

(from which he pulls eight consecutive quotations) and an article by William K. Frankena. Much the same occurs in Chapter Two, where 45 of the 48 footnotes derive from a *single* source, Lon Fuller and Robert Braucher's *Basic Contract Law*. Chapter Three has eight footnotes, in one of which Bennett asserts that what "has not received much attention in contemporary thinking is Rousseau's theory [of social contract]!" In Chapter Four he summarizes Socrates and quotes extensively from the works of Plato, using the editions translated by . . . Edith Hamilton. Chapter Five consists of his summary (of his summaries) and conclusions from his summaries.

Some parts of Bennett's thesis seem like nothing more than an elaboration on Frankena's article. As indicated in its title, "Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy," Frankena's essay deals with the very subject of Bennett's dissertation. In fact, Frankena discusses the work of both Prichard and Ross and then concludes that their philosophies are too narrowly defined. This just happens to be Bennett's conclusion, and throughout his dissertation, from start to finish, one finds a simple reiteration of Frankena's arguments: "As Frankena recommends . . ."; "[The thesis will] broaden the boundaries of the inquiry in a way recommended by Frankena . . ."; ". . . as Frankena would recommend . . ."; "We have taken Frankena's advice and . . ."; "Again we could say with Frankena . . ." The dissertation ends up reading more like an undergraduate term paper than an original work of scholarship.

That a project so lean in size and substance could qualify as a dissertation should perhaps not surprise us. One of the advisors who signed and approved his thesis was John Silber, the president of the institution that so botched the investigation of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s plagiarized dissertation, Boston University. (Silber, by the way, has just anointed his successor at B.U.: it's Jon Westling, who in 1990 said in a letter to *Chronicles* about King's bogus B.U. thesis that "not a single reader has ever found any nonattributed or misattributed quotations, misleading paraphrases, or thoughts borrowed without due scholarly reference in any of its 343 pages.")

Perhaps the most interesting part of Bennett's dissertation is its epigraph.

"Boys, a gentleman always rises when a lady enters a room. He must. A gentleman keeps his obligations, even in Hell." This is certainly true, but in light of Bennett's recent chicanery, one is reminded instead of the "infallible rule" of R. S. Surtees, that "the man who is always talking about being a gentleman never is one." The question is whether the same holds true for declaimers of virtue.

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FILM

Littler Women by Laurie Morrow

Little Women

Produced by Denise DiNovi

Directed by Gillian Armstrong

Based on the book by Louisa May Alcott

Screenplay by Robin Swicord

Released by Columbia Pictures

As the recent effort to remake *Little Women* suggests, Hollywood has remembered that an almost certain way to make a profitable film is to turn a best-selling children's classic into a movie. After all, when Hollywood makes family films, entire families buy tickets, as well as popcorn, sodas, and candy, and replacements for what the kids spill, devour, or quarrel over while the movie's running. Unlike artsy-grotesque films, movies which appeal to families also enjoy profits from movie tie-in products (try marketing a Hannibal Lecter Happy Meal). Among Hollywood's oldest traditions is modifying these classics to insure good box office sales. A 1930's version of *Moby Dick*, for example, has Ahab saved by the love of a good woman; and when discussing the casting of apostles for a film version of *The Last Supper*, Samuel Goldwyn is said to have exclaimed, "Why only twelve?—Go out and get *thousands!*" In the past, moviemakers modified stories to make them more entertaining; now, however, they modify plot and characterization for political purposes.

Hollywood still does not quite grasp what it is about literary classics that attracts the general public. The film industry regards these stories, whose appeal extends across generations and geography, not as fully articulated works of art which express a coherent vision but as loose scenarios into which stars can be plugged and through which they can articulate their fashionable politics.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Columbia Pictures' recent reinvention of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Alcott's 1868 novel teaches a number of important moral lessons, most of which Columbia Pictures hurls overhand out the window. This is a pity, as *Little Women* offers a feminist view of life—an unfashionable feminism, admittedly, one grounded in self-reliance, endurance, and commitment rather than in a politically correct scramble for "privileged victim" status. Their "self-esteem" firmly intact, Alcott's young women are less apt to remind us of Gloria Steinem than of Katharine Hepburn, who, in 1933, starred in George Cukor's more faithful interpretation of the novel. Alcott demonstrates that a woman can choose the kind of life she wishes to lead, provided she recognize and emend her character flaws and not compromise her ideals.

Little Women was, after all, intended to be edifying as well as entertaining: John Bunyan's religious allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* provides the novel's structural framework as well as the source for several chapters' titles and themes (e.g., "Playing Pilgrims," "Meg Goes to Vanity Fair"). Good minister's daughter that she was, Alcott created four recognizable types of young women, each of whom must overcome some weakness in her character in order to move from childhood to maturity. Meg is responsible but proud; Jo, talented but stubborn; Beth, sensitive but overly shy; and Amy, charming but vain. Each endures many tests of character, including financial problems, conflicts with family, friends, and lovers, and the illnesses and deaths of loved ones. Ultimately, though each retains her essential nature, the four "little women" become responsible, mature adults through self-discipline, hard work, and mutual devotion. Most importantly, Jo, the focal point of the action, refuses to marry until she finds a man who takes her intellectual and artistic aspirations seriously.

Now, this may seem a sturdy enough

little story just as it is. But Columbia Pictures does not approve of the lessons Alcott's novel teaches. The religious elements are attenuated beyond recognition, with Alcott's lessons about faith and morality replaced with anachronistic diatribes on the inequity of the sexes. Even the female casting choices undermine Alcott's original purpose: the robust Claire Danes, for example, plays the fragile Beth. Danes struggles to conceal her athletic build by stooping while she lopes through the picture, until, mercifully, her pink eyeshadow deepening conspicuously as she nears her final moments, she expires.

More troubling, however, is the casting of Gabriel Byrne (whom Ken Russell cast as Byron in *Gothic*) as Professor Bhaer. Though a talented actor, Byrne is considerably younger and sexier than Alcott's original. Alcott sharply differentiates Jo's two suitors to call attention to the reasons behind Jo's choosing Professor Bhaer for a husband. The other suitor, Laurie, is an adolescent girl's fantasy beau—in addition to being young, handsome, rich, amusing, and from a socially prominent family, he is kind and thoughtful and is sincerely fond of Jo and her family. The average 14-year-old is horrified when Jo ends up marrying Professor Bhaer, a recent immigrant who, though also kind and thoughtful, is middle-aged, poor, pudgy, and socially awkward.

Long before she meets Bhaer, even before she embarks on her career in journalism, Jo deliberately terminates her romantic relationship with Laurie before it progresses beyond mild flirtation. Jo knows that she and Laurie are ill-suited for each other as marriage partners: passionate, headstrong people, each needs a spouse who will complement, not duplicate, his character—someone “steady,” as they used to say.

Unfortunately, “steadiness” is not a virtue much beloved of Hollywood these days. It would have been a considerable challenge for screenwriter Robin

Swicord to show why Jo prefers a man who, though poor and middle-aged, takes her intellectual and artistic aspirations seriously to a man who, though handsome, wealthy, and kind, is unable to provide her with the intellectual companionship she desires. Instead, Hollywood blanches when Professor Bhaer criticizes Jo's writing. Neither Jo's family nor Laurie has ever seen Jo's lurid melodramas as anything but ripping good tales which handily pay the bills. Professor Bhaer, however, recognizes her talent, and gently tells her she is wasting it. At Jo's urging, he politely but acutely criticizes her writing. Jo's welcoming of his astute criticism helps her to mature.

Many self-proclaimed feminists, however, equate being “taken seriously” with being praised, not criticized, especially by men. Unaware of the irony of her position, *New York Times* film critic Caryn James deems it disrespectful of “the bearish Professor Bhaer” to tell Jo that she should be a great writer rather than a tabloid hack: “[He] scolded her for writing sensational stories; then she married him anyway.” Ms. James just doesn't get it: Jo marries Bhaer not *in spite of* his criticism of her writing but *because of* it. Indeed, Bhaer is among the strongest feminists in the novel: though a professor from Germany—the intellectual center of 19th-century Europe—he recognizes artistic potential in a young woman with little formal education.

Sadly, this movie dismisses Alcott's message that someone who is not “young and sexy” can nevertheless be desirable, and that intellectual companionship with someone who challenges you to make the best of yourself is essential in a mate. Such, at least, are the values Alcott's novel presents, and such are the values of those of us who love *Little Women* just as it is.

The filmmakers' antimale bias becomes especially apparent when we compare the male characters in the two versions of *Little Women*: whereas Alcott's portraits of even the minor male characters are complex and subtle, the men in the movie are mere caricatures. Consider, for example, the film's treatment of Mr. Davis, the teacher who strikes Amy's hand with a wooden rod for bringing pickled limes (a status symbol) to class. Amy tells her mother that Mr. Davis said it was “as useful to educate a woman as it is to educate a female cat.” The outraged Marmee condemns his sadistic sexism—“By law Mr. Davis

may beat his pupils freely—as well as his children and his wife and his horse,” and withdraws Amy from the school for his “brutal punishment.”

Alcott's original narrative is, however, considerably more complex: Amy is not a blameless victim, nor Mr. Davis a sexist ogre. Alcott's Mr. Davis is a “much-enduring man” who had “done all that one man could do to keep half a hundred rebellious girls in order.” Though Alcott criticizes Mr. Davis's bad temper, she sympathizes with the challenge he faces of controlling a classful of adolescent girls: “Boys are trying enough to human patience . . . but girls are infinitely more so, especially to nervous gentlemen with tyrannical tempers.” Alcott's Amy is also presented as more culpable than her twin in the film: she compounds her fault by trying to conceal some of the forbidden fruit after she has been ordered to discard it. Amy's vanity prompted her to assume that the rules just would not be applied to her and that her mother would offer her unqualified sympathy (which the film Amy gets). Kindly but firmly, Alcott's Marmee informs Amy that she deserved punishment for knowingly breaking the rules; though Marmee disapproves of corporal punishment, she ventures that, in this case, “I'm not sure that it won't do you more good than a milder method.” Marmee removes Amy from the school, not simply because she disapproves of Mr. Davis's teaching methods, but also because Amy's female friends are encouraging her to develop poor values.

Or consider the treatment of Dr. Bangs, old Mr. Laurence's personal physician, whom he sends to tend the ailing Beth. Fearing Beth may die despite his best efforts, Dr. Bangs suggests that Marmee be sent for. Rather than be grateful for Dr. Bangs' assistance, however, the movie's Marmee bursts into Beth's bedroom, certain her daughter has received inadequate treatment. “Dr. Mom” declares that Beth's feet have not been kept properly warm, and, with a woman's instinctive understanding of folk medicine, calls for vinegar to “draw the fever down.” Once again, the male professional is incompetent and insensitive, the female amateur omnicompetent and omniscient.

Nor do the other male characters fare better. Alcott's crusty but charming old Mr. Laurence virtually disappears, as does the father of the little women, Mr.

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March. (So insignificant is Mr. March that one reviewer referred to the family as a “single-parent household”). Other male characters violate the conventions of polite behavior, at least by 19th-century standards: as if they were cohabiting, Bhaer enters Jo’s bedroom without knocking, kissing her familiarly on the back of her neck.

Even Laurie (peculiarly called “Teddy,” which he rarely is in the book) does not escape feminist revision. His first gaze at the girls is salacious, and he professes interest first in Meg, then in Jo, and then in Amy, without ever making the reasons for these changes in his affections clear; one expects Marmee is next in his apparent determination to wed a March girl, *any* March girl. While in Europe, Laurie is reduced to a level of degradation undreamt of by Alcott: he swills liquor from a flask and associates with women of ill repute (as the bare legs of his overdressed companion suggest).

In an act of ultimate absurdity, children’s writer Laurie Lawlor has produced a novelization of Robin Swicord’s tin-eared screenplay of Alcott’s novel. Apparently, Columbia Pictures sees nothing peculiar about novelizing a novel, nor anything wrong with revising one woman’s vision to advance another’s political agenda. Only 133 large-type pages (in contrast to the 449 small-type pages of the unabridged Signet Classic), Lawlor’s dreary little polemic lacks Alcott’s style but maintains Swicord’s shrillness. It is, if anything, a parody of Alcott. Like the pre-Bhaer Jo, Lawlor is wasting her talent by pandering to her least informed readers’ prejudices.

By reducing the roles of Alcott’s men while artificially inflating the roles of the women, both movie and novelization attempt to bring Alcott’s characters into accord with politically correct feminism. What are produced, however, are shallow caricatures rather than complex human beings, for diminishing the male characters diminishes, correspondingly, the female characters. Concerned about the unwillingness of men to attend this movie, director Gillian Armstrong mused, “We could change the title.”

Perhaps Columbia Pictures should have changed the title to something more appropriate—*Little Women*.

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Mailer on Madonna

by John Lofton

Years ago, in an article he wrote for the *New Yorker* titled “My Philosophy,” in a section subheadlined “Eschatological Dialects as a Means of Coping with Singles,” Woody Allen wrote: “We can say that the universe consists of a substance, and this substance we will call ‘atoms,’ or else we will call it ‘monads.’ Democritus called it atoms, Leibniz called it monads. Fortunately, the two men never met, or there would have been a very dull argument.”

Well, Democritus has, alas, finally met Leibniz, sort of. Norman Mailer has interviewed Madonna. He talked about this talk on national TV. And it was indeed *very* dull. In fact, what H.L. Mencken once said about Thorstein Veblen can also be said about Mailer blabbing mindlessly about Madonna, the “most famous woman in the world,” if we can believe the recent television movie about her life: he does indeed have unprecedented talent for saying nothing in an august and heroic manner.

When asked on *Good Morning America* why we should find Madonna fascinating, Mailer said: “I respect her because she’s not predictable. She’s one of the few artists we’ve had in America who is not predictable.”

Get serious, please! Whatever Madonna does, she is totally predictable. And what’s totally predictable is that she will do whatever a slut does. The woman is predictably vile.

Mailer: “What she does is always interesting and very severe. She’s got severe talent.”

Always interesting? I don’t think so—unless you’re a sex pervert and a voyeur. Severe? Again, not the best word to describe this wretch, since my dictionary, the last one I trust—Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*—defines “severe” as “not . . . indulgent . . . sometimes perhaps, unreasonably strict or exact; giving no indul-

gence to faults or errors . . . sober, sedate to an extreme . . . not lax or airy . . . nice.”

Mailer: “She’s not giving it [her ‘severe talent’] to us for too little.”

True. It costs a lot of money to attend Madonna concerts. And her pornographic books are insanely expensive.

Mailer: “In other words, what she’s saying, what she’s always saying, which the others don’t do, is that life is very difficult.”

Gosh.

Mailer: “[What she’s saying is that] there are extraordinary elements, there are profound contradictions, that we don’t know our own natures and we have to search for them.”

On the contrary, what Madonna proves is that John Calvin was right when he said our human natures are totally depraved until we are born again, made good by God. Indeed, Madonna proves that, if anything, Calvin understated the depravity of human nature.

A little later, Mailer says with a straight face that Madonna has tried to “fill the void” that Andy Warhol merely catered to. He says: “She has this feeling—when I speak of the void what I mean is that everybody has—you remember when Jimmy Carter made that speech about American malaise. And we’re beginning to feel it now, that there’s something wrong that we all feel, that there’s something wrong with American life. It’s not what it used to be. There isn’t that certainty we all used to have. We used to have a feeling 30, 40, 50 years ago that this is a great country and we’re gonna do marvelous things and now that confidence is no longer there. And that’s what I call the void: this empty feeling inside that things are not right and not going well.”

Ah, yes, malaise. I know the feeling well. In fact, I felt it at the precise moment I listened to Mailer blather on about Madonna. And yes, there is something wrong with American life. Proof of this fact is that Madonna is such a celebrity in our country, which, contrasted with 30, 40, or 50 years ago, is not great. If we *were* great today, no one would have ever heard of Madonna. She would have been deported years ago.

Mailer (for this one you should be seated): “Madonna is trying to find out what the nature of truth is. That’s why I think she’s a great artist.”

Madonna searching for truth? Madonna a “great artist”? Sure, like