Appendix D - **UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM**
**SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL**

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PROJECT TITLE: A Woman's Legacy: An Analysis of Feminist Themes in the Work of Louisa May Alcott

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I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

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**A Woman's Legacy:**

**An Analysis of Feminist Themes in the Work of Louisa May Alcott**

Senior Honors Thesis

by Jessica Greene

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Ever since the publication of *Little Women* in 1868-69, Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888) has enjoyed continuous popularity among young readers as the creator of the beloved March sisters. Throughout her lifetime, Alcott maintained a constant reputation as the respected author of cherished children's novels. Often dubbed "The Children's Friend," Louisa Alcott was prolific in the genre of juvenile fiction and her characters garnered much public affection. Her novels about the March family have never gone out of print, and her other children's books, such as *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870), *Eight Cousins* (1875), and *Jack and Jill* (1880), helped to build her reputation as a maternal figure whose books inculcate certain values while entertaining the children who read them. Many of her works for children were also admired by adults; at the time of its publication, *Little Women* was favorably reviewed by critics for *Harper's Magazine*, and even the *Critic* and *Atlantic Monthly* published articles praising Alcott's work during the 1880s (*LWFI* xxiii-xxv). These heartwarming novels not only offered Alcott a source of much-needed income, but they also established her as a writer worthy of esteem from both children and parents.

However, while her work in children's literature earned Louisa May Alcott her wealth and her fame, she never acquired the critical respect that she desired because, in many ways, her reputation in juvenile fiction limited the scope of her appeal. Many 19th-century scholars derided popular fiction, and the praise that Alcott received from the public induced many late 19th-century critics to dismiss her writing as popular trash. For most of the late 1800s and early 1900s, Alcott was neglected by academia--her children's fiction was deemed too insignificant, and her few adult novels were recognized as only fair attempts at unrealized greatness. In their study of Alcott's critical reputation, Janice Alberghene and Beverly Clark note that Alcott rarely surfaces in scholarly articles from the early 20th century, and most references to her writing are pejorative. As the Alcott researchers write, "Most often the status of Alcott with the cultural elite, throughout the twentieth century, can be gauged by such neglect; only rarely is it conveyed more directly. When it is, Alcott is sometimes dismissed because of her associations with children" (*LWFI* xxviii). In their catalogue of references to Alcott in scholarly articles, Alberghene and Clark found that Bronson Alcott received roughly twice as many index entries as Louisa. Until mid-century, Alcott was snubbed by critics despite the overwhelming public adoration of her novels,

particularly *Little Women*. Literary critics refused to accept *Little Women* and other pieces of Alcott's work as classic texts with themes and insights valuable to generations of readers. As Alberghene and Clark astutely note, "By the standards of mid-century criticism, Alcott's continuing popularity doesn't count for anything, not even as an indication of something that could be considered universality" (xxix). Louisa May Alcott's critical reputation was basically negative during the early part of the 20th century, and the neglect that her legacy endured reflects not only her role as a children's author but also her position as a female writer dismissed by male members of the academic elite. Scholars called her work sentimental and insignificant, assigning her popularity to the public's lack of taste and discarding her, along with many other female writers of the 19th century, into the mists of literary mediocrity.

However, the work of Louisa May Alcott has been recently revisited by scholars due to a renewed interest in the author's personal and professional life, spawned by the discovery of several texts that she published under her pseudonym. In 1943, two of the foremost Alcott scholars, Leona Rostenberg and Madeleine Stern, unearthed five letters from magazine editor J.R. Elliott in which Elliott urged Alcott to send him more stories for his periodical, *The Flag of Our Union*. In one of these letters, Elliott writes, "You may send me anything in either the sketch or novelette line that you do not wish to 'father', or that you wish A.M. Barnard, or 'any other man' to be responsible for" (qtd in *BTHH* 79). This pivotal discovery of Alcott's pseudonym (A.M. Barnard) and the subsequent effort to find Alcott's secret thrillers has engendered renewed interest in Alcott in the years since 1943. Alcott wrote and published over thirty stories and novellas with Elliott and Frank Leslie, editor of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. Most of these stories are lurid romances featuring strong, independent heroines who defy male authority, and the sexual power struggles that the thrillers relate dramatically defy the gender norms endorsed in many of Alcott's more traditional juvenile novels. The republication of some Alcott thrillers in 1976 initiated a new wave of scholarship which explores the psychological and thematic implications of Alcott's secret romances. Many critics have read the powerful narratives of Alcott's best thrillers and then returned to read texts like *Little Women* and *Work* in light of the feminist fury so obvious in her pseudonymous work. In reflection, they find that Alcott's best-known novels demonstrate nuances of the same feminist doctrine. As a result, scholars have started to re-evaluate Alcott as a multi-faceted author whose work consistently

reflects her feminist ideology, whether through overt appeals for suffrage or subversive sexual tension and warfare. Neglected for over a century, Louisa May Alcott has been re-discovered by both critics and the public as an author with diverse talents whose traditional reputation as a "mere children's novelist" requires revision.

Louisa May Alcott was the second daughter of Bronson and Abigail Alcott, and as the child of two reformers, she was reared in a home environment strongly influenced by Transcendentalist ideology. Bronson Alcott (1799-1888) aligned himself with the "Transcendental" movement early in its development, and for a time he worked as an educational reformer who implemented ideas about coeducation and racial integration into his classroom. He was a man of lofty principles, but not a particularly likable individual; he lived according to his idealistic beliefs about self-control and inner contemplation and not according to the demands of reality. Martha Saxton writes in her biography of Alcott, "The [Transcendental] movement needed an exemplar, and Alcott...set about living life as it should be rather than as it was" (*Modern Biography* 58). In contrast, Abigail was a more practical woman, but she shared her husband's desire to reform society by educating women and curbing racial prejudice. Abigail thought that it was important for women to cultivate their minds in order to become better home companions to their husbands (46), but however limiting her reasons, she did ensure that her daughters received adequate education. Each of the girls read widely, and all were encouraged to keep a daily journal to improve their writing skills and encourage self-assessment. Louisa was literally immersed in Transcendentalism since she passed most of her adolescence and adult life in Concord, Massachusetts, the cradle of Transcendental thought. Emerson and Thoreau were her reform-minded neighbors, and her father frequently engaged each of them in philosophical conversation. Margaret Fuller was also a Concord resident and acquaintance of Bronson Alcott, and the two scholars discussed the unwarranted social and intellectual subordination of women in American society (86). Such discussions may have influenced Bronson's decision to educate his four daughters, and they undoubtedly influenced Louisa's resolve to become an independent woman. Louisa's three sisters, Anna, Elizabeth and May, were immortalized in *Little Women*. According to most biographers, Anna was a sweet and cautious girl who embodied feminine virtue, while Lizzie was a bashful invalid and May was a somewhat spoiled flirt. Anna was Bronson's favorite child because she was most

like himself, and Louisa's relationship with her father was strained because she was least like Bronson. As Saxton says of Bronson, "He never liked Louisa, who [he found] too aggressive, willful, and fierce for his definition of feminine...He was never comfortable with her expressive temperament" (7). While Bronson Alcott did try to give his daughters educational and even political opportunities later in his life, his deeply ingrained ideas about "feminine" behavior limited his understanding of Louisa, his most creative and powerful daughter. Even so, her parents instilled in Louisa the desire to free everyone (including women) from the social and intellectual oppression that held them in bondage, and by teaching her to write well, they inadvertently provided her with an acceptable means with which to espouse her feminist ideas.

The future author was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, on November 29, 1832, and although Louisa shared her birthday with her father, Bronson Alcott and his accomplished daughter maintained an emotionally distant relationship throughout their lives. Bronson did not understand his forceful daughter; even as a baby, she bewildered the placid philosopher with her implacable cries. She was a difficult baby, and Bronson partially attributed her fussiness to her physical affinity with her less cultivated mother, Abigail. As biographer Martha Saxton writes, "[Louisa] was dark-eyed and dark-complected, like Abba and unlike Anna. Bronson considered blond complexions like his own a sign of grace, and Louisa's coloring indicated to him that she was lower on the spiritual ladder than her sister and father" (76). The tension that Louisa experienced with Bronson can be linked to his complete lack of understanding for this dark, introspective daughter. Unlike her older sister, Louisa did not accept her parents' rules passively; she frequently defied her father's orders, and he considered her an obstinate and even violent child. In the eyes of her parents, Louisa was a troublemaker whose constant mischief demanded attention that the harried parents were incapable of offering, for baby Lizzie soon occupied her mother's time and Bronson was perplexed by Louisa's "impetuosity of temper" (qtd. 88). Louisa was a child governed by powerful emotions, and she rarely adhered to the Victorian model of feminine passivity embodied by her older sister and endorsed by her father. However, by 1839, Bronson's difficulties with young Louisa grew subordinate to his problems with Boston society. The family moved to Boston in the mid-1830s so that Bronson could open an experimental school that would operate according to his philosophical theories about the ways that children learn. His Temple School offered a coeducational environment, and his lessons focused on

"conversations" between teacher and pupil. When parents learned that the topic of some of these "conversations" was sexual reproduction, many children left the school. After Bronson admitted an African-American child, the Bostonians rejected his experimental methods completely and forced the Temple School to close. After his failure with the Temple School, Bronson Alcott declared that his reformist ideas alienated him from the external world. He decided never to work again because he was unsuited for labor, and his decision plunged the Alcott family into financial distress. Martha Saxton has argued that the poverty that Louisa endured as a child determined her resolve to work and earn enough money to support her family (132). Perhaps the experience of watching her father withdraw from reality also forced Louisa to realize that she could not rely on financial or even psychological support from any man.

In 1843, the Alcott family endured several months at "Fruitlands," a utopian consociate family vision concocted by Bronson and his friend Charles Lane. At Fruitlands, the Alcotts and Lanes would live close to nature, sharing the same frugal meals and engaging in farm labor in order to acquire a higher level of understanding. However, Abigail Alcott quickly saw that the men Alcott adopted into his consociate family were exploiting her role as a woman. The utopian visionaries decided to perpetuate a gender-based division of labor, and because Abigail was the only adult woman at Fruitlands, she alone was responsible for cooking and cleaning for the various strangers who wandered around Fruitlands philosophizing with Bronson. The experiment ended in November because Abigail told her husband that she and her girls were leaving the drafty farmhouse, and, helpless without her, he followed his wife back to Concord. The patriarchal system that Alcott and Lane perpetuated at Fruitlands was too limiting to succeed, and ultimately Abigail's physical frustration mirrored that of other "Fruitlanders" who wondered when their gifted leaders would stop rhapsodizing about the nobility of labor and pick up a hoe. Louisa saw her mother's harried face and understood that she never wanted to be placed in a position similar to that which her mother endured, not only at Fruitlands but even back in Concord. The family relied on charitable donations from Abigail's brother to survive, and often Abigail worked as a seamstress to support the family, since her husband refused to work. As Saxton conjectures, "Louisa saw clearly the price of her mother's dependence, and it became her intention never to ask for anything in her life" (155). Instead,

Louisa struggled to achieve financial independence for herself rather than relying on support from her father or any other man. Her early experiences influenced Louisa's desire to attain self-sufficiency by showing her the plight of married women, like her mother, in a patriarchal society that exploits them, demanding their labor and granting them few opportunities to escape the domestic sphere.

When she was very young, Louisa Alcott commenced the literary career that would financially liberate her. As a child, she slowly perfected her writing style with the practice in written expression that she acquired by keeping a daily journal. Once Louisa reached her teenage years, she began writing fanciful plays that she and her sisters would perform for friends and neighbors. The fantastic plays, which had titles like "Norna; or, the Witches' Curse" and "The Captive of Castile, or the Moorish Maiden's Vow," constituted a much needed form of escapism, for Louisa and her family had moved into rooms in crowded and drab South Boston by the early 1850s (174). In 1851, Louisa entered the ranks of professional authorship with the publication of her first poem, "Sunlight", in *Peterson's Magazine* under the pseudonym "Flora Fairfield" (190). The following year, Alcott published her first story, "The Rival Painters," at the tender age of nineteen in a Boston magazine called *Olive Branch*. (*BTHH* 48). Her warm reception in these periodicals encouraged Louisa to write *Flower Fables* in 1854. This collection of fairy stories was Louisa's first legitimate volume of fiction, and some of the moral tales included in the book were stories that she told to amuse Ellen Emerson when the family lived in Concord. Alcott moved away from juvenile audiences when she wrote "Love and Self-Love" in 1859. The story serves as a prelude to her later sensation stories, but it was published by the *Atlantic Monthly* as a piece by a promising young author. During the Civil War years, Louisa worked briefly as a nurse in a Washington field hospital until she contracted typhoid pneumonia in 1863. To treat the disease, doctors administered massive doses of mercury because they thought it would purge the infection from her body. Instead, the so-called "calomel treatment" subjected Louisa to strange hallucinations, bouts of vertigo, and joint aches that plagued her throughout the remainder of her life. However, one favorable result of Alcott's foray into medicine was her *Hospital Sketches*, published in 1863. This collection of stories about the patients of a Civil War nurse was moderately successful, but Alcott turned her attention to another type of fiction throughout the mid-1860s.

In 1862, before her stint as a nurse began, Louisa May Alcott had submitted a story to a contest advertised in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, a New York penny dreadful. When she returned from Washington, she learned that her story, "Pauline's Passion and Punishment", had received the grand prize of $50. Although she made some submissions to other "blood and thunder" magazines before 1862, "Pauline" launched her career as a writer of thrillers for an insatiable public. As Stern writes, "By the 1860s Alcott was writing full steam, producing a steady flow of thrillers for the periodicals launched by two publishing houses--Frank Leslie's in New York and the firm of Elliott, Thomas and Talbot in Boston" (66). At present, over thirty of these thrillers have been unearthed by Alcott scholars, and all of these works were published anonymously or under the pseudonym of A.M.Barnard. Apparently, Alcott turned away from sensation fiction after the success of *Little Women* made her a beloved national figure. Most biographers agree that she thought the pseudonymous thrillers unworthy of an author adored by thousands of innocent children. Also, there was no longer an economic necessity demanding that she write for the penny dreadfuls. She turned toward children's fiction as a means to gain financial success and not, as many people think, because she particularly wanted to write children's literature. Her publisher demanded a book for girls, and the book she offered him was *Little Women* (1868), soon followed by the sequels *Good Wives* (1869), *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886). These novels made Louisa's fortune, and they also placed her in the public limelight as an author of juvenile fiction, though she did not enjoy the genre. She rarely made drafts of her work, preferring instead to write with concentrated effort and scarcely revising the novels. Unlike when she wrote her exciting thrillers, Alcott did not slip into a "vortex" during her labor sessions with *Little Women* and her other juvenile classics. The experience was rarely enjoyable or cathartic because it required her to revisit and romanticize her painful childhood. Alcott's adult fiction, like *Moods* and *Work*, rarely met with public acclaim, so she resigned herself to writing for children though she disliked it. She dismissed most of her own children's fiction as "moral pap for the young" (qtd *Modern Biography* 371) and longed to achieve more distinguished literary fame, but she continued to produce novels for young people because the work provided her with financial stability and public renown. However, in the 21st century, the legacy of Louisa May Alcott begs to be reconsidered, particularly alongside the pseudonymous work and adult fiction into which Alcott invested so much of herself.

Few people realize that Louisa May Alcott was a strong advocate of women's rights; most consign her to the domestic realm because her popular fiction celebrates home and family, but she worked throughout her life to give women the political and social equality that men denied them. Some Alcott scholars have argued that her resentment toward the "male lords of creation," as she referred to them in her letters, stems from an incident that transpired when Louisa was a teenager. As Madeleine Stern recounts, nineteen-year-old Alcott went to work as a companion for the sister of Honorable James Richardson, a Massachusetts lawyer. Stern writes:

> As it turned out, James Richardson was less honorable than his title. The young hired help...became the recipient of his maudlin attentions. When his pursuit proved unsuccessful, he assigned all the household tasks to her...He especially enjoyed having her blacken his boots. After seven weeks of humiliating drudgery, young Louisa received four dollars in payment (*FA* viii).

Her experience in the Richardson home may have spawned Louisa's anger with men and the power they wield over women in traditional Western culture. Many of Alcott's thrillers invert this relationship, making women the victorious oppressors and transforming men into fawning and powerless beings. Louisa herself assumed the traditionally masculine responsibility of supporting her family. But although she enjoyed single life and never wanted a husband, she felt obliged to justify her independence and her fame "as a matter of duty to the family" (*VD* 43). In a culture that rarely permitted women to function outside the home, Louisa may have felt she needed to explain her desire to be alone in terms of a family obligation. Yet her prolific career, and the books that she produced throughout that career, constitute her constant assertion of a woman's right to work outside the domestic sphere. As she wrote in a letter to a fellow feminist, "I am so busy just now proving 'woman's right to labor' that I have no time to help prove 'woman's right to vote'" (qtd *BTHH* 154). Her example provided a constant inspiration for women who wanted to escape the oppressive customs that confined them to their homes. She was raised by philosophical parents who placed every human life at equal value, so it was only natural that Alcott would actively seek to remedy the social injustices that placed women in an inferior position. Despite her busy schedule, Alcott did attend the Women's Congress of 1875 and other suffrage rallies, and she submitted frequent letters to *Woman's Journal* encouraging women to join the suffrage movement. In 1880, Louisa May Alcott became

the first Concord woman to vote in a school election, after the state decreed that local school committee elections were the only forum in which women should have political sway. Twenty women voted in the Concord school committee election in 1880, and the polls were closed before any man could cast a vote (149-150). Alcott commented that it seemed fair to her, as it was the only political question over which women held any influence. Although she died well before her dreams of women's suffrage were realized, Louisa did work throughout her life to garner support for the movement. When other Concord women proved too apathetic to appear at the school committee elections, Alcott made personal calls to persuade other women to vote whenever and wherever they could. Alcott died in 1888, a spinster who nonetheless remained at the center of a fruitful professional and personal life. At her death, she had written hundreds of fictional works and attained great success, but she always remained tied to her parents, sisters, and adopted daughter. She tried to blend her work and her family into a continuous whole, and the work that she bequeathed to modern audiences endorses her conviction that a woman can combine self-fulfillment with devotion to family responsibilities.

Louisa May Alcott offers modern critics an opportunity to explore the long-neglected labor of an artist whose work in many different genres establishes her as a woman divided between the forces of convention and the desire to express herself in an uninhibited style. There is an intriguing dichotomy between Alcott's juvenile fiction with its endorsement of the traditional family and her pseudonymous thrillers which undermine patriarchal custom. The feminism that Alcott infused into her novels serves as a reflection of her personal beliefs, while the presence of traditional sexual politics in some of her fiction indicates the author's own submission to pressure from her society. Louisa May Alcott's work needs to be re-evaluated in light of a modern understanding of Alcott's position as a 19th-century woman and writer. Once scholars examine her entire body of work, Alcott will emerge as a feminist author whose work in children's literature constitutes merely one facet of her literary achievement. Not only do Alcott's adult novels and her sensation fiction demonstrate her feminism, but they also define her as a woman with an inexhaustible creative capacity.

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Louisa May Alcott's novels about Josephine March and her family have remained popular among young female readers, partially because the works explore and celebrate family relationships. The warm images of love between family and friends that Alcott defines within the March saga endear the novels to many modern readers. Alcott wrote Part One of *Little Women* in 1868 at the behest of her primary publisher, Thomas Niles, who had been urging her to write a girls' book for several months. The original two thousand copies sold quickly, and she completed Part Two of *Little Women* (also called *Good Wives*) in early 1869. The novel was immensely popular, and Roberts Brothers publishers sold a phenomenal 23,000 copies of *Little Women* within months of its completion. The novel itself introduces the four March sisters (Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy) and describes incidents in their lives as the girls mature from teenagers into "little women" with very different aspirations. The book is tied together by character rather than a unified plot, and the novel ends with a series of weddings that both Alcott's readers and her publisher demanded. Alcott began writing *Little Men* in 1870 while vacationing abroad; revenues from the sequel were intended to provide economic support for Louisa's recently widowed sister, Anna Alcott Pratt (*Modern Biography* 309), and the novel was accepted in 1871 by an adoring public. In the novel, Alcott focuses on Jo's married life--she is the wife of a schoolmaster and surrogate mother to a dozen young students, whom she must teach to be little ladies and gentlemen. Specifically, the novel shows Jo's work with two orphaned boys and the two girls who constitute Professor Bhaer's attempts in coeducation. Alcott did not revisit the March family until 1886, when she wrote and published *Jo's Boys,* despite health problems that inhibited her ability to hold even a pencil. This final work presents Plumfield School as an idealistic, communal home where the March sisters gather ten years after the events described in *Little Men*. Jo's husband is a professor at nearby Laurence College, while Jo is a friendly advisor to his students, both male and female. By the close of *Jo's Boys*, Jo emerges as a woman who has realized her childhood dreams and campaigns to help other girls realize their own. *Jo's Boys* was Alcott's last novel because the mercury poisoning that she endured as a Civil War nurse finally took her life in 1888. Unlike Jo, Alcott was thoroughly tired of seeing her March family when she finished writing the final novel in the series. As she wrote at its close, "It is a strong temptation to the weary historian to close the present tale with an earthquake which should engulf Plumfield and its environs so deeply into the bowels of the earth that no

youthful Schliemann could ever find a vestige of it" (*JB* 277). The scarcely concealed hostility that Alcott reveals in these lines demonstrates her attitude toward most of her juvenile fiction. Yet though she found the work tiresome, her lovable characters have provided a touchstone for generations of girls. Modern women should reflect upon the influence that Alcott exercised when she infused her popular narrative with feminist sentiments through the use of strong heroines, matriarchal family politics, and her unique treatment of marriage.

Meg and Beth seem to embody the traditional models of Victorian womanhood that Alcott disliked, but their presence in the novel reflects the influence of these norms on Louisa May Alcott's inner life. Meg is beautiful, and many critics believe that she is inspired by Louisa's older sister Anna, who was the family favorite. Meg is a traditional Victorian heroine; she is concerned with fashion and society, and she wants to marry, keep house, and have children. Beth is also unbelievably domestic, for she is a girl who delights in cooking, cleaning, and helping others. Based loosely on Louisa's long-dead sister Elizabeth, young Beth seems too good to be true. These models of feminine virtue exemplify the widely accepted norms of Alcott's age. The girls have placid tempers, docile manners, and their faults are few and gender-specific: Meg is vain and Beth is shy. However, rather than rejecting these girls as unrealistic, Alcott was forced to incorporate them into her narrative because her publisher wanted a novel with heroines to instill morality--and proper behavior--into young readers. These characters represent the type of woman that Louisa Alcott could never become, for it would require her to sacrifice too much of her individuality to become as dutiful and "feminine" as these sisters were. The inclusion of these gentle girls can represent a refusal to exclude any girls, however traditional, from symbolic sisterhood with a rebel like Jo. Meg does ally with her younger sister, Jo, when she initially rejects John Brooke's proposal by saying that she is too young to wed. Jo wants her to refuse him because she thinks he is trying to tear apart their sisterhood, and that once Meg marries, she will be lost to Jo forever. Meg does not feel threatened in this way, and she overcomes her indignation quickly. A moment later, she rescinds her verdict, defending her love of Brooke to Aunt March by stating, "I shall marry whom I please, Aunt March, and you can leave your money to anyone you like" (Alcott, 212). Her ability to argue her right to marry whomever she likes is a major step towards self-liberation, for traditionally, the family decided a marital match based on material gain and

rarely asked the young lady's opinion of her potential mate. Beth's great moral and physical will similarly indicate that she is a strong heroine who finds Jo, with her ideas about self-reliance, an exhilarating figure. Beth is so timid that she rarely ventures outside the home, but she does subtly influence her family in matters of compassion. She is a traditional feminine martyr, incapable of survival in the real world that Jo wants to enter, but her ability to cling tenaciously to life is a strong indicator of her internal power. She has faith in her sister's ability to become a great writer, and though she never breaks out of conventional gender roles, her kinship with the more assertive sister affirms that women of divergent characters can share sympathy, love, and a belief in one another.

Marmee, or Mrs. March, is perhaps the most influential member of the family; unlike traditional Victorian novelists, Alcott does not describe a wife who bows to the will of her husband, but instead she delineates a strong matriarch who is capable of managing her household alone. Alcott may have modeled Marmee on an idealized version of her own determined mother, for both women demonstrate that they can survive without the assistance of men. In the novel, Marmee strives to keep her girls healthy and happy during her husband's long period of military service. She demonstrates that she can balance family duties with work and charitable deeds, and her daughters view her as an ideal model of womanhood. Unlike so many other mothers in Victorian prose, Marmee does not encourage her daughters to marry for security. As she has proven, a woman *can* live without a husband by relying on her reserves of courage and tenacity, but nobody can live without love. At one point, Marmee says to her girls:

> I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected; to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives....My dear girls, I *am* ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world--marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid houses, which are not homes because love is wanting....I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, and contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect or peace...Better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands (92).

For the period in which Alcott was writing, Marmee's opinions about the possible dignity of spinsterhood were unusual. Most mothers would rather see their daughters marry anyone rather than have them suffer the stigma of being an "old maid," but Marmee has realized that there is more to a woman's life than

marriage and childbirth. She certainly feels the value of each experience--she calls marriage "the sweetest thing which can happen to a woman"(92)--but she does not pressure her children to fulfill these maternal dreams by forcing her girls into a loveless relationship. Marmee is no angel, despite the glowing descriptions of her daughters, and her ability to feel anger is another indication that Alcott wanted her fiction to dispel the myths of angelic womanhood. Jo and Marmee share a fierce temper, and although Marmee has learned to check her anger before she reacts to a situation, this flaw gives depth to her character. If she is capable of anger, she must also feel passion, and she is certainly not afraid to contradict those with whom she disagrees, including her husband. For example, on the matter of Jo's book, she advises her daughter to accept the editor's suggestions, while Mr. March tells Jo to leave the text as it is (250). Naturally, Jo follows her mother's more pragmatic advice, and Mrs. March's words prove that she is not a woman to acquiesce to her husband's ill-advised ideas. Marmee understands Jo's aspirations to greatness, and the guidance that she gives Jo will help her daughter enter the literary world quickly. Marmee's role in the novel is apparently that of a proponent of blended domesticity and feminism, for while she does not reject the sanctity of home and family, she does believe that a woman is capable of shaping her own destiny.

Amy is the most cosmopolitan March sister, and throughout the novel she demonstrates that she is focused on lofty goals and is capable of autonomous action. Throughout the book, Amy is portrayed as a vain, self-conscious child modeled after Alcott's youngest sister, May. Amy March is very feminine in certain respects: she cultivates her appearance and her wardrobe to appeal to others, she seeks approval from aristocratic ladies and gentlemen, and she surely wants to marry well. However, Amy also has artistic dreams of becoming a great painter. When she is a young child, she says to her sisters, "Jo and I are going to make fortunes for all of you; just wait ten years, and see if we don't" (146). Apparently, she believes that she can earn money as an artist, and this belief guides her to Europe, where she will absorb the techniques of the great artists. Amy is intelligent, and she understands the ways to make others give her the things that she wants. She impresses Aunt March with her manners, and thus she is able to gain passage to Europe at Jo's expense. She also gets along well with her wealthy neighbors, because unlike Jo, she desires upward social nobility and has learned the way to flatter inane ladies and gentlemen. Her

intelligence and adept understanding of human weaknesses indicate that she can make a place for herself in the world. Amy also rejects marriage for money in favor of a marriage for love. By turning down Fred Vaughn's proposal, she symbolically refutes the idea that women must grasp at male wealth to attain any social significance. Her marriage to Laurie is one of real love, and in that relationship she exercises a role of moral authority. It is Amy who lures Laurie out of his self-indulgent despondency when they meet in Europe, and she ensures that he always devotes some of his income to Jo's experiments at Plumfield and also to feminist philanthropies. As she says to her beloved husband:

> Ambitious girls have a hard time, Laurie, and often have to see youth, health, and precious opportunities go by, just for the want of a little help at the right minute. People have been very kind to me; and whenever I see girls struggling along, as we used to do, I want to put out my hand and help them, as I was helped (419).

When he agrees to her plan to help "ambitious girls" survive in a patriarchal world, Amy's influence on the young man manifests itself in feminist action. Her reformation of the young man, from wealthy profligate to sensitive gentleman, indicates that she is a girl to be taken seriously. When she marries, she does abandon her dreams of artistic greatness, for it was a common belief during the 19th century that women could not effectively combine marriage and a career. However, she continues to practice her art for her own enjoyment. As Keyser points out in her criticism of the novel, "Even after surrendering her ambitions, Amy continues working for her own pleasure; she does not need parental encouragement--or permission--to resume a proscribed activity" (*LWFI* 91). As a young woman, she shows promise as an individual who will not let herself be governed by her husband but instead will take some initiative; with her husband by her side, Amy cultivates her dreams of helping herself, and other women, realize their potential.

Jo is the central figure in *Little Women*, and so many readers have been fascinated by her because she strains powerfully against the gender stereotypes that bind her, and she emerges as a modern figure with ideas about female roles that seem completely opposed to her social order. Jo is continually described as a tomboy, or an "unfeminine" girl, or even as the "son Jo" that Mr. March never had. She frequently expresses her desire to be male and points out that her life would be much easier if she were a boy. She dislikes dresses and elaborate manners, and flirtation is completely foreign to her. She wishes she could attend college, like Laurie, and often laments that there are so few avenues open to her. Of course, Jo is

derived from Louisa Alcott's own experiences as a child, and Alcott altered the family's reaction to Jo's antics to reflect the way in which she believed they ought to have reacted to her own. Jo is free to express her desires for independence throughout much of the novel because there are no men present who will oppose her. As she tells her sisters after her first publication, "I shall write more, and [Laurie's] going to get the next paid for, and I *am* so happy, for in time I may be able to support myself and help the girls" (*LW*144-5). She longs to make a career in writing in order to take care of herself, and she is the only March sister who leaves home to work in New York City to earn money and liberate herself. Her rejection of Laurie's marriage proposal indicates her early belief that she cannot work and be married simultaneously, as well as her knowledge that, even though the match with Laurie would be socially advantageous, she would be unhappy because she does not love him. She knows that if she were to marry Laurie, he would want her to stop working and rely on him for support. This would be a negation of her childhood dream, which is to "write books, and get rich and famous" (133). Jo, like Louisa, would not give up her writing for any temptation, and Jo would happily have enjoyed a solitary life if Alcott had not been cornered into marrying her off to somebody by her readership. When Jo does marry, it is to a man who respects her desire to work, though he does not approve of the sensational stories that she writes to earn money. Mr. Bhaer is a poor man, and she loves him despite his poverty because she sees in him a kindness and a respect for others that she does not find in young Laurie. The couple will work together to organize Jo's dream of an experimental school at Plumfield. The equality in their relationship is very striking, even by modern standards. In the end, she does not have to compromise her dreams of writing and teaching, but she only has to relinquish her solitude to gain a lifetime of love and happiness.

Alcott constructs her novel in such a way that there is a strict division between male and female worlds, and in the female-centered world, she creates an atmosphere in which the girls can express their desires freely. During the entire first half of the novel, all the women reside alone in the March home; Mr. March is in battle far away, and Laurie lives with his grandfather on the other side of the fence. The home becomes a matriarchal environment in which Marmee possessively cultivates her children and keeps them away from physical and emotional harm. The isolation of these women from patriarchal influences frees them from traditional gender roles. For instance, Jo is allowed to assume the role of "man of the house"

during her father's absence. She tries to protect her sister Meg from suitors, and she nobly cuts her hair, which not only masculinizes her appearance but also allows her to become the source of monetary support for her family. She and her sisters also indulge in imaginative games in the attic without the fear of male interference. When Jo proposes the acceptance of Laurie into the "Pickwick Society," her sisters strongly object because they believe he will laugh at their beloved Pickwick Society and its newspaper. Although Laurie proves himself worthy of their friendship by not teasing them about their games, the girls' anxiety reflects their reluctance to express their dreams around men. To young girls who have hopes beyond the range of a bridal bouquet, the male world can be ruthless and hostile. In *Little Women*, Alcott tries to develop an environment in which her young heroines can "build castles in the air" without the fear that men will topple them. But as Susina, a male critic, points out, "Alcott has engaged in some exclusion of her own. In redistributing the balance of power, her male characters are often marginalized, infantilized, or viewed as the other" (*LWFI* 169). For instance, when Mr. March does return from the Civil War battlefield, he assumes such a minimal role in the family's activities that the novel remains dominated by female characters. Even Laurie remains on the fringes of Part One's action, and his marginalization is illustrated by his "spying" on the March girls and their mother from his cold and isolated home next door. In the end, nobody prohibits the girls from marrying whomever they choose, and no man keeps Amy or Jo from aspiring to successful artistic careers. Alcott's ideal version of family politics, in which young women govern and rely upon one another rather than a patriarch, is undoubtedly a riveting image to female readers in every historical period.

Modern feminist scholars disagree about the thematic implications of Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer at the novel's close, primarily because their courtship is somewhat unexpected. Some readers believe that Jo's decision to marry Bhaer rather than Laurie constitutes an assertion of her desire to blend love and work. Jo knows that Laurie could never permit her to work as an author if they were married because he belongs to a class of men that do not appreciate women working outside the domestic sphere. Furthermore, and most importantly, Jo does not love or respect Laurie--she refers to him as "Teddy" or "my dear boy," thereby diminishing the young man's relative stature. In contrast, Jo does respect Professor Bhaer, who is an educated man and can help her realize her potential greatness. However, critics often speculate about

the extent to which Bhaer respects Jo in return. Some see her marriage as an inevitable submission to patriarchal custom rather than an egalitarian union. Earlier in the text, Alcott depicts Meg as a woman-child, reduced into submission to John Brooke in anticipation of their pending marriage. Meg sits on his lap, subdued and obedient, listening to *his* hopes for their future together. This image is a troubling one to readers who see the text as a feminist document, for it seems to negate the idea that women and men can be equal partners in marriage. However, Meg has always been described as a rather passive character, and perhaps by placing her in a traditional position of submission within a patriarchal model of marriage, Alcott emphasizes Meg's role as a foil to Jo. The tomboyish sister would never casually submit to orders while perched on Bhaer's knee. Some critics argue that Jo's marriage is a form of failed self-realization because with her wedding she partially relinquishes her dreams of becoming independent. Yet, as Ann Douglas writes, "[Alcott] could not disregard, however, the unpleasant facts confronting her female contemporaries and characters; unlike her male peers, a Victorian woman rarely had a spouse, a family, and a full-time career...The lives of the March sisters represent a collage of partial yet persistent self-realization on several fronts" (*LWFI* 56). The girls do sacrifice independence in their decision to marry, but Alcott recognized that since her readers, and her publisher, demanded that all the girls marry, she should at least represent marriages of love in which the girls can continue to pursue their dreams on a smaller scale. The key issue in Bhaer's proposal to Jo lies in the attitude he displays toward her. Feminists have argued that he plans to rule her, reducing Jo to a small, diminutive form desiring protection. He does "teach" her to respect convention by discouraging her work with the penny dreadful publications like the *Daily Volcano*. According to some critics, Bhaer becomes a father figure who exercises authority over Jo. In the words of one scholar, "In marrying Professor Bhaer, Jo's rebellion is neutralized" (39); she submits to a patriarch despite her early rejection of such systems. However, as the March saga continues, Jo March will prove that she has not succumbed to convention. Instead, she dominates her world and continues to challenge the cultural norms that would confine her to family and home. Ultimately, Alcott's narrative presents her readers with what Judith Fetterly has called "the ambivalence...of what it means to be a little woman...It accurately reflects the position of the woman writer in nineteenth-century America, confronted on all sides by forces pressuring her to compromise her vision" (40). Alcott wanted to celebrate

the joys of young womanhood and family warmth, but in doing so she was also required to design the weddings that her culture expected all young women to desire. As Alcott subversively indicates to her audience, becoming a "little woman" can be a painful process; while some girls relish thoughts of the honeymoon cottage that awaits them, not every little woman can realize her dreams before the demands of reality force her to alter her vision.

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When *Little Men* opens, Jo Bhaer has assumed her role as the source of maternal comfort in Professor Bhaer's experimental school, but she still retains the independent spirit that characterized her throughout *Little Women*. In this sequel, Jo emerges as a strong and protective mother, very similar to Marmee in *Little Women*. Not only does Jo comfort and guide her two young sons, but she also assumes responsibility for her husband's fourteen pupils. She keeps a "conscience book" in which she maintains a weekly record of each child's moral progress, and she remains very involved in the events of each youngster's daily life. In the novel, Jo becomes the most perceptive, kind, and tender parent that any child could desire. She is capable of touching and helping every orphan that she meets, including tough Dan, the central young protagonist of the novel. Jo has transformed herself from a rebellious girl into "Mother Bhaer," a maternal figure of cosmic proportions who valiantly protects and rescues even her most wayward charges. Professor Bhaer is the agent of her transformation, for he places her in the position of maternal authority which serves as a counterpoint to his paternal discipline. Yet Professor Bhaer, like Mr. March, is an intellectual figure who frequently exists outside the range of the novel's action, leaving Jo alone at the work's center. Jo becomes the "mother confessor" who consoles her young companions and satisfies all of their childish needs. As Alcott writes upon Nat's arrival at Plumfield, "[Jo] had a way of filling up a fellow's plate before he asked, of laughing at his jokes, gently tweaking him by the ear, or clapping him on the shoulder, that Nat found very engaging" (*LM* 37). In short, Mother Bhaer is the most wonderful and perceptive mother imaginable. However, Jo has relinquished her dreams of fame and fortune in favor of motherhood. She is not an author, for the only things she writes are letters and entries into her "conscience book." Yet, Jo still understands the rebellious spirit of children like Nan and Dan, who try to challenge the boundaries of sex and social class that limit their aspirations. She sympathizes with Nan's desire to run

away, recounting to the girl her own lone excursions into the city as a child, and when Dan begins to seek wider spaces because Plumfield is too small for him, Jo helps him vent his frustrations through active labor. As she tells the boy, "[The need to roam] is not 'the devil,' as you call it, but the very natural desire of all young people for liberty. I used to feel just so, and once I really did think for a minute that I would bolt" (268). Yet Jo did not bolt; she develops into a compassionate mother, unafraid to help her children confront their troubling desires. Similarly, Jo continues to voice her opinions when she insists to Professor Bhaer that Nan should be permitted to enroll in the predominately male school. She has not lost her fundamental belief in gender equality, and she and her husband boldly defy convention by initiating coeducation. Indeed, Jo has become a strong, maternal figure, and as she guides her young charges, she proves that she understands their need to escape the confines of a world that inhibits the growth of their spirit.

Like Jo's more domestic sisters, Daisy Brooke embodies the traditional image of girlhood that prevailed during the Victorian era, and her presence in *Little Men* verifies the influence that such stereotypes wielded during Alcott's lifetime. As a heroine, Daisy is not particularly dignified; she is an exceptionally good girl who delights in cooking and sewing handkerchiefs for her twin brother. Alcott describes her as a "gentle mother" who "could not get on without her little work-basket and bits of sewing" (26). She emerges as a proper young lady quite unlike her dear Aunt Jo, but nonetheless beloved by her free-spirited kinfolk. Daisy upholds traditions of patriarchy through her domesticity and her calm submission to male expectations, particularly when they are voiced by her brother Demi-John. As Bhaer's nephew Emil remarks to an indignant Demi, "you bully Posy [Daisy] every day of your life"(116), and indeed he does when he forces her to play "Kitty-Mouse" with him and tells her that the demonic spirit demands she sacrifice her paper dolls on a funeral pyre (126). Alcott defines her as a girl ignorant of woman's rights; as she writes, "[Daisy] quietly took all she wanted, and no one denied her claim, because she did not undertake what she could not carry out, but unconsciously used the all-powerful right of her own influence to win from others any privilege for which she had proved her fitness" (248). The notion of woman's "influence" was widespread during Alcott's lifetime, for most people believed that women could exercise such power within the family that their morality would influence the actions of men when they

entered the larger, public sphere. By aligning Daisy with traditional ideas about woman's proper realm, Alcott offers a nod to the conventions that she would combat throughout the remainder of her work. Yet even Daisy is not entirely lost to the cause of woman's rights. She acquires the same education as Demi, thus placing herself on an equal intellectual plane with the brother that she admires so much. Daisy also maintains a close friendship with Nan, who proves that she is more rebellious and determined to succeed than Jo. Perhaps by showing her audience that even a very feminine girl, like Daisy, can become an educated young lady with independent friends, Alcott was trying to illustrate the forces that bind all kinds of women in essential unity.

Nan Harding develops as a strong-willed and assertive young girl throughout *Little Men*, and her presence in the work serves as an extension of the self-realization that Jo struggled to achieve in *Little Women*. Like Jo March, "Naughty Nan" has dreams of becoming a career woman. As she tells her companion Daisy, "I don't want any house to fuss over. I shall have an office, with lots of bottles and drawers and pestle things in it, and I shall drive round in a horse and chaise and cure sick people" (250). Even at the tender age of ten, Nan knows her goals and sets about reaching them by practicing first aid on her schoolmates and learning the curative properties of herbs from Professor Bhaer, "who did not shut his door in her face because she was a little woman" (249). Alcott places Nan and Dan, Plumfield's two most rebellious children, at the focal point of her narrative, and in doing so she strengthens Nan's position as a positive role model for free-spirited girls. Nan does get into trouble during her sojourn at Plumfield, but only, as Jo says, because she is "full of spirits" (112) and needs some gentle guidance from a strong maternal figure like "Mother Bhaer". However, from the moment of her arrival at the school, Nan proves that she will unabashedly challenge the gender stereotypes endorsed by her young male companions. She immediately demonstrates that she is not of a "weaker sex" simply because she is female; Nan grabs a stinging nettle, hits her head against a barn wall, and challenges the boys to a game of baseball within minutes of her advent upon Plumfield school (115-6). Nan's deliberate self-abuse indicates Alcott's troubling belief that a woman must endure great pain in order to succeed in a patriarchal society. When Nan's trunk does not arrive promptly from the train station, she goes to retrieve it herself, dragging the box alone for a mile. Nan does not wait passively for others to perform duties she feels capable of performing

herself. As the boys as Plumfield soon realize, Nan is a strong young girl who will not let convention bind her manners or her dreams. As Alcott comments approvingly, "Nan found as much pleasure in using her quick wits and fine memory as her active feet and merry tongue, while the lads had to do their best to keep their places, for Nan showed them that girls can do most things as well as boys, and some things better" (122). The work affirms her tomboyishness and commends Nan's tendency to seek intellectual and social equality with the boys who surround her. In one passage, Demi, Tommy, and Nat ruin Daisy's elaborately planned tea party with a food fight. Rather than crying like Daisy and baby Bess, Nan vents her rage at the mischievous boys and makes certain that their crimes are punished by an enraged Aunt Jo (142-3). Unlike her docile friend Daisy, Nan will not casually submit to the injustices that insensitive boys level against girls. By making her a companion to prim little Daisy, Alcott provides her readers with a compelling image illustrating the harmonious relationship between two very different girls. She also shows that Nan, like so many other girls, can flourish in an environment in which she is permitted to express and pursue her dreams in spite of the gender stereotypes that limit her life choices.

Alcott uses *Little Men* as a forum in which to celebrate the advantages of coeducation, and Jo's firm belief that her little men and women should have the same opportunities to learn is a strong testament to Alcott's own feminist convictions. According to Professor Bhaer and Jo, boys and girls can learn at the same speed, and by teaching them together, they can also learn to understand one another. As Jo tells her husband when she asks him to admit Nan to Plumfield school, "Daisy needs a companion, and the boys would be all the better for another girl among them; you know we believe in bringing up little men and women together, and it is high time we acted up to our belief" (111). The Bhaers conclude that girls can be a pacifying influence on rowdy boys, yet they do encourage Daisy and Nan to join the wild games concocted by the boys because they understand that healthy girls must lead active lives. Alcott frequently commented that the sedentary activities and restricting garments of "fashionable" girls contributed to the deteriorating health of many young ladies. Some critics have argued that Jo teaches her girls self-sacrifice while her boys learn to achieve greatness. Nothing could be further from the truth. As Strickland writes, "Alcott did not subscribe to such a neat bifurcation of the goals of education between the sexes...In keeping with Alcott's notions of coeducation as a prelude to companionate marriage, she makes clear that the

lessons of self-denial and self-control apply equally to boys and girls" (*VD* 134). Indeed, Dan learns difficult lessons about relinquishing his liberty in order to keep himself fed and clothed and to provide a positive role model for adoring baby Teddy. Just as Nan and Daisy learn to consider the feelings of others, the boys must also learn empathy and gentleness, thereby negating the argument that only Jo's girls must learn to sacrifice their desires. When Jo punishes Nan for running away during a trip to the huckleberry patch, she does try to curb the girl's thirst for liberty. However, Jo does not do this to transform Nan into a traditional, stay-at-home girl; instead, she leashes the girl to a bedpost in order to punish her for worrying the family and idly endangering the well-being of herself and young Rob. She teaches rebellious Dan virtually the same lesson when she warns him not to leave Plumfield, not because she wants to hamper his freedom but because she knows he is too young to survive alone and his adoptive family would be heartbroken if he selfishly set out for wider horizons. At Plumfield School, the Bhaers try to teach boys and girls the same lessons of intellectual and personal development, but when Jo teaches Daisy to cook by playing "Patty Pans" with her toy stove, Alcott does succumb to convention. Yet Alcott was a realist, and she knew that her culture would demand that young girls acquire domestic skills in addition to academic prowess; otherwise, the girls would be considered impractical and their achievements devalued. Daisy must submit to this traditional female chore in order to succeed in her world. As critic E.L. Keyser has written, "Jo, for all her good intentions, helps her girls accommodate themselves to constricting gender roles rather than escape them" (*WD* 99). To a certain degree this is true because Jo and her girls do live in a patriarchal society that endorses traditional gender roles, but Jo does everything in her power to ensure that, while her girls have the skills to function in a world dominated by patriarchal custom, they also have the freedom to dream of greater achievements alongside Jo's most assertive boys.

Critics have fiercely debated the classification of Plumfield as a true feminist utopia, for while some maintain that the school fosters female growth, others argue that the patriarchal system is too pervasive to be halted by Plumfield's idealistic walls. "Utopia" is derived from two ancient Greek words meaning, respectively, "good place" and "no place." In other words, the utopian vision is a self-acknowledged fantasy, just like Alcott's own March novels, which serve as a romanticized account of Louisa's tumultuous life. At Plumfield school, Jo does emerge as a more powerful entity that her husband.

Like her own Marmee, Jo becomes a strong matriarch who guides her children in their moral and spiritual growth. As Nina Auerbach observes:

> [Jo] rather than her husband assumes the authoritarian role of ingenious and judicious punishment of select students who may have battles to win. Beyond sisterhood, Mother Bhaer presides over a utopian community of cooperation among and between the sexes, whose influence as it follows sailor Emil, musician Nat and pioneer-jailbird Dan, spreads into the capitals and wasteplaces of the world...The school she shapes at Plumfield is also family, farm and cosmos" (*LWFI* 22).

Again, Alcott emphasizes the importance of feminine "influence" by creating "Mother Bhaer," a wise maternal ideal whose words follow each boy throughout his travails. In many ways, Plumfield becomes a utopian community in which Jo can exercise her beliefs about coeducation and child-rearing, uninhibited by social custom. However, the school is restrictive in many ways that seem to combat the classification of Plumfield as a utopia. As Keyser notes, gender-divided chores abound in the novel. She writes, "If Plumfield is Alcott's model for society, then she envisioned one in which women still nurse the body and nurture the emotions while men stimulate the mind and foster, as well as pursue, careers" (*WD* 88). Indeed, Professor Bhaer is a mobile teacher while Jo is a home-bound mother, thereby incarnating the doctrine of two spheres. Some critics argue that Plumfield cannot be a utopia because while Jo has become a powerful matriarch, she has repressed her own dreams of personal success. Jo's chosen vocation as surrogate mother to a dozen children limits her opportunities to write. She seems to have relinquished her dreams in favor of helping children like Nan, Dan, and Nat realize their own dreams. Jo's situation at Plumfield serves as a reminder of Alcott's mother's predicament at Fruitlands thirty years earlier. As Tomasek remarks, "a utopia planned by men was *no place* for a woman" (*LWFI* 241) because these utopian visions perpetuate gender roles and crush female independence. As she points out, the utopia is limited because it refutes Jo's most fundamental aspirations. Inevitably, a woman's dream must be postponed until she can expand her social sphere beyond the realm of the kitchen and the parlor. Like Alcott's own mother, Jo has put her desires aside to help her husband realize his dreams in the form of an experimental school. But far from constituting self-sacrifice, Jo views her work as a great achievement. As Laurie tells her, "It is the best

joke of the family, this school of yours and its success. So unlike the future we had planned for you, and yet so suited to you after all. It was a regular inspiration, Jo" (*LM* 360). Not only does Laurie see the school and its pupils as products of Jo's hard work, but he also sees the nobility of that labor with respect to her youthful dreams of fortune. By the close of *Little Men*, every character has learned something about the beauty of helping other men and women secure their own fantasies, most particularly Jo.

*Jo's Boys* features Jo Bhaer as a woman who has matured both as an individual and as an artist, for she emerges as Alcott's great portrait of a woman who has fulfilled the demands of society and realized her own dreams. Much like Louisa Alcott, Jo has finally become a renowned author whose fame is a flattering nuisance. As Alcott recounts, "[Her writing] began during a bad year when everything went wrong at Plumfield...Jo got desperate over the state of affairs, till she fell back upon the long-disused pen as the only thing she could do to help fill up the gaps in the income" (*JB* 35). Just as she had done for her own family years before, Jo assumes the masculine role of family breadwinner when she writes stories to support her young charges. In doing so, she realizes the artistic dreams that she neglected for so many years when she exhausted herself by mothering a dozen foster children. In this final novel of the March saga, Jo returns to her familiar expressions of defiance, but she maintains a matronly demeanor around her children. She is still "Mother Bhaer," but her alignment with woman's rights advocates is far more pronounced; Jo evolves into a vocal proponent of careers for women, and she even validates the single life for modern women. At one point, Jo actually questions the wisdom of her decision to marry Professor Bhaer. As she tells her protégé, young Nan, "I sometimes feel as if I'd missed my vocation and ought to have remained single" (19). Actually, Jo is effectively single throughout much of this final novel, for her husband recedes into the background narrative as the tale focuses on Jo and her children, who are now entering young adulthood. Professor Bhaer is not a central authority figure at home any more, and Jo eclipses him in matters of domestic importance as well as community ascendancy. When her "boys" George and Dolly wander astray after their entrance into college, Jo corrects their patronizing airs with a harsh lecture about the harmful effects of alcohol consumption and the difference between "frivolous girls" and true women (207). She similarly advises the youths of Laurence College in matters of personal

significance. By all standards, Jo has developed into a woman who reigns supreme both in her home and in her community. Her powerful endorsement of woman's rights and most particularly her celebration of feminine independence serve as a guidepost for some of Alcott's most engaging young heroines.

*Jo's Boys* also highlights the growth of Daisy Brooke and Bess Laurence as these two very passive girls endure adolescence and reveal that, despite their adherence to traditional gender norms, they are strong girls who have flourished under the tutelage of powerful female mentors. Daisy continues to display a calm temperament, and her chief desire is to become a wife and mother. She wants to remain in the domestic sphere like the idealized "angel of the house" glorified throughout Victorian literature. Like her mother Meg, Daisy is an image of gentle, domestic warmth. However, she is also like her mother in her stubborn insistence that she marry the man she loves, despite her family's objections. Daisy loves Nat, and when he goes abroad, Daisy valiantly struggles to keep her impatient heart subdued, and ultimately she convinces her mother that the young musician is a steady man who will provide a comfortable home for her to govern. While Daisy may embody passive obedience, she does illustrate strength in her insistent desire to marry for love. As Alcott writes, "[Daisy] was an old-fashioned daughter, dutiful and docile, with such love and reverence for her mother that her will was law; and if love was forbidden, friendship (with Nat) must suffice" (71). Certainly Daisy is self-sacrificing, but she is also strong, loyal, and true to her heart's demands. In her, Alcott has created an admirable female character who asserts her desires within the boundaries of social convention. Bess, like Daisy, also adheres to the models of feminine virtue and beauty that were revered during Alcott's career. Louisa introduced Bess as a minor character in *Little Men*, but she expands her description of Amy's daughter during the final March novel. Like Amy, Bess is stunning. Alcott describes her as "Diana-like", graceful and fair (22). She is also a genius of feminine "influence," for whenever she enters a room, every male is so enchanted by her serene manners that they begin to behave chivalrously. However, Bess is no mere doll to be admired and worshipped from afar, although Dan does reveal that he cherishes the unattainable girl's image in a most romantic manner. Neither is Bess an angel, or even a mythical "Aslauga," as Dan imagines her to be. In part, Jo frustrates Dan's desire for Bess because Jo knows that she is not an exalted maiden who desires idealized love, but rather that she is a real girl who could never be content with a reckless boy like Dan. Instead, Bess is a promising artist whose

desire to emulate her mother's accomplishments transforms her from a girl with illuminating beauty to a woman of glorious potential. Bess, like a true artist, becomes completely absorbed in her work, and as she tells Laurie, "Mamma often tells me to stop; but when we get in here we forget there is any world outside, we are so busy and so happy" (24). Eventually, as Alcott tells her readers, Bess distinguishes herself through her artwork, but like her mother, she does so within the traditional institution of marriage. Alcott writes, "women can be faithful wives and mothers without sacrificing the special gift bestowed on them for their own development and the good of others" (22), and women like Amy and Bess illustrate this conviction beautifully. While they do choose a more traditional route than some other influential women, their quiet self-assertion and solemn alliance with their more rebellious sisters solidifies the appeal of Alcott's novels to a broad spectrum of womanhood.

Alcott introduces Josie in this final March chronicle, and the young tomboy quickly distinguishes herself as an aspiring actress and an assertive champion of sexual equality. Josie is her Aunt Jo's namesake, her mother Meg's despair, and her cousin Ted's loyal playmate. Josie makes a grand (and indecorous) entrance onto the porch of Parnassus at the novel's opening, when in pursuit of Ted, she leaps a hedge and gets stuck in some bushes (14). Alcott describes Josie as a "little wild rose" (53) who remains unintimidated by the world and its expectations of her. Like her Aunt Jo had been as a girl, Josie is bold and outspoken, particularly when she proclaims to her cousin Bess, "I *will* see [Miss Cameron, a great actress] and tell her my hopes and make her say I can act someday. Mamma would believe *her*"(116). Despite her anxious mother's disapproval, Josie does resolve to become an actress. She reveals determination when she tries to impress Miss Cameron, her idol, by recapturing a pearl bracelet from the ocean waters in which Miss Cameron lost it. As Josie insists that she will not give up the search, the girl demonstrates the resolve that will be invaluable to her once she tries to enter the public domain as an actress. After her dramatic audition with Miss Cameron, the woman is impressed by Josie's ability but warns the expressive girl to finish her education. As Miss Cameron points out, "all accomplishments are needed, for a single talent makes a very imperfect character" (123). By encouraging Josie to become a well-rounded young lady, Miss Cameron serves as a mentor who confirms the radical notion that women can excel in many areas outside the domestic sphere. Not only does Josie aspire to professional success,

but she also engages in steady combat against young men who deny or reduce the stature of feminine achievement. As she tells her family after a clash with her cousin Ted, "I'll show [Ted] that a woman can act as well, if not better, than a man. It *has* been done, and will be again: and I'll never own that *my* brain isn't as good as his" (31). George and Dolly are two of Jo's boys who have wandered away from the principles of their enlightened coeducational upbringing, and when Josie overhears them maligning girls for eating too much or wearing dowdy clothes, she attacks. As Alcott phrases it, "Josie loved to harass the lords of creation who asserted themselves too much" (203). When her ire is raised, Josie charges Dolly and George with wasting their Harvard education, saying "your fathers say they wish they hadn't wasted time and money just that you might say you'd been through college. As for the girls, you'll be much better off in all ways when they do get in [to college], and keep you lazy things up to the mark" (204-5). Josie boldly confronts these superficial boys and their misogynistic attitudes, which favor ornamental women and demand male exclusivity at such public institutions as Harvard. Josie exhibits a pioneering attitude by justifying her right to become an actress and attacking those who deny her fundamental entitlement to the same opportunities enjoyed by ungrateful men.

Alcott continues her characterization of Nan in this final novel by describing her devotion to the medical profession, her pragmatic mind, and her decision to remain unmarried. Since her days in the willow tree with Daisy, Nan has known that she will challenge convention by becoming a female doctor rather than a wife and mother. Unlike Bess, Josie, or the March girls, Nan has no intention of blending her dreams with family obligations. In appearance, Alcott describes her as "simply and sensibly dressed, full of vigor, with her broad shoulders well back, arms swinging freely, and the elasticity of youth and health in every motion" (11). Nan carries herself with a confidence that seems almost masculine in character. She is self-assured, has her mind set toward her medical career, and tolerates little romantic nonsense from Tommy, who adores her with the hopeless passion of an infatuated lover. At one party, she turns away from Tommy's proffered plate of refreshments with a flippant remark that it is unhealthy to eat rich foods at such a late hour (65). However, her indifference to Tommy's affection is not rooted in any flaw belonging to the boy; he actively supports woman's rights, most particularly Nan's choice to become a doctor. He understands that the medical profession is highly suited to Nan's practical yet sympathetic

mind. She reveals her devotion to her chosen path when Rob is bitten by a dog and she must calmly burn the flesh around the wound to prevent infection. She does not flee the gory sight, nor does she go into hysterics. Instead, reliable Nan does her job quickly and with surety, inducing Jo to keep Tommy from pestering her any longer because her medical dreams are certainly attainable, if Tommy would not "fret her like a mosquito" (113). When Mrs. Jo says, "That girl's career shall not be hampered by a foolish boy's fancy. In a moment of weariness she may give in, and then it's all over" (113), one wonders if she may be recalling her own experiences with Laurie and Frederick, which ended in her temporary forfeiture of the author's pen. She does not doubt Nan's ability to become a doctor, but she does doubt Nan's ability to resist the social pressures that will induce her to marry. This subversive attitude is a strong indicator of the degree to which Alcott's society was permeated by a belief that women must marry. Nan defies popular convention not only by entering medicine, a male-dominated field, but also by resolving to remain single. Alongside Alice Heath, Nan espouses woman's suffrage and convinces her male brethren that women must attain the right to vote. In one compelling scene, she interrogates each of "Jo's boys" about his opinion of woman's suffrage, and all of them adamantly confirm their dedication to the cause for, as Nat eloquently states, "I owe [women] everything I am or ever shall be" (84). Nan (and Jo) have taught these young men well, and as Nan rises to leave, she offers her friends the advice to "continue to be staunch [in support of suffrage]...don't sit in draughts, and, boys, beware of ice-water when you are warm" (85). For Nan, practical medical advice and the logical decision to establish social equality are inextricably linked because both stem from a pragmatic view of the world in which there is an obvious remedy to every ill; people simply need to heed the advice of a trusted and worthy doctor.

In this final novel, Alcott includes a minor character named Alice Heath whose unwavering resolution to become a scholar and an advocate of woman's rights distinguishes her as a feminist pioneer who flourishes under the tutelage of Jo Bhaer. Alice is a student at co-educational Laurence College. Alcott refers to her as Nan's ally because the aspiring doctor finds Alice a "brave and sensible young woman" who "had chosen a career" (82) over waiting at home for wealthy suitors to rescue her impoverished family. Although the nature of Alice's chosen career is never articulated, her bold assertions

of woman's rights comprise her most compelling attribute. She shares Nan's conviction that women should have equal opportunities within the public sphere. As she pleads to her male classmates:

> Only give us a chance, and have patience till we can do our best. Now we are expected to be as wise as men who have had generations of all the help there is, and we scarcely anything. Let us have equal opportunities, and in a few generations we will see what the judgment is (82).

Her humble plea corroborates Nan's resolution to prove that women can succeed in professional careers without the benefit of a husband. As the narrative continues, Alice emerges as the top student of her class; when she delivers her speech on graduation day, the image of a lone woman before a crowd of male scholars becomes a riveting argument on behalf of coeducation in higher institutions of learning. If Alice can transcend the cultural barriers that would prevent her from obtaining a college education, then certainly Alcott's female readers can prove their intellectual equality as well. As she does with Nan, Alcott uses Alice Heath to illustrate a woman's ability to achieve the same honors traditionally enjoyed only by men. Following her inspiring graduation speech, Alice makes a difficult decision that challenges the most fundamental beliefs of Victorian society, thereby making herself a radical heroine. Demi asks her to marry him, and Alice is thrust into a dilemma; she thinks she must either marry him and relinquish her career goals or become a spinster and support her needy family with the money she will earn as a career woman. In her mind, she must choose love or her career; as Alcott describes it, she is torn between passion and duty to her family and to her own goals. However, Alice overhears Jo telling Daisy that she believes Alice will decide to marry Demi-John, despite her economic situation and family obligations, because she is a woman capable of accommodating both love and diligent work in her life. Her pivotal decision to accept Demi's marriage proposal centers on this revolutionary conviction that Alice can have a career and a husband. Alice, unlike Nan, affirms the possibility of "well-rounded" women--those women who believe that, even by entering a male-dominated world of work and politics, they will not sacrifice those qualities that make them feminine.

*Jo's Boys* is a forum in which Alcott blatantly espouses female independence, or the idea that a woman's "sphere" is wherever she chooses to apply her talents. Throughout the novel, Alcott battles narrative conventions by refusing to allow her heroines to enter in ordered procession toward the marriage

altar. Jo holds sewing circles in her home at which she encourages the girls at Laurence College to find a vocation rather than a spouse after graduation. According to the "cult of domesticity" so sacred to Victorian-era readers:

> Woman's place was in the home, and if the home was a world radically apart from the marketplace, then it followed that woman's role and identity would be radically different from that of man...he [would] venture outside the refuge of family to do battle with the barbarians in the marketplace, she [would] remain within the haven of the home (*VD* 10).

By urging her girls to discard this gender-differentiated fantasy, Jo asks her girls to redefine the doctrine of separate spheres, proving woman's ability to succeed in education, politics, and even professional areas. However, while she actively advocates careers for women, Jo also believes that a blissful marriage is the most wonderful thing that can happen to her "boys." The tension in the novel between Jo's dreams for her girls and her hopes for her boys may be attributed to the conflict Alcott experienced between convention and conviction. As critic Elizabeth Lenox Keyser points out, "[Jo's contradictory desires] reveal that if one has been indoctrinated in the notion of separate spheres....one will be called by duty to conventional roles at the expense of one's vocation. Thus the novel implies that we *must* worry about our sphere--not about conforming to it, but about redefining it, lest we fail to heed the call to any must domestic duty" (*WD* 167). Alcott indicates that women have a duty to themselves, and girls like Alice and Nan understand that they should follow their dreams before succumbing to traditional gender roles. Alcott also affirms the nobility of spinsterhood in this novel when she validates it as a legitimate choice rather than lamenting the situation of "old maids." As one girl notes, unmarried women can be fiercely independent because they do not have to justify their actions to anyone but themselves. Such an unrestrained fate makes spinsterhood seem almost inviting, and when Jo tells the girls about an unmarried woman who "works for the poor day after day with no reward but the thanks of the needy" (*JB* 216), she assures them that the noble woman's sacrifices will reap a better reward than any distinguished society woman could acquire from public laud. According to Jo, spinsters are admirable women, and one of her less idealistic pupils even concedes, "some [old maids] have grown famous and proved that woman isn't half but a whole human being, and can stand alone" (216). Yet single women are not alone in this assertion of independence; Jo joins the cause when she begins to write again, making herself and her surrogate family financially secure. As Tomasek states, "An

independent income has given Jo the freedom to realize her own domestic ideal" (*LWFI* 252), an "ideal" in which women are granted the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their labor without fear of patriarchal oppression. This novel challenges feminist readers to question the dichotomy between masculine and feminine spheres by encouraging its heroines to assert their gifts in a male-dominated society.

*Jo's Boys* constitutes a final realization of the feminist utopia suggested by *Little Men*, primarily because this final novel affirms the heroines' ability to thrive outside the binarisms that order patriarchal society. The setting of this book visually recalls Part One of *Little Women*, in which Alcott establishes a temporary matriarchal family system. In *Jo's Boys*, the remaining March girls live at or near Plumfield, which has been recently converted into Laurence College, thanks to a large endowment from Amy and Laurie. A large portrait of Marmee oversees the events at Parnassus, the new family home, lending the entire establishment a matriarchal ambiance. And it is not insignificant that Alcott included hundreds of allusions to Greek mythology in this novel. By naming the home Parnassus, Alcott not only links her characters to the gods that revel on that mystical mountain, but she also suggests that the work is an idealistic vision of life as it should be. Meg, Amy, and Jo are leading pleasant lives, and each sister continues to practice her art within a supportive community of women. Even Meg returns to the stage during a dramatic holiday performance, confirming that she has never entirely relinquished her childhood dreams. As Amy glowingly affirms, "Don't suggest that we are growing old...We have only just bloomed; and a very nice bouquet we make with our buds about us" (*JB* 25). More compelling than the girls' freedom and happiness, however, is the novel's argument that men and women can remain friends despite marriage and family obligations. When Amy, Jo, and Meg sit on the porch of Parnassus reminiscing, Laurie joins them as an equal; like dear, lifelong friends, Laurie and the sisters exchange memories, demonstrating an egalitarian relationship that crosses gender boundaries. The chief difficulty in classifying *Little Men*'s Plumfield as a utopia resides in the community's perpetuation of gender-divided tasks. In *Jo's Boys*, all men but Laurie disappear; Professor Bhaer and Mr. March are distant figures who teach far up on the hill while the girls, particularly Jo, encounter mundane realities and assume "masculine" responsibilities. Jo not only provides the financial support for her family with the popular stories that she writes, but she also assumes a stereotypically paternal role when she discourages Dan's pursuit of Bess and

when she encourages Nat to prove his self-reliance during his musical study abroad. Tomasek links Jo's "intermediary gender position" to her role as a tomboy in *Little Women*, arguing that she challenges gender stereotypes in both cases. Perhaps she feels free to explore the limits of those stereotypes because she has finally found an environment free from patriarchal oppression. There are no forces pressuring her to conform to social expectations, and Jo is free to become the strong independent woman that she always hoped to be. As Tomasek concludes, "In her search for *some place* for women outside the binarisms of domestic ideology...Alcott continues the tradition of women utopian writers who tried to imagine alternatives that stretched nineteenth-century gender norms" (*LWFI* 255). Alcott's March series culminates with a valiant attempt to describe a world existing outside the gender binarisms that polarized Victorian society. In suggesting a utopia in which women are free from the social constraints that limit their dreams and their free expression, Alcott aligned herself with other feminists who worked to expand the Victorian woman's social imagination.

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hostile, male-dominated world. Alcott began writing the novel in the early 1860s, calling it *Success*, but by the early 1870s, Louisa had revised the earlier text, added several new sections, and incorporated into the novel a more blatant feminist subtext. The novel brought financial security to the Alcott family--Louisa made nearly $8000 within two years of its first appearance in *The Christian Union*--but the book garnered little critical attention (xxx). Alcott herself acknowledged that the book was not the product of her best efforts, but most scholars dismissed the novel not because of its content but because of its status as mere "women's and children's fiction." Through this dismissive attitude, critics solidified Alcott's reputation as a "popular" novelist unworthy of academic attention.

*Work* chronicles the experience of Christie Devon as she struggles to become an independent woman. Throughout the first half of the novel, Christie systematically experiments with each of the occupations available to Victorian women and finds each job inadequate. At last, when she is on the brink of suicide, Christie's friend Rachel brings her to a kind, religious woman who fosters Christie's emotional and spiritual growth. At last, Christie marries a kind man, and after he dies in Civil War combat, she resolves to help other working women realize their dreams of political and social equality. The text is a riveting argument eloquently expressing Alcott's own feminism, both in its portrayal of women and its treatment of key issues pertaining to nineteenth-century woman's rights.

Christie Devon is a dynamic heroine who fearlessly enters the public sphere to assert her independence and, as her spirit strengthens, she learns to challenge social expectation by boldly asserting the power of womanhood. When the novel opens, Christie is a dissatisfied young woman; her life at her uncle's farm is too limiting, for tradition binds her to the family hearth and insistently demands that she accept a husband. As Christie tells her kind aunt, "There is going to be a new Declaration of Independence" (*W* 5) in which Christie will forge her own future. Like a true feminist revisionist, Christie want to extend the fundamental rights of man, outlined in the original Declaration of Independence, to encompass women as well. When Christie states her will to leave home, she aligns herself with a multitude of boys who share her resolution to become financially independent. By leaving, Christie asserts her equality with those young men, for she plans to prove her strength by succeeding in a male-dominated, urban environment. Unfortunately, the only occupations available to Christie dissatisfy the capable young

woman. In the first portion of the novel, she discards careers as a domestic servant, actress, governess, companion, and seamstress. Each of the jobs, deemed appropriate for women by patriarchal custom, demands that Christie sacrifice some quality that she feels is essential to her character. For example, when she works as a "second girl" in a wealthy household, her employer insists upon calling her "Jane" because the name is easier for her to remember (*W* 19). Consequently, Christie must play the role of "Jane" in order to keep her position; she conceals her distaste for the Stuarts and their elaborate dinner parties, and she must mask her intelligence behind a facade of dull obedience. In essence, the patriarchal forces that surround her in the Stuart home thrust Christie into the acceptable persona of a plain servant content to perform domestic tasks. Yet Christie has larger dreams, which she articulates when she refuses to submit to "the degradation" of shining Mr. Stuart's boots and becoming unambitious, plain "Jane." Even after the Stuarts dismiss her for expressing independence by reading a book, the cycle continues when she works in other occupations. Every job compels Christie to conform to some gender-differentiated ideal. As a governess, Christie feels obliged to become "Jane Eyre," a passive and meek young lady whose virtue seduces Philip Fletcher, the rough older man. As a companion, she must passively witness the devastating effects of upper-class feminine idleness. Keyser points out in her critical analysis of Christie, "[acting the role set before them] both protects by disguising [women's] true identity and enables them to express it in another guise. Through acting women can vicariously--and sometimes actually--experience power, but they can also, as Christie often comes close to doing, lose all sense of self." (*WD* 105). When she works as an actress and again as a seamstress, Christie does lose her identity in her zeal to conform to a masculine ideal of achievement. In each case, she becomes little more than a vessel through which men see their will enacted. In her haste to achieve financial success, she sees personal relationships and positive community interaction as secondary in importance.

But just as her isolation places Christie at the brink of suicide, she is opportunely cast into a society of women who succeed in rebuilding her spirit. Cynthy Wilkins and Mrs. Sterling reintroduce Christie to a supportive network of women with whom Christie can reassess her goals and begin to assert her unique perspective once again. The male-oriented public sphere nearly crushes young Christie, but through her contact with Cynthy and Mrs. Sterling, Christie regains confidence in her ability to work and

maintain her identity, despite the pressure to conform to a stereotype constructed by patriarchal tradition. When she marries David, she enters a loving union with a man who appreciates her just as she is--an independent woman who will continue to assert herself as long as she is backed by a community of women who will prevent her from succumbing to despair. At age forty, Christie is a widow who resolves to help other women realize their dreams. She acts as an "interpreter" between scholarly ladies and the working-class women who struggle to assert their equality in a hostile social environment. As a proud spokeswoman, helping women like herself find comfort in the sympathy and support of a feminist community, Christie proves that she has found her identity. As she told her aunt at the beginning of her journey to self-discovery, "I hope my life may be like [a glowing log], so that, whether it be long or short, it will be useful and cheerful while it lasts, will be missed when it ends, and leave something behind besides ashes" (*W 9*). Just as she wished, Christie bequeaths her readers confidence in the notion that women can forge a place for themselves, even in a public sphere monopolized by men.

Rachel, like Christie, is a young woman struggling to assert her independence, and through this secondary character, Alcott explores the way in which patriarchal systems victimize women who do not conform to a rigid ideal of "femininity." When Christie initially encounters Rachel, both girls are working as seamstresses in a highly respectable establishment. Knowing virtually nothing about the girl, Christie resolves to become her friend because Rachel wears a haunted expression and she never joins in idle gossip with the other young ladies. Christie can see that Rachel has endured pain despite her youth, and her aura of solemnity attracts Christie, who has also acquired an intimate knowledge of quiet suffering through her varied experiences. Soon after their friendship begins, it is threatened by spiteful insinuations that prove true. As Miss Cotton reveals to their employer, Mrs. King, Rachel is a fallen woman. According to Victorian ideology, a young maiden's most important task lies in the preservation of her virginity against lustful suitors (*WD* 8-10). Her sexual purity defines her womanhood, and because Rachel has experienced sexual intercourse, her society finds her contemptible. In the eyes of a patriarchal culture preoccupied with feminine chastity and virtue, she is a degraded woman. When Miss Cotton and Mrs. King eject Rachel from her place of employment, they enact the standards of propriety dictated by men. Furthermore, as owner of a capitalistic institution, Mrs. King fosters an environment in which competition between

women--particularly women like jealous Miss Cotton--flourishes. While it is populated by many well-meaning women, Mrs. King's sewing room ultimately endorses the patriarchal standards that victimize Rachel. Mrs. King's sewing room is devoid of compassion, and much later in the text, Christie learns that Rachel's brother similarly suspended his compassion when he learned of his sister's "fallen" status. As Christie learns from David, "Rachel" is actually Letty, a young woman who "wanted to go away and support herself" (265), fell upon hard times, and succumbed to the advances of a lover. The news of her transgression killed her adoring father, sickened her mother, and enraged her brother, David. As she tells Christie, Rachel/Letty "brought a stain upon her honest name that time could never wash away" (266); in degrading herself, David believed that she had degraded the entire family, and he disowned her because her sin threatened his masculine pride and family honor. David set his sister adrift in a world that despised her for her sexuality because he felt it was his duty to perpetuate the patriarchal code that protects feminine virtue and destroys those who trespass against it. Yet, despite the contempt of her family and her society, Rachel/Letty does persevere; she tells Christie "I can get on alone; I'm used to this" (111), and she does prove her strength by refusing to concede to despair. As if to spite the patriarchal customs that resign her to solitude, Rachel/Letty works hard to achieve the reward that she deserves from the masculine culture in which she labors. When Rachel rescues Christie from her desperate thoughts of suicide, Rachel displays a quiet strength and tenderness as she guides her friend to a place where Christie can recover her hope. As Alcott writes, "It was plain that Rachel had learned to distill balm from the bitterness of life, and groping in the mire to save lost souls, had found her own salvation there" (126). In other words, Rachel's faith in herself, her friends, and a higher power keep her from losing her true identity to the mere label of "fallen woman." Through Rachel/Letty, Alcott creates a portrait of a marginalized woman who transcends the contempt of her society and uses her quiet virtue to challenge the ideology that polarizes her culture.

With Helen Carroll, Alcott delineates another secondary character whose spirit is threatened by the patriarchal forces that operate within her family. Christie meets Helen when she acquires a position as the girl's companion; Helen seems to be a lonely invalid in need of the diversions that active, young Christie can provide. In the initial pages of the "Companion" chapter, Alcott describes Helen as a sorrowful girl, and Christie attributes much of her depression to the enforced idleness so common among women of

upper-class families. But as the text continues, Alcott alludes to a more sinister force than mere apathy that is at work within the Carroll household. At last, Christie learns that insanity is common among members of the Carroll family and Helen fears that she will inherit the curse of madness. Simply the thought of her pending insanity haunts Helen, and she longs to end her life before her mind grows diseased. The Carroll madness is a patrilineal inheritance--Helen's father harbored a predisposition for mental illness and passed it to his children. While each of them feels the weight of certain doom, only Helen is so depressed by dread that she feels her only means of escape is death. As Keyser notes, "by making the curse of Helen's family patrilineal rather than matrilineal...Alcott directly associates female madness with patriarchy" (*WD* 107). It is not simply madness that crushes Helen but also her entire lifestyle, which conforms beautifully to a 19th-century model of feminine passivity. Helen must sacrifice everything, including her lover, because of her family indisposition. She is not allowed to exist outside the confines of her home, and instead she spends her days reading in quiet rooms or cultivating flowers in her greenhouse. She has no aspirations because she knows they can never be realized, but she still resents the forces that propel her to her doom. As she tells Christie, "I used to wish I could be [an actress], I was so fond of the theater. They should have consented, it would have given me something to do, and, however hard it is, it couldn't be worse than this" (*W* 79). "This" refers to the constricting lifestyle her mother deemed appropriate for the languishing young girl: she is isolated from her friends and protectively guarded by her mother and brothers from external factors that may quicken her apparent illness. However, Christie perceives that Helen's madness is partially a product of her limiting lifestyle. She encourages Helen's sister, Bella, to escape the insanity, telling her "you have self-control, strong will, good nerves, and cheerful spirits...save yourself." (99). Christie sees that Bella can survive if she escapes the oppressive patriarch-obsessed environment that destroyed Helen. When Helen Carroll finally stabs herself, it is because she can no longer endure her situation, separated by force from her community and by guilt from her own family. Her death illustrates the way that the patriarchy eventually destroys women if they submit to the system's forceful demands by diminishing their own spirits and conforming to established norms.

Cynthy Wilkins and Mrs.Sterling are important secondary characters because each of these women nurtures Christie and helps the desperate girl reorganize her life as she prepares to subvert convention and

emerge a strong and capable feminist leader. Cynthy is a warm, inviting maternal figure. She provides Christie with the bodily comfort that she needs when she arrives at the Wilkins' home a cold, wet, hungry, and exhausted young woman. She physically rebuilds the heroine, and she offers Christie spiritual guidance by directing her to Reverend Power. Yet Cynthy's most significant contribution to Christie's well-being is her "Cure for Despair." In this passage, she tells Christie a story about an argument she had with her husband in which they decided to separate temporarily. Cynthy says she grew desperate when she was apart from her husband and children, and finally they reconciled. The story is an inspiring tale about the importance and nature of love, as well as the value of compromise in relationships. The humble account reminds Christie of the qualities of community that were absent during her life as a working girl. Keyser claims that this exchange of stories is a manifestation of "women's power--the capacity to see and present their lives as drama or story" (110), but perhaps it is simply a chance to reestablish the type of intimate connection that Christie lost during her solitary existence as a member of the urban workforce. When Christie moves to Mrs. Sterling's home, she enters a serene environment in which her emotional needs will be fulfilled. Mrs. Sterling is kind and orderly; her home is an ideal environment in which Christie can soothe her shattered nerves, which are the result of months of anxious, unrelenting labor. She works in the woman's kitchen, and as Keyser notes:

> Christie's return to [kitchen work]--first Cynthy's, then Mrs. Sterling's--represents a return to past sources of strength, the solidarity she shared in Aunt Betsey's and Hepsey's kitchens but found threatened, compromised, or destroyed by the patriarchal home, the male workplace, and the female workplace organized on a male model and governed by male notions of propriety (111).

Through the kitchen, she reestablishes bonds with other women, and these women eventually encourage her to venture into companionate marriage with David Sterling. Initially, Cynthy and Mrs. Sterling encourage Christie to remain within a domestic haven in which she can enjoy female community without any masculine threat. However, the heroine declines their offer, and by the novel's end she propels both these women and the supportive help they offer into the public realm.

Alcott's novel offers, then, a detailed account of a woman's experiences in the "masculine" public realm; through Christie's struggles, Alcott criticizes patriarchal models and redefines "woman's work" as

any labor that a woman endeavors to perform. With Christie, Alcott explodes the popular myth that women are frivolous beings too frail to survive in the rough working world. Yet, while her own merits often keep Christie out of wretched poverty, her soul hungers for support from friends. According to Alcott, the public sphere is too hostile to women for Christie to endure alone. As Alcott writes, "It is not always want, insanity, or sin that drives women to desperate deaths; often it is a dreadful loneliness of heart, a hunger for home and friends, worse than starvation" (*W* 118). The capitalist working world is individualistic; it promotes self-assertion and achievement, and it condemns the "tender ties" between people as restraints that limit a worker's production. By entering the workforce, Christie can gain financial independence, but she acquires her independence at the expense of community. Her constant labor as a seamstress alienates her from other women, and as Keyser writes, "Lack of such female solidarity casts Christie first as martyr, then as victim, a role that threatens to become her last" (*WD* 108). It is not until Rachel rescues her from an icy plunge and introduces her to Cynthy Wilkins that Christie begins to rebuild the relationships that will support her throughout her life. In the working world that Alcott describes, men try to victimize Christie and other women like her, thereby increasing her need for a supportive community of women to whom she can fly for comfort and with whom she can rally in resistance. For example, when she works as an actress, Christie's employer, Mr. Sharp, inspects her as though she is a product rather than a human being. As he evaluates her, Sharp says of Christie, "Good tread; capital figure; fine eye. She'll make up well, and behave herself, I fancy" (*W* 33). Sharp cares nothing about Christie's personality; he simply wants to exploit her body for his shows, and when he comments that he expects her obedience, he infantilizes Christie. Ironically, Christie is cast as an Amazon queen, but rather than leading her fellow Amazons in a rebellion against Sharp and his patronizing manners, all of the women are afraid to offend him because they need the money he can provide. Alcott writes of the actresses, "A most forlorn band of warriors they seemed, huddled together and looking as if afraid to speak lest they should infringe some rule; or to move, lest they be swallowed up buy some unsuspected trap-door"(*W* 34). Sharp has diminished his female employees to trembling masses of flesh. He has undermined their confidence with his critiques and constant admonishments. When Christie works as a governess, her employer's brother, Philip Fletcher, similarly tries to manhandle Christie. He convinces the girl that he adores her, but he tries to pressure her

into wedlock by saying that he is the only man who will have her because her acting career casts a dark shadow on her reputation. He uses her inferior position as a family employee to intimidate Christie, but she offers strong resistance to his proposal. Alcott implies that the masculinized public sphere tries to victimize women like Christie by denying them authority. In the end, while the working world does threaten to destroy Christie, she survives and finally reenters the public sphere as a spokeswoman on behalf of working women, whom she tells "no matter how hard or humble the task at the beginning, if faithfully and bravely performed, it would surely prove a stepping stone to something better" (*W* 332). The unified community of women that Christie leads as they work to prove "women's right to labor" offers hope to struggling women everywhere.

One of the most compelling issues for feminist readers of *Work* is Alcott's portrayal of the egalitarian relationship between Christie and David. In delineating David's character, Alcott constructs a man who is androgynous; David has characteristics traditionally ascribed to both men and women, yet he maintains an equilibrium between his masculinity and femininity that serves as a model for Christie and her contemporaries. For example, David is a strong man whose size and love of physical labor align him with male gender stereotypes. As Alcott describes him, David is a "broad-shouldered, brown-bearded man, with an old hat and coat, trousers tucked into his boots, fresh mold on the hand he had given Christie to shake, and the cheeriest voice he had ever heard" (175). His physical attributes attest to David's masculinity, but he is simultaneously "feminine" in demeanor. Christie complains that he has no ambition; he seems content to stay at home, leading a passive existence alongside his mother. David also displays sensitivity in his careful cultivation of flowers and the delicate floral arrangements that he sells to brides and bereaved mourners. As Christie learns when Rachel/Letty reappears, David embraced his femininity after excessive masculine pride induced him to disown his wayward sister, Letty. Repentant and believing her to be dead, David disassociates himself from the harsh patriarchal code and becomes an ally to women, thereby rejecting his quick, faulty temper and accepting his latent feminine traits. As he tells Christie, "I tried to be [a brother of girls], and, for Letty's sake, had pity on the most forlorn, patience with the most abandoned; always remembering that she might have been what they were" (268). But while David's androgyny makes him a more responsive man than most, Christie has been inculcated by romantic tradition and she desires a

heroic partner. While living with Mrs. Sterling, Christie reverts to an ideal of feminine domesticity, and she believes she wants a powerful man capable of brooding sorrow and intense, wrenching love. According to the "cult of romantic love" in response to which Christie longs to perform her hero-worship, men and women conform to gender-differentiated roles as they allow passion to consume them (*VD* 6-8). David should be masterful, or so newly feminized Christie thinks, until David finally encourages her to recall the assertive spirit that initially lured her away from Aunt Betsey's hearth. Keyser writes that "David Sterling and Mr. Power (the minister) encourage Christie to accept David's androgynous nature and reclaim her own" (*WD* 113). Christie begins the task by working alongside David in his greenhouse, complementing his carefully bred hybrid flowers with her own artistic additions until they produce a lovely bouquet by working together. Keyser calls this a "merging of spheres" (113), and the two continue to merge until they declare their love for one another and marry. At the wedding ceremony, they represent a thrilling image of equality, for rather than wearing maidenly white, Christie wears "her gray gown with no ornament but delicate frills at the neck and wrist" (*W* 293). The dress is her nurse's uniform, and as she tells her newly mustered fiancé, "I want to consecrate my uniform as you do yours by being married in it" (293). As they stand side by side, each wearing a Civil War uniform of sorts, Christie and David visually assert their equality. Alcott envisions, in their union, a symbolic marriage of love and work, for just as they work together in David's greenhouse, they will continue to work together as soldier and nurse. Christie and David complement one another in their androgyny--Christie is assertive while David is passive, David is sensitive while Christie is practical--and their marriage ultimately subverts the traditions inherent in the marital institution. Rather than endorsing patriarchal rule, their marriage promises to be one in which Christie and David can guide one another.

Perhaps the most significant issue in *Work* is Alcott's endorsement of women's solidarity, for only by grounding herself in the firm support of other women can Christie truly succeed in her chosen vocation. As previously argued, Christie founders when she tries to function in the public sphere without the benefit of female support. When she regains a sense of community through her friendship with Cynthy and Mrs. Sterling, Christie must use her newfound security as an anchor from which to explore new occupations and new relationships with men. However, she must also learn that her "role" is not the one ascribed to her by

social pressure but the one in which she feels comfortable and content. Her ties to other women help Christie when she encounters Philip Fletcher again, for while he seems reformed and has a newfound respect for Christie, she does not love him. Christie cannot decide if perhaps she should marry him to make him happy. But as Cynthy tells bewildered young Christie, "ef anyone wants to go a sacrificin' herself for the good of others, there's better ways of doin' it than startin' with a lie in her mouth" (*W* 253). As Cynthy explains, Christie's thoughts of marrying Philip simply to please him are ill-conceived because a realistic woman's "role" is not to become a selfless martyr. With Cynthy's kind guidance, Christie feels she has the strength to decline Philip's proposal, despite her apparent lack of marriageable male acquaintances.

After she and David have married and he dies selflessly in combat, Christie resolves to bring the source of female strength--community--to other working women of all ages, classes, and races. She speaks at a woman's rights rally that was suffering from a chaotic class rift. As Alcott describes it, "Anyone who chose got up and spoke; and whether wisely or foolishly each proved how great was the ferment now going on, and how difficult it was for the two classes to meet and help one another in spite of the utmost need on one side and the sincerest good-will on the other" (330). In the work, feminist scholars do not know how to communicate with their overworked sisters until Christie rises to speak. She seeks to enable the working women in her audience without alienating the educated women, and her speech is designed to inspire them and to offer them the psychological support they need. As Christie tells her gathered female friends and young daughter, "I owe all I can do, for in labor, and the efforts and experiences that grew out of it, I have found independence, education, happiness, and religion" (343). Cynthy rejoins with, "Then, my dear, you are ready to help others into the same blessed state, and it's your duty to do it!" (343), and, indeed, Christie seems determined to become a leader in the movement to emancipate women. She encourages wealthy Bella, who reappears at the novel's end, to foster intellectual conversation among social ladies to keep them from sliding into bored apathy. She tells herself that she will be a pioneer in women's rights, and she begins the arduous task by reaffirming her ties to other women as she "stretched her hands to the friends about her, and with one accord they laid theirs on hers, a loving league of sisters" (343). In doing so, Christie and Alcott celebrate womanhood in a scene of convivial warmth, out of which will emerge a

fearless feminist leader eager to emancipate women from the sexual stereotypes that confine a woman's power.

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into a riveting stage play. This story, also serialized in *The Flag of Our Union*, appeared in 1866 under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard (xxii). "Behind a Mask" features actress Jean Muir in the role of a lifetime; she plays a passive young governess who systematically seduces every male member of the Coventry family in her quest for financial security. She is deliciously evil, and she achieves her victory by manipulating patriarchal tradition and gender stereotypes. "Taming a Tartar" is a more subdued text. It originally appeared in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in serial form during 1867 (xxiii). "Taming a Tartar" is the story of Sybil Varna and her ambitious attempt to civilize rough, crude Prince Alexis, a man who exudes masculine power and must learn to neutralize his masculinity to win Sybil's affection. The thriller features the power struggle between Sybil and Alexis, and it culminates--like *Work*--in the realization of androgyny. Like all of Alcott's thrillers, each of these three stories involve strong heroines who confront the male "lords of creation" and challenge them to engage in a dramatic sexual power struggle from which Alcott's women inevitably emerge victorious.

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Virginie Varens of "V.V." is a deceitful woman who uses her wits to acquire power in a society that consistently denies women any sort of authority. When she first appears in the narrative, Virginie exudes beauty and a false innocence that endears her to Allan Douglas, her wealthy Scottish admirer who offers her love and a title if she will marry him. But although she wears the costume of a dainty angel when she meets Allan backstage, Virginie is no innocent maiden. She reveals her manipulative abilities when she openly tells Allan, "I may [marry Victor] if no one else will offer me a name as he does. I do not love him, but he is useful, he guards me like a dragon, works for me, cherishes me, and keeps me right" ("V.V." 83). Victor, or the jealous lover who eventually stabs Allan, becomes a being for Virginie to use at her convenience; in her mind, he is "useful," and by stringing him along, Virginie inverts the traditional male-female ideal relationship celebrated in the "cult of romantic love" in which the woman virtuously pines for love while the man uses her for his selfish intents. Virginie immediately reveals herself as a woman unafraid to pervert such norms. After Victor kills Allan, Virginie and her murderous lover disappear, but much later in the story, Douglas reveals that Virginie used her charm to appeal to wealthy Colonel Vane and she became his sole beneficiary after the man's death. When she reappears as Mrs.

Vane in the Douglas home with her sights bent toward young Douglas, Allan's cousin, she repeats her cycle of manipulation. Victor is still with Virginie, but she is clearly the dominant power in their relationship. While she is "Mrs. Vane," descended from the noble Montmerenci family, Victor plays her degraded servant Jitomar, who fetches Virginie's horse and cleans her shoes. The means that Virginie uses to captivate Douglas are similarly intriguing. She orchestrates a grand scheme to destroy Diana, Douglas's beloved, by telling her awful lies about the young man and planting suspicion in the innocent girl's heart. Like a true villainess who loves her artful strategies, Virginie skirts discovery with her quick intelligence. As one character remarks to Virginie when she directs events following Diana's disappearance, "You have the nerves of a man, the quick wit of a woman, and presence of mind enough for us all" (114). In her relentless quest for rank and title, Virginie gains ascendancy over every man she meets. She is heartless, but she assertively pursues her desired wealth in a manner that demonstrates righteous wrath against the men who would possess her. As Stern writes, "Virginie Varens must take a lead position among Alcott's femmes fatales, for even as she appalls, she enchants" (*FA* xiii). Her ultimate victory is one in which she uses her cunning to escape her decreed punishment and finally frees herself from a world that tries to reduce her from a powerful villainess to a little woman.

In "V.V.", Alcott inverts the traditional male-female power relationship, thereby placing Virginie in control of the men who surround her in an intriguing dramatization of the ongoing sexual power struggle that fascinated Alcott. Stern attributes Louisa's preoccupation with sexual politics to the incident with James Richardson, in which Louisa's poverty forced her to demean herself (see Biography section). Stern writes, "[In her thrillers], either anonymously or over her pseudonym of A.M. Barnard, she could vent her fury in several power struggles that reversed the roles of male masters and female slaves" (*FA* xiii). In "V.V.", she certainly details a situation in which Virginie wields power over Victor, her adoring lover. While he has branded his initials on her wrist in a display of physical domination, he has not conquered her spirit. He can physically intimidate Virginie, as he does when he forces her to leave Allan's corpse and follow him, but he really wants to win her love. This places him in psychological submission to manipulative Virginie, who subtly exploits Victor's adoring heart. Victor represents brute masculinity in his forceful attempts to possess Virginie, and by abusing Victor in return, Virginie exemplifies a form of

feminine empowerment. As the tale progresses, Victor becomes increasingly passive, allowing himself to be directed by Virginie because, as he tells the girl, "I will find patience to work on for one whom I try to love for your sake" ("V.V" 123). Yet, despite his frank admissions of love, Virginie remains resolute in her mercenary designs. Though Victor would like to think that he has authority over Virginie, it is she who wears "a smile of conscious power" even as she prepares the young man's dinner.

Virginie engages in combat with Douglas while she is disguised as "Mrs. Vane," a solemn young widow whose modest insinuations ultimately destroy Douglas's intended bride, Diana Stuart. Virginie has determined to win Douglas's affection and, in doing so, attain the wealth he possesses. In conquering the titled aristocrat's heart, Virginie will symbolically elevate herself above the young man and rule him, as she has both Victor and Allan. When Douglas sees her tiny footprint beside the pool in which heartbroken Diana drowned herself, he knows that she is a dangerous source of fury directed against him. However, after he confronts her with his incriminating evidence, she proves that she is still not subordinate to the young man. Though he has justice and truth on his side, Virginie escapes punishment through her death. However, to some readers, her suicide is problematic because it can either be perceived as a final victory or an admission of defeat. After all, Douglas does drive her to desperation by revealing all of her secrets and offering her a detailed description of her future accommodations in a lonely stone prison tower. Yet, Douglas does not win his private war against the enchanting Virginie because she denies him the single thing that would make his victory complete--possession of Virginie. Just as Douglas patronizingly tells her "Escape is impossible,", she responds with the exultant proclamation "I have escaped!" (143). She does not kill herself out of fear or despair but out of a desire to emerge victorious; the poison she had hidden in her opal ring demonstrates that Virginie knew someday she would only be able to "win" by killing herself. In doing so, she again becomes the dominant force in her environment, reducing the men who surround her into powerless, fawning beings who must watch as she eludes their hungry grasp once more.

Jean Muir of "Behind a Mask" is among the most feminist of Alcott's characters; she is a woman whose contempt for patriarchal tradition induces her to use her wits and forceful imagination to infiltrate the wealthy Coventry family. Jean is an excellent actress; when she arrives at the Coventry home, the

thirty-year-old woman successfully assumes the guise of a meek, teenage governess to endear herself to the family. Jean is intelligent, as she reveals when she finally wins dubious Gerald's affection by luring him into her salon and appealing to his sense of chivalric duty. Her wits serve her well, for Jean is a woman determined to win wealth and security by them. As she says to herself early in the tale, "I'll not fail again if there is power in a woman's wit and will!" ("BM" 367), and she reveals her strength as she systematically seduces both young Coventry brothers as well as their elderly uncle. Even when her plots are on the verge of disintegration, Jean continues to follow her early resolution to defeat these men and win the status she desires. As an unmarried woman without family, Jean is physically vulnerable in the patriarchal world she inhabits, and she harbors resentment towards people who wield power. In part, this also accounts for Jean's relentless pursuit of the Coventry men, whom she calls "patronizing" and indolent (425). In Jean's mind, these men do not deserve to rule their small domain, and as she tells Hortense, she will prove their ineptitude. She writes, "they are an intensely proud family, but I can humble them all, I think, by captivating the sons, and when they have committed themselves, cast them off, and marry the old uncle, whose title takes my fancy" (425). Jean assumes the task of proving that a single, manipulative woman can destroy an entire household of aristocratic men, and in doing so, she challenges the patriarchal system at large. She initializes her endeavor not through gentle "influence" or an overt call to arms like so many heroines in Alcott's domestic fiction but by becoming the idealized "angel of the house" who will subvert tradition through her apparent conformity and require the patriarchy to reconsider gender stereotypes.

"Behind a Mask" abounds with sexual power struggles in which Jean Muir allows the Coventry men to believe they are omnipotent until she devastates them with her ultimate ascendancy. Jean is a product of patriarchal tradition; without a father or a husband to define her, she is impoverished and powerless--a victim. Yet, when she enters the Coventry household, she plays the role of an appealing, feminine victim in order to entice masculine chivalry. She transforms herself into a persecuted maiden in need of protection from evil, lusty men like Sydney, and her ploy succeeds. As Keyser indicates, "men have no sympathy with victims of patriarchy such as the destitute, disreputable, and aging actress Jean truly is, but they do sympathize with and derive erotic gratification from the sufferings of young, well-born,

and attractive victims such as Jean appears to be" (*WD* 50). Certainly, Jean wins each man by becoming ultra-feminine, anticipating and fulfilling their every need while allowing them to feel as though she desperately needs them. Winning Ned's heart is a simple task for Jean because he is a romantic boy inclined to admire anyone who flatters his pride, as Jean does when she claims she mistook him for the family heir rather than a younger son. Jean's battle for Gerald's affection is more complex, for she fascinates the reticent heir with her quiet submissiveness. When she reveals to him that young Sydney's lustful advances drove her to attempted suicide, Gerald sees her as a docile girl in need of his robust protection. Won by her false tears, Gerald says, "Miss Muir--nay, I will say Jean, if that will comfort you--listen and rest assured that no harm shall touch you if I can ward it off" ("BM" 399). In her success with Gerald, Jean proves that men are attracted to women who they feel are helpless, for by loving and protecting Jean, Gerald makes himself the source of power in their relationship.

At last, this girl who feigns passivity so well wins the heart of Sir John Coventry, achieving a grand victory over the "proud family" and the patriarchal norms they represent. Sir John is the patriarch of the family, and he emerges as a stronghold of masculine honor. Sir John becomes very enchanted by the governess when she tells him that she is the lowly orphaned daughter of Lady Howard, a very aristocratic woman of eminent family lineage. Before hearing her contrived story, he "merely acknowledged her presence by the sort of bow which gentlemen bestow on governesses" (373). But even Gerald, still suspicious of Jean until she appeals to his own protective urges, notes that "the dear old gentleman is getting fascinated" (392) by Jean and her sad fortunes. As a proud family leader, Sir John can scarcely imagine his noble nephews becoming enamored of a lowly governess, but when she reveals her family history, she becomes a suitable match because title lends her the rank that her character could not. Sir John's concern with class mirrors the preoccupation of his larger social sphere. When she flies to Sir John after her schemes have been unearthed by Ned and Gerald, Jean invites Sir John to believe that she is in love with him. While he initially offered his paternalistic protection to the girl, Sir John is so captivated by her that he finally asks her to be his wife. Jean again plays the role of a persecuted maiden, and Sir John becomes her noble protector against rumor, for he believes that such is his natural role. He says to Jean, "I will make you my wife at once, if I may. This will free you from Gerald's love, protect you from Sydney's

persecution, give you a safe home, and me the right to cherish and defend with heart and hand. Shall it be so, my child?" (415). Sir John envisions himself as Jean's savior, and he still views her as a child--his inferior, rather than his equal. She has so successfully conquered his heart that he does not know he has been defeated by a woman who adopts gender stereotypes only to overcome them. At last, Jean is victorious, for she triumphantly asks Gerald, who knows her passive victim image has been a contrivance, "Is not the last scene better than the first?" (429), as she parades out of the room perched on Sir John's arm. As the master's wife, she has more influence than any of the Coventrys. And, most ironically, she gained her position by allowing men to believe that she was weak and ineffectual. Like Alcott herself, Jean successfully offers a domestic ideal while seething with concealed rage against foolish men and the power they wield in a patriarchal society. Jean's victory is one in which she allows the patriarchy to defeat itself and, through her own wits, she wins from the patriarchy that which it is most unwilling to give women--power.

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truly inspiring, for despite his rank and his wealth, Sybil knows that his cruel actions are wrong, and she boldly confronts him as a dramatization of the sexual power struggle that Alcott believed dominated her society. Sybil becomes the spokeswoman of rationalism in her defense of Nadja, Mouche, and the serfs that Alexis terrorizes, making her an interesting foil to Alexis's role as an impassioned nobleman. In the end, Sybil's tenacity proves victorious, and her character emerges as a model of the true feminist determination to correct the wrongs perpetuated by the patriarchal system.

As Sybil engages in an ongoing power struggle with Alexis, she reveals her fortitude by denying Alexis the accustomed pleasure of watching others obey his commands. Indeed, she requires the prince to learn patience and graciousness--traditionally "feminine" traits that Sybil possesses and Alexis must acquire in order to gain the love of any independent woman. In short, Sybil must wean him from his "tyrannical tendencies" (586). She begins by refusing to view him as her superior but rather as her equal from whom she will tolerate no implacable demands. When she happens upon Alexis preparing to beat his dog, Mouche, Sybil protects the defenseless animal and becomes the voice of reason, calmly asserting that Alexis has no right to abuse his pet. Although he turns purple with fury and threatens to strike Sybil, she will not succumb to Alexis's will by leaving Mouche to be beaten. As Sybil says to herself during the tense confrontation, "I was bent on having my own way, and making him submit as penance for his unwomanly menace. Once conquer his will, in no matter how slight a degree, and I had gained a power possessed by no other person" (591). By defying him, Sybil does gain authority over Alexis, although when she falls and sprains her ankle, he would like to think that she would relent out of physical pain. Yet she stubbornly refuses to allow him any advantage over her indomitable spirit. Such strength directed against Alexis bewilders him, but in his growing affection for her, he becomes more receptive to her entreaties to "[yield his] wishes to the comfort and pleasure of others" (606). In time, Sybil becomes known among the serfs as the "good angel of the house" because simply a glance from her is enough to subdue the tyrant's rage. Hers is a triumph of influence, for after Sybil becomes certain that Alexis has learned to control his temper, she does submit to his marriage proposal. The two are reunited after a serf uprising destroys the house and land, and their love promises to be enduring and androgynous. While he was formerly "male chauvinism personified" (*FA* xvii), Sybil forces him to learn the self-control and self-denial that are traditionally

assigned to feminine virtue. In doing so, she deconstructs patriarchal binarisms, making both herself and her reformed lover straddle the boundary between "masculine" and "feminine." In the end, he is passive: he lovingly tells Sybil she has broken his will, and he submits to whatever she demands. This inversion of traditional sexual politics, in which the woman dominates her husband, is a compelling development in Alcott's fiction. The power struggle has ended, and with Sybil's lingering promise *not* to obey Alexis at the story's close, readers are confronted with the beginning of a bold, new literary era in which a woman's voice demands to be heard and heeded.

Louisa May Alcott was indeed a feminist who used her fiction as a forum in which to discuss woman's place in her society. The question of women's rights was one that colored Louisa's world, and in her various genres of fiction, she explores several different interpretations of a woman's sphere. In her children's fiction, she advocates "domestic feminism," or a belief that women can lead fulfilling lives without sacrificing the sanctity of home. As Sara Elbert writes, "Louisa never questioned the value of domesticity; instead, she challenged the price ordinarily extracted from women like herself" (*HH* 150). Her March novels explore other possibilities for women outside the home while preserving the nobility of a domestic existence for girls like Meg, Daisy, and Beth. The adult novel *Work* follows a similar pattern, although it includes many arguments on behalf of the working women who must sacrifice domesticity in order to become self-sufficient. Alcott's sensation fiction constitutes her boldest assertion of feminist empowerment, for the women in her thrillers consistently engage in sexual warfare against a patriarchal system that would like to silence their unique voices. Perhaps her most overtly feminist work because it was so secretive, Alcott's sensation stories provide modern readers with some insight into Louisa's oppressive world. In imagining a fictional outlet for her rage, Alcott could voice the concerns of her era and envision a realm in which a woman could defeat the forces that tried to limit her authority.

Alcott's literary reputation has been neglected for a century, despite her many contributions to fiction and to literary feminism. Her work consistently debunks the mythology surrounding the "cult of childhood" by presenting many examples of realistic, mischievous children like Jo, Dan, and Josie from the

March novels. She similarly explodes the "cult of romantic love" with her portrayals of companionate marriage in *Work* and *Little Women*. Most importantly, Alcott worked to deconstruct the doctrine of separate spheres in her descriptions of women who successfully enter the public realm. She imagined working women who refused to sacrifice their femininity, and she proved, both through her fiction and within her life, that a woman need not be defined by her husband. Instead, she can be judged on her own merits and function perfectly well as an independent human being. As Mother Bhaer tells her girls in *Jo's Boys*, "our sisters are in earnest, you see, and don't waste time worrying about their sphere, but make it wherever duty calls them" (*JB* 225). Louisa's duty to her countless readers is a highly compelling example of the author's movement to redefine the proverbial "spheres," for Alcott was determined to forge her own place in American society. Through her fiction, Alcott *has* found an honored place in the hearts and minds of her readers, who allow themselves to be inspired and beguiled by the heroines she created over a century ago.

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