was read and hailed as a gallant tale of female defiance against the feudal order, a desperate cry for help against the oppression of arranged marriage.

In this way, many past Chinese folktales about failed love take on the color of hopeless defiance. The story of the Butterfly Lovers (Liang Zhu) has gained incredible popularity in contemporary Chinese film and literature. In the story, two lovers are kept apart due to differences in caste and parental prejudice. In the immensely popular and classic 1994 remake of the story by Hong Kong director Hark Tsui, the narrative takes on an especially tragic flair. In the film, the female protagonist, Zhu Yingtai, cries until her eyes bleed, leading to her blindness.

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Her lover, Liang Shanbo, is beaten and persecuted to death. At the end of the tale, a tornado disrupts the marriage procession and carves open a grave where Liang’s body lays, burying alive Zhu Yingtai so that the two lovers could remain together after death.20 Such representations of marriage in the Chinese past side unequivocally with the pre-established politics in mainland China that arranged marriage signifies the demise of all women’s happiness and autonomy. The visceral collective memory of the oppression of arranged marriage and its totalizing victimization of women is brought up in this episode of *Palace* as a form of resonance that underscores Qingchuan’s suffering. In her mother’s opinion, Qingchuan’s being able to marry Feifan is a tremendous fortune, as men like Feifan, who are hard-working, responsible, and loyal, are hard to find.

In addition to a rejection of personal agency, as Qingchuan is deprived of expression and control in her marriage, Qingchuan also experiences a barrage of attacks on her identity and personal character in the present time. Once at the engagement party, Qingchuan is disinterested in greeting the guests and Feifan’s family (see figure 1). Plugged into her Mp3 player, Qingchuan infuriates Feifan’s mother, who proceeds to call her, “average in appearance, poorly educated, and lacking in good manners.”21 Feifan’s mother thus proclaims her own dissatisfaction with Qingchuan and her lack of qualifications to marry Feifan. In ritualistic Chinese prescriptions of an ideal marriage, the families ought to be an appropriate match in terms wealth and status. Even in alternative imaginations of classical romance, the man and woman should be equal in intelligence, beauty, and moral virtues.22 These concepts of finding the appropriate match both in individual traits and family backgrounds persist into the present as a source of controversy. Mrs. Lin’s comments suggest gendered forms of social prejudice, putting forth objective standards required for Qingchuan or any other woman to marry well.

These remarks also reject any kind of individuality or alternative means to cultivate value in one’s life.

Though Qingchuan fails to conform to these dominant standards of feminine virtues, it is made clear to the audience that she displays an eager interest in and professes expansive knowledge of history, especially that of the Qing dynasty. A glimpse into her dream at the beginning of the episode shows us her outrage at a second-rate period drama that inaccurately represents the historical characters involved. After she wakes up, she is immediately immersed in a historical novel, apparently so much so that her mother threatens to burn the book to get her out of bed. These unique aspects of Qingchuan’s personality are unknown to the harsh Mrs. Lin. This narrative structure establishes an affinity between the protagonist, Qingchuan, and the audience, easily lending her experiences to our empathy. The metaphorical and physical manifestation of escape, away from the terrible present reality, seems reasonable and inviting at this point in the show.
In contrast with the much victimized and silenced portrayal of Qingchuan in her life in the present, a curious and feisty Qingchuan takes form when interacting with materials having to do with pre-modern Chinese history, marking historical learning and imaginings as a form of escape in *Palace*. When in front of her mother and future mother-in-law, Qingchuan is reserved and repressed. She speaks little and does not care to refute opinions that clearly run counter to her beliefs. This forced mannerism comes in sharp contrast with the Qingchuan we meet at the very first scene of the episode, which actually takes place in Qingchuan’s dream. There, she aggressively attacks the cast and crew of a period drama set in the Yongzheng era, denouncing their misrepresentation of those historical characters, especially the Yongzheng emperor (see figure 2). With this opening of the show, Qingchuan’s character as a passionate and somewhat quixotic amateur historian is made apparent. However, her colorful personality is overshadowed by the authoritarian presence of the elders in real life, making Qingchuan’s passions and interests insignificant and trivial. Thus, the dream realm, in tandem with the realm of the past, is one in which the most carefree and authentic Qingchuan resides.

Figure 2, Qingchuan interrupts a period drama film crew and protests their inaccurate historical representations
Without ever fully acknowledging it, Qingchuan also engages in this form of escape metaphorically through objects and texts that tie her to the past. When enduring the endless nagging of her mother, who beseeches Qingchuan to marry Feifan, Qingchuan picks up a worn-out copy of a Yongzheng era historical fiction and diverts her attention away from the reality embodied by her mother. Later at the engagement party, Qingchuan is captured by an antique painting on the wall and chases after the painting when it is blown out the door by a gush of wind, physically escaping the problems of the present by running away. While both the text and the painting may serve as signifiers of fate, which draw Qingchuan into the past, they are also symbols of escape that serve important roles in the character’s coping with the many sources of tyranny enumerated here.

The narrative setup in Palace is, by no means, exclusive to a Chinese model of period dramas, as the pilot episode of Lost in Austen puts on display the same bind for a modern woman. Amanda Price is portrayed as a perfectly average woman in her 20s with a stable job and a long-term boyfriend. But her deep sense of dissatisfaction with the overwhelming mediocrity of it all and a constant denial of how much she wants more are reminiscent of Qingchuan. Though without an overbearing mother and an ostensibly arranged marriage, Amanda encounters an engagement of her own when her boyfriend Michael proposes to her. After a drunken night out, Michael attempts to propose to Amanda with a ring ripped from the top of a beer bottle, “marry me, babes,” accompanied by a loud, disgusting burp.23 A close-up of Amanda’s face makes obvious her profound sense of disappointment. The classic eyeline match adopted here is traditionally used to present interaction between two people. A shot of Michael is followed by a reverse shot of Amanda. In this scene, the eyeline match pushes into the fore not only a lack of communication between the “lovers” but an acute absence of connection. As the camera cuts to a long shot, we see the great distance between Amanda, standing in the kitchen, and Michael, asleep on the couch, giving away our previous sense of illusion that the two were

side by side. Again, these cinematographic devices underline Amanda’s intense feelings of disillusionment and isolation.

Like Qingchuan, whose sense of individual identity and value is constantly threatened by figures of authority, especially matriarchs in her life, Amanda’s mother displays the same disparaging opinion towards Amanda’s desire for a better romance, reminding her of her own ordinariness and lack of qualification to demand more. “I am reminding you, Amanda, that you are what you are. If you waste your life pretending to be something else, you’ll regret it,” says her mother in a concerning tone (see figure 3).24 There in the home of a middle-aged, chain-smoking divorcee, Amanda is encouraged to settle for her sloppy, unromantic, and apparently cheating boyfriend because he might be the best shot she has at not ending up just like her mother. By using a reminder to reiterate Amanda’s identity as a woman average in appearance, talents, and background, the mother’s words reinforce an external sense of self that is defined by society.25 It is insignificant who Amanda makes herself out to be. When self-invention fails to be validated by society along with its standards of dating and mating, such a self is reduced to pretension. Amanda’s belief that she is someone deserving of a memorable romance, like those in Jane Austen novels, is rejected as a pompous fantasy, making her a mere impostor of those women who actually merit such romances.

24 Ibid. Episode 1. [5:35]
In the context of her modern life, Amanda or who she thinks she is simply cannot be, which lends itself to an alternative realm of escape. This longing is established with force in the very first scene, when we are presented with a shot of the Jane Austen novel *Pride and Prejudice*, retrieved from under a blanket by Amanda’s hand. The camera cuts to Amanda, settling into her couch as her eyes are transfixed by the pages of the text. Her voice-over narrates to us, “it is a truth, generally acknowledged, that we are always longing to escape. I escape, always, to my favorite book *Pride and Prejudice.*” Amanda’s introduction to *Lost in Austen* borrows from the original opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*, “it is a truth, generally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” Speaking in the voice of the narrator from the novel, Amanda imagines herself in the 19th century. As Austen is prefacing a story about men and women in the pursuit of marriage, Amanda gives abundant pretext to her own tale of wanting to become or actually becoming a woman who belongs in that Austenian world. Invoking the direct quote from *Pride and Prejudice*.

Prejudice, Lost in Austen negotiates the tenuous difference between the promise of romance in Austen’s story and the seeming lack thereof in the contemporary British life of Amanda Price. More importantly, these words highlight the sense of escape provided by reading. As Amanda utters to us dreamy words describing the elegant and romantic Austenian countryside, we see images of characters and sceneries in Pride and Prejudice with its pleasant evening balls in the summer and gallant young men riding horses into the sunset. The editing suggests that reading alone transports Amanda to that place of escape. One minute, we are in her living room, watching her pick up the book. Then, we are suddenly pulled into the imagination of Amanda, adopting her mental subjectivity that physically sees and takes part in the world of Pride and Prejudice (see figure 4).

Figure 4: Amanda takes us into the world of Jane Austen through reading.

Scholars have related this kind of escapist pleasure through reading with a productive discourse on the modern experience of womanhood. In her seminal work, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture, Janice Radway argues that reading novels that are presumed to be a reinforcement of patriarchal values actual functions positively in the
lives of many women. For the housewives and stay-at-home moms who deal with the daily
drudgeries of chores and caretaking, escape into a Harlequin novel actually helps them find a
space of their own to engage with difference notions of transcendence and female
empowerment.28 It is as Radway describes in her study, Amanda finds a source of comfort and
ease in reading *Pride and Prejudice* alone, mentally entering a place where she can really be who
she is, a woman with standards (for romance and more), even if her present reality tells her
otherwise.

While the challenges of the modern condition for women are similar in each show, the
theme of escape takes on great divergence between them, foreshadowing the completely
different trajectories on which each protagonist will travel. This divergence lays in the
duplicitous meaning of both relief and punishment inherent in escape (exile). While the
protagonists’ experiences kindle a sense of commiseration, they also face the anxiety over
transgressions against an entrenched patriarchal order, as their lack of interest in suitable mates
and desire to be ejected from the system altogether can also become sources of agitation. In
*Palace*, the desire for escape is complicated by another will for castigation, for the show implies
that Qingchuan needs an experience that will teach her to move beyond the naiveté and
impudence she displays in the pilot episode. In contrast, *Lost in Austen* avoids this excoriating
gaze from the audience by employing the voice-over persistently, allowing Amanda a self-
denigrating, reflective, and sardonic commentary that preemptively addresses the anxiety of the
male gaze. In the paragraphs to follow, I will define and explain what I mean by a “gaze” or the
“male gaze” and its power by borrowing from famous feminist film theorists like Laura Mulvey
and Mary Ann Doane.

University of California Press, 1976. 220-232. where Dyer discusses the ways in which mass art embodies a kind of utopian
sensibility that attracts a desire for escape.
While Qingchuan is portrayed in a positive and sympathetic light, this representation is fraught with infractions of the social order, invoking the punitive aspect of escape in the narrative meaning of the show. Her lack of appreciation for both her mother and Feifan as well as a complete disregard for authority make her seem naïve and passive-aggressive. In this light, escape is not a means to get away from the oppression of the present. Rather, it represents a challenging journey that is necessary to educate and reform the protagonist, pushing her to see the harsh nature of reality and make manifest her previous sense of entitlement to what she already has. This oscillation between empathy and castigation is much theorized in feminist film and television studies as the fluidity in the genderization of the spectator. While the feminized spectator can fully identify with the struggles of a female protagonist, there is constant tension between such identification and the inevitability of the male gaze. In both the original as well as a later piece on the afterthoughts of “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey discusses how the logic of filmic narratives and visual language imposes a male subjectivity onto the audience. Mulvey’s theorization—though Western in context—can certainly be applied to Palace, which does engage some more universalized tropes such as scopophilia. In this vein, we are constantly invited to investigate what Qingchuan really wants through the eyes of her mother, her fiancé, and even her potential mother-in-law. In a way, the pilot episode is centered around the question, “what does Qingchuan really want?” A limited range of narrative provides few insights into the thoughts and reflections of Qingchuan herself, the audience is forced to assume the positions of matriarchs and patriarchs, posing as agents of oppression in order to advance deeper in a psychological dissection of the female lead.

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31 Wolf, Margery. Women and the Family In Rural Taiwan. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972. For clarifications on the Chinese family and an understanding of matriarchs as one in which a woman ascends to the role of matriarch through patriarchal means and negotiates a network of male relations (husband and sons) as part of her uterine family.
With the frustration of this masculinized examination of Qingchuan, the longing to escape becomes retributive rather than empathetic. Qingchuan’s lukewarm interactions with the limited cast in the first episode suggests a sense of rebellion against their claim on her but refuses to pronounce the nature of her rebellion. At the engagement party, Qingchuan asks Feifan if he really wants to marry her, pointing out to him that she has many flaws. To this, Feifan kindly responds, “I like you, even your flaws.”32 As in the proposal scene in Lost in Austen, the scene is set in shot-reverse-shot with the classic eyeline match, indicating eye contact and interaction. Here, the technique is also used to highlight the lack of intimacy and understanding between the betrothed. Qingchuan nods to Feifan’s words and returns her attention to her Mp3 player. Unlike Amanda Price, who openly decries the absence of authentic romance, Qingchuan remains silent. The sense of hesitation and unwillingness only conveyed through her repressed mannerism. Compared to Amanda’s desperate confessions, which reveal to us all that she wants in place of her present reality, Qingchuan affords us nothing but silence, defying an eager gaze and its exploration of her desires and wants. The tension presented invites vengeance, making escape a means to teach her a lesson.

In her writings on film noir, Christine Gledhill proposes that female characters, especially the femme fatale, must be contained or killed at the end because they are constant sources of uncertainty for the male onlooker. By refusing to succumb to easily stereotyped, consistent personalities, female leads in film noir challenge and contribute to a failure of the male desire.33 Though vastly different in genre and cultural context, the character setup of Qingchuan in the pilot episode resembles Gledhill’s understanding of women in film noir. Qinghuan’s identity and image are unstable at best and constructed purely out of negations. In the beginning scene, we learn that Qingchuan rejects historically inaccurate television soaps (ironic in the context of the show itself). From the conversation between Qingchuan and her

mother, it is made obvious that she does not want to marry Lin Feifan. No more information is made explicit from Qingchuan to the audience or to any other character on the show. The entire identity of who she might be is constructed out of who she does not want to be. As both Mulvey and Gledhill mention in their psychoanalytic readings, the frustration experienced by the male/hegemonic characters in the show embodies that of the audience as well. As a result of this inability to demystify and domesticate Qingchuan into any single social narrative, escape as a means to “deal” with this character also becomes exile. By sending her away into even more harsh, oppressive conditions, the chance for Qingchuan to get away from her troubles in the present is fraught with an agenda to reform. This agenda seeks to amend her performance as an object to be looked at on the screen, demanding to know more about Qingchuan as a character.

Unlike Palace, Lost in Austen puts to great use the voice-over as a way for Amanda Price to fully unveil herself to us, which not only consolidates a sympathetic view of the character, it also avoids the drive for castigation in the function of escape. “I have no right to complain about my life,” says Amanda in her voice-over, as the camera pans from her nametag to a close-up of her face. Amanda is dressed in a red button-up shirt with a gray suit jacket, working in “customer relations” at Sanditon Life.34 What follows is a series of montage on the various clients with whom Amanda maintains relations. From the angry ex-boyfriend to the verbally abusive single mother, Amanda remains amiable and tolerant behind the desk, smiling through her chaotic and uninspiring day at work. While these individuals represent everything Amanda disapproves of in modern society, its lack of manners, respect, and civility, they are also a characterization of the temporal, social, and economic caste in which Amanda has found herself. Like Amanda or what she might become in a few years, these customers are lower (middle) class, inarticulate, and, most importantly, deeply and obviously unfulfilled. Reflecting on this collective suffering and powerlessness, Amanda says, “I do what we all do, I take it on the

While function as some sort of bank or insurance company here, “Sanditon” is actually the title of Jane Austen’s last novel, which she never finished, as Amanda’s own Austen story is just at its beginning.
When Qingchuan closes herself off from the interrogation of the camera, Amanda could not be more accommodating. Not only are the details of her dull, unrewarding lifestyle unequivocally portrayed in the first five minutes of the show, she even narrates and explains. At the same time, because Amanda admits that “she has no right to complain,” she prevents the audience from thinking this exact thing on our own. After all, she is quite privileged compared to the majority of the rest of the world, employed and a white woman in her prime. Her problems are mainly emotional and existential, rather than physical and material.

The use of the voice-over also addresses a fundamental issue in all Austen remakes, the loss of the ironic voice of Austen herself. By acting out events described in the novels, most filmic adaptations lose out on the author’s implied point of view, one that is fraught with ambivalence about the values endorsed in the novels, those having to do class, romance, and marriage. By using the voice-over in Lost in Austen, the ironic, implied authorial perspective is somewhat restored, as Amanda juggles the complicated relationship between a status quo that she should accept and the deep-seated longing for something better. Amanda addresses her attitude as “what we all do,” implicating the audience in her dissatisfied condition, suggesting that while we all know we should not complain, most of us wish our lives were not so damn lame (why else would one be watching Lost in Austen on a Saturday evening? Or any evening? Or ever?). Through the voice-over, Amanda humbles herself to the audience and invites the audience to become aware of itself as one who longs to escape with Amanda. When the inevitable sense of guilt that comes with discounting modern Western society and everything it has endowed upon us is acknowledged and acquiesced, escape becomes more inviting than ever. As that copy of Pride and Prejudice lies quietly on Amanda’s couch, the desires of both Amanda and her spectator are aligned, desperate for a quick adventure of pretend romance and happiness.

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It is as Richard Dyer outlines in his writing, “Entertainment and Utopia,” mass art engenders many otherworldly qualities that present to us both the characters within the shows and their spectators, the possibility of something better than the reality of our own. Dyer argues that such entertainment does not dwell on the specificities of utopian social organization, rather, “the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies.” In other words, television series like Palace and Lost in Austen open the doors to an alternative, more hopeful world by instrumentalizing the imagination, offering the sense of what it would truly be like to live and love in that other universe. Whether that destination of escape and its institutions are actually better, perhaps more just or egalitarian becomes irrelevant. That feeling of escape and pleasure are produced by sentimentality rather than reason. Into such utopias we travel with Amanda and Qingchuan, not only because they will patch up the pains and challenges of our own daily lives, but also because these epic journeys will act as a sadistic/ masochistic sources of reform. Through them, these characters (along with the audience) will find a way to live in the reality as it is, for the inability to do so implies failures and inadequacies of our own. Time-travel period dramas take on a deeply didactic rhetoric, as they provide a temporary solution that seems to promise lessons that resolve those problems in a woman’s life so saliently presented in the beginning of Palace and Lost in Austen. The escapist drive is shared by both the characters and the spectators, implicating us in the gendered educational foundations of these cultural productions.

As discussed in this chapter, nuances and divergences in how each show is plotted lead to drastically different modes of escape, one purely romanticist and the other fraught with retributive power. With this point of contrast, Amanda and Qingchuan’s journeys will take on completely separate trajectories. The following chapters seek to examine their respective paths in hopes of shedding insight into the nature of the lessons learned in each show and their significance within their specific cultural contexts.

Chapter 2

The Battlefield of Gender: How Palace and Lost in Austen Teach Women to Win

While in the present, both Qingchuan and Amanda find their romantic prospects unsatisfying, struggling to convince themselves that they can truly love the men they are encouraged to marry. Their escapes into the past provide opportunities for them to encounter the kind of love they desire. For Qingchuan, the Yongzheng emperor-to-be and the object of her historical fascinations prove to be an ideal mate. For Amanda, Mr. Darcy is every bit as unpleasant and proud as portrayed in the novel, presenting her the opportunity to will him into love as Elizabeth Bennet does. In this chapter, I will focus on the conception of feminine success that takes for granted the primacy of romance. While each protagonist finds the man of her dreams, it is up to her to earn his love or inspire him to commit to marriage. This burden is seen as an inalienable aspect of feminine success in the context of these shows because it is an outcome widely desired by the other women around the main characters. A closer analysis of both Qingchuan and Amanda’s paths of ascension towards an ideal marriage shows the different conceptions of feminine success in the Chinese and Western contexts. By valorizing each methodology to success, the shows attempt to educate their respective characters as well as the audience in what it takes to “win” as a woman.

To make my case, I will first introduce and argue that Palace necessitates a competitive homosocial female space into which Qingchuan is placed. Then, I will observe how Qingchuan cultivates her unique set of resources to assert leverage in this environment, necessarily making the minor characters around her foils to her success. I will compare this path to feminine success with that of Amanda Price. In Lost in Austen, supportive female friendships are much more common despite the pressure to win over an ideal marriage. This difference contributes to Amanda’s success with Mr. Darcy as one that does not assume the failure of the other women around her. Rather, the minor characters in Lost in Austen seem quite capable of finding

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38 Qingchuan does not actually end up with him at the end of the show, which I will cover in chapter 3. I do find their courtship an interesting example of wish fulfillment through escape, paralleling that of Amanda.
alternative forms of happiness that do not get in the way of Amanda’s central romance. While Qingchuan learns to engage actively with forces of patriarchy to achieve her ends, Amanda is made to realize that accepting who she really is will be her path to happiness.

In order to observe the nature of feminine success as a product of specific cultures of homosocial spaces, it is important to understand the homosocial environments in both the Chinese and Western contexts. In her work on women’s homosociality in Ancient Greece and pre-modern China, Yiqun Zhou finds significant differences between the bonds formed between women through rituals and festivities.\(^{39}\) She argues that Greek practices reflect an agonistic relationship between men and women (battle of the sexes), which allows women to come together outside of the family and form supportive, friendly bonds. In the Chinese context, however, the patrilineal family remains the locus of all social organization, making the management of familial female relationships a more central issue than that shared between extrafamilial women. In this way, Chinese women are also made much more reliant on their immediate male kin rather than on one another. This framework developed by Zhou is useful to conceptualize the more general differences between homosocial interactions in the Western and Chinese contexts.

The differences in portrayals of homosociality between *Lost in Austen* and *Palace* map onto these findings. Women in *Lost in Austen* are much more likely to forge supportive, mutually beneficial friendships than those in *Palace*. In contrast, Qingchuan and the minor characters live under constant pressure to perform domestic harmony as part of the emperor’s imperial court, while negotiating an undercurrent of fierce female competition that seeks out the favoritism of the closest patriarch. One difficulty remains in appropriating Zhou’s work for the project at hand. While her comparative study notes the power of extrafamilial female relationships in ancient Greece and confinement of female relations within the family in China, my cultural samples seem to invert these structures. In *Lost in Austen*, the

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Bennet women interact, more or less, within the context of kinship. In *Palace*, most of the women, from maids to courtesans, in fact share relationships outside their natal families. My approach to dealing with this challenge is twofold. First, I believe that the traditions, as studied by Zhou, serve as deeply influential precursors to much of the Western and Chinese imaginations of female homosocial relationships respectively. Their heritage takes on a multiplicity of forms and imageries while the spirit of the divergences remains. In that sense, the phenomena spelled out in Zhou’s text exert their influence on the two cultures even after the original social organizations that caused such differences have evolved and changed a great deal over time. Second, a closer look at the women in each show still generates a great deal of resemblance between *Lost in Austen* and the Greek examples in Zhou’s book, as well as between *Palace* and the Chinese works used by her. These convergences exist because the homosocial space does extend beyond the boundaries of family in *Lost in Austen*, involving characters such as Caroline Bingley and Charlotte Lucas. At the same time, while the women in *Palace* are not related in the sense of their natal families, they are, in a more grand sense, related with regard to a singular patrilineal figure, the male master whom they serve. Between the concubines and imperial maids, they can be said to engender the domestic space within a family because they are all women of the emperor and the relationships shared between them reflect the familial management of the emperor and the empress as masters of the “household” that is the imperial court. In short, I believe that Chinese and Western imaginations of female homosocial spaces continue to take root in their pre-modern forms, which are reflected in the shows studied here.
Competition and the Female Homosocial Space in *Palace*

Female homosocial spaces in *Palace* seem ubiquitously fraught with competition. Even when Qingchuan is speaking with her future mother-in-law, other hypothetically more qualified women are invoked to compete with Qingchuan’s chances of marriage. This sense of rivalry among women becomes more egregious after Qingchuan crosses over into the past. At the engagement party, Qingchuan is transfixed by a Yongzheng era painting on the wall of the antique shop. A gush of wind blows the painting off the wall as Feifan prepares to announce their engagement. In pursuit of the painting, Qingchuan runs out on the party and finds herself lost in the woods. The time travel scene comes abruptly and dramatically. The clouds gather and the stars align above Qingchuan, when suddenly the ground under Qingchuan sinks, leading her into a free-floating whirlpool of time. The scene cuts to a courtesan house in the Qing dynasty, where a pageant competition is unfolding. A contestant named Su-yan is about to emerge as the winner, when Qingchuan makes her magical appearance from the sky. As Qingchuan finds herself lying awkwardly onstage to the shock of a group of costumed spectators, a classical Chinese song starts to play on her mp3 speakers. Attempting to run away, Qingchuan clumsily trips and grabs onto a ribbon hung from the ceiling. Swinging from one corner of the courtyard to another, Qingchuan is interpreted by the crowd to be performing a dance to the music. This never-before-seen acrobatic dance draws much fascination from the audience, who then decides to choose Qingchuan as the beauty queen of the pageant (see figure 1).

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40 Later, it would be revealed to us that the painting was made by Yongzheng as a way to commemorate Qingchuan. Not only is this a form of foreshadowing, referencing the fated ending of the tragic love between Qingchuan and Yongzheng, it is also a token of destiny that will drive Qingchuan to its fulfillment.


The scenes presented here foreshadow an incipiently competitive relationship among women in the show’s representation of Qing China, as Qingchuan both intrudes into a web of pre-existing, antagonistic female relationships and readily participates in them. After Qingchuan falls into the time pool, the camera cuts to the courtesan house where Qingchuan will make her entrance. An establishing shot of the courtyard of the courtesan house puts on conspicuous display its own problematics of intra and inter-gender relations. While a group of colorfully dressed women perform a flirtatious dance onstage, groups of feasting men sit around the tables offstage, ogling and judging the women’s performances and beauty. The camera then cuts to close-ups of the women onstage, slowly moving away until it is centered in front of them, implicating the audience also in the scopophilic pleasures of viewing the feminine bodies. A beauty pageant as a metaphor for relationships among women is reminiscent of Andrea Dworkin’s famous use of fairy tales to explain the cultivation of intra-gender hostility between women.

43 As previously referenced in chapter 1, Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze” could not be more apparent here. The male gaze here is complicated by the fact that the vast majority of Palace’ audience is women. Mary Ann Doane offers a possible explanation to the female onlooker by positing that the female spectator fantasizes about being an object of desire, as seen on screen. Doane, Mary Ann. “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator.” Issues in Feminist Film Criticism. edited by Patricia Erens. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1990. 45-47
Dworkin argues that the paradigm of fairy tales displays the patriarchal drive for the most beautiful woman who is also suitable for the role of wife and mother. Confronted with this imperative to become the most valorized and cherished (thus the winner) among women, the singular woman is pushed to persecute others, as seen in the perversity and evil acts of Snow White’s stepmother. Beauty pageants, both in the filmic pre-modern China and in general, represent this mentality unambiguously. They organize a fantastical zero-sum game of winning and losing in the concept of womanhood, making the success of one the necessary demise of the others. In Palace, the female space in Qing China is conceived as such, “setting the stage” for Qingchuan’s escape.

Despite an obvious lack of integration into this courtesan culture and temporal space, Qingchuan is immediately invited and coopted into the pre-established female homosocial space under discussion. The first shot presented of Qingchuan in the midst of the courtesan women already singles her out as a source of menace in competition. The mis-en-scène situates her at the foreground, dominating most of the shot spatially. The other courtesan women, including the runner-up, Su-yan, are pushed into the background in a single file. The close-up granted to Qingchuan refuses a depth of field that would provide insights into the facial expressions and movements of those behind her. Instead, the focal point of the shot rests on Qingchuan, while everything behind her, the other women, are flattened and blurry, already rendered subsidiary by Qingchuan’s unexpected appearance. In terms of narrative structure, Qingchuan’s accidental win as a result of the magical sound effect produced by her Mp3 player as well as her unintended acrobatic performance seems a rather awkward logical stretch. But it seems to convey the rapid, perhaps inevitable, co-optation of Qingchuan into the war among women in the journey of her exile into history.

While the forces of female competition are powerfully exhibited in Palace, there are also moments of supportive homosocial bonds that appear empowering and perhaps even

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subversive. After drifting from place to place in the Qing dynasty, Qingchuan begins working at a local tailoring store. Due to a successful, modern fashion inspired marketing campaign, Qingchuan is kidnapped by an imperial concubine to work for her as a maid in the palace. Life in the palace is consistently challenging, as Qingchuan and the others have to bear the long working hours, mutual competition, and abuse from the princes and concubines. In response to these conditions, Qingchuan’s character is portrayed in an overwhelmingly positive light, as she chooses to stand up against the capricious princes who bully palace maids for fun and the head servants who treat the women unfairly. After entering the imperial court, Qingchuan meets Su-yan again, who is sent there on an espionage mission by the fourth prince. While attempting to seduce the emperor, Su-yan is found out by a concubine and sent to run laps in the garden. Exhausted and humiliated, Su-yan accidentally bumps into the eighth prince, who, in fury, condemns her to become a slave in the imperial labor camp.45 Passing by the garden, Qingchuan witnesses this scene and decides to stand up for Su-yan. She admonishes the princes for placing themselves above the law and punishing a servant unjustly. With Qingchuan’s help, Su-yan survives the fate of slavery. However, Qingchuan has also made herself the archenemy of the most powerful princes in the courts, inciting a series of bullying and abuse. Su-yan comes to Qingchuan’s aid during this trying time, saving her food and warning her against potential danger. Later in episode 9 and episode 12, Su-yan goes against the orders of her handler, the fourth prince, and refuses to kill Qingchuan, saving her life on both these occasions. The relationship developed between Qingchuan and Su-yan becomes a kind of sisterhood. Not only do they provide each other with emotional and spiritual support in the face of multiple sources of oppression ranging from class and gender to individual jealousy and resentment. In these instances, they resist the divisive pressures of oppression, refusing to abandon each other in order to save one’s own skin or gain an upper hand.

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This kind of close-knit relationship shared between Su-yan and Qingchuan seems incredibly promising as a kind of “protofeminist” gesture to combat what Andrea Dworkin argues is the way patriarchy pits women against one another. It would seem that they have survived the inherently competitive homosocial model in the Qing Palace by creating a cooperative, intimate space of their own. However, their friendship ultimately fails in the face of romantic rivalry, defeating the potential of feminine subversion in Palace.

This kind of unfulfilled feminist potential is echoed by Emily Honig when studying sisterhoods in post-World War I Shanghai. Emily Honig takes a close look at the ways in which female workers organized sisterhoods to protect themselves against street hoodlums and sexual harassment from the factory foremen. At the same time, they also provided material support for the members by collectively helping to pay for events like weddings and family funerals. Honig finds that while these may seem like a manifest declaration of the feminist consciousness, that is not necessarily the case, because “once formed, the sisterhoods did not inevitably lead their members to see that by acting collectively they could change their circumstances.”46 Like what Honig observes in history, the filmic, historical portrayal of the sisterhood developed between Qingchuan and Su-yan bears these qualities of protection and support. Not only do they help each other cope with the distress of service in the imperial courts, they supply each other with materials and information that sometimes prove to be lifesaving, often at the risk of their own well-being. However, Qingchuan and Su-yan’s ultimate purposes are to survive and find their own happiness through marriage. It is as Honig argues about the failed feminist potential of the Shanghai factory sisterhoods; their friendship is uninterested in bringing about any kind serious improvement in the life of a lower caste servant in their social environment.47 In the end, their individual interests lie in their own successful integration into the patriarchal, patrilineal order.

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involving a legitimate, socially upward-lifting marriage. When such interests come into conflict with their friendship, it is the friendship rather than the institutions of patriarchal marriage that breaks down. Without a doubt, shows like *Palace*, a romantic drama centered around women and produced for women, cannot escape the imprints left by a lineage of narrative making that predetermines the primacy of love.\(^{48}\) However, it is the directorial choices made in creating tension between female friendship and romance as well as the means to deal with such tension that becomes emblematic of the failure of sisterhood and the reinforcement of destructive intra-gender competition in *Palace*.

**Triumph in *Palace*: MAN-ipulation and Qingchuan’s Feminine Success\(^{49}\)**

In order to effectively examine Qingchuan’s individual actions that allow her to achieve feminine success as prescribed by the show, meaning a legitimate, loving marriage that brings upward social mobility, I will use the homosocial model I have developed so far. When at the courtesan house, Qingchuan prevails because she is presented as a novelty, an odd person, possibly not even from “the central plains” or a “female knight errant.”\(^{50}\) Both terms imply that Qingchuan is the one who does not belong or reside within the Confucian social order, as she is neither identifiable in terms of an attachment to a political organization (such as a palace maid servant) nor an affiliation with a social institution (such as a family).

Observing a trend that originates from the pageant scene, I argue that the key to Qingchuan’s feminine success, the ability to acquire a monogamous, socially upward-lifting marriage at the expense of the romantic pursuits of the other women, derives precisely from this characterization and perpetuation of her as a lone drifter, an unnamed, unaffiliated individual.


\(^{49}\) The pun “MAN-ipulation” owes its origin to Tania Modleski and her book *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*.

\(^{50}\) The central plains is the geographic area on the lower reaches of the Yellow River. While its political boundaries evolve, it is commonly used to mean the central administrative/ political areas of the historical, Chinese civilization. The implication of someone who is not from the central plains, in this context, is that she is of a minority ethnic origin (which would mean not Han or Manchu). This term is used by the madame in the courtesan house in episode 1.
This quality embodied by Qingchuan allows her to present herself as a vessel of transcendence for patriarchal characters in the show, thus persuading them to fall in love with her. For instance, in episode 4, Qingchuan enters the imperial courts as a maid servant. She is bullied by the other maids. While crying by herself at night, Qingchuan sees the fourth prince. The fourth prince empathizes with Qingchuan’s victimized status and conviction to overcome these challenges, as he struggles with the fight for the crown because his mother is a less powerful concubine. He teaches Qingchuan how to become more resilient.51 In this scene, Qingchuan immediately recognizes the fourth prince as an important figure. A shot of her puzzled face quickly cuts to a sepia-toned flashback of the fourth prince marching into the palace with his entourage. However, Qingchuan is quick to hide her recollection and pretends to not know the fourth prince, even postulating that he must be one of the guards. Through this concealment of knowledge, Qingchuan makes herself a stranger, someone the fourth prince can talk to without suspicion. Though the fourth prince can see that Qingchuan is a maid servant, he does not know who she is or what her allegiances are in the palace. Thus, there exists a mutual anonymity between the two. Within a dangerous palace plagued with violent, political competition, Qingchuan creates a space of authentic, personal interaction.

Later in the show, this kind of mystery surrounding their exchange is crucial in facilitating romance. In episode 19, the fourth prince visits the courtesan house Meng Xian Ju, The House of Heavenly Dreams, to drink after a nasty confrontation with his wife Jinzhi and after suffering much political defeat at court. When Qingchuan approaches him from behind the curtains, he asks, “who are you?” Rather than giving herself away, Qingchuan answers, “a person of Meng Xian Ju (a person of the house of heavenly dreams)” (see figure 2).52 Here, not only does Qingchuan avoid giving away her identity, she constructs a surreal space outside of and beyond reality by referring to herself as one from the house of heavenly dreams. Though

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52 Ibid. Episode 19
intended as a sexually invocative name for a brothel, the phrase (the name of the brothel and the response) works to make Qingchuan appear otherworldly. Not only is she from another domain that is beyond the world of humans, she is conceived of as an entity in the dreams of those in the other domain, suggesting that perhaps she is not even real, a phantom or a figment of one’s imagination. The fourth prince challenges her claim to mystery by asking, “do those in the house of heavenly dreams have no worries?” Qingchuan replies, “we do as well.” She proceeds to advise him that he should confide in someone and let out his feelings as a way to cope. Qinghuan persuades him to trust her, “because we are strangers. Tonight, fate brought us here together. After tonight, neither one of us will know the other.”

By following a modern intuition that emphasizes the role of catharsis as a therapeutic mechanism and promising to maintain a safe, confidential space, Qingchuan allows her “patient” to feel far removed from the concerns and stressors of his daily life. After this initial visit, the fourth prince comes to trust that he has a confidante behind the screen, whom he knows nothing about. This anonymity provides a sense of safety and comfort for him, away from the cautious and scheming lifestyle he leads with his royal family. It is in these nightly conversations that romance, as well as the fourth prince’s dependence on Qingchuan, grows. By the time that the fourth prince finds out it was Qingchuan all along, he becomes determined to marry her at all costs.

53 Ibid. Episode 19
Figure 2: The fourth prince confides in Qingchuan whom, hidden behind the screen, he does not recognize.

Through a continued insistence on creating distance between herself and an established social order, Qingchuan becomes a symbol of removal and escape, which translates into an object of desire and longing for the fourth prince, as he struggles more and more to deal with the unpleasant reality of his own. The irony here rests in that Qingchuan is also an escapee herself, having used imaginations of the fourth prince, the Yongzheng emperor, to deal with the mediocrity of her own life while in the present time. Having traveled into the past, Qingchuan lends herself to the fourth prince as a vessel of escape, allowing him to leave behind the pressure and exhaustion of the political war for the crown. The effect Qingchuan has had on the fourth prince is first and foremost a consequence of her fantastical entry into the past, a product of her being from a different temporal space entirely. However, these examples cited above also show a certain degree of artifice crafted by the character herself. Despite an unlikely twist of fate, which transports her back in time, Qingchuan is also an agent in situating herself and performing what she believes to be a carrier of trust and happiness for the fourth prince. While the specific intentions and motivations of a fictional character are beyond speculation and perhaps
irrelevant to the inquiry at hand, what can be determined is the nature of this phenomenon of fostering love in *Palace*. It is by elevating a female figure into the realm of the mystical, utilizing her as an enabler of transcendence that a woman proves her value and gains the confidence and intimacy of the man she loves.

This status and conceptualization of women as one of the mystical, a healer of wounds and source of inspiration for men is theorized by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. When unpacking the myths that determine women’s philosophical function in society, Beauvoir tells us that women serve as mediation between man and nature, which inspires horror otherwise. Just as the woman is reviled for the menstrual blood as contamination, she is revered as a goddess who connects man to the divine (nature, God, etc.). Though theorized from a different cultural context, we can obviously see the application of Beauvoir’s work in *Palace*. As the fourth prince does with Qingchuan,

> “man wishes to attain the goals he sets without the help of his peers, and he would find another man’s opinion inopportune; but he supposes that the woman speaks to him in the name of other values, in the name of wisdom that he does not claim to have, more instinctive than his own.”

In this dialogue, the fourth prince is consistently portrayed as a lone talent, an unpopular and reserved prince who seeks to gain power through manipulation rather than the civil endorsement of others. Though intelligent and thoughtful, he lacks amiability and investment in the well-being of others, which isolates him from his brothers and colleagues. Under the pressure to become more powerful against the competition of other candidates for the crown, the fourth prince grows increasingly anxious but is unable to find resolution with those men around him, as he refuses to trust them. As so keenly observed by Beauvoir, the feminine Other, embodied by Qingchuan, becomes an acceptable means to confront his struggles. Speaking to a woman hidden behind the screen, the fourth prince’s failures and pains can be temporarily

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Historians have also found Chinese conceptions of the menstrual blood as a source of contamination, see Furth, Charlotte. “Blood, Body, and Gender: Medical Images of the Female Condition in China, 1600-1850.” *Chinese Science*, 1986, 7: 43-66.
55 Beauvoir, 199
unleashed without damage to his masculinity and strength. The lessons in trust and love offered by Qingchuan appear intuitive and emotional in contrast with the classical, canonical cultivation of the imperial courts. This intervention of the feeling staged by Qingchuan is both crucial to the fourth prince and yet insubstantial, for its sentimental content seems to barely constitute a mode of edification. Their relationship is that between an artist and a muse, a man and a woman, in which Qinghuan aids the fourth prince in completing his own projects without creating anything of her own. Through the feminist perspective of Beauvoir, it is undeniable that Qingchuan’s path of ascension is indeed one of compliance with patriarchy rather than one against it.

I will further the conception offered by Beauvoir to say that Qingchuan manipulates patriarchy rather than simply acquiescing to it in order to get what she wants and that this approach is precisely how Qingchuan is educated. This education is ostensibly transmitted to the female viewer. I make my argument based on a minor revision to Beauvoir in the context of this Chinese cultural product, which is that Qingchuan does not simply help the fourth prince in his own projects, rather, she uses her influence over him to turn her projects into his, thus fulfilling her own needs via the power and willing cooperation of a patriarch. Rather than an instrument to the male, Qingchuan plays into the dynamic as such in order to instrumentalize him in pursuits of her own.56 While he originally visits the courtesan house to cope with the stress of fighting for the crown, by the time he realizes that he loves Qingchuan, the fourth prince is convinced that he ought to abandon politics and divorce his wife. By playing into the muse relationship, Qingchuan actually wins everything she wants from the man instead of the other way around.

I further my case with a particularly salient comparative study between Qingchuan and another minor character on the show, Jinzhi. In Jinzhi’s character, I find that Palace is not

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56 There is a series of emergent internet vernacular that describes this phenomenon, where a person manipulates his/her way to date/marry another out of their league (in terms of class, money, education, appearance, etc.) key words: 尴尬逆袭, 屌丝逆袭. Film, television, and literature have all widely captured this phenomenon. It is certainly without coincidence that it appears in Palace. The self-help nature of such cultural products are also evident.
unable to imagine a more reactionary attitude towards the challenges that lay between the Qing filmic reality and the female characters’ desire for a monogamous, faithful marriage. However, by condemning Jinzhi and her management of her relationship with the fourth prince, the plot of *Palace* shows active preference for Qingchuan’s guileful approach. Jinzhi is first introduced in episode 5 of *Palace*, when the fourth prince tracks her down after a brief encounter with her through her father. In a scheme to manipulate her father to help him seize the throne, the fourth prince learns that she loves opera and attempts to seduce her at the opera house. After spotting her there, the fourth prince invites Jinzhi to sing with him. During a flirtatious interplay between their opera characters, the fourth prince lifts up Jinzhi’s face with his fan, speaking in verse his affections for her. Jinzhi begins crying and recounts to us her longing for and fear of love. Through this monologue, we learn that Jinzhi’s father fell in love with her mother, an actress at the opera house. Due to a difference in status, they were not able to marry. This doomed her mother to a tragic fate, serving as the mistress to the love of her life. Though her feelings were reciprocated, Jinzhi’s mother had to watch her father take on another wife and concubines. Jinzhi tells us “I have been yearning to find someone with whom I fall in love upon first sight. However, I am also afraid of making the same mistake as my mother.”

The fundamental dilemma for Jinzhi here is the tension between arranged marriage and free love. This is a classic and well-established discourse in Chinese history and literary imagination. In *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China*, Haiyan Lee examines marriage as an important aspect of the Confucian, patrilineal social order. She elucidates that marriage has much more to do with duty and virtue rather than romantic preference. This understanding of marriage relegates the possibilities of romance to a peripheral world of courtesans and actors. The tension between the righteous wife/mother and the talented,

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beautiful courtesan represents the often impossible gap between obligation and romance.\textsuperscript{58} For Jinzhi, this worldview seems to represent her temporal reality. She desperately hopes to annihilate the difference between the two and find an ideal marriage that has both legitimacy and love.

On her wedding night, Jinzhi asks the fourth prince to make her a promise, “that I am the only one you will love and care for in this life.” Seeing his hesitance, Jinzhi retorts,

“this shouldn’t be difficult. If the fourth prince truly loves me, naturally, he would not have eyes for other women. However, if the fourth prince does not love me, he must have some other purpose for painstakingly getting me to marry him. Then, he should do right by his duty and make it all worthwhile.”\textsuperscript{59}

Unlike Qingchuan, Jinzhi is not from another era where alternative forms of love and marriage define the norm. Jinzhi’s character is one without a secondary perspective or intellectual awareness of the problematic institutions that define her anxiety over polygamy. She is portrayed as someone exclusively devoted to what she believes she wants, in a way that is almost amoral and sociopathological.\textsuperscript{60} In this way, Jinzhi hopes to change the male and class centered nature of marriage out of self-interest. Since she cannot find broader justifications, other than her own feelings, for why a partner in marriage/love is entitled to demand fidelity, Jinzhi resorts to “acting out” as a way to reform polygamous marriage in imperial China.

Jinzhi’s hope for a mutually affectionate, monogamous marriage is no different from Qingchuan’s vision of romance. Jinzhi’s stubborn efforts to protect a monogamous relationship with the fourth prince parallel and anticipate Qingchuan’s demands on the fourth prince later in the show. In episode 19, Qingchuan receives word from the fourth prince that they will be granted marriage soon. While elated by the good news, she quickly realizes to herself that “he will become the Yongzheng emperor in the future. If I go with him, then I would have to share


\textsuperscript{60} Here, the word “sociopathological” is used because Jinzhi, at times, actually displays violent, murderous tendencies toward those women who threaten her marriage. In fact, she attempts to kill Qingchuan based on an unfounded suspicion (earlier in the show) that Qingchuan is involved with her husband.
one man with many other women.”61 Reluctantly, she says to the fourth prince, “but the kind of love I want is for only one person for an entire lifetime. But you…” Though she does confess to the fourth prince the nature of her concern, she does so indirectly. Rather than making clear she would only marry him if he can maintain monogamy, Qingchuan avoids placing pressure and blame onto the fourth prince by simply describing what she wants. Knowing what Qingchuan is suggesting, the fourth prince immediately decides to divorce Jinzhi. I see Qinchuan’s rhetoric here as massively similar to Jinzhi’s crude, expose-esque, self-centered monologue on her wedding night. Both are simply ways to unleash demands of fidelity. However, to Jinzhi, the fourth prince says no, but to Qingchuan, he acquiesces without her even making explicit what she wants.

While Jinzhi exhibits a sense of entitlement to demand loyalty in marriage, Qingchuan displays a sense of removal from existing conditions and practices. She voices her desires in the singular “I” rather than imperatives on another. By stating plainly, “but the kind of love I want,” Qingchuan stands by her beliefs and pursuits with certainty. However, she stops short of asking another person or demanding her circumstances to accommodate those “wants.” In contrast with Jinzhi’s ruthless, narcissistic harassment of the fourth prince throughout the show over suspicions of infidelity, Qingchuan pronounces what she is looking for and seems willing to walk away from anything that falls short. In these terms and in the filmic world of Palace, what Qingchuan does seems virtuous and deeply moving. However, what appears to be profound humility and self-awareness in Palace can also be read as passivity and implicit conformity with a deeply oppressive patriarchal order. When placed in juxtaposition, it astounds me that Jinzhi is the woman of “old society,” as she does complete justice as a representation of a feminist activist, valiantly protesting against an inherently unequal system of marriage, constantly pointing out its/its enforcers’ flaws and hypocrisies.62 On the other hand, Qingchuan is

61 Ibid. Episode 19.
62 “Old Society” is a term commonly used in Chinese Communist propaganda. It denotes the deeply oppressive feudal order before the 1949 Revolution.
supposed to be the modern woman. She nearly lives up to this origin in the beginning of the show when she stands up against the princes who bully palace maids for fun. However, as deeper issues of love and marriage come to the fore, Qingchuan appears more traditional than ever, seemingly defeated by dominant forces of social control, uninterested in creating change for the better (personally and otherwise). What remains paradoxical is that it is only through this appearance of defeat that Qingchuan wins in the end, getting the fourth prince to willingly commit to monogamy for good. She gets what she wants by getting him to want what she wants. What Qingchuan seems to have learned and practices in Palace exhibits the peak of successful womanhood, turning the patriarch against himself in the interest of the woman.63 By comparing Qingchuan against Jinzhi, it is clear that Palace as a cultural product has no interest in systematic and institutional change, refusing to even indulge in the potential of subversion. Rather, it preaches, both to the characters as well as to the viewers, that women can only change their weakened status by acting as if one is playing into a man’s game. Those who perform like Qingchuan will win in the end, decimating the hopes and dreams of other women, not because of their intellect and ability to fight for change. Rather, it is because they are able to avoid artfully the antagonism inherent in overcoming the patriarch by leading him to believe that she will not fight against him, through which she persuades him to fight her battles for her and compromise his own ends.

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The Homosocial and the Homoerotic: Women’s Relationships in *Lost in Austen*

I will now turn to *Lost in Austen* to observe how homosocial spaces and feminine success are conceived drastically differently in a British/Western context. The *Palace* model of the homosocial and feminine success come into powerful contrast with that of *Lost in Austen*, where female friendships are much more common and the happiness of the main character, Amanda Price, is not scripted as mutually exclusive with the happiness of other female characters. Inside the Bennet house, the women constitute a universe of their own, with little or no male participation. After her first night there, Amanda awakens with Lydia Bennet inside her bed, who proclaims with surprise “oh you’re miss Price of Hammersmith. I thought you felt funny. I often get into bed with Lizzie at night. [...] What preparation do you use for you hair? It is most pungent.” The casual intimacy on display here suggests a close-knit female space inside the Bennet house. While the male sex is clearly absent here, the sexual is not. The physical contact and bed-sharing between Amanda and Lydia fall nothing short of homoerotic, as Amanda jumps out of the bed and screams, “what’s the deal here? Are we on live cable or something? Oh come on, what are you after, guys? Is it a little girl on girl action under the covers?” The use of homosexual imagery furthers a sense that the male is not only absent, it is not needed or called upon. Amanda’s paranoia emphasizes this point further, as her imagination of a “male” camera crew in the room is ridiculed by both Lydia and the viewer. In contrast with the pageant scene at the beginning of *Palace*, which depicts the competition among women based on patriarchal aesthetic standards, the conversation shared between Lydia and Amanda is one of nascent sexual curiosity and exploration, rather than jealous mutual comparison. Lydia’s question about Amanda’s hair treatment as well as her later observation about Amanda’s shaving of her pubic area, which Amanda pulled out as another way to further agitate the imaginary camera crew, both suggest a lack of regard for another woman as competition but only as a compatriot of

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sorts, as all women deal with and must prepare their hair, whether it is on one’s head or one’s pubis. When Amanda arrives downstairs for breakfast, we are presented yet again with another domestic, exclusively female scene. The Bennet sisters are sitting around the dining table, the topics under discussion include fashion, Mrs. Bennet’s anxiety, and of course, Mr. Bingley. The harmonious, peaceful, and friendly relationships under portrayal here strike a powerful contrast with scenes of the scheming, backstabbing maid servants’ quarters inside Palace (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Jane Bennet invites Amanda to join the sisters for breakfast.

While recent feminist scholarship often excludes kinship from the discussion of homosocial friendship and love, I find the contrast striking insofar as the community under observation in Lost in Austen is elastic and inclusive, not necessarily bound by blood relations, as it readily welcomes Amanda as well as individuals like Charlotte Lucas. At the same time, the expressions of an all-female, harmonious community is shown verbally, narratively, and

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66 The scene of female domesticity and homeliness is drastically different from Amanda’s life in contemporary England, where she lives alone and struggles to find genuine human connection. Pucci observes this as a general phenomenon in modern Austen films, arguing that it is a desire to return “home” as means of coping with contemporary urbanized, globalized living.


67 Charlotte Lucas is a family friend of the Bennets’; she is particularly good friends with Lizzie Bennet and later marries Mr. Collins.
visually. The visual language used here, including the soft lighting, uniform clothing, and group shots, conveys a general sense of shared womanhood. These elements of mis-en-scène and cinematography are saliently different from those in Palace, where women are always dramatically adorned in highly saturated colors. Rather than shots of groups conversing together, their interactions are characterized by close-up individual shots, which deliver a sense of antagonism and confrontation. The few moments when maidservants are portrayed in long shots together, they are either collectively bullying a member of the group or engaged in pageantry in front of their superiors.68

While female competition is present in Lost in Austen, it is often diffused by the realization or revelation of the women’s individual, non-conflicting goals. Like in Palace, romance and the pursuit of the ideal partner, the most wealthy, handsome, and talented man, pushes plotlines of jealousy and contention among the women in Lost in Austen. As described in the original Pride and Prejudice, Caroline Bingley stands as a powerful obstacle to marrying Mr. Darcy and persists in humiliating the Bennet girls. On the path to marriage with Mr. Darcy, Amanda Price similarly encounters the romantic rivalry of Caroline Bingley. Throughout the first three episodes, Caroline consistently finds ways of reducing Amanda to embarrassment. At a dinner party in Rosings, where Amanda first meets Lady Catherine, Darcy’s powerful aunt, Caroline casually suggests that “her ladyship must demand the festival for the senses that is Miss Price’s music.” In response to Caroline’s conspiring expression, Amanda retorts in her head and to the audience, “you think you’re the girl for him. Step off, Caroline, you conniving, smirking... BUMFACE!”69 The antagonism between the two is more than obvious, as Caroline finds Amanda lacking in talent and sophistication and Amanda thinks Caroline depraved in character. They find each other equally undeserving of the seemingly perfect Mr. Darcy, and continuously sabotage one another’s efforts to be closer to him. This sense of female competition

that presumes the primacy of marriage as the ultimate goal of womanhood is similar to the toxic homosocial environment in *Palace*.

However, *Lost in Austen* finds a rather creative way to dissolve such tension, thus recuperating the theme of female cooperation and shared happiness. At the end of Episode 3, Amanda and Darcy open up to one another and confess their love. However, when Darcy finds out that Amanda is not a virgin, he announces that it is impossible for them to marry. In the face of such devastating defeat, Amanda returns to her room to pack and leave, when Caroline makes an appearance in her room. While Amanda is apprehensive of what Caroline might do this time, Caroline attempts to approach Amanda with tenderness in her eyes. Presuming that Amanda is a lesbian, which Amanda concocted to reject the affections of Mr. Bingley, Caroline confesses,

“the physical society of men is something I have never sought. [...] But the poetry of Sappho is the only music that shall ever touch my heart. Though I have yet to play upon the instrument myself. I wanted you to know this and form a sisterly communion before you scuttle back to Hammersmith, you tawdry little squib.”

As Caroline speaks these words of longing and fantasy, she slowly approaches Amanda and starts to lightly stroke Amanda’s lips, insinuating the “playing of the instrument” of the female sex organs (see figure 4). With the homoerotic plot between Caroline and Amanda, physically and visually drawing closer their relationship with one another, their competitive relationship is complicated and somewhat resolved, as Caroline ceases to be a “real threat” in that she is not even interested in men. Though Caroline is still determined to marry Darcy out of convenience and propriety, the nature of the competition has changed. Caroline only accepts heterosexual marriage as her own end socially but has no interest in it personally. Her wish, as is conveyed through her little confession to Amanda, is to marry a man and endure him as well as she can while carrying out Sapphic affairs on the side.

Earlier in the show, Caroline consistently makes fun of Amanda for being lower-class

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70 Ibid [40:57]
and lacking in refinement, exposing her failures to perform the rituals of high society. Here, the endearing though somewhat diminutive nickname “tawdry little squib” connotes that Caroline has enjoyed those moments of bullying previously not only because she wants Darcy to dissociate from Amanda but also, perhaps more importantly, because she is secretly drawn to Amanda. Amanda’s lower-caste “cheapness” comes with a certain degree of glamour and allure, thus “tawdry,” like a piece of plastic jewelry that may not endure (such as in marriage) but commands great temptation. This scene of homosexual love challenges the most prominent set of romantic competitors in Lost in Austen, thus strengthening the homosocial sphere in Lost in Austen as more harmonious and conducive to friendship than the one in Palace. In part, this is because women, even those in competition, turn out to have divergent goals that make the happiness of each not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Figure 4: Caroline Bingley attempts to seduce Amanda.

The peaceful resolution of potential romantic conflict includes the implication of Elizabeth Bennet, who loses her opportunity to marry Darcy as a result of her traveling into the present. While this would seem to create conflict between Elizabeth and Amanda, Elizabeth actually realizes that she is not interested in staying in Victorian England and marrying Darcy.
Rather, she would prefer to remain in contemporary England. This twist in the plot, again, helps to restructure the homosocial space, making the perfect romantic ending one in which Elizabeth can pursue other womanly ideals, ones that cannot be afforded to her in Victorian-era England. In this sense, Elizabeth and Amanda are scripted to pursue entirely different kinds of happy endings that do not conflict with one another. Not only do these non-conflicting goals prevent the two women from growing to hate and compete against one another, they enable Elizabeth and Amanda to foster and encourage each other’s pursuits, allowing their friendship to endure and flourish.

Having established that the homosocial space in Lost in Austen turns away from competition and opts for a more friendly, mutually beneficial model, I now investigate what Amanda has to do in order to earn the ideal marriage. Unlike Qingchuan, who must manage to stand out against all her female competitors and play into structures of patriarchy, Amanda’s obstacles are much more internal than external. For Amanda, traveling into the fictional, historical world teaches her to reconsider her own understandings of identity and desire. The biggest obstacle that threatens her happy ending with Darcy is related to herself: a categorical refusal to acknowledge her love for Darcy.

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Learning about the Self: Amanda’s Path to Pemberley

Amanda’s sense of self-denial when it comes to her affection for Darcy is constructed by her own narrative about her relationship with Jane Austen novels. She believes that she merely appreciates those aspects of Austen stories that are lacking in modernity, such as the decorum, elegance, and sentimentality. She reiterates in the first half of the show that she is not “hung about Darcy. I do not sit at home with the pause button and Colin Firth in clingy pants.”73 Making this statement to her mother during a frustrated conversation about why she does not want to marry her cheating boyfriend simply because she lacks better prospects, Amanda anticipates her mother’s criticism that her standards are set based on a fictional, idealized character. Amanda contends that she is not one of those crazy Janeites who purchase cardboard cut-outs of Mr. Darcy and save all her money to play dress-up at the annual Jane Austen Festival in Bath.74 By making clear that she loves the fairy tales of Jane Austen without actually wanting to be in one, Amanda distances herself from the immediate, popular conception of a nearly middle-aged woman who is so obsessed with Jane Austen that they become the social equivalent of a comic book geek. At the same time, Amanda wants to assert that she is more sensible and reasonable, not deluded by works of fiction like some other Janeites might be.

Once inside the world of Pride and Prejudice, Amanda continues to renounce her desire for Mr. Darcy by clinging onto a kind original narrative integrity that insists on the union between Darcy and Elizabeth. In episode 2, Jane Bennet expressly advises Amanda to take an interest in Darcy, telling her to “look to Mr. Darcy. He is an insufferable, proud man. But he has qualities.” Amanda immediately dismisses Jane’s opinion, “no, Darcy is not for me. Darcy is for Elizabeth. It’s her destiny to be with him.”75 While the romantic possibilities between Amanda and Darcy are made quite clear, Amanda immediately invokes Elizabeth Bennet to avoid

addressing such potential. Like earlier with her mother, Amanda’s respect for the happy endings in *Pride and Prejudice* mediates her love for Darcy and makes any kind of intervention in the completion of the novel’s romances seem unethical. Amanda shows that her admiration for the romances in *Pride and Prejudice* does not come from a kind of wishful thinking that usurps the spotlight. Rather, it is the total embrace of the whole text that demonstrates her devotion to Jane Austen.

Jane’s persuasion for Amanda to accept her blossoming romance with Darcy is reiterated when Jane witnesses Darcy’s nascent desire for Amanda at Rosings. This episode takes place after a heated confrontation between Amanda and Darcy, one in which the two are driven to rage over the failed romance between Jane and Bingley. As Darcy instructs Bingley to turn away from Jane, Jane decides to marry Mr. Collins and move with him to Rosings. When visiting Jane, Amanda is invited to dine with Lady Catherine, Darcy’s aunt. Still angry about their argument, Darcy condemns Amanda for coming to Rosings but ends up nearly kissing her, as a swept up Amanda asks, “are you quite sure this is what you mean to do?” Having seen this romantic gesture, Jane tells Amanda that Darcy is in love with her. A frenzied and shocked Amanda, exclaims “no, he can’t be. That doesn’t make sense at all. That’s crazy. Darcy, OK, and ... Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn, not Darcy and Amanda Price of W6!” Amanda shakes her head wildly as she says this, appearing tormented and conflicted. As suggested in her earlier attitude towards the Darcy-Elizabeth pairing, Amanda seems to hold this story as something sacred, as a representation of the possibility of such romance, even if fictional. The idea that Amanda herself may end up with Darcy rather than Elizabeth seems to offend her notions of how the Austenian cosmos operates. Implicit in her words of protest, juxtaposing Longbourn with W6, the modern postal code of Hammersmith in England, is the belief that she is not

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deserving of Darcy as Elizabeth is.\textsuperscript{77} Not only is Elizabeth the most beloved, strong, independent heroine of Jane Austen’s novels, she is from Longbourn, the idyllic English countryside from the 19th century. In contrast, Amanda’s place of residence, W6, almost sounds like some sort of dystopian slum, where alienation, oppression, and depressingly monotonous fashion rule the land. Elizabeth seems the rightful heroine who finds her way to Darcy’s Pemberley home, rather than Amanda, who is an alien both temporally and culturally. Ultimately, we see that it is Amanda and her own disavowal that stands in the way of a happy union with Darcy. Not only does she continue to use the story between Elizabeth and Darcy as an excuse to avoid addressing her feelings towards Darcy, she refuses herself the right to be loved by Darcy, because she finds herself unworthy of it. That rationalization is why Jane so painfully attests, “I think you are a good person and you deserve happiness!”\textsuperscript{78}

For Amanda, love readily presents itself, but she persists in refusing it because she cannot come to terms with what her heart really wants. The myriad of explanations and excuses heard through both dialogue and voice-over reveal that Amanda is afraid of who she is, as well as what she really desires. It is as Lady Catherine so shrewdly observes to Amanda, when she denies that she wants to marry Mr. Darcy, “what you want, my dear, frightens you to death.”\textsuperscript{79} Through these pivotal moments in the show, it becomes clear that the lesson Amanda needs to learn is about herself, to overcome her own fears and self-rejection and pursue what her heart desires. This comes into contrast with Qingchuan’s path of ascension, as Qingchuan’s enemies are physical and real, competitors in love who must be vanquished. Amanda, however, has few outward obstacles to romance. It is her own lack of understanding and acceptance of who she is that prevent her from being happy.

\textsuperscript{77} For scholarly speculations of the actual location Jane Austen may have had in mind that corresponds to Longbourn, see Smith, Kenneth. “The Probable Location of ‘Longbourn’ in Jane Austen’s \textit{Pride and Prejudice}.” \textit{Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line}, Vol. 27  No. 2. (2007) 234-241. Smith suggests that Longbourn correspond to Redbourn in England, which is actually about an hour drive away from London/Hammersmith, which is in West London.


\textsuperscript{79} Ibid [19:58]
The tension, both antagonistic and romantic, between Amanda and Darcy finally comes to fruition when Amanda begins to accept her desire for him. Towards the end of episode 3, Darcy reveals to Amanda that he loves her. Still hesitant and uncertain, Amanda asks him to re-enact the famous scene of the soaking wet, strapping Colin Firth emerging from the pond, a transparent white blouse revealing his muscular build.80 With some degree of comical effect, this is when Amanda finally comes to terms with her feelings, “I love Fitzwilliam Darcy. I love him. Maybe that’s what’s meant to happen. I’m like the understudy. The star has failed to turn up and I have to go on and do the show.”81 This exemplifies a drastic change in Amanda’s attitude toward and understanding of her relationship with Darcy and Elizabeth. While she previously believes that any alteration to their predetermined romance is a form of betrayal and degradation of Austen’s creation, Amanda begins to learn that perhaps it is okay for her to desire Darcy and even fall in love with him. Previously driven by an imperative to preserve the plot, Amanda now reexamines her role in Pride and Prejudice and offers herself a way to be a part of the story rather than just the passive spectator she has been for so long. Though she still understands herself as an inferior version of Elizabeth, her understudy, Amanda begins to believe that the epic romance in the novel is not just reserved for the Victorian elite, that she, too, can long for and even pursue such love. It is precisely Amanda’s acceptance of who she is at the end that seals her love and happiness, earning her the right to marry the most eligible bachelor in the story.

Similar to Qingchuan in Palace, Amanda’s lesson to ascension is one of transformation and metamorphosis. Both protagonists are equally clueless when entering the world of the past/ fiction, Qingchuan a naïve young girl and Amanda in denial about her love of Darcy. However, the time-travel forces them to learn how to fight for what they want, rather than fantasize about

80 Lisa Hopkins argues that this hyper-sexualization and obsession with the male image in Hollywood renditions of Jane Austen is a kind of catering to the female gaze, which denotes a desire for control. This could not be more apparent here, as Amanda directly asks Darcy to do this simply for her own viewing pleasures. See Hopkins, Lisa. “Mr. Darcy’s Body: Privileging the Female Gaze.” in Jane Austen in Hollywood, edited by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. 111-121
it through books and daydreams. In imperial China, Qingchuan masters a kind of manipulation of patriarchy that guarantees her feminine success, conquering the other female competitors who also pursue the fourth prince. However, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Amanda must come face to face with her own identity, probing deeper into her own desires and hopes and learning to accept them. In examining the politics and aesthetic of contemporary film remakes of Austen’s novels, Rebecca Dickson argues that the makers of 1996 film *Sense and Sensibility* reinterpret the story of Elinor in order to create a narrative of change and feminine growth, thus catering to a kind of misogynous popular taste. Dickson is troubled that Elinor, an independent woman of great wisdom in the novel must be made to break down several times during the film and eventually learn to be stronger by confronting her own feelings. Dickson argues that in the novel, Elinor is already mature and grown-up when she is presented to the reader, making her the most complete, self-reliant female character in the text. However, the film portrays her as one filled with self-doubt whose path to understanding herself is guided by the men in her life.\(^8\)

This dynamics of problematizing and reexamining the self is prominent in *Lost in Austen* as well. While Amanda is poised a reasonable Jane Austen fan, one who does not veer towards excess in her romantic appreciation and avoids the stereotype of the woman whose love for Darcy prevents her from love in the real world, the show subjects this sense of balance to gruesome interrogation, leading Amanda to finally admit and embrace her debilitating obsession with Darcy. However, I want to qualify this kind of paradigm of criticizing Jane Austen films by suggesting that personal growth is an inalienable aspect of the narrative structure from a long Western lineage, since Greek epic poetry.\(^9\) While Dickson has a sound comparative basis for identifying the characterization of Elinor in the film remake of *Sense and Sensibility* as anti-feminist, I do not think that a narrative of metamorphosis is necessarily so in all Austen remakes. In addition to Amanda, the male characters also grow a great deal in *Lost in

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\(^9\) see: Propp, V. I.A. *Morphology of the Folktales*. Bloomington, Ind.: Research Center, Indiana University, 1958 for the classic hero’s quest narrative and the way the hero must grow through the journey.
As Darcy comes to embrace Amanda despite the opposition of propriety. In the original *Pride and Prejudice*, both Elizabeth and Darcy must mature and overcome their pride on their path to matrimony. Personal growth and feminine growth on their own do not constitute exploitation of the female character. Rather, I see Amanda’s need to confront her own emotions and deep-seated desires, compared against the more interpersonal approach towards ascension in *Palace* where Qingchuan negotiates a complex web of female competition, as a manifestation of a kind of privileged, upper-middle class, Western configuration of what it takes to succeed and find happiness in life.

In *Palace*, a lack of awareness and careful calculation of the choices one makes in the context of one’s social, political environment lead to serious consequences. The failure to win a female competition framed around marriage and financial security leads to the death of several prominent female characters, including the attempted suicide of Su-yan as well as the forced suicide of Jinzhi. What may seem to be a trivial, melodramatic feminine sphere turns out to provoke grave consequences when one refuses to play by the rules correctly. In contrast, Amanda’s Austenian journey is much more light-hearted. While the women vie for the attention of Bingley and Darcy, they never drive each other to physical harm. The few nasty quips exchanged between Caroline and Amanda resemble the apex of “negative” consequence in *Lost in Austen*. It is within this framework of pre-established security and stability that Amanda may focus on herself, weaving together a narrative of self-enlightenment as means of learning and achieving happiness.
Chapter Conclusion

In this Chapter, I have discussed the different homosocial spaces conceived in *Lost in Austen* and *Palace*. Borrowing from Zhou’s comparative work on women’s relationships in ancient Greece and China, I have shown that while the homosocial space in *Palace* is incipiently competitive, that of *Lost in Austen* is generally cooperative and friendly. It is within these differing contexts of how women interact with one another that a gendered education and stories of feminine success unfold. In *Palace*, the competition necessitates that all the women have the same goals of marriage with a prince, making their happy ends mutually exclusive and the success of one the demise of the others. In *Lost in Austen*, while a few the women appear to be competing for the attention of eligible bachelors like Darcy, the tension among them is resolved by the realization of each individual’s divergent goals. I see several implications for the arguments put forth here. An examination of how women interact with one another in fairly recent popular cultural products in both China and the West show a preservation of the fundamental roots from which they grow, one as an alliance of sisterhood competing against the male sex, the other a scattered positioning of individual women as parts of patrilineal families. Connecting the dots from the ancient to the contemporary functions as a background in understanding how to evaluate such gendered lessons of feminine success in each show, how they vary in historical and social backgrounds, and how feminist theories and answers proposed in one culture cannot always relate to another.

Beyond tracing the separate lineages and presenting contextual differences, the divergences in each show are also telling of how women of each tradition have grown and come to configure success differently in the present day, away from their respective roots in the pre-modern. As I will further elucidate in Chapter 3, the self-discovery of Amanda as means of growth and pursuit of love take on a heavy-headed postfeminist flavor, one in which Western women are more and more encouraged to interpret choice, any and all, as a form of empowerment. In contrast, Qingchuan’s hard-earned relationship with the fourth prince and the
careful ways in which she transforms his desires into that of her own speak to the challenges of womanhood and limited means she has to achieve her ends. In Chapter 3, I further explore such implications and also examine a last twist in each show. By the end of the following chapter, I make clear how I have learned to engage with cross-cultural products through a feminist perspective. Furthermore, I discuss how these shows ultimately function as texts that represent challenges faced by women in both China and the West and how they instruct women to interpret such challenges.
Chapter 3

The Politics of Choice:

How *Lost in Austen* and *Palace* Reconcile Impossible Romances in Time

Having discussed the significance of escape, homosocial space, and feminine success in *Palace* and *Lost in Austen* in the previous chapters, I will now turn to the ending of each of the shows. I respectively examine Qingchuan’s abandonment of the ideal man she found in the Qing dynasty and Amanda’s decision to stay in the fictional world to be with Darcy. To me, the endings represent the most dramatic divergence between two time-travel period dramas from different cultures. While Amanda decides to stay in the world of *Pride and Prejudice* for Darcy, Qingchuan forsakes the fourth prince after discovering his immoral character and eventually returns to the present on her own. By taking a closer look at the ending of both *Palace* and *Lost in Austen*, studying how each of them is scripted in order to deliver a last moral lesson, we can unveil what the shows ultimately hope to teach women about the pursuit of romance and marriage and the larger implications of these pursuits. As discussed in Chapter 1, each show foregrounds a seemingly insurmountable dilemma at their beginning, presenting the lack of romance and standards of such as an inevitable reality for modern women. At the end of the shows, this problem must find its resolution. Will Amanda and Qingchuan find the kind of love they dream of and how? While in *Lost in Austen*, Amanda gets everything she wants because she comes to terms with who she really is, Qingchuan in *Palace* must learn to stand by her moral principles and leave behind someone she loves. By looking more closely at how each of the shows resolves the problems presented at the beginning of the show, I argue that *Palace* asserts the practical, traditional message voiced by Qingchuan’s mother at the beginning of the show, forcing the protagonist to see that finding “a good person with a good heart” is more important than anything else, even true love. On the other hand, *Lost in Austen* pushes Amanda’s enlightenment in self-knowledge further, urging her to focus exclusively on what she wants and what makes her happy, abandoning moral and practical considerations altogether. I believe that
the choices made by Amanda in *Lost in Austen* represent an indulgence in an assumed postfeminist order in the West, where issues of gender and social injustice are assumed to have been resolved, presenting modern individuals as completely autonomous and their personal choices devoid of political implications. In the context of *Palace*, I find that the message appears glaringly traditional, preaching wisdoms of the past and the perpetuation of the status quo. However, when the presentation of Qingchuan’s return to her mother is placed in a Chinese context, it actually gestures at a moment of subversion when the pre-established historical narrative of women’s liberation is called into question.

**Amanda in Pemberley: a Postfeminist Marriage**

While I have analyzed *Palace* first in each of the previous chapters, I start this chapter with a close reading of *Lost in Austen*. I take this reverse approach because I find that what happens in *Lost in Austen* and the growth of the protagonist are much more familiar to our Western (American) cultural environment than that of *Palace*. Towards the end of the show, Amanda faces the dilemma of having to choose between staying with Darcy and returning to the present. By unpacking *Lost in Austen* through the lens of Western feminism, it will be easier to see the critique or inadequacy of such paradigmatic frameworks in *Palace*, which can serve as an alternative vision or source of criticism. The Western feminism concerned here is multifaceted and always a subject of interpretation. Second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 70s is chiefly concerned with highlighting the depth of women’s oppression and marking the urgency of reform for equality in the workplace, family, and reproduction.84 Today, a strong emergence of postfeminism subscribes to the belief that the goals of (second-wave) feminism have been achieved; women today can only empower themselves through individualist projects, most likely

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through capitalist consumption. Postfeminism, in my view, can sometimes be said to co-opt or attempt to mainstream philosophies of third-wave feminism. Third-wave feminism voices criticisms against the essentializing stance of the second-wave, protesting that second-wave feminism must take into consideration the intersectionality of oppression as well as individual experiences. The rhetoric of third-wave feminism, when placed in popular discourse, carries the potential to shift the focus of feminism onto individual choices rather than an organized pursuit of social justice on a communal level. It is in this controversial and murky contemporary cultural environment that productions like *Lost in Austen* finds their place. In the following pages, I hope to show that while *Lost in Austen* can be read as a feminist text, because it adopts a postfeminist point of view, it elides fundamental issues of structures of power and emphasizes the self to the exclusion of larger sociopolitical considerations. Now, I will turn to specific scenes and moments in *Lost in Austen* to understand its ambiguous statements of female empowerment and its position as part of the cultural discourse.

In the last episode of *Lost in Austen*, Amanda and Darcy must venture into the present, reminding us of not only the tremendous differences between the two worlds but also the profound sociopolitical anachronism and intolerance of the world of *Pride and Prejudice*. A slight (not at all!) modification to the original narrative, Lydia runs away with a heartbroken Bingley rather than Wickham, to Hammersmith, both believing that the “hometown” of Amanda will provide refreshing excitement. Enraged by their behavior, Mr. Bennet gets into a brawl with Bingley, which results in an injury to his head. With Mr. Bennet’s life in danger, Amanda goes through the portal to find Elizabeth. Darcy decides to follow her. Living in 2008 metropolitan London, Elizabeth has completely transformed, marking a powerful gesture towards progressive Western feminism in the show. Working as a nanny in the suburbs, Elizabeth has cut off her

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85 For this tentative definition, I have consulted Budgeon, Shelley, *Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender In Late Modernity*. Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 15
long hair and shed her Victorian dress. Ironically, when Elizabeth opens the door to Amanda and Darcy, she gasps that Amanda is wearing her floor-length day gown, exclaiming “it would not fit me now, I am macrobiotic!” A macrobiotic diet, the practice of prioritizing grains and vegetables as main staples as well as eschewing from processed foods, strengthens Elizabeth’s metamorphosis into a modern woman beyond mere alterations to her appearance. The choice to be macrobiotic suggests that she is somehow a healthier, more autonomous person than the one she was before. The awareness of modern nutritional science and the ability to design her diet based on her own preferences show a certain expansion of freedom that is not only intellectual but embodied.

Once informed of her father’s condition, Elizabeth tells Amanda that she must leave her employers, Dr. and Mr. Rosenberg, a note before going. An amazed and dumbfounded Darcy repeats their titles, “Doctor and Mister?” Elizabeth, with an ounce of pride in her eyes, informs Darcy, “Dr. Rosenberg is a lady. Yes. The world is greatly changed.” This scene is a curious one as it completely inverts the dynamics of power across all three parties. Mr. Darcy, the wealthy, educated patriarch who holds the fate of the Bennet family estate in his hands, is reduced to a naïve, ill-informed refugee in time, addressing Tinky Winky as a gentleman and wincing at the thought of a female doctor. Conversely, Elizabeth Bennet becomes an adept and tech-savvy woman of modernity, who supports herself financially through work and leads a productive life as a single woman. She masters the electric appliances that confound Mr. Darcy, muting the television and ordering a taxi online. At the same time, Lizzie’s power also derives from the capacity of her knowledge. In addition to her mastery of all the modern devices around the house, she identifies Darcy and informs him of their tethered fates, proving herself by pulling up a website of Colin Firth on the internet (see figure 1). This sudden clarity and revelation contrast with many of Amanda’s previous attempts to convince Darcy that he is fated to marry Elizabeth.

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87 Ibid. Episode 4. [21:43]
The succinct, confident mannerism of Elizabeth serves as a powerful point of juxtaposition to Amanda’s self-conscious, muttering style in the Austenian world, marking Elizabeth as a much better equipped time traveler.

Two sets of contrasts are at play, highlighting the benefits of progressive feminism and the improved quality of life for modern Western women. The first contrast is between the Elizabeth in contemporary England and the Elizabeth pre-time travel. Not only does modern living appear better suited for Elizabeth Bennet personally, this scene in *Lost in Austen* stages a feminist statement about the superiority of life for modern women generally. This scene also points out the multiplicity of dissatisfactions and restrictions of Victorian life for women by showing the renewed freedom and self-reliance of Elizabeth Bennet. Her self-sufficiency, autonomy, and pride implicitly invoke the kind of repressed, limited lifestyle she previously leads, which can be seen through Amanda’s journey. The Bennet women live under constant fear of poverty and a bad marriage. Their movements in society are restrained by propriety and
commands of their parents, their love impeded by prejudices of social caste, and their dreams decimated by the harsh reality of women’s lack of financial options in the Victorian era.88

The second pair of contrast is created between Elizabeth and Amanda. Their positions seem to have been switched or perhaps each has finally found the space in which each belongs. While living in the contemporary era, Amanda is abjectly miserable, constantly dreaming of escaping into Jane Austen novels. It is implied that Elizabeth Bennet is not particularly enthused about her Victorian living, as she fully embraces her first opportunity to get away through the portal in Amanda’s bathroom and never looks back. In this first encounter with the post-time-travel Elizabeth, the most striking element seems to be a straightforward manifesto for the improvement of women’s conditions between 1813 and 2008. The contrasts observed not only present Elizabeth’s own sense of autonomy, it also positions her as the most composed and self-assured figure in the entire scene, signifying that such feminist empowerment elevates the status of women in tangible ways. It remains an underdeveloped paradox why Amanda, another beneficiary of improved equality and freedom for women in modernity, struggles to find happiness in her own contemporary moment and must return to a more oppressive order.

In addition to gender, the problem of race is addressed in noting the differences between the two worlds, presenting another instance of alarm and concern when it comes to Amanda’s dilemma to stay or return. When finally arrived at the time portal and ready to deliver Elizabeth back to her father, Elizabeth suggests to her old flatmate, Pirhana, that she go through the time portal as well, just for fun. Pirhana, completely taken aback and nearly offended, shouts back, “Amanda, I’m black!”89 I found this moment particularly entertaining in Lost in Austen, as someone finally points out the romantic indulgences in the culture of Jane Austen novels as totally blind or willfully ignorant of racial and economic privilege. In Jane Austen in Hollywood,

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88 This is tragically portrayed through the story of Charlotte Lucas, who decides to go to Africa as a missionary after realizing that she has no marriage prospects. also see: Monaghan, David. Jane Austen In a Social Context. [London]: Macmillan, 1981.
Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield identify the tenuous politics of a modern obsession with Jane Austen as a desire to “do without clashes between disparate sections of society or between different nations with mutually incomprehensible social codes and objectives.”90 Through the rules of propriety and manners, the world of Jane Austen introduces something simple, limited, and deeply controlled, allowing literary and filmic escapees like Amanda the guilty pleasure of hiding from the complicated relationships and moral struggles of globalized, contemporary living. In this instance, when Pirhana forces us to face the problematic implications of wanting to go back in time, to a place where an imperialist worldview defines the norm, what is at stake with Amanda’s decision to stay or leave the Austenian world becomes ever so heavy and politically charged.

This anxiety about the ambivalent politics of preferring a less egalitarian past to the present is reiterated one last time as Amanda is about to go through the portal and return to her apartment in contemporary England. Having decided that Darcy belongs with Elizabeth in the end, a teary-eyed Amanda goes to the time portal in the Bennets’ attic in order to return to the present. Scenes of touching moments shared with Darcy float through her mind. At the latch of the door, Amanda finds a small note left behind by Darcy. On the back of his first Metro ticket, when Darcy and Amanda were on their way to find Elizabeth, Darcy writes, “Not one heartbeat do I forget.” Seeing this note, Amanda breaks down into tears and subsequently runs back to Darcy in a supremely and climactically romantic scene that testifies to the power of love. While these last few scenes seem to follow one another seamlessly and weave together a final happy ending, they, once again, bring up the issue of preference for a more oppressive order as means to true happiness. While the Metro ticket, inscribed with Darcy’s final confession of love, may bring back those memories of courtship and tenderness, it is also a testimony to yet another facet of the discrimination and inequity in Darcy’s world. While Amanda and Darcy are on the Metro, Darcy notices a mother and daughter reading a Teletubby book, the mother asking, “and

what color is he” about the images on the page. This shot is disrupted by a black man passing by Darcy who proceeds to remark, “surfeit of negroes.” To prevent others from taking offense, Amanda quickly tells the passengers that Darcy has “Tourette’s” (See figure 2, figure 3).91

Figure 2: A black man passes by Darcy and Amanda on the bus.

Figure 3: Darcy makes an offensive comment on the bus.

Despite the fact that this scene is clearly an attempt at comic relief and a display of self-awareness on behalf of the show, it invokes the topic of racial discrimination in Victorian England.\textsuperscript{92} The parallel between a child’s education in colors and Darcy’s blatant exclamation about people of color on the bus shows the anachronistic, backward, and ridiculous nature of Darcy’s racial perspective. By comparing his understanding of people of color to a child learning the words purple and green, \textit{Lost in Austen} not only addresses but highlights Darcy’s ignorant and retrograde view of the world. Exposing Darcy as such challenges Amanda and other Janeites’ romanticist vision of Darcy as a sophisticated, learned man, forcing us to accept that Darcy also represents a world order that is today considered to be morally unacceptable and depraved. Amanda’s disclaimer that Darcy has Tourette’s Syndrome accentuates this bizarre moment further. The suggestion that only someone who is mentally disabled would unknowingly voice an opinion such as his makes it unimaginable that modern women or women from any time should fantasize about Darcy as romantic ideal. Thus, the use of the Metro ticket as a token of Darcy and Amanda’s love as well as the final straw in persuading Amanda’s to stay in Darcy’s world takes on a double meaning. First, it is a celebration of Amanda and Darcy’s romance. Second, it reminds us of the politically troubling historical position occupied by Darcy. When Amanda forsakes the time portal and rushes into the arms of Darcy, the message is clear, love triumphs over all, even the morally unsettling fact that one’s true love can be interpreted in some circles as a slave-driving, women-hating white male oppressor.

From chapter 1 to this point, we have uncovered several elements of social criticism and perhaps self-criticism in \textit{Lost in Austen}. While the unsatisfying and restrictive conditions of modern women’s living are made apparent in the beginning of the show, kindling a hope for escape, the kind of romanticist vision of Jane Austen novels, which overrides potential social inequalities, becomes a site of tension by the end of the show. In observing how modern

\textsuperscript{92} Jane Austen does not shy away from addressing problems of slavery, as Sir Bertram of \textit{Mansfield Park} is explicitly engaged in the slave trade. Austen, Jane, and John Wiltshire. \textit{Mansfield Park}. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
filmmakers appropriate Austen, Devoney Looser is convinced that these films reverse women’s role as objects of desire and actively addresses their subjective needs and demands, thus marking a progressive, feminist gesture.93 *Lost in Austen* does indeed belong in this category of Jane Austen films for women, in which the female protagonist and her romantic yearning take center stage, replacing a kind of traditional, male subjectivity that looks at the female character as an object to be owned. However, Looser neglects the larger social implications of this female, individual-focused framework, in part because her work does not deal with the clash between the modern and the Victorian. The materials of Looser’s analysis are mainly remakes of classical Austen novels with no element of time travel. Within the confines of a strictly historical setting, the woman’s talents, needs, and desires can indeed be valorized, which denotes a source of feminine empowerment on the silver screen. However, Looser forgets that these remakes, even if strictly period, always address anxieties and concerns of the contemporary audience. As another scholar Amanda Collins so shrewdly points out in her own take on our nostalgia for Jane Austen,

> “it is a desire to learn about the past as it relates to the present, and as a result the films are judged not on the basis of their historical realism but on their ability to mold history into a form which is reminiscent of the present.”94

In popular Jane Austen films, we do not simply see an innocent, removed vision of what came before. Rather, the audience places itself within the reality of Austen’s time, speculating and relating to the experiences of the women presented. Therefore, the minimally “feminist” gesture discussed by Looser should be qualified by its relationship to the modern audience, how it glamorizes Victorian living and its sophisticated gentlemen as an exclusively white, upper-class heritage.

In *Lost in Austen*, the focus placed on female subjectivity as a positive source of social education for the audience is disrupted by its blatant disregard for the unnerving political

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ramifications of accepting Mr. Darcy as he is, infinitely charming but also racist and misogynistic. Amanda’s choice to remain behind in the world of *Pride and Prejudice* seems to represent a resolution to the social criticisms voiced both at the beginning and towards the end of the show. Amanda’s problems of being perennially uninspired and romantically unfulfilled, as well as the suggestions of Darcy’s anachronistic political views, seem to be totally resolved by the decision to embrace love alone.95 This way of wrapping up the narrative indicates that romantic, heterosexual love is a panacea for the social criticisms made clear in the show both with regard to women’s condition in modernity and the awkward human rights implications of worshipping a historical, fictional character like Darcy. Thus, when Amanda finally unites with Darcy at the end of the show, all of these social issues seem to disappear, which relieves the show of a larger political heft and marks the terrain of the conclusion as apolitically escapist.

As discussed in this chapter as well as chapter 2, much of what enables the happy ending in *Lost in Austen* revolves around Amanda’s quest to understand herself, a quest in which she must come to terms with who she really is and what her heart desires. This emphasis on the self and the choices the female subject faces can be seen as borrowing from a series of postfeminist critiques of second-wave feminism. In the 1960s, second-wave feminists were chiefly concerned with stronger notions and institutions of gender equality in the workplace, the family, and reproduction. Advocates of postfeminism claim that those second-wave feminists have positioned all women as victims rather than agents. Thus, postfeminists advocate a philosophy of individualism and autonomy, believing that it is only when each woman begins to assert herself outside this sense of victimhood and realize her individual projects that female empowerment can be achieved.96

However, this paradigm of understanding and prescribing womanhood is clouded by its total lack of peripheral vision of the structurally unequal relations between “autonomous”

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96 For salient voices in such criticism, see works of Rene Denfeld, Katie Roiphe, Christina Hoff sommers, and Naomi Wolf.
individuals, which leads to unsettling political pitfalls in which the character Amanda Price has found herself at the end of *Lost in Austen*. In Diane Negra’s words, from her wildly entertaining and ambitious overview on popular culture in a postfeminist age, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of the Self in Postfeminism*,

> “postfeminism withdraws from the contemplation of structural inequities fostered by feminism, putting forward diagnostics of femininity that take the place of analyses of political or economic culture. It achieves this, in part by relentlessly stressing matrimonial and maternalist models of female subjectivity.”

Negra points out that the nearly solipsistic culture of the self in postfeminism elides and willingly forgets a history of oppression and current manifestations of such oppression. It pretends as if the female agent lives inside a vacuum, in which her choices are neither informed nor directed by the political and economic forces that surround her by virtue of her gender. Lastly, Negra reminds us that this autonomy is limited in scope, as it is continuously “fulfilled” by an assumed primacy of romance and consumption. It is by positioning such female gender-specific desires at the forefront of all postfeminist choice that serves as the total content of this newfound woman’s subjectivity. Such emphasis on women’s ability to choose reflects our simultaneous appreciation of Amanda’s courage to embrace romance and repulsion towards her ideal mate as a ruthlessly offensive human being. While the show applauds Amanda for working on herself, learning about who she is, and taking a leap of faith towards love, it leaves us with a strange aftertaste. It is as Mr. Darcy retorts against criticisms about his classist prejudice in breaking up Jane and Bingley, “it’s not my fault Ms. Bennet chose to marry Mr. Collins. It was a decision freely made. This is a free society, Miss Price!” But of course it is not! Jane Bennet married Mr. Collins in order to save her family from destitution, as Mr. Collins is the owner of their estate. Our heroine, Amanda, valiantly proves Darcy wrong and makes him beg for forgiveness in a profoundly satisfying sequence of events. At the end of *Lost in Austen*, Amanda’s choice to return to Pemberley leaves us with the same sense of indignation as she has

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experienced in regards to Darcy’s social discrimination, wondering to ourselves, is it a freely
made decision and is that justification enough?

A Reformation of Desire: How and Who *Palace* Teaches Women to Love

Now, I will turn to *Palace* and examine a completely different ending, an alternative
imagination of how to resolve the shared issues presented at the beginning of the two shows. At
the beginning of both shows, the female protagonists are constrained by the practical,
uninspiring routines of modern living, constantly urged to settle for what they already have. *Lost
in Austen* breaks free of such unsatisfying conditions and promises the heroine a complete
escape for good. However, at the end of *Palace*, Qingchuan actually heeds the advice given by
her mother in choosing the man for her and ultimately returns to the present.

At the beginning of the show, Qingchuan is wrangled into an arranged marriage to a man
of whom her mother approves, putting on display the male archetype to which she must return
at the end of the show. Though Qingchuan does not love her fiancé Lin Feifan, her mother shows
incredible approval of Feifan. The mother praises him for passing up opportunities to make
more money, as he chooses to stay at Qingchuan’s family antique shop simply because he loves
Qingchuan. When Qingchuan questions the marriage, suggesting that one should marry
somebody they have feelings for, her mother counters, “feeling? Feeling does nothing. When it
comes to marriage, you have to find somebody who is a good person with a good heart, who
knows how to live life practically.”99 As examined more closely in chapter 1, Qingchuan is
continuously reminded of how little she actually deserves Feifan as well as her incredible fortune
in being able to marry him. Like in *Lost in Austen*, the social criticisms mounted here are thus
that women in contemporary China are judged based on a set of objective standards on which
matrimonial matches are made. Furthermore, the obsession with marriage on display figures
into another prominent discourse on the primacy of marriage for women in urban China, as

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middle-aged single women are often derived as *shengnü*, a leftover woman.\footnote{For Chinese discussions on the “leftover woman,” simply search 剩女 on the Chinese web. Also see a NYT blog entry on the phenomenon: http://schott.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/15/leftover-ladies-3s-women/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0} The prioritization of a practical marriage and denigration of Qingchuan’s personal desires and wants present a problem to be resolved by the end of the show.

In the pilot episode, it is clear that Qingchuan has no eyes for Fei-fan and actively prefers the fictional character, the Yongzheng emperor, over other possible romantic pursuits in her life. This viewpoint concerning romantic desire serves as a metaphor for her unique conception of love. When Feifan is brought up in conversation, Qingchuan picks up her book on the Yongzheng emperor (the fourth prince) and redirects her attention. This move already signifies Qingchuan’s personal preference for the fourth prince over anybody else, especially those who already love her. The relationship between Qingchuan and the Yongzheng text foreshadows her unrequited love for the fourth prince and her stubborn pursuit of “romantic feeling” with disregard for everything else. This nascent conception of love leads Qingchuan to behave dismissively towards her fiancé Feifan and everyone else at their engagement party. With much doubt, Qingchuan asks Feifan, “do you really want to marry me? [...] But I have so many flaws.”\footnote{Zheng, Yu, Yang Mi, Feng Shaofeng, Leanne Liu, Mickey He, Sonija Kwok, Tong Liya, et al. *Palace: Lock Heart*. Hunan, China: Hunan ETV Culture Media Co., Ltd. 2011. Episode 1. [7:15]} To this, Feifan responds, “I like you, even your flaws.”\footnote{Qingchuan’s mother falls mentally ill later in the show as a result of missing her daughter. Thus, it will not affect our readings on motherhood that follow.} Unlike the Yongzheng emperor’s complete lack of regard for Qingchuan, both as a character in Qingchuan’s book and as a person she encounters in the past, Feifan is so completely devoted to Qingchuan that he sacrifices both his professional life and risks Qingchuan not returning his affections at all in order to be with her. Later we find out that Feifan has faithfully taken care of Qingchuan’s family business as well as her mentally ill mother after Qingchuan disappears into the past.\footnote{Though we don’t see much of Feifan and don’t get to learn much about him, it is clear through the first and last episode that Feifan is the essence of the “good person with a good heart, who knows how to live life practically.” Not only does he stand by Qingchuan through all her mistakes and struggles, he}
continues to support her despite her lack of interest in being with him romantically at the end of the show.

The time-travel scheme functions as a source of escape and rebellion against a contemporary order. Time travel allows Qingchuan to pursue the kind of romance she prefers. The fourth prince is presented as the most talented, handsome, and powerful of all the princes and is destined to become the Yongzheng emperor. The romance between Qingchuan and the fourth prince defies the expectations set out by Qingchuan’s mother earlier in the show. Rather than settling for a caring, pragmatic, and stable man, Qingchuan is driven by the deep platonic connections she shares with a married prince who is mysterious and (for most of the show) unable to promise her a reliable, domestic future. By episode 18, the romance between Qingchuan and the fourth prince seems likely to result in a happy ending, when the fourth prince decides to forsake politics and make Qingchuan his wife. However, a drastic turn of events thwarts their hopeful future, making Qingchuan realize the wisdom in her mother’s earlier advice.

In episode 19, Qingchuan learns about the corrupt moral character of the fourth prince and realizes that love should not be pursued to the exclusion of such considerations, thus leaving behind the fourth prince in search of a “good man with a good heart.” Su-yan, a friend to Qingchuan and the fourth prince’s spy in the imperial palace, is enraged when she finds out about their happy union, as Su-yan has been deeply in love with the fourth prince for years. Qingchuan learns from the broken-hearted Su-yan that the fourth prince has previously attempted to use Qingchuan as political leverage and plotted to murder Qingchuan when she got in the way. Revealing to Qingchuan his vicious nature, Su-yan laments, “aside from him, who would be so cruel under the heavens? When he uses you, he is endlessly tender. When he abandons you, he is without mercy” (See figure 4, 5, 6). Here, Su-yan speaks to the

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exploitation of others engaged by the fourth prince to secure power and ensure his candidacy for the position of crown prince. Knowing that she cares for him, the fourth prince pushes Su-yan to risk her life in political espionage by making a vague and distant promise that they will finally be able to be together when he becomes emperor. After this tumultuous and emotional revelation, Su-yan leaps off the edge of the fortress wall and commits suicide.
Figure 4: Su-yan reveals to Qingchuan the depravity of the 4th prince.

Figure 5: A teary-eyed Qingchuan asks: “why did he try to kill me?”

Figure 6: Su-yan reveals that the fourth prince would do anything for the crown.
Upon hearing these revelations and watching Su-yan end her own life, Qingchuan realizes that the fourth prince is not the person she believed he was. He is contrary to everything she had read in the Yongzheng novel. This moment is one of complete disillusionment for Qingchuan, as her voice-over at the end of this episode speaks, “there is too much of a discrepancy between the Yongzheng in history and the Yongzheng in novels.”

Though we never really hear Qingchuan reflect on or talk about the Yongzheng in her fantasies, we can detect traces of her impression from her past interactions with the fourth prince. In the episodes preceding this climactic moment, the fourth prince often rescues and comforts Qingchuan in moments of need. He teaches her how to cope with the bullying of others and fosters her musical talent by instructing her how to play the zither. Furthermore, Qingchuan truly develops sympathy and understanding for him when he confides in her, revealing the sense of isolation he feels in pursuit of the crown. All of these brief and ambivalent interactions feed into Qingchuan’s initial ideal of the fourth prince as the perfect man, one who is superior to Feifan and her other suitors. However, it is as Qingchuan is about to win everything she has ever wanted that she is informed of the real character of the fourth prince.

Qingchuan charges to his manor to confront him, just as the fourth prince is busy breaking things off with his wife, telling her that he has decided to leave her for Qingchuan. Shocked by Qingchuan’s hostility, the fourth prince begs, “I am sincere, this time, I am sincere,” asking Qingchuan to give him a chance to explain. Qingchuan rebuffs, “how many people have you said that to in the past? And what became of them” (see figure 7)? Qingchuan’s sentiments are clearly sarcastic, referring to the suicide of Su-yan, who had faith in the fourth prince’s “sincere” words. This scene as one that directly follows the fourth prince’s attempt at separation with his wife Jinzhi, whom he married to win over the political allegiance of her father, is also ironic. Qingchuan poignantly exposes the consequences of believing the loving words of the fourth prince, as Su-yan lies dead on the palace grounds and Jinzhi is inside the manor sobbing.

104 Ibid. Episode 19. [40: 05]
over the forced divorce. Qingchuan’s conviction that the fourth prince is who he is, along with his vicious, self-serving nature, implies the immutability of moral character. This philosophy circles back to Qingchuan’s mother’s prescient words that one must find a “good person with a good heart,” suggesting that such a quality will endure regardless of circumstance. Conversely, the fourth prince is a bad person with a bad heart, which necessitates his total doom in the moral order of *Palace*, denying him any opportunity for happiness for the rest of the show.

![Figure 7: The fourth prince tries to stop Qingchuan from leaving, the eighth prince mediates the two.](image)

At the end of episode 18, Qingchuan turns to the eighth prince for comfort and hope. While learning that the fourth prince attempted to assassinate her, Qingchuan’s sense of her own happy future with the fourth prince dies. With that, the show stages a form of resurrection through the eighth prince, who saves Qingchuan’s life when Su-yan attempts to take Qingchuan down with her. In this scene, Su-yan has just revealed everything to Qingchuan, condemning the fourth prince and lamenting her own broken heart. Driven by hopeless anger and outrage, Su-yan grabs Qingchuan and acts as if about to push her off the fort. Su-yan asks the eighth prince to kill himself to save Qingchuan in hopes of proving her point that all men are ultimately
selfish. Without hesitation, the eighth prince stabs himself in the abdomen, collapsing onto the ground. This resolute act of bravery and romantic devotion, in tandem with the various earlier manifestations of the eighth prince’s affections for Qingchuan, appears truly touching in the context of the episode. Not only does he prove that he truly, “sincerely” loves Qingchuan, he also asserts his selfless moral character, which motivates him to die for someone he cares for. Qingchuan’s turning away from the fourth prince and ultimate preference for the eighth prince signifies a return to her mother’s philosophy of love, which revolves around moral character and reliability rather than romantic affection.

There is a great parallel between Feifan and the eighth prince both in terms of their relationship to Qingchuan and the male qualities depicted. In episode 4, the eighth prince realizes his romantic interest in Qingchuan and attempts to force her into marrying him. He instructs several palace guards and maids to kidnap and pamper Qingchuan for an impromptu concubine wedding. However, when Qingchuan sees the eighth prince and learns of his ruse, she defies his desire for her in much the same way she doubts Feifan, “what are you thinking? What other scheme have you employed to mess with me”? As in the earlier instance with Feifan, when Qingchuan shows incredulousness towards the fact that he is interested in her at all, Qingchuan also refuses to acknowledge the affections the eighth prince feels for her. Because she invests so much faith in her own notions of love, she actually struggles to understand different kinds of love expressed by others and actively subjects the love of others to reductive skepticism. However, her painful experience with the fourth prince and their doomed love shows that Qingchuan’s own ideas of romance and desire are inadequate and shortsighted, leading her to a tragic heartbreak. By learning her mother’s lesson the hard way, Qingchuan is convinced that she must prioritize a good moral character in men in order to find matrimonial happiness.

Qingchuan eventually decides that she will embrace the eighth prince and help him become emperor, “eighth prince, your character is upright; you value both friendship and justice. You ought to be the ruler of all that lies under the heavens.” This decision is not made by
following one’s heart (romantic heart) or identifying the feelings of love. Rather, it is based on the superiority of moral character, the better fit for “a good person with a good heart.” After traveling into the past and learning on her own what it means to survive and love, Qingchuan realizes the truths spoken by her mother and starts to take notice of the men who have been silently loving and protecting her all along. The kind of love Qingchuan thought she wanted turns out to be temporary and unworthy. In the long run, it is the kind of love prescribed by her mother that becomes important.

The value invested in Qingchuan abandoning the fourth prince comes into some degree of conflict with what was explored in Chapter 2, where the most important didactic message is how to earn the affections of the fourth prince. By drawing the fourth prince closer emotionally, Qingchuan is able to convince him to forsake his own goals, instrumentalizing his patriarchal power for her own benefit. Qingchuan’s success, contrasted with the tragic failures of both Su-yun and Jinzhi, suggests that her employment of male power through manipulation is promoted in the context of Palace. How can Palace both endorse Qingchuan’s manipulation of the fourth prince as an important means to female happiness and make Qingchuan denounce their romance at the same time? Does the ultimate ending of the show, where Qingchuan walks away from the fourth prince, void the powerful narrative of “make the man will what you will” as a didactic message in Palace? I believe that both lessons are intentionally plotted as they seem contradictory.

On the one hand, this kind of deeply invested and morally ambivalent love triangle leads to spectacular commercial success, as fans of the fourth prince and the eighth prince throw themselves into fierce debates about who Qingchuan should have chosen. On the other hand, it deftly engages with the discourse of “can she have it all”? The question of can a woman have it all, when invoked in popular feminist discourse, often refers to the tension between professional and romantic success. In Palace, however, the question takes on the tension between the ideal

105 Fans of Palace factionalize into different camps based on the love triangles, they’re often referred to as 四爷党 or 八爷党. Any Baidu search of these terms will generate numerous fan fiction forums and debates.
marriage desired by Qingchuan and the one prescribed by her mother. By allowing Qingchuan to 
both earn the love she wants and resort to the love she ought to want, according to her mother, 
*Palace* allows Qingchuan to “have it all.” The show reveals to us that it is important to learn to 
manipulate forces of patriarchy to our advantage but it is ultimately more important to find 
one’s role in the domestic space with a stable, long-term husband. Qingchuan’s success, her 
ability to earn the affections of both the man she thought she wanted and the man she learns to 
want, allows her to always be in a position of power. The men stand before her, as the courtesans 
stand before their male patrons in a beauty pageant, waiting for her to choose one over the 
other. Thus, the lessons learned in Chapter 2 are important forms of gendered education 
because they allow Qingchuan to reverse the structure of power, using love to subjugate the 
powerful princes. It is by carefully balancing the message of manipulative triumph and domestic 
recourse that Qingchuan stands on the silver screen as the ultimate winner, implying to the 
minor female characters and the audience that though she returns to her mother’s advice, she 
does so with absolute control rather than with a kind of impoverished helplessness.

The ultimate resolution of the problems of romance and unfulfilled feminine desire at 
the beginning of *Palace* is thus resolved through Qingchuan’s coming to terms with the wisdom 
in her mother’s words, adopting a more traditional attitude towards marriage and a woman’s life 
path. This contrasts profoundly with that of *Lost in Austen*, in which Amanda completely 
abandons the advice given by her mother and physically leaves her mother behind in the 
modern world to go to Pemberley. Now I will turn to this phenomenon of returning to the family 
and mother and provide a close analysis of its significance. In this analysis, which will entail 
both discussions of *Palace* on its own terms as well as a comparative perspective, I hope to 
propose a framework to think further about womanhood in the Chinese and Western contexts, 
how they interact, conflict, and relate to one another. My undertaking here is meant to reconcile 
my own and perhaps somewhat shared perplexity about how we deal with the different 
feminisms across academic, cultural, and individual limitations.
While in *Lost in Austen*, the female subjectivity is most relatable and blatantly expressed through the inner thoughts and struggles of Amanda Price, thus decentering the male gaze towards an often sympathetic feminine look, the spectator’s point of view in *Palace* oscillates between that of the patriarchal to that of the motherly. There are two layers to my reading. First, the male gaze, as explicated in chapter 1, is nearly undeniable and inescapable in a mainstream cultural production geared towards romance and consumption. In chapter 1, I argue that the male gaze brought upon Qingchuan becomes a retributive one, in which a desire to punish is fostered on behalf of the spectator. I qualified this claim of the punitive patriarchal perspective with the possibility that the gender of the gaze oscillates between male and female. Taking into account the episodes that follow and especially the ending of the show, I find that the female eye in viewing Qingchuan is a motherly one, where the audience feels towards Qingchuan as her mother does, with a mixture of both affection and concern. 

In her study of mass-market romance fiction, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, Tania Modleski shows that audience’ feedback on their experiences of watching soap operas resembles the emotional states of a worrying mother,

> “the subject/ spectator of soap operas, it could be said, is constituted as a sort of ideal mother: a person who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all), and who has no demands or claims of her own."^{106}

In the beginning of the show, while there is clear cause for sympathy for Qingchuan and her defense of free marriage, the flagrant display of her naïvete makes her mother’s words ring true. Qingchuan’s lack of self-awareness and ability to exercise her autonomy make her out to be a mere child who still has much to learn about the harshness of reality. Her mother’s wise recommendations that she ought to appreciate those around her and prioritize moral virtue in finding a husband, though reiterated, are mostly neglected. The following 34 episodes chronicle Qingchuan having to learn this lesson the hard way, through mistakes, falters, and foils. Much

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like the patient and controlling mother, the audience must sit in front of the television helplessly, as Qingchuan falls in love with a manipulative prince and gets her heart broken into pieces.

This motherly lens is nowhere to be found in *Lost in Austen*, creating a narrative of generational transcendence rather than one of continuity. In *Lost in Austen*, Amanda’s mother seems to be dressed after some sort of archetype of the middle-aged crack addict, with black bags under her eyes, cigarette and a drink in hand, her apartment in a state of wretched dilapidation. This image contrasts with Qingchuan’s mother, an independent, self-sufficient, and practical widow, who raises her daughter and manages an antique shop on her own. The advice dispensed by Amanda’s mother, while similar to the practical wisdom of Qingchuan’s mother, is laced with incredible cynicism rather than an optimistic spirit to survive and navigate the challenges in life. When Amanda tells her mother than she has standards, her mother replies, “you have standards, pet. I hope they help you on with your coat when you’re 70.”

The admonition here seems to be that pursuing what one wants will only result in disappointment, as shown by the current state of Amanda’s mother, divorced and unhappy. Through her negative example, Amanda is instructed to give up on her expectation to meet a Mr. Darcy in life and settle for whatever she has before she loses that as well. The negative, even repulsive, representation of an older female generation in modernity in *Lost in Austen* preaches precisely the opposite of the words spoken by Amanda’s mother. Through such characterizations, it is suggested that giving up on one’s hopes and dreams, like Amanda’s mother does, is what dooms one in the end. Thus, Amanda must transcend the advice of her mother and fulfill her own standards elsewhere. This female transcendence contrasts heavily with Qingchuan’s return to the home and to her mother. At the end of *Palace*, not only does Qingchuan resort to the lessons taught by her mother, she also travels back in time to return home to her mother.

Having unconvered such trends and patterns in representation and narrative in each show, I find the evaluative aspect of this project especially trying. While my perspective on the postfeminist culture of *Lost in Austen* is positioned within a wealth of literature from Western feminist scholars who reflect on such cultural phenomena, I find *Palace* much more difficult to place and examine in terms of its discursive identity. *Palace* inevitably inherits those movements in Chinese women’s history in interpreting gender relations, such as the May Fourth Movement and the Communist Revolution. It also deviates from those discourses by transgressing temporal, spatial boundaries. Furthermore, *Palace* seems to take on the subjectivity of contemporary, urban Chinese women who are equally influenced by Confucian/Communist traditions as well as cultural products from the West. Reception of how Western feminism may take root or influence women in China remains a topic of great controversy. While scholars like Li Yinhe have played an active role in introducing Western theories to promote freedom of sexuality in the Chinese context, other founding mothers of the discipline, such as Li Xiaojiang, often criticize Western feminism as a hegemony in and of itself, imposing its doctrines of liberation onto a Chinese context in which it often finds itself incoherent. A diasporic Chinese women’s studies scholar, Bai Di critiques a kind of “lifestyle feminism” prevalent in the West by pointing out that consumption and choice have become synonymous with feminist progress, where the ability to choose in the marketplace is equated with the different kinds of freedoms a feminist may demand (political, economic, social, educational, intellectual, etc.). She suggests that there ought to be a difference between a woman’s identity as a citizen and a consumer, whereas the former imposes social moral obligations, the latter

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108 Both Li Yinhe and Li Xiaojiang are incredibly prolific. See below for some selected references:

Li, Yinhe. *Liang Xing Guan Xi =: Sex Gender.* Di 1 ban. Shanghai Shi: Hua dong shi fan da xue chu ban she, 2005.
Li, Xiaojiang. *Nü Ren: Yi Ge You Yuan Mei Li Di Chuan Shuo.* Di 1 ban. [Shanghai]: Shanghai ren min chu ban she, 1989.

For an overview and interpretation of their works, I have also consulted:


109 I discuss what Bai calls the “lifestyle feminism” in my earlier analysis of postfeminism in *Lost in Austen.*
grants reverence to consumption regardless of its context and ramifications. Through this critique, Bai proposes that Chinese women and scholars adopt a skeptical gaze towards the teachings of Western feminism that present a slippery slope into a kind of narcissistic, self-pitying manifesto of the white, middle-class American woman.\footnote{Bai, Di. “Man Zu Yu Wang, Zi Wo Xuan Ze - Xi Fang de ‘Sheng Huo Fang Shi’ Nü Xing Zhu Yi (满足欲望,自我选择-西方的‘生活方式’女性主义), edited by Wang, Lihua. Quan Qiu Hua Yu Jing Zhong De Yi Yin: Nü Xing Zhu Yi Pi Pan (全球化语境中的异音:女性主义批判). Di 1 ban. Beijing Shi: Beijing da xue chu ban she, 2008.}

Chinese feminist scholars’ criticisms of Western feminist scholarship often have to do with the lack of compatibility between the Chinese historical backdrop and that of the birth of Western feminism. As Li Xiaojiang writes in her reflection after attending the 50th anniversary of the publishing of Simone de Beauvoir’s \textit{The Second Sex}, Western feminism and its fundamental tenets fail to apply to a modern Chinese history in which Chinese women are made deeply aware of their oppression through the Communist Revolution and led to believe that the revolution has liberated them once and for all.\footnote{Li, Xiaojiang. “Shijimo kan ‘Di er xing’ (The Second Sex at the end of the century). Dushu 20 (1992):98-103.} While I agree that a native conception of feminism is in demand, I also find it reductive to dismiss whatever is “Western” in their totality when studying China, Chinese popular culture, and Chinese women today. Such reductive gestures are more clearly exemplified in Bai’s criticisms of “Western feminism.” Her characterization of Western Feminism is in fact a popular trend in postfeminism that invokes much disapproval from feminist theorists in the West itself. In negotiating such a multiplicity of national, gender discourses and keeping in mind the project in my pursuit, I find that it is necessary to draw from both positive and negative accounts of the feminisms of the West.\footnote{Thanks to a brief lecture by Professor Estelle Freedman, it is forever impressed upon my mind that feminism is never (should never be) static nor monolithic.} In perusing the collection of works produced by these famous Chinese feminist scholars, I find myself wanting and demanding more dedicated, nuanced accounts of modern, urban Chinese womanhood. The oeuvres of scholars like Li Xiaojiang and Li Yinhe continue to focus on the traditions of Confucianism and policies of the Communist Revolution, relegating studies of
popular culture and contemporary phenomena to the periphery of serious academic inquiry.\textsuperscript{113} These concerns of mine work in tandem with those scholars in the West, diasporic or not, who struggle with the heterodoxy of studying gender in China with her own Western subjectivity.

In her examination of Chinese feminism and methodological worries of studying China, Shu-Mei Shih suggests that in studying the Other, we must adopt a perspective of heteronomy rather than autonomy.\textsuperscript{114} In a philosophical tradition established by Emmanuel Levinas, Shih defines autonomy as asserting one’s subjectivity through assimilation, by adopting the perspective of the main group. Conversely, heteronomy refers to the acknowledgment of the desires and actions of the Other.

As my project in comparing time-travel period dramas in both the Chinese and Western context comes to a close, this Levinasian perspective, as elucidated by Shih, provides me with much insight. While Amanda’s path to happiness through self-discovery and the primacy of choice with disregard to those choices’ political significance present a kind of indulgent and inadequate gesture at feminist empowerment, Qingchuan’s decision to reconcile morality with individual romantic desire seems to represent a heteronomy of its own. After traveling into the past and finding a romantic partner of her choosing, Qingchuan’s narrative could have well followed that of Amanda. The fourth prince, while vicious at first, displays genuine tendencies to change for the sake of Qingchuan. The twist in the narrative of Qingchuan turning away from her ideal man, while quite plausibly a cheap script device to drag out the drama, represents a rejection of the kind of postfeminist philosophy endorsed by \textit{Lost in Austen}. In \textit{Lost in Austen}, struggles of gender and race are assumed to have succeeded. Pirhana, Amanda’s black

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item $^{113}$ That is not to say that there are no scholarly works on contemporary urban women, for instance, Lin Yinhe’s texts often address sex and marriage in the contemporary context. also see a newly published work on how urban Chinese women relate to and view the topic of sex: Pei, Yuxin, \textit{Yu Wang Du Shi: Shanghai 70 Hou Nü Xing Yan Jiu.} Di 1 ban. However, the quantity and quality of secondary literature on popular culture and gender seems truly lacking.
\item $^{114}$ Without getting deep into controversies in debates in cultural studies in terms of the Other, my reference here simply refer to common academic understandings of the Other as a individual or group that is culturally different from that of the speculator/ scholar’s native group; it is often critiqued for the scholars’ objectification of the Other as a subject of study. For elaborations, see Said, Edward W. \textit{Orientalism.} London: Penguin, 2003. Lévinas, Emmanuel. \textit{Totality and Infinity: An Essay On Exteriority.} Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
roommate, resides happily in the modern space. Elizabeth Bennet also finds fulfillment by staying in contemporary England. Thus, the protagonist is granted the freedom to choose at will without having to worry about the racial, sexual, political meanings entailed by her decision to return to Pemberley and marry Darcy. In contrast, Qingchuan leaves behind the fourth prince and begins to accept the eighth prince, who is, for many purposes and intents, a stand-in for her responsible, stable fiancé, signifying a return to the mate selected by her mother at the beginning of the show. Though crossing through time and space, Qingchuan’s struggles as a woman, in terms of romance and survival, remain astoundingly consistent. When in the present, she is too naïve to understand the value of a man with moral virtues. This shortsightedness is why she must undertake an unlikely journey into a dangerous past, where she will learn the costs and consequences of loving the wrong man.

While we may read Qingchuan’s return of her mother’s advice as a desperate preservation of patriarchal traditions, in which daughters become mothers, metaphorically and literally in Palace, I suggest that the presentation of continuity of oppression and a necessity to return to constraining traditional wisdoms carry the potential to subvert a post-Revolutionary narrative of women’s liberation in China. In a Chinese social context, the metanarrative, one that is constructed and disseminated politically, holds that Chinese women were persecuted and abused under the feudal, traditional order and their liberation is made possible only through the Communist Revolution. Implicit in this story of history, told by the Chinese Communist Party, is the that the oppression of women has been done away with and China, too, has entered a postfeminist age.

115 Metanarrative can be generally defined as a constructed history that adopts a literary narrative structure, which rules out the possibility of objective truth. My use of the term here refers to the politically constructed narrative of women’s liberation in China, which serves the interest of the Communist Party as one who rescued and saved Chinese women. For more on Metanarrative as well as meta history, see: White, Hayden V., *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination In Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Johns Hopkins paperback ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975.


Such understandings of women as exclusively victims imply that the Communist Revolution and modernity brought about their liberation.
However, the Communist Revolution co-opts women’s issues under its broad tenets and refuses women a dedicated sphere of grasping and addressing those struggles that affect women exclusively. In her reexamination of the revolution and women’s experiences in it, Wang Zheng supports this view by showing that women are often impeded in their feminist work during the revolution and discriminated against in the party hierarchy.116 Furthermore, the many movements in post-Revolutionary era put on display a degenderization of women, as they are pushed into fields of labor purportedly as part of the gender-neutral proletariat while encouraged and forced to match standards set by men. Li Xiaojiang’s work in the 1980s stages a specific critique also of this kind of denial of the female.117 The metanarrative of Chinese history denies that Chinese women today continue to deal with many of the same problems they dealt with before 1949. *Palace* and its nearly sadistic drive to break the protagonist via forces of patriarchy strikes me as a refreshing reminder that liberation is but a myth and that systematic women’s oppression exists on a continuum across time and space. Qingchuan’s journey into the past and her seemingly fluid assimilation into its competitive, manipulative homosocial space may appear incoherent and nonsensical at first. However, when placed in the Chinese context, it suggests that women under the past feudal order and the new socialist order today are not so different after all. They deal with the same struggles of confinement, dependence on men, and lack of female solidarity.

As those scholars who study time travel schemes and Jane Austen nostalgia so poignantly present in the previous sections of this thesis, we read, imagine, and escape into the past only to contemplate problems of the present. Perhaps those exaggerated, anachronistic, and ultra-conservative social rules of the past not only highlight values of the present but also put on display the shortcomings of our own perspective. Rituals of the past remind us our ability to relate to those extreme forms of sexism, racism, and other forms of injustice, as we continue to

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find traces of their manifestations in the present. In *Palace*, the cruel lessons learned about the need to return to tradition inadvertently expose women’s lack of “liberation.” Women today continue to succeed and fail according to many of the similar rules made up by our “oppressive” ancestors, who are anything but long gone. I can only speculate that perhaps this is why after several immensely popular productions, time-travel period dramas have become officially banned by the Chinese Communist Party in 2011.
Both time-travel period dramas—*Palace* and *Lost in Austen*—possess a flair for the historical, which puts on display drastically different appropriations of a common theme. Amanda Price from *Lost in Austen* finds a portal into the world of *Pride and Prejudice* in order to escape the mediocrity and pressures of Western women’s modern living. Unfulfilled by her professional and romantic life, Amanda takes a journey into the fictional past that ends up teaching her much about herself and the pursuit of real love. By watching her, we learn that it is possible to dream of and fulfill the fantasy of finding Mr. Darcy. The miniseries teach us that what prevents us from living this fantasy is not reality itself, but rather our lack of acceptance of that deep-seated desire.

In *Palace*, Qingchuan rejects her mother’s advice to marry a simple, hard-working, and reliable man because she demands to experience true love just like Amanda. However, her journey into the past proves much more trying, as she is repeatedly placed in life-threatening circumstances and subjected to much physical and verbal abuse. Such visceral representations of suffering teach Qingchuan that it is necessary to manipulate patriarchy for survival and for the furthering of her own ends. Ultimately, Qingchuan walks away from the feminine success earned through manipulation and chooses a simple loving man just like her mother prescribes. Watching Qingchuan cope with the harshness of reality, we see that while a woman must learn to negotiate patriarchal forces to advance her goals, she can only find real happiness in marrying the right man.

By studying closely the narrative structures and gender dynamics within each show, I highlight the commonalities and differences in understanding gender in each culture. Both shows use the theme of escape to denote a lack of fulfillment in contemporary women’s living. The escape is also rhetorically represented as a form of exile, because the protagonists must learn to resolve their contemporary problems through a journey into the past. The homosocial relationships portrayed in each show exhibit great consistency with a Western cultural lineage of
manifest sisterhoods and the lack thereof in a Chinese context. While women in Lost in Austen are plotted to resolve their conflicts through friendship, homoeroticism, and individual projects, women in Palace are constantly pitted against one another in a pursuit of a monogamous, socially upward-lifting marriage with the same prince. These differences in homosociality engender different conceptions of feminine success.

In the British/Western context, a postfeminist perspective is adopted to understand the feminine self and its relationship with the outside world. This postfeminist perspective encourages a freedom of choice as a governing principle of women’s empowerment. This approach to teaching women about themselves and their quest for love threatens to elide serious, moral ramifications of the choices made and obscures the social forces which still can constrain a woman’s ability to live a life based on self-determination. A postfeminist methodology in thinking about the future of womanhood assumes an amnesiac attitude towards the forces and events that gave rise to present circumstances.

In contrast, a Chinese perspective continues to grapple with a post-Revolutionary narrative of women’s historical oppression and recent Communist liberation. Palace serves as a vivid and imaginative manifestation of how popular discourse on gender struggles with the legal, economic emancipation of women, which often clashes with glaring evidence of gender inequality in contemporary Chinese society. The “emancipated” woman from modern China fits in seamlessly with a much reviled feudal, patrilineal culture in Palace, in which lessons learned about the manipulation of patriarchy and value of matrimony continue to inform Qingchuan, as well as the audience, after a return to the present. The value granted to wisdoms from the past puts on display the relevance of experiencing or watching female suffering from a supposedly long-gone oppressive past. The adaptability of the lessons learned by Qingchuan and the ease with which they map onto a contemporary Chinese society delineate Palace as a potential site of contention and fissure against an imposed historical understanding of gender in China.

fluidity between pre and post-Revolutionary China in Palace shows the continuity of women’s suffering and how women today continue to learn from women in the “past,” both historically and imaginatively, to better their lives.

In the end, both these dramas are meant to make us feel better, to escape from the drudgeries, pressures, and impossible desires we have come to own as part of womanhood. They are modern fairy tales that continue the promise to reward ordinary girls with the chance to meet their own princes. The cracks and fissures surfacing in the cultural productions are indeed important ways of understanding the complexity of gender in each cultural context. However, the feeling of satisfaction from the fairy tales reiterated to us cannot be ignored. Such a sense of gratification speaks to the paradoxical issues a woman viewer is left to consider on her own: the power and denigration placed on traditional feminine beauty, the ethics of playing into patriarchal regimes to achieve one’s own ends, the pressure to “stand up” for all the contradictions inherent in what a woman is. As I untether myself from the many visits into the world of Palace and Lost in Austen, I find that their magic persists in their dual assertions that a woman should certainly work hard to get what she wants. Further still, once she completes the rites of passage (time travel), material wealth, successful relationship management, a sense of self-esteem will all be gained (through one man). The triumphs of these fairy tales derive, precisely, from the frustrating reality that in our own lives, no matter how hard we seem to work at it, we will never be perfect nor will we finally come to “deserve” Everything. The very first text I read when embarking on this project is Janice Radway’s recuperative project on cliché romantic Harlequin novels, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature. I found Radway’s positive evaluation of Harlequin novels inspiring. I believed, upon my first reading, that we need more feminist scholars who, instead of berating women, start to really try and understand what everyday women hold dear. After completing a project of my own on the mass pleasure of “fairy tales” for women, I realize that while these works may

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serve a positive function in women’s lives, what they ultimately reinforce is the lack within ourselves. We can try to probe deeper into the self like Amanda or negotiate forces of patriarchy with an attitude of ingratiation like Qingchuan. Despite such efforts to receive the didacticism of these dramas, we still find ourselves stuck in their pilot episodes or playing the part of the best friend, waiting for our own fairy tales to launch into action.
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