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Postfeminist Authorial Corpography Winona Ryder and the 1990s Woman Author Cycle

Abstract

This article explores the gendering of the authorial body in *Little Women* (Gillian Armstrong, 1994), *How to Make an American Quilt* (Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1995), and *Girl, Interrupted* (James Mangold, 1999). As I will show, Ryder's 1990s woman author cycle mobilises female authorship's unruly connotations of female self-determination and autonomy, so that the Ryder figure emerges as an ideal vehicle for the enactment of feminist-inflected agency. Crucially, however, these feminist signifiers exist alongside conservative narrative trajectories which attempt to contain, contextualise, or frame the oppositional potential of this figure. Through these contradictory discursive movements, I argue, Ryder's woman author films engage a set of sophisticated recuperative manoeuvres associated with postfeminism. In this way, this article sheds light on the hitherto overlooked ways in which the female author figure has come to function as a signifier of the contradictions and ambiguities constitutive of postfeminism, the role of Ryder's star persona in this signification, as well as the implications of this film cycle for the broader conceptualisation of « The Author ».

Resumen

Este artículo explora la genderización del cuerpo autorial en *Little Women* (Gillian Armstrong, 1994), *How to Make an American Quilt* (Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1995) y *Girl, Interrupted* (James Mangold, 1999). Como mostraré, el ciclo de Ryder sobre la mujer autora de los años 90 propone connotaciones rebeldes de la autoría femenina respecto a la autodeterminación y la autonomía, de manera que la figura de Ryder emerge como un vehículo ideal para la escenificación de una agencia feminista. Sin embargo, y de modo crucial, estos significantes feministas coexisten con trayectorias narrativas conservadoras que tratan de contener, contextualizar o cercar el potencial de resistencia de esta figura. A través de tales movimientos discursivos contradictorios, sostengo que las películas de Ryder sobre la mujer autora envuelven un conjunto de sofisticadas maniobras de restauración asociadas con el postfeminismo. Así, este artículo arroja luz sobre las maneras, hasta ahora ignoradas, en las que la figura autorial femenina ha venido a funcionar como un significante de las contradicciones y ambigüedades constitutivas del postfeminismo, el rol de Ryder como celebridad en esta significación, así como las implicaciones de este ciclo fílmico para una conceptualización más general de « El Autor ».

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Postfeminist Authorial Corpography Winona Ryder and the 1990s Woman Author Cycle

The image is striking – and strikingly familiar. A beautiful, young, white woman labours at her 19th century writing desk. In her long black hair, she wears a red velvet cap. Her ink-stained fingers travel across the virgin white page, quill violently scratching the parchment. In the 1960s, she sports a pixie cut and a stripy tee, and anxiously sketches in her journal. By the 1990s, she sits at her typewriter reworking her Master's thesis, her bob-length hair awkwardly falling into her eyes. No matter the era, or its technologies of authorship, the same startled eyes, frenetic energy, and diminutive frame recur. Her name is Jo March, Susanna Kaysen, Finn Dodd – but she is best known as the actress Winona Ryder. In *Little Women* (Gillian Armstrong, 1994), Ryder stars as rebellious Jo, an aspiring sensation novelist growing up in Concord, Massachusetts, during the American Civil War. *Girl, Interrupted* (James Mangold, 1999) sees Ryder's Susanna journal her way through her internment at Claymoore psychiatric hospital in the late 1960s. Finally, in *How to Make an American Quilt* (Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1995), Ryder's character, graduate student Finn, spends her summer with the Grasse quilting bee while finishing her Master's thesis on women's crafts in tribal cultures.

Using *Little Women*, *American Quilt*, and *Girl, Interrupted* as case studies, this article explores the circulation of female authorship in what I term Ryder's 1990s woman author film cycle. With all three films being adaptations of female-authored texts (the civil war era novel *Little Women* [Louisa May Alcott, 1868], the middle-brow novel *How to make an American Quilt* [Whitney Otto, 1991], and the memoir *Girl, Interrupted* [Susanna Kaysen, 1993]), with female screenwriting (Robin Swicord, Jane Anderson, Lisa Loomer and Anna Hamilton Phelan) and/or directing credits (Gillian Armstrong, Jocelyn Moorhouse), it is noteworthy that all three texts are embedded in a striking proliferation of on- and off-screen female authorial identities. However, this article focuses primarily on the representation of female authorship as embodied by Generation-X icon Winona Ryder, and in particular the gendering of the authorial body. As I will show, all three texts mobilise female authorship's unruly connotations of female self-determination and autonomy, so that the Ryder figure emerges as an ideal vehicle for the enactment of feminist-inflected agency. Crucially, however, these feminist signifiers exist alongside conservative narrative trajectories which attempt to contain, contextualise, or frame the oppositional potential of this figure. Through these contradictory discursive movements, I argue, Ryder's woman author film cycle engages a set of sophisticated recuperative manoeuvres associated with postfeminism. In this way, this article sheds light on the

hitherto overlooked ways in which the female author figure has come to function as a signifier of the contradictions and ambiguities constitutive of postfeminism, the role of Ryder's star persona in this signification, as well as the implications of this film cycle for the broader conceptualisation of « The Author ».

1. Mobilisation of feminist signifiers

My first contention is that the figure of the woman author, as embodied by Ryder signifies as an « unruly woman » in 1990s popular film. This article is indebted to the seminal work of Kathleen Rowe Karlyn who defines female unruliness as « a cluster of attributes that challenge patriarchal power by defying norms of femininity intended to keep a woman in her place ». As Karlyn notes, female unruliness is « implicitly feminist because it destabilises patriarchal norms »¹. As I will show, in *Little Women*, *American Quilt*, and *Girl, Interrupted* the identity « woman author » is laden with cultural connotations of autonomy, independence, and self-determination. In other words, I argue that Ryder's woman author possesses precisely the kinds of « attributes that challenge patriarchal power »². As such, the « woman author » is culturally understood as an unruly feminist subjectivity.

In *Little Women*, Jo's signification as « unruly » relies, in part, on the film's setting in the pre-feminist past, in which her displays of disruptive, agentic behaviour such as sport, marriage refusals, and authorship, are perceived by her contemporaries as in some way deviant. Unlike her sisters Meg (Trini Alvarado), Beth (Claire Danes), and Amy (Kirsten Dunst), Jo slouches at the breakfast table, is quick to anger, uses « slang », cuts her hair short for money, and shows little interest in marriage (« why must we marry at all? » she asks). In an early scene, she confesses to Beth: « truly, I don't know if I could ever be good like Marmee. I rather crave violence. If only I could be like Father, and go to war and stand up to the lions of injustice. [...] I want to do something different ». Through this dialogue, the film indicates that Jo struggles to conform to, and in fact wishes to transcend, the expectations of feminine « goodness » embodied by Beth as the « angel of the house ». Implicit in Jo's yearning to « do something different » is a critique of the limitations of historicised feminine conduct and its gendering of agency as male.

The film moreover connects Jo's disruption of gender roles to her status as an avid consumer and producer of novels. Aunt March (Mary Wickes) – whose favoured reading material deals with the immateriality of the soul – looks down upon Jo's interest in novels, declaring: « this one has entirely ruined her disposition with books ». Aunt March's censure evokes the 18th and 19th century moral panics around women's reading, and in particular, regarding novels' suitability as reading material for young women. In the Victorian era, women's reading became « a site on which one may see a variety of cultural and sexual anxieties displayed »³. Debates about the novel as form are indeed indicative of broader societal anxieties regarding « unregulated social and economic forces, and the erosion of established hierarchies of value and authority »⁴. In this period, reading was figured as a potentially seditious

1. Kathleen Rowe KARLYN, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2011, p. 10.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Kate FLINT, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 22.

4. E. J. CLERY, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction 1762-1800*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 88.

activity providing to women an « indirect, even an only half conscious, language for appeal, complaint or rebellion »⁵. With the « period's constant elision of textuality and sexuality », this potential seditiousness was displaced onto the female body, so that women's reading was « repeatedly figured as a sexual act or seen to reveal their sexual nature »⁶. No wonder then, that Aunt March condemns Jo's reading as « ruining » her marriage prospects.

Just as Jo's novel-reading is figured as transgressive, so is her novel-writing, which is presented as a male masquerade. She writes stories full of « murder and gore » which deliberately differ from her confined feminine existence (« the first rule of writing », she proclaims, « is never write what you know! »), publishes under a male pseudonym (« Joseph March »), and directs plays while dressed in male attire. When writing alone in her garret, her red velvet cap signifies her affectation of maleness deemed essential to her embodying of authoriality. That Jo feels the need to cross-dress as male implies that authorship is a subjectivity unavailable to women. In this way, *Little Women* invokes Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's influential *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979). In Gilbert and Gubar's view, the reliance on metaphors of literary paternity indeed functions to exclude women from embodying literary authority. While masculinity is « integrally associated with the assertive presence of literary power », femininity, Gilbert and Gubar suggest, « is associated with the absence of such power ». As such, they ask, « If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts? »⁷.

In part, Jo's writerly ambitions connect to a desire to provide financially for her family through work. Through dialogue, this opportunity is crucially framed as an alternative to marriage: « wait till I'm a writer », she tells Beth, « I'll buy you the best piano in all creation ». When Amy suggests that the piano might be more normatively acquired by marrying into wealth, Jo retorts: « I wouldn't marry for the money. What if his business goes bust? Besides, down at *The Eagle* they pay \$5 for each story they print. Well – I have ten stories in my head right now! ». Later on, having sold « *The Daily Volcano* » and « *The Sinner's Corpse* » to a newspaper, Jo observes that her fee will « buy a new coat for Beth ». Unlike marriage, then, commercial authorship is envisaged by Jo as a reliable, and autonomous source of income for women. At times, Jo's authorship is even positioned as in conflict with marriage. Her move to New York, where she pursues publishing opportunities, directly follows her refusal to marry Laurie (Christian Bale). Her statement that she « can't just go and be a wife », suggests that her authorship is intimately connected to her identity as a single woman. Jo's male masquerade of authorship thus threatens heteropatriarchy by making marriage, or indeed men themselves, potentially unnecessary.

The authorial project of *American Quilt* is similarly figured as an obstacle to marriage for protagonist Finn. The film opens with Finn's decision to « go away for the summer » in order to complete her thesis. That Finn's departure coincides

5. Jacqueline PEARSON, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: a Dangerous Recreation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 93

6. *Ibid.*, p. 87

7. Sandra M. GILBERT and Susan GUBAR, *The Madwoman in the Attic the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000 [1979], pp. 7-8.

with her boyfriend Sam's (Dermot Mulroney) proposal of marriage, foreshadows Finn's struggle to marry authorship with matrimony. Through voiceover, the film grants access to Finn's doubts: « Sam's great, and I really love him. [...] But how do you merge into this thing called 'couple', and still keep a little room for yourself? » Finn's feminist-inflected wish to retain her identity, to « keep a little room » for herself, her desire for a Woolfian « room of her own »⁸, is crystallised when Sam colonises Finn's professional space (her writing desk) with blueprints of their house, which he is remodelling while she is away. The composition of the scene sees Sam towering above Finn, expressing his spatial dominance. He holds a pen in his right hand, indicating that, although Finn is ostensibly a writer, it is Sam who has the power to (re)write their future. This literal and symbolic erosion of Finn's professional space is then echoed in their conversation, as Finn notes: « You were supposed to give me three months. Three months to get my head together. And here you are two weeks later ». Furthermore, while showing Finn the plans, Sam suggests that the spare room be used as a nursery, rather than Finn's expressed preference for « a separate room » for her office. In addition, Finn articulates feminist critiques of marriage: « You see, what they don't tell us is that marriage is an anachronistic institution, created for the sole convenience of the father who needs to pass off his daughter into the care of another man [...] You know, now that we've gotten our independence and that we earn our own living, there's really no purpose in being someone's wife ». As Finn's ambivalence toward marriage and motherhood emerges, the film explicitly places the identities of « mother » and « wife » into conflict with that of « female author », and more broadly marriage and motherhood into conflict with women's professional ambitions.

In *American Quilt*, Finn's authoriality threatens not just heterosexual marriage, but the broader reproduction of gendered norms. Through a Masters thesis exploring women's handiwork and crafts in tribal cultures, Finn's authorship is implicitly aligned with the work of feminist Art Historians such as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock. As Parker and Pollock show, feminine crafts such as quilting have long been culturally denigrated, so that « the arts of painting and sculpture enjoy an elevated status while other arts that adorn people, homes or utensils are relegated to a lesser cultural sphere under such terms as 'applied', 'decorative', or 'lesser' arts »⁹. The hierarchisation of art vs. craft in fact relies on the gendering of the public and domestic spheres and the conditions of production they authorise: « What distinguishes art from craft in the hierarchy is not so much different methods, practices and objects but also where these things are made, often in the home, and for whom these things are made, often for the family »¹⁰. In devoting her thesis to crafts, then, Finn participates in the feminist Art History project of reclaiming women's work, and, in turn, disrupting the patriarchal devaluing of domestic crafts.

Like *American Quilt, Girl, Interrupted* presents the female author as engaged in important acts of feminist revision. The film opens with a shot of a sinister basement window, panning down to reveal a decrepit network of pipes, as the film's title appears and the muted opening notes of Simon and Garfunkel's « Bookends » begins to play. As the camera continues to pan down, Susanna comes into shot. As

8. Virginia WOOLF, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, edited with an introduction and notes by Morag Shiach, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2008 [1929].

9. Rozsika PARKER and Griselda POLLOCK, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, London, Pandora, 1991, p. 50.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

she looks around the room, the camera follows her gaze to reveal Lisa (Angelina Jolie) shedding silent tears; Polly (Elisabeth Moss) seeking comfort from a cat which runs away from her grasp; and Georgina (Clea Duvall) sweeping the remnants of a broken light bulb and carefully extracting a discarded syringe. The non-diegetic song lyrics « time it was/ And what a time it was, it was/ A time of innocence » highlight the youth of the performers onscreen, who are understood to be innocent because of their age, and contributes to a sense of incongruity and tragedy. The song's melancholy melody, and its nostalgic idealisation of childhood as « a time of innocence/ a time of confidences », which is memorialised by photography (« Long ago, it must be/ I have a photograph »), is at odds with the signifiers of risk and suffering embedded within the iconography of the scene (crying, darkness, broken glass, drugs). This unnerving juxtaposition begs the questions: who are these young women? How did they end up in this space so ill-suited to our understanding of girlhood as a « time of innocence »? Interrupting the spectator's questioning, Susanna's voiceover begins: « Have you ever confused a dream with life? Or stolen something when you have the cash? Have you ever been blue? Or thought your train moving while sitting still? Maybe I was just crazy. Maybe it was the 60s. Or maybe I was just a girl... interrupted ».

Through her ambivalent statement, « Maybe I was just crazy. Maybe it was the 60s », Susanna is positioned as bringing psychiatric practices and rhetoric into question. As Vera Chouinard perceptively argues, this opening scene troubles « conceptions of institutional landscapes as necessarily therapeutic and healing ». In fact, as the film transitions to the next scene, it becomes clear that « medical practices themselves can heighten suffering and fear »¹¹. When Susanna's voiceover pauses between the words « girl » and « interrupted », she turns her head slightly and looks directly at the camera as sirens begin to sound. Unidentified hands seize hold of her shoulders, and in the next shot, she is violently pushed down onto a hospital bed. The abrupt match cut draws attention to the violence of the brightly lit scene, as Susanna is put in restraints and her stomach is pumped. Drawing attention to the violence routinely involved in medical treatment of mental health issues, this scene reveals that for women like Susanna, « being in places of psychiatric care is sometimes to be subjected to disturbing degrees of discipline and force »¹².

By challenging the conception of psychiatric spaces, *Girl, Interrupted* construes Susanna's authorship as a revisionist struggle against patriarchy. Elaine Showalter¹³ and Jane Ussher¹⁴ have for example shown the ways in which both psychiatric jargon and treatment have historically been deployed to pathologise, contain, dismiss, or silence disruptive women. As Ussher notes, the signifier « madness » functions as a silencing, disciplinary force « which positions women as ill, as outside, as pathological, as somehow second-rate – the second sex »¹⁵. Crucially, Susanna's authorship has the power to revise the misogynist structures which have dismissed

11. Vera CHOUINARD, « Placing the 'mad woman': troubling cultural representations of being a woman with mental illness in *Girl Interrupted* », *Social & Cultural Geography* 10 (7), 2009, p. 797.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Elaine SHOWALTER, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*, New York, Virago, 1987.

14. Jane M. USSHER, *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?*, New York and London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

non-conforming women as « mad » throughout history, and with it, the social order within which women are necessarily « the second sex ». In this way, *Girl, Interrupted* invokes the works of feminist literary critics Gilbert and Gubar, as well as the French feminist Hélène Cixous. In « attempting the pen », Gilbert and Gubar argue, the woman writer enters in an intimate « battle for self-creation » in which « she must redefine the terms of her socialization »¹⁶. Cixous similarly evokes the subversive, revisionary thrill of « écriture féminine », in particular its power to disrupt the « phallogocentric tradition »¹⁷. Precisely because writing is a locus of women's repression, it contains within it the « very possibility of change »¹⁸. For Cixous, when a woman « put[s] herself into the text »¹⁹, it is an act of resistance which poses a terrifying threat to patriarchy: « A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments »²⁰. In this context, Susanna's authorship is an unruly, disruptive force, with the power to rewrite woman's place in society.

In an article exploring Ryder's woman author cycle, it is crucial not to overlook Ryder's authorial function as a significant star text of the 1990s. Indeed, the characterisation of Jo, Finn, and Susanna as « disruptive » subjects trades heavily on Ryder's own counter-cultural, edgy star persona, in particular her status as poster girl for so-called « Generation X »²¹. Appearing seemingly « overnight », by the mid-1990s, the term « Generation X » came to « operate in public culture as a catch-all label for a particular cultural formation of problematic youth »²². As a counter-culture positioned in conflict with its parent generation, the « Baby Boomers », the moniker connoted disruption—and so did Ryder. Ryder's own discursive linkage with Generation X « is primarily if not exclusively attributable to her lead role in the film, *Reality Bites* [Ben Stiller, 1994] »²³. In the film, Ryder's character, aspiring documentarian Lelaina Pierce – another woman author of sorts – epitomises both the rebellious aesthetic (« oversize thrift-store garb ») and affect (« angst, irony, apathy, cynicism ») typifying Generation X²⁴. *Reality Bites* in fact opens with Lelaina's college graduation speech, in which she rejects Baby Boomer status signifiers such as long working hours or expensive commodity products. Similarly, the grunge aesthetics of her documentary eschew the « invisibility » of the camera which characterises traditional narrative film, privileging instead, hand-held shots and conspicuous camera movements. From the opening moments of *Reality Bites*, then, it is clear that Lelaina and her peers are intent on unsettling socio-cultural norms. Off-screen, Ryder was discursively constructed as similarly « edgy », contemporary commentators recycling the same handful of facts as evidence of Ryder's nonconformist credentials: Her being named after a city in Minnesota; her unusual upbringing on

16. GILBERT and GUBAR, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

17. Hélène CIXOUS, « The Laugh of the Medusa », *Signs*, 1 (4), 1976, p. 879.

18. *Ibid.*, emphasis original.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 875

20. *Ibid.*, p. 888

21. Helene A SHUGART, « Isn't It Ironic?: The Intersection of Third-Wave Feminism and Generation X », *Women's Studies in Communication*, 24 (2), 2001, pp. 131-168 and Jonathon I. OAKE, « Reality Bites and Generation X as Spectator », *Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film & Television* (53), 2004, pp. 83-97.

22. Jonathan OAKE, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

23. Helene A. SHUGART, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

24. *Ibid.*

a commune without electricity; her parents' counter-cultural activities as archivists of magazines devoted to mind-altering substances; and her connections to controversial high profile men, such as her godfather Timothy Leary, or former fiancé Johnny Depp²⁵. Ryder's gendering is also significant here: her persona was « premised largely upon flaunting the rigidly defined gender constraints regarding femininity in mainstream popular culture »; and as such, she represented a challenge « to traditional feminine gender norms »²⁶. Capitalising on Ryder's off-screen linkage with discourses of subversion, *Little Women*, *American Quilt*, and *Girl, Interrupted* all figure the Ryder author character as a counter cultural subject signifying a threat to traditional gender norms.

2. Postfeminist acceptability

Ryder's woman author cycle, I have suggested so far, mobilises female authorship as signifying forms of female unruliness associated with various feminist theories. Crucially, these feminist signifiers exist alongside conservative narrative trajectories which attempt to contain, contextualise, or frame the oppositional potential of this figure. In *Little Women*, Jo relinquishes her passionate attachment to a disruptive mode of authorship and writes a biographical novel instead. *American Quilt* sees Finn reconcile with her fiancé Sam after her passionate critiques of the oppressive politics of marriage. *Girl, Interrupted* concludes with Susanna authenticating the power of psychiatry to « heal » the madwoman subject. What is at stake in such « bait and switch » narratives? What do we make of films which praise shrewish authorial identities but also tame them into compliance? What does it mean for texts to invoke feminist discourses while also repudiating them? I argue that through these contradictory discursive movements Ryder's woman author cycle engages a set of sophisticated recuperative manoeuvres associated with postfeminism. As Angela McRobbie shows, postfeminism relies on a « double entanglement » which « positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force »²⁷. As McRobbie observes, the act of taking feminism into account is strategic, since it « permits all the more thorough dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal »²⁸. The double entanglement of invocation/repudiation thus works to imply that, having succeeded at securing women's rights, feminism can now safely be cast aside; it is the « very success of feminism that produces its irrelevance for contemporary culture »²⁹. Importantly, Rosalind Gill observes the synergies between neoliberal and postfeminist discourses, with the « autonomous, calculating self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bear[ing] strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

27. Angela McROBBIE, « Post-feminism and popular culture », *Feminist Media Studies*, 4 (3), 2004, p. 255.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

29. Yvonne TASKER and Diane NEGRA (eds.), *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 8.

subject of postfeminism »³⁰. Gill moreover notes the significance of concepts of choice and agency to postfeminist media culture: « the notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities »³¹. This focus on the individual finally « turns the idea of the personal-as-political on its head », meaning gendered experiences are « framed in exclusively personal ways »³². In other words, under postfeminism, the political is personal.

In an essay on mass magazine cover girls, Sarah Projansky warns about the shortcomings of « disruption-containment » criticism. Under this model, something is « understood to illustrate the ways in which girls can be disruptive in popular culture [...] while simultaneously being contained by popular culture »³³, and this article is, arguably, a typical example of this approach. Projansky suggests that such arguments are « all logical and necessary developments in our thinking » which « emerge in the process of coming to terms with postfeminism in popular culture »³⁴. However, she finds the model limiting: « the problem with these approaches », she argues, « is that they pretty much define all postfeminist media representations. In other words, postfeminism is by definition contradictory, simultaneously feminist and antifeminist, liberating and repressive, productive and obstructive of progressive social change »³⁵. As a means out of this critical impasse, Projansky suggests scholars of postfeminism « avoid claiming either disruption *or* containment » and emphasise, instead the « both/and nature of postfeminist representations »³⁶. Following Projansky's astute observations, this article wrestles with the « both/and » structures of postfeminist representations, and considers the ambiguities and incoherences inherent to this generic territory. As such, I do not suggest that containment « cancels out » the unruliness of the Ryder character. Rather, through their competing discourses and polyphonic address, *Little Women*, *American Quilt*, and *Girl Interrupted* register a sophisticated ambivalence and uneasy co-existence of often contradictory discourses, so that the woman author figure herself comes to function as a signifier of the contradictions and ambiguities constitutive of postfeminism. Nevertheless, this article contends that containment strategies themselves merit further study: their recurrence across this cycle is significant, and symptomatic of a postfeminist moment whose relationship to second- and third-wave feminism is complex, and ever-shifting. The tropes of containment indeed belie a need to make feminism in some way « palatable » to a mainstream audience. In making visible both the processes of containment, as well as the ambiguities they entail, my analysis in part uncovers the parameters of postfeminist « acceptability ».

As I will show, the granting of a sense of « pastness » to feminism³⁷ is a key component of the postfeminist acceptability of Ryder's characters. In safely

30. Rosalind GILL, « Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility », *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10 (2), 2007, p. 164.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Sarah PROJANSKY, « Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters », in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (eds.), Durham, Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 66-67.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. McROBBIE, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

transferring feminist struggle to the pre-feminist past, Ryder's woman author cycle depicts « safe rebellions that in no way challenge the contemporary status quo »³⁸. As Antje Ascheid writes, « in displacing the desire for both gender equality and sexuality onto historical periods commonly associated with overt domination [...] period romances locate gender struggles in the past »³⁹. *Little Women* is a case-in-point, and for example sees Jo argue passionately in favour of women's suffrage: « I find it poor logic to say that because women are good women should vote. Men do not vote because they are good, they vote because they are male. Women should vote – not because women are angels are men are animals – but because we are human beings and citizens of this country ». Thanks to the gains of first- and second-wave feminism, such as women's suffrage, the feminist « problems » which *Little Women* touches upon are understood to be resolved in the postfeminist present of the film's release. As such, the film attempts to reduce feminism to a couple of flagship issues (white middle class women's suffrage) and obscures those problems persisting in the present – in particular the intersection of gender with other modalities of difference such as race and class. *Girl, Interrupted* adopts a similar « posting » strategy in relation to homophobia. When Lisa quips « You're not a sociopath, you're a dyke! » to one of her fellow patients, the film picks up on the fact that homosexuality was still considered a mental illness in the 1960s, cannily positioning both Lisa and the film itself as « posthomophobic ». Since homosexuality was no longer considered a mental illness in the 1990s when the film was produced, the (fallacious) assumption made is that we must live in a world which no longer pathologises or discriminates against homosexual people. As in *Little Women*, *Girl, Interrupted*'s screened unruliness is characterised as a « safe rebellion » by locating problems into the pre-feminist past.

Girl, Interrupted moreover characterises feminism as that which is « understood to have already passed away »⁴⁰, through the repudiation of Lisa's character. Under the logic of the double entanglement, as it is Lisa who articulates much of the film's feminist critiques of Claymore's practices, it is her authority and legitimacy which is eventually called into question. Disavowing Lisa's influence and friendship, Susanna declares, « You're dead already, Lisa! ». In marking Lisa as spiritually dead, the film suggests the feminism she embodies is itself dead. At stake in this scene is Susanna's recognition of Lisa's function as her doppelgänger, with Susanna finally acknowledging, and necessarily rejecting her own inner monstrosity. In *The Madwoman in Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar argue that the nineteenth century literary heroine's « mad double » functions as an expression « of her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts »⁴¹. In metaphorically « killing » her « mad double » Lisa, Susanna is not only killing the monstrosity within herself (feminism), but also disavowing this « raging desire to escape male houses and male texts » (constraints of acceptable femininity). When she is eventually released from Claymore after declaring Lisa (and the mad, monstrous, feminist rage she represents) « already dead » Susanna is finally ripe for recuperation into postfeminist girlhood.

38. Antje ASCHEID, « Safe Rebellions: Romantic Emancipation in the 'Woman's Heritage Film' », *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*, 4, 2006.

39. *Ibid.*

40. McROBBIE, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

41. GILBERT and GUBAR, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

Ascheid's concept of « safe rebellions » moreover makes sense of the ambivalence of women's heritage films which both « activate and seemingly reconcile often contradictory narrative trajectories ». In particular, the term illuminates the ways in which the prototypical female protagonist is « both 'different' (in the context of the historical setting) » and yet « thoroughly recognisable (to today's viewers) »⁴². The heroine as nexus of both difference and identification is evident in *Little Women*, in which Jo is ostensibly different from her contemporaries (as a woman pursuing a writing career), and yet « thoroughly recognisable » to a contemporary audience (as a woman attempting to « have it all »). Although she violates nineteenth century norms of femininity, Jo nonetheless complies with twentieth century expectations: her slang is relatively tame (« awful », « scoundrel »), her short hair is nonetheless feminine, and her reluctance to marry eventually cast aside. In short, Jo's profeminism is particularly palatable. Although she rebels against social mores through her initial refusal of an advantageous offer of marriage, Jo eventually builds an equal romantic partnership with Friedrich Bhaer (Gabriel Byrne), whom, like her, appears to be a twentieth century character « displaced into the historical past »⁴³. Underpinning this scenario of « romantic emancipation »⁴⁴, is the suggestion that it is Jo's previous suitor, Laurie, who was unsuitable – not marriage itself.

Jo's unruly authorship is further figured as a « safe rebellion » through her pairing with an older, more experienced, but benevolent, male authority figure who « authorises » her work. *Little Women's* benevolent patriarch is professor Friedrich, whom, in time, becomes Jo's privileged reader and critic. In New York, Friedrich not only enables Jo to access spaces (male-dominated political gatherings, the opera), culinary experiences (coffee, wine), and contacts (literary publishers) otherwise out of bounds to her due to her gender, class, and cultural background, but also generously mediates these experiences for her. He notably translates songs into English for Jo at the opera, and makes a point of asking her opinion on women's suffrage when she is being spoken over at a party. Friedrich however disapproves of Jo's chosen genre of sensation fiction and of her adoption of the male pseudonym « Joseph March ». Reading her published story « The Sinner's Corpse », he asks sceptically, « Lunatics... vampires... this interests you? ». When Friedrich's honest opinion is later solicited, he didactically states that: « You should be writing from life, from the depths of your soul. There is nothing in here of the woman I am privileged to know ». Equating the sensational elements of Jo's writing to in a lack of artistic integrity, Friedrich urges Jo to author a more authentic text: « there is more to you than this, if you have the courage to write it ». Toward the end of the film, Jo returns to her hometown of Concord. Following Friedrich's criticism of her writing, and the trauma of her sister Beth's death, Jo frees herself from writerly props (the red velvet cap which she has worn throughout the film during scenes of authorship is conspicuously absent) and affectations of maleness to write « from life ». She hears her sisters' voices narrating key episodes from the film, and she begins to write uninterruptedly. The implication is clear: Jo is now a vehicle for truth rather than a creative author of stories of « murder and gore ». In the film's logic, Friedrich's criticism enables Jo to grow as an artist and finally deliver a truthful text.

42. ASCHEID, *op. cit.*

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*

Importantly, I argue that Friedrich's role in the narrative in part neutralises the threat posed by the Jo's unruly authorship by « authorising » her authorial project. This patriarchal authorisation may appear benign, but characterising Jo's authorship as in some way compliant with patriarchy undermines her authority over her body of work. The sinister undercurrent of the film is that the narrative which enables Jo to « have it all » in fact reifies male authority at the expense of female authorship. The production of the made-over female subject – the newly « tamed » Jo – is indeed activated by the taming of her shrewish, sensational stories into an « authorised » text. In *Little Women*, the authorised text is one which is compliant both with Friedrich's expectations of « truthfulness » and with patriarchal expectations of female domesticity. Jo tellingly signs her work « Josephine March », indicating her conventional (re)gendering as female. By casting aside her masculine masquerade and renouncing her literary methodology, Jo submits to Friedrich's literary authority. Therefore, in the act of writing « Little Women », Jo achieves the status of « author », but crucially loses « authority » over her text. The film's final irony is that the act of writing the male-authorised text transforms Jo into a successful author whilst simultaneously exhausting the very material that grants her authorial status. In *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction* (2005), Mary Eagleton notes the prevalence of a plot device whereby a woman author loses authority « over her work in terms of content, form [or] legal ownership »⁴⁵. In Eagleton's study of literary fiction, « the loss of a woman's authority over her work [...] results not in a dispersal of power and a liberating deposing of 'The Author' but in a redistribution of power which confirms existing hierarchies of gender, class and race »⁴⁶. The same logic appears to be at work in *Little Women* in which Jo's metaphorical loss of authority functions to authenticate traditional structures of authority associated with whiteness and maleness, and thus naturalise the unequal distribution of authority along gender lines. The recurrence of this scenario both in literature and in film moreover confirms that the woman author's access to authority is always already compromised by her gender.

Another key containment strategy prevalent in Ryder's woman author cycle is the framing of gendered experience and oppression in « exclusively personal ways »⁴⁷. In *American Quilt*, Finn sits on the porch with her mother, discussing the effects of having grown up hearing that « marriage is bullshit ». « Do you have any idea how crazy you've made me? » She asks, before concluding, « the imprint's been made. I'm a mess ». Through this conversation, *American Quilt* warns of the dangers of being your mother's metaphorical sister in feminism: it makes you « crazy ». The film thus reveals that Finn's reluctance to marry – which initially appeared to be rooted in a well-articulated feminist critique of patriarchal structures – is really « craziness » resulting from irresponsible feminist mothering. In sum, Finn's issues are personal, not political. With her feminism revealed to be untenable, Finn is « liberated » from bankrupt ideology, and left free to embrace heteronormative romance. The disappearance of Finn's feminist rhetoric is mirrored by the metaphorical disappearance of her similarly disruptive thesis whose pages are dispersed by a sudden burst of wind. Once reconstructed, her thesis becomes narratively irrelevant. Instead, the

45. Mary EAGLETON, *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 5.

46. *Ibid.*

47. GILL, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

film focuses on the completed wedding quilt: wrapping herself up in the quilt she symbolically acquiesces to the conservative gender script of marriage which she had hitherto rejected.

In *Girl, Interrupted*, meanwhile, the postfeminist personalisation of the political results in an emphasis on neoliberal personal responsibility. Drawing on 1990s « girl power » discourses which recast structural inequalities as « poor personal choices, laziness »⁴⁸, *Girl, Interrupted* characterises Susanna's mental illness as « laziness », and her recovery as a matter of « choice ». Girl subjects, Anita Harris explains, are indeed imagined as « willful subjects » who « have a range of good choices before them »⁴⁹. As a result, « success and failure are constructed as though they were dependent on strategic effort and good personal choices »⁵⁰. This rhetoric of « strategic effort and good personal choices » is highly visible in *Girl, Interrupted* which links Susanna's disordered personality with childishness, and her recovery with responsible choosing. The film's infantilisation of Susanna is particularly apparent in the scene in which nurse Val (Whoopi Goldberg) carries her out of bed, and drops her into a cold bath in order to draw her out of a lethargic state. Walking past the tub, Val briefly pushes Susanna's head under water, before calmly heading for the door. Susanna angrily slams her hand in the water and shouts, « get me the fuck out of this tub! » « Get yourself out », Val responds. Susanna's repeated swearing, as well as her movements code her as sulky teenager aware of her own performance of resistance. Val, however, has no patience for Susanna's sulkiness: « You know, I can take a lot of crazy shit from a lot of crazy people. But you, you are not crazy. [...] You are a lazy, self-indulgent little girl who is driving herself crazy ». The actresses' respective star personas and performance style contribute to the scene's moral coding, so that Whoopi Goldberg embodies benevolent authority, while Ryder brings the rebelliousness and counter cultural attitudes attributed to Generation X. As Val concludes « you're throwing it all away » the film appears to suggest that Susanna – and by extension all Gen Xers involved in cynical societal critique – in fact holds the key to her own recovery, and is wasting her significant potential.

Eventually heeding neoliberal postfeminism's imperative for self-improvement, Susanna comes to share Val's worldview. Under Val's tutelage, she finally engages in therapy. In addition, Val recommends that Susanna shoulder the responsibility of recovery through autobiographical writing: « Put it down. Put it away. Put it in your notebook. But get it out of yourself. Away, so you can't curl up with it anymore ». From this point onward, Susanna's autobiographical authorship is characterised as a particularly therapeutic act associated with achieving mental health. In an extended montage of cross-fades and intermingled voiceovers, Susanna is pictured as constantly occupied in writing, sketching, and painting, reflecting on her illness and on her recovery. Susanna's journal and art therefore become the locus of her therapeutic self-work, functioning as a neoliberal self-monitoring practice. Under neoliberalism, autobiographical authorship is indeed perceived as a gendered form of therapeutic self-work facilitating the (re)production of conservative gender scripts. Pamela Thoma thus suggests that « writing is represented as an appropriate form of entrepreneurial labour because it simultaneously monitors,

48. Anita HARRIS, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, New York and London, Routledge, 2004, p. 25.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

reflects on, and expresses the heroines' unambiguous and authentic femininity » and « facilitates the working woman's makeover »⁵¹. In particular, « writing facilitates the overt display of self-work via the extensive use of a first-person mode »⁵². By choosing to use self-reflective autobiographical authorship, the flawed female subject Susanna is eventually « made over » into an appropriately compliant subject « compatible with a postfeminist model of feminine subjectivity »⁵³. As we have seen, this requires Susanna to disavow Lisa's feminist-informed critiques; her rejection of Lisa is then cemented in her journal in which she writes « Lisa's eyes, once so magnetic, now just look empty ». After this montage ends, the film signals that Susanna has finally recovered by intertextually nodding to the iconic scene from *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) in which Dorothy discovers she always had the power to go home but had to discover her agency for herself.

That Ryder's Jo, Susanna, and Finn find their feminist disruptiveness somehow tempered importantly correlates with Ryder's own edginess being repeatedly discursively contained in contemporary coverage of the star. This is largely achieved by highlighting Ryder's « fragility », « tormentedness », or « diminutive » frame. For example, critics regularly used words such as « ethereal » or « waiflike » connoting feminine ephemerality and vulnerability⁵⁴. Her 1999 Diane Sawyer interview during her *Girl, Interrupted* promotional tour strongly reinforced this impression of fragility, as Ryder admitted on air having suffered with severe anxiety and depression, and checking herself into a clinic. Similarly, photographic portraits of Ryder frequently foregrounded a startled, fearful, or melancholy facial expression, or awkward poses speaking to mental distress, much of them in black and white. This fragility still seems to hold currency as her recent role as the unruly yet emotionally fragile mother-of-two in *Stranger Things* (2016) suggests.

Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of the ways in which *Little Women, How to Make an American Quilt* and *Girl, Interrupted* conceptualise female authorship as politically subversive, while also ambiguously placing the woman author character within conservative narrative trajectories seeking to recuperate her unruly subjectivity into feminine compliance. In doing so, this article sheds light on the parameters of postfeminist acceptability. One key manoeuvre rendering the unruly woman author « acceptable » is to restrict her authorship to autobiographical projects and subjects. In *Little Women*, Jo abandons lunatics and vampires and writes about her own family's experiences; in *Girl, Interrupted*, Susanna's journal becomes central to her therapeutic practice and recovery; in *How to Make an American Quilt*, Finn's thesis eventually disappears and is replaced by the wedding quilt, which collects the quilters' own experiences of love and marriage. Under neoliberal postfeminism, the oppositional potential of autobiographical *écriture féminine* is traded in for neoliberal self-surveillance. The postfeminist autobiographical mode allows women to claim a voice, insofar as that voice is to give personal – not political – accounts of their

51. Pamela THOMA, « What Julia Knew: Domestic Labor in the Recession-Era Chick Flick », in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (eds.), Durham, Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 126 and 110.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

54. Helene SHUGART, *op. cit.*

lived experiences and comply with traditionally feminine genres. In other words, in these films, the author's gender dictates the genre of their text, their corporeality defining their corpus.

What is stake in Ryder's female author cycle is therefore a broader question about authorship, identity, and the author's claim to « universality ». If fictional, privileged young white women authors such as Jo, Susanna, and Finn find themselves foiled and contained in their authorial projects, where does this leave the real-world female author of colour? The trans author? The disabled author? The Muslim author? Universality, is, indeed, the province of the white, male author, he who is thought to be « just » an author. As Richard Dyer demonstrates, « There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human ». In the context of white privilege and the invisibility of whiteness, Dyer elucidates how « The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that - they can speak only for their race »⁵⁵. As « *just* humans », white middle class men are imagined to transcend both their corporealities as white men, as well as their temporalities as bound to a historical moment, and « can speak for the commonality of humanity » through their art. In this model, embodied subjects, those marked as « bodies » by their gender, race, class, disability or sexuality, are imagined as illegitimate bearers of « universality » who can « speak only for their » lived experience. Marked as bodies by their femaleness, women authors cannot, in theory, transcend their corporealities as women, so that if/when they are included in the literary canon, it is primarily as *women* authors. Multiply burdened individuals – women authors of colour for example – are further ghettoised.⁵⁶ It is thanks to this logic that William Shakespeare, by contrast, is imagined as a perpetual « contemporary ». Ryder's 1990s woman author cycle thus sheds much-needed light on the ways in which popular culture reifies and universalises the works and status of the white, male author, while disparaging other claims to authorship as fundamentally « marginal ».

And yet, the woman author's very marginality paradoxically offers us a glimmer of hope. Even as she was first being theorised, the figure of woman author has always been ambiguous and contradictory. Just as second-wave feminist literary critics began to explore questions of female authorship through landmark works such as « The Laugh of the Medusa »⁵⁷, *A literature of their own: from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (1977)⁵⁸, *The madwoman in the attic. The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination* (1979)⁵⁹, so Roland Barthes' « The Death of the Author » (1967) was being reprinted in the collection *Image-Music-Text* (1977)⁶⁰. As Eagleton notes,

55. Richard DYER, *White*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 2.

56. This ghettoising occurs not just in literary criticism. This phenomenon was particularly striking in the 2008 democratic primaries opposing Barack Obama to Hilary Clinton. As Toril Moi suggests, to force individuals to « 'eliminate' their gendered (or raced) subjectivity » to « masquerade as some kind of generic universal human being » ultimately devalues « actual experiences as embodied human beings in the world ». Conversely, « to run for office as the 'black' or the 'woman' candidate », symbolically cuts individuals off from the « 'universal', the general category, and hence imprison them in their gender (or race) ». See Moi, « 'I am not a woman writer': About women, literature and feminist theory today », *Feminist theory*, 9 (3), 2008, p. 265.

57. Hélène CIXOUS, *op. cit.*

58. Elaine SHOWALTER, *A Literature of their Own: from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing*, London, Virago, 1999 [1977].

59. GILBERT and GUBAR, *op. cit.*

60. Roland BARTHES, « The Death of the Author », *Image, Music, Text*, London, Fontana Press, 1987 [1967].

this publishing context signals « a curious contradiction in intellectual history », in which « one group of academics was declaring the ‘death’ of the author as a figure of origin, meaning and power at precisely the same moment as another group, from varying feminist positions, was looking for the ‘birth’ of the author in terms of a reclamation of women’s literary history and an exhortation to women to claim a voice »⁶¹. With the 1990s came the publication of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990)⁶² which brought the term « woman » itself into question. By this point, this « curious contradiction in intellectual history » was even more fraught, resulting in what Toril Moi terms « a kind of intellectual schizophrenia » whereby « one half of the brain continues to read women writers while the other continues to think that the author is dead, and that the very word ‘woman’ is theoretically dodgy »⁶³. And yet, just as the « question of the woman writer disappear[ed] from the feminist theoretical agenda around 1990 »⁶⁴, so Ryder’s woman author film cycle began with *Little Women* in 1994. Though this cycle ends with *Girl, Interrupted* in 1999, popular films across genres have steadily continued to feature woman author protagonists⁶⁵. In fact, I argue that it is precisely because of her unique place at the heart of a crisis in literary history, as well as her status as a signifier of the contradictions and ambiguities constitutive of postfeminism, that the screened woman author should give us pause. Through their ambiguities, ambivalences, and polysemic address, Ryder’s embodied woman author texts, as well as their successors, carve out a space of resistance to the figuring of the Author as ahistorical, disembodied, and universal. Despite both her « marginality » in literary criticism, and the symbolic death of the author, popular culture is far from finished with the woman author.

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61. Mary EAGLETON, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

62. Judith BUTLER, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge classics, New York and London, Routledge, 2006 [1990].

63. Toril MOI, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

65. The actresses Renée Zellweger, Drew Barrymore, Anne Hathaway, Emma Stone and Kristen Wiig are particularly associated with this figure. See texts as varied as *Mansfield Park* (Patricia Rozema 1999), *Never Been Kissed* (Raja Gosnell 1999), *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Sharon Maguire 2001), *Possession* (Neil LaBute 2002), *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry 2002), *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (Donald Petrie 2003), *The Life of David Gale* (Alan Parker 2003), *Sylvia* (Christine Jeffs 2003), *Down with Love* (Peyton Reed 2003), *Something’s Gotta Give* (Nancy Meyers 2003), *The Perfect Man* (Mark Rosman 2005), *Blood Diamond* (Edward Zwick 2006), *Miss Potter* (Chris Noonan 2006), *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel 2006), *Music and Lyrics* (Marc Lawrence 2007), *The Nanny Diaries* (Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini 2007), *Atonement* (Joe Wright 2007), *Becoming Jane* (Julian Jarrold 2007), *State of Play* (Kevin Macdonald 2009), *Enid* (James Hawes 2009), *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (P.J. Hogan 2009), *Easy A* (Will Gluck 2010), *The Help* (Tate Taylor 2011), *Young Adult* (Jason Reitman 2011), *Girl Most Likely* (Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini 2012), *Begin Again* (John Carney 2013), *Adult World* (Scott Coffey 2013), *The Rewrite* (Marc Lawrence 2014), *Wild* (Jean-Marc Vallée 2014), *Their Finest* (Lone Scherfig 2016), or *The Incredible Jessica James* (Jim Strouse 2017). The woman author protagonist also recurs on television under the guise of the lifestyle columnist in *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), the budding journalist in *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007, 2016), the teenage blogger in *Awkward* (2011-2016), or the TV writer in *30 Rock* (2006-2013).

