

Making a Mark at the Masquerade Ball: A Digital Exploration into British Social Hierarchies

Project Duration: *June 7, 2021—July 30, 2021 (8 weeks)*

Student: Riley DeBaecke

Bucknell University Class of 2023

Majors: Managing for Sustainability (B.S.B.A) and English—Literary Studies, with a concentration in Race and Literature

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Ghislaine McDayter

Professor of English and Associate to the Provost

English—Literary Studies Department

Email: mcdayer@bucknell.edu

Student Signature:



Faculty Signature

Ghislaine McDayter

A. Research question and creative endeavor

As our society reinvigorates the work dedicated to de-institutionalizing racism and sexism, we turn not only to our own, but also to European cultural histories where so many of these social constructs and barriers originated. For example, many of the woman-authored literary texts from the long 19th century garnered criticism from men who could not stand the thought of the woman in any sphere of power beyond the household. This was especially true should she seek to enter what was universally considered the “masculine” domain of cultural production and scholarship.

Likewise, male English writer Horace Walpole damned Mary Wollstonecraft as a “hyena in petticoats”¹ for writing her audacious *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, while the somewhat more “ladylike” Jane Austen filled author Mark Twain with an “animal repugnance.”² Clearly, the extreme responses by men to those women who intruded into the public realm can only be explained by “the male’s revulsion from a society in which women seem to be at the center of interest and power.”² Examining the literature and cultural norms of this period is invaluable for understanding the many external influences that have played such a large part in the systemic subordination of women, even today.

In order to fully engage in the origins of this oppression, however, one must fully engage with the foundations of those power structures at play. In an educational setting, the best way to do that is to “gamify” history, to interact with representations of these power structures through hands-on or online “game” scenarios. This research project will immerse readers in a 19th century masquerade ball online experience. It will familiarize students with class, social, and sexual hierarchies as well as gender dynamics rapidly emerging in the scientific discourse of the day in England. My work will help readers understand how wealthy British culture reinforced a racist, sexist class system using the novel realm of human sciences readily embraced by the masses.

Here, race science and sexology, disciplines that explained the “natural” distinctions between any given set of individuals using the biological rhetoric of human variability³ quickly became popular. Predictably, this new, authoritative work set out to “prove” that women, people of color, and/or people from marginalized communities (such as Ireland) were physiologically inferior. Authors of this research based their reasoning on phrenology, sexual structures, and anatomy.

As such, this project will explore not only the “conduct” books of the period that enforced the regular and acceptable behavior of a range of bodies in sexual intercourse, but also the new scientific documents and theories that underpinned them. The masquerade ball, with its intricate rules of etiquette and social mores, offers the student a view of the complex social networks of 19th century England in a digestible format. When looking at the masquerade ball, we can examine members from all segments of society in one packed ballroom, along with how their social operations performed sexist and racist attitudes prevalent in society. Moreover, we can dissect how the masquerade ball redrew these power dynamics in a carnivalesque setting. In doing so, it made way for the radical possibilities and repercussions of dancing, mingling, and becoming intimate with individuals of different race, gender, and class.

Examining the primary scientific documents from the period as well as the literary and social documents they provoked, I will utilize feminist theories of intersectionality to highlight the ways in which the masquerade ball provides a window into the beginning stages of racism and sexism of 21st century America.

B. Project Description

In the first five weeks of summer, I plan to build a whole new online narrative and scholarly thread for the evolving online Masquerade Ball game (worked on by previous students over the last three years). I will amplify it with concise historical context and visual engagement for readers interested in exploring the impact of race on the social dynamics of the long 18th century—something not yet touched on in the existing game. My work will build upon the research I performed in Dr. McDayter's *Literature of Flirtation* graduate-level seminar in Spring 2020.

However, notably absent from the current masquerade thread is the mention of race. Therefore, I will center my new thread around a Black woman, after the famed *The Woman of Colour: A Tale*, written by an anonymous author from the perspective of an orphaned Jamaican heiress. Plunged into life in high-class England just after the abolition of the British slave trade, the Black woman protagonist details her trials and tribulations as a persecuted, wealthy woman of color in a predominantly white society. I will design my thread with British society's misconceptions of and discriminations against her in mind.

Additionally, I will examine white people's fetishization of "Romanized" Black features and its reverberations into the colorism we see today in America. I will also illustrate in this thread the fetishization of Black women in 19th century England and how that translates to the fetishization of the Black woman in America today. To highlight this absurdity, I will juxtapose this objectification of the Black woman's body with the race science that "proved" the inferiority of women's intellectual capacity, a science whose methodology often only involved the measurement of the skull.³ My thread will ultimately display the intersectionality between these racist and sexist pseudosciences that oppressed the Black woman and positioned her as a social parasite in the culture. I will display my research in this thread mostly in paragraph format, accessed via links on the site that will lead curious readers to this greater historical context.

I purposed each week of my eight weeks of summer research into specific tasks, the first of which is preliminary research and source collection in the Bertrand Library beginning June 7. With the help of librarian Jason Snyder, I will search for paper and online copies of works such as *Aristotle's Masterpiece* and *Woman As She Is* to aid me in my research. I will read and take notes about these primary and secondary sources in the second week.

In week three, I will initiate the research for my thread centered around the Black woman, and I will create and write for the thread in weeks four and five. Designing this thread requires three weeks because not only will I extensively research and collect visual images for it, but I will also write supporting historical documentation within the thread that equates to about five single-spaced pages. Once finished, I will spend the sixth week preparing a PowerPoint presentation on my findings for the Kalman Research Symposium and writing an outline for the research paper I will submit to the 2022 Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities (HICAH) by

December 2021. Finally, I will spend the seventh and eighth weeks writing said research paper, which I estimate will fill at least five single-spaced pages as well. Completing all of these projects will require me to work five days a week, eight hours per day.

C. Research Value

Exploring 19th century England in this way is valuable because these institutional, social, and class structures are complex and remain untouched in most American educational settings. Yet, they provide a lens through which we can examine the very origins of racism and sexism. Through my research and development of a cultural archive, I hope to widen this lens for readers in other disciplines.

Personally, I will value this research because it will allow me to begin researching for the honors thesis I plan to write senior year. It may seem early for me to do so, but I have other aspirations for the summer after my junior year, so it makes sense for me to begin my work this summer, especially since I could not do so last summer due to COVID-19. I am a double major, so researching at Bucknell this summer will facilitate a smoother writing process for my honors thesis and culminating experience senior year. Lastly, I am also considering studying literary studies abroad in London. Because of the pandemic, squeezing that into my last four semesters at Bucknell will be difficult, so beginning my research this summer would ease that process.

D. Sharing the results

In addition to my masquerade ball thread, I will create a PowerPoint/Prezi describing my research findings for the Kalman Research Symposium and write a research paper on the subjects I explored to submit to HICAH, a renowned international conference celebrating undergraduate research. Conference attendees will have the opportunity to read my paper, and I will have thirty minutes to discuss my findings with them and answer questions.

Communicating my findings in research paper format in 2022 to HICAH would gain recognition for the literary studies department and the Literary Studies Arts Merit Scholarship program at Bucknell (of which I am a scholar). It would also expose the conference attendees to this relatively niche genre of literature and cultural study. Further, presenting my findings at an international conference would hone my public speaking skills and cause me to critically examine my writing, both of which will help me succeed at Bucknell and beyond.

E. The Faculty Mentoring Relationship

Dr. McDayter and I have maintained a very close, professional relationship since meeting at the Arts Merit Scholarship Weekend in 2019, and she has since become my advisor. I know I will flourish under her guidance, and she will undoubtedly give my work constructive criticism that will produce exceptional final products. I will meet with her in-person on Mondays and Fridays, following all coronavirus protocols, and over Zoom on Wednesdays. Each meeting will last for one hour. When in-person, we will work outdoors or in the Willard Smith Library. Dr. McDayter and I also feel comfortable calling, texting, and emailing. As of right now, Dr. McDayter plans on going away briefly in July, but we will communicate when necessary while she is away.

References

- ¹Ratcliffe, Susan. "Horace Walpole." *Oxford Essential Quotations*, by Susan Ratcliffe, 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2014.
- ²Trilling, Lionel. *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*. Viking, New York. p. 208, 1955.
- ³Stepan, Nancy. Introduction, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800-1960*. Department of History, Yale University. *Archon Books*, 1982, p. xii.