

**Foregrounding the staunch feminist author  
behind the sentimental novel**

Marriage and the working woman in Greta Gerwig's adaptation of  
Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

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## Abstract

*Little Women* is one of those classic texts which can be reinterpreted every time it gets adapted, mostly because it is highly ambiguous as it contains progressive as well as traditional elements. Some scholars have condemned an adaptation of *Little Women* from 1994 for creating a damaging mythical feminist depiction of the female struggles of the nineteenth century. However, this criticism is not in line with the current ideas on fidelity in adaptation theory and with the postmodern perspectives on the fictionality of historical constructs. Therefore, this thesis set out to provide an alternative way of analysing adaptations of *Little Women* while looking into the most recent adaptation by Greta Gerwig from 2019. The main purpose of this work was to find out how Greta Gerwig has dealt with the ambiguity of the original text in her adaptation of *Little Women*. To this purpose, this thesis analyses how the central sentimental theme of marriage and the progressive theme of the working woman are depicted in her adaptation compared to the novel. It asserts that the marriage theme has been reworked to create a deeper understanding of the significance of money in contemporaneous marriage relationships and to be able to provide metanarrative commentary about the presentation of marriage in fiction. At the same time, the adaptation on theme of the working woman compared to the original text, including into the artistic experiences of two of the central characters modern social issues of the glass ceiling and the pay gap.

Key words: *Little Women* (2019), Louisa May Alcott, Greta Gerwig, marriage, the working woman, film adaptations

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## Introduction

*Little Women* is a quintessential example of a classic text which has been adapted numerous times and has not yet failed to spark interest. The last couple of years especially saw a large interest in adapting the novel: five adaptations of *Little Women* were produced in 2019. Multiple scholars have pointed out that each of the adaptations of *Little Women* has managed to provide a new version of the original story. Elise Hooper remarks that “almost every generation receives its own film adaptation of *Little Women*, and each reflects the time in which it was produced”.<sup>1</sup>

The popularity of *Little Women* among filmmakers is remarkable considering the genre of the novel. The novel belongs to the traditional genre of the sentimental novel. It is essentially a domestic story about four young girls who are taught moral lessons in self-sacrifice, docility and modesty to grow up as ‘proper’ women as society desires. As a sentimental novel, *Little Women* inevitably ends with the main female character Jo entering the marriage relationship despite her independent character. At the same time, the novel has several elements that were progressive for its time. Jo is an unconventional female character: she is a hot-tempered, ambitious tomboy who laments being a girl instead of a boy. The author’s own unconventional life, most notably her unmarried status, her successful professional writing career, and her feminist activism during her lifetime, have also been posed as an argument for reading *Little Women* in a feminist light.<sup>2</sup> Alcott supported that women engaged in paid labour, which is reflected in her portrayal of working women in her novel *Work* and to a lesser extent in *Little Women*.<sup>3</sup> Given the ambiguity of the original text, film makers who adapt *Little Women* have to make decisions regarding how to bring the feminism in Alcott’s work to the screen.

In the case of the previous prominent adaptation of *Little Women* by Gillian Armstong from 1994, some scholars voiced a strong disapproval of the decisions that had been made in the adaptation process. Hollinger and Winterhalter wrote about the 1994 adaptation that ‘Alcott frequently insists so emphatically upon traditional visions of domestic stability that it is quite stunning that Swicord [the screenwriter] could transform the novel so completely into

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<sup>1</sup> Elise Hooper, “Girl Power: A Look at Recent Little Women Adaptations,” *Women’s Studies* 48, no. 4 (2019): 430, accessed June 5, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1614873>.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter, “A Feminist Romance: Adapting Little Women to the Screen,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 18, no. 2 (1999): 175, accessed June 5, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464445>

<sup>3</sup> Janis Dawson, “Little Women Out to Work: Women and the Marketplace in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and *Work*,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 34, no. 2 (2003): 128.

an unequivocally feminist text'.<sup>4</sup> Hollinger and Winterhalter do not look upon this transformation in a positive light: they question what happens to our sensibility of the female struggle for equality during the nineteenth century when the original characters of the novel, even the more traditional ones, become liberated feminist heroines ahead of their time in the adaptation.<sup>5</sup> This criticism on the 1994 version of *Little Women* has been reiterated by Linda Grasso who argued that the adaptation reflects a 'myth of regeneration' that 'Louisa Alcott's nineteenth-century vision, experience, and sensibility can be regenerated in a newly liberated 1990s'.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to this criticism on the adaptation, current approaches in adaptation studies reject fidelity as the central focus for studying adaptations. Moreover, postmodern theory has rejected the notion that there is one 'true' version of history. A reassessment of how to analyze adaptations of *Little Women* therefore becomes necessary.

The adaptation by Greta Gerwig, being recent, has received little attention in adaptation studies thus far. This adaptation seems particularly relevant for the current study given the director's close connection with the novel and her repeated assertion in interviews that the novel is very modern. Gerwig has described Jo as her childhood heroine and Alcott as her heroine as a woman, which indicates her close attachment to the novel.<sup>7</sup> Gerwig has repeatedly pointed in interviews towards the modern lines written by Alcott which 'could have been written yesterday'.<sup>8</sup> Applying a plural model from post-fidelity criticism in adaptation studies and taking a postmodern perspective on history, the current study will contrast the original text and the film, while also considering the cultural-historical contexts of both works and the creation and reception of the adaptation. In particular, it shall look into how Gerwig has dealt with the complex feminism of the text by looking at the novel's traditional sentimental theme of marriage, as well as its progressive theme of the working woman. This should provide insight into the complexity of adapting *Little Women* and illustrate how recent approaches in adaptations studies can be applied to *Little Women*. The

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter, "A Feminist Romance: Adapting *Little Women* to the Screen," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 18, no. 2 (1999): 173, accessed June 5, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464445>.

<sup>5</sup> Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter, "A Feminist Romance: Adapting *Little Women* to the Screen," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 18, no. 2 (1999): 173-174, accessed June 5, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464445>.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Grasso, "Louisa May Alcott's 'Magic Inkstand': *Little Women*, Feminism, and the Myth of Regeneration," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 19, no. 1 (1998): 177, accessed February 9, 2021, doi:10.2307/3347148.

<sup>7</sup> Amanda Hess, "What Greta Gerwig Saw in 'Little Women': 'Those Are My Girls,'" *New York Times*, 31 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/movies/greta-gerwig-little-women.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Eliza Berman, "'I've Been Waiting 30 Years.' Greta Gerwig on Getting to Put Her Stamp on *Little Women*," *Time*, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2019, <https://time.com/5743438/greta-gerwig-little-women-interview/>.

thesis will start by discussing perspectives on fidelity in theories in adaptation studies and in postmodern theory. Next, the second chapter will first discuss the genre of the novel and then analyze the two relevant themes in the novel. The following chapter will first provide a brief outline of the production and reception of the adaptation, and continues by examining the two themes under investigation in Gerwig's adaptation. The central claim is that, while the adaptation by Greta Gerwig still captures some of the female struggles encoded in Alcott's *Little Women*, it also reworks the marriage theme from the original story by integrating biographical elements from Alcott's life. As to the working woman, the theme from the original text is emphasized and the adaptation provides us with social critique and historical context for deeper understanding.

### **1. Theoretical approach: post-fidelity criticism and postmodernism**

In adaptation studies, there has allegedly been a tendency to assess the aesthetic value of an adaptation based on its relative closeness to the original text, a criterium which referred to as fidelity. Such studies are referred to as fidelity criticism or fidelity studies.<sup>9</sup>

Fidelity is a controversial term in current scholarship, as it proves to be problematic in several ways. To begin with, fidelity is a problematic as a criterium because of its terminology. The term fidelity is vague and ambiguous, as becomes clear when definitions of fidelity are compared. De Zwaan describes the fidelity approach as the idea that there is a 'responsibility' of adaptations to 'copy and reflect' their original 'faithfully'.<sup>10</sup> David T. Johnson defines fidelity as 'the extent to which a given aesthetic object', often a film in adaptation studies, 'reflects a faithful understanding of its source'. the original text.<sup>11</sup> These definitions begs the question what it means to 'faithfully' replicate a novel or show a faithful 'understanding' of a novel. Brian MacFarlane has observed a difference in fidelity between being faithful 'to the "letter"', and being faithful to the 'spirit' or 'essence' of the original text.<sup>12</sup> This distinction between faithfulness to 'spirit' and exact copying underlines the ambiguity of the term fidelity and simultaneously creates the additional problem that the notion of an 'essence' of a work is hard to define.

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<sup>9</sup> Brian MacFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 194.

<sup>10</sup> Victoria De Zwaan, "Experimental Fiction, Film Adaptation, and the Case of "Midnight's Children": in Defense of Fidelity," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2015): 246, accessed May 4, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43799034>.

<sup>11</sup> David T. Johnson, "Adaptation and Fidelity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (2017), 1, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199331000.013.5.

<sup>12</sup> Brian MacFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 9.

Aside from a terminological issue, recent scholarship in adaptation studies has posed several arguments in its heavy condemnation of the fidelity approach. Thomas Leitch has identified the fidelity criterium as one of the twelve fallacies in adaptation theory. He finds that fidelity is ‘a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation’s value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense’. He argues that no adaptation would be able to surpass the original text because ‘the source texts will always be better at being themselves’, even in cases of remakes or rereleases.<sup>13</sup> Linda Hutcheon recognizes that adaptations always carry a shadow of the text which it is based on. However, she argues that adapting a work does not merely entail the mere reproduction of a work. Adaptation is a process which is ‘repetition, but repetition without replication’.<sup>14</sup> John Glavin goes as far as arguing that ‘film adaptation disrupts, rather than copies, fiction’, claiming that ‘to make a good film, indeed any sort of film, must mean inevitably to disrupt, to subvert, the makings of fiction’.<sup>15</sup> He makes a valid point when he argues that ‘the more closely a film adaptation approaches its fictional predecessor the less it interests us as film’, although this would probably also depend on the viewer’s personal attachment to the original text.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of historical adaptations, an argument for fidelity is often invoked that questions what happens to our understanding of history when a historical production fails to accurately portray history. This argument also applies to film adaptations portraying literary works that are set in the past. However, historians following a postmodern perspective have maintained that history is in itself a construct, because a historian creates a representation of history from the available evidence and shapes a textual construct to reflect his own intentions. Postmodernism therefore rejects the notion of there being one ‘real’ version of history and instead regards history as a fictional construct, a narrative which is just as fictional as fiction itself. Defne Ursin Tutan finds that the criterion of the ‘truthful depiction of historical facts’, resembling the fidelity criterion in adaptation studies, depends on the relative distance that the audience feels from history. History, Tutan reminds her reader, involves an endless cycle of rewriting and each version of history constitutes change.<sup>17</sup> Echoing Hutcheon that “to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present”, Tutan asserts that the fictional representations of history are more revealing

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Leitch, "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory," *Criticism* 45, no. 2 (2003): 161, accessed June 18, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/23126342](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23126342).

<sup>14</sup> Linda Hutcheon and O’Flynn, Siobhan, *A theory of Adaptation*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 7.

<sup>15</sup> John Glavins. *Dickens on Screen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 3.

<sup>16</sup> John Glavins. *Dickens on Screen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Defne Ursin Tutan, “Adaptation and History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (2017), 2, <http://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199331000.013.5>.

of the present than the past.<sup>18</sup> Historical adaptations, in other words, show us nothing new about the past, but rather shine a light on current standpoints on history. Therefore, Tutan asserts, “there exist no possible options for fidelity in the case of history as adaptation”.<sup>19</sup> Based on the postmodern perspective, the interpretation provided by adapters is valuable rather than hazardous, because it reflects contemporary views on history.

Notwithstanding the severe criticism against fidelity as a critical approach, it should be noted that fidelity criticism is still present in adaptation studies. Recently, De Zwaan has argued that fidelity cannot be ignored given that the original work is inevitably influenced by the expectations of the audience about adaptations of a multiple-adapted classic text: viewers will always make a comparison between this particular adaptation and the original and previous adaptations even if they do not immediately discard an adaptation as a “failure”.<sup>20</sup> De Zwaan, in her analysis of *Midnight Children* argues that in some cases, for example in experimental fiction, taking fidelity into account still proves fruitful.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, David T. Johnson finds that recent scholars in adaptation studies often claim to reject the previous study which they consider to remain “too close” to the fidelity approach, while ultimately never fully diverting from it in the end, partly because of the ambiguity of the term fidelity.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the complicated relationship between fidelity and adaptation studies, a general consensus exists amongst scholars that fidelity should not be the only criterium to study adaptations. In addition to fidelity criticism, scholars have successfully incorporated cultural studies into their theoretical approach for study adaptations. In *Adaptations: from Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan state that an approach taking after cultural studies “foregrounds the activities of reception and consumption, and shelves – forever perhaps – consideration of aesthetic and cultural worthiness of the object of study”.<sup>23</sup> Cartmell and Whelehan’s model includes reception, cultural and historical context, narration,

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<sup>18</sup> Defne Ursin Tutan, “Adaptation and History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (2017), 2, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199331000.013.5.

<sup>19</sup> Defne Ursin Tutan, “Adaptation and History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (2017) 10, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199331000.013.5.

<sup>20</sup> Victoria De Zwaan, “Experimental Fiction, Film Adaptation, and the Case of “Midnight's Children”: in Defense of Fidelity,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2015): 246, accessed May 4, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43799034>.

<sup>21</sup> Victoria De Zwaan, “Experimental Fiction, Film Adaptation, and the Case of “Midnight's Children”: in Defense of Fidelity,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2015): 249, accessed May 4, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43799034>.

<sup>22</sup> David T. Johnson, “Adaptation and Fidelity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (2017), 5, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199331000.013.5.

<sup>23</sup> Imelda Whelehan, “Adaptations: the contemporary dilemmas,” in *Adaptations from Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, ed. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (New York: Routledge, 1999), 18.

reception, context of consumption and intertextuality in addition to fidelity.<sup>24</sup> Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* focuses on motives, reception and context for the adaptation process aside from the nature and form of adaptations. She defines an adaptation as both a product created through transposition and a process of creation which always involves reinterpretation and creation, as well as a process of reception through an 'extensive' and 'announced' intertextual relationship with other texts.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the audience is aware they are watching an adaptation because the adaptation openly acknowledges its relation to the source text and previous adaptations and does merely consists of a brief reference. Hutcheon maintains that the adaptation process constitutes change because of the person who adapts the story, the wider context for the creation and the reception of the adaptation. The wider context includes the celebrity status of the actors and director, but also the time and culture in which the adaptation is made. Rather than aiming to discard fidelity, the appropriate model thus incorporates fidelity into a plural model which also includes factors such as cultural and historical context and reception.

This thesis is partly a comparative study which will contrast the novel to the adaptation. However, following the current standpoint on fidelity, its aim is not to assess the success of Gerwig's adaptation based on how well it has managed to reproduce the original text. Instead, the study contrasts the book and adaptation to gain insight into how the adapter decided to divert from the original text and how this diversion results in a new interpretation of a complex classic text. A comparison of the adaptation to the film might also show how the interpretation of history in the adaptation mirrors the perspective of contemporary society on the part of history in question. Furthermore,

## **2. *Little Women*, sentimentalism and feminism**

### *2.1 Genre and feminist criticism*

The sentimental novel is a literary genre whose prime objective was to evoke compassion for the less fortunate by depicting scenes that showed their intense distress, suffering emotionally as well as physically. Their misfortune often involved the separation of a happy family, which highlights the genre's promotion of unity between people.<sup>26</sup> The sentimental novel has aptly been described by Marianne Noble as 'an epistemological, spiritual and political genre that

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<sup>24</sup> Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 15

<sup>25</sup> Linda Hutcheon and O'Flynn, Siobhan, *A theory of Adaptation*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 7&8.

<sup>26</sup> Marianne Noble, "Making This Whole Nation Feel: The Sentimental Novel in the United States." In *A Companion to the American Novel*, Ed. Alfred Bendixen, 170–71, (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), <http://doi.org/10.1002/9781118384329>.

has moral designs upon its readers'.<sup>27</sup> Sentimental fiction was one of the subgenres of the American novel, aside from utopian fiction and naturalistic novels, which was used for political protest.<sup>28</sup> However, rather than taking a rational approach and deconstruct social systems in an analysis, the genre sought to realise political change by triggering people's emotions and by uniting people in their shared compassion for those who were suffering, .

Although works by high-brow male authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Green Gables* and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Evangeline* also include features of the genre, sentimental novels are strongly associated with women's writing. Female writers like E.D.E.N. Southworth, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Louisa May Alcott were popular best-selling authors during the years surrounding the American Civil War when the sentimental novel had its heyday.<sup>29</sup> General characteristics of the sentimental novels are domesticity, emotionalism and a heavy focus on relationships.<sup>30</sup> Domesticity refers to the fact that sentimental narratives told stories of the everyday life in the home. Emotionalism involves the novels' interest in the emotional life of its characters.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Cindy Weinstein has pointed out that the sentimental novel centred around women ended exclusively in marriage because this was considered to be the only appropriate ending for female characters at the time.<sup>32</sup>

*Little Women* features many elements of sentimental fiction. The novel depicts how the four female protagonist struggle to adhere to the patriarchal norms which were imposed on women. The novel also contains a characteristic scene of sentimentalism when the girls decide to visit the Hummels to share their Christmas breakfast with them after their mother informs them of their baby's illness and their lack of food.<sup>33</sup> The novel is largely set in the home, which is represented as an idyllic place which provides shelter from the outside world. The novel also starts by informing the reader of the separation of the March family: their

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<sup>27</sup> Marianne Noble, "Making This Whole Nation Feel: The Sentimental Novel in the United States," *In A Companion to the American Novel*, ed. Alfred Bendixen, 171 (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), <http://doi.org/10.1002/9781118384329>.

<sup>28</sup> Chip Rhodes, "Social Protest, Reform, and the American Political Novel," *In A Companion to the American Novel*, Ed. Alfred Bendixen, 188 (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), <http://doi.org/10.1002/9781118384329>.

<sup>29</sup> Cindy Weinstein, "Sentimentalism," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, Ed. Leonard Cassuto, 209 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), <http://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521899079.015>.

<sup>30</sup> Cindy Weinstein, "Sentimentalism," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, Ed. Leonard Cassuto, 209 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), <http://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521899079.015>.

<sup>31</sup> Cindy Weinstein, "Sentimentalism," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, edited by Leonard Cassuto, 213 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), <http://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521899079.015>.

<sup>32</sup> Cindy Weinstein, "Sentimentalism," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, edited by Leonard Cassuto, 210 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), <http://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521899079.015>.

<sup>33</sup> Louisa May Alcott. *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 15-16.

father has gone to fight in the American Civil War. Finally, the end of the novel finds all the female protagonists married, excepting one of them who perished.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the sentimental novel started to receive attention in academia from female scholars. Their judgements about these type of novels were mixed. Sentimental fiction was perceived by Ann Douglas as promoting repressive female roles, while Jane Tompkins saw an empowering quality in these novels which provided women with public voice.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, *Little Women* has also received various opposite readings. It has been read as asserting negative character traits upon women, as being subversive for its time compared to other sentimental fictions, or as a warning to young girl of the dangers for women in adulthood.<sup>35</sup> A dated but highly influential article by Judith Fetterley has demonstrated the ambiguity of the novel's message regarding the female condition, finding covert message in *Little Women* which contradict its overt messages.<sup>36</sup>

### 2.2 Marriage, the importance of money and marriage in romance fiction

*Little Women* is filled with traditional romantic notions about love, which must be linked to the promotion of marriage and romance in the novel. Alcott refers to the marriage ceremony as 'the sweetest chapter in the romance of womanhood'. The girls' mother, Marmee, asserts that "to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing that can happen to a woman".<sup>37</sup> When Jo plans to move to New York to 'try her wings', Marmee gladly consents but she believes that after this experience Jo will 'find something sweeter', which is suggestive of romance and love.<sup>38</sup>

Despite these romantic notions in the novel, Alcott repeatedly rejects the notion that woman should marry for money. In the chapter 'Meg goes to Vanity Fair', Meg overhears slander that her mother has plans for one of her daughters to marry their rich neighbour Laurie. Marmee, being told about this remark by Meg, stresses the importance of love over wealth in a marriage relationship:

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<sup>34</sup> Marianne Noble, "Making This Whole Nation Feel: The Sentimental Novel in the United States," *In A Companion to the American Novel*, edited by Alfred Bendixen, 171 (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), <http://doi.org/10.1002/9781118384329>.

<sup>35</sup> K. Hollinger and T. Winterhalter, "A Feminist Romance: Adapting *Little Women* to the Screen," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 18, no. 2 (1999), 174, accessed June 5, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464445>.

<sup>36</sup> Judith Fetterley, "'Little Women': Alcott's Civil War," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 2 (1979): 372, accessed February 9, 2021, doi:10.2307/3177602.

<sup>37</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 106.

<sup>38</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 9 "Tender Troubles," p. 18, Kobo.

My girls, I *am* ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world, marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid houses, which are not homes because love is wanting.<sup>39</sup>

Marmee does not pressure her girls to marry, at least not if this makes them unhappy: “better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands”.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, Alcott, elaborating on the importance of love in marriage, also reiterates throughout the novel that married life is challenging and requires more than love alone. Marriage requires ‘infinite patience as well as love’, as Meg discovers after having gone through her first trial of her marriage.<sup>41</sup> Marmee later uses the same statement as an argument for why a marriage between Laurie and Jo would not work out: their similar free-spirited, passionate, strong-minded characters would make them ill-suited to each other for a relationship which requires ‘infinite patience and forbearance, as well as love’.<sup>42</sup> Alcott thereby shows very nuanced views regarding requirements for success in marriage.

Moreover, while largely reflecting the gender roles ascribed to husband and wife at the time, Alcott also ridicules the ideal for the house wife. Chapter 28, titled ‘Domestic Experiences’, starts off by describing Meg’s determination to be a perfect house wife: her husband ‘should always see a smiling face, should fare sumptuously every day, and never know the loss of a button’.<sup>43</sup> This quote clearly matches the descriptions of the ideal house wife in *Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms*: ‘Whatever have been the cares of the day, greet your husband with a smile when he returns.’<sup>44</sup> However, the preceding sequences Alcott describes shows that following this ideal requires too much exertion of Meg:

Her paradise was not a tranquil one, for the little woman fussed, was over-anxious to please, and bustled about like a true Martha, cumbered with too many cares. She was too tired, sometimes, even to smile.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 106.

<sup>40</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 251-53.

<sup>41</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 5 “Domestic Experiences,” p. 14, Kobo.

<sup>42</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 9 “Tender Troubles,” p. 20, Kobo.

<sup>43</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 5 “Domestic Experiences,” p. 1, Kobo.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Idle Hill, *Hill's manual of social and business forms* (1888), <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA02/rodriguez/GildedAge/Gilded%20Age%20Marriage.html>

<sup>45</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 5 “Domestic Experiences,” p. 1, Kobo.

Alcott shows that following the ideal for the house wife, which were enforced by advice literature, are both unattainable and undesirable.

Aside from her criticism of the ideal of the house wife, Alcott promotes the involvement of the father in the care-taking of the children and life at home, while asserting that women should leave their house from time to time to enjoy themselves and leave their household tasks. Meg is encouraged by her mother to let her husband be involved in the household rather than strictly keeping to the separate spheres reserved for their gender. Marmee also advises Meg to leave the house from time to time to enjoy herself and not be overwhelmed by her tasks at home.<sup>46</sup> Initially, the couples fear the consequences of their gender traits for the upbringing of their child: Meg thinks that John's harshness will break her child's spirit, while John thinks Meg's indulgence will spoil the child's temper.<sup>47</sup> Meg discovers that John can be caring as well as strict: 'I never need fear that John will be too harsh with my babies, he does know how to manage them, and will be a great help.'<sup>48</sup> These sequences, though not rejecting the two separate spheres in gender ideology, suggest that husband and wife should not refrain from occasionally engaging leaving their sphere and engaging with the other.

*Little Women* also shows a discrepancy between representations of marriage in romance literature and the "real-life" experiences in the novel. Chapter 10 of *Little Women* shows a series of entries from the Pickwick Paper, the newspaper set up by the four female protagonists. Jo's entry, a short story called 'The Masked Marriage', illustrates how problems regarding marriage in romances are easily overcome: in the story, Voila, a sad but lovely lady, is forced by her father to marry Count Antonio, in spite of his strong dislike for him.<sup>49</sup> However, in an abrupt turn of circumstance, Lady Voila manages to marry the man of her choice in the end primarily because her lover, initially said to be an English artist, conveniently turns out to be Earl of Devereux and De Vere who has "an ancient name and boundless wealth".<sup>50</sup> In chapter 15, during a conversation with Meg about her poverty, Jo laments: 'Oh, don't I wish I could manage things for you as I do for my heroines! You're pretty enough and good enough already, so I'd have some rich relation leave you a fortune unexpectedly'.<sup>51</sup> To this statement, Meg responds that 'people don't have fortunes left them in

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<sup>46</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 15 "On the Shelf," p. 8-9, Kobo.

<sup>47</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 15 "On the Shelf," p. 20, Kobo.

<sup>48</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 15 "On the Shelf," p. 21, Kobo.

<sup>49</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 109.

<sup>50</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 109.

<sup>51</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 172.

that style nowadays, men have to work and women marry for money'.<sup>52</sup> In real life, money proves to be an obstacle that is not so easily overcome as romances suggest.

Daniel Shaelys even maintains that Alcott is invested in creating egalitarian marriage relationships. Shaely makes a valid point when he argues that Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer, though contrary to Jo's independent character and the unmarried status of the author herself, was a compromise. Alcott had intended for her protagonist to remain a spinster, but the audience insisted that Jo should marry Laurie.<sup>53</sup> Alcott ultimately conceded to let her protagonist marry at the end of the story, but she invented a ruse which entailed picking an odd choice for Jo as an alternative to young, frolicking Laurie: an old, idealistic professor.<sup>54</sup>

However, Shaely fails to notice that Alcott occasionally shows the inequity and the dangers in the marriages she depicts. In *Little Women*, women seem to require help from their husbands to restrain themselves and they have to be mindful to maintain the peace at home. Marmee, equal in character to Jo, used to have problems containing anger and she confides in Jo that she has received help from her husband to learn to control her anger on account of being a role model. Mr. March used a sign to signal when she failed control her temper, at which point she is described to fold her lips and leave the room.<sup>55</sup> Shaely too easily dismisses the message conveyed in this passage when he states that 'while some readers may see Mr. March's advice as overbearing patriarchal authority, Marmee does not view it that way'.<sup>56</sup> The passage strongly shows the silencing of women by men who fear female aggression, even if Marmee does not seem to experience this as oppressive. Alcott herself was very familiar with the fear of female aggression: her father was disturbed by her violent, tumultuous and uncontrolled character and tried to control her.<sup>57</sup> Madelon Bedell writes that 'from childhood on, she had been at war with him'.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to the silencing of women, Alcott hints towards the dangers for women who are restricted to the domestic environment. In chapter 5 'Domestic Experiences', Marmee reminds her daughter Meg of her husband's masculine temper: 'He has a temper not

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<sup>52</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 172-73.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Shealy, "'Wedding Marches': Louisa May Alcott, Marriage, and the Newness of Little Women," *Women's Studies* 38, no. 4 (2019): 366 & 368, <http://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1614869>.

<sup>54</sup> Daniel Shealy, "'Wedding Marches': Louisa May Alcott, Marriage, and the Newness of Little Women," *Women's Studies* 38, no. 4 (2019): 377, <http://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1614869>.

<sup>55</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 87.

<sup>56</sup> Daniel Shealy, "'Wedding Marches': Louisa May Alcott, Marriage, and the Newness of Little Women," *Women's Studies* 38, no. 4 (2019): 373, <http://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1614869>.

<sup>57</sup> Madelon Bedell, *The Alcotts: Biography of a Family*, 1st ed (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1980), 243 & 244.

<sup>58</sup> Madelon Bedell, *The Alcotts: Biography of a Family*, 1st ed (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1980), 243 & 245.

like your own - one flash and then all gone – but the white still anger that is seldom stirred, but once kindled is hard to quench.’<sup>59</sup> Because of John’s masculine temper, Marmee strongly advises Meg to never cross her husband in order to maintain the peace at home: ‘Be careful, very careful, not to wake this anger against yourself, for peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect and always be the first to apologize during a quarrel.’ In this advice, Marmee hints towards the female entrapment in a home which is marked by constant quarrels. Given the references to John’s inflammable temper, this advice might well refer to the danger of domestic violence.

### 2.3 *The working woman: waged labour vs. domestic duties*

in *Little Women*, the four female protagonists are strongly encouraged to work.<sup>60</sup> In the very first chapter, Father March writes in his letter: “remind them that while we wait we may all work, so that these hard days need not be wasted”.<sup>61</sup> Later on, Marmee tells the girls that ‘work is wholesome, and there is plenty for every one; it keeps us from ennui and mischief; is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion.’<sup>62</sup> Alcott was a champion for the working woman in a time when women were not generally expected to work. However, just as her portrayal of the domestic is underpinned by the dangers for women within the domestic sphere, her portrayal of the working woman is undermined by the restrictive limitations to the home. As will become clear, the portrayal of the working woman in *Little Women* can be attributed to the complex reality of the gender ideology of the time and a tension between contemporary gender ideology and the belief in the morality of work.

In their past, historians have employed a paradigm which was accordance with the gender ideology of the time. In this ideology, men were engaged with the public sphere and women were restricted to the domestic sphere. As later research has shown, the reality of women’s lives was in fact quite different depending on social factors like class, race or location. Anne M. Boylan explains that the dichotomies ‘public’ and ‘private’ were fluid.<sup>63</sup> Women were very much present in the public sphere by the late nineteenth century and the paradigm of the two separate spheres is problematic for several reasons, one of them being that the paradigm holds at best for white woman whose husband earned an income high

<sup>59</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 5 “Domestic Experiences,” p. 12 & 13, Kobo.

<sup>60</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 9.

<sup>61</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 9.

<sup>62</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 128.

<sup>63</sup> Anne M. Boylan, “Claiming Visibility: Women in Public / Public Women in the United States, 1865-1910,” in *Becoming Visible : Women's Presence in Late Nineteenth-Century America*, Ed. by Janet Floyd, Alison Easton, R. J. Ellis and Lindsey Traub (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2010), 19&20.

enough to allow her to stay at home. Many women also worked in other people's houses or found ways to combine their household tasks with waged work at home.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, industrialisation caused a shift in the work environment for women: in the postbellum period, women occupied paid positions in urban commercial service and industrial economies, as well as in rural agriculture.<sup>65</sup> This shift towards industrialisation resulted in anxiety regarding female paid labour, questioning the consequences of the women's new-found independence for their caregiving at home as well as their safety in the new work space in terms of exploitation.<sup>66</sup> In her analysis of the working woman in *Little Women and Work*, Janis Dawson provides historical context for Alcott's depiction of work. She points out that a belief in the morality of work and the evil of idleness persisted in the nineteenth-century, in spite of the gender ideology of the time. Dawson finds that this belief in the morality of work allowed Alcott to reconcile the domestic ideal in the novel with the necessity of waged work in her own life.<sup>67</sup>

The financial situation of the Alcott family underlines the simplicity of the public-private paradigm, as the family's severe poverty forced the women in the family to work. Alcott's father Bronson, an philosopher, failed to provide financial stability for his family due to his progressive idealism. His wife Abigail, finding that 'Mr. Alcott cannot bring himself to work for gain', was therefore forced to take matters into her own hands.<sup>68</sup> She became engaged in charity work for the poor.<sup>69</sup> The two eldest daughters also took on several paid position: when the family was 'poor as rats', the oldest, Anne, worked as a governess outside of the house, and Louisa worked as a teacher while also keeping to her writing.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Anne M. Boylan, "Claiming Visibility: Women in Public / Public Women in the United States, 1865-1910," In *Becoming Visible: Women's Presence in Late Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. by Janet Floyd, Alison Easton, R. J. Ellis and Lindsey Traub (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2010), 22.

<sup>65</sup> S.J. Kleinberg, "Women's Employment in the Public and Private Spheres, 1880-1920," In *Becoming Visible: Women's Presence in Late Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. by Janet Floyd, Alison Easton, R. J. Ellis and Lindsey Traub (Rodopi, 2010), 88-89.

<sup>66</sup> Anne M. Boylan, "Claiming Visibility: Women in Public / Public Women in the United States, 1865-1910," In *Becoming Visible : Women's Presence in Late Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. by Janet Floyd, Alison Easton, R. J. Ellis and Lindsey Traub (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2010), 22.

<sup>67</sup> Janis Dawson, "Little Women Out to Work: Women and the Marketplace in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women and Work*," *Children's Literature in Education* 34, no. 2 (2003): 114.

<sup>68</sup> Beth Luey, "Home and Family: The Alcott Houses, Concord and Harvard," in *At Home: Historic Houses of Eastern Massachusetts* (Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 127. Accessed May 31, 2021, <http://doi.org/2307/j.ctvpbnpc2.8>.

<sup>69</sup> Beth Luey, "Home and Family: The Alcott Houses, Concord and Harvard," in *At Home: Historic Houses of Eastern Massachusetts* (Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 135. Accessed May 31, 2021, <http://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpbnpc2.8>.

<sup>70</sup> Beth Luey, "Home and Family: The Alcott Houses, Concord and Harvard," in *At Home: Historic Houses of Eastern Massachusetts* (Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 135. Accessed May 31, 2021, <http://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpbnpc2.8>.

*Little Women* clearly reflects the nineteenth-century gender ideology, but also highlights the fluidity of the public-private dichotomy. The female protagonists are described to engage in household tasks like knitting, sewing, mending and washing the dishes, their ‘domestic duties’.<sup>71</sup> Aside from their tasks in the household, the two oldest girls work to compensate for the family’s poverty.<sup>72</sup> Jo and Meg work as governesses and companions to their family. Marmee does charity work to support the war and helps poor families like the Hummels.<sup>73</sup> The most elaborate accounts of the working woman in *Little Women*, however, is restricted to Alcott’s descriptions of Jo’s experience as an author.

Janis Dawson has rightfully pointed out that, in her descriptions of Jo’s experience in New York, Alcott has domesticated her work experience by placing her in a homely environment.<sup>74</sup> Her hostess, Mrs. Kirke, heartily welcomes Jo and makes her feel at home: ‘now dear, make yourself at home, said Mrs. Kirk in her motherly way’.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, when Jo leaves the homely boarding school to go into the city, it is described in negative terms; as filthy and gruesome. When going up to the office, Jo is said to mount “two pairs of dark and dirty stairs”.<sup>76</sup> The office itself is filled with clouds from cigars.<sup>77</sup> Alcott seems to create a strict opposition between the comfortable domestic and a dark, filthy, unfriendly public world.

At the same time, Alcott shows the dangers for women working outside of the home. Alcott points towards exploitation, and more specific issues encountered by women such as the lack of respect accorded by men in her work life. Her first visit to the office of the *Weekly Volcano* becomes a humiliating experience. Jo is struck by the disrespectful behaviour of the three gentlemen who are ‘sitting with their heels rather higher than their hats, which articles of dress none of them took the trouble to remove’.<sup>78</sup> Jo perceives that the ‘little fiction of “my friend” was considered a good joke’. Even in the home boarding school, which seemingly represents a homely environment to replace her family home, Jo experiences a lack of respect afforded to her by men as working women: a group of men criticize her for eating with them at the dinner table, which Jo links to her position as a governess when she refutes that “a

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<sup>71</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 4, 10, 11, 47, 82, 120, 127, 152.

<sup>72</sup> Stephanie Foote, “Resentful Little Women: Gender and Class Feeling in Louisa May Alcott,” *College Literature* 32, no. 1 (2005): 70-71.

<sup>73</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), 7 & 16.

<sup>74</sup> Janis Dawson, “Little Women Out to Work: Women and the Marketplace in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women and Work*,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 34, no. 2 (2003): 116-17.

<sup>75</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 10 “Jo’s journal,” p. 2, Kobo.

<sup>76</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 11 “Friend,” p. 2, Kobo.

<sup>77</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 11 “Friend,” p. 2, Kobo.

<sup>78</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 11 “Friend,” p. 2, Kobo.

governess is a good as a clerk".<sup>79</sup> Later on, Jo turns out to be paid only the bare minimum by her editor. Alcott informs the reader that Mr. Dashwood "graciously permitted [Jo] to fill his columns at his lowest price," because a former employer had "basely left him in a lurch" after being offered a higher salary.<sup>80</sup> These passages indicate that Jo is being exploited by her editor.

Aside from this exploitation and lack of respect, Alcott shows how Jo's work as an author is undermined by the role of the mother which society expects her to fulfil as a woman. Contrary to her previous characterisation as an independent tomboy, Jo becomes characterised as mother when she is forced by the editor to cut out the moralistic parts of her story. Jo experiences the act of cutting down her work as "a tender parent" who is asked "to cut off her baby's legs in order that it might fit into a new cradle".<sup>81</sup> This characterisation of Jo as a mother persists as the story continues. Towards the end of the novel, Jo finally becomes a successful author when she writes stories inspired by her family.<sup>82</sup> Alcott describes Jo's stories as children leaving the nest to go into the outer world, reassert Jo's role as a mother:

So taught by love and sorrow, Jo wrote her little stories, and sent them away to make friends for themselves and her, finding it a very charitable world to such humble wanderers, for they were kindly welcomed, and sent home comfortable tokens to their mother, like dutiful children whom good fortune overtakes.<sup>83</sup>

By the end of the story, Jo fulfils the role of the married women and the mother as society would expect of her. She marries with professor Bhaer. She becomes the caregiver of the pupils at her boarding school and also has children of her own. This reading of the progression of Jo's character supports Janis Dawson's claim that Alcott is engaged with the promoting the domestic ideal.

However, when taking into account her own experience as an author, Alcott might more accurately be demonstrating how female writers were unable to write their own stories due to expectations which society had about female writing. Alcott had experienced severe criticism prior to writing *Little Women* and had already discovered the negative consequences this had on the outcome she produced. Critics disapproved of her work *Moods* (1865) because

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<sup>79</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 10 "Jo's Journal," p. 8, Kobo.

<sup>80</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 11 "Friend," p. 9, Kobo.

<sup>81</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 11 "Friend," p. 6, Kobo.

<sup>82</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 19 "All alone," p. 9&10, Kobo.

<sup>83</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives* (e-artnow, 2013), chpt 19 "All alone," p. 9, Kobo.

they thought its ideas about marriage were immoral.<sup>84</sup> Alcott wanted to write a true stories rather than popular ones, but she learned to adapt her work for the audience. This experience is also reflect in Jo's experience as an author. In the chapter 'Literary Lessons', Jo struggles to please her audience. She finds that their criticism is contrary to her own judgements. The metaphor of a baby which Alcott evokes in the relation of Jo's experience in New York strongly resembles a metaphor employed by Anne Bradstreet in her poem *The Author to Her Book*, a poem illustrating how a female author fails to produce quality work because of her poverty.<sup>85</sup> The speaker in the poem tries to amend the faults that have been found in her work, shaping her 'child', a written work, to suit the demands of others like Jo does: she refers to washing its face and stretching its joints to make the feet even. Despite her efforts, her attempts to create a better version fail, and ultimately she can only dress the child in material from the home: 'In better dress to trim thee was my mind, / But nought save home-spun Cloth, i' th' house I find.' The speaker says she cannot but publish her work because she is poor, meaning she writes for a living: "thy Mother, she alas is poor, / Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door.". Similarly, only near the end of the novel does Jo learn to please her audience by writing stories for her family, when she fulfils the role of a mother as society would expect of a woman and no longer "desecrates" her womanliness by writing sensational stories. Through Jo's experience, Alcott shows how female authors were restricted in their work by society's wish that they should fill the role of the mother.

To sum up, the sentimental novel was a literary genre which was focused on evoking compassion in its reader for the suffering of particular social groups. *Little Women*, for example, shows the struggle of four girls learning how to adhere to the social rules prescribed by patriarchal society. Sentimental novels often revolved around the life at the home, which is also largely true for *Little Women* which is characterised by its idyllic depiction of the home. Finally, *Little Women* follows the generic convention in sentimental fiction centred around women by having its female protagonists married at the end, or death.

In relation to the marriage theme, *Little Women* reflects the gender ideology of the time. Nevertheless, Alcott has been demonstrated to mock ideals for wife and to promote the involvement of a husband's wife in the domestic sphere. Despite the romantic nature of the

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<sup>84</sup> Eugenia Kaledin, Louisa May Alcott: Success and the sorrow of self-denial," *Women's Studies* 5, no. 3 (1978): 254, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1978.9978453>.

<sup>85</sup> Anne Bradstreet, "The Author to Her Book," in *The Complete Works of Anne Bradstreet* (1981), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43697/the-author-to-her-book>.

book, Alcott emphasizes that girls should only marry for love and not for money, while also acknowledging the complexity of the marriage relationship by stating that more than love is required to make marriage succeed. Alcott also hints towards inequities in marriage relationships and the possible dangers for wives in their domestic life.

For the working woman, it was shown that *Little Women* mirrors the contemporary gender ideology, but at the same time it reflects the fluidity of the public-private dichotomy in reality contrary to the gender ideology. The girls engaged both in domestic tasks and occupied waged positions as governesses and artists. During Jo's experience as a female writer in New York, Alcott briefly points towards the lack of respect and exploitation women are afforded. Rather than promoting the domestic ideal, it has been argued that Alcott shows through Jo's experience how female authors were undermined by societal expectations that their work should be in line with the female role.

### **3. Adapting *Little Women*: Greta Gerwig's adaptation**

#### *3.1 The creation and reception of Gerwig's Little Women*

What is unique about Greta Gerwig's version of Alcott's text is its narrative structure. In her film, Gerwig creates two different story lines, one of which is set in the past starting in fall 1861 and the other in the present starting in winter 1868. Rather than starting at the beginning of the chronological story of the novel, Gerwig starts with the present and then alternatively switches between the two story lines throughout the film. At the end of the film, the two story lines intertwine. When the story lines intertwine, Gerwig moves on from the ending of the novel and incorporates new scenes to create a different reality. By moving on from the original ending, the film is able to comment on the ending of the novel and fictional endings in romances in general, as will become clear from the analysis in the next section.

Overall, the film deemed a successful adaptation by film critics, which can partly be explained by Gerwig's close engagement with the author who wrote the original text. Gerwig generally follows the original words from the novel quite closely, but she also included facts about Alcott's own life and lines from her other works, her journal and letters written by her. As a result, the actors in the film find themselves speaking lines from secondary material from Alcott in between lines from the original text. In reviews of *Little Women*, it has been argued that Gerwig engages more with the source text rather than trying to rewrite it. In a review of *Little Women* (2019) in the *New York Times*, Amanda Hess remarks that 'Gerwig's film is

less an update than it is an excavation'.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Clarissa Loughley writes in *The Independent* that 'the director is less bothered with preserving the original text than with capturing the mind and spirit of the woman who wrote it'.<sup>87</sup>

The film critics who point to Gerwig's use of the biographical material describe the film as being bold, energetic and current, but also as devoted and respectful to the original text. Wendy Idle argues that "Greta Gerwig brings the entire March family to life like never before in a respectful but bracingly current version that couldn't be more perfectly timed".<sup>88</sup> Peter Shaw describes the adaptation as a "passionately devoted new tribute to Louisa May Alcott's classic novel of sisterhood".<sup>89</sup> He later refers to the end of the novel when he writes that Gerwig's "revives" the original story to 'an autofictional manifesto for writing your own life'. Alexandra Pollard finds a contrast between the "cosier and less spiky" version of 1994 and the 'boldly meta new version'.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the use of biographical material appears to have given a refreshing quality to Gerwig's adaptation, while still allowing Gerwig to create a story that feels as 'being devoted', in other words being faithful, to the original text.

In addition, Gerwig herself has emphasized the modernity of the original text in interviews prior to the release of the film. In these interviews, she asserts that, although there are modern lines in the film which seems to have been added by her, they were actually there in the original text, or a line from Alcott. 'I didn't invent it. It's there.'<sup>91</sup> Her emphasis on the modernity of the novel and her use of biographical material may have influenced the audience's reception of the adaptation, providing a validity to her version which might otherwise be considered too subversive.

### 3.2 "Marriage is an economic proposition, even in fiction"

*Little Women* (2019) reiterates the message of the novel that girls should only marry for love. But, while the novel *Little Women* features romantic notions of love being the sweetest outcome for women, Gerwig's adaptation explicitly dismisses such romantic notions. During

<sup>86</sup> Amanda Hess, "What Greta Gerwig Saw in 'Little Women': 'Those Are My Girls'," *New York Times*, 31 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/movies/greta-gerwig-little-women.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Clarissa Loughley, "Little Women review: Greta Gerwig's loving adaptation waltzes with a literary ghost," *The Independent*, 25 December 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/little-women-review-greta-gerwig-adaptation-saoirse-ronan-timothee-chalamet-cast-a9259181.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Wendy Idle, "Little Women review – the freshest literary adaptation of the year," *The Guardian*, 29 Dec 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/dec/29/little-women-review-greta-gerwig-saoirse-ronan-wendy-ide>.

<sup>89</sup> Peter Shaw, "Little Women review – sisters are writin' it for themselves in Greta Gerwig's festive treat," *The Guardian*, 25 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/nov/25/little-women-review-greta-gerwig-saoirse-ronan-emma-watson>.

<sup>90</sup> Alexandra Pollard, "Little Women and Portrait of a Lady on Fire are finally doing justice to female artists," *The Independent*, 30 December 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/little-women-greta-gerwig-portrait-lady-fire-celine-sciamma-louisa-may-alcott-female-art-a9261731.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Amanda Hess, "What Greta Gerwig Saw in 'Little Women': 'Those Are My Girls'," *New York Times*, 31 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/movies/greta-gerwig-little-women.html>.

the period where Jo lives with her parents while her remaining sisters are married, she voices her deep frustrations about the idea that “love is all that a woman is fit for”. Jo passionately argues in her speech, which has been taken from Alcott’s *Rose in Bloom*, that women “have minds and souls as well as just hearts, and they’ve got ambition and talent as well as just beauty”.<sup>92</sup>

Like the original text, *Little Women* (2019) shows the importance which society accords to money in marriage relationships, which is conveyed by the character Aunt March. Aunt March repeatedly urges the female protagonists to marry well because of the poverty of their family. Jo is the first to receive a lecture from Aunt March when she voices her intentions to ‘make her own way in the world’. Aunt March tells Jo that ‘nobody makes their own way, not really - least of all women’, and that Jo ‘will need to marry well’. Later on, Aunt March spurs Amy on to marry well when it becomes clear that Jo’s independent nature will prevent her from ever marrying and Meg is devoted to a ‘penniless’ tutor John Brooke. Aunt March tells Amy is the family’s last hope: ‘You are our family’s hope now. Beth is sick, Jo is a lost cause, and I hear Meg has her head turned by a penniless tutor, so it’ll be up to you to support them all and your indignant parents in their old age. So you must marry well.’ These scenes with Aunt March illustrate the pressure that girls experience to marry for money, but it simultaneously points out women’s lack of other opportunities outside marriage to make a living for themselves and to support their family.

In addition to pointing out the economic motives for marriage, Gerwig’s film creates a deeper understanding of Amy’s mercenary motives for marrying by providing historical context for women’s position at the time. In the film, Amy points to the economic nature of the marriage relationship as it was recorded in the contemporary law system at the time. In the scene in question, Amy and Laurie argue about Amy’s plans to marry the wealthy Fredy Vaughn. Amy first argues in favour of a rational approach to love: ‘we have some control over who we love’. Laurie, however, speaks in favour of romantic love by saying that ‘the poets would argue differently’. But then Amy points out the disadvantages of the marriage relationship for women: ‘If I had my own money, which I don’t, that money would belong to my husband the moment we got married. And if we had children they would be his, not mine.’ In these lines, written by Gerwig herself, Amy refers to what Cindy Weinstein calls the ‘femes covert’, the married woman who by nineteenth-century law had lost her entire property, even

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<sup>92</sup> “We’ve got minds and souls as well as hearts; ambition and talents as well as beauty and accomplishments...” from Louisa May Alcott, *Rose in Bloom* (1876), chpt 1 “Coming Home”, <http://www.literaturepage.com/read/alcott-rose-in-bloom-9.html>.

her very self, to her husband and thereby became effectively invisible.<sup>93</sup> As opposed to the romantic notion that marriage is solely about love, as reflected in Laurie's remark, the film argues that, money was a crucial factor in marriage at the time because money, amongst everything else, was transported to the husband by the marriage contract. This understanding might have eluded the reader if Gerwig had not provided this historical context.

In terms of the marriage relationships she depicts, Gerwig has made small yet relevant alterations in Alcott's depictions of the marriage relationship between Mr. and Mrs. March. As in the novel, Marmee confides in Jo that she "has been angry nearly every day of her life". Her comment in the scene where Mr. March returns implies that she is allowed to express her anger in her relationship with him, which is in stark contrast to the novel where her husband teaches her self-control. 'Thank God you are home. Now I can angry with you in person.' In the film, Marmee not only acknowledges that she has had problems with controlling her anger in the past, but she is able to openly express her anger to her husband.

Moreover, the film creates a modern dilemma regarding marriage which was not present in the original story in the scenes showing the marriage between Meg and John Brooke. At the wedding day, Meg rejects Jo's pleadings that she should run away from marrying and she should earn her own money as an actress instead. Meg wants to marry, and she points out to Jo that 'just because my dreams are different than yours doesn't mean they are not important'. This scene suggests that, while some women strive to remain independent and to make their own living by having a career, traditional women who prefer to start a family with their husband and stay at home should feel free to do so without judgements from other. However, the film later creates a nuance when it shows Meg's struggle with poverty as a poor man's wife. Even in marriage between two loved ones, a traditional marriage always comes at the cost of a woman's financial independence.

Finally, the film also points out the economic motives for ending exclusively in marriage. At the beginning, the editor tells Jo to write a story which ends in either marriage or death if the protagonist is a woman: 'if the main character is a girl, make sure she's married by the end, or dead. Either way.' Having already pointed out the limits for endings a female-centred fiction, the editor later rejects the ending Jo has planned for her protagonist, one in which her female protagonist remains unmarried. He believes that 'it would not work at all'. Despite the inconsistency of having a girl with an independent nature marry at the end, the editor believes that the female readers would prefer to have the story in which she marries at

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<sup>93</sup> Cindy Weinstein, "Sentimentalism," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto, 213 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), <http://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521899079.015>.

the end. ‘Girls,’ he states, “want to see women get married, not consistent.’ Therefore, the editor claims, ‘it would not be worth printing’. The new ending which Jo writes is approved by Mr. Dashwood because of its strong emotional effect and the romance. ‘It’s romantic. It’s very moving, that’s very emotional.’ Mr. Dashwood’s comments implies that his ideas about appropriate endings for female fiction are based on gender stereotypes in which women prefer romance and rich emotions to realistic endings. Jo’s realisation following these comments is the central message of the film regarding marriage: ‘I suppose marriage has always been an economic proposition, even in fiction.’ During this metanarrative commentary on female fiction at the end, the film thus links the endings in these type of fiction to gender stereotypes and the capitalist thought that only lucrative works are ‘worth printing’.

### 3.3 *The working woman in focus through a modern feminist lens*

Because *Little Women* (2019) starts at the second part of the book, the story is altered from a story about four girls growing up and dictated become grown-up women, into a story about four ambitious young women who, looking back on their childhood, strive to fulfil their childhood laborious dreams. At the beginning, Jo is introduced to the viewer as a working woman whose life goal is to earn money, motivated by a desire to support her family. During one of the first scenes, Professor Bhaer remarks: ‘always working...’. Jo responds with a quote from one of Alcott’s letters: ‘Money is the end and aim of my mercenary existence.’<sup>94</sup> She explains that, until Amy brings in money into the family by marrying well, she needs to take on the role as the bread winner of the family. ‘Well, my sister Amy is in Paris, and until she marries someone obscenely wealthy, it’s up to me to keep the family afloat.’ Amy’s story starts in Rome when she strives to become a painter, as her childhood dream is become ‘the greatest artist in the world’. Amy is shown to be serious in this endeavour despite her aunt’s larger interest in her marriage proposal. Despite troubles at home relating to her sister Beth, Aunt March stresses that she should not leave Rome before she is officially engagement to Fred Vaughn: ‘You shouldn’t go home until you and Fred Vaughn are properly engaged.’ Amy reminds her aunt of her painting lessons: ‘Yes, and until I’ve completed all of my painting lessons, of course’, to which Aunt March slowly responds with “oh, yes yes”. The scene illustrates Amy’s need to defend her career ambitions in front of the traditional Aunt March, who is focused on bringing in wealth through Amy’s marriage.

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<sup>94</sup> “I get ten dollars a page for my foolish little story for being very local it takes & makes the paper sell & as money is the end and aim of my mercenary existence, I scribble away and pocket the cash with a thankful heart.” - *The selected letters of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson & Daniel Shaelys (The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 76.

The scenes focusing on Jo's and Amy's experiences as aspiring female artists deal with modern social issues like the pay gap and glass ceiling. Gerwig has included a reference to the pay gap between men and women when Mr. Dashwood tells Jo during her first visit to the office of the *Weekly Volcano*: "We pay 25 to 30 for things of this sort. We'll pay 20 for that". These lines state that Jo is underpaid, which would probably remind the modern audience of the pay gap between men and women. During the scenes showing Amy's experience in Rome, the film shows Amy's disappointment as she gives up on her childhood dream. Amy, having spent some time in Europe by now, has come to consider herself a failure. 'Rome took all the vanity out of me and Paris made me realize I'd never be a genius.' She gives up what she has come to regard as 'foolish artistic hopes'. Laurie protests that she has 'so much talent and energy'. Amy, however, is too ambitious to settle for anything less than genius: "Talent isn't genius. And no amount of energy can make it so. I want to be great or nothing." Laurie then points out to Amy that it is the glass ceiling that prevents women from entering the highest ranks in their profession. Laurie reminds Amy that only men are allowed in 'club of geniuses'. After all, as Amy becomes to realise, men cut out all the competition. This conversation between Laurie and Amy illustrates how ambitious girl who strive to excel in their professions, like Amy, are prevented from succeeding in a patriarchal system in which 'the club of genius' is exclusively for men.

The film gives Jo a strong voice by allowing her to rebuke the criticism she receives from Bhaer regarding her stories. In the novel where Jo becomes ashamed of her written sensational stories after Bhaer heavily criticises them. Gerwig instead allows Jo to defend herself against Bhaer. She gives the perspective of the artist in criticism, pointing towards the necessity for women to survive, the subjectivity in the reception of art and the bias against female artists in male-dominated criticism. Bhaer initially promises Jo to give her "honest" critique regarding her work. Jo defends herself against his criticism. She first rebukes that she writes the stories not just for her own amusement, but out of a necessity to survive: 'I can't afford to starve of praise.' She then points out the subjectivity of art criticism by asking Bhaer: 'Who made you the high priest of what's good and what's bad?'

The ending of the film reasserts the subjectivity of judgements about art. The editor initially rejects Jo's story, which we can deduce is the story of her own childhood with her sisters, but his young daughters pressure him to publish a sequel. Even though the editor, an old man, does not recognize the value of the work, the girls do, arguably because as young women they recognize themselves in the story. These girls represent the large group of female readers over the past centuries who have recognized their female experience in Alcott's story.

The analysis in the preceding paragraphs are supportive of Judy Simmons observation that, in addition to entries from Alcott's journals and letters, Gerwig has included in her adaptation 'speeches about social injustice, gender politics, and the economic realities of being a woman in a nineteenth-century, patriarchal political system.'

Lastly, during the final scenes of the film which fully departs from the original novel, the film inserts biographical elements from Alcott's own experience as an author. Like Alcott, Jo experiences the trouble of having to write an ending for her protagonist which she does not think is the right one. The scene also depicts Alcott's purchase of the copyright of her work, as Jo buys the copyright of her own book. Unlike the ending of the novel, the film's final shots provides an alternative reality in which the female protagonist fulfils her childhood dream. Even though Jo has to make compromises in terms of the content of her novel, she succeeds in becoming a published author.

In short, Gerwig's adaptation shows how girls are put under pressure to marry for money and explains why money is such a relevant factor in marriage by providing historical context regarding marriage laws at the time. The film gives an alternative ending which diverts from marriage, but it also maintain the original ending of the novel to demonstrate why such fiction were largely restricted to marriage. Furthermore, the marriage relationship in the novel have undergone slight changes, which allows for more nuance in the marriage relationship of Meg and John Brooke and a more equal relationship between Marmee and Mr. March.

With respect to the working woman, Gerwig focuses more the working woman compared to the original text. As pointed out in the critical reviews of *Little Women*, Gerwig brings forward the experience of the author of the book by incorporating elements of her written texts and by adding biographical facts about her life to the film. More importantly, Gerwig gives a feminist interpretation of the experiences of female artists in the story, Jo and Amy. In this interpretation, she gives a modern social issues of gender inequality, namely the glass ceiling and the pay gap.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has looked into how Greta Gerwig has dealt with the complex feminism of the novel *Little Women* in her adaptation from 2019 by looking into the themes of marriage and the working woman in both works. It argued that Gerwig reworked the theme of marriage and

emphasized theme of the working. At the same time, Gerwig included some of the original depictions of the female struggles encoded in the novel.

With respect to the theme of marriage, Alcott was found to portray romantic notions of love in her novel, but in her depictions of marriage she exhibits nuanced and realistic views on the subject. Furthermore, Alcott is demonstrated to show the inequities in marriage relationships and hint at possible dangers for women during their married life.

For the theme of the working woman, *Little Women* has been demonstrated to mirror the gender ideology of the late-nineteenth century, but at the same time it reflects the fluidity of the public-private dichotomy which existed at the time. The novel contains female characters who are invested in domestic duties as well as waged work outside the home. The passages about Jo's experience in New York, the most elaborate depiction of the working woman in the novel, are revealing of the lack of respect towards working women and the exploitation of the working woman. Rather than promoting the domestic ideal, *Little Women* has been read as showing how female authors were undermined by societal expectations regarding their work based on the female role of the mother.

As for the film, Gerwig's adaptation, similar to the novel, shows how girls are under pressure to marry for money. Unlike the novel, it also explains why money is such a relevant factor in marriage by providing historical context regarding marriage laws at the time. The film partly maintains the original ending of the novel, but it also gives an alternative ending which diverts from marriage to comment on why female fiction ends exclusively in marriage. Furthermore, the film creates more nuance in the marriage relationship of Meg and John Brooke and a more equal relationship between Marmee and Mr. March.

With respect to the working woman, Gerwig foregrounds the depictions of the working woman in the original text in her adaptation. As is often pointed out in the film reviews of *Little Women*, Gerwig brings forward the experience of the author of the book by incorporating elements of her written texts and by adding biographical facts about her life to the film. Moreover, Gerwig discusses the work experiences from the novel in the light of modern feminism, reflecting modern issues of gender inequality of the pay gap and the glass ceiling.

Linda Hutcheon has describes several motives of the adapter for making an adaptation in her theory. Gerwig's motives for adapting the work were probably two-fold. She honoured the original text by largely following the original lines of the story. On the other hand, she diverted from it by dealing with Louisa May Alcott's life to bring out the author's progressive feminism. To this end, Gerwig employed a wide range of secondary materials, including other

works by the author, written letters, and entries from the her diary. She thereby created her own authentic version of *Little Women*.

This use of secondary material gives Gerwig's adaptation validity based on notions of faithfulness: by showing the author behind the book, and by providing an alternative ending which is in line with the ending that the author originally wanted for her female protagonist, an adaptation might claim faithfulness in adapting the novel 'as the author had intended it'. The foregrounding of the author might be regarded as coming closer to the 'real' essence of the novel. This is particularly interest in the light of the notion in literary studies that an author's interpretation should not be regarded as the only legitimate interpretation of a text and that an author should be separated from its work. This also highlights that the fidelity is an ambiguous term, as viewers might consider a text to be faithful in different ways.

De Zwaan argued before that fidelity is still relevant because of the expectations of the audience influence the content of the adaptation. As *Little Women* (2019) is based on a much-beloved classic text, it most likely had to deal with some expectations on the part of the audience with respect to what should be incorporated in the film. Yet, the success of Gerwig's film seems be based on its subversion from the novel by foregrounding the author of the novel. This is consistent with John Glavin's notion that an adaptation interests us by its disruption of fiction.

Contrary to what film reviews seem to suggest, Gerwig has not merely incorporated secondary material, but has also added new material written by herself: in relation to Alcott's portrayal of the experience of the female artists, she has includes issues of gender equality, some of which were not present in the original text at all, like the pay gap. Both the novel and the film reflect the times in which they were created. Alcott's work clearly mirrors the gender ideology of late nineteenth century and reflects contemporaneous concerns of female paid labour. The adaptation, on the other hand, focuses more on the working woman, meaning the gender ideology of the time is less present than in the novel. Gerwig gives a modern interpretation of *Little Women* by incorporating modern social issues of gender inequality which Alcott was not invested in.

Gerwig also deepens the viewers knowledge on the position of women at the time by adding historical context. This shows that a modern interpretation of history might in some cases actually improve our understanding of history rather than limit it, contrary to what previous studies by Hollinger and Winterhalter have suggested. This is in line with Defne Ursin Tutan's postmodern perspective on fidelity in historical adaptation, who stated that

historical adaptations are more informative of the present, showing our current perception of history and are therefore valuable.

Hollinger and Winterhalter analysed the adaptation of *Little Women* from 1994 in the light of fidelity. This study was also partly a comparative study, but again fidelity criticism still proved fruitful in this case. Comparing the film to the novel has allowed us to see which specific choices the director has made. Fidelity thus remains important to take into account. Moreover, by considering the production and reception of the adaptation, as well as the historical context of the author of the original text, this study attempted to apply a plural model instead and not to limit itself entirely to notions of fidelity. Future studies in adaptations of *Little Women* might adopt a similar framework to see how these adaptations choose to adapt Alcott's feminism. These studies may look into other sentimental themes in *Little Women* that lie outside of the scope of this research, such as the issues of morality in the original text, to see how these themes manifest themselves in the adaptation.

*Little Women* (2019) shows that adaptations of *Little Women* are worth analysing because each particular adaptation makes its choices as to what to show of the ambiguous text that *Little Women* is. It gives a unique interpretation of the novel, and these interpretations are telling of the time in which the adaptation were produced. However, scholars need to be mindful not to limit themselves in their research by focusing solely on the translation of book to film. Instead, they should also consider other factors such as reception and cultural-historical context.

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