

FORUM

Louisa May Alcott's Rhetoric of Love:

A Forum on the 13th Meeting of the European Study Group
of Nineteenth-Century American Literature

(Coordinator: Daniela Daniele)

DANIELA DANIELE (UNIVERSITY OF UDINE)

On October 10 and 11, 2019, the European Study Group of Nineteenth-Century American Literature convened at the Centro Studi Americani in Rome for its 13th Seminar. I coordinated the event and the American keynote speaker was Martha Saxton, whose 1977 ground-breaking biography convincingly framed the art and life of Louisa May Alcott within the American Transcendentalist circle, casting light on her submerged thrillers. On this occasion in Rome, she launched the controversial topic of “Louisa May Alcott’s literature of love” which I turned into the conference title *Love and Misfits in the Fiction of Louisa May Alcott*.¹ This *RSA Journal* forum provides a synthesis of our debate on the author’s modern articulations of love, which boldly questioned marriage and threw light on the celibate condition of many women who embraced it to keep full control of their own careers and the profits deriving from them. In the typically cordial exchange which characterizes the work of this study group, the main focus was on Alcott’s vibrant critique of Victorian marriage; her heroines’ arduous handling of marital relations and personal ambitions in the face of the tyrannical demands of their aged tutors. The queer and incestuous proclivities of Alcott’s protagonists were also detected as a component in their contorted affective bonds with their parents, mates and siblings.

MARTHA SAXTON (UNIVERSITY OF AMHERST AND AMERICAN KEYNOTE SPEAKER AT THE SEMINAR)

Louisa May Alcott’s acknowledged work as well as her pseudonymous stories, written largely in the 1860s, have love at their core. Her famous novels and stories, her plays, and poems treat various currents of love, sometimes free flowing, sometimes dammed up, between siblings, friends, spouses, parents and children, employers and employees, and others. Her pseudonymous stories often look at love’s disappointments, its potential for pathology, and its endless, often surprising permutations. She often portrayed love’s frequent attendant, jealousy – the lessons it could teach, the damage it could do. In both kinds of work, she also wrote about the loss of love, its role in cultivating patience, cheerful sacrifice, and good character.

Love provides the broadest portal into her work, as its presence or absence, its form of expression or renunciation was crucial in shaping Alcott's understanding of people. She endured a turbulent childhood in which love appeared and disappeared at irregular intervals, usually accompanied by explicit or implicit conditions, which she had to divine and try to meet. Her life's work reflects her effort to make sense out of her early experience of the scarcity and unpredictability of this fugitive emotional nourishment. Alcott's poorly matched, impoverished, and idealistic parents powerfully demonstrated the endless work and sacrifice that sustaining a marriage required of wives. She absorbed her mother's view of love and marriage for women as a lifelong challenge to subdue the self and accept service to others as the highest moral calling. But in her pseudonymous fiction, she displayed the tension she felt between the ideal love her mother struggled to enact and the heavy burdens marriage placed on nineteenth-century women. In these works, her heroines revenge themselves on insufficiently caring or unscrupulous men. Love, for better or worse, as a cause for transcendence or vengeance, is a skeleton key to Alcott's work.

LORRAINE TOSIELLO (M.D. AND AUTHOR OF *ONLY GOSSIP PROSPERS: LOUISA MAY ALCOTT IN NEW YORK*, 2019)

It is undisputed that Alcott created a vision of mother-love which might be considered a passion in itself. In chap. XLII of *Little Women* Part II (1869), Jo March boldly declares: "Mothers are the best lovers in the world, but I don't mind whispering to Marmee that I'd like to try all kinds" (343). Alcott's first published story "The Rival Painters" begins with a young artist leaving his mother's embrace to seek his destiny. The humble artist finds himself in a contest with a rich and talented rival, also charged with creating a painting "the most perfect in grace and beauty" in order to win the hand of their master's daughter. While the rival paints the beautiful woman of their affections, the young artist wins the contest by painting his mother's portrait, "the face that first smiled upon him, the heart that first loved" (22). Not long after her first story, Alcott wrote of a dutiful love for a fallen mother: in "Ruth's Secret" (1856), a young woman risks scorn

when her secretive excursions are found to be visits to her alcoholic mother. The love of a mother can inspire great deeds, too, she writes. In *Hospital Sketches* (1863), Alcott states: "I maintain that the soldier who cries when his mother says 'Good Bye' is the boy who fights best and dies bravest when the time comes..." (7). In her children's novels, mother-love drives many a plot: from *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1869) to *Eight Cousins* (1875). In *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886), Josephine March becomes a magnificent mother in her own right, doling out wisdom and love among her charges. In addition to the selfless and sacrificing traits of her mother, Alcott found in Abigail May Alcott a source of encouragement in her artistic pursuits, received a pen from her on a childhood birthday, and words of inspiration to bolster her confidence in her dreams of becoming a writer.

DANIELA DANIELE

I would proceed with Lorraine's opening quotation from *Little Women* Part II which adumbrates a very dynamic, unpredictable notion of love: "It's very curious, but the more I try to satisfy myself with all sorts of natural affections, the more I seem to want. I'd no idea hearts could take in so many; mine is so elastic, it never seems full now, and I used to be quite contented with my family. I don't understand it" (343). Louisa's non-conformism was indeed a legacy of her atypical, utopian family, black humorously though affectionately depicted in *Transcendental Wild Oats* (1873). The complicated affective life experimented in Fruitlands, the community founded by her father Bronson and two British pedagogues, severely questioned the exclusive nature of the conjugal bond, prescribing a sexual abstinence which brought Louisa's mother to the verge of divorce. Bronson's idealism, his extravagance and vulnerability, along with his many coed and interracial educational initiatives were socially ostracized, resulting in material difficulties that Louisa May felt obliged to compensate for. The toxic domesticity which finally brought Bronson's utopia to a close echoed the liberal private policies of the Fabian Society and of the Transcendentalist milieu in which Alcott was raised. The ideology of free love which flourished in the context of proto-Marxist utopias was notably embraced by Henry James Sr. who, unlike his more celebrated son, highly

praised *Moods* (1864), the book for adults in which Alcott depicted the family turbulences witnessed in Concord. The private afflictions and conjugal disasters experienced by those radical reformers are reported in *Transcendental Wild Oats*, the chapter from the fictionalized biography that Alcott planned to write of her parents in the mid-1870s but never finished. However, traces of her profound skepticism about marriage are scattered in a number of short stories which revive, in a tragicomic tone, many of the objections expressed by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). Alcott's acute study of mismatched couples started as early as July 1857 in the form of a book, tentatively titled "The Cost of an Idea," which she only partially developed in *Little Men* (Wilkins 64-65) and, in her typical mixture of fact and fiction, reappears in the restlessness of her "tomboys" and the related "gender troubles" which remain a lively force in her writing. It can also be argued that the essentially matriarchal structure of her family, aptly reproduced in *Little Women*, ultimately proved empowering and liberating for the four Alcott sisters, whose "four-girl" saga is endlessly perpetuated in popular TV series such as *Sex and the City*, *The L World* and *Girls*. These series reactualize on screen the Bildung of the energetic sisters who, in real life, grew into sturdy suffragists, convinced advocates of divorce, enthusiastic travelers and accomplished writers, never tired of claiming an equality in love which Alcott did not see sufficiently reflected in her personal relations.

JELENA ŠESNIĆ (UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB)

Margaret Fuller was one of the first transcendentalists to offer a sustaining critique of the degraded form of marital relations in the Western world, which she contrasts with contemporary cultural and mythological variants across different cultures. While she deplored the corruption of both the spiritual meaning of marriage and its liberal version that affirms the idea of marital union in which man and woman stand as sovereign individuals, Fuller envisioned the possibility of transformation in the rise of a new woman whose spiritual guidance might elevate both men and women to an enlightened form of union. Fuller employs and anticipates a plethora of

female-centered social and affective bonds and networks, on some of which Alcott profitably drew.

Alcott's novel *Work* (1873) points to a rethinking of the domestic sphere, of productive and affective labor for women, in a constant tension between the ties that foster their individual growth and those that reinforced the sentimental agenda of their feminine dependency. The narrative still gropes for viable ways of affirming new modes of connectivity for women in an (intimate) public sphere in which, according to Glenn Hendler (132), they may mobilize their (transcendentally infused) femininity into socially valuable and reforming charity work. Marriage thus continues to figure as an arena of women's growth and experience but is dethroned from its sentimental pedestal as the apex of women's existence. Rather, Alcott manages to portray a self-sustaining community of women, pursuing a truly transformative agenda bound by sentimental ties in order to affirm their independence. In that sense, her heroines mature as they take on new responsibilities and provide spiritual haven to society.

CÉCILE ROUDEAU (PARIS DIDEROT UNIVERSITY)

If Christie Devon is in many ways a woman in love, she is actually in love with experience itself... it is *work* that enables the protagonist of *Work* to find herself. What saves Christie is, as she thought, and as the text leads us to believe, a man's love: her wedding is one of the shortest in the history of American literature, and the melodramatic hesitation between lovers reads like yet another parodic experiment with literary genres. Neither heterosexual love nor a simple reversal of gender roles and attributes within the domestic plot nor even a more audacious queering of desire that the narration introduces as one of the protagonist's experiments, can give Christie what she aspires to. In the novel her husband is conveniently killed, as befits the times and the genre of the sentimental war narrative, but Christie does not become the formulaic spinster nor the tomboy of later 19th-century New England regionalism. As the novel ends, she takes up another task, and is ready for yet another experience – that of mediator between the ladies and the workers, a task she can succeed in, the text insists, because of her past trials.

Written during Reconstruction, *Work* may be more profitably read, according to Epstein-Corbin, as performing, through her transcendentalism, the transition between antebellum sentimentalism and postbellum pragmatism (222). Trial after trial, the reader follows Christie Devon as she turns from actress to activist, from a girl in search of the love that will allow her to forget about herself into a woman in love with experience itself. By subjecting its protagonist's – and the reader's – self to a series of experiential tests, Louisa May Alcott's *Work* is a story of experience as self-regulation, a story, in other words, impelled by a love of (self-) reform indexed on the constant revision of one's adjustment to the social in the light of experience.

JULIA NITZ (MARTIN LUTHER UNIVERSITY OF HALLE-WITTENBERG)

In her 1873 short story, “Anna’s Whim,” Louisa May Alcott specifically engages intertextually with questions of conjugal love in conjunction with women’s education. At the outset, the main protagonist, the young, rich, and beautiful Anna West, complains about upper class women, who are taught to be shallow and flirtatious (including herself) and about men who treat women as fools.

ASUNCIÓN LÓPEZ-VARELA (COMPLUTENSE UNIVERSITY OF MADRID)

Alcott’s life was a continuous round of caring for her family, and in her stories – her “children,” as she called them in her *Journals* (163) – her characters suffer a similar fate. This is also the case of “Love and Self-Love” (1860), an early reflection on marriage as a contract based on friendship and mutual understanding, rather than a condition that holds women back in their struggle for freedom and independence. “Psyche’s Art” (1858) follows the path of two artists: a male (Paul) and a female (Psyche – a classical allusion and also the family’s pet name for Elizabeth Sewall Alcott, Louisa’s sister who died in 1858). While Paul achieves great success, Psyche sacrifices her ambitions for the sake of her family, and the author makes it clear that while selflessness makes people better persons as well as better artists, men must be prepared to sacrifice their “self-love” as much as women do.

"Love and Self-Love" begins with the interrogation: "Friendless, when you are gone?" Basil and Effie base their marriage on equality and can only be satisfied when both realize their self-worth and reach an emotional and economic balance, advancing a theme that continued to appear in Alcott's more popular fiction.

JULIA NITZ

In "Anna's Whim," the restless protagonist wishes to be treated like a man: her wish is granted by Frank who coaches her in the ways of men, and Anna, in turn, teaches him manners. Put to the test here is the equality of men and women and the aims of an education reminiscent of Princess Ida's "whim" to found the women's college announced in Lord Tennyson's narrative poem *The Princess* (1847). Alcott establishes this inter-textual connection by having one of Anna's admirers read Tennyson to her. Both texts give evidence of the miseducation of women in patriarchal society and experiment with the idea of gender equality. They differ, however, in their final judgment of conjugal love and female education. In Tennyson, men and women are different by nature and the marriage vow between Princess Ida and her suitor is a noble union in which each sex fulfills its ascribed role and thereby creates an earthly paradise. Alcott questions such a notion of ascribed gender roles and has her female protagonist stop reading novels and "sentimental poetry," and shows her diligently reading "Buckle, Mill, and Social Science Reports to educate herself" (*Silver Pitchers* 55). As a consequence, Anna achieves self-reliance, confidence and a sense of undaunted affection, being ready to selflessly give up Frank in order to stand on her own two feet, until they relate to each other on an equal footing, sharing their "work as well as holiday" (59).

DANIELA DANIELE

In letting Anna and Frank part in order to achieve equality in love, Alcott reenacts Jo's puzzling separation from her best friend Laurie in *Little Women*. After that abrupt move, most readers continued to wonder why such a passionate equalitarian prevented her autobiographical heroine

from happily marrying her most devoted mate. Before returning to that crucial break-up and to Alcott's Victorian lack of passion, we explored the darker sides of Jo's unexpected marriage to a much older schoolmaster who reappears, under various Oedipal guises, in Alcott's anonymous and pseudonymous tales.

ASUNCIÓN LÓPEZ-VARELA

Alcott always sought a balance between sympathy (love for others) and self-respect, mobilizing attributes of the sentimental novel toward her pedagogical ends. In "Love and Self-Love," which is set in Scotland, the sixteen-year-old orphan Effie Home marries a man twice her age, Basil Ventnor, after being rejected by her rich grandfather. As Sarah Elbert clarifies: "Louisa developed attractions for her own 'older men' [...] above all for Thoreau and Emerson. They were safe objects for her adolescent fantasies, and later the father-lovers of her fiction" (76). Although young Effie develops a great affection for Basil, he does not return her feelings and remains attracted to a previous lover, Agnes, now a widow who regularly visits the couple. Basil is self-centered from the beginning, and Effie's high esteem for him only serves to reinforce his ego. In his uncontested power, Basil is totally oblivious to his wife's increasing depression and lack of self-esteem: "I meant no wrong to Effie, but, looking on her as a child, I forgot the higher claim I had given her as a wife, and, walking blindly on my selfish way, I crushed the little flower I should have cherished in my breast" (Alcott, *Love and Self-Love* 304).

The situation has many similarities to Alcott's own family life, particularly with regard to the emotional outbursts and psychological crisis she suffered in 1858, two years before the publication of this story, and after the horrific suicide of Bronson's brother in 1852 (Reisen 141). In a letter discussing her novel *Moods*, in 1865, Louisa explains:

Self-abnegation is a noble thing but I think there is a limit to it; & though in a few rare cases it may work well yet half the misery of the world seems to come from unmated pairs trying to live their lie decorously to the end, & bringing children into the world to inherit the unhappiness & discord out of which they were born. There is discipline enough in the

most perfect marriage & I don't agree to the doctrine of "marry in haste & repent at leisure" which seems to prevail. I [h]onor it too much not to want to see it all it should be & to try to help others to prepare for it that they may find it life's best lesson not its heaviest burden. (*Selected Letters* 108)

DANIELA DANIELE

This frustrating dilemma haunts the oppressive interiors of many of Alcott's sensational stories, often resulting in a domestic drama of duplicity and deception.

MARIANA NET (UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST)

With Louisa May Alcott, love and acting are often related. Salons and ballrooms are where love is expressed, feigned or dissimulated. In the novellas *Behind a Mask* (1866), *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877) and *The Marble Woman* (1865) love – a basic constituent of identity – is revealed through acting. Contrary to common expectation, acting does not conceal one's real feelings but brings them to the fore. In *Behind a Mask*, Jean Muir, an upstart former actress works as a governess in a genteel family in Victorian England and manages to make all the men in the family fall for her; although her schemes are eventually exposed, Jean Muir succeeds in marrying the elderly titled uncle. In Chapter V, "How the girl did it," Jean Muir plays a part in a pantomime. The only person to spot the real identity of the woman on the stage is Gerald Coventry, her employer's eldest son, who, through a double *anagnorisis*, also discovers his own love for her. Within the framework of the interpretation, it is not an insignificant detail that, on various occasions, Jean Muir is shown to summon up her courage by resorting to drinking.

A Modern Mephistopheles goes a step further: wine is replaced by hashish. As the title plainly indicates, this novella is a re-writing of the Faustian myth. The sophisticated elderly hedonist Jasper Helwyze (as Mephistopheles) endeavors to corrupt the innocent Gladys (as Gretchen), just as he had corrupted her husband Felix Canaris (as Faust). Gladys avoids all the traps Helwyze had laid for her and hides her confused feelings even from herself. Gladys' suppressed self and troubled sentiments are finally brought

to surface under the action of drugs (which Helwyze had surreptitiously administered to her). Then Gladys loses self-control; she acts and sings her part on the improvised stage “with a shrill, despairing power and passion which startled every listener” (Alcott, *A Modern Mephistopheles* 104). In this way, Gladys reveals her real identity but immediately afterwards she dies in childbirth along with her baby. Acting is always dangerous, as is the revelation of one’s real self and even more so the use of drugs.

Drugs – more specifically, opium – are also at work in *A Marble Woman: or The Mysterious Model* (1865), the most complex of the three novellas. Cecil, the heroine, is deeply in love with Basil Yorke, her guardian and then husband, but has to hide her feelings and feign indifference. Yorke believes that she hides indifference behind the mask of the devoted wife, whereas Cecil only pretends to play a part and her simulation proves to be a real ordeal for her. In order to sustain her part, she has to resort to drugs and, in an attempt to give vent to her suppressed feelings, she takes opium. Only then does she dance “like a devotee” (Alcott, *A Marble Woman* 185) and gives a brilliant “performance” (“So well did she act her part”; 184) as a young woman overwhelmed by love. In this way, Cecil finally manages to establish a strong hold over her husband, who falls desperately in love with her. But the revelation of one’s real feelings, as well as the discovery of self, as already mentioned, is always dangerous, as is resorting to drugs. In the novella, this combination of (dis)simulation and drugs leads to an overdose of opium which makes Cecil sleep for 24 hours. A whole day “disappears” from her calendar. “Then what became of yesterday?”, she asks “with a troubled look” (215).

MICHAELA KECK (CARL VON OSSIETZKY UNIVERSITY OF OLDENBURG)

Cecil’s playacting and authentic impersonation of the pretty, loving wife, which results in the obvious frustration of Yorke, draws on the ancient myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. Indeed, love and myth prominently figure in this early sensational novella. In *A Marble Woman*, Alcott adapts the famous love story of Pygmalion and amalgamates it with that of Psyche and Amor by duplicating the figure of Amor in the paternal figures of the sculptor Basil Yorke and the mysterious Germain Stein, the former

being the legal guardian and the latter the biological father of the heroine. Both represent the legal authority of the *pater familias* over the young Cecil (short for Cecilia Stein), yet each stands for a different aspect of Eros: Yorke embodies a love that seeks to dominate Cecil's artistic creativity and procreativity. Here, Alcott ingeniously blends the Psyche myth with that of the sculptor Pygmalion, who desires to have his own creation, Galatea, come to life. While Germain embodies a love that is empowering and exhilarating to body and mind, in the context of the nineteenth-century American fiction of marital unity, the legal status of Cecil's husband is that of her "master" and owner. It is not until Yorke relinquishes his ownership over Cecil and acknowledges her sexual, intellectual, and artistic agency that Cecil succeeds in her quest. Her trials and tribulations run parallel to Yorke's gradual acknowledgment of her desires in body, mind, and art.

About the two father figures in the tale, Keyser has observed that "Germain mirrors the incestuous nature of Yorke's feelings for his adopted daughter" (37) and that, together, they "epitomize the way in which men simultaneously deny and gratify their sexual feelings and exercise power over those whom they need to treat as equals" (38).

ETTI GORDON GINZBURG (ORANIM COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, KIRYAT TIV'ON, ISRAEL)

A Marble Woman conveys a disconcerting image of a femininity that is both childlike and erotic. Cecil's mother is dead, and her biological father is a runaway convict. When Basil Yorke comes to her rescue, he is conquered by her innocent charm and eventually marries her. But what starts as the sentimental plotline of an innocent damsel in distress later plays on the Victorian eroticization of childhood to chilling, Gothic, effect: "Unconsciously, I loved you long before I knew you," confesses Yorke to Cecil in the closing scene of the novella (233). Basil's ambivalent (and inherently Victorian) attitude towards children is further emphasized in the story through the metaphor of the marble statue of Psyche that he sculpts in the image of Cecil. The statue freezes Cecil's beauty and plays down her emotional faculties, but simultaneously turns her into an object to be observed and inspected, subjected to Basil's (male) gaze.

VERENA LASCHINGER, ANNEMARIE MÖNCH, SOPHIA KLEFISCH
(UNIVERSITY OF ERFURT)

At first glance, *A Marble Woman* offers a standard marital plot in which the guardian overpowers the girl and confines her to his house and his exclusive companionship. Cecil withers in the process and changes “from a rosy child into a slender, deep-eyed girl. Colorless, like a plant deprived of sunshine” (144). In this respect, the heroine’s name is symbolical, because “stein” translates from German as “stone.” For the most part Yorke is, like the reader, under the impression that he was the one molding Cecil to his needs just like one of his sculptures. In this respect, *A Marble Woman* anticipates Alcott’s novelistic masterpiece *Little Women*, in which the author marries off her fictional alter ego, the tomboyish Jo March, to a much older husband who does not condone her writing forays into the popular penny dreadful, thus smothering her rebellious nature and artistic passion.

However, read within a new materialist, theoretical framework, *A Marble Woman* employs the marriage theme toward a radically empowering understanding of female artistic agency, which reflects Alcott’s own activity as a woman writer. Alcott, we claim, makes the heroine submit to the societal demands on the true woman and the marriage doctrine of her time to cunningly bend this most romanticized of traps into an unexpected new form. In fact, in the story’s surprise twist, we learn that Cecil refuses to put up with a domineering husband and a passionless marriage and finally makes Yorke change his lifestyle and commit to her as his equal. Together they review their past, reveal to each other the actions that created the unexpected present situation and, in the final chapter, their dialogue foreshadows the course of their relationship in the future. From the delight of “the happy wife” and her husband who is no longer “a miserable man” (237) we can assume that from here on they will regulate their relationship by talking to each other openly and honestly, sharing their interests and negotiating a better married life. Eventually, as adult partners, even their age difference and the possible incestuous fantasy which cast a shadow on their relationship is nullified by the dead body of Cecil’s father Germaine, as we learn that he never was, nor will be, Yorke’s competitor.

Therefore, the story which starts off as the patriarchal fantasy of a young wife molded by and for her older husband's needs turns out to be a model marriage in which Cecil recasts herself as a happy woman artist.

DANIELA DANIELE

As we debated Alcott's "marble women," we were surrounded by the statues of the Palazzo Antici Mattei at the Centro Studi Americani, which provided an ideal art frame, in the Roman neighborhood where Louisa settled during her second European trip. Andrea Mariani lectured for us on the Graeco-Roman sculptures evoked in many of Alcott's art tales, constituting an unsurpassed model for the American literary sculptors trained by Bertel Thorvaldsen, whose creations prominently adorn Washington Capitol. On Saturday morning, we visited the art schools and studios attended by Alcott's sister May, mapped out by Daniele Pomilio, along with the other Roman landmarks of the community of sculptresses led by Charlotte Cushman. These women artists rivaled their male colleagues in securing commissions from both the Vatican and the American Congress, and elevated celibacy as a distinctive element of their creative freedom in the Eternal City.

AUŠRA PAULASKIENĖ (LCC INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY, KLAIPĖDA, LITHUANIA)

In *A Marble Woman* the female protagonist is frequently compared to a nun and the male protagonist also leads a cloistered life. A similar pair of socially isolated or self-isolating characters can be found in *Work*. In Alcott, as well as in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun" (1891) and in her novel *Pembroke* (1894), isolation is often tied to a love relationship going wrong. And since both writers were New Englanders and Freeman only one generation ahead of Alcott, during the Seminar I found it significant to analyze the metaphorical ecclesiastic figures, both male and female, in *A Marble Woman* and *Work*.

H.J.E. CHAMPION (UNIVERSITÉ BORDEAUX MONTAIGNE AND THE UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND)

Life-long resistance to heterosexual marriage did not stop Louisa May Alcott from writing of love, rather, her romantic passions seem to be channeled into her fiction. The author admitted that her own reasons for avoiding the altar were in fact because she had “fallen in love with so many pretty girls and never once the least bit with any man.”² While her celibacy remains a subject of speculation, it can certainly be claimed that gender confusion and queer sexual feelings are to be found throughout her writing. These feelings are often peculiarly intertwined with sisterly love, as in the case of the delightfully genderqueer Jo March who “burn[s] to lay herself on the shrine of sisterly devotion” (Alcott, *Little Women Part II* 257). This homoerotic – borderline incestuous – yearning is explored further in the unfinished *Diana and Percy*. As criticism of Alcott’s work is often framed using biographical details, closer consideration of the intimate relationship between Diana and Percy might allow one to raise questions over the possessive nature of Louisa’s sisterly love for May.

Diana and Percy contains clear biographical parallels, the narrative breaking off abruptly when Alcott, grief-stricken at May’s early death, stopped writing in 1879. Yet, if Diana and Percy are indeed fictional portraits of Louisa and May, what can the reader make of the tender and affectionate relationship between these two characters who kiss and hold one another, their words vibrating with sensual desire? Not only does Diana (Louisa) find Percy (May) “attractive and lovable,” Percy declares her intimate faithfulness to Diana before she leaves for Paris (Alcott, *Diana and Percy* 385).

Similarly, the emotional description of Percy’s departure could be read as one of heartbroken lovers, as she “clings” desperately to Diana, their hearts “swelled to overflowing” (393). Finally, how can the reader understand Diana’s feelings of betrayal after Percy’s marriage as well as her hostile rivalry with Percy’s husband? One could ultimately question whether art and the notion of the artistic genius should be understood literally in the text or rather as a metaphor for something deeper, raising questions once again over the ambiguous nature of family bonds and of sisterly and artistic relationship.

AZELINA FLINT (UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA)

Compared to May's model of female artistry, the one embodied by Jo March in *Little Women* is a troubling one, for she sacrifices her literary aspirations to support her family by writing popular fiction. She viewed her artistic compromises as inevitable for any woman who attempted to combine art with married life. Many of her narratives contain a number of artist-heroines based on her sister in which the heroine is forced to choose between marriage and art, as if the author could not conceive of an integrated person who can be both a woman and an artist without letting her femininity be somehow diminished by her art. Yet, in her personal life, she was confronted with the alternative figure of her youngest sister, May Alcott Nieriker, whose female self-determination could encompass both professional and marital fulfillment. A married painter, May embodied a living challenge to the image of an artist of Louisa who, in the unfinished *Diana and Persis*, began to reconsider her earlier rejection of marriage for women artists, as well as the compromises forced upon heroines like Jo March. Art might beget marriage, but marriage could not beget art. Louisa May's "Happy Women" (1868) described literature as "a fond and faithful spouse" (285), but May's output seemed to refute her sister's cynicism. Despite May's assurances that her marriage enriched her artistic production, Louisa persisted in her assertion that some sort of renunciation is imperative for ambitious women and struggled to create a married heroine who was fulfilled in her artistic career. In *Diana and Persis*, Louisa entertained the feasibility of May's double vocation during the months leading up to her sister's death. In the novel, the key to Louisa's envisaged romantic union is the potential for artistic collaboration, as Diana's union with Stafford demonstrates.

DANIELA DANIELE

Collaboration seemed to offer an equal ground on which an alliance of peers could be secured. The "tomboy" is a perfect embodiment of the harmonious coexistence of opposites invoked by Fuller and incarnates a reversibility of sexual roles reflected, in real life, in the emasculation of Louisa's father and in her own extraordinary empowerment in a creative life devoid of love languors.

RALPH J. POOLE (UNIVERSITY OF SALZBURG)

Adolescent masculinities – which roughly coincide with Alcott’s diminutive expression of “little men” – constitute an experimental ground of genderplay and masquerades at work in many of her stories. I am especially fascinated with the figure of the “lad” which oddly identifies Sylvia Yule in *Moods* (Alcott, *Moods* 20-21). Quite unconventionally, the same term identifies another female character in the 1864 “Enigmas,” a detective story in which another “lad” ultimately turns out to be a woman, in a reversal of sexual roles confirmed by the young master who, in the same tale, “blushes like a shy girl” (Alcott, *Enigmas* 24) and displays a “feminine elegance” (22). There is a distinct homosocial if not homoerotic interest in the way in which the young man gazes on the lad. These moments of genderplay are the way in which the author conveys her genuine critique of patriarchal family life and of unequal marital roles, which ultimately questions and discards traditional gender norms. I would have personally preferred to see Sylvia more adventurous in her gender fluidity and, as Elbert concludes in her introduction to *Moods*, I found it rather disappointing that, as her story unravels, “equality within marriage could be accomplished by self-discipline and good faith” (xxxvi). I was, however, very much and pleasantly surprised by Alcott’s short-story “My Mysterious Mademoiselle” (1869) which offers genderplay with much more radical potential. The bachelor-hero George Vane is tricked into believing that he is assisting a pretty young girl to elope by posing as her husband. Blatantly taking advantage of the situation, he eventually must realize that not only was he flirting with his long-lost nephew cross-dressed as a girl, but that he might harbor amorous feelings beyond the strictly heteronormative parameters. I take this story as an admirable attempt by Alcott to experiment with preconceived gender roles and to suggest spaces of erotic possibilities that have not yet been achieved.

DANIELA DANIELE

This playful cross-dressing brings me back to Laurie, who is the character most sincerely involved in the *Little Women’s* private theatricals. And yet, in “Dark Days,” the 18th chapter of the novel, Jo rejects him. The episode,

in which Jo claims equality in love relationships, is wittily commented by Marlowe Daly-Galeano in *Little Women 150*, the blog conceived by Anne K. Phillips and Gregory Eiselein to celebrate the quincentennial anniversary of Alcott's masterpiece ((<https://lw150.wordpress.com/2018/11/26/xviii-dark-days/>)).

MARLOWE DALY-GALEANO (LEWIS-CLARK STATE COLLEGE, LEWISTON, AND EDITOR OF THE *NEWSLETTER* OF THE LOUISA MAY ALCOTT SOCIETY)

This chapter revealed the chemistry between Jo and Laurie, the proof (in those few kisses) that they belong together. And yes, I know you may be rolling *your* eyes now, because you recognize something I didn't: Jo wants the comfort of a friend; she doesn't want to be kissed by Laurie. When Jane Eyre left Rochester because he already had a wife, I knew that she would go back to him. From these novels that shaped my vision of romantic love, I took away the misguided idea that women should say no to the first advance. How they feel is irrelevant: they should always say no. Next, I learned that saying no opens the door (and the expectation or demand) to say yes later on.

I now understand that these are bad lessons.

But the lesson Alcott teaches in "Dark Days" is much better: after "flying at" Laurie and being kissed by him, Jo clarifies that she does not want anything other than friendship. She will maintain this stance throughout the novel, and, later, when Laurie proposes, Jo will reiterate her position. She does not consent. I missed the message the first time I encountered it in *Little Women*, because I was saturated with romantic myths that obscure the value of consent. I now see how clearly Alcott negates the pervasive and pernicious idea that "no means yes." Jo says no to Laurie once, and she says no again, and again. And that's okay. No, actually, it's awesome.

Notes

¹ Our discussion was based on the following materials selected by Martha Saxton: Eve LaPlante's *Marmee & Louisa. The Untold Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Mother*, 2012, 63-132; Hendrik Hartog, *Men and Wife in America. A History*, 2000, 93-135; Louisa May Alcott, "Anna's Whim" (1873), rpt. in *Silver Pitchers and Independence*, 1876, 47-78; "The Cross on The Church Tower" (1857), rpt. in *On Picket Duty*, 1864, 72-89; "A Marble Woman; or, The Mysterious Model," pseud. A. M. Barnard (1865), rpt. in *Plots and Counterplots*, 1976, 131-88; "Which?," chap. IV of *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873, 1994), 309-34.

² Louisa May Alcott's 1883 interview with friend and poet Louise Chandler Moulton, qtd. in Showalter xx.

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