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Ambidextrous Authorship: Greta Gerwig and the Politics of Women's Genres

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February 7, 2020



LITTLE WOMEN, GRETA GERWIG'S second feature film as writer and solo director, is about female authorship, as well as a lauded example of it. The film has earned Gerwig an Oscar nomination for writing, her second in that category. The omission of a parallel repeat nod in the directing category has been widely bemoaned (*#StillSoWhiteAndMale*), but "authorship" usefully blurs distinctions between writing and directing, literature and film. In adapting Louisa May Alcott's 1868–'69 best seller, Gerwig places herself in a long tradition of female creators in the commercial realm of American culture, where the successful appeal to female audiences authorizes expression and power not sanctioned elsewhere.

There is already a formidably feminist version of *Little Women*, written by Robin Swicord and directed by Gillian Armstrong (famous for her debut film, *My Brilliant Career* [1979], which is also about a 19th-century heroine whose writing career conflicts with expectations that women must marry). The 1994 *Little Women* respects the novel's chronology. A Nigella Lawson-worthy Christmas breakfast invites the viewer's longing to join the female family group, and shots through the frosted windowpanes visually link the whiteness of New England snow to the skin of its A-list ingenue cast. Gerwig chooses to put the emphasis more explicitly on authorship by messing with linear plot, opening and closing her film with Jo March (a Louisa May Alcott stand-in) played by Saoirse Ronan (a Greta Gerwig stand-in), visiting the office of Mr. Dashwood (Tracy Letts), her publisher.

In the opening scene, Jo is there to pitch a sensational story for “a friend,” but her ink-stained fingers betray her own hand in writing it. In the concluding scene, she negotiates to retain copyright of the autobiographical novel she’s produced while her three beloved sisters were busy getting married or dying young. Dashwood’s daughters have persuaded him to release the novel, and he’s predictably trying to lowball its author. To anyone who has been paying attention to Hollywood’s self-marketing under the spotlight of Time’s Up, this narrative frame clearly alludes to current efforts to increase the number of women directors and the pay grade of women creatives, as federal investigations, sexual harassment cases, watchdog groups, and data-driven studies have finally made the industry’s century-plus exclusionary practices look shameful. (Things are improving in some areas according to Stacy L. Smith of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which crunches the annual numbers — 2020 promises not one but four superhero films helmed by women, admittedly a questionable criterion.)

Authorship is what film critics call it when the director’s vision shines through the commodity form of cinema. Female authorship is what feminist film scholars look at, not because they believe in innate differences between woman- and man-made films, or ascribe to some mystical notion of individual genius, but because the work of female-identified creators so often addresses the private experience and structural determinants of life under patriarchy in importantly public ways. As Richard Dyer explains in his essay, “Believing in Fairies: The Author and the Homosexual,” identity categories may politicize authorship in ways that deserve attention, even from critics skeptical of “pure” expression and suspicious of opportunistic branding. Gerwig’s oeuvre, which combines the visibility of the actor/celebrity, the interiority of the writer, and the evidence of the director’s well-informed choices, makes for a revealing case study.

Gerwig’s *Little Women*, and its framing device, offers a relatively comforting vision of the Female Author as one who sticks to her own story rather than aspiring to Important Subjects or introducing Others. Jo (and Alcott before her) writes about her life with her mother, sisters, housekeeper, and aunt. (Voilà! Seven plum roles for white actresses.) Adapting her favorite novel, Gerwig expands the vision of female self-invention she realized in her first feature as writer and solo director, *Lady Bird* (in which Ronan also starred). In addition, this Female Author figure produces work that makes a generic appeal to women and girls. Jo’s creator, Louisa May Alcott, was guided to produce her series of domestic novels for young readers by a 19th-century literary marketplace primed by what Nathaniel Hawthorne famously dubbed a “damned mob of scribbling women.” Gerwig brought her talents to a canny remake of a feminist “chick flick” already in progress.

So even as we celebrate “agency” (which in Hollywood is a word with smarmy connotations), we must remember that women making movies is no noble gesture or political breakthrough in itself. It is consistent with the historical role of women as American cultural influencers, from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Oprah Winfrey, whose political ambitions are intertwined with financial success. Gerwig has formidable female talent behind her. Former Sony chair Amy Pascal, doing very-well-thank-you with her own company Pascal Pictures, also worked on

the 1994 version at Columbia, and that film's writer, Swicord, and producer, Denise Di Novi, have credits on the new film, too. All are happy to design a studio movie addressing women. They are aware of the sector's market value, while the rest of Hollywood seems serially surprised by the box-office success of films that appeal to little women (*Titanic*, *Frozen*, *Wonder Woman*). But they are also aware that traditional women's genres, with their focus on domesticity and romance, are both diagnostic of women's restricted roles in society and outlets for their frustration with those restrictions. The female audience is a consumer demographic, with a cause.

Women's cinema, then, is both an authorial and a market category, just like women's (and girls') fiction was in the 19th century. In an address to a diverse female audience lies the proto-feminist capacity of women's genres, even their queer and anti-racist potential. In Alcott's time, the phenomenon of women writing was driven by the white and propertied ideology of male and female separate spheres. Men did politics; women did morality and manners, influencing through their words. As is well known, Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to forward the cause of abolition, and her vision of Christian maternalism outsold everything but the Bible in her time. Louisa May Alcott, her family's principal breadwinner, was less religious and more practical: she trained herself to write with her left hand when her right grew tired. Gerwig finds plenty of 19th-century progressive causes in Alcott's *Little Women* — from boycotting silk tainted with slave and child labor to women's education — and she casts extras as free blacks in scenes where it is plausible to signal the Marches' abolitionist sentiments.

But transposing the racial politics of Alcott's Civil War-era feminism to our current moment is tricky at best. The text's insularity risks maintaining white girlhood as guarantor of female moral authority. Gerwig's celebrity may get in the way here; with Ronan as her avatar, this is the blondest *Little Women* on record. Literary critic Ann Douglas famously holds Stowe's doomed golden girl Little Eva accountable for what she calls "the feminization of American culture," the triumph of "sentimentalism provided the inevitable rationalization of the economic order." Less judgmentally, Lauren Berlant looks to the racial politics of women's culture for the affective origins of our contradictory national "intimate public sphere." Female authorship coupled with feminist address tasks the utopian female collectivity with social transformation, and contemporary audiences surely understand what this would mean differently than did Alcott's.

The shifting figure-ground of female and feminist, of independence and collectivity, is apparent in the layers of the new film's closing scene. It isn't only percentage points Jo negotiates, it is the very question of narrative closure, a primary social task of the novel as literary form. Dashwood demands that the manuscript's Jo get married, imposing the marriage plot on a story whose fundamental attraction is its utopian female homosocial world. Gerwig sees the publisher's demand precisely as a plot against women's autonomy,

and she honors Alcott's own wishes. Teaching the *Little Women* adaptations at Swarthmore College over the years, I was delighted to find these wishes outlined in Alcott's letter to her friend Elizabeth Powell (later Bond), housed at the Friends Historical Library there:

early in April, & like
all sequels will probably
disappoint or disgust
most readers, for pub-
lishers want let authors
finish up as they like
but insist on having
people married off in
a wholesale manner
which much afflicts
me. "Jo" should have
remained a literary spirit
but so many in-
tense young ladies
wrote to me clamorously
demanding that she
should marry Laurie
or somebody, that I
did not dare to refuse &
out of penmanship went
I made a funny match



Elizabeth P. Bond Papers, Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College

A sequel will be out early in April, & like all sequels will probably disappoint or disgust most readers, for publishers won't let authors finish up as they like but insist on having people married off in a wholesale manner which much afflicts me. "Jo" should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, or somebody, that I didn't dare to refuse & out of perversity went & made a funny match for her. I expect vials of wrath to be poured out upon my head, but rather enjoy the prospect.

With the properly cinematic resources of space, time, and *mise-en-scène*, Gerwig approaches these contradictions as Alcott could not. Intercut with the meeting with Dashwood is a generically romantic resolution to the story — Jo's dull professor-ex-machina, Friedrich Bhaer (Louis Garrel), is retrieved from the train station on the brink of departure by a whole troop of Marches and March hangers-on in a rom-com race to unite the hetero-couple. However, the images of this resolution do not actually depict a proposal or a wedding. Rather, after the professor is brought together with Jo for the kiss that signifies traditional closure, the scene continues. A sweeping overhead long take, in motion like much of the film, depicts Bhaer as one among many teachers, family members, and students who fill the halls and grounds of the (integrated and co-ed) school Jo sets up at Plumfield, the home she inherits from Aunt March. (Meryl Streep introduces all kinds of intertextual noise in this role, one note of which derives from her turn as Emmeline Pankhurst in 2015's *Suffragette*.)

While these images of closure are objectively part of the film we are watching, the viewer can't be entirely sure whether the writer Jo accepts the Professor or whether they are visualizations of what happens to character Jo in the novel when her creator capitulates to her publisher's demand. Thus Gerwig "out of perversity" gets away with not marrying off Jo. But she also does marry her off — there is no way to fix the status of the images. The ambiguity has led to conservative readings on either side: one reviewer objected to Gerwig's "postmodern feminism," which has rejected the novel's Jo's mature decision to forgo independence for a "genuinely egalitarian marriage"; another source "explains" the ending, but sees it as both literally and literarily uniting the heterosexual couple. But Gerwig's sly structure assures that even skeptical viewers are carried along in the final sequence's delicious rush of refusal.

Key to this double ending is the identification of Jo with Alcott and the incorporation of the narrative of writing and publishing the book within the film. As Gerwig explains in a podcast from the Directors Guild of America: "[T]he structure truly came out of wanting to introduce

this layer of authorship everywhere.” Gerwig gives us Jo and her published book as final clinch, the couple framed in the film’s closing image. Alcott herself did very well as a “literary spinster” who confessed to having “fallen in love with so many pretty girls” — dare I say, sisters. In fact, today’s young female viewers are quick to surmise that if Jo turns down Laurie (Timothée Chalamet, boy pin-up of the hour) it may just be because she’s a lesbian.

But a genuinely queer *Little Women* would take more than an identity politics check-box or a character trait on the personality quiz: which sister are you? Ronan/Gerwig’s is a feminist Jo, not a butch one (only Katharine Hepburn has given us a taste of that), and some of the erotic glue of the novel is missing in the adaptation. The lesbian reading of *Little Women* is honored more in Jo’s choices than in the film’s portrayal of familial ties — she isn’t jealous enough of Meg’s marriage, protective enough of Beth, passionate enough in her rivalry with Amy, ardent enough with Marmee. The film’s otherwise effective nonlinear telling contributes to the renunciation of queer girlhood, intercutting the women that the Marches become with the promise of their childhood. (Beth prefers to die rather than have Jo outgrow her love for her — I chose Beth in the abovementioned quiz.)

But does Gerwig’s refusal of Jo’s marriage, which signaled closure in the novel (and the conditions for its sequels), open the March family to a larger world? The question of endogamy versus exogamy is consequential to the novel’s ideological inheritance, including its impact on nonwhite girls for the past century and a half. Endogamy, marrying inside a local community, is radical if it incorporates lesbian sisterhood, less so if it excludes on the basis of race. Plumfield school is an exemplar of 19th-century dreams of an inclusive society modeled on domesticity. The film’s final utopian vision extends sisterworld to those who’ve been longingly looking through Orchard House’s frosted windowpanes. Laurie, the rich kid next door, is the novel’s and film’s stand-in for all who want to become part of the March matrilineage; he’d likely marry any one of them who’d have him. Other white men are allowed in (Mr. Laurence has money, John Brooke and Professor Bhaer, education; Mr. March, squatter’s rights). What about people of color? Stowe’s literary imagination, however twisted, included blacks in the national family, both in the plantation South and in the story of the New England spinster, Miss Ophelia, who overcomes her racism to adopt the orphan black girl Topsy. Such a maternalistic model shadows the film’s final scene of black and white kids painting and playing music side-by-side at Plumfield.

Critiques of the film’s whiteness are not beside the point. The question of white accountability at *Little Women*’s very origin is not fully addressed by proposals like the “racebent” casting of the half-Italian Laurie, however appealing the prospect might be to some fans. Originally published in the wake of Emancipation, written by an abolitionist, *Little Women* is about promise and disappointment at the intersection of whiteness and girlhood. Where Little Eva is a sign, the sisters are subjects.

Gerwig, whose authorial persona is informed by her signature film roles as an awkward, half-grown woman, attempts to wrest the iconic figure of white girlhood out of the mirror. *Lady Bird* arose from this legacy, this entitlement. Does showing someone who fights for her place,

when she is already at the center of a culture's value system, crowd out other less charmed accounts of female self-realization? Or does it call out for them, as Kaitlyn Greenidge suggests in the opinion piece, "The Bearable Whiteness of *Little Women*"? Each revisiting of Alcott's text asks how its thrilling account of introspection, self-realization, and sisterly solidarity — played out against a backdrop of political injustice and economic precarity — speaks to other kinds of Americans.

For example, near the end of *Negroland*, her memoir of growing up among the African-American elite in midcentury Chicago, Margo Jefferson offers a retelling of *Little Women*. It is a book emblematic of the culture she consumed and had "the right to claim [...] without any race-linked restriction. 'Claim'? Consider. Study. Toy with. And when I choose, love." She doesn't reject the book's pedagogy, but she realizes in retrospect: "I should have wanted to be Amy. [...] At least Amy had appetite. Insistence." Gerwig's film accomplishes, for many reviewers, the redemption of little sister Amy, who saw the contradictions of femininity plainly and wasn't afraid to play the cards she'd been dealt. Julia Alvarez and her three sisters mapped their own kinship onto the novel. "Long before 'multicultural literature,'" she's written, "before we would find our faces or traditions or histories in American literature, we found our reflection here." Jo is any-woman who wants to write, which allows Gerwig her version. There are countless others.

After all, Gerwig's authorship is more than an expression of personal vision. As a critical construction, it evokes the influential history of American women's mass cultural production and reception, and it contends with the iconicity of white girlhood in that history. The broader concept of female authorship addresses privilege and positionality within the context of collective imagining. The panoramic hive of activity at Plumfield at the end of *Little Women* recalls for me the bustle of the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz*, which I've always taken as an idealized vision of the MGM dream factory. In my romantic vision, Jo gets her book and Gerwig gets not just a movie but a film studio. (Amy heads the art department, Meg's on costumes, Marmee's the AD, dead Beth hovers in the non-diegetic soundtrack.) Hollywood, made over in the image of feminist struggle and self-sufficiency that Alcott's novel inspired, would churn out films by, for, and about little women, wonder women, women of color, trans women, and many more. In this utopian space, "authors finish up as they like."

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