



## Regency Fem(me)ininity in *A Court of Fey and Flowers*

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*This article explores the purposeful excess of Regency-inspired feminine aesthetics on display in Dimension 20's A Court of Fey and Flowers (2022) and the role this excess plays in rendering legible non-binary fem(me)ininity in Regency-inspired art. I examine how A Court of Fey and Flowers interpolates Regency-era femininity through table-top roleplaying and visual art to challenge the supremacy and cohesivity of Wollstonecraftian white femininity. Ultimately, through performances of non-binary fem(me)ininity, A Court of Fey and Flowers offers a queer femme alternative to shows like Bridgerton (2020) while simultaneously grappling with the violent white legacy of British Regency femininity.*

Tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) offer spaces to detach from daily life and explore universes and lifeways entirely different from our own. They also create spaces for possibility shaped around desires and fears too big to exist solely in our material body. I first roleplayed for a *Dungeons & Dragons* game when I was nine years old. Already, at that age, I struggled to imagine my body growing into the woman's shape my family and community expected me to fill. I adored make up and fashion as much as I despised being told how these accoutrements were meant to be used as "flattering" to my "natural" femininity. When my body changed, so too did the language around my movement in the world: I had to sit like a lady, watch how quickly I walked, and think about clothing to garner the "right" attention. It was, and still can be, exhausting. So, in that game, I played an elf ranger named Salogel, who was the spitting image of Orlando Bloom-as-Legolas. Being a boy was not my aim; I wanted to be an otherworldly "feminine" creature with long hair and high cheekbones without needing to shorten my "unladylike" stride or fake incompetence to avoid being "intimidating" or give up my love for soft, beautiful clothes and loud, bright accessories. As I grew and my roleplaying migrated to fandom roleplaying sites, fanfiction RPGs, and the Tumblr's fandom maelstrom, I learned language, specifically around femme-ness, and it felt like finding a permanent home for the feeling Salogel held open in my chest. In these spaces, femme tethered me to others exploring femme via its connection to bodyminds and genders (Brushwood and Camilleri 2002; Kafai 2021; Taylor 2018) rather than through a specific designation in a lesbian butch-femme relationship (Cvetkovich 2003; Kennedy and Davis 1994). Both TTRPGs and femme helped me grope my ways towards a queer future outside the bounds of the femininity I grew up with. Experiencing and exploring femme in the "queer outgrowth" of femme lesbian origins (Hoskin 2021) contributes to my desire to explore femme beyond an American twentieth century boundary.

This essay stems from my intersecting interests in queer femininity in the traditional long eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archive and in new media representations, like TTRPGs. In long eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary scholarship, I consistently look for who is writing on femmes, given the period's deep investment in defining femininity and womanhood against and within the idea of revolution and Enlightenment. Lesbian and sapphic



relationships, for example, provide useful lenses for queer literary history (Castle 1993; Faderman 1981; Lanser 2014; Moore 1997) even though modern conceptions of lesbian and sapphic do not serve as a one-to-one corollary for the period. Similarly, studies of butchness in the period, whether concerning individual figures like Anne Lister (Campbell 2022; Halberstam 1998; Longmuir 2006) or broader categorical interventions, such as the phenomenon of “female husbands” (Manion 2020), demonstrate how butch, as a lens, has been allowed to migrate away from the American twentieth century in ways that femme has not. Recently, Ula Klein (2021) and Declan Kavanagh (2017) expand on queer eighteenth-century scholarship to specifically focus on the complexity of queerness, femininity, and gender. Klein and Kavanagh signal a transition in the field to seriously contend with how femininity functions in varied, nuanced ways rather than as yoked to the masculine-feminine binary. Moreover, my research in the emerging field of studies about actual play (performances of TTRPGs) has led me to think about queer femininity in new media representations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with a particular interest in the Regency era (1811–1820). In this essay, I will argue that TTRPGs offer new orientations towards the past, using fantasy and roleplay to better map the queer femme possibilities hidden under the historical veneer of a presumed monolithic past. Specifically, I use femme theory and narrative analysis to ground my reading of Dimension 20’s *A Court of Fey and Flowers* (ACOFAF), a Regency-inspired actual play, to illuminate how the show’s exploration of femme reveals underexplored queer gender possibilities in other Regency media.

Historically, discussions of femininity in the revolutionary 1790s and into the Regency era (1811–1820) adhered to an inflexible formulation of radical versus conservative (Butler 1975) that left little room for the nuances in the application and development of multiple fem(me)inities. The collapse of femininity into a radical-conservative dyad mimics a binary masculine-feminine model of gender. Ultimately, this division contributes to contemporary issues with recognizing non-normative femme gender expressions, creating a trend in scholarship to prioritize masculine women as emblems of gender transgressiveness. While discussions of conservative versus radical authorship have progressed to allow more nuance (Johnson 1988), there is still a dearth of queer femme scholarship in the period that does not reduce femme to a butch-femme mode. Additionally, shying away from critically engaging with queer femininity as its own transgression enforces that white femininity is the “norm” in the historical past because of its automatic difference from “the slave, the mammy, the whore, the jezebel, the wage slave, the servant, the hussy, the dyke, the welfare queen” (Duggan and McHugh 1996). In the mid-eighteenth century, white, middle-class femininity becomes the bedrock of the domestic woman as subject (Armstrong 1985), becoming baked into early feminist projects emerging at the turn of the nineteenth century. Taking a fem(me)inine angle to the period requires a racial analytic, slowly unbraiding the ties between whiteness, femininity, and cisheterosexual womanhood otherwise left tangled together, obscuring potential unimagined histories. In analyzing ACOFAF, I will demonstrate how actual play aids in moving past a one-dimensional understanding of Regency femininity and away from radicalizing femininity as inherently white, cisgender, and “natural” to track how the show centres queer fem(me)ininity as central to its anti-monarchical and anti-imperialist plot.

*A Court of Fey and Flowers* bridges twenty-first century femme culture with late eighteenth-century debates surrounding femininity and womanhood, opening space for theorizing femme within and against early conceptions of white cisheteronormative femininity. I analyze ACOFAF in conversation with traditional Regency-era writing, such as Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), Jane Austen (1813), and Maria Edgeworth (1801), as well as in



relationship to Regency adaptations like *Fire Island* (2022) and *Bridgerton* (2020). Holding authors like Wollstonecraft, Austen, and Edgeworth against twenty-first century feminist ideals is not necessarily a useful exercise. On the other hand, there is a clear fascination with reinterpreting texts from the 1790s and the Regency era through an inclusionary lens. Whether it's a queer re-telling of *Pride and Prejudice* (*Fire Island*) or a race-conscious recasting of the Regency romance genre (*Bridgerton*), these reinterpretations raise questions about which histories have, possibly, been lost and might be partially recovered through creative, critical interpretations. Returning to the Regency era via *A Court of Fey and Flowers* not only opens space to reconsider who lived in the 1790s but also to think critically about our own conceptions of queer gender due to the historical whitewashing of the era.

In quick summary, *A Court of Fey and Flowers* follows six player-characters as they navigate the Bloom, which is the “magical event of the millennium” meant to blend a variety of common Regency backdrops: London's seasons, the various masquerade balls, coastal excursions for better air, and aristocratic fox hunts, to name a few. Six player-characters plus one game runner make up the onscreen cast:

1. Oscar Montoya (he/him) portrays Dellosa de la Rue (they/them). They are introduced as the Mistris 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 Gwyndolin Thistle-hop (she/they). However, early in the season, it is revealed that Gwyndolin is actually Binx Choppley (she/they), the last known survivor of the Court of Craft. We find out her Court's magic was stolen to sustain the Court of Wonder and other allied dominant courts. Binx's revelation makes visible the Court of Wonder's desire for imperialistic domination and the ties between magic and systems of power in the game.
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 honour to his Court after the disastrous broken engagement between the Goblin Court's Princess Gribalba and the Court of Wonder's Prince Apollo.
4. Omar Najam (he/him) 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 grown person to show up his sister, Suntar, and represent the Unseelie Court.
5. Emily Axford (she/her) and Lou Wilson (he/him) play the cousins Lady Chirp Featherfowl, Countess of Cluckingham (she/her), and Lord Squak Airavis, Earl of Peckersburg (he/him). 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. The Lords have, at previous Blooms, been riotous partiers with numerous lovers and even more duel partners; think *Mansfield Park*'s dynamic duo, Mary and Henry Crawford, meets *The Hangover*. At this Bloom, Grandfather instructs Chirp and Squak it is their duty to make political marriage matches to mend their reputations.



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 she spends much of the season helping Rue in various personal and professional situations.

At the Bloom, these characters explore the complexities of duty and honour versus truth and love while navigating the season's larger plot, which is the overthrowing of the aristocratic (and becoming imperialistic) powers, particularly the Court of Wonder. Their goal becomes to democratize magic for lesser Fey and protect those without magic, namely beings of the Material Plane, which is the stand-in for our world. To fully analyze *ACOFAF* against Regency-era writing and adaptations, I explore the specific benefits of actual play to *ACOFAF*'s exploration of Regency fem(me)ininity.

### Actual Play and Affective Roleplaying

A central factor in *ACOFAF*'s ability to showcase fem(me)ininity as a simultaneously present reality and historical possibility is through its genre: actual play. Actual play, which, in the broadest definition, are recorded performances of TTRPGs, 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 calling "affective roleplaying." Other roleplaying genres, like live action roleplaying (LARP), index how the borders between real life and play intermix in these games. Emotional "bleed," or the overlap between a player's emotions with their character's emotions, is a common occurrence in LARP, and recent studies have analyzed how queer LARP demands a particular kind of affective labour from queer players, producing a unique type of "bleed" (Stenros and Sihvonen 2019). Actual play is a relatively nascent field in comparison to LARP and game studies more broadly, but work in actual play thus far has taken up the genre's capacity to work differently in comparison to LARP and at variable narrative and temporal layers simultaneously to produce unique, material experiences.

Early work on TTRPGs noted how different narrative "frames" worked at different temporal levels, so that in-game player and game master narration might be separated from out-of-character strategizing and socializing (Grouling Cover 2010). More recently, Emily Friedman explores the way time affects the narrative structures in *Critical Role*, one of the most successful (if not the most successful) actual plays currently running, noting that audience factor into the game as the "parasocial frame, between the social intimacy of the table and the intentionality of performance, as the audience sympathetically takes in an exchange occurring within the social frame" (Friedman 2020, 194). This article thinks through the precise ways actual play, when grounded in or related to real-world histories, can permeate multiple narrative and temporal layers to enrich conceptions of queer pasts *and* futures simultaneously.

*A Court of Fey and Flowers* uses game mechanics and characters (both player and non-player) to reinhabit the Regency and posit "femme" as queer historical possibility in one of the key sites of white colonial femininity. This rhizomatic reach of roleplaying through the historical record, such as the Regency era, disrupts a chrononormative (Freeman 2010) sense of history. Chrononormative time adheres all bodies, regardless of difference, to a beat timed against normative frameworks, especially labor and (re)production. To think visually, this kind



of roleplaying reaches backwards, in a horizontal line, while also tethering itself to the present moment. Simultaneously, the mimetic and diegetic layers work together to thicken the historical line, adding in context, possibility, and imagination that aids in collapsing the distance between the historical and present moment. When actual play returns to historical landscapes through fantasy and roleplaying mechanics, the collision of in-game reality with out-of-game past histories creates space for creators and audiences to reinhabit historical moments with new narrative, aesthetic, and affective layers. In the following sections, I will outline how *ACOFAF* uses game design and mechanics to create the conditions for affective roleplaying through historical periods. Then, I will use femme theory to track how Oscar Montoya's portrayal of Dellosa de la Rue leverages affective roleplay to tap into femme erotic subjectivity and anti-Eurocentrism, thus centering nonbinary fem(me)ininity as central to the larger revolutionary plot of the season.

### Game Design and Mechanics

To create a landscape where players meaningfully engage with themes of racism, imperialism, and colonization, *ACOFAF* combines two game systems: *Good Society* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Dungeons & Dragons* dominates the TTRPG field due to its status as one of the first worldwide TTRPG successes. However, in recent years, *Dungeons & Dragons* has faced consistent criticism for its history of racist game design and themes in its fantasy worldbuilding, particularly its depiction of drow (dark-skinned, “evil” elves) and orcs. In summer 2020, *Wizards of the Coast* (WOTC) acknowledged these issues and pledged to remedy them in the subsequent versions of the game (*Wizards of the Coast* 2020). Their poorly executed systemic changes in their recent pre-release of “OneD&D,” which would replace the most recent fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, failed due to its inability to strike at the core racial bioessentialism and racial coding that make race a central, unavoidable aspect of the game (Codega 2022). For example, players historically pick a “race” before they pick any other aspect, and instead of re-thinking the racist mechanics of tying a character's moral alignment, deity, governing society, and character traits to their “race,” WOTC simply renamed “race” as “species.” *Good Society*, the other game *ACOFAF* bases its actual play on, faces an all-together different issue in the “no racism” mechanism built into the world-building of the game:

Gender is a central theme in Austen's work, so it is important to discuss your group's approach to gender power imbalance. *Race is not*. Austen's work is not about race, doesn't grapple with racial prejudice. For this reason, we take the approach that in the world of *Good Society*, *racial prejudice does not exist*, and characters may be whatever race they choose without incident. (Hendro and Gordon 2018, 34, emphasis mine)

*Good Society* players choose whether gender is the same, neutral, or switched (matriarchy) but no such option is built into the game with regards to race or ethnicity. Their choice to position race as non-existent in Austen's works is in line with previous Austen-inspired games, like the MMORPG *Ever, Jane*, which claimed to only represent racial backgrounds and ethnicities that aligned with the “historically accurate racial diversity” of the era, which the creators pushed as meaning predominantly and monolithically white (Friedman and Kugler 2021). Unlike *Dungeons & Dragons*, which cannot seem to fix its race issues due to its insistence on racial bioessentialism, *Good Society* empties race of any meaning at all.



*A Court of Fey and Flowers* combines *Good Society* and *Dungeons & Dragons* in order to create an alternate historical setting in which meaningful encounters regarding queerness, gender, and racial difference (“race,” in their world, being elves, Fey, goblins, and other non-human variants) exist without feeling beholden to a presumed “historical accuracy.” This choice parallels mainstream media sensation *Bridgerton*, which presents an “alternate universe” of the Regency era. In *Bridgerton*, creators and actors of colour, particularly Black creators and actors, inhabit Regency worlds without being subject to performances of chattel enslavement and violent imperial domination, disrupting the notion that nonwhite people only exist in the past as oppressed, dehumanized subjects. As Tricia Matthews notes in her review for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Bridgerton* builds a “multicultural world that feels organic and allows its young characters of color their own *bildungsroman*. Put another way, the Black figures in this world are not in this series in the empty service of diversity or to serve the white characters” (Matthews 2020). Like *Bridgerton*, *A Court of Fey and Flowers* uses its genre (actual play) to its advantage to craft new avenues in Regency media. For ACOFAF, affective roleplaying occurs when diegetic time that the players inhabit in-game “touch” or “affect” historical memory or ideas in ways that collapse temporal and narrative layers, thus adding a thicker texture to the places, spaces, and stories of the Regency era without displacing or replacing the historical Regency or Regency texts. Within this collapse, femme finds its avenue to permeate the game itself and the history it reaches back to touch, allowing it to interact with a history parallel to ours without necessitating a strict fictive break between fantasy and reality.

### At the Bloom

Oscar Montoya’s commitment to femme aesthetic paired with erotic intimacy and emotional vulnerability drive the affective power in his roleplaying as Dellos de la Rue. In analyzing how femme functions in Montoya’s affective roleplaying, I utilize a Lordean approach to the erotic, which views the erotic as the basis for sex and sexuality, rather than sex and sexuality as the base components for erotic, as argued most recently in Ela Przybylo’s *Asexual Erotics* (2019). Returning to the erotic as a basis for intimacy rather than requiring sex as the start point for erotic intimacy allows for a more capacious understanding of queerness not oriented towards sexual coupling. With this understanding of erotic, I deploy femme theory as an analytic frame, rather than as only an identity (Hoskin and Taylor 2019), to more fully index experiences of the “femme body [as] the vehicle for the erotic processes of transformation and the politicization of femme materiality” (Taylor 2021, 92) in *A Court of Fey and Flowers* through its affective roleplaying.

I begin with a tender, early season moment between Rue (Montoya) and Capt. KP Hobb (Mulligan) where Rue’s penchant for high femme aesthetic becomes a central draw and distraction for Hobb. The performances Montoya and Mulligan give at both the mimetic (in character, speaking in the first person) and diegetic (third person, describing or narrating thoughts, movements, or events) render clearer the material contradictions between Rue’s femmeness with Hobb’s commitment to military hierarchy. Ultimately, this scene begins the season-long process of undermining Hobb’s belief in the military hierarchy of the Goblin Court and aristocratic court system more generally. In this scene, Rue, Hobb, and Wuvvy are in the midst of “the Hunt,” which is an event where a willing member of the Court of Hoof and Claw acts as the “bait” for the other player-characters to chase and catch to win a prize. Rue, who is the Bloom’s Mistris and supposedly a neutral spectator, stands and watches as Hobb recruits

their assistant, Wuvvy (Iyengar), to help him capture Theodore, the “bait.” Mulligan narrates Hobb hoisting himself into a tree, covered in mud, while Montoya voices Rue’s amusement as they stand to the side of the tree in a devastatingly good outfit: a take on Robin Hood with nine-inch brown heels, a green and gold mini dress, and an oversized hood and capelet. Their teal green skin glimmers, and their dark teal hair is worn down in waves.



**Figure 1:** Faith Schaffer. *Dimension20: A Court of Fey and Flowers*. Against an illustrated backdrop of a white beach, blue ocean, and light blue sky, there is a figure on the right. They are named Dellosa de la Rue and use they/them pronouns. They have light green skin with a small mouth, small, angular nose, and wide greenish eyes. They are dressed in incredibly high-heel brown thigh-high boots, brown tights, a green and brown Robin Hood-esque dress with brown elbow length gloves and have a dark green and gold capelet with a hood over their long, waist-length teal hair.

The aesthetic staging Montoya uses in his description prioritizes femme’s aesthetic over practical clothing suited to the Hunt itself. Leaning into this excessive costuming can be read in contrast to the first few pages of Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she condemns women raised in “too rich a soil” where “strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty” (Wollstonecraft 1792, 61). Wollstonecraft is hardly the only person critical of feminine excess; from Austen’s Caroline Bingley and Isabella Tharpe to Edgeworth’s Lady Delacour, feminine excess is often emblematic of the *ancien régime* and the prioritization of the producing “weak, artificial beings” (Wollstonecraft 1792, 73).

As the scene moves into direct interaction between Rue and Hobb, Rue’s and Hobb’s competing priorities inform their dialogue in the mimetic layer. The Hunt has proceeded for a while at this point, and as night moves in, 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” (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022b). Rue’s “pleasure and power” (Taylor 2021) in their femme aesthetic draw Hobb in, gesturing towards the possibility of erotic



intimacy, but Hobb's encounter with them cannot become intimate because it would require a capitulation to the game over their own sense of self. At the diegetic level, Iyengar intervenes, asking Mulligan to make an insight check for Hobb, which is a rolled skill to see if one can glean the internal thoughts and feelings of another. His check succeeds, which means at this diegetic level, Montoya describes Rue's "crestfallen" expression in response to Hobb's offer, which Hobb sees clearly. He tries to apologize and emphasize his desire to keep Rue safe, even going so far as to try and scoop Rue into the tree, but Montoya conveys Rue's sense of distrust as they "slap away" Hobb's hand and state: "It's quite alright, Captain. It was silly for me to play along in this game, I am the Game Master...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" (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022b).

Rue's erotic femme subjectivity and their denial of giving Hobb access to their body demonstrates how affective roleplaying may make space to revisit and reinhabit historical moments given its similarity and parallels to misunderstandings and near-misses in Regency romances, both historically and in the re-emergence of the genre in contemporary romance. In this scene, the generic ability to pause, linger, and explore allows Montoya and Mulligan to inhabit Rue and Hobb's experience of the game via the mimetic, first-person layer while also contributing to a deeper understanding of each character's emotions and reactions in the diegetic, third-person layer.

Actual play is not unique in its ability to mimic free indirect discourse; however, its ability to do so is a contributory factor in its suitability for reinhabiting the Regency era, even when not entering a specific historical moment or text. In actual play, the temporal disjunction between performance time (the time it takes the actors to act at the diegetic layer) and the mimetic, in-game time performs similarly to free indirect discourse in its ability to make clearer the interiority of the characters as well as their reactions and relations to others. For Montoya's portrayal of Rue, the narrative layers and temporal disjunction create necessary rhizomatic pathways into which he can weave femme erotic and aesthetic performance. These pathways do not erode the original stories but instead open space for considering the precarity of femme experience, even in spaces where we are, seemingly, in positions of power. Crafting this performance in an alternate history of the Regency era and tracking the material femmeness of Rue's aesthetic and its relationship to their "pleasure and power" underscore how Rue's desires run against the constraints of their duty.

As Rue's feelings for Hobb simmer, Montoya takes advantage of the "epistolary" phase of the game, demonstrating the complexities of queer platonic relationships as they intersect with femme erotic subjectivity. The "epistolary" phase in *Good Society* allows players to use letter writing to move their story forward, mimicking the prolific use of epistolary writing in Regency era fiction, such as Lady Stanhope's letters in *Belinda* (1801) or Austen's confessional use of letters in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Montoya describes Rue's attire in a sumptuous nightgown before switching to first-person to narrate their letter aloud: "Despite my rational brain, who has been in control of my person for many a Fae millennia, my heart has taken control of my body, and it compels me to write you this letter" (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022c). Here, leaning into the "irrationality" of their feelings, Montoya taps into the divide between sense (logic, reason) and sensibility (emotions, passions) that became aligned with conservative and radical politics, respectively. Austen famously explores the distinction in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) (the theme erupts in her other books as well, but *Sense and Sensibility* remains the most direct commentary), and Wollstonecraft builds her idea of women's rights on embracing a rational education to alleviate the irrationality and emotion-

driven passions she views in an uneducated female populace: “I, therefore will venture to assert, that till women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge must receive continual checks” (Wollstonecraft 1792, 103). Wollstonecraft’s advocacy for women’s education is not in error. However, she reinforced ideas of the Enlightenment that devalued the “embodied, contextualized, socially located being” in favour of a “masculinist imperative of stoicism, and the removing of ‘self’ from analyses (as though it were possible)” (Hoskin 2021, 6).

Montoya’s reinhabitation of the rational versus irrational debate, particularly with regards to their duties to the Bloom and their attraction to Hobb, opens a pathway into those debates that reanimate new possibilities for what kind of knowledge and experience can be valued:

Captain, I see a lot of myself in you. Someone who navigates within a world that hardly understands. A Fey caught between duty and instinct. I feel a strong connection with you, Captain Hobb, and to be frank, it scares me. I have never been truly myself with anyone, and as you grabbed me by the wrist and looked into my eyes, I felt something I have never known before. I don’t know what it is. And against my better judgement, I’m willing to pursue it. Where stands you? (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022c)

After Montoya’s composition of the letter, he specifies that Wuvvy is present and hears him composing the letter aloud. There is no privacy for Rue to hide behind, and Montoya’s expression of Rue’s longing for Hobb as interconnected with the role they play for the Court of Wonder foreshadows how the Court of Wonder’s imperialist magic hoarding, which comes to light as the season continues, pull Hobb and Rue together at the Bloom yet keep them emotionally apart.

In the space of Rue’s dressing room, a private space where their secret feelings live, like the dressing room Lady Delacour uses to disguise her medication regimen in *Belinda* (1801), Montoya uses the epistolary phase as a deliberate exploration of the erotic intimacy undergirding their relationship with Wuvvy. Bathrooms and dressing rooms are ideal venues for exploring intimacy in Regency adaptations. In *Fire Island*, one of the most meaningful discussions of femmephobic, anti-Asian gay politics happens between Noah (Joel Kim Booster) and Howie (Bowen Yang) in the bathroom at a party, echoing similar private scenes between Jane and Lizzie Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*. I view *ACOFAF*’s use of the private dressing space as exploration of femme erotics through platonic intimacy. Here, we return to a recurrent scene in Regency media (the dressing room) with the added layer of Rue’s own femme aesthetic (they’re wearing a beautifully crafted nightgown with matching turban) continuing to drive their embodiment in the space. Rue invites Wuvvy into an intimate discussion of Rue’s feelings without relying “on the sexual as the default mode of relationality” between the two (Przybyło 2019, 77). The intimacy achieved is meaningful and acts as a counterweight to Montoya’s ultimate decision to have Rue command Wuvvy to burn the letter, never sending it to Hobb.

At the turn of the fourth episode, Rue has dealt with their complex feelings for Hobb and begun to sit under the weight of what it is to be, primarily, the Mistris of the Bloom before they are themselves. Episode Four ushers in a high tea, complete with teas spiked with various potions to cause specific effects. Montoya indicates that Rue is originally planning to attend the tea in a Georgian gown made of purple and white teacups as “sort of a nod to Marie Antoinette, including a powdered *white* face, in the style of the French Revolution” (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022d, emphasis mine).



**Figure 2:** Faith Schaffer. *Dimension20: A Court of Fey and Flowers*. Against an illustrated backdrop of a white beach, blue ocean, and light blue sky, there is a figure on the right. They are named Dellosa de la Rue and use they/them pronouns. They have light green skin with a small mouth, small, angular nose, and wide greenish eyes. They are wearing a sheer, glass purple-tinted teacup, turned upside down and made into a skirt. It is decorated with purple roses, and the bodice is made of more purple teacups, tea kettles, and flounces, and they are crowned with a large purple rose teacup on their head.

The reference here to Antoinette and the French Revolution aids *ACOFAP* in creating a “historical milieu of their own,” similar to *Bridgerton*’s newest spin-off *Queen Charlotte* (*Queen Charlotte* 2023). In the first episode of *Queen Charlotte*, Charlotte describes the delicacy of “the sapphires and the whalebone corset” she wears, making an incisive parallel between the precariousness of the dress—“one false breath or move could rip both the gown and her skin apart”—and her precarious position marrying King George (Matthews 2023). Montoya’s choice to lean into the imperialist parallels of the Fey world through clothing foreshadows the stunning reveal of Rue’s “true form” later in the episode that doubles down on the connection between Feycentric (Eurocentric) power and femininity.

As the tea begins, Rue walks into the room, and as they walk, their form begins to shift. In Montoya’s narration, he reveals that instead of being an elf with beautiful green skin, teal hair, long legs, and sleek ears, Rue is an owlbear. Standing at over seven feet tall with an owl-like head and beak, furs mixed with feathers, and walking upright with the size and girthiness of a bear, there is no mistaking True Rue for Elf Rue. Later, Montoya reveals that Rue was taken from the Material Plane, from their home and their own kind, and they developed green-skinned Rue to fit in and navigate court life, and the earlier moments of Rue’s anxiety about not being “honest” with Hobb and slapping away his hand were connected to fearing their glamour, hiding their true form, falling away. In this moment, it would have been simple for Montoya to throw off all elements of Rue’s original high femme aesthetic. Places like #lesbiantiktok don femme costuming often before throwing off the garb to reveal the masc lesbian beneath as the true object of desire. In the queer world, more broadly, “no fats, no femmes, no Asians” has become a phrase spoken loudly, revealing the interwoven relationships between racism,

fatphobia, and femmephobia. Instead, Montoya chooses for Rue to embrace the queer fem(me)ininity that has helped them express and sustain themselves in a world their own body does not fit in.



**Figure 3:** Faith Schaffer. *Dimension20: A Court of Fey and Flowers*. Against an illustrated beach with white sand, blue ocean, and light blue sky, stands a figure on the right and words on the left. The words read: “Delloso de la Rue (they/them), Court of Wonder, was an owlbear this whole time.” The figure on the right is Delloso de la Rue, who is now in their true form, which is an owl bear. They are statuesque, with digitigrade-like legs that end with talons and long, feathered arms that also end in talons, and an owl-like face, with a small mouth and owl eyes. In essence, they have the figures of an owl with the size of a bear. They are wearing a soft brown and pink peony covered Regency-style dress with a high thigh slit on one side, and a caplet and crown made of pink peonies.

Montoya describes Rue’s owlbear form in a “beautiful Regency-era gown in a soft pink taffeta,” and their head is covered with pink peonies in a crown shape. As Montoya describes the eruption of peonies, it becomes hard not to notice that the Dome itself—the physical space that *Dimension 20* uses to play and film its actual play—is covered in flowers, as if the season itself is a celebration of fem(me)ininity rather than seeing itself in opposition to this aesthetic. 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. The turn towards mechanics as a method to return power to a queer player-character underscores how affective roleplaying is not simply about telling improvisational stories. Affective roleplaying creates space for complex reinhabitation of these historical landscapes. Oscar chooses the die, saying out loud as the player that “I am actually very nervous” (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022d) and when it lands on a 13, the response provokes gasps to the transformation, but there is no hostility.

Montoya’s continual femme embodiment through Rue becomes the vehicle for their subsequent partnering with Binx Choppley to overthrow the Court of Magic’s magic hoarding



plot. Viewers know, as the sixth episode begins, that Binx is hiding in her “Gwyndolin” face, but most other player-characters have not been let in on the secret, nor has Gwyndolin dropped their glamour. Binx, at the tea in Episode Four, was complimentary of Rue’s true form. In Episode Six, Binx gets Rue alone and states that Rue’s revelation is what spurs Binx to discard her Gwyn-glamor. 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 you because you trusted all of us” (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022e) before letting the Gwyn-glamour 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” (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022e). Linking Binx’s search to recover the stolen, colonized magic with Rue’s embrace of their true form, including their continued high femme aesthetic, is a prime example of “affective roleplaying.” Marie and Montoya’s decision to interweave the anti-imperialist plot with their play with femininity speaks to the current moment of femmephobia and anti-trans sentiment. In the current moment, transfemmes, particularly transfemmes of colour, are subjects of violent attacks that demonize their existence as a contemporary aberration from “natural” womanhood. *ACOFAF* seems to reach back to the ongoing debates in Austen and Edgeworth’s novels and Wollstonecraft’s political writing in favour of a particular kind of femininity. Weaving characters like Binx and Rue back into past histories of revolution that also relied on opposition to nonwhite cisheteronormative femininity 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.

Rue’s interactions with Binx help to create a “counternarrative for ‘femininity,’ rejecting cis-heteronormative beauty and body ideals with roots in Eurocentricity” (Taylor 2021, 92). 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, similar to characters like Harriet Freke in *Belinda* who espouse pro-revolutionary sentiment. On the other hand, Rue is a gesture towards “dandies, beaux, macaronis, mollies, and binary-fluting celebrities” like Anne Lister, the Ladies of Llangollen, the Chevalière d’Eon and Beau Brummel (Friedman 2022). I would build on this characterization of Rue 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, 111). 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.

In the final episodes of the season, Rue and Hobb’s love story returns to the fore, except now, Rue lives openly in their femme owlbear form as an open ally of marginalized Fey, which has led to their own Court, the Court of Wonder, to try and silence them. Hobb and Rue’s arc in the latter half of the season explores deeply how femme erotic subjectivity can reorient others away from familiar oppressive systems. Throughout the season, Mulligan’s portrayal of Hobb leans heavily into the role the soldier plays in the imperialist mission of the Crown. He increasingly feels in conflict with his commitment to the Goblin Court, but towards the end of the season, his anxiety for the stability of the courts begins to outweigh his feelings for Rue. Rue’s revelation of their true self and alliance with Binx leads the Chorus, the “powers that be”



in the Court of Wonder, to offer Rue a position in the Chorus as a way to “buy” their acquiescence to the magic siphoning plot. Rue rejects this, and while Hobb admires her decision, he struggles to understand what she will do and asks if they will join one of the other courts. Rue tells Hobb: “As far as I’m concerned, I’m an orphan in the fairy world, which is not unfamiliar to me [...] There is part of me that wanted to dismantle all courts” (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022g). Rue’s statement to Hobb echoes how femme elders “challenged gay and lesbian homophile politics of respectability” (Taylor 2021, 91) through its recognition that systems made to harm may make space for token representation and tolerance but will not ever work in favour of those it marginalizes. Hobb sees Rue’s position as advocating for “chaos,” which forces the two to confront their differing priorities: Rue advocates for non-hierarchal kinship while Hobb adheres to duty and honour.

Rue’s embrace of their true femme self and their detachment from the court system allows them to push back against Hobb’s notion of “honour,” ultimately leading to his divestment from the Goblin Court’s military complex. Soldiers and the military frequent Regency narratives: Jane Austen depicts a range of military men ranging from the dastardly George Wickham to the admirable Captain Wentworth (Austen 1813, 1817); in her political writing, Wollstonecraft uses the soldier as a counterpart to the civilized woman, arguing that “men may still, in some degree, unfold their faculties by becoming soldiers and statesmen” (Wollstonecraft 1792, 224), an equivalent avenue being unavailable to women. As such, the soldier plays a role in crafting and maintaining appropriate masculine avenues for men’s societal integration, and an abandonment of military prowess and honour is often associated with a lack of masculine worth. *ACOFAF* uses Hobb’s military status to highlight how an uncritical devotion to hierarchical systems empties honour of its meaning, which becomes tied to Rue’s fem(me)ininity through Rue and Hobb’s love story. Rue takes Hobb to task, stating that they are “governed by [their] heart” while Hobb acts “based on [his] court and [his] obligation” (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022g). Hobb responds and points out that he views their service to the Bloom and to take “pity” on his “clumsiness” are honourable and ultimately “in the interest of others” (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022g). Their argument about honour versus love continues until, finally, Rue reveals they are responsible for dissolving the union between Princess Gribalba (Hobb’s sovereign) and Prince Apollo (of the Court of Wonder) at the last Bloom. This dissolution devastated the Goblin Court and deeply affected Hobb’s military mission at this current Bloom. He has spent countless hours trying to bring honour back to the Goblin Court after the broken engagement. Montoya’s choice to combine their critiques of the court with their feelings towards Hobb again returns to femme erotic subjectivity as integral to queer’s desire to demand another way forward. Their revelation ultimately forces them to acknowledge openly that their actions towards Hobb never came from an honourable place, but instead, from a place of desire.

In naming their desire for Hobb, Rue reorients Hobb’s view of his position in the Goblin Court, creating a clear division between themselves and Hobb’s alignment with the Court’s military and potentially imperial mission. Rue proclaims

I love you. I love you intensely and fiercely. I love you in a way that I’ve never loved anything before in my life [...] I pulled away [from you at the Hunt] because I didn’t want you to know that I had claws, I had fur, that I was seven feet tall and not a slender, beautiful elf. [...] I tried to be someone else because I thought that was the way the fey were going to

accept me, and I met you, and I thought, no, I need to accept myself first. (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022g)



Their confession shocks Hobb, and the two are interrupted to run into battle together to prevent the Court of Wonder from fully colonizing the magic from other realms. After the battle, having worked against the Court of Wonder openly in this final rebellion, Hobb's first thought is to run to Rue with his own confession:

... I need you to hear this knowing that I am uncertain of the world that awaits me when I finish speaking. [...] Honor, to me, means something deep and profound [...] It is the doing of good and noble when the world conspires against you from it, and in that sense, *I have never lived an honorable day*. Every sacrifice I have done has been the path of least resistance [...] So, if you would let me act with honor for the first time in my life, I would ask you for your hand and for a kiss. (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022g, emphasis mine)

Hobb's return to the discussion of honour underscores how the word, in the military context, eroded his ability to form meaningful connections to others, in particular to Rue. Mulligan's attentiveness to the physicality of the moment through narrating Rue and Hobb's first kiss solidifies the requirement to abandon an allegiance to systems of domination in embracing femme eroticism. Hobb then moves beyond the symbolism of renouncing his previous definition of "honour" and divests from the Goblin Court for Rue. Mulligan describes Hobb laying down his halberd, his military coat, and his cap, and then Hobb says to Rue, "I renounce the Goblin Court in its entirety and forswear all oaths of loyalty to king and kin. If you are orphaned, then so am I, and you will never know another lonely day as long as I draw breath" (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022g). The show ends with the gesture that Hobb and Rue will go into the world as "two furry fairies in the woods," (*A Court of Fey and Flowers* 2022g) leaving open the queer future they move towards.

*A Court of Fey and Flowers* offers a glimpse into femme histories through its rejection of Eurocentric femininity and embodiment of femme erotic subjectivity. Montoya and Mulligan pull the audience back to the Regency to ask us to imagine what the shape of fem(me)ininity and femme desire in those histories might look like. Additionally, game runner Aabria Iyengar and player Surena Marie add to understanding the power of Rue's femme subjectivity to transform relationships. *A Court of Fey and Flowers*, then, aids in a broader understanding of the Regency because it identifies strands already existing in these past histories and texts and pulls on them to productively weave new aesthetic, affective, and narrative layers. As the past continues to inspire and affect the present, actual play and affective roleplaying may offer nuanced avenues into complex histories we may never fully know but must try to orient ourselves toward anyway.

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