"I Intend to Make My Own Way in the World": Queer Female Artistry and the Noble Nature of Gerwig's *Little Women*

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Abstract: This essay, which merges the boundaries between academic and creative writing, looks at how Gerwig's film adaptation of *Little Women* leaves room for Jo's queerness through the figure of the noble artist. At the heart of this mixing of adaptation, gender, and sexuality with an important memoir on art-as-activism is the question: What does it mean to be an artist? And, more importantly, what does it mean for queer female artists to see themselves on screen?

I want to talk about the ending of Greta Gerwig's film *Little Women*, how it changes from Louisa May Alcott's bildungsroman about duty and sacrifice, and what this means for queer female artists in our age of art-as-activism. As a writer myself, I fill the hours in a quiet room, writing to songs without words, in a deep state of mind somewhere between dynamite and mesmerism. Today, there is plenty of coffee and the quiet mourning of Beethoven's Sonata Pathétique repeats very softly. "I am so lonely" (Gerwig 100), Jo March (Saoirse Ronan) tells Marmee (Laura Dern) near the end of the film, crying to herself, trying to understand why she feels so misunderstood. There is room for a queer interpretation of the film, brought out by Gerwig's courage and focus on the social pressures that Jo is under (e.g. to be married off to a man), and my own bisexuality makes me keenly aware of Jo's cropped hair, military short jackets, and all of the other semiotics of dress that stereotype her as g-a-y (see Figure 1).

Not simply a tomboy, an identity which can conflate gender and sexuality (Craig and LaCroix 454), Jo's most unselfconscious confession of her queer or questioning identity comes after rejecting Laurie's (Timothée Chalamet) marriage proposal: "I don't believe I will ever marry" (Gerwig 98). The theory that Jo is "transgender" (Schweitzer

14) seems in line with the film's harkening to "the drive of conventional trans narratives toward home" (Prosser 177) through multiple forced homecomings (e.g. Jo's return to Massachusetts from New York upon news of Beth's [Eliza Scanlen] declining health). At play is the archetype that being trans "is always a narrative work, a transformation of the body that requires the remolding of life into a particular narrative shape" (4). The question of how we read Jo—as straight, queer, trans, gender non-conforming, etc—is up for debate, but her artistic drive to create speaks to an even deeper drive to create herself. Rather than a lonely romantic, perhaps she has simply not yet self-actualized her identity. Like most young people, she is still figuring herself out. Like most young writers, she is still finding her voice.

Figure 1: Jo March (second left) with a queer-coded haircut.

The drive to create is a process of self-discovery but, more than that, it is a growing activism on any social power that seeks to control one's own mind and body. Jo's identity, my identity, our very existence is radical, but being openly yourself can be risky, at times, because there is still danger and violence takes many shapes. Keep in mind that both the book and film are set in the mid-1800s, a time when any identity outside of the cis-heteronormative experience was culturally viewed as "a capital offense" (Mays 232), and the death penalty for homosexuality still exists today in several countries and regions (Mendos 48–52). I understand now that Jo—swearing she is "not scared of anyone" (Gerwig 42) and commanding Beth, another queer-coded character, to

"fight to the end, be loud, don't just go quietly away" (90)—is scared. Suddenly, it is so obvious that Jo—proclaiming to Friedrich (Louis Garrel) that "no one will forget Jo March" (24)—is scared of dying without ever having lived from a place of authenticity. The fear of being forgotten is something I think many artists can relate to: the fear of not creating something that says 'I was here,' like a dog lifting its leg, like a man putting a flag on the moon, an emblem of aliveness.

From the back of a classroom, a raised hand, quietly, the Beth of the bunch, "the best of us" (Gerwig 100): 'Weren't you scared of coming out?' I am scared. I came out as a teenager to close friends and family, but coming out is not a one-off event: 'Mom, dad, this is my girlfriend; Doctor, I don't need the pill; Father, I've been Baba Yaga excommunicated like John Wick.' The world constantly asks me to testify and bare. 'I'm still scared, but I have to live honestly.' That is the nobility of the human spirit: it is miraculously resilient. Today, we have so many ways to speak about our identities, but Jo did not: "And, I think if she had had the language" (Parsons), Ronan says in an interview with *Out Magazine*, "or even a term that she could use to go, 'Oh, maybe this is how I feel,' or 'This is what I am, and that's okay, and there's a safe space for this,' then totally, I could see her definitely experimenting with her sexuality" (Parsons) (see Figure 2). The reason why telling the story of the queer female artist is so important is because so many voices are still being bound and muffled for honouring the diversity of experience. One of the first things you learn during artistic performance is how to LIVE OUT LOUD!

Figure 2: Saoirse Ronan (left) discusses Jo's queerness in an interview with *Out Magazine*.

Too often, queer or questioning artists like Jo are taught to avoid being discovered, so I make it a habit of shouting, dancing, using sound effects, *love love*, saying a prayer for anyone forced into camps, conversion, the proverbial closet. 'Help each other,' I appeal earnestly, 'protect each other, use your voices to create change, leave a mark.' Imagine being seen as 'strange,' the original meaning of the word 'queer' before its reclamation, feeling all alone, and having no language to express your identity or your emotions. That is the loneliness that lights a fire in Jo to write and publish a book for girls (see Figure 3), a brave act that never happens at the end of Alcott's book. Gerwig's ending proclaims that there is absolutely no time to waste in becoming yourself, independent and free, as an artist and a woman. In the film, the heroine does not cave into the pressure of straight marriage, but chooses an independent path. I want to talk about the ending because it says to queer female artists everywhere: get strong, do it yourself, you "have minds and souls as well as hearts" (Gerwig 100), what Marmee calls: a noble nature (Gerwig 57); courage in the face of danger, difficulty, death; an indomitable spirit.

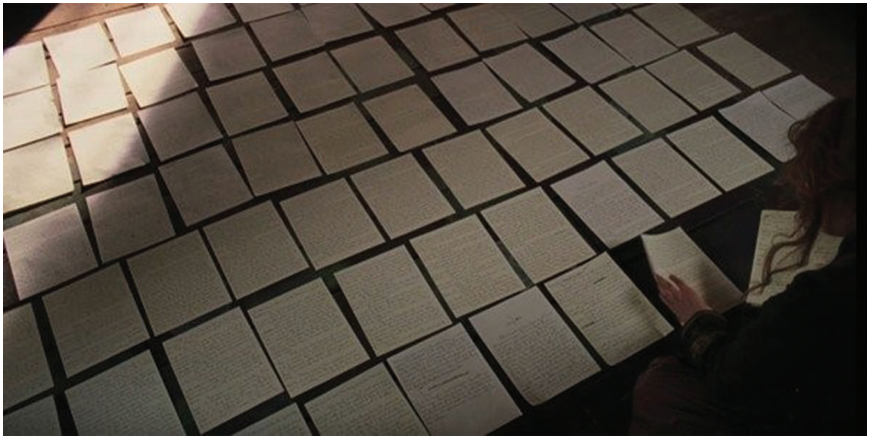

Figure 3: Jo maps out the first chapter of her book on the floor of the attic.

As I sit here, ink to page, listening to the song Friedrich plays on the piano in memory of Beth, I write down the names of activists killed for advancing LGBT human rights—Terrianne, Emanuelle, Mirella, Eddy—and fear that, one day, my own name will appear on that list: J-e-s-s. How many young queer artists will be the victims of a hate crime? One is too many. 'I am scared,' I tell myself, 'of being killed, but I am more scared of killing my true self'—the writer who writes, the woman

who loves, the voice that empowers and sparks a ripple effect. So I write in a room as Jo in an attic, asleep in the day, alive in the night, for my sisters in hiding, not forgotten by dog or man or moon, ennobled by the mind that imagines, creator of self: "I intend to make my own way in the world" (Gerwig 38) and so should you.

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