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Fit Check: High Femme Aesthetic and Queer Embodiment in *A Court of Fey and Flowers*

Good afternoon. My name is Eliza Wilcox. I'm a fat white person with short brunette-ish hair, in a long sleeve pink mesh dress with a floral pattern, wearing a green mask and peach yarn earrings. Please feel free to use the access copies via the ASECS app, or, for access to the talk itself and my slides, follow the GitHub tiny-url or use the QR code.

Regency era media is having a bit of a moment. Two major film adaptations, *Fire Island* (a queer take on *Pride and Prejudice*) and *Persuasion,* have been released in the last year alone. Patricia Matthews points to the booming success of Shonda Rhimes' *Bridgerton,* too, as proof that there is "a world of fans and cultural critics" yearning for stories like *Bridgerton* that move beyond casting Black actors and actresses as secondary to their white counterparts (Matthews 2020). This critical attention to the

white cisheteronormativity of Regency media is essential to eschewing the myth that the Regency era was filled with *only* white, cisheterosexual people. Part of the argument I want to make today is that a new media genre, actual play, provides specific advantages to disrupting these flawed Regency era stories.

Actual play, which, in the broadest definition, are recorded performances of tabletop roleplaying games, can collapse temporal and affective boundaries, both with its audience and within its own story, and within those collapsed spaces, creators and audiences are able to experience what I am (tentatively) calling "affective roleplaying."[1] "Affective roleplaying" is the specific experience in actual play when in-game reality collides with out-of-game past histories, opening up space for creators and audiences to reinhabit historical moments and reinscribe

[1] Adaptations can be transformative, as we know from Hutcheon's palimpsest theory (Hutcheon 2006). Media theorists have already begun to explore how TTRPGs reshape "fantasy" through transmedia transmission (Vu 2017), and actual play researchers, in particular, have investigated the genre's capacity to generate not-yet-knowable futures (Vist 2018). But these theories are imprecise when thinking about how actual play can re-weave historical narratives with new textures to re-work both pasts *and* futures simultaneously.

them with new narrative, aesthetic, and affective layers. These layers are not replacements or displacements of the originals that disavow the past, but rather, components that add thicker textures to places, spaces, and stories. This is significant because adaptations of canonical texts, in particular, are dismissed with accusations of ahistorical presentism most often when that adaptation attempts to render the lives of marginalized people visible, three-dimensional, and necessary. To exemplify how "affective roleplaying" can open up Regency narratives, I will turn to Dimension20's *A Court of Fey and Flowers,* which is an actual play merging together Regency era tropes and characters via Vee Hendro and Hayley Gordon's Jane Austen inspired RPG *Good Society* with the fantasy world of Dungeons and Dragons. After walking through the show's premise, I will specifically focus on Oscar Montaya's portrayal of his character Delloso de la Rue, arguing that his portrayal of the complexities of queer fem(me)ininity opens pathways for reading queer femme

subjectivity as an alternative to the white cisheteronormative femininity of the 1790s and early 1800s.

Before diving into *A Court of Fey and Flowers,* I'd like to pause to define what I mean when I say "queer fem(me)ininity."[2] I define "queer fem(me)ininity" as the exaggeration of feminine aesthetics with an eye towards hypervisibility in ways that actively resist cisheteronormative feminine scripts. This is the lens through which I look at Oscar Montoya's Delloso de la Rue, specifically, and compare them to other spaces of femininity in the show as it speaks back to Regency era notions of feminine subjectivity.

In *A Court of Fey and Flowers,* we follow six main player-characters from various magical courts to the event of millenia, which is called The Bloom. If we take every ball, masquerade, fox hunt, and tea-sharing session from every Austen or Burney or Edgeworth book, put them in a blender, and add in faeries, goblins, and elves, then we might approach what is

[2] Femme theory, a theoretical frame still being worked through in critical femininity studies, views queer femmes as capacious in their ability to "embrace feminine aesthetics" and still subvert "cis- and heteronormative gender scripts" (Schwartz 2020).

happening over the ten episodes of this season. Here is a brief rundown of the six key player characters plus one essential non-player character:

1. Oscar Montoya (he/him) portrays Delloso de la Rue (they/them), pictured here with green skin, teal hair, in a blue seashell dress. They are introduced as the Mistrix of the Bloom, pride of the “Court of Wonder,” who keeps things at the Bloom running. They are, in some ways, the most vaulted member of the Court of Wonder and the most precarious because they were stolen from the Material Plane (our world) before being brought back to the Court of Wonder and “raised” there.
2. Surena Marie (she/they) portrays Gwindolyn Thistlehop (she/they), pictured here in a blue high-low dress with white petticoat, light brown skin, and pink hair. However, early in the season, it is revealed that Gwindolyn is actually Binx Choppley (she/they), pictured here in a long purple moth-like dress, light brown skin, and a blunt brown bob. She is the

last known survivor of the Court of Craft, whose magic, we find out, was stolen to sustain the Court of Wonder and other allied dominant courts.

So, to cap, there are already themes of colonization, imperialism, and resource extraction in Rue and Binx's stories alone.

3. Brennan Lee Mulligan (he/him) portrays Captain KP Hobb (he/him). Captain Hobb is a member of the Goblin Court, at the Bloom to bring honor to his Court after the disastrous broken engagement between the Goblin Court's Princess Gribalba and the Court of Wonder's Prince Apollo. He is a duty-driven, honorable Bugbear, pictured here wearing his standard military jacket with red sash, gold epaulets, and hat, and much of his narrative arc in the show revolves around learning to pick love over duty as he falls in love with Rue.
4. Omar Najam (he/they) portrays Prince Andhera (he/they), the son of Queen Titania, Queen of Air and Darkness, and one of two heirs to the Unseelie Court. He has attended

previous Blooms as a shy tween, hiding behind pillars to eavesdrop, but comes to this Bloom as a democracy-minded grown person, pictured here with medium purple skin and black side-parted chin-length hair, wearing a dark purple and gold kalwar shameez.

And so we have the solider and the young royal, both wrestling with what it means to be dutiful soldiers and leaders to their respective people.

5. Emily Axford (she/her) and Lou Wilson (he/him) play the cousins Lady Chirp Featherfowl, Countess of Cluckingham, pictured here with light blue skin and deeper blue hair, blue legging with a peacock bustier and a matching feather cape and headpiece, and Lord Squak Airavis, Earl of Peckersburg, pictured here in grey pants with black boots and waistcoat, a green jacket and white flouncy shirt with medium-brown skin and white hair that is tinged black at the ends.[3]. The Lords have, at previous Blooms, been riotous

[3] The Lords of the Wing are the only non-Court attendees at the Bloom; their Grandfather, who invented birds, chose millennia ago to abstain from Court factions

partiers with numerous lovers and even more duel partners; think Mary and Henry Crawford meets *The Hangover*. At this Bloom, to mend their reputations, Grandfather instructs Chirp and Squak it is their duty to make political marriage matches, a task that the Lords of the Wing take to with unhinged ferocity.

6. Finally, Aabria Iyengar (she/her), the show's Game Master, portrays Wuvvy (she/her), among many other non-player characters. Wuvvy is Rue's long-time assistant and close friend and companion, pictured hee in a green and gold corsetted top with sleeves and a high white collar, in her standard satyr form with long brown horns. Wuvvy spends much of the season helping Rue, trying to love them in ways Rue does not know how to respond to, and finding her own way when it is clear that Rue's heart belongs to a very tall Bugbear with poor social graces.

At the Bloom, which takes place in what could be thought of as magical Bath (the Seafoam Court), these characters explore the

complexities of duty and honor versus truth and love while navigating the season's larger plot, which is the overthrowing of the aristocratic powers, particularly the Court of Wonder, in the name of democratizing magic for lesser Fey and protecting those without magic, namely the Material Plane (our world). With those details in mind, let's turn to the specifics of actual play and how *A Court of Fey and Flowers* uses them to rupture white cisheternormative Regency narratives.

One of the key aspects of actual play is that it is not a spectator sport. The "divide" between audience and cast is often enticingly thin, as are the divides between player and character. The way that actual play as a genre often collapses the distance between creator-character-audience makes it uniquely suited to showcasing the nuances of a text like *Cecilia* or *Belinda* or any Austen novel.[4] The player-character collapse is the moment in performance where it is unclear if the performance or our

[4] Moreover, theories of networked authorship in the eighteenth century argue for a reconceptualization of works like Richardson's *Pamela* as deeply embedded in an authorial creation network rather than the creator creating alone (Havens 2018); so with a genre like actual play, we can exhibit these factors rather than trying to compress them using spaces like the player-character collapse.

response is to the player (Oscar Montoya), the character (Delloso de la Rue), or the player-as-character (Oscar-as-Rue) (Hope 2017). These collapses can be overwhelming or disruptive, but in many actual plays, they act as rhizomatic ruptures into temporal pathways that the audience, the player(s), or the game runner can explore and push into new avenues without abandoning the previous plot or the future scope of the game.

This ability to pause, linger, and explore can allow players and the audience to simultaneously inhabit their own experience of the game, the first person(s) of the character, and the larger, third-person narrative of the game, similar to how free indirect discourse allows the reader to explore the story. What is different from the reading experience, however, is the improvisational, uncontrolled moments built into the mechanics of tabletop roleplaying, which allows for the effect of real-life people making choices rather than simply an author crafting a narrative. While the choices themselves exist in the play-time of the game, the narrative in-game time is often much shorter *or* much longer; this

temporal disjunction is essential to crafting the rhizomatic structures that weave into past histories and possible futures. Turning to a tender, early season moment between Rue and Hobb, I will argue this is a moment of “affective roleplaying,” where the resonance with Regency love scenes, particularly those scenes based on misreading and misjudgement, come into contact with contemporary fears queer femmes have of being seen, misread, and rejected.

So, there is a hunt. Hobb has recruited Wuvvy to help him, with Rue, who is supposed to be the Bloom’s Mistrix, standing and watching. Hobb hoists himself into a tree, looking for the best place to reconnoiter with Wuvvy, covering himself with mud to camouflage as Rue watches, bemused and enticed. Rue is, importantly, in this outfit, which is a take on Robin Hood with nine-inch brown heels, a green and gold mini dress, and an oversized hood and capelet. The attention to aesthetic over practicality seems, in this moment, a direct response to what Wollstonecraft names as the “too rich a soil” women are in where

“strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty” (x). It may also be a repudiation of the Austen heroine's necessity for physical strength and fortitude as proper feminine development; Rue is not walking three miles to Pemberley in these shoes, or at least, not in this scene. As the scene suddenly becomes night, the hunt having gone on for a while at this point, Hobb says to Rue: “Rue, I worry about you in the glade, there is space in my hiding spot for two if you wish to join me [...] It would be an honor to make sure that you are safe here in the dark forest at night, and also, you are extremely visible and ruining my trap”. At this moment, Iyengar intervenes, asking Hobb to make an insight check to see if he catches the look on Rue’s face “collapsing” as Hobb calls them “extremely visible.” The check succeeds; he sees that they are “crestfallen.” He offers apologies, again emphasizing keeping them safe, but this is Rue’s response: “It’s quite alright, Captain. It was silly for me to play along in this game, I am the Game Master,” and Hobb suddenly unsuccessfully tries to scoop Rue into the tree, which Rue rejects, continuing, “Thank you, Captain

Hobb. I don't know what I was thinking. It's quite alright – I am out here wearing a magnificent green outfit, I do stand out [...] I'm in your way, excuse me."

This moment, which in game time is less than a minute, takes up more than five minutes of production time. The choice to linger here allows Montoya, Mulligan, and Iyengar to add that textural layer only available through "affective roleplaying." Montoya and Mulligan are able to use game mechanics to guide their roleplaying choices, which layer Rue's interactions with Hobb over every Regency love-story. This layering does not erode the original stories but instead opens up space for considering the precarity of queer experience, even in spaces where we are, seemingly, in positions of power. When Rue, in the split second believes Hobb to be protective, is able to feel what it's like to be wanted in the light *and* protected in the dark, they are crafting a layer on top of the near-misses of the Mr. Knightleys and Emmas to highlight the queer femme experience of wanting to be seen as

you are and fearing that when you are seen, it will come with a price.

Montoya continues to sketch out the tension between "proper" femininity and subjecthood; Rue's interactions with Binx Choppley are particularly revelatory on this point. Em Friedman highlights both Rue and Binx as two underrepresented character types from the eighteenth century that *A Court of Fey and Flowers* renders particularly visible. Binx is "the outspoken female revolutionary," who is fighting to prevent further imperialist domination via magic hoarding, while Rue is a gesture towards "dandies, beaus, macaronis, mollies, and binary-fluting celebrities" like Anne Lister, the Ladies of Llangollen, the Chevalière d'Eon and Beau Brummel (Freidman 2022). I would build on this characterization of Rue, in particular, to argue that what Rue offers is resistant to what Kadji Amin names as both the white androgyny of nonbinariness and the "ubiquitous category [of nonbinariness] that [can] seemingly apply to anyone" (Amin 2022). Instead, Rue shows that it is not necessary to be

androgynous or to cross, to be masculine and present feminine and vice versa, in order to be queer and trans; and also, that there is something specifically feminine and queer that is in fact aesthetically, ontologically *different* from cisheterosexual femininity. Rue's own approach to queer fem(me)ininity as expression becomes another moment of "affective roleplaying," especially if we read Surena Marie's choice to discard the "Gwindolyn" face as a direct response to seeing Rue living in their own true form.

So far, this is what Rue has looked like, which is pictured here as their typical green skin, blue hair and wearing an iridescent nightgown with a floral head wrap.

At the turn of the fourth episode, they have dealt with their complex feelings for Hobb, become the subject of a duel of honor as Wuvvy fights Hobb because she does not like how Hobb has made Rue feel, and then begun to sit under the weight of what it is to be, primarily, the Mistrix of the Bloom before they are themselves. They originally plan to go to the high tea that episode

in this outfit: (the tea outfit). Montoya describes it as “a sort of nod to Marie Antoinette” here, including a powdered *white* face, “in the style of the French Revolution,” and the tensions, then, between someone like Binx and someone like Rue become heightened to anyone with a glancing understanding of femininity in the wake of the 1790s. But instead of following the expected storyline, that Rue’s femininity would be antithetical and anathema to someone like Binx, Montoya chooses this moment as the one to reveal that all is not what it seems.

Instead of being an elf with beautiful green skin, teal hair, long legs and just enough European beauty features, it is revealed the Rue is an Owl Bear. Taken from the Material Plane, from their home and their kind, they developed green-skinned Rue to fit in and navigate court life. In this moment, it would have been simple for Montoya to throw off all elements of Rue’s original campy, high femme aesthetic. It’s a trend, after all, in places like #lesbiantiktok to don femme costuming before throwing off to reveal the masc lesbian who is the true object of desire; and in

the queer world, more broadly, “no fats, no femmes, no Asians” has been a phrase spoken loudly, revealing the interwoven relationships between racism, fatphobia, and femmephobia. Rue does not do this. Instead, Rue embraces the queer fem(me)ininity that has helped them express and sustain themselves in a world not built for them, revealing Rue’s Owl Bear form in “a beautiful Regency-era gown in a soft pink taffeta,” covered in pink peonies, wearing a crown of even more pink peonies.[5]

Binx, at the tea, is complimentary of Rue’s true form. She commends them, and Binx’s acceptance already collapses against the revolutionary opposition to femininity we have come to expect; and then, the series explodes it even more, when later in that episode, Binx chooses Rue as who to reveal herself to. Binx says, “Who you showed yourself to be was amazing, and I needed you to know that. And I don’t think you’re like the other people from the Court of Wonder, are you? [...] So, I’m trusting

[5] Iyengar intervenes, offering Oscar the chance to burn a token, which is a significant mechanic, to control how the crowd reacts, or to roll a die, leaving it up to fate; Oscar chooses the die, saying out loud as the player that “I am actually very nervous,” and when it lands on on a 13, the response provokes gasps to the transformation but there is no hostility. As any queer or trans person could tell you, it could have been much worse.

you because you trusted all of us” before letting the Gwin glamor fall. Dismantling her pink-hair, blue-eyed cover, Binx says to Rue “I’m here to find our magic, and I think you’re not like them, because they stole it [our magic]. And you’re not like them.” Montoya’s choices and Marie’s interactions with Rue in this episode are prime examples of “affective roleplaying.” Their decision to interweave the anti-imperialist plot with Montoya and Marie’s play with femininity speaks to the current moment of femmephobia and anti-trans sentiment, as those who are visibly queer receive hatred from the far right and transphobic LGB movements, as well as weaving them back into past histories of revolution that relied on opposition to nonwhite cisheteronormative femininity. This allows the players to inscribe their characters into historical understandings, ultimately making more visible the possibility of real-world people who looked, acted, and thought like Rue and Binx.

This is a show worth watching, and I hope, in this presentation, I’ve made clear how actual play and “affective

roleplaying” have special qualities that make them uniquely suited for Regency-era storytelling. Most of all, though, I hope this presentation was a love letter to Oscar Montoya, to Rue, and to all the Rues who, in our moment, wonder what our future will look like. I hope it is clear that the only way forward is through, in solidarity, with the past in our minds, the present in our hearts, and our eyes on the not-yet-imaginable futures.

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