

PERIODICALLY DRAMATIC

THE HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

BLACK
HISTORY
MONTH

LIBERATION

THE
HISTORICAL
ROLES
OF
LIBERATED
BLACK
PEOPLE



PERIODICALLY DRAMATIC

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Dear Reader,

Happy Black History Month! I am so excited to be giving you this issue. I threw around so many ideas about what it should include. But the settled topic is more than perfect. This issue does not revolve around the freedom and identity of black people in history; this just tells their story. Many black history articles, books, magazines, and more take the angle of their identity. This issue is about life--*their life*. Their joy, sadness, anger, and relationships. The purpose of this angle is to remind readers that black people exist outside of their identity and oppression. This issue features movie and show reviews, historical facts and art, a personal essay, and a short story. I hope you find solace in it.

Stay safe,



Marina Hill, Editor-in-Chief

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Belle and Bette: Identical Cousins

by Ayana Olatunji / @thevintageguidebook

"Belle" (2013) is an important film to me, in many ways: it was the first period drama I had ever seen about a woman who, not only looked like me, but wasn't a servant, slave, entertainer, or someone's dutiful wife behind the scenes. "Belle" is the true story of a Miss Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsey, the daughter of white Captain Sir John Lindsey and his Black enslaved "mistress" who is known to history only as Maria Belle. The movie follows Dido's social struggles in 1780s England. Her struggles include her identity as a mixed-race heiress, her battle with self-hate, and her increasing interest in the famous court case regarding the Zong slave ship, which had a role the eventual abolition of the slave trade in England.

It is a truly wonderful story for all of those reasons, but what *doesn't* get enough attention is the relationship Dido develops with her cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray. In a world where women are so often pitted against each other on-screen and in real life, it is a relief to watch these two cousins share a sincere, loving bond as a major point in the film, even amid society's disapproval of such a relationship.

When Dido is brought into her uncle's (notably, court justice Lord Mansfield, who is presiding over the Zong case) care as a little girl, Elizabeth (or Bette) is already there, having been more or less dumped there by her own father, who has declared her illegitimate. We are not told anything about Bette's mother, but may presume she has died--perhaps in childbirth of a second child, which might explain the indifference Bette's father shows his eldest daughter. In this, the two children already share a bond: dead mothers and absent fathers. As the girls grow up, their aunt and uncle resolve to tell the world that Dido is Bette's "companion," although the pair are treated with the same dignity and privileges in private.

But things change fast when they become young women and Dido's father unexpectedly dies far away on one of his sea voyages, leaving her his entire fortune. (Bette's father, of course, continues pretending she doesn't exist.) Suddenly, Dido is thrust onto the marriage market as a desirable prospect instead of being doomed to a life of lonely, idle spinsterhood as everyone predicted on account of her race. Although, she gets to keep the uncle's house when he dies, which is not a bad deal in my modern opinion.

However, this is the first strain the girls' relationship faces; Bette is happy for her cousin, as she has seen Dido overshadowed repeatedly growing up. Bette even refuses to go to London for the "season" when Dido is initially forbidden from going (A+ for allyship) before everyone finds out Dido is going to be filthy stinking rich. Although, she soon becomes jealous and does her best to hide it. For her part, Dido does her best to be a good wing-woman and help Bette snag the man of her dreams, the esteemed yet impoverished James Ashford, who not only is uninterested in her as soon as he finds out her dowry is almost nonexistent, but is a majorly racist d-bag and kind of a jerk to everybody.



Dido eventually settles for the younger brother of Bette's former flame, Oliver Ashford (and *settle* is the keyword here). Although, Dido is already catching feelings for a passionate young lawyer who is helping her uncle with the Zong case, which further piques her interest in the case. Bette has mixed feelings about Dido and Oliver. To cheer her up, Dido offers to give up part of her own inheritance money so her cousin can boost up her dowry. When Bette says she will use the money to try to win back Young Master Doucheface, Dido loses her temper and they get into an argument where Dido reveals that James has been nothing but awful toward her. But Bette retorts that he wouldn't even go near Dido because she's... illegitimate.

"Bette has always been supportive, celebrates her achievements, and never makes her feel ashamed of her Blackness."

understanding that men are trash and the real problem here is a world that forces women to either become the (literal) property of men or starve.

But they eventually make up when James goes all *poof* on Bette and Dido dumps her own fiancé as she realizes that, although he's the kinder of the two brothers, he is also lowkey (but highkey) a microaggressive racist who routinely praises her white features and negates the Black. She finally calls off the engagement when she realizes that this means she would constantly endure being seen as less than by her new family. The cousins make up and cry it out together,

Although Dido's new journey toward self-acceptance is not something she chooses to share with her cousin, Bette has always been supportive, celebrates her achievements, and never makes her feel ashamed of her Blackness. After all, society has done that enough. Dido, likewise, encourages and comforts Bette, who can be a bit overzealous at times (one suspects she just talks a big game and sounds much more confident than she truly is). But, she has a big heart and excels at making Dido feel loved and cherished.

At the end, of course, both women eventually end up married, and slavery does become abolished on English soil in 1833. Seeing this kind of platonic relationship explored so intensely was a bonus I wasn't expecting in this film. It was not only a break from unhealthy clichés of women fighting over a man but also a welcome depiction of a sincere bond. These two young women aren't angels; they fight, they feel envy, they get angry with each other—just as we all do with people in our own lives.

"Seeing this kind of platonic relationship explored so intensely was a bonus I wasn't expecting in this film."

But their relationship in "Belle" displays understanding, setting personal boundaries, and talking through frustrations, enabling both women to be each other's support instead of each other's competition in a harsh world that is stacked against them both. Their relationship is one of care and tenderness, of true sisterly love. It's a relationship that truly melts even the coldest of hearts and one we can all aspire to. ■



HISTORICAL ART

This piece of art from the mid-18th century holds more importance than one might originally think. This oil on canvas painting is by Stephen Slaughter and is titled "Portrait of Two Society Women." I have also seen it titled as "Young Woman with Servant," although the former is much more common. This painting is significant, not only because it breaks the common theme of black people in western art being visibly subordinate to white people, but because of the black woman's *hair*. First, it is imperative to point out that the black woman in this piece is painted almost as if she is equal to the white woman, which, as stated, is highly uncommon in historical western art.



Second, one should note that the black woman's hair is uncovered, which is another uncommon theme. This is the only historical painting I have seen in which a black woman does not have wrapped hair. Even in the infamous portrait of Dido Belle that graces this issue's cover, her natural hair is covered. This monumental painting by Stephen Slaughter does not receive the recognition it deserves. It stands for something much bigger than we initially believed.

Johann Samuel MockLord
"Jonimo with the Moorish Woman Friederica"
(bef. 1740s)



Agostino Brunias. "A West Indian Flower Girl and Two other Free Women of Color" (1769)



Agostino Brunias. "A Mother with Her Son and a Pony" (1775)





AN ENCHANTING CURSE



by Marina Hill / @periodicallydramatic

The 2020 Netflix series "Cursed" is a new take on the infamous Arthurian legends. Rather than the legendary sword selecting King Arthur, it selects Nimue, a witch. Katherine Langford stars as Nimue in this medieval period drama, alongside Devon Terrell as Arthur. In this tale, Arthur isn't initially a king, but a mercenary. Having seen BBC's "Merlin" first and being a huge fan, I am hesitant to watch another remake.

However, from the first episode, I was drawn in instantly! I am more interested in the series by watching it through a lens where I *don't* picture it as a remake. It is, of course, missing the traditional portrayal of Guinevere and Lancelot, who are my top two favorite characters. This is a little bit of a let-down. Merlin is also much older in this retelling and not the lanky, nerdy boy we know and love in the BBC version.



But it goes without saying that the diversity in this version is much more refreshing than other remakes. There are many black actors, and while it could stand to include actors of varying ethnicities, "Cursed" features LGBTQ+ characters in scenarios where their arcs do not revolve around their identity and sexuality.

This fantasy show embodies what it is truly: fantasy. Many have argued against diversity in period dramas because it is "unrealistic." However, in a fantasy drama with *unrealistic* magical creatures, it is not unsurprising to see a black person in a role other than a slave or servant. The black characters in this show are liberated, sword-wielding, and brave. It is definitely a refreshing show to add to your watchlist! ■



THE AFRICAN BOY-KING

By Margot Handley

"Tut" is a three-part mini-series following the rise and fall of Tutankhamun (Avan Jogia), Pharaoh of Egypt during the 1300s BCE. After the death of his father in a gruesome start to the show, Tut marries his sister, Ankhesenamun (Sibylla Deen), and hopes that they can produce a son to secure the dynasty. Tutankamun begins the series as an out-of-touch leader with no understanding of the real world, but as he begins to interact more with his people and the city of Thebes, he also begins to take more responsibility for the well-being of his empire. As the series continues, more pressing concerns emerge in the form of plague, betrayal, and the threat of conquest from the neighboring Mittani empire. Along the way, Tutankamun falls in love with Suhad (Kylie Bunbury), an Egyptian peasant woman with a Mittani grandmother, who is inarguably the best character in the show. Regardless of background, every character in Tut was clever and multifaceted which kept me watching till the end.



One of the main themes in Tut is the anxiety over what it means to rule an empire. The leaders of the Mittani Empire are trying to conquer arable land to help stave off famine and Tutankamun's advisors want to expand to protect the Egyptians from being invaded. Both believe they are trying to support their people, but in the process do horrible, violent things. Despite Tutankamun's

assurances that "anyone loyal to the Pharaoh is considered Egyptian," he does nothing to refute other characters' claims that Suhad's mixed heritage makes her unfit to be a queen of Egypt.

This question of who can be considered Egyptian, and who is allowed to rule Egypt, bring racial and cultural conflict to the forefront in later episodes. However, the main issue seemed to be Suhad's proximity to Egypt's enemy rather than her skin color. It was interesting to see a show that interrogated imperialism so much but that didn't have anything to do with European colonialism. Period dramas like "Tut" have the power to transport viewers to different times and places and show that the ways we understand the world now are not universal truths.

"Instead of the flat, predictable, and almost mass-manufactured Girl Power that I've started to see in many period dramas, Suhad felt authentic and complex."

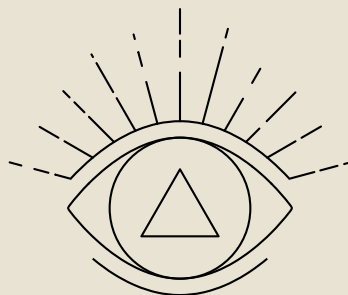
I found Suhad's character to be a breath of fresh air. Instead of the flat, predictable, and almost mass-manufactured Girl Power that I've started to see in many period dramas, Suhad felt authentic and complex. Her independence and intelligence shine through from the beginning and it is clear that Tutankamun both respects and is attracted to her because of those traits. In one of my favorite moments, Tutankhamun thanks the gods for saving his life and Suhad rolls her eyes and responds, "Was it the gods who stopped your bleeding wound and kept you hidden?"

Alongside the battles and political machinations, I enjoyed watching the male characters be allowed to admit and recoup from mistakes, change their minds, be forgiven, and create meaningful and trusting relationships. I feel like Black men in particular are rarely allowed those kinds of emotional storylines. I'm so tired of male characters who fall from power because they are too stubborn or too convinced of their own power to change, so I enjoyed watching the comradery that develops between Tutankamun and General Horemheb (Nonso Anozie), despite betrayal and disagreement.



Despite the lack of historical accuracy, I enjoyed this series. It was the perfect length, and even though all the characters (except Suhad) were fairly self-centered and power-hungry, I still wanted to follow their stories to the end. Though the sets leave something to be desired, the costumes are gorgeous (I sometimes got distracted during all the scheming and just stared at the clothes). There are so many different textures and trims and fabrics, and all the royal characters have the most amazing jewelry.

If you like characters with morally grey motivations and lots of eyeliner, this one is for you! ■





THE ORIGINS OF AMERICA'S CONCEPT OF RACE

The term "race" was first introduced in the late-1500s-to-early-1600s, but it was to describe a group of people who shared a common ancestor--not quite describing skin color. In the United States, the English identified themselves as *Christian* rather than *white*. African slaves were described as "indentured servants," which meant their typical servitude lasted four-to-seven years. However, the ruling class created laws in attempts to extend their servitude, but it wasn't until Bacon's Rebellion in the late 1600s did the modern concept of race come to be. Nathaniel Bacon was a colonist who protested against government corruption and wanted Native Americans to be driven out or killed.

His rebellion concerned the ruling class because they wanted punishments to last. To clarify, the ruling class did not want their subordinates to find the opportunity to rise. If one could become elite by suddenly coming into land ownership and wealth, that meant anyone could change their status. However, if wealth and privilege are defined by skin color, then one's status was incapable of being changed.

TO PROFILE OR NOT TO PROFILE

By Makaila Herrera

Watching both ABC's "Still Star-Crossed" and Netflix's "Bridgerton" felt strange to me. There were great representations of women of color in both shows, and yet it was only while re-watching Bridgerton with my own mother, who is of African and Filipina descent, that something dawned on me. It was an epiphany of sorts—if I want to name it something so extravagant.

My mother said something while watching Bridgerton, specifically addressing Marina Thompson's character.

"Why is it that today, our sisters still profile themselves? Why do we let society define us?"



At first, I thought this was rather morbid and even incorrect. Women of color have provided great representation for themselves by creating their own forms of media, by no longer waiting for society to catch up to us. However, Marina's case really caught me off guard. I wouldn't say that I was upset, but was once again disappointed by how she was represented. Our dear Editor-in-Chief, Marina Hill, mentioned this conundrum in the inaugural issue of this magazine and it felt worth discussing once again.

My experience in life has never been as a black woman. I found pride in my identity as someone of mixed race through the eyes of my mother, who grew up being disassociated from her Filipino peers because she was dark with curly hair. Well, "dark" by Filipino standards, anyway. However, she grew up without her father, a black man, and was raised by her mother, a Filipina woman. My mother always said that her life experience "was not black, because society made her ashamed of her blackness."

It wasn't until my mother was in middle school where my grandmother was finally able to afford a television did she see people who looked like her. She saw women like Nina Simone who sang with a raw, soulful tone that my mother describes as "a symptom of the perseverance to rise

above the suffering and grab inequality by its horns adorned with the colors of oppression.” She finally heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s rallying “I Had A Dream” speech and witnessed the power and activism of women such as Angela Davis in a time when revolution was occurring in her own home country.

My mother is a proud woman. In her youth, she risked her life during protests for equality in her own country. My mother always said that she was starved for representation because she felt as though she blended into the darkness like the shadow that the classmates referred to her as. It was when she made her remarks about Marina and how this character was yet another victim of negligence where I asked, “Why Marina?”

“I want the next generations to grow up in a world where there is an archive of shows, books, and characters that they can look up to who look like them.”

When I told my mother that Marina had died off in the book and that this storyline in the show didn’t actually exist in the original narrative, my mother replied, “Well, she’s better off that way than represented as an unmarried pregnant woman.” I apologize for my mother’s bluntness, but it also intrigued me.



While people like Marina have existed in history, why did it have to be her? There are already so many wonderful black women in the show. Why change this character’s story and bring her in, when this is all you give her to work with? It was simply wrong. I will not discuss the matter of Penelope Featherington because I think our dear Editor-in-Chief did a fine job of explaining the issue with that character’s misgivings.

So, there is Still Star-Crossed that needs to be discussed. Now, I reference my mother so often in this piece because she is the reason I’ve watched shows such as Bridgerton and Still Star-Crossed. Her love of historical fiction and period dramas has been passed down to my sisters and me.

This show was a strange one for me. I couldn’t tell whether or not my experience with it was pleasant or not. To be clear, any historical nerd would be intrigued by the concept of “What would happen, if after Romeo and Juliet commit suicide their cousins Rosaline and Benvolio are arranged to marry one another?” First of all, a modern sequel to Shakespeare’s iconic play? Sign me up, but please allow me an opt-out clause just in case.

The show was a standard “enemies to lovers” trope. While this show cancelled after one season, you didn’t need much more than that to properly analyze the material. It was very nice seeing a female protagonist with much darker skin in a position of nobility. While I did appreciate the strength of Rosaline’s character. It was the depiction of her sister, Livia, that once again disappointed me. Livia Capulet was introduced as the naïve, yet kind younger sister of our main female protagonist. While her relationship with her sister was lovely, her entire purpose felt as though it was only meant to serve Count Paris’s rise to the throne. Lady Giuliana Capulet, the mother of the late Juliet and aunt of Livia and her sister, took advantage of Livia’s naivety in an attempt to legitimize a manipulative young man’s ascent.

***"Changing one
life is better
than remaining
stagnant."***

However, it was not only this aspect of the plot that could be deemed problematic. Lady Giuliana is portrayed by a white actress and Livia is portrayed by a black actress. It is her aunt’s abuse of power and control over Livia that bothered me. Whether they meant for it or not, like in *Bridgerton* with Penelope and Marina, there is racial baggage that follows this relationship. A white woman abusing her position of power in order to manipulate a

young black woman into marrying a potentially abusive white man doesn’t sound good out loud or on paper.

While *Bridgerton* and *Still Star-Crossed* do have delightful depictions of women of color, it is the unfortunate plights of Marina and Livia that take away from what were otherwise two gloriously well-written, well-acted, and enjoyably costumed shows. I learned from my mother that, as women of color, we have the duty and responsibility to create opportunities and provide proper representation for ourselves. Representation is so important, especially for children. I want the next generations to grow up in a world where there is an archive of shows, books, and characters that they can look up to who look like them. Children emulate what they watch and listen to, and they are not to be looked down upon, either. Young people can start a revolution.

With our words, we can share our souls with the world. While not all may be listening, know that someone will be touched by your passion. Changing one life is better than remaining stagnant.

We cannot wait in the wings for society to catch up to us. We must not allow ourselves to become stuck within our profile. Allow yourself to think bigger and be better than their expectations. So, raise your voice and a good pen. Write your own stories. Let them see that we, with our darker skin and curly hair, are as human as those who have sought to oppress us. ■

DID YOU KNOW?

The traditional areas of Tudor England that society focuses on is the tip of the iceberg. Tudor England's position in history is deep and complex.

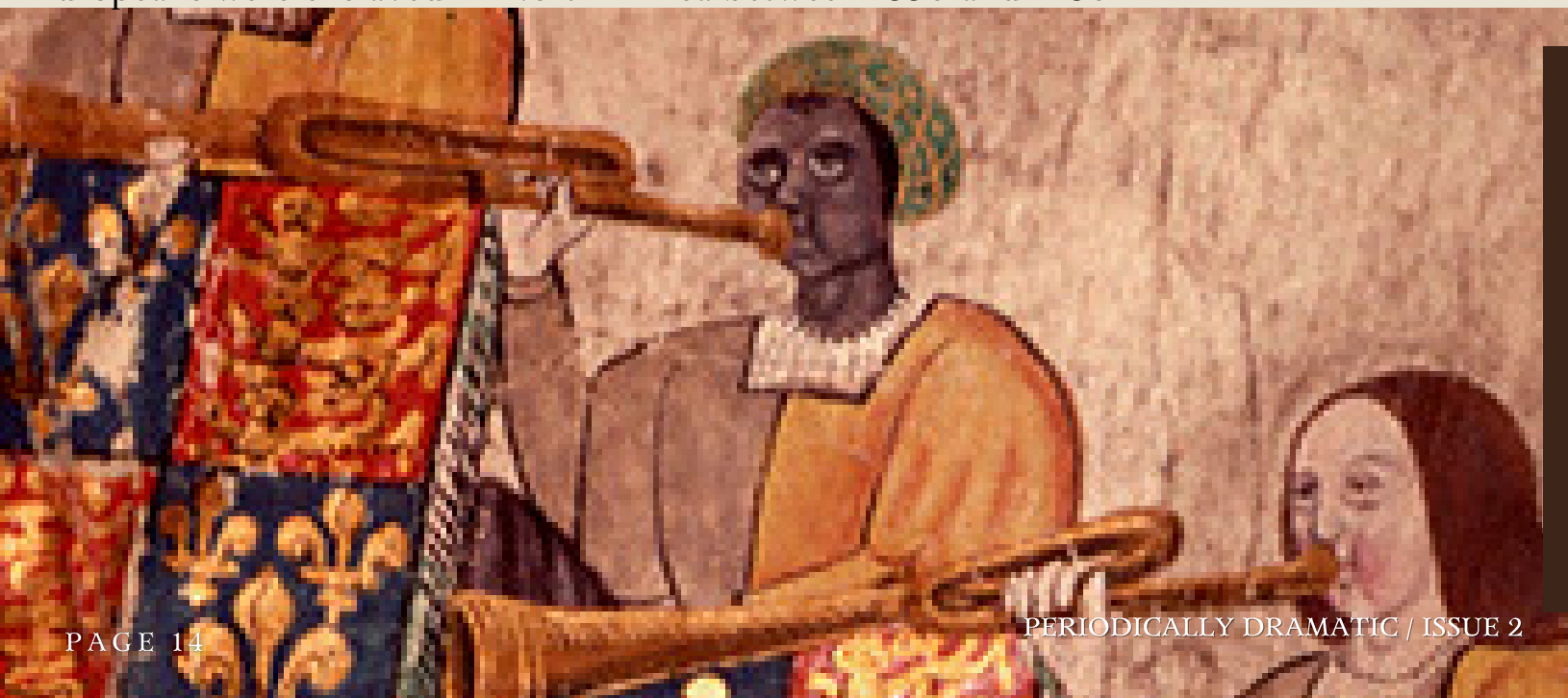
In Miranda Kaufmann's book, *Black Tudors*, she points out that Tudor England was a "relatively weak kingdom on the edge of Europe." Its history of African presence is even more complex. Kaufmann includes a piece of William Harrison's (an English clergyman) "A Description of England."

"As for slaves and bondmen, we have none [...] as soon as they set foot on land they become free in condition as their masters."

Clearly, this isn't true, but Kaufmann explains that it was much easier to become free from slavery in England than other European countries--like Spain, who had an overwhelmingly high amount of African slaves.

Also, in terms of African presence in England, "[m]ore Africans were recorded in Scotland than in England in the first half of the sixteenth century," which is a fact I, myself, was surprised to hear, considering Scotland is much less favored in the media compared to England.

Lastly, many base slavery on Africans--that slavery cannot exist without them post Atlantic Slave Trade. However, Kaufmann will inform you that "[m]ore than a million white Europeans were enslaved in North Africa between 1530 and 1780."



LOVIE AND HER LOVE LETTERS

When Lovie Harlow accidentally receives Leon Riley's letter, they end up becoming pen pals and eventually fall in love.



By Marina Hill / @periodicallydramatic

I rush down the steps of my London home and almost shoulder my servant Millie out of the way. It is much too late; Millie has already obtained the mail.

“Well?” inquire I, picking at my nails. “Any such letters for me?”

“No, Miss Lovie, and I do wish you would stop questioning me every time the post arrived!”

I fight a groan. “It is no secret I am eager to hear from my papa.”

Millie gives a teasing glare. I am rather tired of being treated as a maid by the hands of my cousins, even though we had a servant for these such occasions. The day Papa returns, I will leave and go home.

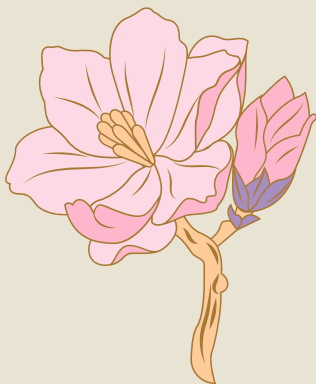
Millie rifles through the post in the living room. “Oh—it looks as though we’ve received someone else’s letter!”

I spin around and take the post to examine. I do not recognize the name. “I wonder what’s inside.”

“Oh, Miss Lovie, no.”

I giggle. “Live a little, Millie! It will do no harm. I shall seal it when finished! No one will know it has been tampered with!” I dash upstairs to the attic—or my bedroom, I should say. There is enough space for me to share a room with my cousin Harriet, but she is insistent I do not share with her. She threw an entire tantrum!

I sit upon the chair at my desk overlooking the city through the circular window and I delicately open the letter.



Miss Eleanor Harlow

March 4, 1816
Dear Doctor Willis,

I am writing to you in concern for my sister, Anne. She is young and has fallen incredibly ill. We are but a day's ride from London and I should appreciate it if you were to visit us. She has seen multiple doctors, though none can determine her condition. She is but of fourteen years of age and is my only sister. My mother and father are in distress, for my younger brother died moments after birth and they cannot stand the death of another child. We have very little money, but have run out of hope. Another doctor has suggested your name. In the meantime, I keep my sister company and joy by reading to her. She adores listening to poetry. I pray that you shall help so she can be well enough to read it on her own.

Yours,
Leon Riley



Oh, no! This is incredibly terrible! A young man's sister has fallen ill; I cannot filch his last chance at hope. As I fold the parchment, I run downstairs. "Millie! Millie! We must deliver this letter immediately."

Inside the kitchen are my three cousins, Ellen, Harriet, and Ruby. Millie sets plates of chicken before them. I bite my lip. "Oh... I was unaware we were dining. Uncle Fred hasn't arrived home yet."

"He sent a letter that we are to dine without him," says Ellen, cutting into her meal.

"Why wasn't I summoned?"

There is no answer from any of them. Millie gulps and walks toward me. "What is it, Miss Lovie?"

I breathe in deeply. The letter. "Oh! This letter. We must deliver it tonight. The young man's sister has fallen ill and it is his letter to a doctor. We must deliver it. We must."

"Are you filching people's mail, Eleanor?" Ruby asks with scorn in her tone.

"No," I say, "it was simply delivered to the wrong address. It is good I did open it, for now I shall rush it to him!"

"Oh, not tonight," says Millie. "It is dark and Master Fred has not come home yet. You shan't venture by yourself."

I shake my head. “But his sister! She is ill.”

“Let her go,” Harriet says to our servant, plopping a piece of food into her mouth. “It should be quite an adventure for her.”

“A learning experience, probably,” says Ruby, and Ellen giggles. Ruby and I are often confused as sisters, as she has tan skin, slightly browner than the rest of my cousins’.

I know not why my cousins detest my very existence so. Ever since Papa has left me with Uncle Fred four years ago, I have been longing for him since. I have received no inkling as to where he is in the world, but as soon as I do, I will venture off to find him myself. But now, I must deliver this!

“Wonderful; I shall dress according—”

“My answer is no, Miss Lovie. It is much too dangerous for a woman like you to take such a—”

“A woman like me?”

“A gypsy,” Harriet sings, and the rest of my cousins fall into giggles. “Eleanor Harlot, a gypsy of men’s beds. Oh—Harlow, I meant.”

My cousins laugh more and Millie turns around and scolds them. I am gone before my servant turns back around. It is much too dangerous for me to take a trip alone.

I am inside my bedroom, standing before the looking glass. The candles reflect dancing light among my brown features. I tug at the cream-colored ribbon in my hair until my chestnut curls cascade down my back. I stare at the letter in my other hand. My cousins offer no such hope for my papa. I am Eleanor Harlow. Papa called me Lennie, until he realized how much of a romantic I am, then Lennie became Lovie.

Lovie and her love letters.

My fingers graze the parchment as I wander over to my desk. This poor Mister Riley. I wish I could deliver the letter tonight! Perhaps as a way to assist his feelings, I shall apologize in a letter of my own, among suggestions to read to his sister. I have quite a collection of works.



Mister Leon Riley

March 8, 1816

Dear Mister Riley,

I must begin by expressing my deepest sorrows for the conditions of your sister, Anne. You likely wonder who I am. Allow me to also begin with my utmost apologies. Your letter has arrived at my home in London by mistake and, despite the objections of my servant, I allowed my curiosity to overcome my senses. I am rather glad of it, for I can now make haste to delivering it to the correct address. As a form of apology, I should like to suggest poets you may read to your sister. I am rather educated in poetry and novels and have such suggestions to fill your time from now until Anne's health.

I suggest: William Shakespeare, William Blake, William Wordsworth, John Keats, and I should suggest a highly esteemed American poet, Phillis Wheatley, for her publications have had a profound impact upon my uncle Fred.

Yours,

Lovie Harlow

At first sunlight, I urge Millie out of bed to deliver the letter. We do so, and I set my own letter in the post. Upon the days of no reply, I lose a bit of hope. Perhaps Mister Leon is offended at my letter and finds no need to reply.

I allow my usual readings and writings to refill my days. One evening, I sit among candlelight on my reading chair and there is a knock at my door. It creaks open.

"Miss Lovie? Sorry to bother, but a letter has arrived for you."

I shut my book as hope begins to rise in my stomach. "Papa?"

Millie purses her lips and frowns. "No. It's from a... Leon Riley? I know not if you know of such a name."

My chest tightens. Mister Riley! I almost forgot about him!

"Yes, I do!" I exclaim, getting up. "Well, I don't, but—" I extend my hand and accept the letter. Millie leaves. I sit on my bed, my silk nightgown absorbing the sweat on my palms. Papa bought me this nightgown the year I moved in with Uncle Fred.

March 13, 1816

Dear Miss Lovie Harlow,

I admit, I was hesitant to respond. The only reason I am is because of my sister, Anne, whom you know of. I took the liberty to read her few works by the poets you suggested and she adored them. It brought her joy in this unfortunate distress. It brings me quite discomfort to know another has read my personal correspondence, but, you are right, it is good it was you. Thank you for hastily delivering my letter, Miss Harlow. And I must admit, you have a rather odd name. I have not met a woman named Lovie before in my entire time of life. Although, it has quite a charm to it. Lovie Harlow, the maiden who reads. I have read Phillis Wheatley times before, and your uncle Fred, I've no doubt, is now a wonderful man for reading her works. There is no such demon like the rabid hatred of another race. What of your family? I should think you have a sibling named Kisses, or Heart.

Yours,

Leon Riley

Oh, a charming man, this Leon Riley! I rush to my desk to respond instantly.

March 19, 1816

Dear Mister Leon Riley,

I am ever so relieved to know that you do not find me disagreeable for my deed. Pray tell, has Doctor Willis arrived? I truly hope he has, for Anne is a girl deserving of health. I know not of her, though she has a very caring brother, and therefore she is agreeable. As for my name, I'm afraid it is a nickname. My full name is Eleanor Harlow. My papa nicknamed me Lovie for my love of romance, much of a contrast to the remainder of my family. I am very shy to admit, but I was born out of wedlock. My servant and cousins encourage me to hide this as a fact, but I am unashamed of myself, though I remain shy. I live with my uncle Fred and my three cousins. They struggle to find kindness amongst me. I am aware I have shared so much about myself. Please share more of you so I do not feel alone.

Yours,

Lovie Harlow

This is utterly absurd! I am explaining my entire life to this man I hardly know! Everything about this is a bad idea, but I cannot go halfway. He is a stranger. Could there be such harm in this? Perhaps so, but I must take risks!

March 27, 1816

Dear Miss Lovie Harlow,

There is something endearing about your candor. We live amongst a society where truth is not valued, but rather a guise. That is an unfortunate situation you are in, Eleanor. I hope the situation with your family will be resolved. You seem as a girl deserving of such kindness. Do tell, is your father there? I should assume that such cruelty would not be tolerated by a worthy father. As for my own situation, I live upon the countryside with my family. We have not much money and live inside a small house, although I am lucky enough to admit I have my own bed chambers. Well, not so lucky, if I say. I would have shared it with my brother, if he survived the tribulations of a new life. My parents tend to a farm day in and day out, and I find myself most happy among horses. The journeys they take me on each day is exhilarating. I have not ridden much, as my sister is in need of my assistance. Thank you for your inquiry about the status of Doctor Willis. I'm afraid he has declined our request of his services due to our lack of money. Anne is not doing so well in result. I will continue to read her the works you have suggested to ease her pain. I request you tell me more of yourself to distract my mind from these trying times.

Yours,
Leon Riley

I am so very touched to receive Mister Riley's post. It breaks my heart, however, to hear of Anne's condition. It is atrocious! Miss Riley's life should not be deemed by such money! I mull over a response for one-to-two days, and I receive more post from Mister Riley before I sit down to write.

Dear Miss Lovie Harlow,

I write to you with a heavy heart—Anne has passed on. She has succumbed to her illness and I remain the final child of my parents. I know not why writing to you offers a relief I have not found in my property. My only sister is gone from me, Miss Lovie, and I'm afraid I feel lost.

Yours,
Leon Riley

I collapse onto the closest bench in the park. Oh, Mister Riley... Oh, Anne... I rush home to write back immediately.

April 3, 1816
Dear Mister Leon Riley,

Allow me to offer my deepest condolences. I cannot imagine the suffering through losing a beloved family member. I should send you as much affections as I possibly can from my home here in London. You are rather far, but imagine I am right there beside you! I should suggest you tend to your horses, for horse riding seems a lovely, lovely hobby to hold. Anne is an angel amongst God now, and she peers down on you! Be sure to offer your family my condolences as well. There is no value in how large or small a family may be. Large or small, you and your family have such an incomparable value, Mister Riley. I dare say that my papa does not stand in my day-to-day life. He has brought me to Uncle Fred some years ago, and I have been here ever since. I urge you to hold your mother and father closer and closer as the days go by.

Yours,
Lovie Harlow

I apologize for the coffee stain!



April 9, 1816
Dear Miss Lovie Harlow,

In this time of grief, your letters have shown me such light. Thank you for that. I am sorry to hear of your father's disappearance. I hope he will appear soon. You are correct in holding family close, especially during times of grief. It should, however, bring me joy to speak of such other matters, so as to distract my mind from the raging grief within. I should hope one day we may meet, though I have no idea of your appearance. Allow me to begin: I am a man of six feet and two inches high. It is too tall to become a jockey, as I have heard, but it aids me in tending to my family's farm. I am a man of fair complexion and dark hair. If I had such a painting, I should think to send it, but I have the money to neither be painted nor send such an item.

Yours,
Leon Riley

April 15, 1816
Dear Mister Leon Riley,

There is no doubt in my mind that you are the handsomest in all of England! Your heart is amiable, and therefore you must be handsome! I'm afraid I am not a woman of fair complexion. I have been ever so described as "dark-skinned," but my mother is much darker than I! (My mother passed when I was just a babe.) I explain I am of brown complexion with hair of a darker shade. I am shy to admit its curl! Oh, Mister Riley, please let us move to another topic! I should think of myself as attractive, but not enough to keep the eye of any man!

Yours,
Lovie Harlow

We are to have dinner with Uncle Fred and his friends. It is a night I shall dread, but I fight through it nonetheless. I am in Harriet's bed chambers, helping Millie get her into her dress. I myself have not dressed yet, for Uncle Fred insisted Millie and I help my cousins!

Ellen and Ruby sit on Harriet's bed, absolutely useless, and gossiping as though they are thirteen and not eighteen!

Uncle Fred waltzes through the door with a letter in his hand. "Lovie, there is something in the post for you. From a... Leon?"

My chest tightens. Oh, how I dread this letter, too! All in all, I am somewhat surprised there is a reply, for it is hard for a woman like me to find an agreeable man. However, it is noticeable that Mister Riley himself is an agreeable man, so how dare I assume otherwise!

"Yes!"

But my cousin Harriet snatches my post from Uncle Fred. "Who dares to send you a letter, Eleanor?"

"Harriet! Give it here!"

She holds the letter out of my reach and steps down from the dais. Her dress is not entirely laced up, but she saunters around the room and opens my letter. She laughs among the first words. "Miss Lovie Harlow! Who on earth calls you Miss other than our servant!"

"Miss Harriet, please!" Millie shrieks.

Ruby and Ellen continue giggling, but I wish to disappear as someone reads my personal correspondence. I snatch Harriet's wrist and take back my letter.

Harriet gasps. "How dare you—"

"Oh, don't look so surprised, you wretch!"

My cousins and Millie gasp, but I care very little. I run up into my bed chambers and shut the door. I hold the letter against my chest, hoping to calm down my rapidly beating heart. To think my wretched cousins almost discovered my secret—the one thing, the one person, who brings me comfort.

It appears you are not the only clumsy one!

April 19, 1816

Dear Miss Lovie Harlow,

Well, madame, as you've said, I know your heart: You are a woman of intelligence and compassion and therefore your heart and self are beautiful. I, myself, am shy to admit such a fact: I am of four and twenty years old, and none such women desire my hand due to my financials and desire to tend to horses all day long. I pray you do not feel alone in the idea that you may feel undesired, for I understand such a feeling. However, you sound quite stunning, Eleanor. What is it you truly prefer? Eleanor or Lovie? Lovie is quite charming, though Eleanor has a regal ring to it. Nonetheless, it is your desire, and I shall comply with whichever you choose.

Yours,
Leon Riley

My heart and belly warm. Oh, the way he makes me blush so! I find myself falling for Mister Leon Riley.

*

It's now been over a year since I've started exchanging letters with Mister Leon Riley. The letters with him are the days I look forward to. Harriet has married a man who is not very kind, but it means she has moved from our house in London.

Uncle Fred says he has a dinner tonight with lots of eligible men for me and I have no interest in any man who is not Mister Riley.

Millie stands behind me, lacing up my corset as I open Mister Riley's most recent letter.

June 1, 1817

Dear My Darling Lovie,

I write to you bearing wonderful news, my Lovie. On the 15 of June, I will be journeying to London for the celebrations of the opening of the Waterloo Bridge that will be in the following week. I hope that you will attend and therefore I will finally get to meet you. The past year of exchanging letters has made me fall deeply in love with you. I know I have told you this, and you me, but I am eager. Please write back presently.

Yours,
Leon Riley

I almost drop the letter. He is coming to London! He is going to be here!

“Millie!” I shout and turn around. “Oh, Millie, can you believe it! Mister Riley is coming to London! He is coming to London to finally meet me, oh can you believe it? I can’t! How I’ve dreamed of this!”

Millie smiles. “Truly, Miss Lovie? He is truly coming?”

“Yes! Here! Read!” I shove the letter into her hand and scour my dresses as she reads. She is ecstatic as I! I may finally meet the love of my life and I may marry! Oh, this is all too much! It is true! Leon Riley is coming to me...

Uncle Fred is a prominent employee of the Somerset House and I urgently write back for Mister Riley to meet me there, for my cousins and I shall be there, enjoying the festivities. The countless attempts Uncle Fred has made to pair with eligible men have failed miserably every time. No man has ever touched my heart the way Mister Riley has.

On the day of, Millie gives me extra care with dressing me. It takes us the whole of three hours! I wear a white dress adorned with pink flowers. Millie braids my hair into a beautiful bun with curls framing my face. She bids me to wait and rushes out of my room. Moments later, she returns.

“Flowers from the garden for your hair, Miss,” she says with a smile.

“Wonderful idea, Millie!”

She wishes me good luck as I leave, and my cousins and I step into the carriage. Harriet and her husband Mister Middleton join us; he is a quiet man and does not often speak, and when he does, it is to Harriet.

I constantly stretch my neck in search for Mister Riley, then chide myself. I have no idea who I am looking for! He may have passed me a dozen times. There are many tall men of fair complexion and dark hair.

Somerset House has closed. My cousins and I stand in the courtyard, awaiting our carriage as the remainder of guests take their time leaving.

“Why so sullen, Gypsy Harlot?” Ruby asks. “Did not you find many customers today?”

“You are cruel, Ruby Jenkins.”



“I may be cruel, but at least I am beautiful,” she sings.

I roll my eyes and turn away. More and more guests are finding their way toward the exit. I see our carriage arrive at the front and my gaze falls to the ground.

“Miss Lovie?”

My chest seizes at one last chance of seeing Mister Riley today. But when I look up, the stranger has his attention on Ruby. His hand extends and gently takes Ruby’s. Ruby hardly responds and raises a brow.

“I must say, you’re much more beautiful than I thought,” the man says, and my shoulders fall. It is... him?

“Mister Riley?” I whisper.

Ruby snorts and snatches her hand away. Mister Riley looks up, startled, and his gaze falls on me. Tall. Fair complexion. Dark hair. He is as handsome as the devil. And he thinks I am Ruby! I cannot imagine his disappointment among finding I am Lovie Harlow. Ruby is not fair. She is of one or two shades lighter than I with brown curls of her own. But she is not me.

“Miss Lovie?” he asks.

Ruby then laughs and looks at Ellen and Harriet. “He thought I was her! I don’t know whether to be offended.”

I gulp and take the skirt of my dress and lift it. I turn and dart toward the north-west wing, to the arches. I hear Mister Riley shouting behind me as he follows, but it matters none. It is highly inappropriate and improper, but there is nothing else I can think of to do. It is ruined. It is utterly ruined! My wretch of a cousin will never allow me to forget that the love of my life thought I was her.

“Miss Lovie! Eleanor, please!”

I do not slow until I reach the shade of the arches. His footsteps echo behind me and I pick up my walking pace.

“Miss—please!”

“Leave me alone!” I shout over my shoulder, curls getting caught in my vision.

Mister Riley's footsteps cease, and his loud recitation makes me stop: "The morn awakes, and wide extends her rays, / On ev'ry leaf the gentle zephyr plays; / Harmonious lays the feather'd race resume, / Dart the bright eye, and shake the painted plume. / Ye shady groves, your verdant gloom display / To shield your poet from the burning day."

I stop walking and slowly turn around. It is an excerpt from a poem by Phillis Wheatley. My favorite poem by her. He knows that. He also knows the torture my cousins put me through. Mister Riley walks closer. He is out of breath and regards me carefully. "I found myself delayed and was frightened I would miss the opportunity to see you for the first time. Therefore, I rushed upon searching for you," he explains. "That is your... favorite poem. I wanted to impress you upon meeting you. I was... I was nervous, Miss Lovie. I greatly apologize for what I've just done. It is a mistake I wish I could retreat. While you are more stunning and elegant than I ever could have imagined, it matters none what you look like, for your heart is my heart, and my soul is your soul. Please do forgive me."

Oh, Mister Leon Riley. He is so very handsome. He wears a deep blue tailcoat with two rows of gold buttons. His trousers are white and his tall boots are black. He does not look as though he has as little money as he claims. But he is... here. This is him. "Mister Riley?" I whisper, stepping closer. "Is it truly you?"

He nods. "It is I, my darling Lovie. It is I..."

Our solitude his highly improper, but we are no longer a secret. We are no longer hidden messages. He stands before me, beautiful as ever.

I gulp. "I should like you to kiss me now."

Leon blinks. "I'm—I'm—that is not appropriate at the mome—"

"My papa has left me a generous dowry. As cruel as they are, you are not the man my family would permit me to marry. Nor am I the woman you are destined to be with. I'm afraid members of this society do not desire my being with anyone not of my complexion nor my standing. I do not believe we will ever be appropriate to anyone who does not believe in us, and therefore, Mister Riley, I should like you to kiss me. Now."

He waits silently. Upon my lack of continuation, Leon walks closer and wraps his arms around my body. I have never been in such proximity with a man. When he kisses me, I melt into his arms and hold the sides of his face to keep myself upright. My fingers slide into the hair at his nape.

At last, I have found a home.



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