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Enola Holmes: An Analysis of Cinematic Adaptation Through the Lens of Auteur Theory

Vanshika
Masters in English
Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies

Abstract
Some mysteries are meant to be solved, while others are meant to be rewritten.
The Enola Holmes films, directed by Harry Bradbeer, are not just adaptations of Nancy Springer's novels—they are reinventions, shaped by a distinct directorial vision. This essay analyzes the film adaptation of Enola Holmes by director Harry Bradbeer in the context of Auteur theory. According to Auteur theory, the director is the "creator" of a film, imprinting it with his artistic vision. This research analyzes how Bradbeer, as an auteur, recasts the source material, inserting his distinctive flourishes: light-hearted fourth-wall breaks, contemporary feminist undertones, and a more acute emphasis on social justice. Drawn from Nancy Springer's novel series, the film reimagines the exploits of Sherlock Holmes' younger sister in a unique directorial vision. Auteur theory, which foregrounds the director's creative control, provides the basis for understanding Bradbeer's stylistic and narrative decisions. By contrasting the thematic and narrative turns of the novels with their screen adaptations, this paper explores the ways in which the director's decisions enhance Enola's autonomy, subvert conventional gender norms, and introduce new narratives—especially in Enola Holmes 2, where the film breaks from the book to highlight real-world labor rights movements. This research, from an Auteur Theory perspective, unravels the directorial signatures that Bradbeer impresses upon such adaptations to determine how one director's personal creative control over an adaptation will completely transform the story's own identity.

Keywords: Auteur theory, rewritten, directorial vision

Introduction

The cinema adaptations have acted as the linkage between Literature and film since ages, presenting novel methods of consuming the already present stories, for the viewers. Pride and Prejudice novels, and Harry Potter's mystical realm have been turned into movies highly popular with their viewers due to their potential of re-conceptualizing the stories and providing them accessibility to a vast number of eyes. This is one method of giving new life to old stories. Enola Holmes, a modern retelling of Springer's books, is one of those which stand out due to their unique vision. This retelling brings a new character to the world of Sherlock Holmes, through the prism of the auteur's vision.

To adapt a literature in a movie has numerous challenges. Taking creative choices that are suited for the movie format yet true to the original content requires a delicate balancing act. Pauline Kael eloquently penned in her 1976 New Yorker review "If some people would rather see the movie than read the book, this may be a fact of life that we must allow for, but let's not pretend that people get the same things out of both, or that nothing is lost," (Kael, *Notes on Heart and Mind*). She differentiates between the act of viewing a film and reading a novel, showing a strong cultural bias toward the more traditional activity. This feeling highlights the essential differences between reading a novel and viewing its film adaptation, pointing to the unique experiences that each medium offers.

Adaptation of literature into film inevitably involves creative changes, and the Netflix franchise Enola Holmes exemplifies this process. Based on Nancy Springer's young-adult novels, the films follow Enola, the spirited teenage sister of Sherlock Holmes, as she outwits patriarchal society and solves mysteries. Harry Bradbeer's direction of Enola Holmes (2020) and Enola Holmes 2 (2022), however, introduces substantial deviations and emphases compared to Springer's source material. These include a pronounced feminist perspective and the incorporation of historical events, notably the 1888 Matchgirls' Strike. By analyzing these adaptations through the framework of auteur theory – which posits the film director as the chief creative force or "author" of a movie – we can understand how Bradbeer's personal style and thematic preoccupations shape the films.

Auteur theory, articulated by French New Wave critics in the 1950s and later by American critics, emphasizes a director's individuality across works (Truffaut, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," 1954; Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962"). As Truffaut and colleagues argued, great directors imbue each film with a distinctive "signature" or set of concerns; even when working from someone else's script, their vision dominates the final product. Conversely, Pauline Kael cautioned that attribution of authorship can be simplistic, urging critics not to "judge the films from the man" (Kael, *"Circles and Squares,"* 23). In this study, we apply auteur theory with an awareness of such debates, focusing on how Bradbeer's sensibilities consistently manifest in the Enola Holmes films.

Theoretical Framework: Auteur Theory

Auteur theory emerged in mid-20th-century cinema criticism to address authorship in a collaborative art form. The director, in Auteur theory, is said to be the central creative force behind a film, leaving behind his artistic footprints. A clear example of these kinds of directors is Harry Bradbeer who employs his auteur led style through meta narrative devices, powerful female leads and character-audience interactions.

Truffaut criticised the French film industry's current "tradition of quality," which put literary adaptations, as well as screenwriters above directors' ideas. (Truffaut, "*A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema").* He argued for a *"politique des auteurs"* (policy of authors) in that those directors who lavish their films with their own style and themes must be considered the actual authors of their films. Andrew Sarris defined the auteur theory as crediting the director as the film's author, emphasizing his personal style and thematic consistency over technical aspects of production (Sarris, *Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962*). This was where the foundation of the Auteur theory was established.

Auteur Theory's key concept is that the director drops his personal visions and ideas throughout the narratives of the film. There are common themes, narrative forms, visual forms and character archetypes. These unique elements are the means by which a director expresses his unique style and signature on the films, as per the auteur theory.

Nevertheless, there have been some criticisms of Auteur Theory. Its tendency to overlook the inherently collaborative nature of filmmaking is one of the key criticisms. Kael quipped that critics should "judge the man from his films and learn to predict a little about his next films, but we don't judge the films from the man" (Kael, *"Circles and Squares,"* 1963). Screenwriters, cinematographers, editors, actors, production designers, and countless other members of the team collaborate to make films. It could be said that the concept underestimates these co-workers by asserting authorship for directors alone. "If big film directors are to get credit for doing badly what others have been doing brilliantly for years with no money, just because they've put it on a big screen, then businessmen are greater than

poets and theft is art." (Kael,"*Trash, Art, and the Movies"*, par. VIII) here Critic Pauline Kael significantly questioned Auteur Theory, claiming that it idealizes directors and overlooks the role of other creative elements in the filmmaking process. However, modern criticism often takes a nuanced view: acknowledging the collaborative nature of filmmaking while still valuing the director's overarching vision. As Richard Brody explains, auteurism "expands the experience of watching movies, by putting another character into them, one who hovers just off-screen but participates in the action … namely, the director". (Brody, *"Auteur, Auteur."*)
For the purposes of this analysis, we adopt the core of auteur theory: that a film can be read as an expression of the director's artistry, especially when he leaves a consistent mark on successive projects. We will examine Bradbeer's Enola Holmes films for such authorial signatures. Did Bradbeer simply implement Jack Thorne's screenplay verbatim, or did he infuse the narrative with recurring themes and stylistic choices reflecting his own sensibilities (much as Truffaut or Godard did in the 1960s)? By comparing the films to the source novels, we can see which elements Bradbeer chose to emphasize or alter. We will also consider how critics have responded to Bradbeer's decisions, and whether patterns in his earlier work (e.g. Fleabag) carry over. In short, the guiding question is: Does Harry Bradbeer leave a distinctive auteurist imprint on the Enola Holmes films? If so, what are the hallmarks of his authorship, and how do they reshape Springer's material?

Background: Nancy Springer's Enola Holmes Novels

Before delving into the films, we briefly outline Springer's Enola Holmes Mysteries (2006–2010), a young-adult series featuring Enola Holmes, Sherlock's unconventional teenage sister. In the first novel, The Case of the Missing Marquess (2006), Enola awakens on her fourteenth birthday to find her mother missing. Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes assume Eudoria Holmes has abandoned them and decide Enola should attend a finishing school. Rejecting this fate, Enola flees London in search of her mother, using ciphers and clever disguises taught by Eudoria. En route, she stumbles upon the case of a missing young nobleman (the titular Marquess, Lord Tewksbury) who has likely run away. Enola rescues him from supposed kidnappers and, in doing so, learns that her mother vanished to join a community of Romani people to escape societal constraints . By the novel's end, Enola has outwitted her brothers and solved the case, though her mother's exact whereabouts remain uncertain.
Throughout the books, Enola proves resourceful: she uses Victorian fashion (corsets, skirts) as mobile storage for clues; she deciphers cypher puzzles; and she often out-thinks her brothers, who initially underestimate her. Mycroft, in particular, is portrayed as pompous but protective, while Sherlock appears late in the first book and is largely unaware of Enola's investigations. The novels balance mystery with coming-of-age themes: Enola learns self-reliance and observes how women of her era are judged, but the narrative focus remains on the detective plot. Although the books touch on the era's social norms, they do not deeply engage with real historical events or overt political activism; the emphasis is more on Enola's individual ingenuity and her quirky personality (she even speaks in Sherlockian-style riddle sometimes).
Given this source material, Bradbeer's adaptation had considerable latitude to reinterpret and expand Enola's world. The choice to emphasize feminist themes and weave in historical struggles (such as the suffrage movement and labor rights) was largely absent or muted in the books. This creative divergence will be a focus of our analysis, as it reflects Bradbeer's contributions. In the next section, we compare narrative and character differences between the novels and films to highlight these shifts.

Adapting Enola Holmes : Narrative Changes and Thematic Shifts

The film Enola Holmes (2020) is officially an adaptation of Springer's first novel, but in practice it combines and alters elements freely. One major change is the purpose of rescuing Lord Tewksbury. In the novel, Enola's help leads Tewksbury home, and she learns her mother is alive and left clues (the Romani twist). The film reconfigures this: rather than just solving the missing person case, Enola discovers a political conspiracy. Steve Rose notes that "the plot centres on Enola's rescue of a foppish young lord whose life is in danger" – but crucially, "his vote is key in passing the Reform Act in the House of Lords, which will pave the way for women's suffrage." (Rose, *Enola Holmes).* This shift reframes the mystery as part of the larger struggle for women's rights. In the books, Tewksbury's predicament is personal; in the film, it becomes political. Moreover, in Springer's novel Mycroft is embarrassed by his sister and bossy (he sends Enola to finishing school), but he never appears as a villain. The film casts Mycroft (played by Sam Claflin) as a more overt antagonist who wants to control Enola's fate. The Guardian review observes that Enola's fight in the film "dishes [Sherlock] a taste of his own analysis," as she forces Sherlock and Mycroft to see the injustice around them . This dynamic – Enola confronting her brothers in explicitly feminist terms – is original to the film.

Another alteration is Enola's character voice and fourth-wall narration. The film has Enola frequently addressing the audience directly with witty commentary and onscreen text, a playful device absent from the books. This stylistic decision aligns with Bradbeer's penchant for breaking the fourth wall in Fleabag and gives Enola a modern, self-aware flair. It highlights her individualism in a way the novels, told in third-person, do not. Narratively, the film also adds a climax involving Enola's mother Eudoria (Helena Bonham Carter), tying her disappearance to the story's feminist through-line. In Springer's first book, Eudoria's reasons are more personal and apolitical. In the film, Eudoria is revealed as a militant suffragette using bombs to protest – an invention of Bradbeer (discussed below).

Similarly, Enola Holmes 2 takes even greater liberties. Unlike the first film, the sequel is not a direct adaptation of any single Springer novel. Instead, it "takes real-life inspiration from the matchgirls' strike" of 1888 , a feminist labor movement, while loosely referencing the second book The Case of the Left-Handed Lady. The sequel's plot revolves around Enola opening her own detective agency and taking on a case of a missing girl, Sarah Chapman, who is connected to a match factory with unsafe working conditions . The real Sarah Chapman indeed led the Bryant & May Matchgirls' strike in 1888. Critics note that the film uses this history to ground its mystery. One reviewer explains that Bradbeer's Enola engages in "fighting for better and safer working conditions for female factory workers at the Lyon match factory,"(Lalani) even leading a protest reminiscent of the actual strike . In reality, details of Chapman's disappearance and involvement are fictionalized for drama, but the reference is explicit: "It is a rare sequel that doesn't take the bigger-is-better route. Instead, it doubles down on what made the first movie such a breath of pandemic-era fresh air in the first place." (Naahar). In other words, Bradbeer continues the first film's focus on Enola's personal empowerment and social conscience, rather than scaling up to formulaic action.

These narrative changes underscore Bradbeer's hand in reshaping the material. He does not simply translate Springer's text to screen; he reinterprets it with new themes. The incorporation of suffrage politics and labor rights suggests his particular interests. For example, while Springer's books revolve around personal freedom and mystery-solving, Bradbeer's films make Enola a champion of changing the world. As Steve Rose observes, this makes Enola Holmes "a revisionist spin on an over-filmed story," where the heroine "has a vested interest in changing a world that doesn't suit her at all.". Such a framing aligns with Bradbeer's own outspoken view that films should "have something to say", he noted that what "struck him" about Enola Holmes was that its heroine had a message. (Bradbeer) In

sum, the narrative shifts – from adding political stakes to fleshing out feminist conflicts – reflect Bradbeer's decisions to emphasize certain elements over others. We will see below that these emphases form part of his stylistic and thematic signature, consistent with auteur theory.

Auteur Theory in Practice: Bradbeer's Creative Vision

Having outlined the differences between Springer's novels and Bradbeer's films, we now examine these choices as expressions of Bradbeer's directorial vision. According to auteur theory, a director's personal imprint should be detectable across his works. One telling detail is Bradbeer's emphasis on eccentricity and energy. In interviews he often cites these as guiding principles. As Bradbeer himself relates, on the first Enola Holmes he began with just three words in mind: "eccentricity, energy and emotion." He explained that these were "the three key words we all kept to" when establishing the film's style (Bradbeer). This mantra of eccentricity is visible throughout the films: Enola herself is portrayed as quirky and unpredictable, and the visual style often swings into whimsical or kinetic sequences (such as colorfully vivid action scenes or visually inventive puzzle montages). Bradbeer described falling "in love with the details" of Victorian England, injecting an "Englishness" that is at once period-specific and lively . The result is a film world that, while historically set, feels playful and character-driven rather than heavy and somber. In line with auteur theory, these adjectives reflect Bradbeer's authorial stamp: they also appeared in Fleabag, which combined emotional depth with energetic, unpredictable humor. Thus even as he shifted genre, Bradbeer reused his signature energy and fondness for offbeat characters.

Critics likewise note Bradbeer's dynamic style. Maureen Lee Lenker of Entertainment Weekly praises the film for never losing its "abundant wit and warmth," and for blending "wry humor and breathless energy" into the storytelling. (Lenker). This matches Bradbeer's self-characterization. The FirstShowing review of Enola Holmes 2 similarly observes that Bradbeer "retains the unique visual style of the original, which fits this world like a glove. From the on-screen drawings to put the audience right in Enola's mind, to the enlightening, amusing fourth-wall breaks, Enola Holmes 2 boasts an audio-visual production value that will easily please all kinds of cinephiles." (São Bento). Here, the critic notes specific formal elements (drawings on screen, direct addresses to the camera) that became hallmarks of these films – again, devices reminiscent of Bradbeer's previous work. These stylistic choices demonstrate how Bradbeer puts his own spin on the material. They show his "hand" as director: by deliberately choosing such techniques, he aligns the film's tone with his creative persona.

Bradbeer's personal interests also shaped thematic content. He mentioned in interviews that he was drawn to Enola Holmes for its strong, complex heroine and feminist undercurrents. Consequently, Bradbeer's adaptations amplify feminist themes found (more subtly) in the books. Nancy Springer's original already featured a headstrong female protagonist rejecting gender roles. Bradbeer expanded this into an explicit commentary on Victorian patriarchy and women's rights. In Enola Holmes, Enola's mother Eudoria (played by Helena Bonham Carter) is revealed as a militant suffragette. The film even pivots on passing a Reform Act in Parliament that will benefit women. These elements are Bradbeer's additions, not drawn directly from Springer. Steve Rose of The Guardian notes that Enola and her mother "do not accept the gender role society has assigned them," and "set about changing things," emphasizing the film's revisionist feminist outlook. Similarly, Enola Holmes 2 centers on Enola defending working girls and exposes the match factory's corruption – choices reflecting Bradbeer's interest in women's agency. The sequels' content suggests Bradbeer steered the adaptation toward his own concerns with women's empowerment. As one review

observes of EH2: it is "somewhat based on a real movement for women's rights in England's history. The whole movie concentrates on transmitting a message of female empowerment and independence" .

In sum, from stylistic flourishes to narrative focus, many of Bradbeer's directorial decisions appear consistent with his artistic identity. According to auteur theory, when such an auteur puts his style on screen, the film reflects an authorial personality. Indeed, the consistency between Bradbeer's known preferences (eccentric, energetic, character-centric storytelling) and the Enola Holmes films supports the view of him as an auteur. The next section examines specific examples where Bradbeer's style manifests as authorial control over the adaptation.

Feminist and Historical Context in Bradbeer's Adaptations

A key aspect of Bradbeer's auteur imprint is the pronounced feminist perspective in the films. While Springer's novels featured a plucky young heroine, Bradbeer's adaptations frame Enola's story as directly challenging patriarchal society. The mother-daughter duo becomes a kind of two-generation feminist team. As Steve Rose summarizes, "Enola was trained to be [independent] by her mother, who turns out to be a militant suffragette activist. Like Mother, Enola doesn't accept the gender role society has assigned her. And like Mother, she sets about changing things." . This quotation highlights the filmmakers' intention: the daughters of the Holmes household will not meekly accept prescribed roles.

In the first film, the stakes of this feminist battle are made explicit through political context. Unlike the book's focus on Enola's personal autonomy, the movie interweaves the suffrage movement: Enola's rescue of Lord Tewksbury directly enables a vote on a reform bill aiding women's suffrage . By tying Enola's detective work to historical women's rights, Bradbeer signals a broader social awareness. Maureen Lee Lenker notes that "the film intersects with plenty of 19th-century politics, including a landmark Parliamentary reform bill and the stirrings of the suffragette movement, lending the proceedings real-world stakes" . This situates Enola's personal quest within a communal struggle. In contrast, the novels did not give the Holmes family active roles in politics. Bradbeer's choice to have Eudoria's cause (and bombs!) figure into the plot is a clear expansion.

The feminist theme continues in Enola Holmes 2. The Matchgirls' Strike of 1888, an actual labor protest led by women, is dramatized through the character Sarah Chapman (named after the real-life leader). In reality, Chapman led a protest against the dangerous white phosphorus in match production. In the film, a factory girl's illness and disappearance reveal a deadly epidemic among match workers. Bradbeer uses this to highlight gender and class exploitation. The Gazelle student review explains that while many historical details were altered, "the protest [led] with Sara Chapman… is also a reference to the Matchgirls' strike in 1888," with this inclusion serving as "a little nod to a movement that strived for better conditions for working women." . By incorporating this episode, Bradbeer further emphasizes Enola's allyship with women of all classes, reinforcing feminist solidarity.

From the perspective of auteur theory, these thematic expansions can be seen as authorial input. Bradbeer uses the adaptation to explore issues he finds meaningful. Just as Truffaut championed directors who infused films with personal obsessions, Bradbeer has clearly prioritized women's empowerment as a concern of his cinematic authorship. We might say that Enola Holmes bears Bradbeer's feminist signature. As one critic puts it, rather than just self-discovery, "the story [of EH2] is about… Enola trying to prove her worth so as to not be overshadowed by her renowned brother's success as she immerses herself in her first case." (Lalani) . In other words, the narrative underlines Enola's struggle for agency, echoing Bradbeer's own thematic interest.

Harry Bradbeer's Cinematic Style

Beyond themes and plot, a director's authorial stamp is visible in style and technique. Harry Bradbeer's Enola Holmes films exhibit a distinctive audiovisual language that marks his personal touch. One prominent feature is the playful breaking of the fourth wall. Enola frequently addresses the audience, narrating in energetic voice-over and even interacting with on-screen graphics (e.g. text overlays, animating clues). This technique invites the viewer into Enola's perspective. Such devices are not typical of traditional period dramas, but they align with Bradbeer's modernizing approach. Each time Enola smiles at the camera or scribbles a note in the air, it signals the director's whimsical sensibility. The creative screenwriting interview confirms Bradbeer's comfort with blending narrative modes – as a director, he had experience mixing comedy and drama across genres .

Visually, Bradbeer favors vibrant movement and creative compositions. The film often frames Enola dynamically: she is shot in medium close-ups with lively edits as she escapes trouble, and wide shots in colorful London streets that emphasize her smallness against society. The frequent quick cuts during chase or mystery-solving sequences keep the tone brisk. Bradbeer also uses visual humor (e.g. comedic reaction shots, witty intertitles) and editing quips (the famous Misogyny Tea Scene plays as an extended metaphor). These stylistic choices create a sense of fun and urgency, underscoring Enola's spirited character.

The overarching effect is that Enola Holmes has a coherent aesthetic distinct from other Holmes or Victorian works. Rohan Naahar of The Indian Express observes that, unlike other imitations of Fleabag, Enola Holmes 2's contemporary edge "is baked into the plot" rather than relying on punk soundtracks or gimmicks (Naahar). In other words, Bradbeer's freshness comes from story structure as much as style. Yet the combination of narrative timeliness with quirky filmmaking techniques is precisely Bradbeer's modus operandi. Across the two films, we see an auteur pattern: a fanciful visual flair (colorful sets, animation), a dynamic editing style, and a playful tone. All these reflect Bradbeer's personal creative fingerprint on the adaptation.

Bradbeer as Auteur: The Authorial Voice in Enola Holmes

Having documented the thematic and stylistic consistencies in Bradbeer's Enola Holmes films, we now evaluate how these elements qualify him as an "auteur" by the standards of auteur theory. Sarris would have us ask: does Bradbeer's body of work, even if only these two films, display enough personality and control to consider him the author? Our analysis indicates yes. Bradbeer writes (or co-writes) and directs these films, infusing them with a clear, personal agenda. For instance, EH2 is credited as "Story by Harry Bradbeer" in addition to Jack Thorne , showing Bradbeer's involvement in crafting the narrative itself. (Enola Holmes 2, Netflix media centre). This dual role of writer-director fits Sarris's model of an auteur: he exerts control over both story and visualization.

Bradbeer's fingerprints are visible in every creative decision. When adaptation purists might have expected a straightforward translation of Springer's plot, Bradbeer instead prioritized his vision. The result is a coherent style that transcends individual scenes. Moreover, Bradbeer's work on Enola Holmes aligns with traits found in his earlier projects. The strong female perspective and comic sensibility recall Fleabag, where he directed each episode. In Killing Eve, Bradbeer also balanced tension and humor with stylish cinematography. Thus, Enola Holmes does not feel like a one-off anomaly; it extends Bradbeer's established oeuvre. Authorial consistency is a key tenet of auteur theory, and Bradbeer meets it. Pauline Kael warned that one should not lazily attribute every good element of a film to the director, (Kael, *"Circles and Squares,"* 1963) but in our case, the breadth of Bradbeer's recurring choices

suggests more than coincidence. Critics have recognized Bradbeer's imprint as well. The Indian Express notes "single-minded clarity of consciousness" about social issues in EH2, saying "it's an awful lot like its plucky heroine"(Naahar). This suggests the film's conscious perspective – its consistent point-of-view – is tied to the director's sensibility. In auteur terms, the director's worldview has become embedded in the film.

In a sense, Bradbeer "authors" Enola's voice, turning a literary character into a cinematic persona that bears his own narrative style.

In conclusion, Harry Bradbeer's Enola Holmes films exhibit the hallmarks of auteur cinema. His directorial choices – narrative shifts, stylistic flourishes, thematic emphases – create a body of work that can be read as his personal expression. Thus, through the lens of auteur theory, Bradbeer stands revealed as the films' true "author," imbuing an existing literary world with his unique creative fingerprint.

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