

Louisa May Alcott's Many Masks: An Encounter Between Feminism and Queer Theory

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This essay makes Louisa May Alcott's multifaceted work into a pretext for an encounter between feminist and queer theory-oriented literary analysis. Alcott's work lends itself particularly well to such a comparative reading not only because it is typically focused on unconventional young women but because it explicitly makes gender identity, social conformity and rebellion, and female (and to a lesser extent, male) homosociality key issues. While much has been written about the ambivalent gendering in *Little Women* (1868) and the powerful heroines of Alcott's more gothic fiction such as "Behind a Mask" (1866), this essay examines not only these well-known texts but also Alcott's two more socially exploratory novels, *Moods* (1865, 1882) and *Work* (1873), as well as other lesser known stories. Special attention is given to the queer moments and possibilities in Alcott's writing and a case made for reading her as a queer writer even though she has never been considered as one and rarely appears in queer literary histories (except, on occasion, as the creator of the famous tomboy "Jo"). The insights about Alcott made available by feminism are placed side by side those suggested by queer theory in order to understand how these two approaches can offer complementary readings.

Louisa May Alcott's literary reputation has undergone a dramatic metamorphosis in recent decades. Long considered a minor writer of popular middle-brow children's books, Alcott emerged as a far more intriguing and complex figure after the publication of her long over-looked pseudonymous thrillers in the 1970s.¹ Feminist critics were happily surprised to discover that Alcott, like Jo, had written "rubbishy tales" with powerful heroines and transgressive plots. The incongruity between her well-known work, which she herself called "moral pap for the young," and the dark potboilers, has been a source of endless fascination (Showalter, *Alternative Alcott* xlii). As the most anthologized of the sensational stories was titled "Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power" (1866), "the mask" became a favored conceit for the tension between Alcott's two genres. The image of the mask implies a false and a true face, with the sentimental stories playing the role of false public persona and the scandalous thrillers that of Alcott's truer face, but this trope is too limiting to be truly accurate. First of all, it ignores the many continuities between the sentimental and the sensational fiction. Secondly, it obscures the importance of that work which falls into neither category, such as her two "serious" novels *Moods* (1865) and *Work* (1872), both realistic dramas about a young woman's life choices, and such short stories as "My Contraband" (1863).

Like Kate Chopin's or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, Louisa May Alcott's critical revival has been the work of feminist scholarship. Although a fervent advocate of women's rights and suffrage, Alcott has nevertheless troubled feminists with her portrayals of female domesticity and self-effacement. In response to this paradox, feminist critics have sought to find traces of subversion under the apparent submission to Victorian female norms depicted in *Little Women* (1868-1869). Not surprisingly, much of this criticism has focused on the tomboyish Jo, Alcott's unconventional alter ego. More recently, critics working under the aegis of queer theory have also begun to explore Alcott's work and, like feminists, have been attracted by the gender-bending Jo March. Yet Alcott has never registered with any force on the radar (or gay-dar, as it were) of gay and lesbian literary history.²

¹ Madeleine Stern, a literature teacher and rare-book seller, along with her life-long business partner Leona Rostenberg, discovered in the 1940s the thrillers that Alcott had published in various magazines either anonymously or under the pen-name A.M. Barnard.

² For example, Claude Summers' *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* contains no entry for her. The interview quotation is from Louis Chandler Moulton's chapter on Alcott in *Our Famous Women* (1883), p. 49, but has been reprinted widely, including in Showalter's introduction to the Library of America edition of *Little Women*, p. xiii.

Nonetheless, Alcott's fiction, including the "moral pap," is at least as full of queer situations and moments as feminist ones. In fact, Alcott's fiction is often responsive to both feminist and queer concerns at once. As a feminist who has found herself increasingly engaging with the paradigms emerging from queer theory in recent years, I welcome the opportunity to create an encounter between the two around a specific text.³ This is not to say that queer critics are not feminists (most are), but to acknowledge that feminism and queer theory often have somewhat different goals and preoccupations. Feminist literary criticism is generally concerned with the representation of women and gender in literary texts, the recovery of women writers in literary history and female perspectives in literature, women readers, and the sexual politics of language.⁴ Queer theory is concerned with exposing the contingent and constructed nature of gender performances, understanding the complex workings of desire and sexuality in literature, and paying attention to the contradictions that attend representations of both hetero- and homosexuality.⁵ Both share a concern with how gender is constructed and represented, and how gender generates, inflects and complicates power relationships, but feminism has been more willing than queer theory to engage with the way women's reproductive capacity has played a key role in their social and sexual subordination. On the other hand, queer theory has been more attentive to the subtleties of sexual desire and its unpredictable effects on gender; it is in fact ideologically committed to the proposition that desire is inherently transgressive and destabilizing.⁶

³ Works focusing on more general theoretical encounters already exist, such as Elizabeth Weed's and Naomi Schor's *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* (1997), which offers a series of essays by distinguished scholars, but this collection is limited both by its level of abstraction (it is a theoretical debate rather than a literary critical one) and its exclusive focus on psychoanalytic feminism.

⁴ Cf. Mary Jacobus, ed., *Women's Writing and Writing About Women*, Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Literary Criticism*, and Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*.

⁵ Cf. Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Tendencies*, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, and Lee Edelman, *Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural History*.

⁶ Lesbian feminism has also staked out a position that differs somewhat from both, exposing the unconscious heterosexism that persists in some feminist criticism and deploring the lack of feminism in queer theory. For the purposes of this essay, I tend to subsume lesbian feminism under feminism insofar as I view lesbian feminism emerging from and using the tools that feminism developed (the heterosexism of some of its practitioners notwithstanding). For an early formulation of lesbian feminism, see Bonnie Zimmerman's "What has Never Been: an Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism." For a more recent overview, see Amy T. Goodloe's "Lesbian Feminism and Queer Theory: Another 'Battle of the Sexes?'" (1994).

In the following essay, I draw on both feminism and queer theory to examine the four issues that struck me as particularly salient to a reading focusing on gender: one, a resistance to gender norms, including notably marriage; two, the importance of homosociality; three, an unusual attention to social performance and dissembling; and four, the unpredictability and intractability of desire. Most of these issues overlap, and some open up into topics that could fill up an entire essay by themselves (such as anger, which has in fact already been the subject of many articles), and I will not discuss them in four neat sections, but rather three interlocking ones. The issue of desire in particular runs like an electric current throughout the other three. My purpose is not to discover whether Alcott was demonstrably straight, lesbian, bisexual, or asexual, but to explore how gender and sexuality are represented in her work and how feminist and queer literary criticism, respectively, can make sense of them.

Resistance to conventional gender roles is the most obvious place to begin since Alcott's most famous work is known both for its seeming conformity to Victorian prescriptions for female behavior and its one magnificent and beloved exception, Jo March. As much as the rest of the book seems to endorse submissiveness, self-effacement and cheerful domesticity for its little women, the tremendous impact of the novel can be attributed to its independent, rebellious, and endearingly awkward tomboy heroine. Eyes often twinkling with mischief or some secret plan, Jo is alive with humor, sparkle, complexity, and playfulness. Both feminists and queer critics have claimed her as their own and all agree that the Jo of Part 1 of *Little Women* is far more attractive than the Jo of Part 2 (*Good Wives*) and *Little Men*.⁷ No one cares much for poor Friedrich Bhaer, the kindly German teacher to whom she inexplicably "surrenders" in Part 2. Feminists have seen in Jo a figure for the trouble faced by all women in their transition from the freedom and creativity of girlhood to the straight-jacket of adult womanhood,⁸ while queer critics see in Jo more specifically the drama of the sexual misfit or the queer adolescent. One has astutely pointed out that Alcott's "perverse" deci-

⁷ See, for example, Catherine R. Stimpson's "Reading for Love: Canons, Paracanons, and Whistling Jo March," p. 967.

⁸ Cf. Elizabeth Janeway, "Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, and Louisa." Janeway is worth singling out for her insistence that "Jo is a tomboy, but never a masculinized or Lesbian figure," p. 98.

sion to make a forced and “funny” match for Jo has made generations of readers into the kind of selective and resisting reader the queer reader often is (Quimby, “The Story of Jo” 4). The question of whether Jo’s resistance to proper nineteenth-century femininity is a straight feminist or a queer one is complicated by the fact that feminism, as it was originally developed by writers like Adrienne Rich and Kate Millet, already had a queer dimension insofar as these scholars argued that all forms of resistance to “correct” femininity were on a continuum with a refusal of compulsory heterosexuality and its institutions.⁹

One could quote Jo’s famous quips about wanting to marry Meg herself and keep her in the family or that “mothers make the best lovers” as evidence of some sort of lesbian desire, but this would be to inaccurately sexualize a desire that merits being recognized on its own terms: Jo’s (and Alcott’s) intense love of family. While it is arguable that any desire has some sort of erotic component, I would suggest that in Alcott’s case home represented everything *but* sexual love. Instead, it meant maternal love, sibling affection, and personal support. Fathers and husbands are secondary figures, if they appear at all. It is in the context of Alcott’s lifelong conception of a home as source of vital emotional support that Jo’s dismay at her sisters’ marriages as well as her own marriage to Professor Bhaer should be read. I am referring here to the widespread critical disapproval of Jo’s metamorphosis into “Mother Bhaer” in *Little Men* and *Jo’s Boys*. In an extreme version of a widely shared opinion, Angela Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant argue that Alcott murders Jo in *Good Wives*, replacing her with “a false Jo, a broken doll, a compliant Beth,” a mutilated *Stepford Wives* version of Jo (“The Horror of *Little Women*” 582). Yet this is not at all fair to the adult Jo of Plumfield. Granted that *Little Men* is focused on the children who live there, Jo is an indispensable presence, providing the complex emotional tone that make both the school and the novel successful.

Moreover, the solution that Alcott has offered her in the form of a home that combines work and family as well as leaving her the freedom in *Jo’s Boys* to continue her career as a writer should not be dismissed. Although Jo is not unmarried like the four heroines of “Happy Women” (1868), she is nonetheless clearly a happy woman. Not only does she get to mix home life with a double career as educator and author, she transforms Plumfield into a feminist social laboratory for two radical social experiments. One is sociological and concerns family reconstitution and redefinition: Friedrich’s two sons from a former marriage live

⁹ Feminist critics and historians have since taken issue with this influential argument. See Sharon Marcus’ *Between Women* (2007) for a thorough examination of this debate, pp. 10-13, 29.

with his and Jo's two biological children, some of her nephews and nieces, and several paying pupils as well as two street orphans. By way of this progressive heterogeneity, Alcott re-imagines the domestic space in terms of affiliation and education instead of kinship. No real difference is made between Jo's biological family and the paying pupils and orphans who live with them. Anyone who is willing to commit to its values, respect its rules and who is ready to love and be loved can belong to the Bhaer family. The second experiment has an equally important feminist thrust, and that is Jo's project to turn rough boys into thoughtful, respectful and home-loving men through a combination of love, discipline and play. Finally, it bears noting that although Plumfield is a school for boys, there are several girls who attend and whose presence is indispensable to the success of the school as a model family and nurturing community. As one critic suggests, Alcott feminizes the genre of the school novel as much as she masculinizes the domestic novel, thus "regendering both" (Lyon Clark, "Domesticating the School Story" 338).

To return to the adored earlier Jo of *Little Women*, there is no doubt that a large part of her appeal lies in her unique combination of creativity and rage. To begin with the former, Jo is not only a tomboy who prefers running and whistling to dresses and frying pans, but she is a writer with a complex inner life. Alcott's description of Jo's writing spells is often discussed by critics but seldom appreciated in their full eccentricity. "Every few weeks," the narrator tells us, Jo would "shut herself up in her room" and "fall into a vortex" of writing which typically lasted a week or two. During this time, she hardly ate or slept, but wrote "with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, unconscious of want, care or bad weather" (*Little Women* 281). The text makes no mention of any household chores disturbing the fury of the vortex and Jo is apparently left alone until the "fit" passes. As a fantasy of female creativity, Jo's vortex represents a kind of utopian version of the madwoman in the attic. Not only does she have a room of her own, she has an understanding family which does her housework and brings her tea while she works. When we consider the frequency ("every few weeks") and duration (a week or two) of these writing spells, we can appreciate more fully why the adult Alcott had such reverence for family life. The blissful vortex Jo enters every few weeks is described almost like a drug experience, where she lives for a while in an "imaginary world full of friends almost as real and dear to her as any in the flesh," yet her family respectfully makes time and space for these spells. Like a shaman waking up from a hallucination, Jo emerges from her room a week or two later, "hungry, sleepy, cross, or despondent" (281). The extraordinary freedom Alcott (and the March family) allows her heroine, as well as her utterly guilt-free enjoy-

ment of it, are clearly part of the envious admiration that Jo excites in her readers of both sexes, but probably more so among girls.

Jo's rebellion against conventional femininity is inextricably linked to her anger, which is made into the key to Jo's personality and the special fault that she must conquer on her Bunyanesque journey towards self-improvement. Critics have written about this issue in some detail, especially the striking way in which the gentle Marmee is revealed to struggle with her own anger every day even though her daughter has never noticed it apart from wondering why she tightens her lips and leaves the room at times (89).¹⁰ From a feminist point of view, of course, the fact that Marmee "folds her lips together" would function as a literalized trope for the way women must keep their mouths and their sexes tightly shut in order to be sufficiently passive and unthreatening to survive in a social order that strictly regulates both female speech and sexuality. Jo's own description of her anger characterizes it as "savage" and sadistic, and she fears it will make her do something "dreadful" (89). As Judith Fetterley points out in an incisive early essay, Jo's anger is thoroughly punished in the novel by its terrible consequences when Amy nearly dies ("*Little Women: Alcott's Civil War*" 380).

In contrast, the potboilers simmer with unpunished anger. The story that won Alcott a prize, "Pauline's Passion and Punishment" (1862), for example, is about a girl consumed by a desire for revenge after being abandoned by her lover for a wealthier woman. Her anger and resentment control her entirely and the story begins with a description of her pacing "to and fro, like a wild creature in its cage" (*Louisa May Alcott Unmasked* 3). Although the title promises a punishment, Pauline's is very light; she is alive and well at the end of the story, though two innocent characters have died. A later story, "La Belle Bayadère" (1870), revisits the same plot line and this time allows the young Indian woman her revenge on a treacherous Englishman without even the pretense of a punishment. The best and most famous example of female rage, however, is "Behind a Mask." The heroine of this story, Jean Muir, is animated by two desires: to lift herself out of poverty through an advantageous marriage and to punish each of the members of the Coventry family according to their particular fault or injury towards her. Jean Muir's letters to a girlfriend, purchased by the spurned younger brother and read to the family at the end, are brimming with malice and resentfulness as

¹⁰ Cf. Judith Fetterley, "*Little Women: Alcott's Civil War*," Stephanie Foote, "Resentful *Little Women*: Gender and Class Feeling in Louisa May Alcott," Karen Fite, "From Savage Passion to the Sweetness of Self-Control: Female Anger in *Little Women* and 'Pauline's Passion and Punishment,'" and Lynette Carpenter, "Did they never see anyone angry before?: The Sexual Politics of Self-Control in Alcott's 'Whisper in the Dark.'"

well as a touch of pathos. Yet Jean Muir not only succeeds in her perfectly meted out punishments of the Coventries, but goes utterly unpunished herself. On the contrary, after securing her prize – the kindly, rich and titled Sir Coventry, the husband least likely to be jealous, invasive or controlling of the three men in the family – she apparently lives happily ever after, according to the text, which tells us in passing that she “faithfully performed” her promise to him in the years to come (*Louisa May Alcott Unmasked* 415).

Feminist readings of this text focused on the precariousness of working women in Victorian culture (on both sides of the Atlantic), particularly governesses, caught between two social classes and subject to constant sexual harassment. They have also recognized the justice of Jean Muir’s anger, stemming not only from the impossible demands made upon her but the dismissive way she and her labor are regarded by the entire family (e.g. Fetterley, “Impersonating” 12). From a feminist point of view, the true radicalism of the story consists in showing Muir as a witch-like confidence woman in the first chapter and then gradually rendering her fully sympathetic and finally triumphant. The revenge fantasy is once more depicted as successful and fully savored.

A queer reading might add to this account the observation that Muir does not herself seem to have any sexual or emotional desire for any of the men (although a feminist might argue that she cannot *afford* to). She seems genuinely happy to acquire the relatively low-maintenance safe haven offered by the eldest Coventry, but this is a question of survival rather than love. While feeling none herself, Muir is an expert manipulator of men’s desire, staging herself in a series of poses and attitudes based on cultural clichés of femininity, exposing both the socially-constructed nature of men’s desire and her own expert, almost *professional*, distance from it. Her only sincere emotional attachment seems to be the woman to whom she addresses the frank letters, and the betrayal implied by this mysterious Gertrude’s sale of the letters to Ned passes virtually unnoticed by the story’s characters and critics alike. The letters could be seen as merely a narrative excuse to have Jean Muir’s plot exposed in her own uncouth voice, but a queer reader might wonder about this untold and unmourned story of betrayed female friendship.

If anger was seen in the nineteenth century as an unfeminine emotion, Alcott’s work explores in vivid detail why it has come to be seen as the *feminist* emotion *par excellence*. Alcott’s sensational fiction, in particular, explores a desire for possession and an abuse of power which is only possible for men given the legal and cultural situation which grants them such extraordinary power over the bodies and lives of women. Some stories, like “Whisper in the Dark” (1863), portray manipulative and abusive male guardians. In this story, a guardian confines a young girl to

an insane asylum in order to steal her inheritance, and her anger at this very confinement is used as evidence of madness. In "The Marble Woman" (1865), a cold and exacting guardian drives his young ward into a morphine addiction, while in "Fate in a Fan" (1869), a greedy father makes his daughter drug young men with a toxic hand-fan before he robs them, leading to her death from repeated exposure to the poisonous fumes. The most powerful and chilling tale of male cruelty, however, is the novel *A Long Fatal Love Chase*, written in 1866 but never published in Alcott's lifetime as it was deemed "too sensational" by publishers (Alcott quoted by Bicknell in "The Genesis" 349). It is a dark story of a girl tricked into a false marriage by an unscrupulous and selfish man. Their seemingly happy marriage turns into a nightmare for Rosamond after a year when she accidentally discovers that Philip Tempest is already married. Rosamond flees in the night and the "long fatal love chase" ends only after Tempest accidentally kills her and then himself.

A Long Fatal Love Chase is probably the darkest work that Alcott wrote and represents Alcott's response to Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), a novel with which Alcott often engaged in her fiction (including "Behind a Mask," as we see from the name "Jean Muir"). As a romantic fantasy, *Jane Eyre* is found wanting by Alcott, particularly in its attempt to portray a lying would-be bigamist reformed into a suitable husband. Tempest is clearly modeled on Rochester, both in his sincere love of the spirited but childlike Rosamond and in his cynical sense of entitlement and exemption from human laws. His better and worse natures struggle within him, but the worse is clearly far stronger from years of indulgence. Not only does he consider Rosamond as his possession, he raises his own son as a house slave, telling him he was found on the streets in Greece, and treating him as a "pretty plaything" (*A Long, Fatal Love Chase* 32). Alcott thus makes a link between the legal status of coverture, under which women became men's property, and the equally archaic custom of treating children as their father's property, suggesting that both could lead to abuse.

The novel mounts a critique of the sexual inequality of Victorian marriage, acutely conscious both of the power that it granted the husband over his wife and of the way it was used as an instrument of social control over single women. An unmarried woman who had sexual relations with a man was disgraced and ostracized, while a married woman lost her legal autonomy and legal rights. In short, marriage offered a woman a lose-lose scenario, in which she was damned if she was not married and damned if she was. Rosamond discovers that Tempest has tricked her into a fake marriage: he could use this circumstance to blackmail her, or he could simply abandon her to destitution and disre-

pute, as happens to Charlotte Temple in the eponymous novel of 1792. The first Mrs. Tempest has refused him a divorce because she would then lose any legal claim to the child she hopes to recover, the boy that Tempest has raised as a personal servant. She has otherwise been able to leave Tempest and live a comfortable if lonely existence thanks to his indifference to her. Rosamond's fate is starkly different because of Tempest's desire for her, which leads to the years of stalking, crime and terror preceding the violent climax.

Furthermore, the famous moment of intense ambivalence that Brontë stages at the instant Jane must decide if she will accept Rochester's proposal to live as his mistress is restaged at regular intervals in Alcott's novel, since Tempest's love is described as sincere and Rosamond's own heart remains perversely loyal to her tormentor. A queer reading would pick up on the way in which desire is represented as transgressive and intractable. Many times Rosamond is described as hesitating, but she cannot entirely forgive and trust him. Her resolve is strengthened at the end by the arrival into the narrative of a man who represents Alcott's ideal alternative to the tyranny of a Philip Tempest: Ignatius, a monk who becomes Rosamond's friend and protector. Although he possesses the "superb muscular power of manhood in its prime," at one point throwing Tempest off a cliff and crippling him, Ignatius also possesses the self-control and self-denial that Alcott exalts in *Little Women* (322). In spite of his love for Rosamond, he offers her only a lifetime of chaste adoration. If Ignatius can be read from a feminist perspective as the kind of protective but safe man who has willingly renounced all male privilege and power, he can also be read from a queer perspective as partly feminized by his absolute self-control regarding desire. Recalling how *Little Women* is a *bildungsroman* of women learning how to master their selfish wills and desires, we can read Ignatius as a male version of that feminine ideal.

I would like to compare this sexless love solution at the end of *Long Fatal Love Chase* with some of the other marriages Alcott writes for heroines who resemble her (independent, principled, innocent, eager to see the world). Of course, the first that leaps to mind is Jo's "funny match" with Professor Bhaer. Alcott explained later that she was under pressure from publishers and readers to marry Jo to Laurie, or at least to somebody, and "out of perversity" she married her to the comic German teacher Jo calls "Sir" even as they agree to wed. Much has been said about this odd pairing, but since Alcott wrote it apparently to please others I would rather look at the marriages she devised in the books she wrote more for herself, *Moods* and *Work*, both of which nevertheless feature marriages of equally sibling-like chastity. *Moods* was published in the immediate wake of the success of the first thrillers (including "Paul-

ine's Passion") and represents an attempt to write a novel of ideas. In the 1883 interview, Alcott looks back on it as the book into which she put the most "time, love, and hope; it is much truer than people suppose" (Moulton, "Louisa May Alcott" 47). She also wrote later that she was trying to explore and portray the dangers of an inconsistent character and faulty upbringing, but the novel seems to be, and was taken to be, about marriage and desire.

Clearly an alter ego for Alcott herself (as her later interview confirms), Sylvia Yule is a seventeen-year-old girl who, like Jo, is a restless tomboy on the verge of womanhood. Although sweet and intelligent, she has one flaw: an inconsistency of character we might call a (normally) fluid subjectivity but which Alcott describes as "moody" (*Moods* 157). This notion is taken from a passage by Ralph Emerson: "Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows us only what lies in its own focus" (Emerson, "Experience" 233). Although Emerson's description of life as a train of moods is neutral and descriptive, Alcott's application of this idea to her protagonist turns it into an anxious moral study of a life going wrong. Still scarcely more than a child, Sylvia finds herself confronted with two would-be lovers, the brotherly Geoffrey Moor and the exciting Adam Warwick. The resulting situation is a staple of Victorian literature, the dilemma of a young woman choosing between a nice boring man and an exciting but unpredictable one. Lacking in experience and reliable judgment, Sylvia cannot negotiate the complications of courtship in which she suddenly finds herself. Warwick is more attractive to her, but he also seems to be engaged to a Cuban girl, and when he disappears without an explanation, Sylvia surrenders to Geoffrey Moor's gentle but insistent wooing. Warwick returns and declares his love for her, at which point she realizes she has made a mistake in marrying Geoffrey and really loves Adam. Her first impulse is to resign herself to a lifetime of secrecy and self-discipline (a life in the closet, as it were), but she soon betrays herself by speaking of Adam in her sleep. The chastened Geoffrey leaves for Europe while Sylvia resigns herself to solitude.

To return to the question of marriage, *Moods* is extremely suspicious of the passionate union that a marriage with Adam Warwick seems to represent. Warwick, as the naughty pun in his name seems to suggest, is dangerous for Sylvia. His wise spinster cousin, Faith, whom Sylvia seeks out for advice, warns Sylvia that Warwick "demands and unconsciously absorbs into himself the personality of others, making large returns, but of a kind that only those as strong, sagacious, and steadfast as himself can receive and adopt to their own individual uses, without being overcome and possessed" (329). This enigmatic passage, depicting Warwick

as a giant human sponge, is meant to suggest that the “moody” and pliant Sylvia would not survive a marriage with him. She would be “overcome and possessed.” It is striking how Alcott reverses the fear of engulfment, stereotypically associated with a male fear of the feminine, into a danger *for the woman* from the man. Philip Tempest’s “long fatal love chase” can also be viewed as a variation on this invasive, overpowering male force. Thus, the most obvious feminist reading of *Moods* would focus on how it registers the dangers that await a young girl embarking upon her life, especially when her main desire is for experience of the world, whereas what she gets is a choice between two men, both of whom seem to be wrong for her.

The novel also offers a rich field of possibilities to a queer reading, with its “odd” heroine, secret love, queer triangle, and intense homosociality. Although Sylvia is not quite so explicitly boyish as Jo, she is still rather unconventional. Her voice, instead of being girlish, is “full and low as a matured woman’s,” and (in the first version) she first attracts Moor’s admiring attention by gardening in boy’s clothing, appearing initially as “a strong-armed and sturdy” boy before being recognized as a girl (164). The narrator frequently dwells upon the “discord” and “want of harmony” in her face, at one point being described by the narrator as “odd,” a word that Terry Castle has argued has served as something of a lesbian code word (*The Apparitional Lesbian* 9-10n). A queer reading would notice the intensity of Moor’s initial attraction to the slender “lad” in the garden, not to mention his own femininity. One of Alcott’s typical brother figures, Moor is defined by the fact that he had nursed a sick sister for five years until she died, an experience which had killed all his “old desires,” leaving him with “all that was best and sweetest in a man,” and “no longing . . . so strong as that for a home” (181). Adam Warwick is the exact contrary, an unpolished adventurer, noble and good, but hard and restless. In the first edition, we first see him cruelly breaking off an engagement with a Cuban woman for no particular reason, whereas in the second edition he is introduced in the act of saving Sylvia from being swept away by a rising sea tide. Intelligent as well as manly, he is reading Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in the first chapters of the novel (*Moods* 207). If Moor represents brotherliness, Warwick clearly represents sexual desire (in both its power and its instability).

The novel gets even queerer as the two men form a love triangle with Sylvia, and when she inadvertently confesses her secret love to Geoffrey, he sails off to Europe for a year . . . with Adam. The scene just before they return home to America is startlingly tender and affectionate:

Warwick laid an arm about [Moor's] shoulders as he had often done of late when they were alone, drawing him gently on again, with a touch of playfulness to set both at ease, –

“Tell me your plans, ‘my cup of gold,’ and let me lend a hand toward filling your brimful of happiness. You are going home?”

“At once; you also.”

“Is it best?”

“Yes; you came for me, I stay for you, and Sylvia waits for both.” (350)

Not only do the two men clearly love each other, they seem remarkably at ease with their triangular situation with the absent Sylvia. Alcott seems to have found no solution to this queer dilemma besides making Adam conveniently die in a shipwreck to save Moor's life as they are returning. Just before jumping into the stormy sea, they say goodbye in case they are separated: “In the black night with only Heaven to see them the men kissed tenderly as women, then hand in hand sprang out into the sea” (353). The history of queer American literature allows us to recognize in this scene a number of tropes that are characteristic of queer writing, i.e., the sea, the darkness, holding hands, the plunge into the unknown, the tender kiss. This scene could have been written by Walt Whitman, and in fact, all the elements I have just listed *were* written by Walt Whitman into the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which contained the poem “Calamus” for the first time.

Recognizing the gay male tropes in this scene invites a deeper look at the friendship between Sylvia and Faith, Adam's unmarried thirty-year-old cousin. When Sylvia seeks advice and solace from her, the discussion ends with Faith gathering Sylvia in her arms and crying together with her in a tender embrace. The scene is described thus: “Leaning on each other, the two hearts talked together in the silence, feeling the beauty of the tie kind Nature weaves between the consoler and consoled. Faith often turned her lips to Sylvia's forehead, brushed back her hair with a lingering touch, and drew her closer, as if it was very sweet to see and feel the young creature in her arms” (*Moods* 332). Although potentially motherly, the embrace is both intense and drawn out, as both women evidently enjoy the physical contact. In fact, Sylvia has been longing to lay her head on Faith's bosom from her first sight of Adam's “shapely and tall” and “singularly attractive “cousin, who lives by herself in a little house in the hills. Described as a “right womanly woman,” at thirty, Faith is also hardly a matron. A queer reading of the scene might point to the fact that as the cousin of the man Sylvia loves, Faith might be attractive as a kind of queer proxy for the dangerous and forbidden male lover.

The question of whether such a scene should be regarded as homoerotic or merely friendly in a loving sisterly sort of way touches on an important point of controversy within feminism itself. Adrienne Rich argued in the influential essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality" (1977), that all female resistance to heterosexuality could be located on a "lesbian continuum," and that physical love between women was just one end of a wide spectrum of friendships, solidarity networks, and supportive and affectionate relationships (239). This notion allowed scholars to see a continuity between political and personal refusals to participate in conventional femininity and the choice to love other women and their bodies. There is also a certain critical tactfulness and pragmatism in not requiring evidence of genital sexuality as a condition for recognizing the intense and exclusive emotional bonds between women. On the other hand, the "lesbian continuum" was criticized by women who identified themselves as lesbian and felt that this blurring of boundaries between lesbianism and nonsexual female solidarity once more erased the specificity of lesbian sexuality, which has traditionally struggled with invisibility.¹¹

The problem of female homoeroticism in Alcott is further accentuated by the tradition of female romantic friendships in the nineteenth century, which made physical demonstrations of affection acceptable within the conceived norms of girls' friendships. While some of these friendships were undoubtedly physical and erotic, most probably weren't. Moreover, Sharon Marcus' recent study demonstrates that not only were friendships between women generally suffused with romantic rhetoric and intensity, but that even sexual relationships, when adopting the terms and outward appearance of heterosexual marriages, were surprisingly tolerated among the cultured middle classes. Marcus takes pains to argue that neither one posed a threat to heterosexuality, and were perceived instead as essential components of Victorian ideas about both femininity and marriage. In light of all these factors, it seems all the more difficult to read the tender moments between Faith and Sylvia, which are scarcely more suggestive than the norm for women's friendships. In fact, according to Marcus' argument, even if these moments were understood as eroticized, they would still not necessarily be construed as an alternative to Sylvia's marriage to a man, but as a prelude and/or complement to it. However, Alcott can perhaps help to nuance Marcus' own argument, which seems to have swung the pendulum far in the opposite direction from Rich's. Instead of all female alliances constituting a resistance to institutionalized heterosexuality, in Marcus' reading

¹¹ Cf. Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*.

of Victorian culture none do. I would like to insist on the fact that in Alcott's non-sensational fiction the intensity of the female friendships far exceeds that of any male-female couple.¹² In *Moods*, for example, Sylvia's immediate attraction to, confidence in, and physical affection for Faith stands in stark contrast to her tepid marriage with Geoffrey and her passing attraction to Warwick's adventurous life.

A passionate female friendship is also the principal drama in *Work, A Story of Experience*, an episodic novel about a young girl's work experiences from the age of eighteen to forty. After working as a domestic servant, actress, governess, companion to a mentally ill girl, and finally a seamstress, the cheerful and dynamic young heroine, Christie, meets a reserved girl named Rachel and is immediately attracted to her. Watching her with "covert interest," Christie "wooed this shy, cold girl as patiently and gently as a lover might," rewarded at first only by blushes and even more reserve (104). Yet the girl's eyes "seemed to appeal to her with a mute eloquence she could not resist," and Christie finally overcomes Rachel's resistance, kisses her warmly and asks her to move into her room. The idyll proves short-lived as Rachel is soon exposed by a prying coworker as a fallen woman, tainted by some unnamed sexual trespass (which we learn later was a sexual relationship out of wedlock), is fired from the sewing workroom and leaves town. Christie, who has been cheerfully single up to now, is devastated by this loss and passes a year in what is clearly a state of heartbreak: "Her heart was empty and she could not fill it; her soul was hungry and she could not feed it; life was cold and dark and she could not warm and brighten it" (115). As she is about to commit suicide, she is saved miraculously by Rachel herself, who guides her to a kind woman's house and then disappears again.

After a long emotional convalescence, Christie falls in love with another of Alcott's typical brother figures. Like Ignatius of *A Long Fatal Love Chase*, David Sterling has vowed to forego romantic love as a form of personal penance. Defined by self-denial and domesticity, David is able to fill the empty place left by Rachel because he turns out to be . . . her brother. In fact, David is described more broadly as "a brother of girls . . . a man . . . who has 'a clean heart to love all women as his sisters'" (267). His relationship with Christie is almost entirely devoid of carnality, as they spend their entire year-long engagement living as siblings in David's mother's house. When David leaves for the Civil War less than three weeks after their wedding, Christie follows him as a nurse until he is killed in action soon after. Christie continues to live with Rachel, David's mother and the daughter that is born nine months after

¹² In the potboilers, heterosexual love may be passionate but also tends to be seasoned with manipulation, domination and hate.

the wedding and long after David has died. The ending of the novel, in the chapter "At Forty," shows Christie happily surrounded by her daughter and women friends, "a loving league of sisters, old and young, black and white, rich and poor" (343). As she is about to embark on a new career as mediator between working women and genteel reformers, the homosocial ending is clearly political in its vision of female solidarity and affection. The novel leaves no doubt of its feminist commitment to women's right to fair and meaningful work, which Christie stipulates to David as a condition for their marriage. However, looking at the novel from a queer perspective, it is hard not to notice that Christie's relationship with Rachel seems far more intense than her chaste and sisterly marriage with David.

This might be the moment to come back to that famous quotation in which Alcott speaks of falling in love with "pretty girls" rather than men, and to suggest that perhaps the reason the marriages in her work seem so tame, chaste, or downright "funny," as she calls Jo's and Professor Bhaer's, is because she herself loved women more than men. The entire passage of Louis Moulton's biographical sketch of Alcott deserves to be quoted:

How well I remember the humorous twinkle in her eyes, which half belied the grave earnestness of her manner, when she told me once that she was inclined to believe in the transmigration of souls.

"I have often thought," she said, "that I may have been a horse before I was Louisa Alcott. As a long-limbed child I had all a horse's delight in racing through the fields, and tossing my head to sniff the morning air. Now, I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man's soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman's body."

"Why do you think that?" I asked, in the spirit of Boswell addressing Dr. Johnson.

"Well, for one thing," and the blue-gray eyes sparkled with laughter, "because I have fallen in love in my life with so many pretty girls, and never once the least little bit with any man." (49)

Although critics have often quoted the last sentence, no one has quite taken Alcott at her word. Perhaps it seems too unthinkable that a woman would confess so openly to being a lesbian in the nineteenth century. The very term "lesbian" scarcely existed in its current sense, and the term "homosexual" had not yet begun to be current.¹³ Was female ho-

¹³ The term "lesbian" apparently began to assume its current meaning only in the 1870s, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Otherwise, the words "tribade," "uranian," and "Sapphist" were used in the course of the nineteenth century to designate women who slept with women. The word "homosexual" also only appeared in print for the first

mosexuality still so far off the cultural map that Alcott was able to make this statement with no fear of raising eyebrows? Or was she able to make it knowing that no one took female sexuality seriously enough at that time to take her avowal seriously? It is interesting that Moulton insists twice in the passage that Alcott's eyes "sparkled with laughter" and had a "humorous twinkle, which "half belied" the "grave earnestness" of her manner. If Alcott was serious, as her manner half suggests, Moulton would be the first of many critics to simply assume that she is joking and attribute twinkling, sparkling and any number of synonyms for winking to her at this moment. One can also wonder what it means that Alcott's eyes only "half belied" her earnest manner. Is there another half that we may be allowed to believe?

It is also interesting to note that Alcott states her desire for girls as a first order of things, and from this fact she makes an inference about her gender, imagining herself in the terms of the reigning trope for homosexuality at this time, inversion, according to which men and women had different minds or souls which could then be "trapped" in the wrong body.¹⁴ Queer critics have discussed the latent heterosexual presumption in this trope because it imagines homosexuality in terms of heterosexuality (since only a man can desire a woman, a lesbian must be a man trapped in a woman's body, and vice versa).¹⁵ It is significant that Alcott muses that she must be a man because she likes pretty girls and not because she acted like a boy when she was a child. This behavior is attributed instead to the fanciful conceit of having a horse's soul (as in the story by Edgar Allan Poe), which recalls the way Jo is described as a "colt" in *Little Women* (10). Critics never quote the bit about having a horse's soul because it casts the idea of having a man's soul into a far less serious register. It also undermines the desired effect of having Alcott seem to identify herself as masculine in a broadly inclusive and behavioral sense, whereas she clearly limits it to the question of desire.

time in 1869, and neither "lesbian" nor "homosexual" were widely current at the time of Alcott's interview. Sharon Marcus describes female marriages and other relationships in her book, *Between Men*, yet even her nuanced and exhaustive study does not provide a clear blueprint for how to understand Alcott's frank acknowledgement of exclusively same-sex desire in its cultural context.

¹⁴The OED Supplement records uses of "invert" in the 1890s and cites John Addington Symonds, Aubrey Beardsley, Henry Havelock Ellis and the English translation of Richard Krafft-Ebing. According to Melanie Taylor, Krafft-Ebing describes female sexual inversion as "the masculine soul, heaving in the female bosom" ("The Masculine Soul" 288-289). This was the most common Victorian understanding of homosexuality, i.e. as an inversion of sexual "souls" and bodies.

¹⁵ See Christopher Craft, "Kiss Me With Those Red Lips": Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, p. 114, and Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 87.

The point that I would like to emphasize here is that it is not necessarily useful or critically accurate to identify Alcott as “boyish” or “masculine” just because Jo identifies with boys in *Little Women*. Although Alcott, like Jo, liked to run, whistle, and play with boys, this hardly suffices as an argument that she was “really” a boy inside. Surely our far more flexible notions of girls’ behavior would not label Jo as a boy but view her a normal child. Moreover, if we look at Alcott’s fiction, it would be unthinkable to identify it as demonstrably “masculine” in its style or subject matter. This is not to dismiss the possibility that Alcott felt some gender alienation, as many women do, or perhaps more than most women, but it is rather a suggestion that we remain flexible in our suppositions regarding her gender identification and sexual feelings, and that we not lump the two prematurely together. As Eve Sedgwick argues in *Epistemology of the Closet*, sexual definition and gender definition are not the same thing (27-35).

Before turning to my last section on the theatricality of everyday behavior in Alcott, I would like to briefly describe a little-known story she wrote which presents the issue of same-sex desire in a light-hearted and campy way. In “My Mysterious Mademoiselle” (1869), a man is attracted to a lively young girl who turns out to be his own nephew. The boy has dressed as a girl in order to sound his uncle’s character and arranged to be alone in the same coach with him. The uncle flirts shamelessly with the “pretty blond school-girl” only to discover after a long dark tunnel (Freudians take note!) that she is a “handsome, black-haired mischievous lad.” The “young rascal” was looking at him with “such a world of fun in his fine eyes” that the uncle “tingled all over with a shock of surprise which almost took [his] breath away” (*Louisa May Alcott Unmasked* 729-730). After a detailed explanation, the uncle and nephew are both wet-eyed and very happy. Upon their arrival in Nice, they “shook hands, manfully, and walked away together, laughing over the adventure with my mysterious mademoiselle” (732). The story is not only striking for its playful treatment of same-sex desire, in which the uncle flirts aggressively with the girl who is actually a boy, but for the complete success of the nephew’s impersonation of an irresistible blond maiden. The stretch of the imagination that such an improbably perfect performance requires leads me to my last topic, which is that of the frequency and excessiveness of precisely these kinds of dramatic transformations and performances in Alcott’s fiction.

While the March family saga is clearly concerned with learning how to “act” properly in everyday life, the sensational fiction is entirely about improper uses of acting, i.e., dissimulation and deception. Many of the characters are professional actors and actresses. Yet, even when the characters are not stage professionals, they perform or “act” constantly,

especially in order to conceal their emotions and even more especially in order to conceal their love or desire for someone. This tendency is already present in Alcott's very first novel, *The Inheritance* (written in 1849), a melodrama about a young orphan raised as a companion to a girl in a wealthy English family. The novel focuses mainly on how well she conceals both her sorrows and desires from most of the other characters in spite of her constant blushing.

In Alcott's later thrillers, not even a blush will betray the more expert manipulators, such as Jean Muir or Virginie Varens of "V.V., Or Plots and Counterplots" (1865). One of the most memorable moments in "Behind a Mask" is when the seemingly blithe young governess is described as removing her "mask" in the privacy of her room:

Still sitting on the floor she unbound and removed the long abundant braids from her head, wiped the pink from her face, took out several pearly teeth, and slipping off her dress appeared herself indeed, a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least. The metamorphosis was wonderful, but the disguise was more in the expression she assumed than in any art of costume or false adornment. Now she was alone, and her mobile features settled into their natural expression, weary, hard, bitter. She had been lovely once, happy, innocent, and tender; but nothing of all this remained in the gloomy woman who leaned there brooding over some wrong, or loss, of disappointment which had darkened all her life. (366)

This scene is uncanny for at least two reasons. One is the startling ambivalence of the description of the character: while exposing her as an almost witch-like con-woman, the narrator also emphasizes the woman's hard life and suffering, thus immediately and powerfully soliciting readers' sympathy.

However, an even more important source of uncanniness in this passage is the fact that it is difficult to imagine a wig, some makeup, and a few false teeth permitting a "weary, hard, bitter" woman of thirty-something to look like a teenager. The narrator specifies that the disguise lay not so much in the accessories but in the change of expression, and this is where Jean Muir's background as an actress seemingly comes to her aid. Yet, even taking her stage skills into account, her performance exceeds the realistically credible. She seems able to control all her supposedly involuntary physiological reactions such as blushing, blanching, weeping, trembling, dilation of eyes, and heartbeat. In fact, she masters all her bodily symptoms of fear, anxiety, and especially desire. She is thus able to both feign and conceal these feelings perfectly.

The most obvious way to tackle this issue from a feminist perspective is to discuss the limited and contradictory roles expected from

women in Jean Muir's position, or from women in general. This is the way that critics such as Karen Halttunen, Judith Fetterley and others have read this text. One could also discuss the contradiction inherent in the way women were praised for being innocent and sincere even while their subordinate position guaranteed their necessary dissembling in order to survive. In other words, a feminist perspective would place the theatricality of Jean Muir's behavior in the context of the self-control and self-effacement demanded of women by Victorian society.

However, it seems to me that the quality of the performance attributed to Jean Muir is of a still greater and stranger order. It borders on the supernatural, and yet it is typical of the acting skills of Alcott's characters in the sensational fiction. It reveals an obsessive concern with the body as a source of signs, and an obsessive need to control the signs emitted by the body. More than anything else, it is love and desire that needs to be either duplicitously displayed or carefully hidden. Love is the only weakness, the single greatest calamity that can happen to a character in one of these stories, and is the main cause of many a character's downfall. Feeling love is a punishment in itself, and the signs of the presence of this feeling are all described in the lexicon of betrayal. Desire is "betrayed" by symptoms such as a flushed face, bright eyes, or rapidly beating heart, and the most skillful players in Alcott's racy narratives are able, like Jean Muir, to discipline their bodies not to betray them by these observable signs.

Although this problematic can be discussed from a feminist perspective, queer theory can possibly do more justice to its odd intensity. The single most important work written on the question of the visibility of homosexuality is Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), which discusses the way dissimulation became the over-arching fact of homosexual existence in the wake of Victorian pathologization and criminalization of homosexuality. Thomas Yingling's study of the poet Hart Crane offers an equally pertinent insight into the importance of bodily control: "The gay absorption into signs, meanings, interpretations, and art is related to the fact that for the homosexual the 'problem of homosexuality' is in fact a problem of signs . . . One is taught young, for instance, that homosexuality is a semiotic, that there are *signs* of it, and that one ought not to produce those signs" (34-35). Yingling's argument is perhaps more historically accurate for the twentieth century, but it may suggest a context in which to read the obsessive concern with the control of the body that we find in Alcott. While her juvenile fiction shows characters struggling with their lessons in good manners and self-control, and not always succeeding, the sensational fiction presents a fantasy world where people possess perfect control over the identity

they project and their feelings, and can manipulate all bodily signs at will.

To conclude, Alcott's work not only presents a rich field of study for the feminist and/or queer critic, it presents many unsolved mysteries. This essay has tried to tease out some of these strange moments – the queer triangles, the extreme performances of self-control, the brotherly husbands, and odd intensities of friendship – which both solicit and resist the reader's attempts to understand them. In the spirit so present in this SPELL volume of resisting binary oppositions, I have tried to show that Alcott was both a feminist writer and a rather queer one. Without making any claims about Alcott's affections beyond what she herself said, it is clear that her work lends itself extremely well to queer readings. Nevertheless, the historical Alcott may very well always remain behind her mask of fiction: a "mysterious mademoiselle."

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