

Lady Whistledown: A Modern Tiresias in *Bridgerton*

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Abstract

This paper explores Lady Whistledown in the Netflix series, *Bridgerton*, as a modern Tiresias. The series tells a story of people, especially the socio-economic life of people living in the Regency Era. Throughout the entire series, the character: Lady Whistledown narrates people's lives through her society paper that exposes the scandalous secrets of people living in the society. Drawing on insights from Joshep Cambell's notion of myths, the paper argues that Whistledown's narrativization of people's secrets embeds mythical prominence as it deals with the complexities of people and is indeed an inseparable unit from human life. Although the mythical character belongs to the primordial period, Tiresias stays in the mindset of people in an archetypal mode. This archetypal character holds such a power that audiences fail to eradicate it from their memories as they create different forms in their minds. Consequently, this ultimately presents new forms with novel components that serve to inform humans through the behaviors they present. Whistledown exhibiting the quality of Tiresias exposes the secrets of aristocrats through her writing in the society paper. The analysis shows that she empowers characters and audiences through the playfulness of words and projects herself as a modern Tiersias restoring the elements of myths in modern form and evoking the rage to interrogate the societal norms where representation is treated with disparity. Thus, Whistledown despite being a modern character personifies a mythical character: Tiersias, who resists the discrepancies existing in society.

Keywords: Whistledown, Scandalous, Gossip, Secrets, Myth

Introduction

In the realm of myth and storytelling, there lies a multifaceted narrative that not only includes a diverse array of characters but also acknowledges the role of the readers in interpreting and engaging with the story. This narrative has flourished with the blending of modern media and traditional print and the seamless integration of both worlds has succeeded in creating an experience that captivates audiences on multiple levels. Through the pages of a book, readers are transported to intricate worlds crafted with words and meanwhile, the infusion of modern media introduces an interactive dimension, where visuals, sound, and interactivity elevate the narrative, pulling audiences deeper into the story's embrace. The combination creates a synergy that blurs the lines between fiction and reality adding an allure, drawing in audiences with its ability to spin intricate narratives that feel immersive and real. It's like peeling back layers of reality to reveal hidden truths, much like the myths of old did for ancient cultures. This alliance can be picturized in the Netflix series, *Bridgerton*. Here an anonymous character arouses curiosity with gossip and exposes the scandal of elite society through the sheet, 'The Society Paper.' This character with narratives dispenses fascinating facts to all readers. Recognized as the Lady Whistledown, the character shapes the plot, directs the storyline with the publication of intrigues related to them, and owns enough power to elevate or ruin people's reputations and relationships in high-class society. She is the emblem of gossip among the people as she exposes secrets through her publications. Her role can be assumed as reminiscent of the ancient Greek mythological figure: Tiresias, who was bestowed with the talent of prophecy.

Lady Whistledown, in a similar instance, possesses an ability to predict the happenstances. Through it, she picturizes the social life of London in the Regency Era, in 1813, following the lives of the wealthy Bridgerton family and their interactions with other high-class societies of the town. The topic of discussion under social season that took place in society in the era, according to Anne K. Mellor, "the eighteen-century focus on the courtship plot of traditional romance, urging their readers — through the examples of their heroines — to be rational, cautious, prudent, and above all to insist on mutual compatibility in their choice of a husband" (44). Mellor illustrates that marriages were often

observed as a strategic alliance for social, economic, and political purposes. Women were taught to prioritize values that would ensure them a suitable match and help them establish compatibility that would lead to a stable and successful marriage life. Whistledown, through her astute observations, recognizes the pretentious nature of high social status people that they often wish to keep hideous. This phenomenon resonates with the Olivier Klein, et. al. idea that “identities cannot be sustained unless they are acknowledged by others” (29). Klein and his colleagues acknowledge that social identity and perception play significant roles in shaping how individuals present themselves and maintain their identities within society because “the term identity performance concerns phenomena involving social, not personal identity” (Klein, et. al. 30). This indicates that identity performance highlights how individuals navigate and enact their social identities within various social contexts, often shaping their behavior to align with prevailing norms or expectations associated with their social group.

However, while her insights uncover the secrets and flaws with her analytical wit, they also raise ethical questions regarding privacy and consent that arouse problems because of her omnipresence ability. Scholars like Marcel Becker relate this kind of observation to “corresponding embarrassment . . . not the intrusive eye of another person, but the constant observation, which can lead to conditions . . . a threat to the person’s autonomy” (309). By publicly exposing the secrets and flaws of individuals without their consent, Whistledown's actions become an intrusion into the personal lives of those elite people. Moreover, her gossip column perpetuates power dynamics within high society, as the fear of being exposed by Whistledown leads individuals to manipulate or maintain their social standing through secretive means. Thus, while Whistledown’s analytical wit unveils the intricacies of reputation, courtships, and societal expectations, it also prompts a critical examination of the impact of media sensationalism on personal and communal integrity.

Before delving into the scrutiny of societal dynamics that Bridgerton offers, some researchers have variant ways of interpretation. For instance, Anamarija Šporčič focuses on the lens of “metamodernist characteristics that could help shed light on an emerging sensibility that is likely to replace postmodernism as the cultural dominant” (123). Šporčič hits on the idea of

disclosure of new cultural sensibility, which is a shift away from the dominant post-modernism, and the reappearance of the sensibilities that are the focal element of modern societies. Besides this, Julie Anne Taddeo, in the research, writes *Bridgerton* dispenses area for multifaceted studies presenting disciplines from literature and history to communication and media studies with the combination of romantic genre and academic ideas as it “presents us with a multitude of issues to analyse” (4) but her focus is on women and her article explores experiences of Regency women involving in “sex and romance and how twenty-first-century consumers of the romance genre interpret those experiences . . . and how period drama viewers like ourselves engage with *Bridgerton* on an intellectual and emotional level” (4). Taddeo tries to portray the authentic Regency history through the depiction of female sexuality.

Other than this, Oliver Von Knebel Doeberitz sheds light on the linguistics pattern of the series with its comparison to another series set in early 19th century England and centralizes the idea of the Regency Era claiming that “recent TV and streaming series create a Regency Englishness which, while retaining some of the elements popularized by the Austen adaptations, moves far beyond the traditional 'heritage' depiction” (235). While still rooted in the iconic elements of the Regency era, the series embodies the modern interpretations that take significant strides in reimagining and expanding upon the historical and cultural landscape of the period. Unlike various arguments proposed by the researchers above, this research paper centers on the actions of the narrator: Lady Whistledown, claiming her to be similar to the mythical character, Teirasis, drawing an intersection between myth and gender issues and also presents how it works as a social critique taking into consideration the idea of Joshep Campbell’s myths.

There are parallel connections between Lady Whistledown and Tiresias as they both hold idiosyncratic perspectives and have the power to transform through their knowledge. Tiresias, a blind prophet, granted insights into different realms. However, people who were the subjects of Whistledown’s social commentary were described in such a way that affected even their position. Additionally, the phenomenon of Whistledown’s observations resonates deeply with the tradition of mythological storytelling as a means of social critique, particularly regarding gender dynamics. Wendy Donigher

O'Flaherty defines myth as, “a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past, or more rarely, in the future, an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered; it is a story that is part of a larger group of stories” (27). This statement clarifies that myth and storytelling intertwine.

Just as myths in various cultures have served as allegorical narratives to challenge societal norms and power structures, Whistledown's revelations expose the gendered expectations and inequalities that pervade elite circles, and this aligns with Carl Gustav Jung's idea of myth. According to Jung, “Myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings, and anything but allegories of physical processes” (154). Like myths, her observations serve as revelations of unconscious social dynamics, offering involuntary statements about the complexities of gender dynamics within the Regency era. Through her commentary, Whistledown's insights transcend mere allegories, providing profound reflections on the unconscious workings of societal norms and power structures. Furthermore, Whistledown's scrutiny of courtships and societal expectations sheds light on how gender roles are constructed and enforced within high society. Edward F. Edinger brings forward that idea of myths, “not simply tales of happenings in the remote past but eternal dramas that are living themselves out repeatedly in our personal lives and in what we see all around us. . . They are eternal patterns of how life happens below the surface if only one can see it” (3). Just as myths reveal enduring truths about the human condition, Whistledown's observations shed light on the ongoing dynamics of the elite class, exposing the timeless patterns of power, reputation, and societal expectations at play beneath the surface of Regency society.

By unmasking the façade of prestige and privilege, Whistledown's gossip column becomes a contemporary form of mythological storytelling, offering a critical lens through which to examine the intersection of gender, power, and social status. Thus, her role as a social commentator not only exposes the intricacies of elite life but also catalyzes broader discussions on gender inequality and social justice. Therefore, focusing on the two questions: Wow is Lady Whistledown a modern Tiresias and how does her role contribute to the manifestations of myths? What are her roles contributing to the discourse

on gender representation and social critique in popular media? The paper analyzes Whistledown and her narrativizing skills and their impact on society and posits that Whistledown's writings originate amusement and fear as her column spreads rumors that could prospectively lead to scandal while maintaining mystery around her identity.

Unveiling Lady Whistledown: Exploring the Modern Tiresias Archetype

Tiresias was enchanted with peculiar prophetic abilities and thought-provoking insights. This allowed him to comprehend entangled social dynamics in societies, and to this, Shelia Cavanaugh writes, "Tiresias is a Theban diviner who is famous for having lived as both a man and as a woman" (4). The experiences he obtained after living the lives of both genders granted him conceptions of human conditions. Having survived for generations, he occupied knowledge and could deliver it to the world. According to Alfred Schutz, he "visualizes a world in which he does not live and in which he has never lived" (71). Schutz informs that he is occupied with omnipresent qualities even without being in a particular location. Furthermore, Schutz points out that "Though Tiresias cannot see what happens, he knows things to come. Yet without any power to bring them about or to prevent them, he remains an impotent onlooker of the future" (71). As a gift was bestowed upon him, he could predict the future despite sightlessness. But his abilities have limited agency as he could not alter the events he foresaw. His prophecy was a subject through which he could highlight the fate of humans but could not have control over the outcomes. Lady Whistledown, in a similar instance, is also assumed to have a dual identity.

With her astute observations, she comments on the events of societies. But being anonymous made people question her gender despite having 'Lady' as her first name. Colin Bridgerton interrogates, "Who knows if Whistledown is even a she?" (37:52:04-37:54:12). The statement implies that as Whistledown's true identity is intentionally kept secret, there is a possibility that she could be someone other than a woman. It even challenges the assumptions and expectations of the readers or characters within the series as her identity stays mysterious. Her omnipresent role serves her as an almighty, which aligns with a gift granted to the seer figure, Tiresias. Similar to him,

Whistledown monitors the complicated lives of the characters and expresses her opinions on their hidden motives. Voiceover of Lady Whistledown, in the series, says, “Dearest reader, this author finds herself compelled to share the most curious of news” (27:33-27:39). She would unveil the concealed truths and foretell the future through her column that was read by myriad people in society. Moreover, she owns the power in her as she could change the psychological state of the character.

Unlike the quality that Tiresias is powerless to control the outcomes he foretells, Whistledown has the potential to transform the future of the character she predicted. Furthermore, she would communicate the gossip of the societies with the insertion of wit through her sheet. The people of the community would describe her paper even as a symbol of offense, as Violet Bridgerton comments, “Do not tell me that is yet another scandal sheet” (10:15: 21-10:17:03). It is because her societal comments would either aggrandize the subject about whom she discusses or the same subject would be flattened based on what steps they march in their everyday lives. For instance, Daphne Bridgerton was marked “the season’s Incomparable” (10:53:07-10:53:37) and also a “diamond of the first water.” (10:55:47-10:56:21) after she presented herself in front of the queen as a candidate of a social season. These comments were Whistledown’s words provided to Daphne.

Indeed, the words raised her position in society as most suitors desired to court her, which even influenced her destiny. Undoubtedly, the Whistledown column has the power to impact lives and it certainly did alter the life of Daphne as she voices, “And the drawing room at Bridgerton House currently appears to be emptier than the muddled head of her dearest King George” (28:45-28-50). Here, with the use of metaphor to create a comparison between the emptiness of the room and the confused state of King George, she satires the decorated and furnished spaces of Bridgerton’s house, which is devoid and lacks liveliness despite the fact the Queen praised Daphne. The capability of Whistledown to expose the truth mirrors her Tiresias Archetype, and it is similar to the words of Carl Gustav Jung, as he defines archetype as “a tendency to form such representations of a motif—representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern” (67). The statement states that an archetype is a blueprint that represents a familiar pattern of

human experiences despite variations in details. To relate it to Whistledown, she recognizes the fundamental structure humans are deeply rooted in and discloses the truths through the writings that could shape the characters' fates or impact their lives. Her actions collide with Tiresias's way of representing the situations around him.

Manifestations of Myths through Lady Whistledown

Lady Whistledown, known for her scandalous society paper in the series, serves as a fascinating channel through which various mythological elements are manifested. According to Joseph Campbell, "Mythology is apparently coeval with mankind" (20). This is to say, since the emergence of homo sapiens, mythologies have remained persistently universal. The concerns of it exist over the entire mankind on the earth. This furthermore implies that myths are ingrained in human culture, reflecting their essence in various aspects of roles that people perform. Identically, Whistledown's sheet holds a prominent place among people of society because there reside the narratives of people that do not fail to seize the interest of audiences. The act of Lady Whistledown narrating the hidden truths of aristocratic people, exposing secrets and scandals, also signals that myths, and by extension storytelling, are indispensable ingredients in human culture. As Mark Schorer writes, "Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves" (360). The statement states that myths function like a map that guides us to the novel territories of life. It offers narratives and symbols that we can relate to, helping us to disentangle the complexities of our existence. For instance, Lady Whistledown, through her writing, says, "But as we know, the brighter a lady shines, the faster she may burn" (7:21:03-7:25:21), which, in the series, is her implicit warning to Daphne Bridgerton to not to keep high expectations just because Queen complimented her beauty.

The testimony appears to be the concern of Whistledown, exactly the way myths address universal concerns and reflect the performance of people. To support this, in the words of Schorer, "A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has to organize value for the experience" (360). Myths shape the way we perceive

and interpret the facts related to our lives. Relating it to Whistledown, she creates the world through her words where reality and myth interweave. Her words are the powerful force that forms the narrative of society, revealing the hidden truths beneath the surface, and as per Arthur Berger, “. . . the narrative form of myth helps it become a more powerful teaching and learning experience” (122). Myths generate a rich and immersive experience that echoes with us on a deeper level by interknitting characters, their events, and emotions. This captivates our attention and drags us to the lessons they convey, making it easier for us to comprehend and memorize the teachings submerged within myths. Whistledown does the same. She disperses a deeper message, through her keen insights, to the superficially monotonous events of characters’ lives. Her way of interpreting the events serves as a reminder of the power of storytelling itself, as her society paper offers us a world beyond our own: one where truth and fiction dance. Besides, her character mirrors the functionalities of an archetypal figure, a trickster.

The society paper of her, known for the embodiment of the scandalous story of the characters, indicates her role as the trickster. Carl Gustav Jung interprets Trickster as “a figure whose physical appetites dominate his behavior; he has the mentality of an infant (112). The statement interprets a figure that is largely influenced by primal instincts and has the mentality that prioritizes their cravings like hunger and thirst, similar to how an infant reacts. However, I do not mean to define Whistledown as the lady with the infant as mentioned above qualities. Instead, I intend to merely connect Whistledown’s psychological and playfulness to Trickster and define her, according to Jung, as “a figure lacking any purpose beyond the gratification of his primary needs, he is cruel, cynical, and unfeeling. This figure passes from one mischievous exploit to another” (112). The person, as per the statement, disregards the impact and aftermath of their actions on others as they prioritize their contentment above everything else. They reject the deeper implications or prolonged effects of their behavior about whom they mention or discuss. The words of Lady Whistledown read, “This author is left to wonder whether Her Majesty might reconsider the high praise she once afforded Miss Bridgerton for we all must know what the queen despises more than anything. Being wrong” (28:24:28-28:42:50), and this statement questions to the queen’s

opinion of Miss Bridgerton as she is proven wrong which she detests. Moreover, this thought of Whistledown even has tension for Daphne Bridgerton as she was once entitled to seasons “Incomparable” and also “Diamond of the First Water,” and now she is not able to get any calls from any suitors. Thus, Whistledown’s notion of delivering a fact leads to complications for those about whom she makes the description.

The Power of the Pen: Lady Whistledown as a Social Critic and Representee

Through the power of her written words, Lady Whistledown displays the transformative role highlighting the prominence of critical voices to unmask the sordid actions and motives in which aristocrats were involved. She exercises her pen as a potent tool for social critique through her scandalous society paper. Alongside exposing the flaws and hypocrisies of aristocratic society, she defies traditional gender norms. Because ladies of the regency era were occupied with household responsibilities, to support, the article entitled “Ladies” writes, “High society ladies would either receive calls or visit others. Tea would be drunk and snacks eaten” (1). This conveys that women were engaged in tasks that would probably require the engagement of their cognition. Besides this, the article further inscribes that “a Regency woman would change her clothes up to 6 times a day and would have had several different outfits for every conceivable occasion” (1). Women would, throughout the day, change their attires to match it to every possible situation they would visit. It states that women of the era used to engage in trivial things which has no sort of significance in assisting them in sharpening their knowledge. However, Whistledown confronts the expectations that women in her period were supposed to live with. In contrast to the submissive and demure character traits of females, Whistledown undertakes an authoritative position traditionally associated with men. Fearless attributes within her reject the notion that women should be silenced or confined to miniature roles. This contributes to her role as a gender representative as she empowers audiences to question societal expectations set out on women.

Whistledown’s character, moreover, formulates the gateway for social critique through her society papers. I would relate it to the character: Daphne,

who voiced her liberty against the supremacy that Anthony Bridgerton, her eldest brother, was implicitly imposing on her to choose her husband. I believe it was Whistledown's gossip columns that accompanied her to speak up about the lordship that Anthony had landed on her. Rather than making her work easy, comforting her at such a heavy time because it was the time, as Catherine Curzon writes, "conforming to strict rules in order to find a husband, who then had control over her property and lifestyle; risking the loss of reputation for any societal indiscretion; and enduring painful pregnancies and childbirths: life for a Regency woman came with supreme challenges" (1), her brother was ascending complexities. Regency women had to adhere to strict societal rules and also endure physical hardships for their husbands. To be precise, they had to risk their lives for men who had dominantly conventional ideologies. Had Whistledown not marked Queen's comment on Daphne as "flawless", the wrong decision, Daphne would never have urged to express her frustration to her brother saying, "Lady Whistledown has all but declared me ineligible worthy of the affection of a detestable simpleton and no one else. Tell me, what others should ever want such damaged goods now" (31:50:02-32:01:56). The words of Whistledown led her to believe that she has been considered unbecoming of affection by everyone leading her to feel damaged and question on herself. Whistledown mirrored the unequal treatment revealing the oppressive structure formed by the brother naming it the protective shield. Although Daphne's contempt for the writer can be seen extensively, I stress the role of society paper writer solely encouraged her to critically analyze and interrogate the power dynamics and hierarchies in the series. Therefore, Whistledown in popular media grabs the attention of audiences to the broader issue of representation. She works as an eye-opener standing out as an influential figure to inquire about the disparities that each individual has to face.

Conclusion

Lady Whistledown's character in the series is a fascinating incorporation as she has the potential to transform knowledge within contemporary storytelling techniques. The social commentary that comes through her society paper presents her as an all-seeing observer who would generate thought-provoking discussions on the representation of gender within

societal norms. Through her enigmatic persona, she reveals the complex human nature incorporating the qualities of Tiresias. Despite the leap between the characters, through the character traits of Whistledown, there is a resemblance to historical myth. Even though she is a modern character, she is an old Tiresias in the modern world. This modern Tiresias generates chaos among characters and provides a thrill to audiences and techniques for dealing with the disparities that exist in society.

Besides, the embodiment of manifestations of myths adds a deeper level of intrigue to the series. Her scandalous paper keeps her identity mysterious and defies societal norms. Prior, the primitive Tiresias despite being a blind seer was known for his prophecies, and now the modern Tiresias: Lady Whistledown, uses popular media to mirror the discrepancies between characters in the series and audiences that people in society are compelled to live upon. Her storytelling capability challenges the expectations that society inflicts upon women, violates the patriarchal structures that force women to adopt demureness solely and contributes to amplifying voices demanding inclusivity. Therefore, her role proves the persistent power that a pen holds in forming the shape of society and also claims that the impact on society is mythical.

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