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## The Film Adaptation as an Essay on Feminism in the Victorian Novel

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The University of Connecticut

The Film Adaptation as an Essay on Feminism in the Victorian Novel

Abstract: This film analysis investigates how the representation of women in Victorian and pre-Victorian literature influences society's ideas about women in the evolving popular imagination.

This research explores the idea that film adaptations function as essay films on the novel, indicative of evolving interpretations of nineteenth-century literature throughout history.

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## Introduction

The words on the page aren't as stable as we think. Novels contain mixed signals, permitting the reception of various literary meanings. They slide on a politically charged spectrum. In a way, there is no definitive text.

Take Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, for example. Depending on your interpretation, introverted heroine Fanny Price may exhibit passivity or tactical agency. The calculating anti-heroine Mary Crawford may be avaricious or a feminist. The trouble is, mixed signals are everywhere. What are Austen's intended meanings? Is Mary, candid and proactive in her ambition for wealth and security, a feminist? Is Fanny a feminist, too, in her way? Which of these women is the better feminist?

In this essay, I compare nineteenth-century novels to the film adaptations they inspired throughout history. Specifically, I examine how filmmakers amplify and detract from feminist themes present in the original works. To do this, I consider the film adaptation as an essay on the source text.

The nineteenth century was a breeding ground for ways of thinking that reflect the modern era. It broke barriers for women, not only in the legal sense, but in how novelists like Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Louisa May Alcott, and the Brontës forced society to comprehend women as complex human beings.

At least, critics speculate that these authors forced society to comprehend women as complex human beings. The reality is that it's difficult to say. All of these authors struggled with censorship. Publishers deemed the original editions of their novels too subversive. The "anxiety of influence" (Armstrong 100) forced female authors to accommodate the system or risk losing

their cultural power. Conformity meant popularity, translating to inclusion, power, and an elevated economic status.

Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, the authors of the foundational feminist text *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, would argue for the existence of hidden feminist undertones, beginning with the mythic figure of the madwoman, a secret, inexplicit outlet for the author's anger against patriarchal oppression (Gilbert and Gubar 376). Reading the literary canon for feminist themes has become an act of speculation, and speculation is exactly the point of the film adaptation as a medium.

Film adaptations inevitably change the way the story is told. No matter how directly a filmmaker attempts to transpose the narrative, the representation of the story will change. I theorize that these changes arise in tandem with cultural change.

To explain this further, Deborah Cartmell classifies these changes on a sliding scale of three broad categories:

1. **Transposition**, the faithful delivery of a text into a new modality.
2. **Analogue**, the reworking of motifs, characters, or scenes from a text into an entirely new cultural product.
3. **Commentary**, adaptations that comment on the politics of the source text by means of alteration or addition.

Film adaptations of the Victorian novels that actively revise the text fall under this last category, commentary.

Each of the five nineteenth-century novelists I chose to analyze leaves narrative gaps imposed by censorship—meanings or events that go unspoken, or unexplained—and that the reader must fill in using their imagination. In other words, feminist subtext is up to critical

interpretation, and film adaptations provide this interpretation.

And filmmakers that speak to these themes intentionally? Filmmakers who actively explore feminist themes and comment on what the source text means? They create films that consciously comment on the source text by revising it, thereby changing the scholarly discourse; they create essay films.

Film adaptations add another dimension of perception to the five nineteenth-century novels that I chose to profile in my research: *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy, and *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott.

In turn, I profiled ten films, two for each of the novels analyzed, spanning from the early 1930s to 2019.

On the tragic end of the spectrum, contemporary critics cannot discuss *The Madwoman in the Attic* and feminist poetics without referencing *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* begins with Antoinette's childhood in Jamaica and moves to her unhappy marriage to Rochester. Rhys' conception of Rochester is brought to coldness, condescension, and brutal violence by his internalized racism, sexism, and inferiority complex. He revokes Antoinette's name and identity, decides she is mad, and, in the third, briefest, most psychologically tortured act of the novel, shuts her up in the attic of his mansion in the English countryside.

Susanna White's 2006 serial adaptation, however, clearly uses flashbacks to paint Rochester as the victim. White justifies Jane's decision to remain with Rochester, in the end, by offering proof that Rochester is not an abusive monster, and that he never was. However, these flashbacks convey more than White's attempt to give greater depth to Rochester's past, as the

opening scene of the first episode suggests. Unlike most other recent adaptations, the series does not begin with a shot of young Jane curled up with a book; instead, the first image that viewers see is Jane wandering across the Sahara Desert during a vivid sunset, before the camera cuts back to Jane at home, reading *The Arabian Nights*. White takes pains to showcase Jane's imaginative powers, forcing the audience to question whether these stories of Rochester's past, brought to life as sensory images, represent his history as it truly transpired, or how Jane imagines it. White implicates Jane's perspective, like Rochester's, as unobjective, and driven, perhaps, by an undercurrent of misogyny.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* writes back to the cannon, freeing readers from Jane's gaze, prejudiced by colonialism, her whiteness, and the patriarchal influences in her life. Rhys doesn't perceive Jane's narration as the truth, and neither can viewers of the flashbacks in White's adaptation.

Unreliable narrators resurface in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Here, flashbacks coalesce to create a story within a story, a frame within a frame, twisted by multi-layered perceptions and emotions that fuel gendered biases. Lockwood, an outsider, records the story he hears from the "steady, reasonable" (Brontë 31) Nelly Dean. Nelly, with her dry humor and common sense, is a compelling narrator, but she lacks compassion for women who defy socially construed patriarchal authority.

In the 1970s, director Robert Fuest appropriated the nature of *Wuthering Heights* to contemporary cultural issues; most notably, sexual violence and assault. Where Wyler softens the edges of Brontë's characters, Fuest sharpens them, exposing issues of consent and gender-based sexual violence. By probing the narrative gaps in the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine, Fuest highlights the undesirable role of women within a coercive sexual relationship

in a period that denied women power over their own bodies. Where Rhys picked up on the potential for sexual violence previously unseen and unacknowledged in *Jane Eyre*, Fuest may accomplish a similar feat with Catherine and Heathcliff's destructive relationship in *Wuthering Heights*.

Speculations on Thomas Hardy's intent are questionable, considering Hardy's struggles against the gaps imposed by a society that deemed the original edition of *Tess* socially unacceptable. Filmmakers, however, gain the power, and the growing stamp of social approval, to flesh out the ambiguity of the white space superimposed over Tess's narrative voice and experience by a combination of Hardy's narrative choices and society's censorship.

While Roman Polanski's film uses the male gaze to build upon the sexualization and silencing of Tess, David Blair's serial adaptation restores Tess to the female gaze. Furthermore, it's difficult to separate the sexual assault present in *Tess* from the similar act committed by the director two years before the making of the film, especially as the film's poster art problematically describes Tess as a "victim of her own provocative beauty" (Martin). Polanski, for all his revolutionary willingness to liberate his heroine from societal condemnation as an impure woman, refuses to liberate Tess from the male gaze (Higonnet).

Two of the films I profiled more accurately fit the title of the essay film than others. These are the 1999 adaptation of *Mansfield Park*, directed by Patricia Rozema, and the 2019 adaptation of *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig. These are, ostensibly, happy, even comedic, novels. They have their serious moments, but they also poke fun at people and appear to wrap things up neatly in a bow. The heroines, Fanny Price and Jo March, achieve the ultimate end goal of nineteenth-century domestic fiction: to marry respectably, at the expense of their individuality.

However, does that actually sound like a happy ending? Some filmmakers say no.

On the surface, *Mansfield Park* resembles the classic Cinderella masterplot. The painfully shy heroine, Fanny, is sent off to live with her wealthy relatives, the Bertrams, at a young age. There, she is mistreated and overlooked until her snide relatives come to appreciate her virtues. Thereafter, they spend the rest of their lives looking up to her as a shining beacon of unattainable morality. *Mansfield Park* is not the typical Austen novel. It lacks Austen's characteristic irreverent humor, and its heroine isn't opinionated, witty, or obviously appealing. The role, rather, is reserved for the antagonist, Mary Crawford.

In one passage of the novel, Fanny discusses slavery and abolitionism with her cousin, Edmund. Fanny tells Edmund that she would have “longed to inquire further” on these topics with her uncle, a plantation owner in the West Indies, but, then, Fanny speaks of what she terms a ““dead silence”” (Austen 201)— she says that she would ““...not like to set herself off at her cousins' expense, by showing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel”” (201).

So, here's our first narrative gap. What does this mean? Does Austen's “dead silence” condone the imperial enterprise? Or, taking the opposite view, does it signify disapproval of slavery?

The end of the matter is that suppositions regarding Fanny's feelings on gender, race, and class are largely speculation. Fanny is painfully shy. If she—or Austen—were a feminist, or an abolitionist, we would have no way of knowing.

No way of knowing, that is, without the 1999 adaptation. Instead of directly transposing the novel, in which Austen only recounts the discussion, Rozema creatively stages the discussion as a driving plot point. Through Fanny's formerly unnarrated opinions, Rozema responds to the

scholarly debate of critics such as Edward Said and Devoney Looser on the ambiguities in the source text.

The aesthetics of the 2007 film, however, reinforce the socially conservative interpretation of *Mansfield Park*. In MacDonald's version of the slavery discussion, Fanny hesitantly questions her uncle about slavery, and her uncle responds that they might well do without slavery, but without order, they are lost. While the film doesn't necessarily defend slavery, it justifies, to an extent, the "ordered" elitism that is the foundation of the Bertram family's wealth. The film omits entirely Fanny's stay with her impoverished parents and siblings in Portsmouth, a choice that falls in line with the pretty, safe aesthetic that this adaptation perpetuates.

Rozema's film, on the other hand, does acknowledge poverty and classism—the very real fears that drive Mary Crawford's calculating attitude toward marriage and men. It's essential to note that Austen herself never voices an explicitly negative judgment upon Mary. Despite Mary's faults, her downfall arises only from her willingness to help another woman avoid social ruin. Today, this ought to strike readers as an act of heroism.

Both films take Fanny as the obvious model for womanhood, with Mary as her foil. Rozema, however, does this by making Fanny opinionated, witty, and obviously appealing; in short, by giving Fanny all of Mary's best qualities. Rozema fuses two opposing poles of femininity to create the most appealing heroine possible, putting Fanny's morality together with Mary's courage to create a champion of abolitionism. MacDonald, on the other hand, keeps Fanny's character pretty much intact. However, this means that in his adaptation, Mary gets to keep her witty, feminist charisma. In this way, when Mary ultimately gets her supposed just deserts, MacDonald unwittingly creates sympathy for the devil.

The most recent adaptation of *Little Women* deliberately shapes an ambiguous ending, in honor of what Alcott, according to her letters and diaries, wanted to write herself: it hints at the truth, that Jo's marriage was a concession to cultural norms, concealing the underlying narrative of a victorious unmarried woman writer. Like so many other female authors, Alcott had to rein in her audacity in creating her heroine. Alcott could create women who pushed the boundaries of traditional femininity, but, ultimately, had to "...[join] her to a husband of wealth and position..." (Fite 102), "...[challenging] the norms of her culture without becoming unforgivably tasteless" (102).

In Gerwig's version, however, the scene of the couple's reunion is intercut with a negotiation between Jo and her publisher debating whether or not Jo must marry off the heroine of her novel. Jo, like Alcott, eventually agrees to give her heroine a traditional ending, but only to please the audience, hinting that this romantic scene might have been imaginary all along. The cliché of kissing in the rain is exactly the overly dramatic romantic ending that the publisher wanted, and that's what Jo gave him.

The audience can even tell when the portrayal of events begins to deviate from Jo's novel to the reality of her experience: the moment Jo closes the door upon Professor Bhaer, the scene is no longer shot with the cold blue filter reserved for the present/adulthood. Instead, the warm, golden tint floods the lens. When the camera cuts back to the publisher, the camera lens snaps back to the cold filter once again. It's entirely plausible, perhaps even likely, perhaps even obvious, that Jo never opened a school at all, but remained the literary spinster that Alcott so desired.

With this ambiguity, Gerwig gives audiences the perfect adaptation. According to some interpretations, *Little Women* preaches a feminist independence tale buried beneath the surface of

a woman writer's ultimate (and tragic) assimilation into society. According to others, Jo displays inconsistency because the path of the female artist is a challenging one. *Little Women* represents a complex struggle between femininity, masculinity, professional ambition, and domestic virtue that triggers difficult questions.

*Little Women* and *Mansfield Park* have become tools, alternately, for radicalism and conservatism, for social justice and elitism. When held up to the source material, however, their ambiguity, perhaps their intentional ambiguity, makes the filmmakers' deviations seem possible. Their films are so powerful, in fact, that they prompt audiences to question whether they are, in fact, deviations at all, or simply nuanced extrapolations. Gerwig and Rozema's adaptations fill in narrative gaps to create new stories grounded in evolving cultural norms. These adaptations revise the source text in the context of gender politics, blending the fact of society's evolving treatment of women with the fiction of the narrative.

Imprisonment, Powerlessness, and Dead Silence: Subversions of *Mansfield Park*

It's difficult to organize the themes of *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen's most intricate novel, into a box. While several critics have interpreted the novel as a feminist, abolitionist, or realistic work, just as many have countered with staunchly conservative, pro-slavery, or romantic readings. In *Jane Austen and the Conflict of Interpretations*, Alistair Duckworth discusses the difficulty of arriving at a consensus regarding the messages behind *Mansfield Park*, as a range of values can be detected therein. According to Duckworth, *Mansfield Park* is a prime example of novels that contain mixed signals, permitting the reception of various literary meanings. Characteristics of *Mansfield Park* slide on a politically charged spectrum. Depending on the interpretation, introverted heroine Fanny Price may exhibit passivity or tactical agency; the calculating Mary Crawford may be avaricious or a feminist; and Austen's narration of her characters may be sympathetic, ironic, or somewhere in-between.

The trouble is mixed signals are everywhere. Is Mary, candid and proactive in her ambition for wealth and security, a feminist? Is Fanny a feminist, too, in her steadfast resolution to defy her uncle's authority and do what she feels is right? Which of these two women is the better feminist? Which of them, under the constraint of their circumstances as dependent women, has more space to be a feminist? Who has more freedom to act, and who acts more effectively? When the study of film adaptation comes into play, it becomes more and more apparent that these mixed signals have become a function of society's evolving understanding of womanhood.

In one passage of Austen's novel, Fanny says to Edmund, "'But I do talk to [Sir Thomas] more than I used to. I am sure I do. Did you not hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?'" and goes on to add that she would have "longed" to inquire farther, "'...but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming

at all interested in the subject, I did not like—I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by showing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel” (Austen 241). Edward Said, reading the Bertrams’ dead silence as equivalent to Austen’s, claims “it would be silly to expect Jane Austen to treat slavery with anything like the passion of an abolitionist or a newly liberated slave” (Said 96), but implicates *Mansfield Park* as a work of cultural power advocating a morality that condones the imperial enterprise. Critics such as Devoney Looser, on the other hand, claim Fanny’s indictment of her cousins’ silence, veiled by her characteristic shyness, may signify disapproval of the slave trade. These striking parallels and contradictions beg the question: Does Austen’s “dead silence” intimate the stifled voices of abolitionists? Or, taking the opposite view, the complicity of the British upper class in slavery and imperialism? Given Sir Thomas’s status as a slaveowner, and considering Austen’s reference to the “pleasure” Fanny would take in hearing his opinions, Looser’s interpretation seems implausible on the surface, but in the words of Said, “...interpreting Jane Austen depends on *who* does the interpreting, *when* it is done, and no less important, from *where* it is done” (Said 93).

When analyzing this scene through a feminist lens, for instance, Fanny’s self-censorship on the topic of slavery may have everything to do with her compulsion to limit herself to fit with the patriarchal order of her uncle’s household, and nothing to do with slavery. Other critics often analyze this scene without giving due consideration to the context of Fanny’s protestation; for Fanny is simultaneously denying her extreme shyness and defending it as a defense mechanism. If Fanny is a feminist, readers have no way of knowing it, because submissive silence is Fanny’s only safeguard against the maltreatment she invariably receives when, prompted by her strong moral compass, she does voice her contrary opinions, as in the case of the theatricals, or her

refusal of Henry Crawford's proposal. Fanny receives this treatment—belittling, and at worst, abusive—most particularly from her Aunt Norris, but also from her cousins, the Crawfords, Sir Thomas, and even, at times, Edmund. Given the basis of the Bertram family fortune upon slave labor, it is possible, even likely, that the Bertram household would hold conservative viewpoints, and in such an environment, any expression of liberalism concerning gender, class, and race could jeopardize Fanny's fragile position of social and economic dependency in Mansfield Park, a dependency that arises from her status, not only as a poor relation, but as a woman. Fanny's silence springs from an introverted disposition shaped by her circumstances, which constrain her abilities to act broadcast feminist values, or, indeed, any non-conforming values at all.

Suppositions regarding Fanny's feelings on gender, race, and class, however, are largely speculation. All readers know is that Fanny is a pillar of morality, and in this, she is an outlier among the characters of *Mansfield Park*. While readers can draw assumptions regarding the beliefs of the Bertram household, Fanny's reserve renders her convictions nearly impenetrable. To extend Fanny's morality to abolitionism, feminism, and class equality is a significant jump, yet none can deny Fanny's intrinsic sense of what is right, and the subtext surrounding slavery in *Mansfield Park* is sufficiently ambiguous to warrant varying critical interpretations, including, perhaps, an abolitionist stance.

The first film adaptation of *Mansfield Park* (dir. Patricia Rozema, 1999) aims to take that stance, and to make this jump not necessarily by exploring Austen's motivations, but by exploring the possibilities that Austen's canvas creates. To do so, Rozema interprets Fanny not as sanctimonious but as principled, not in her conservative morality, but in the independent, liberal charisma that more rightly belongs to her antithesis, Mary. Rozema introduces a transparently feminist and abolitionist figure in Fanny, a startling extrapolation, or deviation,

from the ambiguity of the text. By creating a different kind of heroine, one apt to express her opinions rather than pass silent judgment, Rozema allows herself to take a stance on what Fanny's indefinite opinions *are*, especially regarding Austen's controversial, intentionally or unintentionally equivocal references to slavery. Instead of directly transposing the novel, in which Austen only recounts the discussion in Fanny's retrospective conversation with Edmund, Rozema creatively stages the discussion as a driving scene and major plot point. In the 1999 film, Sir Thomas makes grossly racist remarks regarding the slaves on his Antigua plantation, and Edmund, prompted by an encouraging look from Fanny, stands up to correct him. When Sir Thomas treats his son's opinions with contempt, Fanny herself rises with the outspoken contradiction, "Correct me if I'm wrong, sir, but if you were to bring one of the slaves back to England, there would be some argument as to whether or not they should be freed here... if I'm not mistaken'" (Rozema). Sir Thomas responds to Fanny's criticism by commenting on her appearance, making her, and viewers, rightly uncomfortable. Rozema must clarify Sir Thomas's ambiguous views on slavery, too, and while Fanny becomes a champion of social justice, Sir Thomas transforms from a stiff but seemingly well-intentioned parent into the apotheosis of racism and sexism.

Through Fanny's formerly unspoken, and unnarrated, opinions, Rozema responds to contentious scholarly debate on the ambiguities of her character and the perspective Austen takes on slavery in the source text. Some hesitancy persists in Fanny's demeanor, but Austen's Fanny lacked the courage to combat her relatives with such outspoken subversiveness, the same outspoken subversiveness that led to Mary Crawford's exile from Mansfield, quietly spearheaded by Fanny herself. Rozema foregrounds this issue of voice, too, by making Fanny an aspiring

author, with the power to express her thoughts in stories and letters to her sister, delivered to the audience in character asides. Austen's Fanny may even have found this behavior improper.

Again, however, that's speculation, and productive speculation is entirely the point of Rozema's *Mansfield Park*, and, often, of adaptation as a medium. Deborah Cartmell classifies adaptation into three broad categories: transposition, the faithful delivery of a text into a new modality; analogue, the reworking of motifs, characters, or scenes from a text into an entirely new cultural product; and commentary, adaptation that "comments on the politics of the source text, or those of the new *mis-en-scene*, or both, usually by means of alteration or addition" (Sanders 27). Julie Sanders describes Rozema's *Mansfield Park* as a prime example of the commentary adaptation, as Rozema "made visible facts that the novel represses... the absences or gaps in the original narrative being commented on in the transpositional film was one that had previously been highlighted by the work of postcolonial critics" (27). Rozema restores Fanny's voice to express a social consciousness that may or may not lurk upon the outskirts of *Mansfield Park*, redeeming the cultural impetus of Jane Austen for the evolved society that has become her audience. Film adaptations, even adaptations that do not seek to accomplish the subversions of Rozema's *Mansfield Park*, cannot provide neutral retellings. The degree of the instilled message varies, but all adaptations, intentionally or unintentionally, take a perspective on their source material. By reworking *Mansfield Park* to applaud a heightened awareness of issues of race, class, and gender, Rozema creates a *Mansfield Park* that revolves around a triangle of imprisonment, powerlessness, and injustice. Rozema connects this struggle of empire and British power overseas to the domestic conflict at the Bertram estate, and inhibits Fanny's redeeming morality (a different kind of morality, skewing strongly liberal as opposed to conservative) through the barrier of her dependency, holding true, in this way, to the novel, while also making

deviations in a way that, when held up to the source material, seem possible, in a way that prompts audiences to question whether or not they are deviations at all, as opposed to nuanced extrapolations.

The aesthetics of the second film (dir. Iain MacDonald) reinforce the socially conservative interpretation of *Mansfield Park*, underscoring Fanny's dependence on those who surround her. At the same time, however, Fanny becomes the centrifugal force that drives the Bertram family together, granting her a measure of power that may speak more to the superficial interpretation of the quiet power of Austen's heroine. MacDonald's less inventive rendition of Fanny stays true to her conservative moral convictions through tactical agency, rather than passionately fighting for groundbreaking liberal ideals with eye-catching rebelliousness. In MacDonald's evocation of the oft-contested slavery discussion, Fanny hesitantly questions Sir Thomas, "I hope you won't mind my asking, sir, but now that you have lived amongst it, do you believe slavery can continue in the same way?" (MacDonald). Sir Thomas responds, "I think, my dear, we may very well do without slavery, but without order, we are lost" (MacDonald). Audiences could take this to imply a critique on the repression of abolitionist or feminist outspokenness, but as MacDonald's film continually drives home the theme of order, without ever again bringing the shadow of slavery to light, it seems more likely that audiences are meant to view Sir Thomas's rebuke as valid. While the film doesn't necessarily defend slavery, the script defends itself against Said's pro-slavery reading not by redeeming Austen with abolitionism, but by justifying, to an extent, the "ordered" elitism that is the foundation of Regency England and the Bertram family's wealth. As the film progresses, more and more members of the Bertram household leave Mansfield Park, departing to cities such as London, which, in both the novel and the 2007 film, serve only to corrupt. As in the novel, London leads

Tom to debt, debauchery, and life-threatening illness, Henry to sexual temptation, Maria to ruin, Julia to elopement, and Mary, most strikingly, to the worst version of herself—according to Edmund’s letters, that is, which narrate to Fanny, ““You know the weak side of her character, and may imagine the sentiments and expressions which were torturing me. She was in high spirits, and surrounded by those who were giving all the support of their own bad sense to her too lively mind”” (Austen 509). Edmund goes on to deprecate the influence of Mary’s female friends upon her character, describing one as a ““cold-hearted, vain woman, who has married entirely from convenience... who places her disappointment not to faults of judgment... but to her being, after all, less affluent than many of her acquaintance.... They have been leading [Mary] astray for years”” (510). In the film, only Fanny remains behind continually, a fixture in the house, the symbol of one who has done what is right all along.

To accomplish this centrality, the film omits entirely Fanny’s stay with her impoverished parents and siblings in Portsmouth, a choice that falls in line with the pretty, safe aesthetic that this adaptation perpetuates. Whereas Rozema’s Fanny appears in dark, serious colors, MacDonald’s Fanny wears pastels, and never has the conversation that her mother, in Rozema’s film, hesitantly broaches, with the sorrowful words, ““I’ve been thinking, Fanny. There is no shame in wealth, my dear...”” (Rozema). When interrupted by her husband’s vulgar summons, she says quietly, ““Just remember, Fanny. I married for love;”” (Rozema). This conversation never appears in the novel, nor MacDonald’s film, nor does the momentary acceptance of Henry’s proposal that succeeds it, which Fanny prefaces to Henry with the statement, ““Poverty frightens me. A woman’s poverty is harsher than a man’s”” (Rozema). Fanny, haunted by the idea of betraying her conscience, which compels her to marry for love, swiftly retracts her acceptance, but not before turning a spotlight on the very real fears that drive Mary’s calculating

attitude towards marriage and men. In the novel, Fanny never has this conversation with her mother, and she accepts Henry's proposal, but the class dichotomy haunts Fanny's decisions about her future, and when lying awake at night, kept up by the noise of a small, untidy, poverty-stricken household, she muses that, "The wonderful improvement which she still fancied in Mr. Crawford was the nearest to administering comfort of anything within the current of her thoughts" (Austen 502). Austen adds, toward the end of the novel, that "Would [Henry] have persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward, and a reward very voluntarily bestowed..." (Austen 567). Even a conscience-stricken Fanny understands the necessity of supporting herself, and that her only option for economic and social security has always been marriage.

Then, what separates Mary Crawford from Elizabeth Bennet, Austen's most popular heroine? Mary's sense of right and wrong, for one thing. Not necessarily when it comes to her calculating opinions on marriage, one would argue, though Edmund and Fanny criticize her for them. Her willingness, however, bordering on hope, for Tom's death, doesn't stand her in good stead. In Rozema's adaptation, Mary shocks every member of the Bertram family in a conference during which she cheerfully plans to re-introduce Henry and Maria to society by spending Tom's money and hosting lavish parties, with Edmund the expectant heir to the family fortune. Aghast, Edmund denounces Mary for her cold-heartedness towards his brother, her attack on Fanny, and her rudeness to his father, but, interestingly, doesn't speak a word against Mary's plans to forgive Maria and Henry. In the novel, Mary experiences these same callous feelings towards Tom, but the only person to whom she ever communicates them is Fanny. In the novel, Edmund's disgusted rejection stems purely from the "perversion of mind" (Austen) Mary exhibits in her pragmatic plans to contrive a marriage between Henry and Maria to save Maria's

reputation. Despite her faults, Mary's downfall arises only from her willingness to help a woman avoid social ruin and permanent exile from her family. Today, this ought to strike readers as an act of heroism. Rozema creates a villain to root against in Mary, but endows her much more strongly with the murderous qualities and motivations that will strike a modern audience as truly villainous.

The most interesting aspect of MacDonald's film, on the other hand, is that it doesn't demonize Mary; at least, not in the way Rozema's film does. MacDonald's adaptation downplays Mary's willingness for Tom's death, the only truly vile aspect of her character, in this final confrontation with Edmund—a private conversation, this time, in which Mary only discusses Maria and Henry and their “folly” (MacDonald), and her plans to help them regain footing in society. Edmund's ice-cold rejection, “I would have lost you a thousand times rather than see you for what you really are” (MacDonald), visibly humiliates Mary, rather than simply infuriating her. Though her vindictiveness still manifests itself in a voice-over letter to Fanny, in this scene, Mary is simply progressive, while Edmund is regressive. Edmund would condemn his sister to be a pariah forever, as would the rest of his family and Henry Crawford, leaving Maria to become a “fallen woman.” Even Fanny, in her lack of agency, is complicit in Maria's downfall. As the film comes to a close, Edmund, Fanny, and a reformed Tom, who, on his sickbed, affectionately calls Fanny “an angel” (MacDonald), are the only members of the new generation to remain at Mansfield. As in Rozema's film, the Bertram family comes to see Fanny's value; only, in this rendition, Fanny represents values of a different color. Fanny and Edmund will uphold the new standards in the Bertram family, safe, conservative standards, as exemplified by their safe marriage. By exorcising the negative influence of the Crawfords, and

coming to rely on Fanny's virtue, the inmates of Mansfield Park retreat from a bolder, more passionate, more damaging value system.

But does Austen herself seek to condemn this value system, or to simply explore it? It's essential to note that Austen's narrator never voices an explicitly negative judgment upon Mary, and that the only criticisms leveled against her come from the perspectives of male characters and Fanny—and, as many critics have noted, Edmund had “recommended the books which charmed [Fanny's] leisure hours, encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment” (Austen 570), and, in essence, “formed her mind” (Austen 570). Edmund, by power of uncomfortably paternalistic influence, creates an angel in the house and marries her, as opposed to the outspoken, independent Mary, who is candid about her goals of marrying for happiness and safety. According to Edmund, these goals are insensitive and wrong, but as Mary points out herself, Edmund, though a younger son without a wealthy inheritance, is a man, and can make his fortune by going into the law or the military. Society permits Edmund to judge Mary and act upon his judgments while constraining Mary to dependence on marriage, and marriage alone, to secure happiness and even safety. Readers have seen parallels, too, between Mary and Jane Austen. Both possess a love of “wit and imagination” (Duckworth 45) and assertive independence.

Alternatively, Fanny and Mary may embody conflicting aspects of Austen's personality. Fanny may represent her gravity, sensibility, and objective observations, with Mary personifying her wit, charm, and strength. In *The Madwoman and the Attic*, Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar perceive a doubleness in Fanny and Mary: Both are fatally dependent on men. Both struggle to reconcile their need to acquire a safe, secure situation with their desire to marry for romantic love—their desire, in fact, to marry the same man. Throughout her entire life, Fanny endures

exclusion and belittlement, represses her feelings, and toes the line of what's expected of women in her day and age, a sentence that might inspire rage and resentment in another character.

Fanny, however, takes her destiny in remarkable, yet unnatural, uncanny, and unrealistic stride, combating her repression only through tactical agency, a strength of its own, but not an act of insurrection. Only Mary takes a stance of outright rebellion against the imprisonment, powerlessness, and imposed dead silence that characterizes the dependent fate of women. Mary, perhaps the Bertha Mason to Fanny's Jane Eyre, may epitomize the outward manifestation of the anger that a woman in Fanny's position could likely, or even should, feel. Both are constrained by circumstance. Fanny has been brought up to shyness, suppressed by the dependency of her financial situation, and Mary, raised under the auspices of her tyrannical uncle and his callous attitude toward his wife, seems justified in her calculating attitude towards marriage and men. Their fates overlap and intertwine in curious ways, despite their polar opposite personalities.

Gilbert and Gubar suggest that, in an ending emblematic of a society that requires women to be silent, Mary is expelled from the Bertram family, while Fanny Price, the heroine, is "destined to become the next Lady Bertram, following the example of Sir Thomas's corpselike wife" (Gilbert and Gubar 164). In this, Gilbert and Gubar speculate that Austen created a deliberately ironic ending. Austen portrays Fanny's happy ending with sufficient irony to suggest that perhaps she is not sincerely praising her heroine's attitude. MacDonald's film, however, ends with an unequivocally charming outdoor wedding, complete with waltzing on the lawn, and Fanny's line, "Is it possible to be so happy?" (MacDonald). Here, not a shadow of irony haunts Fanny's happy ending, which celebrates the upholding of an old, wealthy family bound by traditional values, without "any fuller awareness of price had to be paid to make such places" (Semenza and Hasenfratz 346).

When considering the messages of MacDonald's film, along with the mixed messages that underpin the novel, audiences may sympathize with MacDonald's evocation of Mary. Based on the lighthearted mood of the film's ending, however, untempered by the ironic, or at least dissatisfying, atmosphere of the novel, one would assume that MacDonald did not intend viewers to pity Mary as a victim, the way Rozema clearly intended viewers to feel indignation for the role of the enslaved in the Bertram family's prosperity. Both films take Fanny as the obvious model for womanhood, with Mary as her foil. Nevertheless, Rozema's Fanny absorbs the powerful liberalism of Austen's Mary, and, intentionally or unintentionally, MacDonald's film highlights the desperation behind Mary's attempts to control her fate, and the visible devastation of her eventual failure elicits sympathy for the devil. These adaptations recast the dead silence surrounding slavery, transforming a "throwaway line" with innumerable hidden meanings into a metaphor, implicating elitist British society for the lack of choice that inhabits the triangular sphere shared by women, dependents, and the enslaved, the sphere of the imprisoned and the powerless; and again, MacDonald's film transforms it back into a throwaway line—this time, without equivocation, yet in a film which, despite itself, triggers feminist debate. *Mansfield Park* has become a tool, alternately, for radicalism and conservatism, for social justice and elitism.

Gendered Imagination and Demonized Women: Uncomfortable, Unknowable Truths Stifled  
 Within the Confines of *Jane Eyre*

With the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, author Jean Rhys posits a postcolonial response to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, writing from the perspective of Antoinette Cosway, alias Bertha Mason, a white Creole heiress. Rhys explores the gendered imbalance of power, particularly in marriage, that defined the era. Rhys' retelling gives Antoinette a backstory and identity apart from that of Rochester's insane wife, and, in doing so, provides an outlet for the repressed female voice in *Jane Eyre*. Filmmakers throughout the decades have attempted to take on the mirrored madwoman with limited success, and not nearly as much daring as Rhys, often reducing Bertha Mason to a monstrous shadow stifled to the confines of the production. Nevertheless, these adaptations translate the female voice in unique ways, some reducing the presence of Jane's double and others blurring the lines between the two roles more explicitly. Earlier adaptations instigate new forms of sexism that, for a time, diminished succeeding cinematic interpretations of *Jane Eyre*. The most recent miniseries, however, participates in conversation with evolving feminist thought, fundamentally altering the way modern audiences respond to both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Critics praise one of the earliest adaptations of *Jane Eyre* (dir. Robert Stevenson, 1943) for the skilled acting of Orson Welles and Joan Fontaine, and for the cinematography and lighting, characterized by sepulchral shadows and stark contrasts that perfectly capture the Gothic overtones of the novel. Notably, however, this adaptation excludes Jane's period of refuge with her cousins, the Reeds, "...which is to represent the end of her march toward selfhood" (Gilbert and Gubar 186). During this essential period, Jane rises to overcome St. John's attempts to coerce her into "absolute exclusion from the life of wholeness" (Gilbert and

Gubar 186) she has sought since childhood. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar go so far as to acclaim Jane for symbolically “[beheading] the abstract principles of [St. John]” so she can achieve independence and self-actualization, reconciling the aspects of her personality that yearn toward passion, love, and ease with her value for religion, principle, and self-denial. This omission removes the second side of Jane’s ethical crisis, allowing viewers to witness only the first in which Jane asserts her powerful moral integrity, alongside her self-value; this time, against her desire to stay with Rochester, whom she rejects, refusing to compromise her morals. Jane’s rejection of St. John, on the other hand, acknowledges the existence of such feelings as passion in women and validates them, becoming, arguably, the most powerful moment in Jane’s growth toward feminist independence. In excluding this climax of Jane’s character arc, Stevenson denies Jane the financial security, the discovery of family, and the space to develop independence that came from her time with her cousins. Instead, Stevenson devotes more screen time to Rochester’s development. Rochester’s blindness and the burning of Thornfield humble him, allowing him to experience growth at the expense of Jane’s character, which weakens as a result.

Jane’s rebelliousness shines through in Stevenson’s depiction of her harsh childhood, which spans nearly a quarter of the film. Stevenson’s Jane becomes increasingly submissive as her character develops. In both the novel and the film, Jane displays greater assertiveness and tenacity for justice during childhood as opposed to adulthood. The death of Helen Burns, her virtuous friend from Lowood, moves her deeply, and as Jane matures into adulthood, she subsumes much of Helen’s devout, submissive spirit into her own personality. In all adaptations, the school does not encourage Jane’s attachment to Helen, but Jane defies its emotional sterility by declaring her attachment to Helen—a choice that, in later adaptations, aligns with potentially

queer interpretations of Jane's internalized passion, emotion, and repression. Jane's rejection of Rochester, however, included in Stevenson's film, places the locus of this friendship light within the self-sacrificing morality that Jane develops throughout her life. By removing the episode of Jane's victory over St. John, Stevenson steps out of the temporality of the novel, altering the transitions that give Jane's narrative momentum, to a point at which it no longer remains Jane's narrative. The film fails to acknowledge that Jane's ultimate decision to return to Rochester springs from self-discovery, the culmination of a process, the gradual, conscious understanding that she cannot live without passion and emotion, qualities more closely associated with the mythic madwoman. Like the novel, it makes a sharp distinction between sane emotion and insane emotion, and this becomes the sum total of Jane's character arc; later, Gilbert and Gubar, and, potentially, Susanna White, will argue that this concept exists within a gray area. Nevertheless, as Stevenson's film progresses, Rochester overshadows Jane in centrality to the story and dominates the on-screen presence, disrupting the first-person narrative that presents Jane as one of the strongest, most ascendant, complex, and gripping characters in Brontë's novel and perhaps in literature.

The placement of Stevenson's *Jane Eyre* within Deborah Cartmell's categories of film adaptation is ambiguous. Unlike the novel adaptation *Wide Sargasso Sea*, most of the films that have emerged from *Jane Eyre* throughout the decades have conformed strictly to Cartmell's first category, transposition, in their faithful delivery of the source material. None of these films fit the middle-ground of commentary, which would portray the original story while highlighting narrative gaps. Stevenson's film, like the text, represents Bertha as the malevolent shadow of a monster, who appears briefly, attempting to strangle Rochester before being shoved back into her attic prison, never to surface again. Antoinette/Bertha has since gone on to become a symbol of

repressed female voice, agency, and sexuality in scholarly research, most notably in Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, which asserts that Antoinette/Bertha is Jane's "dark double" (Gilbert and Gubar 55), a living embodiment of Jane's repressed emotions. As Gilbert and Gubar published their work in 1979, much later than the making of the 1943 film, none of this feminist consciousness appears in Stevenson's adaptation. The treatment of women and gender roles in Stevenson's film amplifies the sexist cultural norms that dominated the cultural period of its production. Jane's feminist agency regresses rather than progresses, prioritizing the idea of Rochester as Jane's emotional home at the expense of the strain toward female autonomy as the force that drives the novel, amplifying the theme of man as woman's shelter.

Like Ian MacDonald's *Mansfield Park*, Stevenson's *Jane Eyre* eliminates any possible duality of its heroine, any hidden madwoman beneath the angel in the house. Both films accomplish this elimination through omission; to use a stronger term, they accomplish this through the censorship of the original author, construing a politically charged vision in the style of the essay film. Nevertheless, this adaptation better fits the criteria of transposition than commentary; and if this adaptation is an essay film, it is an unconscious one. Jane's submissive spirit derives more from the omission of her climactic moment of independence than as a result of a conscious effort to create a more dependent character. Unlike Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park*, Stevenson's *Jane Eyre* imposes an unintentional critique upon the source text; again, unlike Rozema's film, grounded in liberalism, Stevenson's critique superimposes patriarchal norms upon Brontë's narrative, exorcising any possible feminist subtext—driving away any shade of uneasiness that lurks within Jane's ultimate marriage to Rochester, and any of the haunting psychological duality that exists between Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason. The film simply

duplicates gender assumptions prevalent at the time of its making. Nevertheless, this highly influential, well-known adaptation has laid the groundwork for succeeding generations of *Jane Eyre* adaptations, which often exclude or reduce the time Jane spends with the Rivers family, diminishing Jane's narrative, and reducing feminism to read the text as a work of conservatism, and of romance—a problematic phenomenon in *Wuthering Heights* adaptations as well.

Another choice the Stevenson adaptation makes for Jane's character is the acknowledgment of her first-person point of view. Five times, the film broadcasts images of pages taken from the novel over the screen, read aloud to the audience through Jane's voice-over narration. This decision could be seen as restoring the rightful power of Jane's voice. However, though the screen shows passages that are presumably from the novel and capture Jane's narration, these passages were created explicitly for the film. They do not come from Brontë's novel, and they create a different kind of Jane, one who fails to evoke the complexity of womanhood present in the heroine of the novel. In the film, after extinguishing the fire Bertha sets to Rochester's bed, Jane narrates, "Had the mystery in the tower driven him madly away, just as we seemed so close together?... Winter turned to spring and no news came, but I found a measure of escape in the happiness of Adele" (Stevenson). In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar write that Bertha Mason epitomizes "on a figurative and psychological level... the most threatening avatar of Jane" (Gilbert and Gubar 183) — threatening, both to the inevitable patriarchy and Jane's survival within the patriarchy. Bertha echoes Jane's ever-present fears of madness, as epitomized in Jane's reaction to the red room. During Jane's repressive, orphaned childhood, the essence of Bertha within Jane must exist to enable Jane's survival, to compel her to maintain her independent personhood and defy the cruelty of authority. As Jane ages, taking on the "angelic exterior" (Gilbert and Gubar 177) and religious convictions that will

protect her from patriarchal threats, she grows increasingly fearful of the sensations that she terms symptoms of madness, narrating, when struggling to repress her feelings for Rochester, “...it is madness in a woman to let a secret love kindle within them, which, if unreturned and unknown, must devour the life that feeds it; and, if discovered and responded to, must lead *ignis-fatuus*-like, into miry wilds whence there is no extrication” (Brontë). During Jane’s time at Thornfield, the increasingly material Bertha executes Jane’s secret will, burning the wedding veil when Jane’s repressed resentment toward Rochester’s increasingly masterful treatment runs high. Stevenson, however, instead of turning Jane’s internal monologue to the fears of madness that haunt her adulthood, reconfigures this overhanging specter to the psyche of Rochester rather than Jane. Rochester’s psychological torment becomes the focal point of the film, and even of Jane’s narration. In the novel, on the other hand, Jane’s internal dialogue delves deeply into metacognition, involving Jane’s musings on the meaning of her life apart from Rochester. To compensate, Stevenson bequeaths to Jane a maternal instinct that the Jane of the novel is far from feeling. Brontë’s Jane, rather, exhibits defensiveness, even anxiety, over her lack of maternal feelings concerning Adele. She explains, in one of her typical asides to the reader, “This, *par parenthèse*, will be thought cool language by persons who entertain solemn doctrines about the angelic nature of children... but I am not writing to flatter parental egotism, to echo cant, or prop up humbug; I am merely telling the truth.... Anybody may blame me who likes....” (Brontë 120). By putting false words into Jane’s mouth, the film locks away her true thoughts. The more “monstrous” thoughts of the real Jane, are, like Bertha, imprisoned, forbidden from making any appearance on-screen. In this way, the film completes a second, even more extreme division of the female mentality. Stevenson makes Brontë’s Jane, the true Jane, into a second

madwoman all on her own, allowing only the least threatening avatar that can be extracted from Jane's character to come to the surface.

As these ostensible passages of Jane's psychology acknowledge, however, the novel *Jane Eyre* does not conduct factual reporting, but a feat of first-person narration. In the novel, Brontë makes Jane the interpreter of events for the reader. Jane's anxious narrative voice betrays uneasy, shifting perceptions that sympathize, alternately, with women and their oppressors. In *Forbidden Otherness: Plain Jane's Regress*, Gana discusses the connection between Bertha's role as Jane's psychological double and Jane's role as a first-person narrator and the sole female character in possession of a voice. Gana claims that a tone of anxiety lurks beneath Jane's "constant appeals to the reader for approval" (Gana 6) with Jane, as Gilbert and Gubar assert, living in simultaneous terror of the "...monster-woman and the angel-woman..." (Gilbert and Gubar 34), of the madwoman that lurks within her and the repressed dependent that St. John, especially, places her in danger of becoming. Jane's struggle leaves her no option but to choose between "the orphaned child/Bertha or reason" (Gana 7). To marry Rochester, in the end, Jane must stifle an internal instinct toward independence, and Gana reads, in Jane's "Reader, I married him" (Brontë 503) an "...apogee of self-betrayal...and a symptom of failure coming under the guise of self-assertion rather than an emblem of feminine triumph" (Gana 20). Jane must exorcise her inner Bertha so she can leave Rochester, forfeiting her passion, and then once more so she can marry Rochester, forfeiting her independence. Bertha's death permits Jane and Rochester to marry, but the physical death, the surmounting of the legal impediment, is superficial. The psychological death, the defeat of Jane's independence, the powerful side of her personality, is the one that carries true weight.

In the early 2000s, British television was "...busy cultivating associations with the theatrical and literary past...[wresting] from the hands of Hollywood and the international community control of their own high-cultural traditions" (Semenza and Hasenfratz 233). As exemplified by Ian MacDonald's *Mansfield Park*, many of these adaptations emphasized the nuclear family, order, and a spirit of authenticity toward the original text. This object of transposition, however, made these adaptations vulnerable to "...charges of stylistic and cultural conservatism" (233). The most recent BBC serial adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (dir. Susanna White, 2006) emphasizes many of these themes, but, nevertheless, takes a somewhat inventive approach. White's miniseries almost certainly falls in line with the transpositional adaptation, without, as explained by the Hollywood Reporter, "...[adding] new colors to Brontë's novel. Rather, it brings out all the shades and hues of the original portrait, restoring it to its full glory" (Garron). White's miniseries does not highlight narrative gaps such as Bertha Mason's marginalized personhood. Nevertheless, this adaptation evokes the anxieties a twenty-first-century readership might feel regarding feminism. This adaptation places the focus on Jane by including her time with her cousins, making her steady evolution toward independence complete. While the novel, and, to a more pronounced degree, the Stevenson adaptation, entomb Jane forever with Rochester, White's miniseries pulls threads of the original novel that emphasize Jane's discovery of family through her achievement of emotional and financial independence. Rather than focusing on Jane's relationship with Rochester alone, White creates a heroine more reflective of contemporary values. As the epilogue of the novel comes to a close, Jane narrates, "I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth... I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine" (Brontë 505). Jane describes how she sees her female cousins, Diana and Mary, only once each year; she explains how she cannot care for Adele, because her "...times

and cares were now required by another—[her] husband needed them all” (Brontë 504). In a macabre repetition of Jane’s childhood, the Rochesters send Adele away to boarding school.

The closing shot of White’s final episode, meanwhile, features the entire family gathered around for a portrait. Here, Jane gives the orders, retaining her independence and individuality as she tells her household (including her female cousins and Adele, who remain in her life, Rochester, and even Grace Poole, who is pictured holding one of Jane’s children) where to stand. Encircling the portrait is a frame, detailed with exotic flowers and tropical imagery that, upon first glance, appear as if meant to evoke associations with St. John’s missionary work—in India, in the novel, while the Cape in White’s film. Even a miniature portrait of St. John is embedded in the corner of the frame. This makes Jane’s family, and, in this new interpretation, Jane’s happy ending, complete. The frame, however, may symbolize some duality within the unseen, guiding energy that presides over Jane’s future, signifying an influence beyond the religious morality that St. John epitomizes. To a reader of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the frame more closely suggests Antoinette/Bertha’s childhood home, Coulibri, in Spanish Town, Jamaica, with “...the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in flames.... The bamboos and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver, and the soft green velvet of the moss on the garden wall” (Rhys 170). All this imagery appears in the mind of a tormented Antoinette moments before she sets fire to Thornfield, liberating herself in the only way she can. Antoinette’s memory, the influence of the rebellious feminist, may cast a shadow over the future of marriage and family that Jane builds for herself; this may be a shadow of doubt, of desire for the same liberation that Antoinette achieves, symbolized by the imagery of Antoinette’s childhood, or simply of ill-defined unease. Regardless, this vague, overarching shadow encircles White’s portrait of Jane’s happy ending like a vise. White, nevertheless, appears to restore Jane to her rightful place as the

protagonist of her own story; and with the nature and meaning of the frame so ambiguous, too ambiguous to do justice to Antoinette/Bertha's character, it does not successfully restore it to personhood. It's still not a very radical story. If the madwoman's influence pervades, it does not pervade enough.

Overtones of feminism, however, may arguably extend to the humanization of Bertha in an entirely different aspect of White's adaptation: in flashbacks that portray Bertha as she once was, before she became the madwoman in the attic. White's flashbacks depict Bertha as a woman, a real person living her life in the Caribbean, which is a mark of progress from Stevenson's monster, and from Brontë's Bertha, who never speaks, and is less than a character. Nevertheless, these scenes imply that Bertha was, in fact, a madwoman who had to be imprisoned in the attic by the patriarchy because there was no other solution. In Rhys' version of the story, Rochester deteriorates Antoinette's mental state with emotional and physical abuse. *Wide Sargasso Sea* begins with Antoinette's childhood in Jamaica and moves to her unhappy marriage to Rochester. Rhys' conception of Rochester is brought to coldness, condescension, and brutal violence by his internalized racism, sexism, and inferiority complex. He revokes Antoinette's name and identity, decides she is mad, and, in the third, briefest, most psychologically tortured act of the novel, shuts her up in the attic of his mansion in the English countryside. White's flashbacks, however, clearly paint Rochester as the victim. The camera depicts Bertha walking through a restaurant in the Caribbean against a backdrop of "delightful, passionate music" (White), as described in Rochester's confiding voice-over narration to Jane, which also includes the description of "the women" (White), who are, of course, "very beautiful... seductive, but also mysterious... tantalizing, dangerous..." (White). Later, Rochester, looking vulnerable and helpless, pleads with an increasingly violent Bertha, who

throws things and laughs at her husband when he walks in on her having an affair with another man. Rochester, in the novel, when telling Jane his story, redefines his own adultery as an assertion of agency within a loveless marriage. These scenes claim that Bertha's adultery, however, is part of her madness. White justifies Jane's decision to remain with Rochester, in the end, by offering proof that Rochester is not an abusive monster, and that he never was. In making his character more palatable to modern audiences, White makes Jane's story more of a feminist triumph, but, in doing so, excludes Bertha's character from the same kind of justice.

White's efforts to visually clear Rochester's name are not limited to his treatment of his wife. Toward the beginning of their relationship, Rochester asks Jane to imagine his liaison with Adele's mother, Celine Varens. He tells her to picture "A suite of rooms in a particularly gorgeous Parisian hotel, upholstered with velvets and furs, everything sensuous to the touch" (White) where he "...breathes in the scent of his lover, musk and amber. Her name is Celine Varens. She is very beautiful. She is a dancer. An exotic bird. She dotes on him, and he is passionately in love with her" (White). Again, Rochester speaks in a voice-over as the camera depicts his past self before a mirror, staring introspectively into the glass. Moments later, Celine walks through the door and cheats on Rochester, unaware that Rochester, concealed, is watching her. By introducing Celine and Bertha from this angle, White seems to attempt to justify Rochester in abruptly severing the former from his financial support and imprisoning the latter in his attic. This empathetic interpretation of Rochester toes the line of misogyny. Rochester's deprecating introduction of these women to Jane, as noteworthy only for being exotic, sexual, unfaithful, unwomanly, and mad, reduces them to foils to Jane's purity, truly deserving of the abandonment they receive in their dependency. Rochester explains that Celine went on to abandon her child and run away with another man, but he never explains why, and, more

importantly, Celine never gets a chance to explain herself either. Desperation could have driven her to make her choices, but Brontë, Stevenson, and White deny her a voice. White's creative decisions may even commit an even greater injustice against Celine and Bertha, because, while the unreliability of Rochester's explanations in Brontë's text leaves room for creative interpretation, White seizes this room for interpretation and clarifies the situation herself, seeming to offer up indisputable, convincing, visual evidence in Rochester's favor.

However, these flashbacks convey more than White's attempt to give greater depth to Rochester's past, as the opening scene of the first episode suggests. Unlike most other recent adaptations, the series does not begin with a shot of young Jane curled up with a book; instead, the first image that viewers see is Jane wandering across the Sahara Desert during a vivid sunset, before the camera cuts back to Jane at home, reading *The Arabian Nights*. The presence of *The Arabian Nights* has nothing to do with the desert; the desert is a trope for adventure, as symbolized in *Lawrence of Arabia*, the novel and film. Here, White almost directly references the film. White takes pains to showcase Jane's imaginative powers and her longing for adventure, forcing the audience to question whether these stories of Rochester's past, brought to life as sensory images, represent his history as it truly transpired, or how Jane imagines it. The vivid, visually descriptive texture of Rochester's duplicitous seduction into marriage by Bertha Mason against the lush, tropical background of the Caribbean, as represented on-screen—and perhaps alluded to in the frame of the last episode, an overshadowing presence that will never cease haunting Jane—is almost overblown. Though White remains the interpreter, she gives Jane the power to interpret her own reality. Because Rochester's memories appear to the viewer through Jane's imagination, White implicates Jane's perspective, like Rochester's, as unobjective, and driven, perhaps, by an undercurrent of misogyny, or perhaps jealousy. Does the

identification convey her potential attraction to women? There's a potential queering of the book here, although it's a challenging concept to undertake. In these imaginative dreamscapes, Jane identifies with the male adventure; throughout the miniseries, she longs to travel and share in the worldly experiences that wealthy white men such as Rochester have the freedom to pursue in her society. These desires point to a masculinization, perhaps even a queering, of Jane's imagination.

Alternatively, setting aside the queering of Jane's character, White may be making *Jane* the interpreter, the one who represents Rochester's life story in such a way as to make his character most appealing. This would subordinate her to a male point of view. Through this lens, Jane is the one who enables this problematically sexualized, demonized portrayal of women such as Bertha and Celine. Jane, not White, is the one turning a blind eye to the questionable patterns that surface in Rochester's history, viewing his mistakes through rose-colored glasses. Unlike the symbolism within the frame, Jane's visionary imagination powers appear throughout the film with frequent enough evidence to make this theory of perception appear convincing.

In the novel, when the existence of Bertha Mason is revealed, Jane detects something of the ominous undertones in Rochester's bitter statement of how he "...hated the recollection of the time [he] passed with Celine, Giacinta, and Clara'" (Brontë 347), and Jane is horrified, understanding that she would almost certainly "...become the successor of these poor girls..." (Brontë 347) and that "...he would one day regard [her] with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory" (Brontë 347). Though Jane's perspective dominates the text rather than Rochester's, Jane, as evinced by this example, may recognize that Rochester is not an objective observer. She considers Rochester's endless cycle of abandoned mistresses as objects of compassion rather than contempt. Nevertheless, in the miniseries, Jane's vision of Bertha's character and history is laced with misogyny. There is detectable sympathy within the parallel of

Jane being confined to the red room as a child; vibrant red decor floods Jane's imagined flashbacks that take place in the Caribbean. While Jane doesn't judge Bertha with a critical eye, she feels threatened by the overhanging idea of Bertha, which Jane comes to view, subconsciously, as a dire warning of what Jane herself might become.

Jane's more skeptical, critical cognition, especially the fearful thoughts that appear in the novel, thoughts that intimate flaws within White's glossed-over rendition of Rochester, remain implied, even ambiguous. However, White may acknowledge Jane's "...[unreliability] when she deals with what she most fears" (Gilbert and Gubar 211). As Gana, interpreting *The Madwoman in the Attic*, suggests, Rochester's retold memories are interpreted by a mind anxious to separate itself from its doomed, demonized predecessors, and to refrain from reflecting too long on its own participation in a shared sphere with the "madwomen" of Rochester's past. Critics have explored the idea that Jane could be an unreliable narrator, leaving much of the truth behind the histories, experiences, and relationships within *Jane Eyre* unreachable; and leaving, therefore, room for expansive interpretation. *Wide Sargasso Sea* writes back to the canon, freeing readers from Jane's gaze, prejudiced by colonialism, her whiteness, and the patriarchal influences in her life. Rhys doesn't perceive Jane's narration as the truth, and neither can viewers of the flashbacks in White's adaptation.

Like Stevenson's film, White's miniseries acknowledges the issue of voice that permeates *Jane Eyre*. The *possibility* of Rochester's being entirely in the right haunts the narrative, as does the alternate possibility of his having engaged in a vicious cycle of seducing and sexualizing, then abandoning and demonizing an endless succession of women, beginning with his wife, whom he *may* have eventually driven to madness and death. By implicating the tragic dependence of women on men as particularly gruesome for women who express emotion

and sexuality, *Wide Sargasso Sea* slams the door shut on the ability to interpret *Jane Eyre*, and, indeed, any work of Victorian literature with a blind eye regarding gender and race. When filmmakers such as Stevenson choose to romanticize Jane and Rochester's relationship, presenting the best for Rochester and the worst for Bertha, they reduce Bertha to a monstrous, faceless extra. They reduce Jane, in turn, to even more of a blind, unknowing victim than Antoinette, who, at least, found victory and rebellion in setting fire to Thornfield. Antoinette cannot tell her truth, and neither can "Celine, Giacinta, and Clara" (Brontë 347) without casting a vile, twisted light upon the familial happiness that Jane finds in her union with a redeemed Rochester.

Stevenson does not allow this redeemed Rochester to coexist with Antoinette Cosway, but must banish her as Bertha Mason. White's adaptation, on the other hand, comes closer to achieving this balance by giving full force to Jane's status as an unreliable narrator. Nevertheless, the truth remains ambiguous: Bertha's multifaceted personhood, her inner "Antoinette," is denied a voice. Regardless of the multifaceted meaning for Jane's character that lurks behind these flashbacks and symbols, only Bertha receives representation, while Antoinette receives none. Full-fledged justice for Antoinette would implicate a feminist, postcolonial retelling of Jane's story. This suggests the impossibility of making Jane a feminist without villainizing other women. This is Brontë's shortcoming due to her acceptance of racial hierarchies and assumptions. Perhaps one day the world will receive the well-deserved adaptation *Jane and Antoinette*, a film with the power to represent both women as the feminist heroines society needs them to be. However, despite the efforts of an evolving culture to humanize the madwoman in the attic, a fearful motivation to smooth over the darker underside to Jane's happy ending pervades in film adaptations of *Jane Eyre*.



Gender-Based Sexual Violence and “Visionary Alternatives” in Film Adaptations of *Wuthering Heights*

In Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, multiple unreliable narrators take turns telling a story that spans three generations. Flashbacks coalesce to create a story within a story, a frame within a frame, twisted by multi-layered perceptions and emotions that figure into gendered biases that fuel the narrative. Lockwood, an outsider, records the story he hears from the “steady, reasonable” (Brontë 31) Nelly Dean. Nelly, with her dry humor and common sense, is a compelling narrator, but she lacks compassion for women who defy socially construed patriarchal authority. Time and time again, she criticizes Catherine and Heathcliff, making Brontë’s message surrounding her characters ambiguous. Brontë may have sought to condemn her characters as selfish people guided by pride, greed, and fear or idolize them as symbols of love and wild nature annihilated by civilization. Alternatively, as suggested by Gilbert and Gubar, Brontë might even be setting Catherine and Heathcliff up as symbols of an oppressed woman’s fragmented personality, the civilized lady and the unruly outcast akin to the madwoman, “half savage and hardy, and free” (74). According to this interpretation, Nelly cannot be taken as Brontë’s mouthpiece, but as the mouthpiece of a sexist society. Film adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* take decisive positions on gaps within the narrative, attempting to define the undefinable spirit of the novel. By shifting aspects of the temporality and narrative of the novel, filmmakers alter the nature of the central romance, appropriating its message to contemporary cultural issues; most notably, sexual violence and assault.

The existence of Hareton and Catherine Linton, seemingly, makes one of the many historical interpretations of the source text, the original novel, most obvious. Readers of the 1850 posthumous edition will encounter a preface by Charlotte Brontë, in which she describes the

second generation of lovers as the core of the novel, encapsulating the moral lesson that she believes Emily Brontë wished *Wuthering Heights* to convey. Charlotte Brontë published this preface, however, as a response to backlash against her sister's novel. Contemporary critics had previously scrutinized the novel for its portrayal of immorality, violent, destructive relationships, and unlikeable characters. With this preface, Charlotte Brontë contradicts these critics, asserting that Catherine Linton and Hareton break generational curses, freeing themselves from the unethical shadows of the original Catherine and Heathcliff to begin anew, learning lessons of generosity and compassion and restoring balance to *Wuthering Heights*. Nelly's continual commendation of Catherine Linton and Hareton also speaks to this interpretation of the text. As Charlotte Brontë writes, "For a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity, look at the character of Nelly Dean; for an example of constancy and tenderness, remark that of Edgar Linton" (Brontë 15). Charlotte Brontë reconfigures Edgar Linton as a true hero amidst the cast of *Wuthering Heights* and makes Nelly out to be a patient and resourceful champion of quiet virtue, much like Charlotte Brontë's own heroine, Jane Eyre.

Gilbert and Gubar write that the Nelly of the novel "...seems to many critics to have been put into the novel to help Emily Brontë disavow such uniformly dark intentions" (151) as the unhealthy, vindictive relationship between the two central characters suggests. This disavowal in the shape of Nelly Dean supports the ideas put forth by Charlotte Brontë in the preface in the novel. While Gilbert and Gubar, in their sympathy with the emotionally turbulent Catherine and the idea of the madwoman, do not concur with Charlotte Brontë's preface, their description of Nelly as the "...patriarchy's paradigmatic housekeeper, the man's woman who has traditionally been hired to keep men's houses in order by straightening out their parlors, their daughters, and their stories" (159) demonstrates how Nelly's personality, motivations, and characteristics

conform easily to the patriarchy, in a way that placated the distrustful audience of Victorian society. Nelly's bias against Catherine, whom Nelly calls a "...haughty, headstrong creature" (Brontë 39) and informs Lockwood that "...[she] did not like her, after infancy was past" (39) validated *Wuthering Heights* in the eyes of the critics of Emily Brontë's era. Charlotte Brontë made *Wuthering Heights* palatable to Victorian audiences by permitting readers to understand it as a narrative grounded in the phenomenon of one woman tearing down another for expressing her gender and sexuality in a way that violated cultural norms of the era.

By encapsulating *Wuthering Heights* within the bounds of another medium, film, and through the eyes of an additional narrator, the filmmaker, film adaptations add another layer of perception to the rendering of events, altering it to create new biases toward different meanings. While never freeing the story from the grip of its original narrator, Nelly, "...much of the burden of narration is nonverbal, borne largely by the camera (the angles, duration, and sequencing of what it sees)" (49). As H. Porter Abbott writes in "Story, Plot, and Narration," "Story seems to pre-exist its rendering... rendering also *seems* to generate the story..." (41) changing the appearance of not only the sequence of events but the nature of them, and, in tandem, the nature of the intersecting romantic plotlines, whether for evil, divided femininity, or liberation. By shifting the narrative structure away from Nelly Dean, or by altering Nelly as a narrator, filmmakers change the true characterization of Catherine and Heathcliff, shifting them away from Charlotte Brontë's stated perception of a cautionary tale of an unhealthy, immoral relationship.

Cinematic interpretations of *Wuthering Heights* have evolved in ways that impart both positive and negative repercussions regarding feminist principles. Today's readers understand the limitations within Charlotte Brontë's preface due to this continual rereading, even reshaping,

of the narrative, accomplished not only through literary criticism, but, in the public imagination, and thus in a continuous, fluid circle of understanding that influences literary criticism, through film adaptation. Audiences have grown to sympathize with the turbulent clash of stubborn independence with worldly principles epitomized, in public imagination, by Catherine and Heathcliff. The sympathy of Nelly for Catherine expressed in the film adaptations of both William Wyler (dir. William Wyler, 1939) and Robert Fuest (dir. Robert Fuest, 1970) takes on a feminist connotation, becoming a contrast to the oppositional relationship between Nelly and Catherine in the novel.

Nevertheless, a word of added caution tempers the tendency to read the cinematic evolution of *Wuthering Heights* as a wholly progressive phenomenon. Abbott analyzes a short segment of narration given by Brontë to Isabella, in which Isabella writes to Nelly, “Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil? ... I beseech you to explain, if you can, what I have married” (Brontë 80). Abbott explains that the drastic turn Isabella’s life has taken lends “emotional excess” (45) to her communicated perceptions, which were, as acknowledged by Catherine, warped in the first place. Isabella has “...made the mistake of importing the wrong plot” (45) by characterizing Heathcliff, in the first place, as a romantic hero, and when filmmakers become behind-the-scenes narrators, their perceptions, too, import the wrong plot.

In the black-and-white classic adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, Wyler, like Isabella, casts Heathcliff as a romantic hero, a departure from Brontë’s sadistic villain. In Wyler’s film, Heathcliff becomes much less physically violent. Wyler paints him in the light of a sensitive, brooding hero, while Catherine, too, becomes kinder toward all other characters surrounding her, never striking Nelly Dean, as in the novel, and treating Heathcliff with more visible regard.

Wyler gives more attention to their childhood, making it more idyllic than grim. The passage of Catherine's diary, the only instance of the novel in which Catherine herself gets to narrate her own story, relays the pious, oppressive behavior of Joseph towards her and Heathcliff, and, more importantly, "...the fact that she and Heathcliff shiver in the garret because 'Hindley and his wife [are basking downstairs before a comfortable fire] ...'" (Gilbert and Gubar 142). According to Gilbert and Gubar, "Catherine's defensiveness is clear. She (and Heathcliff) are troubled by the billing and cooing of 'step-parents' because she understands, perhaps for the first time, the sexual nature of what a minute later she calls Hindley's 'paradise on the hearth' and—worse—understands its relevance to her" (142).

While Gilbert and Gubar did not interpret this piece of insight into Catherine's psychology through this lens of gender-based fears of sexuality, and "all the terrors which attend that phenomenon in a puritanical and patriarchal society" (142), until 1979, Wyler's film fundamentally alters the presentation of sexuality within *Wuthering Heights*. Without this opening, or anything thematically similar, Wyler removes even the possibility of these fears within Catherine's psychology. None of Gilbert and Gubar's sexual or gendered revelations can be present in a film, where, instead, Wyler turns the attention to the untainted relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff as an imaginative paradise. The two of them constantly retreat to Penistone Crag, which they pretend is their castle, and dream of running away to gain wealth and independence. Thus, Catherine's division between Heathcliff and Edgar Linton becomes a conflict between wealth and idyllic true love, eliminating the possibility of a phenomenon grounded in the gender-based sexual terrors that underlie patriarchal society.

In one scene, preceding a ball that Catherine attends with the Lintons, Heathcliff begs Catherine not to go, and when Catherine angrily rebuffs him, he protests, "Who soiled your

heart? Not Heathcliff. Who turns you into a vain, cheap, worldly fool? Linton does. You'll never love him, but you'll let yourself be loved because it pleases your stupid vanity" (Wyler). Rather than asserting itself on-screen as a conflict of repressed female agency, as suggested by Gilbert and Gubar, *Wuthering Heights* comes to revolve around the sole conflict conspiring against Catherine and Heathcliff's romance, contained, in this adaptation, within Catherine's classist impulses; in other words, within her desire for material wealth and social standing. Wyler reconfigures the spirit of the novel from the psychological take of the trapped, repressed woman to that of a couple torn apart by classism and Catherine's growing obsession with the lavish parties and comfortable affluence of the Lintons. Wyler does, admittedly, feature some of the precarity women of Catherine's era faced, acknowledging Catherine's status as Hindley's dependent in the first scene featuring adult Catherine, in which Catherine speaks out against the way Hindley runs his household to little effect. Nevertheless, this scene does more to highlight the disorderly, unsettled atmosphere of *Wuthering Heights* than Catherine's disempowerment as a woman in Victorian society.

In this way, Wyler heightens the wealth inequality between Thrushcross Grange and *Wuthering Heights* in his evocation. When Catherine and Heathcliff infiltrate Thrushcross Grange, they stumble upon a glamorous ball (absurdly full of people for a secluded manor house on the moors). This marks the turning point at which Catherine succumbs to these classist, ambitious impulses that ultimately doom her fate. From a story with heavy potential for feminist undertones and impulses, as recognized by Gilbert and Gubar, *Wuthering Heights* becomes purely a romance. Missing, too, is the potential for an interpretation grounded in an epic psychological thriller, ghost story, and revenge plot; the softening of Heathcliff demands the omission of the whole second generation of characters, whom Heathcliff, spiraling into

increasing insanity, attempts to manipulate and destroy. To add this second chapter of Heathcliff's obsessive existence to the film would make him unredeemable, casting him decisively as the villain, instead of the tragic romantic hero that Wyler seeks to bring to the screen. In the absence of a truly villainous first generation in need of redemption, the redemption arc for the plotline that Catherine Linton and Heathcliff provide becomes unnecessary. Although, the idea of a redemptive ending might draw more from Charlotte Brontë's preface than Emily Brontë's novel. Again, the truth is unknowable, because everything society learns about what this novel could be telling us is filtered through the mouthpiece of critics, filmmakers, and/or those who seek to assimilate the message of the novel to the cultural moment.

Abbott profiles the final scene of Wyler's film in his analysis of this smoothing over of the central characters which accompanies Wyler's remarkable restructuring of plot. The superimposed image of Heathcliff and Catherine, ghostlike, walking toward Penistone Crag, cements the story as a romance by the "closing of narrative gaps on almost every level—moral, psychological, social, and... metaphysical" (Abbott 49). Abbott, too, adds that viewers *trust* this closing scene more than that of the original novel because Wyler codes his narrator, Nelly, "...with greater reliability: white-haired and grave, she is played with authoritative dignity by Flora Robson, whose narrowed eyes seem continually to gaze on the unseen" (49). This marks an extreme departure from the biased, opinionated narrator of the novel, who, instead of sagely commenting on the intricacies of a hidden plot that she understood all along, stumbles upon Heathcliff body's firsthand, experiencing confusion and disorientation before at last, with shock, pronouncing him dead. The Nelly of the novel, "the patriarchy's paradigmatic housekeeper" (Gilbert and Gubar 159), experiences discord with Catherine, a clash of polar opposite ways of expressing womanhood, that Charlotte Brontë's preface casts as a statement against the

madwoman in the attic. Gilbert and Gubar, on the other hand, consider Nelly a symptom of Emily Brontë's denunciation of a patriarchal society that condemned women like Catherine. Wyler's Nelly presents a third alternative: by endorsing the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff, she eliminates the need for redemption of the novel's message, and with it the need for a second generation.

In this way, Wyler's film supports the idea of *Wuthering Heights* as a mystical romance for the ages. After the entrance of the 1939 film into the public consciousness, readers regarded *Wuthering Heights* as a quintessential romance, a far cry from the depraved exhibition of horrible characters in need of Charlotte Brontë's apology and defense. Wyler achieves a complete generic shift, as asserted by Semenza and Hasenfratz, who suggest that Wyler "manage[s] to transfer the narrative from its original literary genre... and embed it in a film genre (the Hollywood romance, which would evolve into the so-called 'women's films of the 1940s)" (Semenza and Hasenfratz 185). It compares easily to *Gone with the Wind* (1939, dir. Victor Fleming), another film with a romance plot as a veneer concealing the narrative of an unlikeable, "strong female protagonist," a narrative that, in itself, buries the terrifying narrative of American slavery. As with *Gone with the Wind*, however, the promotion of Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship in Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* (which retains toxic qualities, even in the softened film version) as an ideal romance overwhelmingly detracts from the film's potentially feminist qualities. Wyler's adaptation gives *Wuthering Heights* a separate existence, and "If a story has a separate existence such that it can be rendered in more than one way and even more than one medium, how do we know it is the same story when we see it again?" (Abbott 41). As Abbott suggests, the act of adaptation demands new ways of telling a story, so much so that the story does not even remain the same story.

By commenting on the “...politics of the source text” (Sanders 27), Wyler’s adaptation makes explicit gaps in the narrative in ways that participate in the scholarly discussion on gender in society “...by means of alteration and addition” (Sanders 27) to the original novel. As Abbott suggests, “...the story is separate from its rendering” (Abbott 40), leaving room for interpretation regarding the truth behind the narration. Films such as Wyler’s interpret this truth, going so far as to create a new story, a new *Wuthering Heights*, grounded not only in changing ideas, but an analysis of changing ideas, accomplished by direct and purposeful alteration of narration, structure, and characterization. For a time, Wyler closed off different meanings and made a romantic interpretation, the farthest possible interpretation from Gilbert and Gubar’s feminist reading, the only interpretation in popular imagination.

The 1960s and 1970s marked the emergence of a new approach to film adaptation: “Panavision adaptations,” as classed by Semenza and Hasenfratz, emphasized a lyrical, pictorial aesthetic, grounded in natural, sweeping cinematography of the British countryside, with the spirit of authenticity but without the “regressive nostalgia” (Semenza and Hasenfratz 271) that characterize adaptations such as Ian McDonald’s *Mansfield Park*. Instead, as the cultural transitions and “...sexual revolutions of the 1960s were rewriting the very moral and social underpinnings of the nineteenth-century novel of marriage, these films tended to meditate on the tragic consequences of repression and patriarchy” (271). Alter and Corrigan add that, during the 1960s and 1970s, “postwar avant-garde and documentary movements continued an emphasis on more creative, more personal documentary engagements” (Alter and Corrigan 5) and experimental cinema. In her essay *The Legacy of Hell: Wuthering Heights on Film and Gilbert and Gubar’s Feminist Poetics*, Hila Schacher notes, too, that “Adaptations made in the 1970s

and onwards show an awareness of the issue of gender, a trend that is arguably most evident in screen adaptations” (Schacher 151).

The Panavision adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* adheres to Semenza and Hasenfratz’s categorization, and to Alter and Corrigan’s flexible definition of the essay film. Director Robert Fuest engages personally with social issues of gender and sexual violence, presenting a nuanced and legible thesis grounded in feminism, alongside an antithesis grounded in misogyny.

On the surface, the feminist portrayal of Catherine reaps no benefit from the kind of sexuality that Fuest portrays. Fuest incorporates sexual encounters between Heathcliff and Catherine, as well as Heathcliff and Isabella, neither of which appear explicitly in the novel, and in both instances, Heathcliff behaves with violence, causing Isabella to actually cry out, “Let me go! You’re hurting me” (Fuest). In one scene, during one of their many arguments, Heathcliff is shown striking Catherine. Brontë wrote Heathcliff as a character who frequently exercises violence as an outlet for his emotions, and who experiences violent love for Catherine in the sense that it is passionate. Would the Heathcliff of the novel ever physically hurt Catherine, and could these sexual encounters have ever taken place in Brontë’s narrative? Brontë tells the story almost entirely from Nelly’s perspective, which makes the truth ambiguous, debatable, and difficult to pin down. Fuest maneuvers the narrative into a springboard upon which to project a social movement that challenged traditional codes of behavior related to sexuality. As his antithesis, a pushback against ultimate feminist designs, Fuest reconfigures the narrative around the theme of the sexual revolution, but not the kind of sexual revolution that serves to liberate the repressed woman of Gilbert and Gubar’s *Madwoman*.

So, while Fuest, in the true spirit of Brontë’s novel, defies Victorian prudishness, the film may escape one form of repressive social conventions to enter another: the portrayal of sexual

violence as a means of expressing passion. Ultimately, too, Fuest sympathizes with Heathcliff in a way that may doom his portrayal of sexual violence as a symptom of misogyny rather than a denunciation of misogyny. Heathcliff cannot be a sympathetic hero and a predator; these roles cannot coexist. Fuest cannot change the fact that the film's instances of sexual violence are committed by the male lead in a narrative that has been rebranded, since the release of Wyler's culturally transformative film, as a romance for the ages.

Fuest's pairing of a more submissive Nelly with an increasingly abusive Hindley further contradicts a liberating interpretation of the sexuality portrayed in this adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*. Fuest's adaptation shifts the temporality of the narrative, foregrounding Catherine's death by opening the story with the scene of her funeral rather than mentioning it as a past event. As previously mentioned, Fuest conveys the rest of the story through flashbacks from the perspective of only one narrator: Nelly, or a version of Nelly, invested with an unrequited love for Hindley. In this way, Fuest makes Nelly the heroine of her own romantic subplot. In the novel, Nelly remains a bystander, but in narrating her story to Lockwood, she takes on a remarkable status in the novel, whereas every other female character—most notably, the principal female character, Catherine—remains voiceless. Fuest's Nelly, on the other hand, becomes *increasingly* voiceless, a tragic figure in her own right. In the novel, Nelly finds motivation as a motherly figure, first for the Earnshaw children, and then for Catherine Linton. Though not much older than the Earnshaws themselves, Nelly is forced by her status as a servant into a caregiving role rather than a romantic one. These motivations prompt most filmmakers, including Wyler, to represent Nelly as a middle-aged, sometimes even elderly figure, removing her from the action with an even more isolating emphasis than in the novel, in which Nelly plays alongside the Earnshaws as children. Fuest, however, evokes a much younger Nelly, tied through

more equalizing bonds to the central characters of the narrative that she relays. Fuest places Nelly on equal ground with Catherine and Heathcliff by making her a dynamic character rather than a “human fixture” (Brontë 21) with “diplomatic immunity to entangling emotions” (Gilbert and Gubar 152). According to Charlotte Brontë, Catherine Linton, the angelic, pure woman, redeems the novel from the rebellious version of femininity (in other words, the madwoman) in the form of the original Catherine, who literally haunts the narrative. After Wyler’s film, which grafted the role of the angel in the house onto the original Catherine, the second half of the novel became culturally irrelevant. Fuest, in this way, creates a “normal” romantic heroine to parallel Catherine, an angel in the house surrogate for the effaced Catherine Linton, who takes up the mantle of heroine.

Fuest’s interpretation of Hindley, however, does not follow through with the idea of the “normal” love story to parallel the toxic relationship. Fuest’s Hindley, driven to depression by the death of his wife, not only succumbs to addiction and brutality, as he does in the novel, but makes a habit of sexually abusing women living in his household. In one scene, Hindley and his friends assault a young female servant, practically chasing her from the premises under threat of rape. In the context of Hindley’s sexually abusive behavior, his portrayal as a love interest for Nelly, the less damaged heroine, who should consequently desire a less damaging relationship—the angel in the house alongside Catherine as the madwoman—evidence would suggest that Fuest’s frame of narration ultimately subjugates women like Catherine and Isabella under a symptom of sexism even more threatening than Wyler’s softening of a female heroine with a rebellious, nontraditional, and supposedly unlikeable personality.

Nevertheless, the film’s portrayal of sexual violence, though accompanied by the cultural phenomenon of the sexual revolution, does not translate to its *endorsement* of sexual violence.

Nelly's narration does not filter through the secondary frame of Lockwood's perceptions; perhaps this is why, despite the film's portrayal of sexual violence in its male romantic figures, the female gaze takes over the camera, looking upon instances of sexual violence committed by both Hindley and Heathcliff with revulsion, rather than romanticizing them. Immediately after Isabella's outcry against Heathcliff's assault, Nelly discovers Heathcliff dominating Isabella in an embrace. Nelly's immediate reaction is horror. Here, Fuest's ultimate thesis carries through. This points to Fuest's critical portrayal of sexual violence, and the acknowledgment of Nelly's perspective through camera angles restores to Nelly her voice, establishing her as a strong character with agency, though Nelly as a character participating in the drama of the Earnshaw/Linton/Heathcliff romantic saga becomes increasingly ineffectual.

Another encounter, too, points to a more sympathetic portrayal of the "unlikeable" Catherine, shifting her motivations to leave *Wuthering Heights* and marry Edgar Linton away from classist impulses and toward a more chilling provocation: Hindley's sexual violence toward dependent women living in his household, like Catherine herself. Catherine, Nelly, and other nearby female servants are revolted and frightened by Hindley's abuse, and Catherine, drawing upon the resource of marriage, the only semblance of power accessible to Victorian women of her social standing, joins herself to Edgar and the Lintons to escape the darkest side of the patriarchy, explored more concretely in the source text of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, a novel also adapted into a Panavision film (dir. Roman Polanski, 1979) during the same decade as Fuest's *Wuthering Heights*. In Fuest's version of events, instead of acting under the lure of classist, ambitious impulses, Catherine chooses to marry Edgar, thus, according to Heathcliff, ruining her life, "... [betraying] [her] own heart" (Brontë 192) and having "...deserved this" (192) and

“...having killed [herself]” (192), because she wished to escape an environment of sexual violence that endangered her every day of her life.

At first glance, it may appear as though Fuest seeks to further liberate Brontë's characters, including her female characters, through the recognition and validation of female sexuality, in the same way that *Wide Sargasso Sea* recognizes and validates the sexuality of Bertha/Antoinette. Fuest's film permits Catherine, like Bertha, to express her sexuality. However, as Rhys makes clear, a woman's assertive expression of her sexuality in Victorian society also precipitates her downfall. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's downfall comes in the shape of her husband's fear and distrust of her otherness, which he considers linked to her expression of sexuality, while Catherine's sexuality, namely, her reassertion of sexuality upon Heathcliff's return, instigates the self-created illness that destroys her from within. The interpretation of this illness as a manifestation of Catherine's fear of sexual violence becomes more apparent in Fuest's adaptation than in the novel because Fuest denounces, via the female gaze, the sexual violence that Catherine and Isabella undergo, promoting a sympathetic portrayal of women forced to undergo sexual abuse. This is a reading that can be applied not only to Fuest's film but to Brontë's novel, calling to mind the disturbing narrative gap that lies within Catherine's childhood diary entry, explained by Gilbert and Gubar as Catherine's first conscious exposure to sexuality. This reading may even further explain, in both the novel and the film, Catherine's logic in her choice of the phlegmatic, compassionate, physically and psychologically weak Edgar over Heathcliff, whose relationship to Catherine is overtly sexual, violent, and possessive. Where Rhys picked up on the potential for sexual violence previously unseen and unacknowledged in *Jane Eyre*, Fuest may accomplish a similar feat with Catherine and Heathcliff's destructive relationship in *Wuthering Heights*.

Wyler's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* softens the hard edges of the violent, toxic relationship between characters once reviled as unlikeable in the era of Emily Brontë, demanding Charlotte Brontë's apologetic re-reading of her sister's novel. Wyler's re-reading, however, transformed Catherine and Heathcliff into figures of fairy-tale romance, permanently redefining the gendered meaning of *Wuthering Heights* in popular imagination, heightening true love lost to classism at the expense of representing the madwoman and the themes of repressive gender roles that exist between the lines of the source text. Fuest's adaptation, in turn, takes some influence from Wyler's culturally transformative interpretation, as proven in its elimination of the second half of the novel. Nevertheless, where Wyler softens the edges of Brontë's characters, Fuest sharpens them, exposing issues of consent and gender-based sexual violence. By reimagining Nelly and probing the narrative gaps in the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine, Fuest highlights the undesirable role of women within a coercive sexual relationship in a period that denied women power over their own bodies.

Toxic Masculinity, Consent, and Illusions of Safety Within *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

With *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy seeks to strip away the societal constructs that obscure his heroine's identity as a "pure woman" even as society condemns her for her own rape. Hardy's novel demonstrates that Tess is a victim of men and society, criticizing the sexist double standard within the Victorian trope of the fallen woman. Hardy works hard to defend Tess's purity; yet, at the same time, he makes Tess into an incarnation of womanhood, an epitome of the general female experience that represses Tess's identity as an individual. Some critics argue that Hardy treats Tess as an object for display, citing his description of Tess in explicitly sexual, admiring terms. However, as Margaret Higonnet argues in "A Woman's Story: Tess and the Problem of Voice," these speculations on Hardy's intent are questionable, considering Hardy's struggles against the gaps imposed by a society that deemed the original edition of *Tess* socially unacceptable. While film adaptations seek to advocate for Tess in a similar way, restoring her lost personhood and stripping away the male constructs from her unique identity, their directors end by making more of a statement about masculinity than they about femininity, and yet, they do so through a successfully feminist lens.

Censorship forced Hardy to redact the scene of Tess's rape, her four-page letter to Angel Clare, and the wedding-night confession, in which Tess, by all rights, should have finally been given a chance to explain herself. As Colin MacCabe suggests in a review of Roman Polanski's *Tess*, "One could fancifully imagine Hardy in 1891 longing for the medium that Polanski used in 1979... one that could represent sex without much fear of the censors" (MacCabe). Janet Freeman, in "Ways of Looking at Tess," writes that Hardy, as the sole narrator of *Tess*, assumes a position of superiority. Only he can bring Tess's identity into focus, and in this way, he turns

the correct way to view Tess into an intimate privilege. Hardy renders himself the only authority in portraying just who Tess really is, and even his representation of her remains a male construct.

Throughout the text, Hardy makes specific generalizations about women through his heroine, such as Tess's "feminine loss of courage" (Hardy 187) and "the elusive quality in her sex which attracts men in general" (193) (Freeman). Freeman adds that "Failures to see Tess rightly are everywhere in the novel... for the opportunity to look at her is offered again and again" to the likes of Angel, who only understands Tess as an essence of womankind, then a figure of corrupted guilt, and Alec and other male observers, who objectify Tess, not only considering her a temptation to their piety but blaming her for her perceived fault in their temptation.

As with *Wuthering Heights*, another Victorian novel in which the grip of the biased, opinionated narrator skews the rendering of the central characters, film adaptations add another dimension of perception to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Hardy portrays Tess as an emblem of purity, an ideal conception of womanhood, while Nelly Dean does the reverse. In Nelly's eyes, Catherine Earnshaw becomes the emblem of the madwoman, the conception of warped, unnatural womanhood. Hardy and Nelly, as biased narrators, present two opposite poles of femininity, and in doing so, inadvertently stifle the humanity of their hosts. Furthermore, their respective narrators represent Catherine and Tess as heroines intimately connected to the natural world who wish to live beyond the arbitrary, gendered restrictions of society. Similarities exist, too, within Jean Rhys's take on Antoinette/Bertha, who, like Tess and Catherine, has a vivid, extrasensory connection to nature and a relationship with sexuality that demands the acknowledgment of the male characters with whom she develops romantic relationships. All three of these women die at the end of their fall arcs, consumed from within by some form of

mental illness instigated, in some part, at least, by repressive laws of Victorian society and wrongs done to them by male onlookers.

All three, too, are endangered by an environment of sexual violence, and all three participate in the adaptational phenomenon of the 1960s and 1970s, grounded in a meditation on the “tragic consequences of the repression of patriarchy” (Semenza and Hasenfratz 271), “rewriting the very moral and social underpinnings of the nineteenth-century novel of marriage” (271). While *Wide Sargasso Sea* emerged as a novelistic rewriting of Antoinette/Bertha’s subjugation in *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* (dir. Robert Fuest, 1970) and Roman Polanski’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* adaptation, *Tess* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1979). According to H. Porter Abbott in *Story, Plot, and Narration*, filmmakers take on the role of “nonverbal” (Abbott 49) narrator through camera angles and sequencing. In an interview with Polanski, however, Max Tessier stated that his “first impression is that with *Tess*, your personality as a director has become invisible. The story is not told as subjectively as some of your previous films...” (Semenza and Hasenfratz 301). Polanski responded that he set out to create a film that lacked a “subjective narrator of the story” (301) and that the novel itself inspired this creative choice, with “Hardy’s omniscient narration of the novel as the starting point [of Polanski’s film]” (301).

Polanski’s narration, however, is by no means unbiased. The act of filling in the narrative gaps of the source texts makes his version of events fundamentally different from the source text. His representation of scenes so ambiguous structured in the original novel makes his adaptation an extrapolation, and therefore an interpretation by nature. Polanski portrays Tess as awake during the scene of her rape. He does not rewrite her as consenting to have sex with Alec, and he portrays Tess as struggling to free herself. Polanski is clearly portraying Tess as being brutally raped, and yet, he omits the vital moment of Alec drugging Tess that Blair foregrounds in his

representation of this scene. In Blair's version, Tess screams; in Polanski's version, Gladys V. Veidemanis, in a 1988 article written for *The English Journal*, describes Tess as passive in this scene— not only passive but "...awake and acquiescent" (Veidemanis 55). This, of course, is a gross misunderstanding of rape. Veidemanis' suggestion that a more minimal physical struggle equates to acceptance echoes the same hypocrisy that defined the response of late-nineteenth-century society to Hardy's novel. Hardy's Tess exemplifies two poles of womanhood, the active agent and the passive, "pure" woman. Reviewers such as Veidemanis mount a critique that is hugely problematic in its foundational assumption: the assumption that a woman must fight actively against forced sexual relations for these relations to be considered rape: Polanski, according to the text written boldly on the poster that advertises his film, seeks to represent rape and does this successfully. The rape scenes in both its iterations, as represented by Polanski and Blair, are different yet equally horrifying, and perhaps more horrifying than Hardy's description, or lack thereof, in the novel. Hardy disturbs the reader with the ambiguity of the scene, while Polanski and Blair make viewers uncomfortable by forcing them to bear witness.

When Veidemanis calls Polanski out for representing Tess too passively, she does so in a problematic context, but Polanski does fail, throughout the film, to represent any kind of female agency. Hardy's strategic silences make Tess's rape, confession, and letter intensely present in their absence, transforming the narrative into a margin for the unprintable. Hardy's strategic silencing of Tess, a structural technique, reflects the silencing of women in reality, giving a possibly feminist message of the story deeper resonance, and proving the hypocrisy of society. Polanski's film could almost accomplish this same phenomenon, and yet, Hardy shapes a tension within Tess's identity that works to the novel's thematic advantage, promoting the dual existence of both Tess, the scripted embodiment of passive femininity, and Tess, the speaking subject.

Polanski seeks justice for women and successfully conveys the multifaceted nature of rape, which, despite the messages of critics like Veidemanis, cannot be pinned down to a one-size-fits-all definition that calls for the qualifying factor of resistance by kicking and screaming.

However, he fails to evoke a complex female character. By representing one side of Tess, Hardy defends women, advocating for their protection as powerless figures, forced into passivity by an unjust society. Tess's other side, the active agent, champions women, portraying their potential for powerful speech and action, and celebrating all that women can, in a just world, become, creating a place in a changing world for the New Woman. Hardy's Tess speaks powerfully, even when she does not speak at all. By withholding Tess's silent speech, Polanski revokes the power from Tess's silences, and therefore from Tess as a character.

Hardy criticizes these male observers, yet, with the close of the novel, he exhibits startling self-awareness by implicating himself, or, at least, his overhanging presence as the narrator, in the patriarchy. During the ending scene of the novel, Tess's execution, Tess is no longer visible to Angel, the reader, and even Hardy himself. Hardy, no longer able to "see" Tess, surrenders his intimate privilege. Polanski's closing scene conveys Tess's execution through a caption of text superimposed over the fading image of Tess walking between the police officers leading her away from Stonehenge. According to Higonnet's interpretation of the novel's conclusion, Hardy diminishes his position of power by making Tess invisible, implicating himself in the society that caused Tess's downfall. Polanski replicates this ending by removing his own directorial presence and the viewer from the privileged position of those who watch Tess's tragic life unfold. Like Hardy, like Polanski, and like Angel, viewers are reduced to reading the baleful warning emblazoned across the screen, just as readers must watch a personified black flag symbolic of their guilt as opposed to Tess's guilt.

David Blair, on the other hand, crafts his most impactful message within his casting, within his interpretation of characters rather than Hardy's ambiguous scenes. In the BBC serial adaptation (dir. David Blair, 2008), Hans Matheson plays Alec, and he evokes Alec's character in a sympathetic light—a precarious choice that could have made Alec appear as a viable, even appealing romantic option for Tess, which would have upset the message of the narrative entirely, but Blair ends in portraying how youthful-looking, boyish, charming individuals can commit inexcusable actions, as well as the more stereotypical, older, uncomfortable sexual predator that Polanski creates in his version of Alec. Blair projects an illusion of safety and innocence that he then shatters in the brutal scene of Tess's rape. Actor Eddie Redmayne does something similar with Angel, bringing the same safe, innocent, endearing energy to the role that Matheson brings to his character. Because Alec's rape and Angel's betrayal come from unexpected, seemingly unlikely places, they affect the audience with greater horror and greater shock value. Blair uses the narrative to impart more about masculinity than femininity, and yet, he does so through a feminist lens, lending a message about the complexity of masculinity, the presentation of masculinity, and toxic masculinity to the source text.

Filmmakers gain the power, and the growing stamp of social approval, to flesh out the ambiguity of the white space superimposed over Tess's narrative voice and experience by a combination of Hardy's narrative choices and society's censorship. The Victorian audience demanded the suppression of the female voice, and Hardy, even in liberating women who exhibit sexuality from society's condemnation, left white space behind that directors such as Blair and Polanski appropriate to new messages—messages that fail to reach the climactic heights of Hardy's once-subversive messages about femininity, female agency, and the female voice. Nevertheless, Blair and Polanski layer their adaptations with important messages about toxic

masculinity that challenge modern audiences in the same way that Hardy's text challenged Victorian gender norms.

Open-Ended Conclusions and Open-Ended Gender Identities: The Beauty of Inconsistency in  
*Little Women* and its Film Adaptations

Through each March sister, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* explores possible iterations of the female identity under the gender-based social constraints of the Victorian era. Jo and Amy struggle to balance familial duty with their ambitions as artists, while Meg marries young and starts a family. Beth remains dutiful to her parents throughout her short, tragic life, teaching her headstrong sister, Jo, how greatly artistic aspirations pale in comparison with domestic comforts. Nevertheless, Alcott ends the sisters' character arcs in a nuanced way that, according to one interpretation of the narrative, recognizes the inherent, synthesized value of domestic and professional accomplishments in the lives of women. Other interpretations, including those put forward in early film adaptations, zero in on Beth's death as the catalyst for the subduing of Jo's spirit, as the event that grounded Jo's ideas and ambitions permanently back to home and family. The most recent adaptation (dir. Greta Gerwig, 2019), however, deliberately shapes an ambiguous ending, in honor of what Alcott, according to her letters and diaries, wanted to write herself: it hints at the truth, that Jo's ultimate marriage to Professor Bhaer was a concession to cultural norms, concealing the underlying narrative of a victorious unmarried woman writer. Gerwig's version doesn't update the novel, but restores it, stripping away unsatisfying elements to reveal the meanings that were present all along.

After the first volume of *Little Women* received a popular reception, readers wrote to Alcott, demanding that Jo marry Laurie in the sequel. To quote Alcott's letter to Alf Whitman, "Jo should have remained a literary spinster... but I didn't dare refuse and out of perversity went and made a funny match for her" (Alcott, xix). Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer, an atypical male lead, satisfied her publishers while stressing the conviction that Jo's marriage was an

autonomous choice, not the choice of the characters of her family members or Laurie, nor the choice of society, publishers, or fans. Alcott satisfies social constraints while also cleverly breaking them. Jo opens a school for boys, successfully balancing a professional life with her devotion to family. Nevertheless, the climactic event of Jo's journey, the loss of her sister, fuels her recognition of the value of domestic virtues, leading to her marriage to Professor Bhaer and her permanent shelving of her literary aspirations. Despite the rebellious narrative of a tomboy who adopts the more masculine version of her name, writes sensational stories, dreams of financial independence, and longs to live the rest of her life as an unmarried novelist, Jo, as Judith Fetterly writes in "*Little Women: Alcott's Civil War*," "Jo's rebellion is neutralized... [she is taken] out of her boots and doublet and her misguided male-identification... into her role as a future Marmee" (Fetterly 171).

Like so many other female authors, Alcott had to rein in her audacity in shaping the final stages of the character arc for her heroine. In "What Feminism Did to Novel Studies," Nancy Armstrong describes how the popularity of domestic fiction in the nineteenth century placed women, their primary authorship, at the forefront of cultural debate, giving women the ability to influence society through the novels they were writing. However, this phenomenon gave rise to "the anxiety of influence" (Armstrong 100), a double bind that forced female authors to accommodate the system or risk losing their cultural power. Conformity meant popularity, translating to inclusion, power, and elevated economic position. Free expression, however, meant losing their terms of inclusion in the literary sphere; in short, their works would not remain popular (Fite 102). Authors like Louisa May Alcott could create women who pushed the boundaries of traditional femininity, but, ultimately, had to "[join] her to a husband of wealth and

position” (102), “[challenging] the norms of her culture without becoming unforgivably tasteless” (102).

Fetterly argues that Alcott “betrayed her own values” (171) in compromising Jo’s character arc, and finding the story’s only merit in the almost-narrative of the literary spinster. Fetterly also criticizes Alcott’s lack of coherency in her advocacy for the rich, independent, fulfilling creative life for the female artist. Citing Gilbert and Gubar, Keren Fite, in her article “The Veiled, the Masked, and the Civil War Woman: Louisa May Alcott and the Madwoman Allegory,” judges Jo March to be “Alcott’s alter ego whom she must destroy, while performing the role of a keen-eyed detective” (172) who accomplishes a “subtext that discloses the woman writer’s drive toward self-assertiveness” (172). The traditional angel in the house must die as a moral lesson to teach the characters who remain to do better, and Beth’s death marks the birth of Jo as the domestic angel in the house, the heroine to uphold Beth’s virtues. Fetterly argues that this conclusion of Jo’s almost-feminist narrative arc is *Little Women*’s weakest link.

Many filmmakers seeking to adapt *Little Women* appear to agree with Fetterly. Fans and filmmakers alike have found Alcott’s ending unsatisfying, with some wondering why Jo didn’t remain unmarried and dedicate her life to her career as a novelist, and others bewildered at Jo’s marrying the unromantic, older, unattractive Professor Bhaer rather than Laurie. According to Constance Grady, a film critic writing for *Vox* magazine, *Little Women* adaptations throughout the decades have struggled to provide satisfying answers to those questions, and generally, “they do so by working hard against the grain of Alcott’s writing” (Grady 1). Laurie’s marriage to Amy “generally gets glossed over as quickly as possible, while Bhaer generally gets transformed into a palatable romantic hero” (1).

However, though Alcott binds the model of the victorious woman writer into the margins of the narrative, that does not necessarily translate to the “symbolic murder of the rebellious woman” (Fite 174) that has become a tool for film adaptations seeking to supercharge impulses of female empowerment with guilty associations. Alcott’s March sisters are some of the first literary heroines designed to praise women who “feel comfortable with [their] conventional social role[s] as daughter, wife, and mother who dares to celebrate her domesticity” (175) and also representing a character like Jo, who is ambitious, headstrong, rebellious, angry, and masculine, yet also caring, virtuous, likable, and feminine. Jo synthesizes the qualities of the angel in the house with the rich inner complexities of the madwoman, possibly, according to yet another interpretation of the text, allowing the fragments of the split female personality to coexist in the healthiest way yet represented in literature. Through this lens, Alcott designs a heroine from a more inclusive perspective of feminism. Alcott treats each sister’s vastly divergent path in life with equal respect and creates a multifaceted, many-sided, human character in Jo March. Critics such as Fite characterize the symbol of the madwoman as “a model of exclusion...” (Fite 175), claiming that “the construct of the female artist as rebellious madwoman” (175) isolates and rebukes women comfortable in their domesticity. While the madwoman remains an empowering symbol for an irredeemable historical tradition of female oppression, Alcott’s synthesis of various iterations of the female identity accomplished a balanced, comforting coherency that many film adaptations of the source text do not represent.

The second screen adaptation of *Little Women* (dir. George Cukor, 1933) was released during the Great Depression, and, like the novel, it broadcasts a message of familial commitment through hardship. However, in Cukor’s film, this theme overshadows the intensely feminist impulses that lay beneath the surface of the novel, and that adaptations such as Greta Gerwig’s

2019 film capture more prominently. At the beginning of Alcott's novel, Jo wishes she could exhibit more traditionally masculine behaviors. She feels the tomboyish impulse to fight with her father in the Civil War, but also a sense of guilt and duty, prompting her to become the little woman her father describes in his letters. Cukor's Jo, however, expresses a desire to rid herself of these more masculine qualities, representing a variation on the Jo of the novel and a definite contrast to Gerwig's rendition of Jo. Moreover, Cukor's film downplays the family tensions present in the novel and succeeding film adaptations. For instance, Cukor leaves out Amy's burning of Jo's novel and reduces the clashes that take place between the two sisters with the strongest, most conflicting personalities. In this adaptation, the tension that Jo and Amy experience manifests itself in trivial bickering, with the omission of any life-or-death consequences, such as Amy falling through the ice. Thus, there is no reference to a woman's capacity for passionate anger, a quality that characterizes both the original Jo and, to an even greater extent, Gerwig's evocation of Jo. In predecessors of *Little Women*, such as *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and, predating those, *Mansfield Park*, this anger manifests itself in the figure of the madwoman, a mechanism for acknowledging a heroine's repressed emotions less explicitly. Since Alcott integrates both poles of identity within Jo's character, Cukor's film can provide no hidden outlet to express yet simultaneously repress female rage, so, instead, this adaptation displaces Jo's anger entirely.

In all versions, Beth's death marks a pivotal transformation of Jo's character. In Gerwig's version, losing Beth teaches Jo the wisdom to balance her desires to love and be loved, and to pursue her writing with more grit and integrity. Yet, in Cukor's adaptation, Beth's dying influence places the crowning moment of Jo's character growth not in the publication of her novel, but in her marriage to Professor Bhaer. As Grady suggests, the relationship between

Laurie and Amy is rushed through, unexplained, and unsatisfying. Alternatively, however, Cukor's adaptation gives greater attention than other succeeding adaptations to the progression of Jo's relationship with Professor Bhaer. Though Bhaer remains the blundering, comic, "funny match" that Alcott intended to portray, Cukor romanticizes their relationship, intertwining even a paternalistic quality that does not age well to modern audiences. Family unity becomes the end result of the March family's trials, just as in the novel, but Jo's career as a novelist comes to an unsatisfying end, with only Jo's throwaway line to Meg, "I sent it off yesterday... you can read it when they send it back" (Cukor). Jo appears to lose interest in her writing, without even the closure of moderately successful publication that Alcott grants her in the novel.

Nevertheless, despite its emphasis on family over feminism, the Great Depression-era adaptation of *Little Women* evokes a Jo possessed of traditionally masculine qualities revolutionary to perceive in the representation of a woman of her time brought to life by a male director, in the same way that Alcott creates a Jo that tests the waters of feminism in the Victorian era. Cukor's film pulls threads of the original novel that spoke to the times, accomplishing the creation of a simultaneously fierce, sensitive, outspoken, and even masculine Jo brought to life by Katharine Hepburn. A potential queering of Jo, even, exists in Jo's rejection of Laurie's proposal, with her tearful apology, "I don't know why I can't love you the way you want me to. I've tried. But I can't change the feeling... and it'll be a lie to say, 'I do' if I don't" (Cukor). Cukor taps into the radical potential at the heart of *Little Women*, making strides such as this one in the visual presentation of gender that acknowledge Alcott's intentions, uninhibited by her publishing team, for her characters, only ever reinstated with the release of Gerwig's 2019 adaptation. The portrayal of Laurie, too, is more feminine, soft, and prone to illness, a characteristic inevitably connected to weakness, than in later adaptations. In the 1949 version

(dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1949), for instance, Laurie runs away from school to join the army, something that the artistic, musical, more androgynous Laurie of the novel would never do. Louisa May Alcott created a heroine who could not “get over [her] disappointment in not being a boy” (Alcott 6), giving her female lead a traditionally masculine name and her male lead a traditionally feminine name, and though Hepburn’s Jo comes to conclude, “It means more to me now, to be loved” (Cukor), Cukor never strips away the qualities that suggest Jo’s gender identity to be (at least partly) masculine. Though uncomfortable, the paternalistic and non-romantic nature of Jo’s ultimate union with Bhaer reflects that, allowing Jo to assimilate into a gendered world without fully compromising her gender identity.

Harkening back to Fetterly’s criticism of Alcott’s lack of consistency, Greta Gerwig’s 2019 adaptation winks at the audience by including the notable conversation between Jo and her publisher, Mr. Dashwood, at the end of the film, in which Mr. Dashwood remarks, “Girls want to see women married, not consistent” (Gerwig). Both the novel and the film end with Jo marrying Professor Bhaer, but Gerwig’s film intercuts the scene of the couple’s reunion with a negotiation between Jo and her editor, during which the two debate whether or not Jo must marry off the heroine of Jo’s newly written novel. Eventually, Jo concedes to her editor’s demands and gives her heroine a traditional ending; the editor, however, never succeeds in changing Jo’s values, but only in convincing her to please him, and her audience, with the argument that this is the only way that she can achieve acceptance in the world of publishing, and the only way she can boost her sales in a patriarchal society. It is not an appealing truth, but it is the painful reality that Gerwig acknowledges, that the gendered publishing world forced Alcott had to undergo, and that Alcott represented in the narrative of the March sisters, eliciting the criticism of analysts such as Fetterly, to whom Gerwig directly responds, acknowledging that inconsistency as the feminist

lesson of Alcott's narrative. Gerwig vindicates not only Jo, but Alcott, too, calling to mind the familiar struggle of the woman writer and the "anxiety of influence" defined in Armstrong's analysis.

Gerwig diverges from the novel only in "bursting open all the doors" (Federico 3) closed to Alcott by the patriarchal publishing world and exposing Alcott's uncensored intentions. By including lines in the script that come from the author's letters and diaries, and even shaping a deliberately ambiguous ending, Gerwig emphasizes Jo's writing as the love of her life, rather than a man. Like the novel, Gerwig's film ends with Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer, and, following the precedent of the many previous film adaptations, Bhaer is made a "palatable" romantic hero. Nevertheless, as Grady remarks in her review of the film, "[Gerwig] reinterprets [Bhaer's] criticism of Jo's writing: Now, instead of moralizing to her, Bhaer is giving Jo constructive feedback because he respects her and her talent enough to be brutally honest with her" (Grady 1), even admitting, without aiming to please, that he himself lacks the talent to compete with her creatively. Gerwig casts by far the youngest actor thus far in Bhaer's role, this does not serve to romanticize their relationship, but to make it more valid and eliminate the paternalistic quality that detracted from Jo's sense of agency in Cukor's film and, debatably, even the novel itself.

Moreover, another layer of nuance adds to this revitalized sense of Jo's unbroken, continuous, independent personhood throughout the film, from beginning to end: the conclusion, once reviled as an unsatisfying conclusion to Jo's feminist arc. In Gerwig's version, the scene of the couple's reunion is intercut with a negotiation between Jo and Mr. Dashwood debating whether or not Jo must marry off the heroine of her novel. Mr. Dashwood says to Jo, "Frankly, I don't see why she didn't marry the neighbor" (Gerwig). Jo responds, "Well, because the

neighbor marries her sister” (Gerwig). Mr. Dashwood demands to know *whom*, in this case, the heroine marries, and Jo responds, “No one. She doesn’t marry either of them” because “she says the whole book that she doesn’t want to marry... no, [marriage] isn’t the right ending” (Gerwig). Jo, like Alcott, eventually agrees to give her heroine a traditional ending, but only to please the audience, hinting that this romantic scene might have been imaginary all along. The cliché of kissing in the rain is exactly the overly dramatic romantic ending that the publisher wanted, and that’s what Jo gave him. After the scene of Jo’s reunion with Bhaer plays across the screen, the camera cuts back to Mr. Dashwood, who smiles and says, “I like it. It’s very romantic” (Gerwig).

The audience can even tell when the portrayal of events begins to deviate from Jo’s novel to the reality of her experience: the moment Jo closes the door upon Professor Bhaer as he leaves the March household to move to California, the scene is no longer shot with the cold blue filter reserved for the present/adulthood. Instead, the warm, golden tint floods the lens. When the camera cuts back to Mr. Dashwood, the camera lens snaps back to the cold filter once again. Then again, despite all the evidence suggesting that Jo’s reunion with Bhaer is a complete fabrication, a scene from a novel written by Jo, designed to appeal to the romance-loving masses, and intended to become a financial success, Professor Bhaer appears in the scene in which Jo opens her school for boys—a scene that Gerwig also chose to shoot with the warm golden filter. It’s entirely plausible, perhaps even likely, perhaps even obvious, that Jo never opened a school at all, especially because the warmly tinted filter is *not* present during the printing of the first copy of Jo’s novel, entitled *Little Women*, a scene intercut with the golden, sweeping, panoramic scene of Jo walking across the lawn to greet every member of her family gathered outside her school for Marmee’s birthday. Laurie appears in this scene, smiling and holding a baby, all three

sisters walk arm-in-arm, and Professor Bhaer, ostensibly Jo's husband, smiles in the background, teaching a boy to paint.

With this ambiguity, Gerwig gives audiences the perfect adaptation. According to some interpretations of the source text, Alcott's novel preaches glorious feminist independence buried beneath the surface of a woman writer's ultimate (and tragic) assimilation into society, put into place only because Alcott's publisher forced her to make some concessions to the limitations of her time. According to others, Jo displays emotional depth and inconsistency because the path she has chosen, the path of the female artist, is a challenging one. Jo does not and should not have to take on the burden of the victorious female artist for all womankind, for, in Alcott's words, "Jo wasn't a heroine, she was only a struggling human girl like hundreds of others" (763). *Little Women* represents a complex struggle between femininity, masculinity, professional ambition, and domestic virtues that triggers varied interpretations and difficult questions. Jo struggles to reconcile her identity to a gendered society, but, for filmmakers, whether the expectations of Victorian womanhood punish or repress her, or whether she can synthesize domesticity with her literary ambitions by opening her school, remains open to interpretation.

Gerwig's incorporation of the historical, her commentary on literary criticism, and the ambiguity of her ending that create a scholarly dialogue in itself, all mark Gerwig's adaptation of *Little Women* as the literary adaptation that most merits the title of the essay film. The narrative of *Little Women* perpetuates ideas about women and female success that have created impressions of heroic feminism *and* acknowledged the stultifying imprint of a sexist reality. These concepts have been taken together in cinematic reproduction. Alcott's novel gives rise to various interpretations, revealing anxieties of the woman writer and the nonbinary gender identity in crisis, both of which manifest themselves in Cukor and Gerwig's adaptations, two

differently though mutually feminist retellings of Alcott's original narrative. Criticizing Alcott for addressing the dichotomy of talent vs. genius and the challenge of professional success, and for treating each sister's path with respect, amounts to another mode of sexism, as critics such as Fite acknowledge, while Alcott, Gerwig, and Cukor do something revolutionary in acknowledging the duality of Jo's journey and gender identity.

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