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# SASSMM'S POP CULTURE TAKE

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## SEXUAL VIOLENCE, REPRODUCTIVE COERCION, AND RACE IN *BRIDGERTON*

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Written by Sam, SASSMM  
advocate and educator

*Bridgerton* is Netflix's newest binge-worthy drama that is set in 19th century England. It is now the most watched show on the streaming platform. In this show, we learn about Daphne Bridgerton, a white woman from a noble family whose hand in marriage is highly sought after. The series follows her romantic relationship with the Duke of Hastings, Simon Basset, a Black man who has secretly sworn never to have children in an attempt to end his family's line.

The two get married by the middle of the season and the remainder of the show follows the tension between Daphne's lack of awareness of sex and pregnancy and Simon's desire not to have children. Even after their sexual relationship begins, Daphne is still in the dark about how pregnancy happens.

Simon has told her that he “can’t” have children (rather than “won’t”) and relies on the pull-out method when they have sex, an act that goes unexplained to Daphne. Late into the season, Daphne learns the truth of how pregnancy happens from her handmaid. The next time they have sex, Daphne positions herself on top of Simon and forces him not to pull out in an attempt to become pregnant against his wishes.

The show is based on a series of romance novels by Julia Quinn published between 2000-2013. In the original version of the story, Daphne has sex with Simon with the same attempt to become pregnant while he is passed out from intoxication. The show adapts this moment so that Simon is awake, sober, and consenting to sex until Daphne becomes forceful. We can see that Simon doesn’t want this. When he realizes he is close to ejaculating, he tries to get Daphne to move or stop, but she doesn’t. We can see the fear in his eyes as he tells Daphne to “wait”. She doesn’t stop what she is doing and continues with a knowing look on her face until he finishes a moment later.

This is sexual assault. In both portrayals of this scene, Simon does not consent to what is happening and Daphne purposefully and knowingly acts against his will. However, the show does not acknowledge this moment as an act of violence. In fact, in the moments after this scene we are made to focus on Daphne’s anger and feelings of entitlement to pregnancy, rather than Simon’s experience of feeling violated.



This is also an instance of reproductive coercion.

Reproductive coercion is a form of sexual violence involving behaviors that control another person's sexual and/or reproductive health. It is a way of maintaining power over someone else, often with the intent of keeping them in a relationship. This may look like:

- Forcing someone to get pregnant, to have an abortion, or not have an abortion
- Knowingly giving someone a sexually transmitted infection (STI)
- Forcing or coercing someone to use a birth control method they don't want to use, or coercing someone into unprotected sex
- Removing a birth control method during sex without the other's knowledge (known as "stealthing")

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All of this is made more complex by the racial dynamics of Daphne and Simon's relationship. There is a long history of assuming and protecting white women's innocence in order to vilify and punish Black men. This dynamic has been the basis of laws and stereotypes, and has resulted in the murders and lynching of countless Black men. Take, for example, Emmett Till or the Central Park 5; Black men have experienced irreparable harm due to racist assumptions about sexual aggression against supposedly pure white women.

Daphne justifies her violence against Simon with his own dishonesty about not wanting children. Could they have communicated better on their desires about children? Yes. Does this mean that Daphne has a right to violate Simon to get what she wants? Absolutely not. However, the show seems to all but gloss over Simon's pain in favor of Daphne's entitlement.

At times, it feels like we are even made to side with her in this situation, as if her taking control over Simon in this way is actually an act of women's empowerment in a time period where Daphne has little power over her life. This seems a bit ironic because *Bridgerton* is frequently concerned with Daphne's ability to consent to situations in her life, but it doesn't extend the same sentiment to Simon in this moment.

In 19th century England, Simon may not have had any way to know that it was okay for him to feel upset or angry about what happened. But what about Black men today? What does *Bridgerton* tell its audience when Simon's experience is pushed aside? Black men are so often excluded from the cultural conversation around sexual violence, which often means they do not have the same opportunities to identify their experiences and get the support they need. Our society has advanced considerably in believing survivors who are cisgender white women, but there is much progress to be made when it comes to supporting survivors of other races and genders.

In order to get there, we have to believe that no one ever has the right to sexually assault someone regardless of identity, or social or relationship status.

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