

# Miscellany

There follows a series of shorter essays, again in autobiographical order.

## The Piano

As Ada and Flora observe Baines saddling his horse, both incline their heads to their left. Many audience members find this humorous. But the joke is on them because this is merely the setup of a practical joke perpetrated by cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh that pays off when Ada is inscribing the piano key. Most audience members then incline their heads to their left as they try to read the inscription. Observing this behavior from the back of the theater was always a joy.

Much of the foreshadowing is rather obvious: An insert of the axe falling on the chopping block. As a visual effect for the play is rehearsed, an axe chops at Nessie's hand in silhouette. But some portents are more subtle and interesting. Baines's right index finger is caught when Ada opens the piano lid. Baines's dog Flynn is missing his right front leg. During the play, a woman who is about to be attacked by her husband with an axe is seen holding a key and silhouetted on a hanging sheet. Ada is later seen holding a piano key silhouetted on a sheet hanging outside her house. Incidentally, another Ada with another piano being transported are to be found in *Cold Mountain*.

Some viewers have been known to sympathize with Alisdair Stewart. As noted in the discussion of *The English Patient*, Arthurian amatory doctrine makes *le jaloux* (the jealous one) a required term in the formula, with Gottfried saying that "deceived husbands have only themselves to blame, for they are blinded by lust."

## The Wings of the Dove

The title of this film is derived from Psalm 55:4-6. It is to such wings that the flapping sound often heard on the soundtrack may be attributed. The film features a rhyming structure reminiscent of *Howards End* and *Sister My Sister*. (With respect to the former, one might be forgiven for fearing that Helena Bonham Carter's Kate Croy will turn a corner in London and encounter her own Helen Schlegel.) It is left to the reader to determine whether it is novelist Henry James or screenwriter Hossein Amini who is responsible for these rhymes:

- Twice Kate is given a necklace by her Aunt.
- Twice Milly enters a church, ascends to a higher level, regards the view and is followed and joined, first by Susan and then by Merton. The second case is also an echo of Merton following Kate upstairs at the party where arrives with the "older woman." In the two scenes involving Merton, he is kissed by each of the respective women.
- Merton tells the butler, "tell her again and again." Kate tells Merton to read her letter, "again and again."

- Kate's father tells her, "Don't look at me like that. We're the same, you and I." Kate later says to Merton, "Don't look at me like that. You've thought the same things."
- Twice Kate is seen inside Merton's flat. Both times, she goes into his bedroom, lies on his bed and is followed into the room by Merton.
- Twice Kate goes to her father's neighborhood.
- Twice Merton is stood up by Kate.
- Twice Milly is seen in or leaving the Doctor's office, after which she observes what is considered a male-only activity (first men reading erotic literature, then boys playing soccer), followed by a scene in which she is shown erotic imagery by Kate (first in the bookstore, then in the art gallery).
- Twice a round object is seen in a downward shot in a grassy outdoor setting: first Merton's hat as he sits on a park bench, then the soccer ball in the game observed by Milly.
- Mark sneaks into Kate's room as she sleeps. Kate then sneaks into Milly's room.
- Twice someone (first Milly, then Merton) declines artificial light offered by an Italian of the opposite sex.
- Twice Merton insistently tells a butler who has turned him away to tell a lady that he has called.
- Milly and Merton both run for shelter to escape rain and then see a man they know.
- Twice we learn a lady's last name from Merton's conversation with a butler.
- Twice Milly cools herself with water from an outdoor source: first a canal, then a fountain.
- Twice Kate kisses Merton after seeing him kiss another woman, first the "older" anonymous woman who came with him to the party and then Milly at the festivities in Venice.
- Kate's aunt helps with Kate's makeup and Kate speaks of "all the plots" her aunt is "hatching." Later, Kate, now hatching her own plot, lends similar assistance to Milly.
- Kate says to Merton, "One day, you'll get tired of me." Merton says, "I think it'll be the other way around." Kate responds, "No, it won't." Later, Kate says to Milly, "I don't want you to hate me." Milly says, "I won't." Kate responds, "Yes, you will."
- Regarding the trip to Venice, Milly asks Merton, "Why don't you come with us?" and then Kate soon asks him, "Why don't you?"
- When Kate asks Merton if he has heard of Sir Luke Strett, Merton answers, "Of course I have." Kate then asks, "Why 'of course?'" Later, Merton asks, "What about poor old Milly?" Kate responds, "Why 'poor old Milly?'"
- Milly is last seen reclining on a couch with her feet on the couch and her shoes on the floor. She is similarly situated when Lord Mark says, "My theory is you can't really live . . .," though her shoes are visible only in unmatted material such as the VHS release or the supplemental featurette on the DVD.
- Both Merton and Kate read in England a letter from the other who is in Italy with Milly.
- Near the end of the film, Kate disrobes and assumes a pose similar to that of the woman in the Gustav Klimt painting she earlier showed to Milly.
- Merton says, "I'm so sorry" to both Milly and Kate as he is about to lose each.

Kate and Milly form the base of two triangles. On one side, Lord Mark, like King Mark, is disqualified. The triangle that includes Merton is more complex and interesting. For Kate, Milly is both rival and instrument in her quest to marry Merton. For her part, Milly says to Merton, "I love you. Both of you."

Some people, as if perturbed by an abstract attractor, feel tempted to summarize this film's plot by saying that Kate is simply selfish, greedy and wants money so that she can marry Merton without her Aunt's involvement. Kate therefore "devises" a "fiendish plot," as Madeleine Williams puts it, conspires with Merton and disingenuously pretends to be Milly's friend in order to get Milly's money. But in a story of this sophistication, there are sufficiently many complicating and mitigating factors to refute what seems merely to be terse, reductive oversimplification.

Kate does not seek out her Aunt in order to exploit her. Rather, as Kate says, "It was she who settled on me." Kate befriends Milly before she knows of Milly's illness, so her friendship is not insincere. Milly is first attracted to Merton without any help from Kate, so there is no entrapment. Kate does not originate the idea of seducing Milly to get her money, but appropriates it from Lord Mark, who also gives Kate a lesson in matchmaking. Kate washes her mother's tombstone to remind us of the possible consequences of poverty, making money a serious issue. Kate is considering not only herself but also her father, whom she gives the jewelry given to her by her aunt. Finally, while Susan and Merton struggle to maintain the lie, it is Kate who tries to abort the plot after failing to foresee herself as its weakest link.

As for Merton, his muckraking article, in addition to making plausible his knowledge of Sir Luke Strett, is an early indicator of his character, foreshadowing his rejection of Milly's money. His writing of the article also tends to contradict his assertion that he fakes passion and conviction. He is encouraged to lie not only by Kate but even by Susan.

If Kate and Merton behave improperly toward Milly, then what would be the more ethical alternative behavior? How would they behave differently if they were better, truer friends? What would Milly want them to do differently? Should they leave her to die alone in Venice?

As in *Heavenly Creatures*, even in the absence of explicit homosexuality, there is something subtle afoot. Insignificant in themselves are the facts that Kate makes a point of showing Milly erotic female imagery by Klimt, wears relatively masculine pajamas, climbs into bed with Milly (which also recalls Jane Eyre climbing into bed with the dying Helen), calls Milly the most beautiful woman she has ever met and wears male clothing to the masquerade. However, even after Kate sees Milly leave the doctor's office, is told of Milly's illness by Lord Mark, and hears Milly's nocturnal coughing and crying, it is not until Merton comes to Venice that she tells him of Milly's illness and says, "I wasn't sure until today." So, what is it that happens that day that proves to be the last straw? Except for a mild fainting spell, which would hardly seem conclusive of mortality, and might even be considered fashionable for a lady, the only other event is Milly's revulsion at the sights and smells of a fish market. Only then does Kate confide fully in Merton and formally bring him into the conspiracy for the purpose of seduction. It may be protested that Milly is reacting to stimuli that are objectively disgusting. But it is precisely because Milly's conduct is well within the behavioral repertoire of the nonterminally ill that it should not matter to Kate. Why, then, does it, except to indicate that she is not the man for the job? (This writer does not wish to put too fine a point on the issue of methylamine biochemistry, but he does direct the reader to the fish imagery in *Henry and June* that refers to a yonic metaphor in Anaïs Nin's original diary.)

On the DVD, a phrase that seems to be "The lady's a little fatigued" is subtitled as "The ladies are late for tea." An automated search of the novel's text found no match for the latter phrase, whereas the former appears as "leettle fatigued." The trailer included on the DVD features music from Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, which, refreshingly, is not used in the film. This

trailer also credits Gabriel Yared with the music, whereas Edward Shearmur is credited during the film's titles.

## Shakespeare in Love

This film's title recalls the command from Queen Elizabeth I to Shakespeare to depict "Sir John in love," a phrase which itself became the title of an opera by Ralph Vaughan Williams. Here again is the Arthurian theme of what Will calls "love that binds two hearts together come hellfire and brimstone" and what Viola calls "love . . . Unbiddable, ungovernable, . . . and nothing to be done, come ruin or rapture." As explained earlier, even if no one is above the law, rules do not always provide deterrence. In certain cases they serve only to sanction punishment for transgression and to foster self-esteem in the rule givers. The duty of fictional lovers is to avoid dissuasion, "for love denied blights the soul we owe to God." Also revisited are issues arising from gender bending and transvestism.

With all the talk about Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, it is useful to remember that the man on whom that story is based, Johann Faust, had been dead only about fifty years.

Great joy was derived from viewing this film with people who appreciated the use of the name John Webster as a punch line.

Colin Firth's Wessex employs a bit of synonymous parallelism ("The Queen, Gloriana Regina, God's chosen vessel, the Radiant One . . .") that echoes a scene from *The English Patient* in which his Geoffrey Clifton hears Almásy say, "His Majesty! Der Führer! Il Duce!" Another such echo comes when, thinking of the dead Marlowe, Will says to Wessex, "Absent friends!" In *The English Patient*, Firth's Geoffrey says, "Let's toast, then. Absent wives."

Technically, the use of the phrase "courtly love" is anachronistic, as it will be coined by Gaston Paris in 1883. Similarly, Wessex is getting a decidedly early start on his plantation in Virginia.

As Will synthesizes the ending of his play and tells of Juliet's suicide, Viola closes her eyes. During my first viewing, I was afraid that with all the reciprocal imitation of art and life going on, Viola had decided to resolve her own dilemma in the same manner. As the tomb scene plays out on stage, lest anyone worry too long, the red handkerchief provides immediate feedback, revealing the death to be fake; a sort of reverse *Tosca*.

This film features many rhyming events, as in *Howards End*, *Sister My Sister* and *The Wings of the Dove*:

- Twice intruders start fights in The Rose theater, first Burbage, then Wessex.
- Twice Rosaline is caught *in flagrante delicto* in Burbage's lodgings by a playwright. She is first found with Tilney by Will, and then with Burbage by Marlowe.
- Twice Will repeats a name provided to him for a play of his and then remarks, "good name." The first name is Mercutio, given by Marlowe for *Romeo and Ethel*. The second is Orsino, given by Viola for what will be *Twelfth Night*.
- Twice Viola sits up suddenly from a reclining position: first on the morning of her Sunday trip to Greenwich, then as Juliet in the tomb.
- Twice characters twirl their hair with their left hands: first Viola in bed, then Will when Viola kisses Sam in rehearsal.

- Twice Tilney enters a theater (first The Rose, then The Curtain) to denounce Thomas Kent as a woman and to close the theater.
- Twice John Webster points out someone in a theater: first he points out Kent to Tilney in The Rose, then he points out Wessex to the queen in The Curtain.
- Twice while walking through the streets of London Henslowe narrowly avoids having the contents of a chamber pot emptied on him.
- Twice Will dodges horses at Viola's home, first as Wessex arrives for a party, then as Wessex and Viola leave to be married.
- Twice the queen inspects Viola, first at Greenwich and then after the play when the queen plays along by calling Viola "Master Kent."
- Twice the action is specified as occurring on a Sunday, first on the day of Viola's royal audience at Greenwich and then on what Wessex calls "a day of mourning."
- Twice while on stage Viola makes eyes at Will and misses (or almost misses) her cue.
- Twice Wessex is kept waiting for Viola in her house by her nurse.
- Twice a girl in the street offers an orange or oranges for sale.
- When dressed as a woman, Will starts to bow and switches to a curtsy. After the premier of the play, Viola starts to curtsy and switches to a bow.
- Will and Ralph, respectively, begin to summarize Will's new play by saying, "Well, there's this [pirate/nurse]."
- Will speaks of "love that overthrows empires" and "a riot in a nunnery." Viola speaks of "love that overthrows life" and "a riot in the heart." The word *chinks* also recurs.
- At least twice Will performs his turning/spitting ritual before writing.
- In trailers, but not in the film, a piece of paper blows onto Henslow's head, as does one onto Essex's face, and thus would have formed a rhyme had it been included.
- Twice, referring to his head, Will assures someone, first Henslow and then Ned, that all or part of his play is "locked safe in here."
- Various mornings are announced by a roosters.

In addition to such rhymes, art imitates life when dialogue in Will's play echoes his personal experience. Also, the music used in the play ("gentlemen upstage, ladies downstage") is the same heard at the dance where Will and Viola meet. Eventually, the imitation works both ways, as when Burbage paraphrases a line from Will's play when he says, "Draw if you be a man." (Incidentally, another film that may have rhyming elements is *Carrington*. Also, in a *Pan's Labyrinth* DVD featurette, Guillermo del Toro acknowledges the elements that he places in his films that are to be discovered in what he calls "a game of interpretation," saying, "In *Devil's Backbone* there is repetition and rhyme.")

The DVD features several questionable captions, including one that reads, "[Cow Lowing]." At an elapsed time of 18:57, what is given in the screenplay as "Ned Alleyn and" is subtitled as "None other than."

## Onegin

This film was issued coincident with the Pushkin bicentennial. As with Merton in *The Wings of the Dove*, Tatiana is put on a pedestal as a saintly model of probity. It is interesting to note how, on the DVD, the Spanish audio track and subtitles differ, and how “love” in Tatiana’s letter (at an elapsed time of 35:15) is translated in the Spanish subtitles as “Vivir.”

One detail regrettably lost to letterboxing occurs at the start of the candle wax divination scene. In the full-screen VHS version, as Tatiana says, “Let her do it,” her toes are seen to wiggle. On the DVD, her toes do not enter into frame until after this point. This is intensely ironic and inappropriate because, as director Martha Fiennes explains on the commentary track, “Pushkin has got this thing about feet.” (Recall also the emphasis on feet discussed in the essay on *Whale Rider*. A similar stress may exist in chapter 15, the “Circe” chapter in the brothel, in *Ulysses*.)

When Tatiana reclines at an elapsed time of 31:30, the image takes on the character of a deposition-of-Christ painting and rhymes with Onegin lying on the pier. Also, Onegin and Tatiana take turns shaking their heads at each other.

If, during the recitation of the rules for the duel, it seems silly to insist that a gun must be discharged in the direction of the opponent, one need only recall the film *Barry Lyndon* to realize the real possibility of intentionally aiming elsewhere, which this rule seeks to preclude.

Much psychological import is ascribed to the first line of *Hamlet*: “Who’s there?” Onegin says to Tatiana, “I wasn’t sure it was you.” She replies, “And . . . is it?” This also recalls the line from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “I was someone else then.” Similarly, in reviewing the novel *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith in the *Los Angeles Times*, 9/25/05, Heller McAlpin writes:

Evident throughout is Smith’s droll humor, as when Howard orders a cab after his dismaying reunion with his father: “When it arrived, the driver’s door opened and a young Turk in the literal sense leaned out and asked Howard a rather metaphysical question. ‘Is it you?’” A throwaway line in another writer’s hands, perhaps, but in Smith’s, it shrewdly cuts to the core of her characters’ – and our – central dilemma: Who are we? Like Forster, Smith goes a long way toward answering that difficult question.

## Topsy-Turvy

This film features several instances of the reciprocal imitation of art and life. Gilbert’s tooth extraction is echoed in the lyrics of the Mikado’s song. The phrase “lots of good fish in the sea” also finds its way into the libretto, from which Gilbert borrows when he tells the choristers that “it’s an unjust world.” Temple’s “sword of Damocles” anticipates the sword falling from Gilbert’s wall. After the music of Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880) is played in the French brothel, Sullivan addresses Helen Lenoir with reference to Offenbach’s 1864 opera *La Belle Hélène*.

## A Beautiful Mind

A piece of music plays on a phonograph at the moment that the protagonist, it is later suggested, begins to have something in common with the composer of that music. The music is by Hildegard of Bingen, who was a famous visionary. The character Charles Herman, who turns out to be imaginary, enters as her music is playing.

## The Pianist

Many people get so caught up in the sociological penumbra surrounding certain films that they think nothing of throwing the baby out with the bath water. I feel no remorse and make no apologies for having seen *The Pianist*. I do not forgive Roman Polanski nor am I, as one writer put it, “unwilling to demand accountability.” But those who would throw the book at him are no less accountable for their aim. Punishment should be restricted to the guilty, without collateral damage. Polanski’s misdeeds are a reason to punish *him*, not me. His debt to society is his and not mine, and I refuse to pay any of it for him by curtailing my cultural edification.

Similarly, Doug McIntyre, in his *Los Angeles Times* article of March 8, disapproves of the acknowledgment during the February 2004 Oscar ceremony of Leni Riefenstahl’s passing. Bemoaning the show’s narrow scope of concern, he says that Riefenstahl “was undoubtedly a brilliant filmmaker, but . . .” Actually, Riefenstahl was only being recognized for cinema, not humanitarianism. If acknowledging Riefenstahl’s death was “honoring a Nazi,” then perhaps buying a Ford car is honoring a semi-literate bigot whose anti-Semitism earned the admiration of Hitler because Henry Ford was a brilliant engineer, but . . . Charles Lindbergh too was a brilliant aviator, but . . .

## The Passion of the Christ

The initial concept was unique and arresting: a film featuring dialogue in Latin and Aramaic but without subtitles. With an audience of millions who can literally quote chapter and verse to explain the action, why not? In his film *Pravda*, Jean-Luc Godard includes a long sequence of untranslated Czech dialogue and a narrator who makes its comprehension the responsibility of the audience. Mel Gibson seemed ready to expand this premise to encompass his entire film. To ensure independence, Gibson contributed \$25 million of his own money. Then came expressions of fear that Gibson’s treatment was “gratuitously graphic” or would blame Jews for the death of Christ and incite hatred. Both Gibson and his detractors felt wronged, but both sides also behaved disappointingly.

How the concept of culpability can come to be associated with the crucifixion of Jesus is far from obvious. It seems doubtful that many Christians believe that Jesus would have functioned as their redeemer if He had died of old age. If His mission was to act as a redemptive sacrifice, then the term “Christ killer” should be an honorific, and Judas, as Joseph Campbell says, is the midwife of salvation. To the extent that Christians do not regret being saved, there is nothing to be said by Christ’s executioners except, “You’re welcome.” Otherwise, let it not be

called “Good Friday.” Christianity itself refutes the charge of deicide, a charge that is actually oxymoronic if the god in question is immortal. The distinctive trait of Christ is not humanity but divinity. He could have resurrected only if His divine nature did not die. Even if the man died, the god did not, *according to Christians*. And if this was all pre-ordained, then any blame falls on God. Plus, an omnipotent being can only sustain injuries voluntarily. For his part, as noted elsewhere, St. Augustine says that Jesus went to the cross like a bridegroom to the bride. Finally, effects cannot precede their causes, so any people responsible for events twenty centuries in the past are all dead and unavailable for punishment. Even if people alive today can, in principle, enjoy collective divine benefit, they cannot bear responsibility, collective or otherwise.

Even if “we live in a world of stupid people,” as Joel Silver is quoted as saying, this is no excuse for compromise (*ex abusu non arguitur in usum*). And even the fear of hate crimes can be dismissed as an *argumentum ad baculum*. The issue for this writer is not anti-Semitism, but simply that he does not appreciate being teased. The first discouraging red flag was the incongruously anglicized title. Then it was reported that Gibson had reneged and subtitled the film. Having also built his own church in Malibu, one legitimately wonders whether subtitles are provided for the Masses celebrated therein. Commercial motives are not necessary to explain Gibson’s reversal, and cowardice is plausibly deniable. Rachel Abramowitz writes in the Los Angeles Times, 2/15/04, “If Gibson hadn’t decided to add subtitles, any sense that Christ died for everyone’s sins in a pre-ordained fashion might have sailed over moviegoers’ heads.” Any such moviegoers are free to make their own film (*vilia miretur vulgus*).

For all Gibson’s ultraconservatism, traditionalism and fundamentalism, his inconsistency leaves one unimpressed. The absolutism and integrity that this writer would apply to such a film would cause even the credits to be in Latin. Without the one gimmick that could have distinguished it from all other foreign-language films, *The Passion* fails to overcome this writer’s apathy and has no particular claim on his attention. Even to observe, as some have, that “it’s only a movie” would be flattery.

## Sideways

It is curious that the name of one of the principal characters, Maya, can be translated as delusion, illusion or deceit in the language in which Jack and Christine have their names engraved in their wedding rings: Sanskrit.

Whatever its aesthetic merits (or lack thereof), this film, like *The English Patient*, proved to be yet another occasion for pridefully belligerent inattention. Writing a “Counterpunch” feature in the *Los Angeles Times* (1/3/05), Burt Prelutsky expresses disappointment in critical acclaim for *Sideways*. “I feel the need to point out that low budget does not necessarily translate into high quality,” he writes, as if anything except the opposite assertion ever needed to be pointed out. Comparing his views to those of “Kenneth Turan and most of his fellow film critics,” Prelutsky asks, “who are you going to believe?” With respect to Prelutsky, the film will be allowed to speak for itself in answering that question. “I, for one, have never steered you wrong,” he says, though nor has an oak tree. Neither deserves a medal.

According to Prelutsky, “Our protagonist, Miles Raymond, is driving up the 405 Freeway while engrossed in completing a crossword puzzle.” The puzzle appears between two shot of Miles driving adjacent to Lindbergh Field in San Diego, the first shot showing three interstate 5



signs next to the onramp. The puzzle is not seen again until days later when Miles is sitting with Maya. The southern terminus of the 405 is approximately 80 miles to the north of the San Diego shots, which is apparently close enough for Prelutsky's caliber of work. One can only wonder what it was that *he* was doing while the film was running. Though a literal falsehood, his statement might charitably be taken as a clumsy attempt at synecdoche.

"To this day, I have no idea what the scene was intended to convey," Prelutsky admits. He may also find quantum mechanics incomprehensible, but would look no less silly rationalizing such a failing by means of upward-looking snobbery.

Prelutsky asserts that "the movie lost all semblance of logic and reality," as if illogical or unrealistic fiction were the least bit novel or inappropriate. God forbid dramatic necessity should raise its ugly head in the context of fiction! His failed suspension of disbelief could have been explained had he mistaken the film for a documentary, but he gives no indication of having done so. By contrast, Laurence Bergreen writes of movies in the *Los Angeles Times*, 2/27/05, "All I seek is two hours of entertainment and escape, authenticity – logic even – be damned." (*Chacun à son goût.*)

Prelutsky finds it mysterious that Maya would like Miles, as if inexplicable attraction were yet another unprecedented phenomenon. Maya and Miles may suffer a few sleepless nights grieving the absence of Mr. Prelutsky's consent, but they will probably get over it.

Citing the aforementioned irresponsible driving, Prelutsky complains that Miles "didn't care how many people he killed." Prelutsky is invited to take his concerns to the police, who will care no more than Miles, as the latter is fictitious. The penal code simply does not extend into the realm of fiction, so the deeds of Hannibal Lecter are a concern only to the equally fictitious Clarice Starling. When Miles takes money from his mother, the loss is no more real than if he had decapitated her. The killing of any number of people can be seen in any number of films, yet Prelutsky finds reason to grouse about a film in which people merely *could* have been killed. Nor does he offer any nonsolipsistic argument for why abhorrent characters, such as villains and antiheroes, should not be fictionally portrayed. However much one may bellyache about his deeds, Darth Vader has a legitimate function to fulfill. (Recall Joseph Campbell's quote regarding Picasso's portraits in the essay on *Heavenly Creatures*. See also the essay on *The English Patient* for the acknowledgment of the utility of bodily waste by Maddy in *Cold Mountain*.)

Continuing his disparagement of Miles, according to Prelutsky, "Over the course of the two hours, we discover that this pretentious poseur has cranked out an awful novel, 800 pages of stream-of-consciousness drivel." With an irresponsibly incautious use of the word *we*, and not content to speak for himself, Prelutsky commits some very slothful induction, as the text of the novel is not available to the audience, who are thus in no position to discover it to be awful or drivel. So, as to the discoveries he claims "we" make: No, "we" don't.

Prelutsky improbably relies on hearsay and notes that Miles, "in one of his few honest moments, admits [that his novel] isn't very good." It is actually at various times that the modest and unpretentious Miles calls it a "mess," a "long shot" and himself a "loser." It is a wonder that Prelutsky would trust so confidently in the opinions of one of whom he otherwise thinks so little.

Nor is stream-of-consciousness technique inferable, being, at best, a figment of Prelutsky's imagination. It is acknowledged that the film does provide two clues as to the novel's length. Prelutsky diplomatically declines to mention that, according to him, the characters, including Maya, who claim to like the work must be either idiots or liars.

Prelutsky offers a false dichotomy when he refers to an "editor who isn't goofy enough to confuse a puffed-up wine snob with Dostoyevsky," as if the latter could not have also been the

former. Neither does it seem likely, on the evidence of this piece, that any such confusion would arise with regard to Prelutsky's writing.

An accusatory confession is then made: "[W]hy anybody in his right mind would elect to spend his time in Mr. Raymond's company is beyond me." That the workings of a right mind are beyond him is nothing about which to brag. If Prelutsky is considered as an alternative, it must be said that correcting him affords considerable amusement.

Having just implied that a fan of this film is not "in his right mind," Prelutsky regrets that now people will be "even more likely to question my taste, if not my sanity." This is no surprise, given that where there is smoke there is fire. Those who do not want to invite suspicion should not blow smoke. So, when he speaks of those "less likely to question the emperor's apparel," the reader is invited to consider who is talking. If the emperor is nude, then what is the impediment standing between Prelutsky and an accurate description of the emperor's body? Having himself raised the issue of his sanity, it is a pity that the commentator, in defending it, did not do more to show his work.

While the empirical facts provide eloquent rebuttal to any overly ambitious claims of attentiveness, if not sanity, they have no bearing on matters of taste, though the connoisseurship displayed by Miles vastly exceeds any displayed by Prelutsky. Indeed, Miles could well repeat his question and metaphorically ask, "Are you chewing gum?" As a matter of taste, Prelutsky's reasons for disliking this film are his business. Why he misperceives it is between him and his doctor. Further, his personal cinematic preferences are relevant only to those responsible for buying gifts for him, which this writer is not.

The best punchline comes when Prelutsky writes that Miles "takes no pride in being a high school English teacher, and we see that he obviously makes no effort to do it well." Given the manifest negligent deficiencies in Prelutsky's spectatorial competence that disappoint even the most modest of journalistic expectations, Miles may not be the only one drinking more wine than he should.

Prelutsky ultimately comforts himself with the observation that "it won't be my fault if, on your death bed, . . . you find yourself wishing you had back the 123 minutes you squandered on 'Sideways.'" He at least manages to phrase this subjunctively, though he is mute on the issue of responsibility for any time squandered on his column. Except for the thrill of victory derived from outperforming him in the task of distinguishing this film from a hole in the ground, to quote Miles, "I'd rather have a knife."

## La Vie en Rose

If *Whale Rider* represents the mild end of the spectrum within the PG-13 rating, then *La Vie en Rose* sits at the rough end. This seems like a very old-fashioned film, especially for a director so young and so pierced. This is especially evident in some of the montages that few directors today would do with a straight face.

Note Edith's very Electra relationship with her parents (father is a hero/mother is a witch), and that at least four characters in the film, including her father, are named Louis. At least two other names are shared by multiple characters. Also note the formula used for generating nicknames. The last syllable of a name is taken and to it is attached, like a prefix, a repeat of the beginning of that last syllable. Thus, *Simone* becomes *Momone*, and the name *Titine* may derive

from *Christine*. When Titine is told, “Your legionnaire’s here,” a piano plays the song “*Mon Legionnaire*” on the soundtrack. Note Doug’s broad American accent, not unlike the equally broad one Edith will herself affect for a couple of lines in the desert.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux would not be canonized until 1925. However, given that she was being fast-tracked, prayers that address her as “Saint” prior to her canonization may be forgivable. When roses are later seen strewn on the floor, remember that Saint Thérèse’s patronage includes florists and that she is quoted as saying, “After my death I will let fall a shower of roses.”

When Edith is first shown in 1935, she hits the side of a car, the gesture having been inherited from her father, who uses it when he quits the circus. The shot of Edith and Momone running up Montmartre steps seems to be meant to contrast with Edith’s later infirmity, as well as to rhyme with her ascending the hospital stairs in a later flashback. The latter is also the second time that Edith ascends interior stairs to find someone dead. For those expressive Europeans, it is not enough to say “I’d rather slit my throat.” They must accompany it with a corresponding hand gesture.

Several interesting things occur with the subtitles. Spoken proper names appear only sporadically. Edith’s invocation of Croesus was thought too obscure, so wealth is suggested by invoking Rockefeller instead. No subtitle appears when Albert demands money from Edith on the street. Also, as with the talk of the high ceiling in *Howards End*, the pace of the dialogue in *La Vie en Rose* is often slowed by interruption, such as with talk of manicures.

At the end of the scene in which she is discovered by Leplée, Edith is given an opportunity and asks, “And if I don’t?” Notice that the following scene is designed to answer that question and to demonstrate the wisdom of never throwing away a business card, wisdom that will later be reinforced when Raymond enters the picture. The impact of being given a bill by Leplée is heightened by having coins tossed at Edith earlier and by her denial to her mother of having bills.

After our first encounter with Albert, as Edith prays, notice the match-on-song editing as the song “*Mon Homme*” is heard in the background and then a cut is made to Edith singing it during her audition. Earlier in the film, there is a match-on-lipstick and a match-on-coin-gathering. One of the larger unannounced temporal jumps likewise has Edith exiting the stage and then seen backstage in a later decade.

When Edith debuts at Gerny’s, Momone is eventually discovered to be in attendance. However, the trouble was taken to include her in the background of the wide-angle shot of the audience during the applause after Edith is introduced. The apprehension of Momone, which is reminiscent of Edith’s forcible separation from Titine, could be called the Roseanne Rosanadana scene, because: “It’s always something. If it’s not one thing it’s another.” Edith’s reaction is understandable, and it must be granted that she comes by her insecurity honestly.

As Edith rehearses with Raymond and Marguerite, notice how she is made to look short: Edith is in flats and slouches, while Marguerite is very tall and in heels. When Raymond stands in the foreground, the framing makes it look as if Edith is to blame for not filling up the excess headroom. It is also refreshing to see the French correct *each other’s* French pronunciation. When Edith leaves the scene, Raymond must admit that he *does* give her the choice.

The phrase “*La Vie en Rose*,” which will later be heard in the song of that title, is first heard in the song “*Frou Frou*.” The camera lingers for an extra moment when Edith is first attired in her signature, iconic clothing. Her eye color seems very dependent on cinematographic technique. Her eyes are very dark with overhead lighting but bright blue in the spot light. At the

end of her first “Music Hall” performance, she looks like Andy Kaufman reverting from his Elvis persona to his Foreign Man character to say, meekly, “Thank you very much.” Not hearing Edith singing in this scene avoids side-by-side comparison with the voice of the actual Piaf as the scene concludes. Though Jil Aigrot provides the voice for most of Edith’s diegetic singing in the 1930s, Marion Cotillard is heard singing at least once, being credited for “*Frou Frou*.”

At an elapsed time of 1:15:56, pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, because a technician’s arm is visible in the upper left corner of the frame, which could have been removed by CGI. At this point, Edith may be forgiven for playing the diva, as she is largely making up for lost time.

Momone, who looks rather good with a mustache, is a role in which one could easily see the late Katrin Cartlidge. Her main functions seemingly are to be told to shut up, to rescue Edith from physical assault and to repeat others’ words. Momone’s two early invocations of sorority heighten the sense of alienation of affection when Edith begins favoring Ginou Richer, who is listed in the credits not only as a character but also as an actor. When the director, for the second time, pulls the rug out from under the audience, it may help to recall that Edith takes a pill at bedtime the previous evening.

The final flashback sequence involves four different settings, like nested parenthetical levels, but they do not exactly proceed with a strict, reverse-order withdrawal (A-B-C-D-C-B-A). It turns out to be A-B-C-D-C-A-B-A-C-A-C-A-B-A-C-D-A. Up to this point in the film, one of the gaps in the story involves Edith’s adolescence. This climactic sequence extends the story into this gap from both directions, continuing the story forward from where it left off at the start of the gap and reaching back before the point at which the story resumes at the end of the gap. The two principal flashbacks complement each other. In them, Edith respectively acquires a doll and loses a daughter.

## Moonrise Kingdom

Sam’s piercing of Suzy’s ears represents the consummation of their relationship via an alternative means of penetration that parallels Redford being stabbed with lefty scissors, Snoopy being shot with an arrow, and is obliquely echoed in the names of Commander Pierce and Captain Sharp.

Whether or not Sam would have eventually been judged a candidate for shock therapy is rendered moot when he is struck by lightning (*fait accompli*).

## Rust and Bone

The film has some interesting symmetries. Obviously, both Stéphanie and Sam are rescued after being unconscious underwater. More subtly and ironically, Ali twice encounters ice on his knuckles, first as a solution and later as a problem. Similarly, he gets in trouble for installing cameras having earlier illegally removed one.

## Frances Ha

Frances meets a woman named Nessa and soon afterwards asks Benji, "You know what Virginia Woolf book this reminds me of?" Does Frances think of Woolf because the latter had a sister named Nessa? Frances could be thinking of the advice given to Laertes by Claudius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* when she observes that "sometimes it's good to do what you're supposed to do when you're supposed to do it." Greta Gerwig's Frances says that she and Mickey Sumner's Sophie "are the same person with different hair." For Gerwig's and Sumner's characters in Noah Baumbach's subsequent *Mistress America*, it is vice versa.

## The Grand Budapest Hotel

Zero is so named for at least two reasons. It would be a fitting nickname as it is the answer to M. Gustave's questions regarding experience, education and family. Having his beloved's name be Agatha allows him to inscribe the dedication "from Z to A" in the book of poetry that he gives to her. Later, bilateral, palindromic symmetry is established by a mirror-image bookend when Henkels orders a search to be carried out "from Augenzburg to Zilchbruck."

The name of Jeff Goldblum's Vilmos Kovacs seems to derive from those of cinematographers Vilmos Zsigmond and László Kovács just as the name Madame D. could be taken as a Max Ophuls reference.

## Ex Machina

The film could be seen as anti-intellectual in having its villain be a genius. Further, the plot rather implausibly depends on this genius being too stupid to implement biometric security properly. According to the principle of three-factor authentication, identification can be based on something one knows, has or is. Nathan becomes voluntarily and unnecessarily vulnerable because he stupidly transforms something that he is into something that he merely has, thus making it transferrable.

## The Lobster

This film by Yorgos Lanthimos provides a good lesson in the Thomist concept of *integritas*. Many people like to speculate and extrapolate beyond the film itself, wanting to know what happens in the story after the film ends. The point made by Aquinas is that whatever happens after the end is not *in* the story.

The film is about people under threat of being transformed into animals, so at one point the soundtrack fittingly features that section of *Don Quixote* by Richard Strauss in which the orchestra imitates the sounds of animals.

## Certain Women

Just as Hector Berlioz opens his *Le Corsaire* overture in way that stimulates agitation in the audience that helps sustain it through the succeeding slow section, writer/director/editor Kelly Reichardt solicitously features a noisy train during the titles of her film. Reichardt is sensitive to dramaturgical speed traps, is in no hurry and relies heavily on nonverbal communication. It is the function of poetry to refer beyond itself and render transcendence through the ordinary. Approached in this way, as Mr. Fuller advises, “You don’t have to say anything special.” Structural devices aid in this endeavor, and in this film, rhymes and recurrent themes are plentiful:

- Both Mr. Fuller and Albert sustain a head injury. By contrast, The Rancher (respectfully capitalized) tells of breaking her tailbone.
- Both Laura and Beth say, “Really?”
- Both Laura and The Rancher are seen watching television.
- Both Laura and Gina show their left profile while looking out a window, after which a POV shot is seen.
- Both Ryan and Gina are seen putting on pants.
- Both Sheriff Rowles (so laid-back as to suggest a modern Andy Taylor) and Gina (who are both in some sense “the boss”) are introduced in scenes where they put a mint or lozenge in their mouth.
- Both The Rancher and Gina receive what could be taken to be a cinematographic flare of benediction. (This could also be the sense of the rattle heard as the film begins, which is later echoed in the dance performed in the mall.)
- Laura, Guthrie and Gina are each interrupted in mid-sentence by other characters, while Beth students are similarly interrupted by Reichardt’s editing.
- Laura’s first words are, ironically, like a wedding vow when she says, “I do” to Ryan, who is married to Gina. She repeats these words when talking on the phone in her car, presumably to Ryan. The first two words spoken by The Rancher are to Beth. With similar irony, they are both “No.”
- In the first story, Ryan says, “They call it taupe.” In the second, he says, “We call it The Crab.”
- Dogs are mentioned on the radio in the film’s opening, and one is seen in each story. A picture of a dog is seen outside Laura’s office, another is seen as The Rancher walks the sidewalks of Livingston and there seems to be another above Albert’s desk. Gina repeatedly attempts to initiate conversation using the topic of coyotes. The film is dedicated to Reichardt’s dog Lucy. Dogs traditionally symbolize fidelity, hence the common name Fido.
- Both Fuller and Albert say a number in conversational isolation: “2:10” and “76,” respectively. Contextualized, it emerges that the former is the time of day and the latter is the speaker’s age.
- Both Ryan and The Rancher express concern about possibly making a female lawyer (Laura and Beth, respectively) late getting to (or back to) work.
- Fuller declines food when asked by Laura, who then eats alone. The Rancher repeatedly declines food while Beth eats her meals in the diner.

- Fuller, Gina (along with Guthrie) and Beth ride as the passengers of Laura, Ryan and The Rancher, respectively.
- Both Laura and The Rancher use an underhand grip to turn their respective steering wheels, both their vehicles pull off the road and stop, and both find themselves in no hurry to return to a car after a meal.
- Twice Beth endures classroom catechisms that recall the boardroom demonstration of the Hula Hoop in *The Hudsucker Proxy*.
- Gina denies plans for a garden, but Laura compensates for this by working with a receptionist named Gardener.
- Both Fuller and Gina are seen fastening their passenger-side seat belts.
- Like Leonard Bast in *Howards End*, The Rancher repeatedly declines offered food, even when it would cost her nothing.
- Feet are highlighted several times. For example, Laura uses her right foot to stroke, in turn, both Ryan and her dog, the latter receiving more intimate contact owing to Laura's bare foot.
- The Rancher speaks of riding with her brothers after Albert speaks about his brother.
- Laura, Gina and (less obviously) Beth successfully elicit a response of "Okay" from, respectively, Fuller, Albert and The Rancher. Laura invests eight months of effort and eventually needs help from a colleague. During Fuller's incarceration, Laura ultimately reciprocates, as if she takes a hint from his name and agrees to a fuller, richer relationship with him. Gina feels impeded by Ryan. Beth accomplishes it with silence.
- As Laura walks back to rejoin Fuller in her car, the camera, looking forward, dollies alongside her on her left. As Gina walks along the river, the camera, looking to the right, dollies alongside her on her left. As The Rancher approaches Beth for the final time, the camera behaves as it did with Laura.
- Twice The Rancher explains her presence in Beth's class, just as Albert twice notes that he was on the phone when he fell.
- The Rancher meets Beth in a school, which is what Albert's sandstone used to be.
- Notes originating in Laura's office containing addresses of other lawyers are read by both Fuller and The Rancher.
- The final interactions between Ryan and Laura, and later between Beth and The Rancher, occur in parking lots.
- Football commentary is heard in Albert's house, the Belfry diner and Gina's segment of the epilogue. Amituana is said to have been a player.
- Several images of birds are seen in Albert's house, echoing the bird figurines in the bookcase in Laura's office.
- Twice The Rancher uses her truck's rearview mirror to observe Beth's car.
- As Beth parks at her office, a visual echo of her student's "reserved parking" question can be seen.

In *Blue is the Warmest Color*, the protagonist is directed toward her destiny by a discussion in a classroom. Here, the voiceover of a television science program offers an invitation to adventure ("It's a mysterious realm. Full of danger . . . and full of promise. A new frontier just waiting to be explored."), after which The Rancher embarks on adventure by driving into town and entering a classroom. (Just such an archetypal herald provides the basis for the subtitle of the essay on *Barton Fink*.)

Todd Haynes is an executive producer on this film. It is as though his *Carol*, a lesbian drama set in the 1950s, is influencing Beth both in terms of attracting another woman and opting for a four-hour drive rather than the contemporary alternative of video conferencing.

At the most fundamental level, The Rancher's interest in Beth need not be sexual. The Rancher is shown gazing wistfully at the ceiling, but is not depicted blatantly engaging in erotic self-gratification. Little other evidence is provided aside from facial expressions and a bit more concern for her appearance than might otherwise be expected.

Parenthetically, a rumor has somehow arisen that The Rancher's name is Jamie, though this writer was never able to find any authoritative source for this. She derives from a character named Chet and her name is never used in the film. "The Rancher" is the only designation given in the credits, on IMDb, and by the director and cast in several online interviews. Thus, until further notice, this alternative name will not be used here. And while on the topic of names, it should be noted that Fuller has an ironic one, given that his life seems to be getting progressively emptier.

In the literary source material (see below), concern is expressed about snow being melted by a chinook wind, thus explaining the variation in snow cover among the ranch scenes.

As one would suspect from the case's title, *Tinker v. Des Moines* dealt with events in Iowa, not Ohio.

In the third class scene, The Rancher smiles because Beth has arrived *and* is appropriately attired for riding. Inviting Beth to join her on the horse, The Rancher shifts her weight slightly in a shot displaying only the top half of her body. This is an example of the film's cinematic minimalism, as the audience is left to interpret this retrospectively as The Rancher vacating the left stirrup to facilitate Beth's mounting of the horse.

The Rancher has her horse trot to school but has it walk when Beth is aboard. The change of gait may be to avoid jostling Beth (who says "it's been a while"), but it also serves to prolong what is clearly a pleasurable experience for The Rancher. Elevated above the ground, they would be like two Apsarasis taking flight, were it not that Beth seems to be having a much more mundane experience. In fact, even though the drive is already an adequate excuse for Beth to discontinue her teaching job, it could be that The Rancher is already making her feel uncomfortable, contributing to her decision. (Serendipitously, the word *Apsarasi* recalls the Apsaroke [Crow Nation] ancestry of the character [Chet Moran] in Maile Meloy's original short story on whom The Rancher is based. So said Lily Gladstone at the New York Film Festival, though the only such specification in the Riverhead paperback edition read by this writer is that his mother "was three-quarters Cheyenne." Nevertheless, the reservation closest to Belfry is that of the Crow.) At the ride's conclusion, The Rancher removes her glove to grasp Beth's scarf, just as Ward Bond's Chief Petty Officer Dowdy respectfully removes his before handling the letter from the title character in *Mr. Roberts*.

Once in Livingston, The Rancher may be giving a nod to her literary prototype as she observes a mannequin in a store window. When Beth discovers The Rancher in Livingston, she says, "Thought I was in the wrong place." She could have said this earlier because she has been getting served in a Belfry diner by staff wearing shirts the backs of which read: "Yellowstone Truck Stop/Livingston, MT." Though it is not until the second diner scene that the back of a shirt is legible, suspicion about this arises in the first diner scene when the name *Yellowstone* is seen on the front of a shirt. Livingston is on the Yellowstone River, while Belfry is not. This association is reinforced by the "Yellowstone Ballet" sign visible across the street from Beth's law office. Though it is not impossible that people would wear clothing designating an



establishment four hours away, the film may be relying on another of Beth's statements: "They're not gonna check." Also to be ignored is the "Bear Canyon Road" sign, which is several miles west of Livingston, but seen as The Rancher is supposedly approaching from the east. Similarly, as The Rancher first enters Livingston, the camera is actually traveling westward on Main Street (U.S. 191) in Bozeman. Passing Tracy Avenue, "APRIL 23" (a date that is also highlighted in *Heavenly Creatures*) appears on the marquee of The Ellen Theatre. A little farther up the road is the Gallatin Valley Mall, which earlier provided the location for a scene set in Billings.

Leaving Beth's law office, The Rancher drives along North B Street past East Callender Street. Turning right on East Park St. would put her on the highway that would lead her back to Belfry. However, emotional symbolism overrides geography. Rejecting this turn allows Reichardt to cast shadows on The Rancher as the truck passes under the railroad tracks. (Not that it matters, but a circuitous route home would still be possible from this point via East Gallatin Street.)

Sheriff Rowles, who forgoes the militaristic SWAT maneuvers that the audience may be expecting. Similarly, the audience is teased with several minor red herrings during The Rancher's episode: Her truck is seen behind her as she brushes her teeth, but she then rides a horse to class instead. Beth is late for the third class but eventually arrives. An empty classroom bodes ill for the fourth session but students subsequently arrive. Before leaving Livingston, The Rancher's truck threatens not to start but finally does. It then seems that she might "rollover on the highway," as per Fuller's wish for his wife, but the truck remains upright. Moments earlier, she is seen to lose consciousness. If she were merely asleep, it would seem that crashing through the fence would cause her to awaken. When no attempt is immediately seen to return the truck to the road, it could be speculated that she is dead. It is not until the epilogue, assuming temporal linearity, that her survival is confirmed. It may be that she is awake as the truck comes to a stop, but is taking the opportunity for a good cry, as the director respects her privacy by keeping the audience at a distance.

Parzival fails in his quest by not expressing compassion when given the opportunity, as is true of the characters in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, who choose not to exit hell when given the chance. *Certain Women* is about the tension between the need for compassion and the difficulty of providing it. With that in mind, does the film have a happy ending?

In the "milkshake" and "hamburger" scenes in the epilogue, the five principle characters all smile, including Fuller, despite the loss of both his freedom and his wife. The Rancher, who has already inspired condolence, displays little discernible emotion.

Albert speaks of "when the town was settled." *Certain Women* is a story about settlers in another sense. *The Remains of the Day* ends with an avian symbol of peace, possibly indicating that Mr. Stevens is resigned to his situation, not in the sense of total satisfaction without disappointment or regret, but of voluntarily acceptance of optimal circumstances. The Rancher, too, could be thought of as being similarly at peace, having opted for what may be the best available compromise. She and Beth both decide that discretion is the better part of valor, preventing their final scene together from being very much more regrettable.

The Rancher has indeed learned the hard way about a realm that is full not only of promise but of danger, and she is lucky to have averted at least some of the latter. It is hoped that she will be able to make the best of it, and that her work with the horses grants her equanimity in the form of equine-imity. She may already be benefitting from some Easter symbolism. She appears to enter her deathlike sleep on a Friday. Fuller observes that the epilogue begins on a

Sunday. Though not specified, it is at least possible that the epilogue segments are occurring on the same day. For one who has already borne witness to a portentous cross of spackle on her ceiling, this would be perfect timing for her reappearance to constitute a “resurrection.” That said, such imagery contrasts with the shot of her wielding a pitchfork. The “cross” shot also features a lightbulb, which not only recalls Jesus as “the light of the world,” but also the (unseen) tattoo on Kristen Stewart’s right arm depicting the lightbulb/eye/sun from Picasso’s *Guernica*. Plus, one segment of the electrical cord branches off into an orientation consistent with that of the Holy Lance. The Friday-to-Sunday aspect of the symbolism is underscored by the transition to the epilogue being deemed sufficiently significant to merit the first nondiegetic music to be heard since the opening seconds of the film. And as if offering internal license for symbolic interpretation, “METAPHOR” tops the list on the blackboard in the second classroom scene. Finally, if those are poinsettias in the laundromat (which would suggest Christmas), then it is perhaps proper that it is The Rancher who is the one sharing the scene with them.

Some can tolerate only so many Beths before retiring from the field chastened, though accommodation and contentment can still be found in the way of William Wordsworth’s *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*:

Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower  
We will grieve not, but rather find  
Strength in what remains behind.

## The Ballad of Buster Scruggs

The anthological structure of this film allows the Coen brothers to have their cake and eat it too. Instead of having to choose between a cynical, fatalistic ending and a happy one, there are opportunities for both.

After Buster Scruggs is killed, he assumes an angelic aspect similar to that already exhibited by Waring Hudsucker in *The Hudsucker Proxy*.

The essay on *Phantom Thread* describes how that film uses and in many ways parallels the scenario of the *Symphonie Fantastique* of Hector Berlioz. In the symphony’s fourth movement (titled “March to the scaffold”), in the seconds prior to the protagonist’s execution, his thoughts are of a woman. So it is for the cowboy in “Near Algodones.” (And is that an uncredited Holliday Grainger distracting him?) Think also of Judge Roy Bean’s final glimpse of Lillie Langtry in *The Westerner*.

The theme of art defeated by commerce is taken to such extremes in the “Meal Ticket” episode that it is hard to compare it to related themes far more delicately explored in such films as Sara Colangelo’s *The Kindergarten Teacher*. Borrowing an idea from *A Futile and Stupid Gesture*, allowance was made for the possibility that the impresario would slip and be the one to “take the Nestea plunge.”

Approximately 38 minutes in duration, “The Gal Who Got Rattled” is the longest of the episodes, allowing the audience admirably ample time for emotional investment. After playing Millie Gately in Kelly Reichardt’s *Meek’s Cutoff*, Zoe Kazan may have felt right at home playing Alice, whose surname immediately recalls the Sundance Kid (Harry Alonzo Longabaugh).

Parallels with *Of Mice and Men* include a dog being taken off to be shot and a somewhat dependent character who engages in flirtation or courtship and is ultimately analogously shot. The color plate for this episode bears the caption, “Mr. Arthur had no idea what he would say to Billy Knapp.” Mr. Arthur finds himself in the position of Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, who says, “What do you want me to do, draw you a picture?”

Having already encountered the actor Tom Waits, whose name is a potential pun, the final episode is titled “The Mortal Remains,” which is another. The episode is interpretable as a journey to the afterlife. The passengers’ inability or unwillingness to leave the coach evokes such works as Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit* and Bruce Jay Freidman’s *Steambath*.

Curiously, to mock the failure of their opponents during their respective shootouts, the teller repeatedly yells, “Pan-shot!” and Mr. Arthur repeatedly yells, “Dog hole!” (The hyphen in the first expression is taken from the book’s color plate.) Further, these symmetrically occur in episodes 2 and 5 of the 6. It is also in those episodes that Native Americans are featured. Nested symmetrically within that pair is another. Episodes 3 and 4 feature, respectively, a counting chicken and a prospector asking, “How high can a bird count anyway?” At the temporal center of the film, in harmony with the taunts noted in episodes 2 and 5, the prospector repeatedly says of his adversary, “He didn’t hit nothing important!” Bracketing all these we have Buster Scruggs ascending to heaven in the first episode and then a final episode that leaves the audience speculating about how many characters may already be dead. (And note that the “Irishman” character goes by the name Clarence, recalling the angel in *It’s a Wonderful Life*.) Whether this bilateral symmetry was intended or not, there it is. Admittedly, counter to this pattern, the similar wounds of Buster and Alice are placed asymmetrically in episodes 1 and 5, respectively, while discussions of uncertainty by Billy Knapp (who is bound for Fort Laramie) and the Frenchman (who is bound for Fort Morgan) occur in episodes 5 and 6, respectively, and episodes 4 and 5 are, respectively, where the prospector and Mr. Arthur play dead.

In an online article titled “The Absent Women of ‘The Ballad of Buster Scruggs,’” Sarah Aswell makes the proper, statistical observation that “men speak twice as much as women, across the board, in movies of all genres.” The goal should be to even out that ratio in films collectively, not the categorical imposition of quotas on every film individually. Otherwise, nearly every film “misses an opportunity” of one sort or another. Absent women in any one film may be offset by absent men in another. In the realm of opera, for example, if both *Billy Budd* and *Sour Angelica* can be accommodated, so let it be with *Buster Scruggs*.

## The Favourite

These essays have often dealt with internal cinematic rhymes. *The Favourite* has a few of its own. For example, Anne and Sarah both tell of a dream, both ask where they are and both say, “Look at me.” Masham and Anne respectively speak of something that makes “my blood hot” and “my blood chill.” Abigail squeezes Masham’s face and then has this done to her by Sarah. Sarah asks Masham if he would “like a bite of” Abigail, who later bites him. Both Sarah and Abigail cause Anne to fall and lie supine on the floor. But consider also how separate films may collectively rhyme. This film by director Yorgos Lanthimos and his previous work *The Lobster* have much in common in addition to actors Olivia Colman and Rachel Weisz:

- In *The Favourite*, lobsters to be raced and eaten echo the previous film's title.
- David, in *The Lobster*, is a childless, shortsighted architect, while Queen Anne has lost 17 children, holds documents very close to her eyes when reading them and shows Sarah an architectural model.
- It is as if Anne's bad leg and concern about lisping derive, respectively, from the previous film's *Limping Man* and *Lisping Man*. *Limping Man* also anticipates Abigail's self-imposed nosebleed.
- Both films feature comical dance moves, a gun that unexpectedly fails to fire a projectile, and an expression of admiration for a woman's hair.
- In both films, guns are used for target practice in a garden setting, first using a two-dimensional human silhouette as a target, then using the human form of a suit of armor.
- Abigail is targeted with a pelletless discharge that echoes the nonlethal tranquilizer darts of the earlier film.
- David and *Heartless Woman* share a hot tub, while Anne and Sarah share a mud bath.
- *Heartless Woman* kicks David's brother to death, he thinks of "kicking her in the stomach over and over again," and Sarah threatens to kick Abigail repeatedly.
- Anne's (inward) fall from a window and crying on the floor echo the (outward) fall of *Biscuit Woman*.
- Abigail and Masham have a playful romp in the woods that comically echoes the more serious fight and chase in the hotel involving David and *Heartless Woman*.
- *Lisping Man*'s right hand is thermally burned while Abigail's right hand is chemically burned.
- *Limping Man*'s mother was turned into a wolf, while Abigail uses wolves as an excuse for the state of her dress.
- Rachel Weisz's Sarah draws eyeglasses on her face using mud, recalling her character's question about eyeglasses in the earlier film. (In an internal rhyme, mud on the face is experienced by Abigail accidentally but by Anne and Sarah recreationally.)
- Weisz plays characters who are guided by a woman after being blinded in one film and blindfolded in the other. One character's dark facial accessory used to mask a scar recalls the earlier character's sunglasses. Both characters also kiss someone while being observed by a woman, and both either experience or threaten the exposure of private, incriminating writings.
- The first film opens with the shooting of a donkey, while pigeons are shot in the second.
- David asks a loner, "Is that a sparrow up in that tree?" Harley distracts Abigail by pointing out an imaginary "wren."
- Both *Heartless Woman* and Abigail speak to a man about the two of them being a good match.
- The "bisexual option" that is denied to David after he inquires about it is opportunistically exploited in the later film.
- *Heartless Woman* speaks of "the animal no one wants to be," but it is never revealed what this animal is. Sarah fires a gun that has not been loaded with a pellet and then speculates that this may prove a useful ruse in the future, but it is never again exploited.
- Anne is treated for gout, perhaps echoing the earlier film's sinister ophthalmologist or the loner who gets his leg caught in a trap.
- Abigail anticipates "something called a pineapple," which may be the counterpart of something called a kiwi that is actually a tennis ball.
- Rabbits enjoy different kinds of favor in the two films.

- David and his fellow hotel guests risk being transformed into animals, while Anne is said to look “like a badger,” her lost children have metaphorically become rabbits and Abigail obligingly agrees to act as “a monster.”
- David with one hand restrained is like Anne after what seems to have been a stroke.
- David mentions the German language, Abigail mentions a German man, and, though not explained in the film, German will be the native language of Anne’s successor.
- Anne eats cake, as do the loners when visiting the city.
- In both films, multiple women slap someone.
- “The red kiss” of the earlier film is echoed in Anne’s bloody bandages.
- Hotel guests in the earlier film are restricted to uniform clothing, while characters in the later film seldom venture beyond black and white costumes that evoke a chess match.
- Loners and “Nude Pomegranate Tory” dodge darts and fruit, respectively.
- Masturbation is mentioned several times in the earlier film, while in the later one, “a man was pulling his . . . .”
- Several shots in the first film seem to have been made using very long lenses, while several shots in the second feature a contrasting fisheye effect. Both films have moments of slow motion.

This film is regarded by many as a prequel to Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Phantom Thread*. Even if the affinities listed above are more numerous, certainly the poisoning of tea and the removal of another person’s lipstick are echoes less of *The Lobster* than of Anderson’s film. (And just as Reynolds ultimately cooperates, there may also be a partly voluntary aspect to Sarah’s poisoning. After her first sip of tea, Sarah regards Abigail with an eye of suspicion, but then resumes drinking.) In any case, just as these essays have previously noted the applicability of auteur theory to the works of Anthony Minghella and the Coen brothers at this level of detail, the same might be said about those of Lanthimos.

At the beginning of her service, Abigail spends much time just silently taking it all in, which ultimately profits her. When she hears of the Duke of Marlborough going into battle “chest-bared,” it foreshadows the state in which she herself will be found when Sarah discovers her in bed with Anne. Abigail hears Harley described as “a useful ally, but a dangerous enemy” and then later presents herself as such to him. Abigail learns of the intimate nature of the relationship between Anne and Sarah, inspiring Abigail to seek Anne’s favor by sexual means. Abigail is also present when Marlborough says, “I must sleep with my men. It is only right.” She comes to realize that Anne may similarly think it only fair to sleep with her women. Sarah speculates that “we” may “think of a use for” the “great jape” of firing a gun in a way that produces only noise. Abigail later claims to have smoking-gun documentation when she accuses Sarah of embezzlement, but she never produces it.

Even though Abigail acknowledges that she cannot afford the luxury of morality, the interpretation of her character should not be oversimplified. If she were absolutely without scruples, she might laugh and dance after burning Sarah’s letter. Instead, she sheds a tear.

Harley fears a Pyrrhic victory when he assesses the cost of the war “even if we win.” A proverbial lesson implicit in the film’s ending is “Be careful what you wish for,” because the true nature of victory is not always predictable (*In cauda venenum*). Abigail may feel this most keenly, but perhaps Anne and Sarah appreciate it just as well. For Abigail, the ending also suggests the old punchline: “What, and give up show business?” (On another comic note, Sarah’s

scar looks like a bit of product placement for Nike, and even vaguely recalls Agatha's Mexico birthmark in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.)

Some viewers are bothered by the use of fisheye lenses, though the director has noted that convex mirrors of the period provided similar views. And, obviously, optical distortion can be metaphorical of distorted psychology and politics. (Harley even uses the phrases "distortion of the system" and "distorted situation.") In simple practical terms, when an entire room is to be shown, as when the desolation of a single human figure is to be emphasized, a stage set with removable walls would allow for more distant perspectives with less distortion. But when shooting in historic aristocratic houses, wide-angle lenses become the only legal option.

The film contains many simple but very telling details. Some are simple questions of timing. When Abigail speaks of Sarah's "biggest secret," Sarah hesitates before turning around. When Abigail tries to explain her background and the extent of her education, Anne impatiently cuts her off by declaring it "all very fascinating." By contrast, after Abigail explains why she is in Anne's bed, there is a significant pause before Anne tells her to get out, as though it is dawning on Anne that that having Abigail in her bed may not be such a bad idea. Indeed, as soon as Abigail leaves, the film immediately cuts to Abigail being summoned back to Anne's room. Sarah sometimes underscores her words with dramatic respiration, as when she says that there should be no limit on one's love of England. The catchlight in Abigail's left eye as she rubs Anne's legs for the first time is, for this writer, absolutely critical for the success of the shot. Also to be cherished is how Abigail's gun points at Sarah as the two of them talk before Abigail scores an unlucky 13 in the final shooting scene.

Someone tweeted the following criticism of this film: "Imagine being so self-impressed that you mistake anachronism for wit." Fair enough. However, as observed elsewhere in these essays, being held hostage to euhronism due to cowardice or lack of imagination is a recipe for squandered narrative opportunity, and is thus, in itself, no virtue. Also, more than one person has described the setting of this film as "Victorian." Anne died in 1714 and Victoria was born in 1819, so this film never gets within a century of being "Victorian."

## Roma

Discussing Arthurian romances, Joseph Campbell observed long ago that the reverse of *Roma* is *amor*. In Alfonso Cuarón's film, love may be sought, but circumstances often run counter to those efforts. The film's stylization is elegantly understated, its slight and reverent flirtation with magical realism being even subtler than the very delicate one in *Blue is the Warmest Color*. Though perhaps never really crossing the threshold into that genre, its closest approach may be when Cleo alone matches Zovek's "tree" pose (*Vriksasana*). (Zovek's costume causes one to fear that his spiel will devolve into a variation of Rex Kwon Do from *Napoleon Dynamite*.) Just as Alma in *Phantom Thread* "can stand endlessly," Cleo finds "the still point," establishes her own personal *axis mundi* and stands imperturbably.

Memories are enhanced to the point of being slightly too good to be true, such that street vendors and the drum and bugle corps arrive in a timely manner when narratively useful. And even by cinematic standards, the forest fire could hardly have been better manicured. As a background element, the DC-8 enjoys the same ubiquity in this film as does Barry Goldwater (by way of portraiture) in *Raising Arizona*. The film's final "*Shantih Shantih Shantih*" graphic

harmonizes both with the household Buddha figure and with Cleo's Zovek pose. And given the autobiographical nature of this film, it may be no mere coincidence that Clio, the Greek muse of history, is suggested by Cleo's name.

## Cold War

"Try everything once, except incest and folk dancing." Whatever the practical utility of such advice (attributed to George S. Kaufman, among others), Pawel Pawlikowski demonstrates that even these taboos may be useful tools in fiction. And while many directors would have made this film twice as long, Pawlikowski manages to cover all this ground in less than 90 minutes.

Music is central to the film and is often used in subtle ways. After the film's ethnomusicological beginning (which recalls earlier efforts such as those of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály in Hungary), Polish music is revisited and reimagined over time. (Examples of repurposing folk music go back at least as far as the Renaissance parody mass.) The director has spoken of the irony of Zula singing a Soviet song in her audition, of Poles and East Germans dancing to Russian music (the Soviet Union calling the tune in eastern Europe literally as well as figuratively) and of Croats (a "SPLIT" sign is visible in the first shot of the railroad station) being serenaded with a Serbian song. (Given his statement about Germans, Kaczmarek should realize that Croats are still Croats. Just recall why the term "balkanization" was coined.) A clue to Wiktor's independent nature comes when he hints at the music of George Gershwin on the piano beneath a portrait of Dmitri Shostakovich, composers of whom communist officials may not have approved. The second piece heard in the 1951 Warsaw performance and the first song that Wiktor plays in Paris seem to derive from the "*Oberek*" song sung by the woman playing an instrument that looks like a pedal-powered accordion. In Yugoslavia, Zula is nearly overcome with emotion when the lyrics she sings become an autobiographical lamentation. Wiktor emotionally improvises on the "Two Hearts" song and on "*Oberek*" (though one phrase also reminded this writer of the Chopin "Fantasie-Impromptu" that he plays earlier), and then seems to acknowledge how communist domination has spoiled all this by concluding with a rueful reference to "The Internationale." ("Two Hearts" goes through changes not only of mood and language but all so key. Originally encountered in C minor, Wiktor transposes it to A for his folk ensemble, to B-flat for his jazz group, etc.) During the credits, the pianist's voice immediately identifies the performer as Glenn Gould. Confirmation of some of these observations, along with additional insightful details, were found in Lisa Liebman's *Vulture* article "The Stories Behind the Songs in *Cold War*."

Imitating Abelard and Heloise, Wiktor is initially Zula's teacher and they spend much time separated. The shot of Zula floating in the water not only recalls the painting of Ophelia by John Everett Millais, but an even closer affinity with Shakespeare's Ophelia is established by the fact that Zula is singing. (Jumping into a river may also be read as an act of baptism.) The impact of this shot is like that of the *Vriksasana* moment in *Roma*. In Paris, Wiktor has a lover named Juliette. Hector Berlioz fell in love with Harriet Smithson when she portrayed Shakespeare's Ophelia and Juliet in Paris. Zula begins the "Ophelia scene" lying on her right side and supporting her head with her right hand. This is the "lion posture," said to have been assumed by The Buddha when leaving the world for the last time. Zula is in this attitude when she speaks of the end of the world.

The cinematography is most interesting and arresting when it is self-conscious and foregrounded. In a visual pun, like an enharmonic musical modulation, a deceptive scene change matches the distressed interior surfaces of a church with the aerial view of muddy ground. Faces sometimes occupy unusually low positions in the frame. In one particular shot, attention is focused on characters in the foreground while people in the background are rendered with noticeably lower contrast. Only gradually does it become clear that the background is being imperfectly reflected in a mirror against which the foreground characters are standing, this optical foreground being simultaneously the physical background. (Note that Zula is already visible in this mirror with her arm supporting her chin and that the apparent depth in the scene results from a parallel mirror on the opposite wall.) Because the director so often depicts Paris in a manner counter to its “City of Light” reputation, it is fitting that Wiktor should work in a club called *L’Eclipse*. (Additional astronomical references are provided by the song “Blue Moon” and by Bill Haley & His Comets.) This club is introduced immediately following the last Berlin shot, in which Wiktor walks in front of a sign that reads “SUNLICHT SEIFE” (sunlight soap). As observed by Casey Jarrin, the name of the club is just one of many things the film may have in common with Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1962 film *L’Eclisse*. As part of this dark portrayal of Paris, a statue seen from the Seine appears to be one of the ones guarding the northern end of the Pont du Carrousel. There then appears what seems to be the south transept of Notre-Dame. Pawlikowski has said that he waited to film until after the cathedral switched off its lights at 1 a.m., which a tolling bell announces early in the scene. By placing objects near the borders of the image, the director dares exhibitors to format the film properly. Unlike Laemmle’s Town Center 5 theater in Encino, Laemmle’s Playhouse 7 theater in Pasadena cropped the image so as to exclude one appearance of the *L’Eclipse* sign at the top of the frame and also the row of pills in the film’s antepenultimate shot.

Wiktor prepares to leave Berlin with figures of skaters behind him, as if suggesting that he is “skating on thin ice.” The application of the term *femme fatale* to Zula proves quite prophetic. Standing under a sign identifying Place Émile-Goudeau in Paris, Wiktor tells Zula that he was waiting for her. (She later says that she will wait for him.) Jason Fraley notes, “The French pronunciation of Goudeau sounds exactly like ‘Godot,’ as in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, where characters wait in vain for a man named Godot (i.e. God).” Further, the mythological significance of the number 9 (and numbers the sum of whose numerals is 9) as being the number of the goddess has been discussed in several of these essays. Though it is admittedly a bit of a stretch, let it be mentioned in passing that Place Émile-Goudeau is in the 18th arrondissement. (While on the topic of Parisian geography, recall this same director’s 2011 film *The Woman in the Fifth*.) As Zula and Wiktor approach the sign, the camera is looking east along Rue Berthe from Rue Ravignan. Juliette may claim that time does not matter to lovers (an idea considered at length in the essay on *Phantom Thread*), but temporality is at least acknowledged as Zula dances to “Rock Around the Clock.” Zula flips through Juliette’s volume of poetry, allowing us to learn that the words “seule dans mes draps” come to be replaced by a repetition of “Loin de toi” when they become song lyrics. Zula finally lands on a poem titled “VOYAGE EN ITALIQUE,” which may resonate with her because of her marriage to an Italian. Zula reveals this marriage after interrupting Wiktor’s work on an Italian-language film sequence.

A prominent theme throughout this love story is the nature and function of marriage. Speaking to Wiktor, Zula says of her marriage to a Sicilian that she “did it for us.” Indeed, it allows her to leave Poland and ultimately reunite with Wiktor. Later, after telling Wiktor that she will free him, she seemingly marries Kaczmarek in exchange for his help in pulling the



bureaucratic strings that result in Wiktor's early release. Having achieved this, she asks Wiktor to return the favor. The marriage to Kaczmarek is not a total surprise, as he has a history of "hitting on" Zula and complimenting her on her appearance. And if Zula has pursued the matter of seeking Wiktor's release more directly, then Kaczmarek's question about the resemblance between himself and Zula's son may reflect some uncertainty about the boy's paternity. During her first marriage, Zula says that it does not count because it did not involve a church wedding. The film ends with a marriage that occurs in a sacred building and includes reciprocal oral vows and even a kind of alternative Eucharist, with only a priest being omitted. This places it half way between the two forms of marriage observed in *Phantom Thread*: the virtually unintentional one and the formal, official one. This is perhaps a Polish version of *Gandharva* marriage, as discussed in the essay on *Phantom Thread*. Early in the film, the sanctity of this ruined church prompts Kaczmarek to remove his hat despite cold. Later, when Zula goes to him to "confess" as she would to a priest, he ironically wants to know if Wiktor is guilty of believing in God. The marriage scene follows one in which Zula reports the need to through up. Similarly, as if purgation were some sort of prerequisite, Kaczmarek enters the church only after urinating. Wiktor experiences purgation when his hair is cut during his imprisonment. By the time he enters the church, his hair has grown back, but he has been stripped of his pianistic virtuosity. Zula and Wiktor vow "until death do us part" even though it is death that ultimately unites them.

George Crow writes, "The use of mirror images not just physical but metaphorical throughout is a stroke of genius." Physical examples include numerous shots involving mirrors (one having been mentioned above) or reflections in panes of glass. The way Zula and Wiktor reciprocally wait for each other and liberate each other may be among the metaphorical examples. Like a mirror, Zula repeats certain words spoken to her, such as "shock," "colour" and "blank." When she is seen wearing headphones, it mirrors Wiktor's use of them at the beginning. Wiktor and Zula are both, in turn, interrupted during a recording session. Also note that Zula contemplates the idea of metaphor while looking at herself in a mirror. First Irena and then Kaczmarek sit in the audience as approval is expressed. But while Kaczmarek is gratified by the rhythmic clapping in Berlin, Irena walks out on the standing ovation for the tribute to Stalin. Then when Wiktor takes his turn sitting in an audience, it is a springboard for his expulsion from Yugoslavia. Kaczmarek suggests lightening the hair of one of Zula's colleagues in order to achieve a more Slavic look. Years later, in keeping with the Latin American theme of her song, Zula wears a dark wig. Zula's interpretation is "blank" during her Paris recording session, but her 1964 song demonstrates admirable professionalism and commitment. When Zula listens to her phonograph record, her reaction contrasts with that of the old man who listens to Wiktor's tape recording at the beginning. Wiktor is ratted on by Zula and then later is called upon to do some ratting of his own. On a related note, among the possible rhymes within this film, both Kaczmarek and the Polish official in Paris nervously drink when discussing how to satisfy the Polish government. "Dark eyes" are referred to in the lyrics of a song, while Kaczmarek considers Janicka "too dark," with specific reference to her eyes. Wiktor's early release echoes Zula's "suspended sentence." Wiktor flags down a taxi and later uses a device labeled "TAXIPHONE." Both Wiktor and Zula conclude remarks about love with "and that's that." After Zula inspects Juliette's book, Wiktor reads as he lounges with a picture of a lounging woman behind him. A shot from a train in 1959 is similar to one from the train to Berlin. In the film's final seconds there is an echo of the wind in the grass as Zula speaks of "rattling on you." Zula and Wiktor interrupt each other during their respective recording sessions. After singing her song in the night club, Zula looks to her right to see Wiktor in the background. She does something

similar when the recording of the French version is played. When they first reunite in Paris, Wiktor asks Zula how long she will be there. When Zula visits him five years later, she asks him how many years he must serve. For her part, Zula has already experienced incarceration when we first meet her. And one need not settle for just one reception with “interesting people.” In her last scene, Irena is the last audience member to stand, just as Zula gets out of sync with the rest of her ensemble after seeing Wiktor in Split and is the last to finish. Most obviously, narrative closure is achieved by revisiting the ruined church. There may also be some subtle numerological rhymes. The film’s second act could begin with the departure of the train for Berlin. As if to announce this, the number 2 is visible on a sign at train station. Within this central act, the number 2 is also seen on the train taking Wiktor from Split to Zagreb. (Fittingly, the appearance of the “SPLIT” sign when Wiktor arrives there bisects narrative part of the film fairly evenly.) As Wiktor waits for Zula in Berlin, a sign on the wall behind him consists of an arrow leading from a numeral 2 to a numeral 22. This graphically reflects our two protagonists headed toward their ultimate destiny because at the end of the film, though there seem to be 25 pills when they are first seen, only 22 are visible in the next shot. (Similarly rhyming visual elements include the line of tiny spikes on the ledge in the last shot of Wiktor in Berlin and the linear array of lightbulbs in *L’Eclipse* in the scene that immediately follows.) Additionally, on the telephone in Paris, Wiktor gives the number “04 18,” the sum of 4 and 18 being 22. (The significance of the number 22 is also discussed in the essay on *Phantom Thread*.) Parenthetically, regarding the spelling of *colour* above (as well as the use of *fringe* instead of *bangs*), the film seems to have been subtitled in English only once for British audiences, which, for Americans, serves to enhance the film’s European flavor. And, curiously, the Criterion Blu-ray subtitles the Lemko song but not the Italian film dialogue.

Claiming that any desire to return to Poland during this era is implausible, some critics regard this film as being insufficiently anti-communist and thus “historically inaccurate.” As noted throughout these essays (and, hopefully, appreciated by the director, who has extensive experience as a documentarian), this criticism is applicable only to documentaries. Otherwise, it might as well be applied to the many such lapses in the works of Shakespeare or to the appearance of dragons in Arthurian romances. As for people foolishly looking for history in all the wrong places, this writer has no interest in protecting them from themselves in nanny-state fashion. Ultimately, any such implausibility merely amplifies the love story by providing an obstacle for the protagonists to overcome in order to be together. As discussed elsewhere in these essays (especially in the one on *The English Patient*), lovers may be judged by how they deal with impediments. For some lovers, such as Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, being in hell is a price willingly paid. If fictional figures (also including Tristan, Huckleberry Finn and the characters in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*) can find reasons to prefer hell, they can (*a fortiori*) willingly prefer Poland. And to this viewer, considerations of realism do not constrain the political critique. Instead, the malevolence of Adam Ferency’s minister is almost comical in its extremity. The audience is implicitly invited to fill the silence at the end of his scene with the Polish equivalent of “Capiche?”

Wiktor speaks of “border crossing in both directions,” but the ultimate border crossing is saved for the end when he and Zula “go to the other side” in more ways than one. One observer on Twitter disapproved of this film, especially the ending, claiming that suicide is never romantic. Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet send their apologies for not having received the memo.

## Maiden

Though this film proved to be a great favorite of this writer, it is not without its quirks. During the fifth Whitbread Race, it is declared that for “the first time in twelve years, a British has won a leg of” this race. The film shows Atlantic Privateer winning a leg in the previous race 4 years earlier when Tracy was its cook. Wikipedia lists it as a United States entry, though the reporter interviewing Tracy at the time refers to her as being “on a British boat.” It is a pity that the film conceals the fact that a second stop was made in Uruguay between the stops in Auckland and Fort Lauderdale in the fifth race. Nor is any information given about those original crew members who do not participate in the twenty-first century interviews. There is, however, narrative propriety in Tracy Edwards speaking of metaphorical rebirth following an episode that features actual death. The film also assumes that the audience knows enough geography so that casual references to such locations as The Needles may be made with no further explanation.

Many films offer an early moment with which the reactivity of an audience may be predicted. Viewing this film, a good audience would laugh at “semi-wonderful.” A great one would laugh at “That *is* my smile.” General applause at the end of this film was common. This writer had the privilege of being part of one audience that could not wait until the end and applauded multiple times throughout.

Director Alex Holmes crops old video source material to make it fill modern screens of a higher aspect ratio. This reformatting is generally done quite gracefully, though it leaves one or two maps a bit compromised. Recalling the formatting issues noted in the essay on *Cold War*, it should be noted that when *Maiden* was viewed in the Regency Theatres Directors Cut Cinema in Laguna Niguel, California, the graphic that told the total number of days spent at sea was partly cropped out of the image, as if better kept secret. Several other theaters managed to keep the information on the screen.

When Easter eggs are placed after the final credits, it makes a nice reward for those who apply The Golden Rule and sit through a film to the very end. This is where the filmmakers chose to place the card publicizing the ongoing philanthropic endeavors of The Maiden Factor Foundation. Starting the credits with this card would have maximized its audience exposure. Perhaps it was thought worthwhile to narrowcast so as not to waste the effort on those least likely to contribute.

Given that this a documentary, and thus supposedly trafficking in historical fact, some of the liberties taken in the construction of the official U.S. trailer border on the comical. In one example, an event that occurred at the end of the third leg of the race is said to have occurred at the end of the first. There is then applied to it a comment about an event at the end of the sixth. This may not violate the spirit of a documentary, but it is nevertheless amusing.

## Little Women

Multiple medieval authors, each with a proprietary axe to grind, adapted the existing story of Tristan and Iseult to suit their whim. Though working with a cherished inherited text, Greta Gerwig recognizes that innovative divergence from the source material is the only excuse for remaking a classic. Her screenplay is interrogative rather than simply regurgitative and curatorial. Reminiscent of Friedrich Schiller’s distinction between naive and sentimental poetry,

Florence Pugh's Amy touches on this issue when she notes the difference between talent and genius after having been introduced via her *Now-you-tell-me* encounter with impressionism. Bruce Adolphe observes that blindly following rules for writing a minuet results in a boring minuet. There are no such minuets by Haydn, Mozart nor Beethoven because they consistently infuse their works with subversive novelty and surprise. Talent involves achieving excellence without breaking rules. Genius involves achieving excellence beyond what existing rules can accommodate.

As to the film's gross anatomy, Gerwig opts for a polylinear narrative that splits the story into an earlier and a later timeline (the earlier one ending with Jo's introduction to Friedrich) and then proceeds chronologically through each while alternating between the two. "Both timelines move forward from their origin point," as specified in the published screenplay. (However, the scene labeled "GARDINER'S NEW YEAR'S PARTY . . . 1861" occurs before the scene celebrating a Christmas that is also specified as being 1861.) Seeing Fred down on one knee can be occurring in the present as Amy's recollection after the fact. Intercutting often creates pointed juxtapositions. Beth's two acute illness episodes are aggressively interlaced, with the length of Jo's hair being one distinguishing factor. However, when her hair is not cropped it is gathered and pinned up, such that it may not at first seem longer. The two timelines respectively span lengths of historical time that differ by a ratio that may not be far from the golden mean or golden section, a full discussion of which occurs in the essay on *Heavenly Creatures*. Gerwig's ending emphasizes the self-referential poiumenal aspect of the story more explicitly than earlier versions. ("Sonnet" by Billy Collins is a good example of a poiumenal poem.)

Gerwig crafts her story in a way that harmonizes well with many examples from the realm of classical music. Schubert's *Winterreise* alternates between minor and major keys in a way that helps distinguish the present of the narrative from memories of the past. Gerwig distinguishes her timelines with respective warm/cool color grading. Smetana's opus 15 piano trio is said to reflect grief for the composer's lost daughter along with affectionate recollection of her. It could be said that both Beth and Mr. Laurence's lost daughter are given a similar treatment.

On a superficial level at least, the film still qualifies as mainstream cinema, and it is thus perfectly acceptable to indulge in some of its traditional trappings, such as the silent consideration shots of Jo and Laurie after they have introduced themselves.

The film's diegetic music is from the period. Antonin Dvorak's "American" string quartet, heard when Jo and Laurie dance outside Sallie's party, would not be written for several more decades. However, since the work is used nondiegetically, it is no more anachronistic than the score provided by Alexandre Desplat. Also quite welcome in the mix is a piece by Louis Moreau Gottschalk, considered by some to have been the greatest composer America had yet produced.

While on the topic of music, Beth is "the musical girl." A sheet music store appears in the background just before Jo is notified about her sister's deteriorating health, as if to make Beth present in spirit. (Similarly, before checking Laurie's post office in the forest, Jo passes by an official one in town.) In a film so deeply involved with reflecting on childhood, Beth is right to play Robert Schumann's *Kinderszenen* (Scenes from Childhood). Specifically, she plays the movement called "Of Foreign Lands and Peoples," as if to anticipate the immigrant Friedrich and the scenes in Europe. Even Beth's preceding selection from Schumann's *Papillons* is apt, given the butterflies seen hanging from the rafters in the March's attic.

As Beth returns home, unaware that she is about to receive a new piano from Mr. Laurence, her gait is appropriately labored due to her illness. It may then seem as if she ascends the stairs in the Laurence house surprisingly briskly. But the gift has acted as a tonic that lifts her spirits, just as Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata* experiences a momentary revival in final moments. Similarly, on the Blu-ray commentary track for his *Topsy-Turvy*, Mike Leigh says that "the medicine of theater" is what allows Arthur Sullivan to conduct in spite of illness.

Music being Beth's vocation, a musical analogy would seem permissible. By the time this story was occurring, composers had long employed the technique of using the three diminished seventh chords in rapid succession to achieve a complete, saturated set of all twelve tones. Jo and Amy have the deepest and most obvious relationships with Laurie, while Meg manages to have him to herself at the debutante ball. But it is particularly nice to see Beth given an opportunity to dance with him at Meg's wedding, thus completing a full set.

When Beth declares purple to be her favorite eye color, one is reminded that her sister Amy was once portrayed by Elizabeth Taylor. Staying with the topic of color, Beth also employs purple for Mr. Laurence's slippers. Gerwig has spoken not only about her film making a cinematographic distinction between the warm past and the cool present, but also about the assignment of colors to certain characters. Amy is associated with blue, paints her shoes blue and Fred matches her in blue near the end of her stay in Paris. When Meg is not wearing green (or buying green fabric) she explores the complementary chromatic region of violet and pink. The significant, recurring color for Jo is red.

Viewing Jo through LGBTQ+ filters has been a common practice since the very beginning. Gerwig is quick to point out that this is not the only option to account for Jo's gender frustration, for example. Socio-economic considerations are equally applicable. Add to this that Jo may not be completely forthcoming. Jo rejects Laurie's proposal and says, "I don't know why I can't love you as you want me to. I don't know why." This may or may not be true. It could be that she knows exactly why but dare not admit it. Either way, her society may not have provided her with the vocabulary needed to address these issues. Labels can be problematic, but can at least be useful for initiating certain conversations. Jo adds, "I've tried it and I failed." Whatever she means by "it," the degrees of interpretive freedom are limited. A thought experiment would seem to be the only possibility. One is not prepared to believe that she has had sex with several guys before deciding that she does not care for it. She may simply have imagined the likely domestic situation that would await her.

As with so many other films addressed in these essays, this one features several distinct rhymes:

- Friedrich and Jo are shown attending a performance of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at the point (III.i.) where Olivia says, "There lies your way, due west." As if departing from her, Viola, disguised as the male Cesario, responds, "Then westward-ho!" The androgyny may resonate with Jo, while Friedrich later announces plans to go west to California. He then takes his leave only to be stopped by Jo, just as Cesario is stopped by Olivia just after the film cuts away from them. (This same dynamic of trying to stop someone from going west is also reflected in playful dialogue between Marmee and her husband.) As the film progresses, Jo, Friedrich and Beth all make references to Shakespeare. Jo says, "I'm no Shakespeare," while Amy says, "I'm not a poet."
- Hannah twice offers shoes.
- Describing Meg as "a wounded soldier" foreshadows her father's homecoming.

- Jo twice pounces on Amy, first playfully then angrily. (Each receives a playful smack from the other at various times. Also, when Jo punches Laurie as they exit the theater, it is as if she is just warming up for her attack on Amy.)
- Amy twice feels relief when Jo expresses happiness for Amy's good fortune: being chosen to travel to Europe and her marriage to Laurie.
- Both Amy and Jo anticipate and try to forestall Laurie's proposal, then Amy and Laurie admit to a longstanding love for Laurie and Jo, respectively.
- Jo tries to discourage both Beth and Laurie from speaking about their respective deaths.
- Amy and Jo both burn some of the latter's literary work.
- Jo has a scorched dress in both timelines, and she and Friedrich have scorched clothing in common.
- Laurie sarcastically uses the expression "Saint Amy" and later claims that he would be "a perfect saint" for Jo.
- Alternatives to Laurie have basically the same name: Fred (Vaughn) and Friedrich (Bhaer).
- Friedrich elegiacally plays the same Beethoven sonata that is, presumably, played by Beth. (It is heard before Jo goes downstairs on the morning of the first Christmas depicted in the film.)
- Meg receives the pet name "Daisy" and in turn gives it to her daughter.
- The beach is visited twice.
- Amy refers to her talent as "middling," a word Meg uses to describe Amy in a different context.
- The film features two New Year's parties: Sallie Gardener's, 1861, and the one in Paris, 1868. Christmas is similarly revisited.
- The cap that Jo removes to reveal her cropped hair and the wings that Amy wears when burning Jo's book are both established in earlier scenes.
- As in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, the sisters undergo various ordeals by fire and water. Jo is "on fire." Beth is "burning." Meg gets a clump of hair burned off of her. By contrast, Amy anticipates "the Nestea Plunge."
- The cutting of Jo's hair is foreshadowed by what Jo accidentally does to Meg's.
- Amy laughs when Meg's hair is burned, then Jo laughs when Amy's foot becomes stuck in plaster.
- Amy's foot trapped in plaster recalls the injury to Meg's ankle. Also, Jo's wiggling toes repeatedly call attention to themselves.
- Amy tells Jo, Laurie and Fred how sorry she is, Jo says how sorry she is to Laurie, John apologizes to Meg, etc.
- Jo attacks Amy and soon afterward rescues her. Both tumultuous scenes end with an abrupt cut to a much quieter one, pulling the sonic rug out from under the audience.
- When Marmee tells Jo not to be angry with her sister, it triggers the cut to the most extreme instance of such anger. When Jo says that life is too short for such anger, Amy immediately thinks of Beth, the sister who is now absent.
- Jo describes herself as "not half so good as my sister," Amy says she is "half as smart" as Jo, and Laurie is half Italian and claims to be "not half good enough."
- Laurie lounges at the Paris party and then again somewhat less languidly in Amy's studio.
- Amy is twice metaphorically linked to a famous artist, first Michelangelo and then Raphael.
- Both Amy and Jo speak of marriage as "an economic proposition" (with two different pronunciations of *economic*) and both admit being "so lonely."
- Jo uses the word "mercenary" on opposite ends of the film.

- Amy and Jo both use the word *vanity*. Taken together with Beth's death and Jo's reluctance to leave childhood behind, this word helps connect this story to the genres of *vanitas* and *memento mori*, which are reminders of not only death but also change in general.
- Amy exhales after saying that she didn't love Fred, while Jo begins the film with a deep, cleansing breath.
- The Buddha is literally The Awakened One. Jo awakes multiple time, including twice at Beth's bedside, on the train arriving home, on Christmas morning, in the attic with the newlywed Laurie, etc. Aunt March's awakening provides a comic counterpoint to these.
- Friedrich dislikes Jo's stories and Laurie dislikes Meg's dress.
- Facial expressions twice cause Jo to ask, "What?"
- Marmee requests ice to treat Meg, and then again to treat Beth. Ice also provides the context for Amy's skating mishap and rescue.
- Multiple times people are said to have grown or gotten bigger.
- There are many instances of people introducing themselves. Perhaps significantly, Amy introduces herself to Laurie twice.
- Gerwig goes to the trouble of matching shots of Jo as "the writer in the attic" framed by windows in Concord and New York, respectively.
- The topic of silk links the first scene of Amy and Laurie in Paris with the subsequent scene introducing Sallie and Meg.
- Laurie warns Meg that alcohol will cause a headache. He then secretly provides some to Jo at Meg's wedding.
- Many have noted that the yellow vest worn by Jo as Laurie proposes to her is the one that he wears when Jo gives him a ring that he then places on his ring finger. Jo's gesture is only a mock proposal, but is all the more conventional because she goes down on one knee.
- The reassuring explanation that Amy is given for why Laurie should be allowed into their club is the same one that Amy gives to Aunt March in Paris: "It's Laurie."
- When Amy is first seen in Europe, one of the first things that she does is to call the name "Laurie" repeatedly. One of the last things that she does before going to Europe is to call the name "Marmee" repeatedly.
- Laurie is introduced in a slow-motion shot that rhymes with an earlier variable-speed shot of Jo running in New York. A slow-motion effect is used again with Jo and Friedrich in the beer hall.
- Amy twice asks why one should be ashamed.
- There are multiple intended or spoiled surprises.
- Jo embraces Amy and Beth following their respective brushes with death.
- Amy registers her discovery of Laurie in Paris by opening her mouth. When Aunt March later asks Amy what needs to be discussed with Laurie, Amy's first reaction is to close her mouth.
- Jo gets angry at Friedrich for being "blunt." Jo's own bluntness incurs Amy's anger when both Jo and Meg deny Amy's request to accompany them to the theater.
- When Jo says, "I miss everything," Beth says, "I know." When Amy says of Beth, "I really miss her," Jo says, "I know."
- Both Amy and Jo are upset about someone "looking at me like that."
- Both Amy and Jo say, "I'm so lonely."
- Beth's playing reminds Mr. Lawrence of his deceased daughter. Friedrich's playing may have the same effect on Beth's father.
- Aunt March is not happy with the idea of being kissed by either Meg or Laurie.

- Amy's hand is bloodied due to punishment and Meg wipes what may be blood off of hers. Jo's fingers are sometimes stained with ink, which for her may be a metaphorical equivalent. Stigmata symbology may accord with Amy's perceived martyrdom, but Meg's buyer's remorse does not put her in the same league as Lady Macbeth.

The film's delightful little details include Amy tapping Beth with a wooden spoon as Amy says, "very cunning." Also note the zeal with which Jo points when saying, "Meg told me to keep still." The combative Mr. Dashwood is first seen with boxing gloves and a picture of a boxer behind him. For all her concern about propriety, Meg descends the stairs at the debutante ball in a most unpretentious way. Jo exhibits casual familiarity with Laurie by disrobing slightly more than might be expected as she says, "Can I call you Teddy?" Marmee amuses not just the audience but herself by saying, "Laurie, how are your ankles? Do you need ice?" When Marmee is told that she should *still* be ashamed of her country, the word *still* could be taken as reaching out across the centuries to apply to the viewing audience. Though Jo tells Meg not to "play mother," one way in which Meg does this is through her use of terms of endearment when dealing with the complaints of Amy and Beth. Many have noted the Christmas-morning shot with the church in the background that contrasts piety with charity. Aunt March need only tilt her head silently after Amy tells of declining Fred's proposal. Shakespeare having been cited above, and recalling Hamlet, when Laurie admits to loving Amy, Jo's "gorge rises at it." As club president, Emma Watson achieves a posh sound by simply dropping her American accent. In the skating scene, Alexandre Desplat suggests northern cold by employing a four-note figure that would feel at home in the Pastoral Suite of Swedish composer Lars-Erik Larsson. The words of George Eliot read by Jo on the beach could be aimed at those who wish they could watch a film for the first time again: "What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known and loved because it is known?" The screenplay confirms that in the first beach scene, the party includes not only Kate Vaughn but Sallie, the otherwise unidentified woman in blue. Though the two are narratively superfluous in this scene, they help provide an adequate number of people to make for pleasing visuals. Amy says of giving Laurie a hard time that "someone has to do it," a reminder that she and not Jo is the kind of disciplinarian from which he benefits. Mr. Laurence still feels the loss of his daughter keenly, just as it is said that the loss of a daughter resulted in the prominent father/daughter themes that were being played out in the operas of Verdi at that time. As teenagers, both Beth and Mia Wasikowska's Jane Eyre (2011) are seen with dolls but neither deserves ridicule, partly because of Jane's past and Beth's future. While comforting Jo after the burning of her novel, Beth appears as if she had been painted by Hans Memling. During Beth's final illness, there is a series of shots in which Marmee is close, Meg is closer, and Jo closest. Jo pleads with Beth not to go "quietly." But, as is confirmed to Mr. Lawrence, Beth is "the quiet one." Thus when Beth wakes, apparently for the final time, she does not disturb the sleeping Jo. In an act of reciprocal discretion on the part of the filmmakers, neither Beth's corpse nor coffin is seen. "No one will forget Jo March" is a self-verifying statement that explains why the audiences is hearing it in the first place. Similarly, when Jo speculates about herself as a hypothetical "girl in a book," it is a self-referential *fait accompli*. Laurie hints at something similar when he speaks of being "the central figure" in an opera that he claims to have been writing. It may be noted in passing that by regretting the loss of childhood to the extent that she does, Jo acts as a stepping stone to Peter Pan, coincidentally mentioning "a pirate ship." Fittingly, the last word of dialogue in the film is "book."



The film's trailer has several features unique to itself. In the film, Amy expresses a wish to be an artist in Paris. In the corresponding excerpt in the trailer, with every syllable seemingly at a premium, the city in question is changed to Rome. The Sony Blu-ray would have benefitted from having twice as many chapter designations, and the multiple featurettes seem to be expected to serve in lieu of any commentary tracks. Among the peculiarities within the Blu-ray's foreign-language tracks is the formality with which Mr. Dashwood invites Jo to "Sit," the English original sounding more like a command given to a dog. It is good to hear Mrs. Hummel exclaim in German before switching to the vernacular on any particular track. And, it must be confessed, it was not until consulting the Blu-ray subtitles that this writer was able to comprehend the word *duels*.

An alternate, horror parody ending might have Marmee enter the attic as Jo sleeps to discover that the manuscript pages arrayed on the floor are all filled exclusively with iterations of the sentence: "All work and no play makes Jo a dull Girl." Short of that, given Amy's preoccupation with her feet, it would be nice if the statuary in her Paris studio included a sculpted foot.

This film received Oscar nominations for its actors and screenplay but not its director, causing many fans to observe that actors and screenplays do not direct themselves. Whatever the merits of Gerwig's direction, the only excuse for having separate categories is so that they may diverge. If any two categories are to correlate absolutely, then they are mutually redundant and one can (and should) be eliminated without loss.

Some people have complained that this film features an excessively white cast and thus suffers from a lack of diversity. As it happens, three black characters have speaking parts (though admittedly, "Don't blink!") and about a dozen can be seen in the final school scene. Myriad similar period pieces are even less diverse. More generally, the folly of trying to apply categorical remedies to statistical issues is addressed elsewhere in these essays.

Gerwig has been accused of applying the wrong sort of feminism to Jo. According to the supposed correct form of feminism, the marriages of Marmee, Meg and Amy do not suffice. If Jo's marriage is morally imperative, then it suggests that *The Lobster* of Yorgos Lanthimos is a documentary. God forbid.

## My Octopus Teacher

Craig Foster says of his time filming "San master trackers" in the Kalahari, "[T]hey just were inside of the natural world. And I could feel I was outside. And I had this deep longing to be inside that world." Getting *truly* inside that world proves to be a long and gradual process for him.

"A lot of people say that an octopus is like an alien." Foster initially regards himself as the alien when visiting the realm of the octopus. However, he becomes emotionally invested in the plight of the octopus, at various times reporting a "terrible feeling," feeling as if "what happened to her had happened to me," and a "big relief." Foster initially regards himself as an intruder who should be no more than a passive observer who does not impose human morality on nature. When the octopus is threatened by a pyjama shark, Foster says, "The first instinct is to try and scare the sharks away. But then you realize that you'd be interfering with the whole process." His perspective ultimately shifts, allowing him to say of the octopus, "What she taught

me was to feel that you're part of this place, not a visitor." This allows his passivity to be retrospectively regrettable, in accord with his emotions. Parzival fails in his grail quest when he feels compassion but suppresses it. If Foster is a part of nature, and compassion is part of his psyche, then compassion is not problematically alien because it is part of a being who is part of the system in question. He is a part that has compassion and altruism among its attributes. These attributes thus constitute not interference but participation.

"It was very difficult to imagine at first that she was getting anything out of the relationship. Why would a wild animal, doing its thing, get anything out of this strange human creature visiting?" Foster comes to see how his presence may be "stimulating" for octopus and may even provide "some strange octopus level of joy."

But is that sufficiently reciprocal? The octopus provides education (as acknowledged in the film's title), entertainment, companionship and the makings of a critically acclaimed documentary. Foster may feel gratitude, but in practice the octopus never reaps as many benefits as it could have. When Foster says, "I was getting so much from the wild, and I could actually now give," he refers to giving to his son.

Abstaining from intervention is something that Foster considers thoughtfully. It would be unfair to attribute to him the sentiment expressed in a line from *The Simpsons*: "The whole thing smacks of effort, man." Nor would it be fair to compare him unfavorably to Lenny Skutnik (the hero of the Air Florida Flight 90 crash in 1982), who rescued someone from drowning when local first responders seemed to operate under the motto: "Don't just do something. Stand there!" But Foster's shift in attitude regarding his place in nature does ultimately justify regret.

## The Queen's Gambit

Whether or not a Netflix series counts as cinema, some metacritical opportunities are hard to ignore. But the series itself will be briefly considered first.

An orphan encountering a call to adventure, mentors, threshold guardians and the like places us in familiar "hero's journey" territory. (As discussed below, mythologically informed narrative devices can be irksome to those who also perceive them to be sociopolitically informed.) Some have accused Moses Ingram's Jolene of representing a tiresome trope. But at least this particular "magical negro" denies being one. Eloise Webb's Annette and Dolores Carbonari's Margaret are not as easily distinguishable as they might be, even if social homogeneity was the intention. It is amusing to see the closely spaced eyes of Harry Melling's Harry pitted against the widely spaced eyes of Anya Taylor-Joy's Beth (very nearly hypotelorism vs. hypertelorism). It is fun to see Colin Stinton again play a lawyer as he had decades earlier in *The Winslow Boy*. Also of note is the transdiegetic music effect that ends the first episode. Even before Beth arrives at the orphanage, Mrs. Deardorff reads a newspaper article reporting that Beth is already nine years old at the time of her mother's death. Beth later tells the *Life* reporter that she was taught chess at the age of eight, perhaps to make her story align better with the lie she told about being 13 at the time of her adoption. Once some time has passed, she feels free to tell the reporters in Moscow that she learned when she was nine. (On the comical flip side, Beth jokingly tells Townes, "I'm 36.") Beth's reaction to her new room in the Wheatley home is the same as that of Jane Eyre arriving at Thornfield, just as Beth's graduation experience is the same as that of Aaron Kurlander in Steven Soderbergh's *King of the Hill*. In a school corridor, the

show approximates the 1812 occurrence in Teplitz when Beethoven walked straight through a group of aristocrats as Goethe deferred to them. Immediately after defeating Annette Packer, Beth amusingly adopts a coquettish contrapposto stance as she lingers in the presence of Townes. Beth offers a slightly quizzical look when she realizes that Mike and Matt are twins. Later, when Roger enters, her reaction broadens nearly to Bride-of-Frankenstein proportions. When Beth resumes her first game with Harry, he does not yet understand the meaning of her pharmacologically induced calm. It is Nicol Williamson's Merlin in John Boorman's *Excalibur* who perhaps says it best: "Look into the eyes of the dragon and despair." (Occasionally during this series, this writer would also imagine the ominous voice of Robert De Niro's Travis Bickle in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* saying, "You make the move. It's your move.") Cincinnati figures repeatedly in this story, so it is natural to recall Norman Jewison's *The Cincinnati Kid*, especially when Benny tells Beth that he does not need to psych her out in order to beat her. The same director's *The Thomas Crown Affair* seems to be mildly echoed when Beth plays Townes. Because of Anya Taylor-Joy's Argentinian childhood, Beth's American-accented Spanish feels like a delicious inside joke. If Beth is 15 at the time of her adoption, then it occurs during or after November 1963. Not until after being adopted does Beth meet Harry. Prior to the U.S. championship that is designated as 1967, Harry visits Beth at her home, where they seem to stretch things a bit by speaking of having encountered each other "five years ago." When Benny, Arthur and Hilton look at Beth in a creepy manner and it is hoped that someone will say something to desexualize the atmosphere, Benny finally says, "Let's do a simultaneous," which, by itself, does not accomplish the task, especially in light of how Cleo has characterized her relationship with Arthur and Hilton. Given the arc of Beth's story, Harry aptly mentions the Phoenix Hotel. (If this were a full-scale, independent essay, its epigraphic subtitle would be the line spoken by Harry but symbolically attributable to Beth: "I'm on my way to the Phoenix Hotel.") Continuing this same theme, Beth's final game with Borgov features the symbolic death and resurrection of the white queen, followed by Beth ending the series dressed so as to resemble that very piece.

In accordance with this writer's preoccupation with rhyming events (and taking for granted Alma's "Denver" payoff), "Now or never," is said both *to* Beth and *by* her. Beth twice says, "I wasn't ready." Twice someone asks Beth's age and then withdraws the question. Twice Townes tells Beth, "You really are something." Twice Harry tells Beth, "You need help." Beth disposes of a doll and a newspaper similarly. The site of Alice's car crash and Harry's hotel are both on New Circle Road. A coat and a hotel room "will do nicely," as will an orphanage uniform. The posthumous discovery of Mr. Shaibel's bulletin board is anticipated by Alma (in episode 3) saying, "I might have to start keeping a scrapbook." Townes motions to Beth to be quiet during a chess game and is himself shushed during another one years later. When Beth yawns during a chess game in Moscow, she does so more discretely than Harry had in Lexington. Beth and Harry, respectively, sense a potentially amorous situation when Townes removes his sweater when Beth is in his hotel room and then she removes her sweater when Harry is at her home. The bare-chested Benny recalls the bare-chested Roger. Harry and Jolene are both surprised by how Beth has changed when each arrives at her house for the first time. There are several cases of a hand placed on another person's shoulder, along with Beth's hand placed on her own shoulder as she loses to Benny. In an example of almost unnecessarily good continuity, Weiss and Friedman are seen in tournament play prior to their formal introduction in the student union scene. Examples of the tables being turned include Beth being late for a chess game with Borgov (just as Harry had been late for one with her) and Benny being concerned with chess

immediately after sex with her (just as she had been after sex with Harry). “Do you mind?” is said to Beth by Harry and by Beth to Alma. When being photographed, Beth is twice told to say something chess-related rather than the traditional “Cheese.” (On the German language track, however, Mr. Ganz has her say, “Cheese.”) Discovering the married Margaret in Ben Snyder’s is fitting punishment for someone who “wouldn’t be caught dead” there. After Harry speaks of how he and Beth could have been defeated by a ten-year-old Borgov, Benny compares Beth’s play to that of Alekhine, whom Luchenko is ominously said to have defeated when still a child. After walking away from conversations, Beth returns to ask, respectively, “What’s a Grandmaster?” and “What’s in Las Vegas?” Over the phone, Beth reminds Mr. Wheatley that she is his daughter, and is later reminded by Mr. Chennault that he is her lawyer. “Let’s play” is said by Beth to a man first in English and finally in Russian.

LGBTQ+ suspicions are aroused by Roger. But some viewers also presume intimacy between Beth and Cleo in Paris. Plausible deniability is provided by the two men to whom Cleo introduces herself in the “lovely bar” after having said of Arthur and Hilton much earlier, “The two of them are better than one of them.” (When Cleo says of these two men in the bar, “Let’s see how many lies they tell,” they are further equated with Arthur and Hilton, about whom Cleo says, “That’s how *they* tell it, anyway,” when giving Beth two versions of the story of how she met them.) Beth then wakes up in the bathtub wearing her dress from the previous evening (more clearly evident in episode 6 than episode 1), not in bed with Cleo. It seems likely that Beth, never changing out of her dress, retires to the bathroom leaving Cleo and the two men to their own devices. The two men then withdraw before Beth is woken. In another instance of jumping to conclusions, this writer initially assumed this incident with Cleo to be Soviet-sponsored sabotage. Incidentally, the woman depicted on the Houston beauty spa poster in episode 3 looks just enough like Cleo to be portentous.

Dinesh D’Souza posted a YouTube video titled “*The Queen’s Gambit*” Is Another Example of Hollywood Sneaking Liberalism Into Us.” Perhaps because his own conservative views are explicit rather than sneaky, he gives himself a pass. More likely, he would excuse aspirational *conservative* fantasies, such as Superman, simply by virtue of their conservatism. D’Souza describes Rebecca Root’s Miss Lonsdale as an “obligatory transexual. . . . And in any other era this would be like comedy. But today we’re supposed to sort of take this seriously.” Ironically, D’Souza’s own skin color might cause white supremacists to ridicule the idea of taking *him* seriously. There is a regrettable deficiency of indiscriminate compassion (*agape*) in both cases.

So desperate is D’Souza to disparage the series as liberal propaganda that he imagines he saw an “obligatory, sort of, lesbian scene. . . . Two women in the bed.” D’Souza is cordially invited to guess again. As explained above, the scene of Cleo in Beth’s hotel room does not qualify as a candidate for this reference, as there is good reason to believe that Beth and Cleo are never in the same bed *at the same time*, and are certainly not depicted that way. There are no obvious sexual implications when Beth and Jolene lie on the same bed in the first and last episodes, nor when Beth and Alma are seen on the same bed or on adjacent ones in episodes 3 and 4. Thus, this figment must remain an article of faith.

D’Souza laments the absence of the loving, stable domesticity that he thinks would be a more accurate view of the time. But to what end? (And *cui bono*?) “The idea is that social harmony . . . is an illusion.” That might be the idea if this were reportage rather than drama, for which harmony simply provides too little opportunity. (In the words of series director Scott

Frank, “People who are happy are boring.”) Whatever the statistical reality, without the crises, tension and conflict (especially involving threshold guardians) on which fiction normally depends, one would be left with a mythologically futile story devoid of entertainment value. Such a deal! Pinch me!

D’Souza posted another YouTube video titled *Netflix’s New Feminist Series “The Queen’s Gambit” Needs a Heavy Dose of Reality*, an ironic title given fact-checking deficiency in the previously cited video. D’Souza claims that Beth “keeps thrashing every male grandmaster in sight,” as if she goes undefeated in the series. Beth does not win all of her games, losing repeatedly to both Benny (at least in speed chess) and to Borgov. Episode 3 pointedly ends with Beth humbled and humiliated. And she is not shown competing with dozens of equally accomplished female chess players. The difference between this story and reality is thus vanishingly small in this regard and thus actually conforms rather well to D’Souza’s expectations. He explains why female chess champions are a rare phenomenon in reality, acknowledging that the series is accurate in showing the rarity of female chess champions but is nonetheless devious in supposedly using oppression as the reason.

Anya Taylor-Joy’s initial reaction after reading the screenplay was: “It’s not about chess.” D’Souza might say the same, in the sense that he focuses on what he takes to be its politically didactic aspects. And in obedience to a specifically anti-Hollywood agenda, the source material (the novel by Walter Tevis) is conveniently ignored so that the blame can fall exclusively on Netflix.

Regarding the visual aspect of filmmaking, cinematographer Geoff Boyle says, “You’re not paid to make *accurate* pictures [but] to make *pretty* pictures.” Alas, artistic license is not universally appreciated. D’Souza characterizes Beth as an aspirational liberal fantasy, embodying a message of “be all that you wanna be, and you can become anything you wanna be.” But he then comically fails to make the necessary genre allowances demanded by fantasy. Instead, he tautologically takes it upon himself “to illustrate how removed all of this is from reality.” This misapplication of documentary standards to fiction merely shows what *would* be wrong with a story *if* it were a documentary, which *The Queen’s Gambit* is not. The only potential beneficiaries of any such “dose of reality” would be those for whom the suspension of disbelief is too challenging a mental task. For those incapable of grasping the concept of fiction, no work of fiction is without the need of such a dose. The rest of us know how to get along without it.

In Jungian terms, role models (even if fictitious) can be psychologically useful as targets for the projections of people’s archetypal self, and D’Souza offers no explanation for why women’s reach and grasp should be coextensive (leaving the legacy of Robert Browning intact). But whatever impedes real women from their goals, fictional characters operate under no such constraints. Otherwise, there would be few reasons for them to exist. And Beth’s prowess, regardless of the cause of its rarity, at least represents a logical possibility, unlike the myriad stories of anthropomorphized animals scattered throughout literary history, which (*a fortiori*) would be in even great need of such a dose. Perhaps D’Souza’s conscience would only allow him to acknowledge that Walt Disney’s *Bambi* is an enjoyable film after first explaining that ungulates do not actually speak English. D’Souza says of the series that “we shouldn’t confuse it with reality.” In the absence of such confusion, no “dose of reality” is needed. And the presence of such confusion is a matter best left between its sufferers and their neurologists.

D’Souza’s idea that the subjugation of girls in the 1950s was insignificant may be no more than wishful thinking on his part. In another Netflix series, *Pretend It’s a City*, Fran Lebowitz, born 1950, speaks from personal experience of the limited expectations placed on girls

at the time. Able to offer only secondhand reports because he was born in 1961, D'Souza must hope that she is lying, or else the very reality that he thinks the series needs is a *fait accompli*. Bruce Pandolfini, the chess advisor for *The Queen's Gambit*, says, "Back in the 1950s, there were very few females turning to chess. They weren't given the opportunities." Either way, any such reality is ultimately moot when history is subservient to drama. One might as well complain to Shakespeare that the real Julius Caesar spoke Latin and not Elizabethan English. Similarly, the narrative utility of dragons in Arthurian romance is not dependent on biological accuracy.

In contrast to those who fail to allow for unrealistic aspirational role models, some viewers are troubled by the alcohol that Alma allows her to drink, saying that when it comes to substance abuse, one should not be an enabler. One not only should but must, *if* one is a fictional character with narrative duties to fulfill. People who are incapable of determining whether or not they are themselves fictional should seek help. There also seems to be a concern that some people could infer drug abuse as the cause of Beth's genius. Beth ultimately proves to herself that the correlation between drugs and chess prowess is merely a superstition (accidental conditioning). Also, Beth's chessboard visions that she associates with induced tranquility begin occurring at night. Consequently, when she interrupts her first game with Harry to take a pill, she enters the restroom and switches off the lights. As with drugs and alcohol, this is just a temporary crutch.

A sympathetic commenter claimed that Hollywood feels free to ridicule Christianity but not Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, which, in the context of this series, is comically ironic coming from people pretending to be concerned about implausibility. The opportunity for such condemnation within *this* story would only arise if Beth were housed in an Islamic, Hindu or Buddhist institution and subsequently approached by Islamic, Hindu or Buddhist potential sponsors. In Kentucky in the middle of the twentieth century, however, these were marginalized groups, making the proposed scenario at least as implausible as a female chess champion. Those seeking the bashing of Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism in a *plausible* setting must look elsewhere, or else the joke is on them. The greatest irony is that implausibility is no impediment to people of faith, faith being unnecessary except in the face of implausibility. And unlike confidence, that in which people have faith is a matter of arbitrary, personal choice. If implausibility invalidates fiction such that documentary is the only tolerable genre, then let *Maiden* by Alex Holmes be considered as a substitute for *The Queen's Gambit*. The actual point of the original comment may have been that there should be no bashing of *any* religion. But as long as D'Souza feels free to bash the (supposed) visibility of *any* sexuality, turnabout is fair play.

A related tangential issue is the defamation lawsuit filed against Netflix on behalf of Nona Gaprindashvili. One of the legal requirements for defamation is "a false statement purporting to be true" as it would be perceived by "a reasonable person." Reasonable persons can successfully engage with fiction by suspending disbelief recreationally, such that they can properly process the speaking of English by both William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and even by Walt Disney's Bambi, which are, respectively, historically and biologically inaccurate. The speaking of English by an ungulate is manifestly false, but can be taken as "purporting to be true" only by the infantile or the clinically insane.

Sanity allows reasonable people to distinguish between a fictional series and a documentary without any outside help. And when help *is* needed to safeguard those who may not be able to deal with such distinctions, the television rating system gives fair warning that this series is intended for mature audiences. Immature audiences thus view it under false pretenses

and should do so at their own risk, taking responsibility for any adverse consequences. As stated often before, historical accuracy is the duty of historians, the duty of dramatists is to entertain by any means necessary, and failing to cope with the tautologically unavoidable untruths of fiction is dereliction of duty on the part of the audience.

Finally, for those still clueless, Netflix posts an indemnifying disclaimer in the credits: “The characters and events depicted in this program are fictitious. No depiction of actual persons or events is intended.” Netflix thus stipulates that even if the depiction of an actual person occurs (intended or not), any allegedly defamatory statement made about them is not presented as a journalistic or historical report of an actual statement ever made by anyone in real life. In other words, Gaprindashvili is not fictional but her alleged defamer is. Alas, explicitly disclaiming the depiction of actual events is apparently not enough to penetrate every thick skull. The Coen brothers take advantage of this for their own amusement in their *Fargo*, wherein the fictitious claim of being based on true events is itself part of the overall fiction. And, as the brothers themselves reportedly said to William H. Macy, why not?

In practice, allowance must indeed be made for audience stupidity. But accommodation of the neurodiverse (including the pathologically credulous) by the nanny state should have its limits such that people are held at least partially responsible for their own mental shortcomings. For example, when David Berkowitz (the “Son of Sam” killer) claimed that he killed people because he was told to do so by a dog, the proper jurisprudential response was to prosecute Berkowitz, not the dog. Now, however, Netflix has been asked to take responsibility for people who are so unreasonable that they would withhold money from the plaintiff solely because of a statement made by a fictional character.

On a related note, on the occasion of the release of Steven Spielberg’s 2021 version of *West Side Story*, a metacritical opportunity arose that is reminiscent of Dinesh D’Souza’s complaint about how *The Queen’s Gambit* insufficiently accommodates the mentally disabled.

In a *Los Angeles Times* article of 12/10/21 titled “The real cultural significance of ‘West Side Story,’” James Densley, David Pyrooz and Scott Decker claim that the 1961 Jerome Robbins/Robert Wise version of *West Side Story* “popularized many fictions . . . that inform public opinion and public policy.” Stating the most trivial of truths, the authors observe that “truth about gangs is largely missing from” the film. Some truth is necessarily missing, or else the work would be disqualified as fiction. It is sad when a work of fiction serves as an opportunity for folly.

The authors enumerate several myths being perpetuated, including inaccurate depictions of typical gang gender demographics, the typical duration of gang membership and the degree of gang organization, as if accurate representation of real gangs were somehow the goal. The authors conspicuously (and comically) omit singing and dancing from their list of misrepresentations. Rather than purporting to be true, all aspects of this story are in the service of its underlying Romeo-and-Juliet narrative elements. Speaking of which, the authors may as well complain that Shakespeare’s play “promotes the myth” that citizens of Renaissance Verona routinely conversed in English, just as Walt Disney’s *Bambi* “perpetuates the myth” that ungulates speak English. The inability to suspend disbelief recreationally is an issue of clinical psychiatry, not film criticism.

The authors say of the 2021 film, “[M]ay it be grounded in a reality that leads policymakers to design gang responses based on fact and not fiction.” It is sanity, not any work of fiction, that should lead policymakers to do their job properly. Filmmakers are not responsible for having their films mistaken for documentaries due to the pathological gullibility of

policymakers. Rather, policymakers are responsible for differentiating fact from fiction. Those who cannot are holding their offices under false pretenses, as policymakers should ideally be chosen exclusively from the pool of mental adults. May the recognition of myths be the sovereign remedy, and may policymakers not consult works of fiction when seeking facts, as reality is welcome in fiction only to the extent that it is entertaining. Policymakers are responsible for grounding their minds in reality, while dramatists are free to ground their fictions in whatever they please. All the genres of fictions, including realism, remain fiction. Thus, may sanity prevent realism from being idolatrously confused with reality.