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## Miscellaneous

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## Presence and representation of mental health in fiction TV series: King George in *Queen Charlotte* (Netflix, 2023)

### Abstract

The representation of disabled people in TV series remains limited, and characterised by stereotypical portrayals. However, over the past decade VOD platforms have promoted a qualitative and quantitative increase in the production of series featuring such characters. This can be attributed to the enhanced visibility of mental health in contemporary society, as well as the obligation of television to serve as a reflection and socialisation instrument. This paper presents a review of the presence and representation of disability in television fiction series produced in the United States. The main objective of this research is to determine the mental health representation in the character of King George III in the TV series *Queen Charlotte. A Bridgerton Story* (Netflix, 2023). From a qualitative methodology, we review the related literature and conduct an in-depth textual analysis of the character as a person, role, and actant. Moreover, we examine the scenes which reveal the symptoms of the king's mental health. The findings show the historical licences adopted by the fiction in favour of the narrative. The symptoms expressed by the king are indicative of a Bipolar I Disorder and Dissociative Identity Disorder: anxiety, verbiage, "races of thoughts," and identity crisis. In conclusion, this representation stands out for a creative and effective purpose, rather than for being realistic. However, it contributes to the visibility of cognitive disability in contemporary audiovisual projects.

### Keywords

**TV-series, mental health, disabled people, VOD platforms, Netflix.**

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## 1. Introduction

In the current audiovisual market, TV series are the focus of media, industrial, and academic interest. The so-called series culture (Cascajosa, 2016) is characterised by the implementation of streaming platforms and the overproduction of audiovisual content, which give rise to the Peak TV era (Neira, 2020). The cultural identity is built by audiovisual fiction through social representation of behaviours and ideas, as well as working as instrument in socialisation (Marcos-Ramos, González-de-Garay, & Arcila-Calderón, 2020). This is especially relevant in relation to social minorities and diversity, such as people with disabilities.

The incorporation of non-normative characters in serial fiction is likely to have a beneficial impact on both the population belonging to certain minorities, and on other viewers. Disabled people are able to feel recognition, empathy, and a sense of belonging to the community. Other people acquire insight into a reality that may be unfamiliar to them, thereby enabling them to develop trust and reduce prejudices in line with the hypothesis of intergroup parasocial contact (Allport, 1954). Television represents a valuable source of knowledge about this aspect. Hence a representation free of stigmas and stereotypes in the characters of this group is essential (Aspler, Harding, & Cascio, 2022, p. 323).

In the context of present-day television, the incorporation and the rise in popularity of video on demand (VOD) services has prompted a shift in academic focus towards the analysis of audiovisual productions created and distributed through these operators. The presence and representation of social minorities is facilitated by streaming, despite the fact that studies conclude that there continues to be an under-representation of functional diversity, the inclusion of which is relegated to secondary characters and plots (Martín-García, Marcos-Ramos, & Angulo-Brunet, 2023).

The lack of visibility and presence of disability and diversity in television fiction has been accompanied by a similar lack of priority in communication studies (Piñeiro-Naval *et al.*, 2023, p. 4). However, there has been a notable increase in media analysis within the field of disability studies (Aspler *et al.*, 2022), from the focus on the production process (Barton, 2015), content (Palenzuela-Zanca, Marcos-Ramos, & González-de-Garay, 2021) and audience (Vázquez-Barrio, Sánchez-Valle, & Viñarás-Abad, 2021).

The above works were reviewed in light of their context, inspiration, and contribution to the ongoing debate surrounding this research. This paper seeks to contribute to the limited and nascent attention given to disability in audiovisual fiction from a communication studies perspective. In the light of the above considerations, an investigation is undertaken into the portrayal of characters with cognitive disabilities in TV series within the current American television market. The series created and produced by Shonda Rhimes, entitled *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* (Netflix, 2023), is selected for analysis as a case study, with the aim of examining the representation of mental health in the character of King George. To this end, a qualitative methodology is employed, based on textual analysis of the character as a person (physical, psychological and social dimensions), role, and actant. Furthermore, the analysis considers the character's cognitive diversity, paying attention to the scenes that express symptoms of Bipolar I Disorder, Bipolar II Disorder, and Dissociative Identity Disorder in accordance with the DSM-IV-TR (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*). The findings afford an evaluation of the representation of disability in a particular case study, and an analysis of its potential social implications.

The research is driven by two key factors: the absence of prior work on this project, and the representation of mental health through the character. This work, therefore, represents a significant contribution from Television Studies to Disability Studies. It also attends to the emerging area of Media Disability Studies (Ellcessor, Hagood, & Kirkpatrick, 2017), which is aimed at investigating the relationship between media and disability.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. From *Bridgerton* (Netflix, 2020-) to *Queen Charlotte* (Netflix, 2023)

This paper presents a case study based on a textual analysis of the representation of cognitive diversity through the character of King George in the Netflix series *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* (2023). The TV series was created by Shonda Rhimes and constitutes a spin-off from the preceding *Bridgerton* series (2020-), which in turn is an adaptation of the literary saga by the writer Julia Quinn. In that adaptation, Netflix permitted Rhimes and producer Shondaland (Bullard, 2023) a considerable degree of creative autonomy. *Bridgerton* sets its plots in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the Regency Period in the United Kingdom (1811–1820), when King George III ceded power to his son, the Prince of Wales (King George IV), due to ill health. The period is regarded as a transitional phase between the Georgian and Victorian eras, during which the United Kingdom underwent significant modernisation and promoted artistic creativity, despite the inherent paradoxes of the era (Curzon, 2023).

The academic literature has analysed the *Bridgertons'* audiovisual project, but *Queen Charlotte* has received little attention. The integration of the spin-off into the same narrative universe as the preceding series, and the shared authorship of both works, justifies mention of previous studies on the first series. These works allow us to contextualise both productions from a scholarly point of view. *Bridgerton* has merited research attention from historiographical, linguistic, and gender perspectives. This TV series includes anachronisms with regard to the representation of racial diversity in British high society, as well as regarding the behaviour and attitudes of its female protagonists. In this sense, Kulak (2022) understands the series as an anachronistic reinterpretation that uses historiography in an instrumental way, “blind to the harsh realities of slavery and its attendant racial discrimination in early nineteenth-century Britain” (p. 180).

Salsabila (2021) also offers an overly critical analysis, pointing to the *Americanised* perspective of European history depicted in the series. This perspective can be seen as part of a fantasy re-enactment of “American imperialism” on other cultures: “The representation of diversity in *Bridgerton* is presented as a means of maintaining Netflix's image of cultural diversity” (p. 23), in line with the demands of the contemporary market. Chae (2023) suggests that, as an artefact of popular culture, *Bridgerton* does not merely situate and represent the historical context in which the story takes place but imbues it with values contemporary to its time of production.

From a gender perspective, Azeharie, Sari, and Irena (2022) analyse the fiction from the perspective of multicultural feminism. Authors conclude very critically that misogynist ideology underlies the series' prominent attention accorded to a newspaper column based on rumours about women. They also note the portrayal of a society in which women lack autonomy and serve at the behest of family patriarchs, an idea that Hashmi, Kazim, and Nawaz (2023) also endorse.

However, other works argue that the fiction supports feminist values (Senfield, 2022). In this sense, the analyses of Cuenca-Orellana and Martínez-Cano (2021) and Cuenca-Orellana (2022) have emphasised the arch of transformation of female characters in order to highlight their progressive distancing from stereotypes, and to achieve more feminist values.

To date, only a few works have adopted *Queen Charlotte* as their subject of study. Among these are the contributions by Waluyo *et al.* (2023) and Nabilaha and Candriab (2023), which concentrate on linguistic discourse. In the initial case, the authors apply discourse analysis to examine the subject matter and rhythm of the dialogue in this TV series. They identify statements in the declarative mode with an expressive function pertaining to romantic thoughts and desires. This enables them to address universal themes that transcend cultural and/or historical boundaries (Waluyo *et al.*, 2023, p. 381). In their study, Nabilaha and Candriab (2023) examine the linguistic styles employed in Charlotte's conversations with other characters. They identify a range of linguistic characteristics, noting that the casual style, typical of informal situations and intimate relationships, is especially prevalent.

## 2.2. Characters with Diversity in US Television Fiction

In the current television market, the implementation of streaming services has led to a series of changes in the production, distribution, and exhibition processes of fiction series, as well as in the content of these projects (Neira, 2020). This scenario signifies the transition from the Third Golden Age of Television to a new era, designated as Peak TV (2015–present day). It is characterised by an excess of audiovisual fiction, and the proliferation of conventional channels and platforms, due to the need to satisfy social demands (Clares Gavilán, Neira, & Merino Álvarez, 2019). Despite the problems that this reformulation of the industrial audiovisual fabric may entail (block premieres, absence of a television calendar, changes in the narrative structure), in this new era fiction series have become cult phenomena: niche projects that seek to attract a wide audience with innovative proposals, such as the hybridisation of film genres (Weeks, 2024), or the inclusion of the gender perspective with a feminist tendency (Garrido & Zaptsi, 2021). In the context of the present study, it is noteworthy that the adaptation of novels has become a source of inspiration and intellectual property in this era of overproduction. The serial format is particularly conducive to such adaptations because it offers a longer duration, and an audience willing to engage with the content in a binge-watching mode (Hazelton, 2019).

The incorporation of a more diverse range of subject matter, narrative, and characters distinguishes productions for streaming operators from those typically seen on conventional television. Notwithstanding the limitations outlined below, it is evident that the greatest representation of characters with disabilities is observed in productions for cable channels and VOD operators. These platforms endeavour to portray alternative social realities that traditionally have either been regarded as taboo or presented through strongly negative stereotypes (Álvarez Moreno & Mora de la Torre, 2020). The advent of streaming platforms has contributed to fragmentation of the television market, thereby creating an opportunity for greater diversity in fiction (Aspler *et al.*, 2022).

In the meantime, a press release from the Nielsen consultancy has revealed that the inclusion of people with disabilities in US television fiction is gradually increasing, albeit at a slow and inconsistent pace. Furthermore, the release does not identify any particular audiovisual genre that is predominantly represented. It does, however, highlight that the majority of representation occurs on cable and digital platforms. Nevertheless, “while people with disabilities believe that streaming platforms offer the most inclusive options, 24% perceive no difference in relevant representation across different platforms” (Nielsen, 2022).

These results accord with the findings of the *Inclusion in Netflix Original U.S. Scripted Series & Films* report for the 2021–2022 season (Smith *et al.*, 2023), which conclude that there are no characters with disabilities who are the protagonists of fiction series during this period. Of the characters with disabilities in Netflix original series, 26.1% are identified as having a cognitive disability, 26.1% are described as having a communicative disability, and 56.5% are classified as having a physical disability. Additionally, there is a notable absence of intersectionality, with the majority of these characters being white men.

Studies that review the portrayal of characters with disabilities in audiovisual media reveal a consistent pattern: these characters are typically absent from the independent life model (Palenzuela-Zanca *et al.*, 2021). Their presence is often shaped by stereotypes and stigmas. Characters with disabilities are not the protagonists of their own plots. They are depicted as victims or villains, objects of pity and ridicule, and other negative tropes (Aspler *et al.*, 2022). The characteristics of the personality disorder may serve to inform the development of the narrative arch of the characters, to a greater or lesser extent.

In order to conduct a historical review of characters with diversity in American fiction series, it is necessary to turn to the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)*, which was created in 2001. Under this system, disability can be classified into four categories: (1) physical or motor, (2) sensory, (3) intellectual, and (4) psychic (World Health Organisation, 2001). In this section, we provide a brief overview of some representative

examples for each of these categories, drawing upon fictional series produced during the so-called Peak TV era.

In this discussion of characters with physical or motor disabilities, we focus on those who have cerebral palsy, with or without a concomitant speech impediment. In the first case, we find the character of JJ in *Speechless* (ABC, 2016–2019), and in the second case, Isaac from *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019–2023) or Ryan Kayes in *Special* (Netflix, 2019–2021). Secondly, with regard to sensory diversity, there are characters who experience difficulties in communicating and/or have lost the ability to see or hear. These include Daphne, a blind person, in *Switched at Birth* (ABC, 2011–2017), and Sam, a deaf boy, in *The Last of Us* (HBO, 2023–). In the context of intellectual disabilities, it is noteworthy that showrunner Ryan Murphy has made significant contributions to the representation of this group in popular culture. This is evident in his work on the series *Glee* (FOX, 2009–2015) and *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011–), where he cast actress Lauren Potter, who has Down's Syndrome, in roles that are not constrained by her condition. Finally, with regard to psychic diversity, characters with mental disorders, such as autism, are particularly noteworthy. Notable examples include Shaun Murphy in the medical drama *The Good Doctor* (ABC, 2017–) and Sam Gardner in the dramedy *Atypical* (Netflix, 2017–2021). Within the context of the present discussion, it is noteworthy that Elliot Alderson in *Mr. Robot* (USA Network, 2015–2019) and Tara Gregson in *United States of Tara* (Showtime, 2009–2011) are depicted as suffering from dissociative identity disorder. Similarly, Carrie Mathison in *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2020), Lexi in *Modern Love* (Prime Video, 2018–2021) and Maria Bamford in *Lady Dynamite* (Netflix, 2016–2017) are portrayed as having bipolar disorder. It is worth noting the representation of mental health in other series such as *One Day at a Time* (Netflix, 2017–2020), which was twice awarded (2018 and 2019) at the *Sentinel Awards* in the “mental health” category for the representation of depression through its main character, Penélope Álvarez.

The incorporation of diversity into social imaginaries facilitates the democratisation of access to knowledge about health, diagnoses, and therapies (Cambra-Badii & Martínez-Lucena, 2020). Therefore, following the recommendation of Aspler *et al.* (2022, p. 324), the inclusion of more diverse stories that include their weaknesses and strengths, with actors and actresses with disabilities, as well as the advice of scriptwriters, creators, directors, and producers with disabilities, is supported. Plots on disability should be articulated with the narrative development of the TV series and not presented in an isolated or stagnant way. Accordingly, within this line of research into the various modes of disability in television series, this paper focuses specifically on analysis of the representation of mental disorders. This research concerns the character of King George in *Queen Charlotte. A Bridgerton Story* (Netflix, 2023), because it represents a paradigmatic example of this demand.

### 3. Objectives and Methodology

This research is based on a review of the presence and representation of disability in fictional television series produced in the United States. The main objective is to determine the representation of mental health in the character of King George III in the series *Queen Charlotte*. In order to elaborate on and expand this objective, the following research questions are posed:

- Q1. What are the characteristics that can be interpreted as symptoms of cognitive diversity in the character of King George III?
- Q2. How does the representation of cognitive diversity influence the development of the plot of the fiction, and in relation to which moments of the narrative arch of the character of King George III?
- Q3. What is the relationship between the character of King George III and the other characters of the fiction, with particular reference to *Queen Charlotte*?

For this purpose, related literature has been reviewed to establish the theoretical framework for the research: studies on diversity in television fiction (Aspler *et al.*, 2022; Palenzuela-

Zanca *et al.*, 2021), reports on the inclusion of functional diversity in US television (Nielsen, 2022), and the Netflix platform (Smith *et al.*, 2023) and previous work on the *Bridgerton* universe (Azecharie *et al.*, 2022; Hanus, 2023).

Then, from a qualitative methodology, an in-depth discourse analysis of the character of King George throughout the *Queen Charlotte* series is conducted as a case study. The methodological choice is justified by the results of the work on the study of disability and diversity in communication by Piñeiro-Naval *et al.* (2023). The authors conclude that the methods most commonly used in this area are content analysis (quantitative) and discourse analysis (qualitative) of messages. In this case, we opted for qualitative research precisely because of the scarcity of cognitively diverse characters in US television fiction, in order to delve into a case study that is representative of the topic to be studied (Mateos-Pérez, 2021).

In order to analyse the character, a dual perspective has been adopted, resulting in a two-part analysis. The initial part concerns the character's construction based on audiovisual textual analysis, while the subsequent part examines the character from the standpoint of its cognitive diversity. Firstly, the methodological scheme of Casetti and Di Chio (2017) and Chatman (1990) has been adapted to identify the construction and functioning of television discourse. This model has been completed with the contributions of Galán-Fajardo (2006, 2007), Guarinos-Galán (2009), and Valverde-Maestre and Pérez-Rufí (2021).

In this initial phase of the analysis, following a preliminary contextualisation of the series (Guarinos-Galán, 2009), the character is examined as an individual within the narrative framework (Casetti & Di Chio, 2017). This approach is based on the premise that characters can be understood as multidimensional entities, encompassing physical, psychological, and social aspects (Egri, 1960; Galán-Fajardo, 2007; Valverde-Maestre & Pérez-Rufí, 2021; Torres-Romay & Izquierdo-Castillo, 2022). Furthermore, the character is analysed from two additional perspectives: firstly, as a role within the narrative, and secondly, as an actant within the fable framework (Casetti & Di Chio, 2017).

The methodological outline is as follows:

- 1) Technical documentation (phase prior to analysis), in which the following data on the TV series are recorded: title, year of production, number of seasons and episodes, film genre, duration of each episode, nationality, data on authorship, and brief synopsis (Guarinos-Galán, 2009).
- 2) Physical dimension, which would collect information on those external characteristics that describe the character: name, age, sex, ethnicity, and physical appearance (Valverde-Maestre & Pérez-Rufí, 2021, p. 172).
- 3) Psychological dimension, based on the model of Galán-Fajardo (2006), with two categories: personality type (extrovert or introvert) and temperament (Torres-Romay & Izquierdo-Castillo, 2022). The objective of the character and the motivation in his or her performance are also included here (Galán, 2007).
- 4) Social dimension. This section focuses on the character's social class, marital status, stability in romantic relationships, sexual orientation, relationship with family, professional activity, and training (Valverde-Maestre & Pérez-Rufí, 2021).
- 5) Character as role (Casetti & Di Chio, 2017), responding to various categories presented in opposition (active/passive; active autonomous influencer/modifier/conservative; active modifier improver/degrader; active conservative protector/frustrater; protagonist/antagonist).
- 6) Character as actant (Casetti & Di Chio, 2017), comprising six categories: subject, object, receiver, sender, helper, and opponent.

Subsequently, a series of specific criteria are used for analysis of the character from the perspective of their cognitive diversity. In this case, the three study items set out by Pacheco Jiménez (2018) are employed: (1) trauma, defined as a traumatic event, typically in the past, that affects the individual's current self; (2) socialisation problems, characterised by difficulty in

forming and maintaining human relations; and (3) personality disorder, which emerges as a consequence of the above factors.

No precise medical diagnosis of the figure of King George III exists in the historical context (Leach, 2023), so it is also difficult to conclude the representation of a specific disorder in television fiction, although this was not an objective of this work. However, the definitions of psychology in the DSM-IV-TR regarding three specific disorders, and their characteristics as observed in the character's behaviour are taken into account in order to analyse the existence or otherwise of these symptoms and the scenes in which they appear, with a view to locating the representation of mental health in the television series. In this case, an initial overview of the project leads us to three specific disorders and their corresponding symptoms (DSM-IV-TR, in Pacheco Jiménez, 2018).

- Bipolar I Disorder: one or more manic, depressive or mixed episodes, violent behaviour and aggression, increased self-esteem or grandiosity, anxiety, verbiage, and “races of thoughts.”
- Bipolar II disorder: one or more major depressive episodes together with hypomania, gaps in memory without always being conscious, social and occupational impairment, and clinically significant distress.
- Dissociative Identity Disorder: existence of two or more personalities with a different personal background, image, identity and name; memory gaps, nightmares or traumatic memories, and suicidal behaviour.

In order to facilitate the mechanisation of this analysis, an *ad hoc* table has been constructed and applied to the six episodes that comprise the single season of the TV series *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*.

**Table 1.** Cognitive diversity analysis table for the character of King George in *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* (Netflix, 2023).

Episode	Scene	Plot	Narrative description	Mental health symptom	Relationship with characters
Title and episode number	Time range	Story moment	Accurate description of the scene	Symptom of the disorder and factors displayed	Alone or other characters involved

Source: Own elaboration.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. TV Series Production

In a first place, the data relating to the pre-analysis phase are showed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Technical Documentation of TV series.

<b>Title:</b> <i>Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story</i>	<b>Year:</b> 2023
<b>Seasons:</b> 1	<b>Episodes:</b> 6
<b>Genre:</b> Romance, history drama	<b>Length of episodes:</b> 54-87 minutes
<b>Total length:</b> 5h 47m	<b>Nationality:</b> United States
<b>Production:</b> Shondaland	<b>Platform:</b> Netflix
<b>Creator:</b> Shonda Rhimes	<b>Director:</b> Tom Verica
<b>Screenwriters:</b> Julia Quinn, Shonda Rhimes, Nicholas Nardini	
<b>Casting:</b> India Amarteifio (Young Queen Charlotte), Corey Mylchreest (Young King George), Adjoa Andoh (Lady Agatha Danbury), Michelle Fairley (Princess Augusta), Ruth Gemmell (Lady Violet Ledger Bridgerton).	
<b>Synopsis:</b> Charlotte travelled to London with the intention of marrying George III, despite having no prior acquaintance with him, and being unaware of the latter's mental health issues. Despite the initial challenges in their relationship, the couple ultimately succeed in forging a bond of love and commitment, ensuring the continuity of the monarchical lineage and confronting the king's health issues.	

Source: Own elaboration.

## 4.2. Audiovisual Textual Analysis of King George III Character

### 4.2.1. Physical Dimension

This analysis starts with a commentary on the physical dimension of the character in accordance with the methodological scheme. The character analysed is King George III, a twenty-three-year-old male of Caucasian ethnicity, tall, slim, dark, handsome, and healthy-looking. Thus, he embodies a physical type assimilable to the stereotype of the white gallant: that is, with “features that are usually common to the prototype [of the gallant] at the iconographic level: masculine, virile, seductive and handsome” (Durán Manso, 2023, p. 77). It is only in the moments of confinement for the violent treatment he receives for his mental illness that he is shown with a clear physical deterioration, a sign of the aggressions he receives from his doctor (E5. 00:12:32–00:13:39).

A parallel duality can be added with regard to his clothing in relation to the public or private situations in which he appears: Publicly he dresses in accordance with his rank, and what is expected of him in each social context. In private or intimate spaces he dresses much more casually, to the point of often being shown shirtless, especially when he is engaged in agriculture or animal care.

Although the character in question identifies himself as King George III of England, the name by which he wants to be called also provides relevant narrative information about his characterisation. The monarch requests that Charlotte refer to him as “George” or “just George,” which serves as a source of humour and complicity between the couple. This also serves to establish a sense of equality and removes any hierarchical distinctions between them (E6. 01:01:04–01:04:59). In moments of crisis, the character disassociates from his social role by identifying as “George, the farmer.” This indicates that, in scenes where he appears to be experiencing a relapse, he exhibits a contrasting personality with which he seems to feel more comfortable, that of a farmer without the responsibilities or authority of his position (E6. 01:19:57–01:23:10). Such behaviour may, therefore, be indicative of a mental health issue.

### 4.2.2. Psychological Dimension

The commentary on the psychological dimension should be complemented by the second part regarding psychological dimension. It is worth noting that he displays characteristics of an introverted personality. Despite the necessity for public exposure required of his hierarchical position, George displays a tendency to avoid social events. He experiences significant anxiety, as evidenced by his unsuccessful attempt at a speech before parliament (E6. 00:45:41–00:47:10).



This is attributable to an exceptionally introverted character, conscious of the considerable responsibility, authority, and also the high levels of demand and discipline to which he is subjected. In the face of circumstances that he perceives as beyond his control, George will evade his responsibilities, seek solace in astrological research and agriculture, or experience a crisis.

The character of George displays two distinct temperaments, contingent upon whether he is depicted in a state of tranquility or in the throes of a crisis. In his calm state, he is perceived as an agreeable, affable, affectionate, loving, forthright, self-assured, and courageous partner. He may be regarded as a simple character, akin to the stereotypical *Prince Charming* depicted in Disney's animated films (Linando, 2014). However, in moments of crisis, his temperament undergoes a significant transformation, manifesting as sadness, insecurity, nervousness, alienation, fear, and an acute vulnerability. This, in conjunction with the diversity of traits that characterise him, results in a complex personality, full of contrasts, which defines him as a complex character.

As for George's goals, his interests are driven by personal rather than professional concerns, even though he occupies the highest role in a monarchical regime. George's primary objective is to conceal his illness from his young wife. Once the illness is discovered, the objective is to overcome it and, in the face of the obstacles encountered, to cope with mental health issues. He wants to ensure his wife's happiness, and to provide her with children to maintain the dynasty. The necessity to procreate becomes a unifying factor that bridges the personal and professional realms.

The motivation behind his goals can be attributed to the considerable sense of responsibility that rests on George's shoulders, and the coercion to which he is subjected by his mother. This is evidenced by the onset of an attack in certain scenes (E2. 00:56:45–00:57:45 and E4. 00:38:02–00:38:20).

#### 4.2.3. Social Dimension

The third dimension of the analysis is that which considers the character from a social perspective. As would be anticipated of a monarch, George is a member of the upper class, to the extent that he is regarded as its leader. The alteration in his marital status constitutes a pivotal element within the narrative structure of the series, with the initial episode commencing on the day of his wedding. However, he is aware of the consequences of his illness, and he is afraid to frighten Charlotte. For this reason, he intends to live apart from his wife, and keep away from her, even during the honeymoon that takes place in the second episode.

Given the absence of any evidence to suggest that he has been involved in other relationships, and the portrayal of him in his old age with his wife, it can be inferred that their romantic relationship is characterised by a high degree of stability. This is further reinforced by the depiction of Charlotte's unwavering commitment to remain by his side in the final scenes of the series. The character's sexual status is heterosexual, as is Charlotte's. Consequently, the queer plot of the series is situated within the context of the kings' butlers.

George's family ties are complex. His mother is the only direct family member with whom he interacts in the narrative. She is controlling and emasculating, and she exerts pressure on her son. These traits could define her as a villain. Nevertheless, her motivations are the continuity of the monarchical dynasty, and the future of the English people. Moreover, she recognizes her son's need for happiness. These reasons serve to soften her portrayal. In either case, George's relationship with his mother is characterised by a high degree of complexity, with instances where he exacerbates her emotional distress (E2. 00:56:45–00:57:45 or E4. 00:02:10–00:05:00). It is notable that no other relatives of the king are introduced. However, it could be argued that the butlers and palace staff with whom he has the closest relationship do, to some extent, come to form a group of a familial nature.

Professional activity is subordinated to other pursuits. He is portrayed as a monarch who is not perceived as a ruler, whose primary interests lie in the fields of astronomy, science in

general, and agriculture. Nevertheless, his role as monarch has a profound impact on all aspects of his personal life, which in turn gives rise to the mental health issues to which he is prone. In terms of his education and past life, the king discusses his premature birth and survival, the illness he suffers as a secret throughout his life, and his training for the position he would occupy.

It is noteworthy that, although the series is named after the queen and she is the main character, the king is actually the focus of the story. This is evidenced by the frequent speeches in which George defines himself in relation to his role as monarch, as Charlotte's partner, and as a sick person. George makes his self-perception clear in every episode.

#### 4.2.4. Character as a Role

From a formal point of view, analysis of the character as a role does not offer a single option due to its development. Although his role as the main character is clear, he is initially presented as a passive character who is affected by a variety of events due to which he gets carried away with. His marriage to Charlotte is the trigger that forces him to change, and he then adopts an active role that modifies and improves his own situation (personal and social). This is followed by various crises that lead to him resuming a passive role. At the end of the story, the protagonist's position in relation to the plot leads him not to fight against the obstacles (his health problems) or to improve them, but to accept and normalise them. Thus, he assumes a protective and conservative role.

#### 4.2.5. Character as an Actant

Analysis of the character as an actant is the one that offers the least effective results. If we were to consider Charlotte as the subject of the story, George would refer to the object of her action, i.e. Charlotte's intention to conquer George would be the object. However, if we focus on the story from George's point of view, he would take the place of the subject and the object would be overcoming the difficulties caused by his illness. It is, therefore, a category that is not highly effective in producing results for analysis of the character.

### 4.3. Character Analysis from a Cognitive Diversity Perspective

The second part of the study is an analysis of the character of King George from a cognitive diversity perspective. The application of the previously mentioned Table 1 (see Annex) reveals the following results.

This TV series includes time-jumps between stories of a past and a future situation. It is divided into two parts: The first three episodes constitute a first narrative block where the central plot is the story of seduction and conquest between Charlotte and George, who are forced to marry. The following three episodes deal more specifically with difficulties in the relationship due to the king's mental health disorders, and the different ways of dealing with the obstacles deriving from them.

In the series as a whole, twenty-two scenes represent or manifest the king's illness in some way. However, this is not a particularly significant aspect for the purposes of this qualitative research project. In particular, the fourth chapter provides a more detailed account of the symptoms, and the causes of the monarch's ailments and crises (E4. 00:05:01-00:08:20). In this episode, the preceding episodes' events are reviewed, with a particular focus on the king, thereby justifying Charlotte's absences and evasive behaviour. In addition, there are scenes in which Charlotte is not present that allow us to delve deeper into the symptoms of the king's illness, causes, and treatments (E4. 00:02:10-00:05:00).

In relation to the three items studied by Pacheco Jiménez (2018) in the representation of the cognitive diversity of the characters: Firstly, the TV series does not mention any past traumatic event that might explain the king's disorders. Rather, they appear to be either innate (explicitly referred to as a "secret" that was kept throughout his life), or a consequence of training for governance of the kingdom. Secondly, the plot depicts socialisation problems. These

arise not only from the character's own difficulty in dealing with public events, but also from his own fear of socialising, which generates anxiety. This leads to a vicious circle because the king is afraid that his cognitive disability will be detected publicly, which in turn causes the first symptoms of the condition itself, and the fear of socialising. Thirdly, the personality disorders become evident in the most acute phases of the crises, in which the king barely responds to external stimuli and imagines himself in an unreal world with unreal characters to whom he presents himself as "farmer George" rather than King George III.

It is challenging to identify the character's symptoms and associate them with any of the disorders observed after an initial viewing of the series. A second viewing of the fiction, coupled with analysis of the symptoms depicted in each scene, could indicate the recreation of a Bipolar I Disorder (characterised by verbiage, "races of thoughts," and psychomotor agitation) in conjunction with a Dissociative Identity Disorder. This is evidenced by the subject's recognition of himself in moments of crisis from a parallel identity, which he refers to as "farmer George." However, there is no evidence of memory impairment, aggressive or suicidal behaviour, or of episodes of self-mutilation. Once the attacks have ceased, the king becomes aware of his experiences, which engenders a profound sense of shame and anxiety. It should be noted that, in the initial stages of an attack, which is characterised by breathing difficulties or trembling hands as the most obvious symptoms (E4. 00:09:20–00:11:00), it is not possible to distinguish between the disorders mentioned previously. Instead, the subject is experiencing anxiety crises.

In terms of the impact of the depicted disorders on the characters' relationships, it is notable that these are presented in private settings, and in the presence of a limited number of individuals. The king's symptoms are not disclosed publicly, which contributes to the creation of a secretive atmosphere surrounding his health. The only instance in which the king's mental instability might have been revealed is in the scene in which he hides and decides not to leave the carriage before delivering a frustrated speech in parliament. However, this does not occur, and only the king's butler, Reynolds, is aware of what is happening at that moment (E6. 00:45:41–00:47:10). As a result, the king's mental health issue remains confined to the private sphere.

Similarly, the treatments administered to the king by the court psychiatrist remain concealed. Initially, the psychiatrist claims to cure George through language (E4. 00:05:01–00:08:20). However, this approach is soon replaced by more severe methods, including immersing the king in ice water, gagging him, applying leeches to him, and treating him with pure contempt (E5. 00:47:13–00:48:11). The introduction of this character will serve to illustrate that the monarch's ailment is not of a physical nature, but rather a mental illness. Despite the inhumane treatment, the patient remains docile and obedient. But Charlotte discovers the practices and puts an end to them in favour of a more humane approach based on solidarity, patience, love, and empathy (E5. 01:09:20–01:10:55). This shift in approach to the king's treatment is linked to a transition from a medical-rehabilitative model to a social model (Álvarez Moreno & Mora de la Torre, 2020, p. 1568). The former perspective posits that individuals with disabilities, as well as those living with chronic illnesses, must undergo a period of rehabilitation. On the other hand, according to the social model, the inclusion of people with disabilities in different areas is promoted, such as leisure or education. It is understood that the problem stems not from the person, but from the barriers and prejudices of society.

In crisis situations the characters with whom the king interacts attempt to conceal the situation from the rest of the court. The butlers and the king's mother were already privy to the intimate affairs of the monarch at the inception of the narrative depicted in the series. Charlotte's introduction to this group of characters who are familiar with the king's situation elicits in her a range of complex reactions. She displays profound empathy towards George, and she approaches the situation with remarkable confidence. This is exemplified in the night scene when the king scribbles on the bedroom wall, exits the room and undresses in the garden, while he is contemplating and conversing with the goddess Venus. Charlotte engages in this fantasy without hesitation, with the aim of interacting with him, covering him, and returning him to the

palace (E3. 00:48:42–00:52:52). Nevertheless, Charlotte's protective and caring disposition does not preclude her from experiencing perplexity and disgust towards the king's mother. She engages in contention with the latter due to her perception of being deceived and trapped in an unwelcome situation about which she was never informed (E4. 00:47:44–00).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The increased visibility of mental illness in recent TV series reflects an effort to align with contemporary audiences' evolving interests. Despite the persisting dearth of characters with disabilities in contemporary fiction, the heightened social visibility of mental health issues today offers a promising opportunity for series creators to embrace inclusivity and explore related plots, particularly in productions for streaming platforms that have flourished over the Peak TV era.

This is exemplified by the TV series *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* (Netflix, 2023). Following Hazelton's (2019) observation, it responds to the adaptation of a literary saga that has afforded the production of several seasons around the fictional Bridgerton family, adding the spin-off of *Queen Charlotte* to the universe. In this case, the subject matter combines elements of the historical and the romantic genres, featuring the inclusion of powerful anachronisms reflective of a feminist representation aligned with contemporary social movements such as #MeToo (Garrido & Zaptsi, 2021). This narrative setting explores the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and functionality within the context of a fictional England bridging the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Together with other TV series pointing out in the theoretical framework of this research, this project represents an isolated and paradigmatic case of mental health representation. This feature and the romantic plot constitute the core of the narrative. Moreover, the character of King George co-stars in the narrative. The consequences of the symptoms of the disorder (first keeping it a secret and then seeking a solution) enable the plot to move forward, together with the intervention of Queen Charlotte. This means that the premise of *Prince Charming* (Linando, 2014) and the princess who marries happily without even knowing him is not sustained. Charlotte attempts to flee her own wedding, and the couple is distanced after the wedding. These factors give way to the king's mental health problems.

The prominence of cognitive diversity in this narrative is a significant innovation on the above-mentioned productions. The popularity of this television fiction contributes to know this reality. It normalises its inclusion in a real social context and encourages a greater presence of diversity in audiovisual production, both in front of and behind the cameras. Nevertheless, the findings of the textual analysis permit the identification of some noteworthy nuances in this regard.

The portrayal of disorder in *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* (Netflix, 2023) serves more for creative and effective purposes, in terms of its function in the development of the story, than for realistic representation. For example, although the king is presented as a victim of his mental health problems, in the initial stages of a crisis, the characters with knowledge of the situation urge him to control the symptoms, as if he has control over them. The main character's will-power is a trait consistent with an active modifying role in the audiovisual narrative (Casetti & Di Chio, 2017) and makes these acts of struggle against symptom expression a sign of empowerment and overcoming. The problem is that the absence of determination and control over his actions –due to the effects of the disease– makes him responsible for expression of the symptoms and, therefore, places the blame on him. This idea could well be highly questionable from a medical perspective.

Conversely, the most efficacious therapeutic approach to illness, in contrast to the inhumanity of treatments based on torture, is grounded in affection, empathy, and the love of the partner. This could result in the (overused) notion that love is a panacea, which could not only

mitigate the portrayal of illness, but even imbue it with a romantic quality. The most compelling evidence of Charlotte's affection for the monarch is her willingness to accept him.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that, at the conclusion of the story, the character is not miraculously cured or saved by the love received. The couple learn to live with, accept and normalise the disease. In this way, the pursuit of the patient's happiness takes precedence over any attempts at healing. This "treatment" based on empathy and the normalisation of cognitive diversity responds to contemporary approaches to mental health therapy. This response could well be interpreted as an anachronistic one in relation to the historical moment depicted. Nonetheless it is consistent with other intentionally anachronistic components of both the *Queen Charlotte* and the *Bridgerton* series.

Finally, this work has led to future lines of research derived from the representation of other minorities in fiction, such as the LGBT community, the black race, and women. An intersectional study from a broader perspective of diversity will facilitate the attainment of more comprehensive conclusions regarding this case. Similarly, the implementation of the above-mentioned analytical approach to other analogous fiction series will facilitate comparisons, and potential modifications in the trajectory of the inclusion and representation of individuals with disabilities in television fiction.

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## **Annex**

The table of results is accessible via the Figshare repository:  
<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.26424853.v1>