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Television Review: *The Gilded Age*

By Rossandra Martinez and Daniela Bedolla

Introduction

Period dramas have a way of transporting viewers through costumes, dialogue, and careful attention to set dressing. But one thing period pieces often don't do is explore the many nuances of an era.¹ HBO's 2022 show, created by Julian Fellowes (*Downton Abbey*, *Gosford Park*, *From Time to Time*) *The Gilded Age*, explores the intersectionality of race, class, and gender during the Gilded Age (1870-1890). This show has a majority white cast and one main African American character, Peggy Scott. The decision to showcase an educated black woman highlights a suppressed narrative and storytelling of black history through period pieces. *The Gilded Age* deconstructs the difference in opportunities for educated black women and limited social mobility in white high society. Although the characters are fictional, *The Gilded Age* remains true to the gender and racial norms in the nineteenth-century; popular culture tends to focus on poor, uneducated black people, whereas historical content and accuracy are relatively high.

¹ Ashawnta Jackson, "Julia C. Collins & the Black Elite of the Gilded Age," *JSTOR Daily*, March 21, 2022. Accessed March 19, 2023. <https://daily.jstor.org/julia-c-collins-the-black-elite-of-the-gilded-age/#:~:text=The%20answer%20is%20that%20Peggy,by%20an%20African%20American%20woman>

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Fellowes' production team had historical advisors, including Rutgers history professor Dr. Erica Armstrong Dunbar. She says,

I was very interested in working on a project that I thought had the opportunity to explore Black New Yorkers in the nineteenth century in a way that was different from anything that we've ever seen on television, in a way that represents what we would call now a middle- or upper-middle-class Black family.²

According to Eric Foner,

[T]he term Gilded Age is influenced by the novel by Mark Twain and Dudley Warner in 1873. The term gilded, represents the shiny golden surface of the era with a more complex and deceptive undercurrent. It lasted roughly between 1870-1890 and was a time of economic prosperity.³

Through the Transcontinental Railroad following the Civil War, the American economy was able to rebuild itself to an industrialized economy; factories, mining, railroad construction, and advancement in technologies created a growing labor force. As seen in *The Gilded Age*, old and new money families competed for high social status due to new money flowing in from railroad construction. Corruption was rooted in the corporate dominance of politics and the extreme poverty faced by those left behind in the race to the top. The gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' grew as new money flowed in and old money was pushed aside.

² Amy Kuperinsky, "HBO's 'The Gilded Age' centers Black New Yorkers with help from N.J. professor," *NJ.com*, February 14, 2022. Accessed March 18, 2023. <https://www.nj.com/entertainment/2022/02/hbos-the-gilded-age-centers-black-new-yorkers-with-help-from-nj-professor.html>

³ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, Seagull 7th Ed. (W.W. Norton & Company, 2023), 615.

Through the tension between the Russells and Bartons and the rest of the “old families,” such as the Astors, viewers experience a lens into nineteenth-century America. Director Michael Engler describes his motivations for the show due to his peaked interest in the changes in American social stratification; Engler says, “There was more than just your background and your legacy that would determine what opportunities and obstacles were in life and meritocracy took over social order.”⁴ The definitions of merit shift with each character within *The Gilded Age*; despite the endless amount of money Bertha Russell has access to, she cannot buy her way into society. Invisible and unspoken social rules dictated the successes of newcomers during the Gilded Age, old money determined who would enter or be shunned from society.



Figure 1: “The Condition of the Laboring Man at Pullman”⁵

⁴ “Director Michael Engler on Directing the Russell’s Lavish Ball in *The Gilded Age*” *AwardsDaily*, June 19, 2022, 1:26.

⁵ Image from Sarah Jones “Lessons From the Gilded Age.”

The Gilded Age, Episode 1, takes place in New York in 1882, one of the numerous cities with a booming economy and population growth. The first episode centers around “Marian Brook, a naïve young woman, [who] enters the rigid social scene of New York’s elite society and learns about life’s harsh realities from both her aunts and her love interest.”⁶ Marian’s character represents the fresh eye, naive and wistful of a new beginning in New York. It is through Marian that viewers are able to question and analyze the difference between new and old rules.⁷ The Gilded Age was a time for wonder and newcomers to make their name in the new economy of New York. Sarah Jones from *The New Republic* says,

[It] was a time of exploding economic inequality, stagnant living standards, growing concern about monopolies, devastating financial crises...brazen political corruption, frequent pronouncements that the American republic was doomed, and seemingly unending turmoil over race and national identity.⁸

There were a multitude of factors that determined what national identity was and how different definitions of success played into social norms. The theme of new versus old money is repeated as construction of railways and buildings gave room for upward mobility. Mrs. Russell represents a threat of new money towards old money, as a new addition to society, she must prove her worth despite continuous exclusion from all wives through

⁶ “The Gilded Age: Is the HBO historical drama based on a true story?” *Marca*, February 2, 2022, Accessed March 28, 2023.

<https://www.marca.com/en/lifestyle/tv-shows/2022/04/02/62487861268e3e1a088b4593.html>

⁷ Director Michael Engler on Directing the Russell’s Lavish Ball in *The Gilded Age*, 2:09.

⁸ Sarah Jones, “Lessons From the Gilded Age,” *The New Republic*, June 13, 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/article/149005/lessons-gilded-age>

fundraisers, balls, and any social events. The wives and bankers that Mr. Russell encountered face the repercussions of excluding Mrs. Russell, due to his loyalty and love for his wife, Mr. Russell strong-armed the board by buying shares as they entered the market, proving “he has more money than God.”⁹ The Russells highlight the parallels between real events of old and new money clashing, as well as the deconstruction of social hierarchies and class structures during the Gilded Age that are primarily influenced by the additions to the transcontinental railroad and big banks/legislation. This is seen with Mr. Russell, a “robber baron” who was inspired by real-life historical figure, Jay Gould. According to a *Marca* article,

Gould was really vilified in the papers at the time. He was someone who became a kind of living embodiment of all of the inequalities of the era. He has such insane levels of power and sometimes he uses them on really vulnerable people and just crushes them like ants.¹⁰

He was able to buy shares as they were coming in to keep his investment afloat in spite of the board passing on a law that Russell initiated. Due to this action, one of the members committed suicide because he gambled his entire life: house, family, and lifestyle, and he could not fathom a world in which he lost his material belongings. The episode focuses on Mr. Raikes (a young lawyer from Doylestown) and Marian; bankruptcy courts see rail companies go under, taking their owners and investors down with

⁹ *The Gilded Age*, Season 1, Episode 1, “Never the New.” Directed by Michael Engler and Salli Richardson, written by Julian Fellowes, featuring Carrie Coon, Christine Baranski, Louisa Jacobson, Morgan Spector, Cynthia Nixon, Denée Benton, Taissa Farmiga, Thomas Cocquerel, aired January 24, 2022, on HBO, <https://www.max.com/?reason=anonymous&returnUrl=https%3A%2F%2Fplay.max.com%2Fshow%2F2537da31-ff99-4195-a53e-e0e1ddb1d67e>

¹⁰ “The Gilded Age: Is the HBO historical drama based on a true story?”

them.¹¹ The beginning of the show focuses on Miss Brook and how her father left her penniless and lied her entire life, leading to her having to move in with her aunts, Agnes van Rhijn and Ada Brook. This is a clear example of women portrayed as damsels in distress and completely reliant on men for financial support and social mobility. The United Manhattan Trust was founded in 1797 by Arnold van Rhijn, among others.¹² Ward McAllister is the bridge between new and old money; as he determines who is suitable to come into society, he reports to Mrs. Astor, who eventually gives her permission. Gladys Russell is based on real-life Consuelo Vanderbilt, a naive girl eager for love and to make her debut and officially come out, which the first season ends with her debutante ball.



Figure 2: Taylor Richardson (left), Debra Monk, Simon Jones, Kristine Nielsen, and Ben Ahlers play members of the service staff of an elite New York family in “The Gilded Age.” Alison Cohen Rosa | HBO¹³

¹¹ *The Gilded Age*, Season 1, Episode 1, “Never the New,” 3:07- 4:03.

¹² *The Gilded Age*, Season 1, Episode 1, “Never the New,” 12:28.

¹³ Kuperinsky. “HBO’s ‘The Gilded Age.’”

Figure 1 (The Condition of the Laboring Man at Pullman) describes the economic environment during the Gilded Age, lower and middle-class workers continued to plummet as the wage group increased with more and more money flowing into railroad construction. Luxury and leisure spending increased as families attempted to outdo each other by building social capital; this is seen with the luxurious construction of the Russells' home, a massive two-story home on 61st Street. Mr. Russell tells Mrs. Russell "I hear fifth avenue is slipping, no one wants to be south of twenty-third street," when she is invited to a luncheon with the socialites.

According to historian H.W. Brands, "As capitalism got bigger in scale, these concerns about the influence of big capitalism on democracy increased," Brands adds. "And they finally gave rise to these demands that big monopolies be reined in."¹⁴ Mr. Russell is the face of new money, and is planning on building a new railroad from New York to Chicago, which is next to existing railroad to prove to future business partners that once he asks a second time on a deal, he will utterly destroy their business. Throughout the show there are instances where Mr. Russell is able to use his money to influence and complete his own agenda. According to Engler,

It's just about this one family that fits into society and the world and the changing world but it's really how all the different factors in so many different areas of society are all affecting each other and are all pushing for their own voice their own influence and so it's the intersection between different parts of society and how they actually cause change and are affected by change is more complex in that way and how it relates to that particular moment what

¹⁴ Stefano Kotsonis and Meghna Chakarabarti "More than money: Antitrust lessons of the Gilded Age" *Wbur Radio*, December 28, 2022. <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2022/12/28/more-than-money-antitrust-lessons-of-the-gilded-age>

was happening in our society and the opportunities that were new that hadn't really existed before.¹⁵



Figure 3: Photo of Cynthia Nixon (left) and Christine Baranski.¹⁶

The dynamic between Mrs. Astor, Mrs. Van Rhijn, Mrs. Russell, and Marian depict old (Astor and Van Rhijn) and new money (Russell). Marian serves as the progressive and inquisitive eye of the viewer and newcomer. As seen in Figure 3, Ada and Agnes are dressed nicely with their hair up; their home has old-fashioned furniture and paintings. The Brook/Van Rhijn household is staffed with ladies' maids, housekeepers, a chef, and a butler named Bannister. Their home was built in 1850, which shows how deep their family roots are in New York; everyone in *the Gilded*

¹⁵ Director Michael Engler on Directing the Russell's Lavish Ball in *The Gilded Age*, 3:09- 3:57.

¹⁶ Alice Burton, "The Gilded Age Recap: Escape From Mrs. Astor's" *Vulture*, March 14, 2022. Accessed April 3, 2023. <https://www.vulture.com/article/the-gilded-age-season-1-episode-8-recap-tucked-up-in-newport.html>

Age knows the Van Rhijn/Brook household.¹⁷ In the first episode, Agnes explains to Ada about her late brother that the Brook women are now forced into poverty, and it will be years before they are able to make their money back. Ms. Van Rhijn continues to be the matriarch of the family. Agnes says to Ada, “Her father [Marian’s father] robbed us of all that we possessed. Invitations, charity appeals, questions from bankers and brokers.”¹⁸ This is a similar situation that happened to women that were entirely dependent on men; Marian’s father was their tie to the Mayflower origins. Speaking about the Brooks/Van Rhijn family, Agnes said, “The old have been in charge since before the revolution. They ruled justly until the new people invaded.”¹⁹ In *The Gilded Age*, this feeling of “invasion” of new money is shared by all old families, which is why the Russells are met with such hostility. The threat of new blood and strangers represents a massive paradigm shift that parallels real-life events during the actual Gilded Age. What producers and directors are attempting to recreate is a rare feat due to the lack of Gilded Age filmography.²⁰ These three-dimensional characters each offer their own representation of different social strata in nineteenth-century New York.

The racialization of work labor and racism is shown through the character, Peggy Scott. She is ambitious, advocates for herself and equality, inquisitive, and literate (everything that white protagonists usually are). Peggy’s character pushes against the narrative of black people being illiterate and uneducated during this time; also, the fact that she is a strong, literate black woman creates a remarkable character arc and depth. According to Ashwanta Jackson from *JSTOR Daily*:

¹⁷ *The Gilded Age*, Season 1, Episode 1, “Never the New.” 25:20.

¹⁸ *The Gilded Age*, Season 1, Episode 1, “Never the New.” 7:49.

¹⁹ *The Gilded Age*, Season 1, Episode 1, “Never the New.” 28:30.

²⁰ Director Michael Engler on Directing the Russell’s Lavish Ball in *The Gilded Age*, 2:09.

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Peggy is a composite of several real-life women, and one in particular, Julia C. Collins, was a trailblazer. Her 1865 novel, *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride*, is often cited as the first written by an African American woman. “Neglected African American women’s stories, if they survive at all, often survive in fragments that cannot be fully comprehended without first being recontextualized.”²¹

In *The Gilded Age*, Peggy learned to write and studied at The Institute of Colored Youth of Philadelphia, and her family resides in Brooklyn.²² This was an actual institution that was first opened,

In 1852 at 716-718 Lombard Street and provided a classical education to young African Americans (with a curriculum including advanced mathematics, sciences, English, philosophy, various social sciences, and classical languages) with a faculty entirely of African American men and women.²³

Peggy is introduced as a poor black woman boarding the train Marian is taking from Doylestown to New York. Peggy is forced to board last and has to sit in the back of the train, where everyone smokes and is huddled together. Peggy is kind enough to lend money when Marian loses her ticket; thus, a friendship is born when Marian sits with Peggy on the train. Upon arrival in New York, Peggy is soon hired as Mrs. Van Rhijn’s secretary, based on her knowledge of Pitman shorthand and education from The

²¹ Jackson, “Julia C. Collins & the Black Elite of the Gilded Age,” *JSTOR Daily*, March 21, 2022. Accessed March 19, 2023.

²² *The Gilded Age*, Season 1, Episode 1, “Never the New.” 26:39.

²³ “The Institute for Colored Youth” <http://moonstoneartscenter.org/the-institute-for-colored-youth/>

Institute of Colored Youth of Philadelphia. Peggy soon moves into the Brook/Van Rhijn household.²⁴ Peggy Scott and her mother are pictured in Figure 4; both women are dressed in modern dresses, untarnished, not hand-me-downs, as Marian initially assumed Peggy was poor. The Scott home is also staffed as the Van Rhijn home; only their staff are black.

As seen in the background of Figure 4, the Scott home is well-furnished and decorated with modern design. Peggy is constantly pushing herself to be better by becoming a writer of short stories and getting published in the newspaper. She continues to be a strong female character as she remains true to herself despite her family's clear disapproval of pursuing education. Irish immigrants that work for Mrs. Van Rhijn are angry with the idea of sharing a floor, bathroom, and food with Peggy. This tension highlights the racialization of the working class in New York. Armstrong, Mrs. Van Rhijn's maid, cries, "But are we to share the same floor? Same bathroom?" It is implied in this episode that Armstrong has strong social and racial biases regarding Peggy.²⁵ Peggy, sleeping on the same floor as house staff who are visibly upset at the idea of sharing space with a black woman. Armstrong asks her if she drinks coffee, sighing and rolling eyes at her presence. Armstrong feels that Peggy is beneath her and the idea of waiting on Peggy decreases the overall Van Rhijn/Brook household reputation. Peggy has to explain racism to Marian as to why certain cabs will not take her or why when she interviewed for a white newspaper, the editor told her to change a black female character to white, and hide her identity. Multiple scenarios are shown where racism and bigotry hinder Peggy from equality. The only characters that treat Peggy as an equal are Marian, Mrs. Chamberlain, Elizabeth Barton, and Ada and Agnes. When Peggy is offered a job at the *New York Globe*, a colored newspaper, she is able to work alongside real-life historical figure Thomas T.

²⁴ *The Gilded Age*, Season 1, Episode 1, "Never the New." 31:54.

²⁵ *The Gilded Age*, Season 1, Episode 1, "Never the New." 30:10.

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Fortune. According to an interview with Denée Benton (Peggy Scott),

Seeing Peggy actually set a boundary and see it be respected is how we get to show Black and white intimacy on screen in an unharmed way that doesn't tell a narrative that we hope to see, but that is a little more true to what it takes to build that kind of trust.²⁶

The representation of poise and advocacy that Peggy Scott brings to *The Gilded Age* is what makes her character crucial to storytelling and combating harmful racist narratives surrounding educated black women in nineteenth-century America.



Figure 4: Denée Benton (right) and Audra McDonald. Photo by Alison Cohen Rosa.²⁷

²⁶ Kelli Boyle, “‘The Gilded Age’: Denée Benton on the Importance of Peggy Scott” *tvinsider*, June 25, 2022. Accessed March 30, 2023.

<https://www.tvinsider.com/1049935/the-gilded-age-denee-benton-peggy-scott-season-2-hbo/>

²⁷ Alice Burton, “The Gilded Age Recap: The Uninvited Guest,” *Vulture*, February 14, 2022. Accessed March 10, 2023.



Figure 5: Denée Benton (left) and Louisa Jacobson.²⁸

As Dave Itzkoff wrote in a New York Times piece on the addition of the character (played by Denée Benton), “[A]n elite Black population in this era of the city...is a factual reality, though one that is not often explored in popular culture.”²⁹ Peggy Scott is key to resisting oppressive histories, white savior complexes, and the whitewashing of black historical figures. According to the interview with Denée Benton, Season 2 of *The Gilded Age* will expand on the wealthy Black community in Brooklyn and Peggy’s storyline with her child.³⁰

<https://www.vulture.com/article/the-gilded-age-season-one-episode-four-recap.html>

²⁸ Boyle, “‘The Gilded Age’: Denée Benton on the Importance of Peggy Scott” *tvinsider*, June 25, 2022. Accessed March 30, 2023.

<https://www.tvinsider.com/1049935/the-gilded-age-denece-benton-peggy-scott-season-2-hbo/>

²⁹ Ashwanta Jackson, “Julia C. Collins & the Black Elite of the Gilded Age,” *JSTOR Daily*, March 21, 2022. Accessed March 19, 2023.

³⁰ Boyle.

The portrayal of hope and youth ignorance is through Gladys Russell, whose sole wish is to make her public debut. Marian acts as the audience to question these social strata and expectations of young women. Gladys is forced to listen to her mother, whose personal goal is not fully revealed until the end of the season. Mrs. Russell has her personal agenda to find the most suitable man for Gladys despite two to three attempts by Gladys to find love. In the third episode, Marian says to Gladys, “How strange these rules are. Why shouldn’t you go out to dinner with your brother and friends? What could be more normal?”³¹ Gladys is not “out”—has not made her public debut—and cannot appear at parties or get-togethers. Homes have to be “christened” before entertaining balls, having calling-ins, or look-ins. Mrs. Russell tried once and was shunned by the old families by order of Mrs. Astor, a prominent old money matriarch. Bertha Russell is unable to be welcomed into society without the blessing of Mrs. Astor. This rivalry is inspired by the real-life rivalry between Alva Vanderbilt, wife of robber baron William Kissam Vanderbilt (Bertha Russell), and real-life Mrs. Astor (Astor).³² According to Director Engler, “Bertha, on one hand, represents the most aspiring striving” new money and strength in New York, making her space in the new society.³³ Thus, Mrs. Russell spends the majority of the season trying to appease and buy her way into society with ridiculously large donations to Elizabeth Barton’s American Red Cross and any surrounding charities. The second episode ends with

³¹ *The Gilded Age*, Season 1, Episode 3, “Face the Music.” Directed by Michael Engler and Salli Richardson, written by Julian Fellowes, featuring Carrie Coon, Christine Baranski, Louisa Jacobson, Morgan Spector, Cynthia Nixon, Denée Benton, Taissa Farmiga, Thomas Cocquerel, aired January 24, 2022, on HBO, 27:42.

<https://www.max.com/?reason=anonymous&returnUrl=https%3A%2F%2Fplay.max.com%2Fshow%2F2537da31-ff99-4195-a53e-e0e1ddb1d67e>

³² Natalie Issa, “The Gilded Age’ Season 2: The real-life Astor family,” *Deseret News*, March 2, 2023. <https://www.deseret.com/entertainment/23622685/the-gilded-age-season-2-the-astor-family>

³³ Director Michael Engler on Directing the Russell’s Lavish Ball in *The Gilded Age*, 1:50.

Mr. Russell buying out a bazaar for war widows, and he is able to flex his money on the women that were excluding his wife. This is where the recurring theme of old versus new money comes into play. The real-life Astors, “according to Britannica, the Astors are a wealthy family that began in the fur trade and expanded to real estate investments in New York City. During the Gilded Age, the Astor family was at the center of upper New York society.”³⁴

Conclusion

Through *The Gilded Age*, we are able to determine the gender, racial, and social dynamics that were in place in nineteenth-century New York. The decision to use the tension and social capital of the wives and daughters of robber barons was a way to humanize and understand the deep-seated social rules of American society, what it means to be American, and how to make your name with new money versus old money. According to Issa, “1880s New York City was filled with opulence and classism, with an elite group of wealthy, prominent families ruling New York’s upper society.”³⁵ *The Gilded Age* remains as true to history as possible, despite it being a dramatized version of history. The addition of Peggy Scott and her likeness to Julia C. Collins is a major step for accurate and positive representation of literate black women during the Gilded Age. Additionally, the other characters based on actual historical figures, such as Mrs. Astor and Mrs. Russell, do the real Mrs. Astor and Vanderbilt justice in capturing their essence and rivalry. It is through these social, political, and racial dynamics that we as consumers are able to educate each other and ourselves on actual historical events and early origins of the United States stemming from New York’s booming economy and ties to both old and new money.

³⁴ Issa, “‘The Gilded Age’ Season 2: The real-life Astor family.”

³⁵ Issa, “‘The Gilded Age’ Season 2: The real-life people behind your favorite characters.”

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Rossandra Martinez is a candidate of the Master of Arts in history at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). After transferring from Imperial Valley College, Rossandra earned a Bachelor of Arts in history and Political Science from the University of California, Riverside. Her thesis will focus on the war efforts of Mexican women during World War I and World War II. Next fall, she plans to teach at the Community College level while pursuing a Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies. Rossandra has worked as an intern for the Bridges That Carried Us Over Project and as a Supplemental Instruction (SI) Leader at CSUSB. Rossandra would like to thank Daniela Bedolla, Dr. Jeremy Murray, and Dr. Tiffany Jones for their guidance and assistance during the writing and editing process.



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Daniela Bedolla is a Master of Arts student at CSUSB majoring in public history. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in public history with a concentration in museum studies. She loves going to museums, enjoys good documentaries, and fears butterflies. Daniela currently works at San Bernardino County Museum as a curatorial assistant. Her academic areas of interest include cultural and political history, with a recent focus on government and religion. She hopes to one day become a history curator at a museum and become a role model for others inspired to work in museums. Daniela would like to thank Rossandra Martinez, Dr. Jeremy Murray, and Dr. Tiffany Jones for their guidance and assistance during the writing and editing process.

