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Part 1

Classic Texts

1

Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (1868–9)

Introduction

Nicola J. Watson

Origins, composition and reception

The publication of *Little Women* in 1868 arguably inaugurated a founding myth of American girlhood, ensured the success of the transatlantic phenomenon of ‘fiction for girls’, and contributed importantly to the genre of the family story. The story of a family of four girls and how they grow up during the American Civil War and its aftermath, it became an instant classic on both sides of the Atlantic and has never been out of print, successively issued in many different editions after the first which was illustrated rather clumsily by Louisa’s sister, May, the model for Amy. It has appeared abridged and in school editions. It has served as the basis for a number of classic stage, musical and film adaptations, most notably those starring Katherine Hepburn (1993) and Winona Ryder (1994) as Jo. It has been translated into almost every world language. At once subversive and sentimental, it describes even in today’s America a powerful nostalgia for uncorrupted domesticity; as recently as 2003, the tableau of the March sisters exquisitely rendered into doll-form formed part of the White House’s Christmas decorations. In modern Britain, it maintains a different but still high profile: in 2007, it was ranked as eleventh in the list of books people could not live without, in an on-line poll for World Book Day, and this ranking rose to seventh if only women’s votes were counted.

Yet *Little Women’s* classic status may have served as much to conceal as to reveal its originality and unusualness in the canon of children’s and adult

literature alike. As successive covers to illustrated editions have repeatedly asserted in their depiction of the tableau of the girls clustered around their mother, this is, after all, a book about girls together. It is rare in its deeply felt celebration of the bonds between women, whether mothers and daughters or between sisters, and its concomitant treatment of the compulsions of the heterosexual love-plot largely in terms of the threat it poses to the family at its centre. Depicting the struggles of girls to negotiate the conflicting demands of growing up into women, this is teen fiction before there were teens; and despite the whiff of costume drama that clings to it, it has remained relevant and powerful for today's girls.

Origins and composition

Little Women, subtitled *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. A Girls' Book* was groundbreaking both in terms of Alcott's own writing career and in terms of the market for fiction. Alcott had specialised (under a pseudonym) in lurid romances and thrillers, blood-and-thunder adventures and the Gothic sensation story for adult readers, and had under her own name been writing fantasy stories for the child-market, before she turned to producing 'a lively, simple book' 'for girls' (Alcott 1997: 166) at the urging of the publisher Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers, Boston. Girls' stories at the time, according to Charlotte Yonge, tended to 'high romance or pure pathos' and it may have been Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856), also a heavily autobiographical family chronicle set in modern times and featuring an awkward adolescent girl, that provided Alcott's model (Wadsworth, p. 39, below). In contrast to Alcott's previous output, and to most of what was on the market at the time, *Little Women* was realistic in mode. It relied heavily on Alcott's own memories of childhood games, pastimes and family conflict, depicting herself as Jo, her sisters and mother, drawing a veil over her brilliant father's many incompetencies, and sketching her subsequent home, Orchard House in Concord, Massachusetts as the Marchs' house. As she said herself, it was 'not a bit sensational, but simple and true, for we really lived most of it; and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it' (Alcott 1997: 167). However new in mode, the aim of *Little Women* was congruent with the ambition of earlier stories for girls, to help them become 'wives and mothers of [a great] race' (Salmon, p. 45, below).

Reviewed well on publication (despite cavils at the play-acting and at the use of slang, toned down for later editions), *Little Women* had an instant success, and there was an immediate call for sequels, supplied over following years with some reluctance by Alcott – *Good Wives* (1869), *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886). Confusingly, *Little Women* is often the title

under which its immediate sequel, *Good Wives*, also goes. This is because although Alcott published these two volumes simply as *Little Women* and then *Little Women Part 2*, in Britain, where the titles were pirated almost simultaneously, publishers invented new titles to differentiate them, including *Little Women Married*, *Little Women Wedded*, *Nice Wives* and *Little Wives*. Eventually *Good Wives* was adopted uniformly (Carpenter and Prichard 1984: 322). As a result, what moderns understand as *Little Women* may be one or both parts; however, American critical tradition has usually read the book in terms of the ending of the second part, so viewing the two volumes as a whole.

Reception/critical terrain

Little Women was to exert considerable influence on the subsequent development of the girls' story in North America; arguably, it is the mother of the *What Katy Did* series, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, the *Pollyanna* stories and the *Anne of Green Gables* series, all of which combined domestic detail with tomboyish girls striving to overcome their natural indiscipline to find a place in society and a husband without compromising their own personalities. It has exerted a well-documented hold over women writers' imaginations (and indeed, over some men's), whether they have 'liked' it or not. So the feminist Simone de Beauvoir wrote of her identification with the tomboy Jo: 'I identified myself passionately with Jo [S]he was much more tomboyish and daring than I was, but I shared her horror of sewing and housekeeping and her love of books' (Alberghene and Clark 1999: xv). Gloria Steinem reflected too upon the possibility of modelling female behaviour according to the novel: 'Where else . . . could we have read about an all-female group who discussed work, art, and all the Great Questions – or found girls who wanted to be women and not vice versa?' (Alberghene and Clark 1999: xvi). Nor is this passionate identification restricted to white women; Ann Petry wrote that 'I felt as though I was part of Jo and she was part of me' (Alberghene and Clark 1999: xvi). This is not to say that many women have not expressed reservations about the book: Brigid Brophy wrote that 'Having re-read it, dried my eyes and blown my nose . . . , I resolved that the only honourable course was to come out into the open and admit that the dreadful books are masterpieces. I do it, however, with some bad temper and hundreds of reservations' (Alberghene and Clark 1999: xv). A more recent feminist, Camille Paglia, wrote fiercely that 'The whole thing is like a horror movie to me' (Alberghene and Clark 1999: xvi). Its critical history has reflected women writers' sense of its import in depicting

the struggles of a fledgling authoress: as Ursula K. Le Guin, for example, reflected:

From the immediacy, the authority, with which Frank Merrill's familiar illustrations of *Little Women* came to mind as soon as I asked myself what a woman writing looks like, I know that Jo March must have had real influence upon me when I was a young scribbler. I am sure she has influenced many girls, for she is not, like most 'real' authors, dead or inaccessibly famous; nor, like so many artists in books, is she set apart by sensitivity or suffering or general superlativity; nor is she, like most authors in novels, male. She is close as a sister and common as grass.

Alberghene and Clark 1999: xvi

The engagement of many women with Jo in her capacity as writer in part accounts for the outburst of critical interest in the novel which coincided with the American flowering of feminism in literary studies from the late 1970s onwards. Much of the best work on *Little Women* dates from this period of the rediscovery and revaluation of women writers, interest in the autobiographical quality of their work, and in the depiction of women, and especially women writers, in fiction and elsewhere. Critical reception of *Little Women* has tended to hinge on what value is accorded to the end of the novel, in which Jo finally marries Professor Bhaer. There is evidence that Alcott, who remained unmarried herself, chafed against the 'happy endings' she provided: 'Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that were the only aim and end of a woman's life. I *won't* marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone' (Alcott 1997: 167). She wrote soon after the publication of the second part that 'Jo should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, *or* somebody, that I didn't dare refuse and out of perversity went and made a funny match for her' (Letter to Elizabeth Powell, March 1869, Alcott 1987: 125). Is Jo's marriage, then, merely a convenient fictive resolution, or is it to be viewed as either positive or coercive? Janet Alberghene and Beverley Lyon Clark have usefully summed up the range of positions adopted by critics of the novel:

Some argue that Jo provides a model of independence, even if she ultimately capitulates to marriage; others, that she embodies a sense of connectedness with a community of women. Some argue that she submits to prevailing cultural norms; others, that she contests them; others still, that she negotiates among competing norms.

Alberghene and Clark 1999: xvii

The essays

Judith Fetterley's seminal feminist essay on the novel, one of a number that appeared in the late 1970s and 1980s, describes the parameters of most subsequent critical arguments over whether or to what extent *Little Women* displays a tendency either to subvert conventional narratives of coming to womanhood, or to contain such subversion. The essay therefore concentrates on the opening of the novel and contrasts it with the outcomes provided for the girls, measuring the rebellions of part 1 by the accommodations of part 2. Ken Parille turns his attention away from the constructions and education of girlhood to the ways this girls' book constructs and controls boyhood in the person of Laurie, reading the book as interested also in the making of American manhood through submission to the disciplines of work. Sarah Wadsworth offers a useful framing account of the genesis, composition, publication and success of *Little Women* within the context of the rise of gender-specific series books, describing the contemporary market for girls' books and for boys' books in the States.

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Little Women: Alcott's Civil War *Judith Fetterley*

When, toward the end of *Little Women*, Jo finds her true “style at last,” her father blesses her with the prospect of inner peace and an end to all ambivalence: “You have had the bitter, now comes the sweet. Do your best and grow as happy as we are in your success.” And Alcott adds her benediction: ‘So, taught by love and sorrow, Jo wrote her little stories and sent them away to make friends for themselves and her, finding it a very charitable world to such humble wanderers.’¹ Finding her true style at last was not, however, such a peaceful arrival in safe waters for Alcott herself. She responded with alacrity to the opportunity afforded by the anonymous ‘No-Names Series’ to write something not in her style, declaring that she was ‘tired of providing moral pap for the young’ and enjoying the fun of hearing people say, “I know *you* didn’t write it, for you can’t hide your peculiar style.”² She prayed more than once for time enough to write a ‘good’ book and realized that without it she would do what was easiest and succumb to the pressure of the ‘dears’ who ‘*will* cling to the “Little Women” style.’³ And at the end of *Jo’s Boys*, the last of her books on the March family, she longs to close with an ‘earthquake which should engulf Plumfield and its environs so deeply in the bowels of the earth that no youthful Schliemann could ever find a vestige of it.’

Alcott’s commitment to her true style was evidently somewhat less a choice than a necessity, somewhat less generated from within than imposed from without. Her initial resistance to the proposal from Thomas Niles, a partner in Roberts Brothers Publishing Company, that she write a book for girls had its origins perhaps in an instinct for self-preservation; certainly the success of *Little Women* limited her artistic possibilities thereafter. Hard it was to deny the lucrative rewards attendant upon laying such golden eggs; hard to reconcile the authorial image inherent in *Little Women* with the personality capable of the sensational ‘Behind a Mask’; harder still to ignore the statement of what was acceptable from a woman writer implicit in the adulation accorded *Little Women*. Indeed, Alcott ceased to write sensation fiction after the publication of *Little Women*. However what these stories, taken as a group, make clear is the amount of rage and intelligence Alcott had to suppress in order to attain her true style and write *Little Women*.

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Alcott's sensation fiction provides an important gloss on the sexual politics involved in Jo's renunciation of the writing of such fiction and on the sexual politics of Jo's relation with Professor Bhaer, under whose influence she gives it up.

Yet clearly both anger and political perception are present in *Little Women*, and, not surprisingly, there is evidence within *Little Women* of Alcott's ambivalence toward her true style. *Little Women* takes place during the Civil War and the first of Jo's many burdens on her pilgrim's progress toward little womanhood is her resentment at not being at the scene of action. Later, however, she reflects that 'keeping her temper at home was a much harder task than facing a rebel or two down South' (12). The Civil War is an obvious metaphor for internal conflict and its invocation as background to *Little Women* suggests the presence in the story of such conflict. There is tension in the book, attributable to the conflict between its overt messages and its covert messages. Set in subliminal counterpoint to the consciously intended messages is a series of alternate messages which provide evidence of Alcott's ambivalence. To a considerable extent, the continuing interest and power of *Little Women* is the result of this internal conflict. As Alcott got farther and farther away from the moment of discovery, as the true style became more and more the only style, this tension was lost and the result was the tedious sentimentality of *Rose in Bloom* or the unrelieved flatness of *Under the Lilacs*. *Little Women* survives by subversion.

The overt messages of *Little Women* are clearly presented in the first two chapters, 'Playing Pilgrims' and 'A Merry Christmas.' The book opens on Christmas eve with the four girls – Meg, Jo, Amy, and Beth – around the fire awaiting the return of 'Marmee.' Remembering the joys of Christmas past when they were rich, they grumble at their present lot: "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents"; "It's so dreadful to be poor!"; "I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all" (5). Such discontent with what one has inevitably leads to the determination to get something more. They recall their mother's suggestion that they not be self-indulgent when others are suffering, but they rationalize their determination to please themselves by arguing that these 'others' will not be helped by their sacrifice and by protesting that they have worked hard and deserve some fun. In the logic of the true style, such commitment to self can only lead to a querulous debate on the question of who works hardest and who suffers most. Their peevishness and grumbling is luckily averted by the realization that Marmee is about to arrive and as Beth gets out the old slippers to warm by the fire, the girls experience a change of heart and decide to devote their little money to

presents for their mother. Such behavior is in imitation of the ‘tall, motherly lady, with a “can-I-help-you” look about her,’ for unselfish devotion to others is the keynote to Marmee’s character (10).

Marmee is the model little woman. Her first words are an implicit reproof to the girl’s self-centered, ‘poor me’ discontent. “Well, dearies, how have you got on today? . . . Has anyone called, Beth? How is your cold, Meg? Jo, you look tired to death.” The little lesson by contrast is followed by a more extended sermon in the reading of a letter from father, away at the war, who urges his girls “to conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women” (12). The paternal exhortation to conquer the self is happily facilitated by Marmee’s proposal that they play again their childhood game of ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ only this time in earnest. Discussion of this plan for self-improvement enables them to get through an evening of uninteresting sewing without grumbling. At nine, they put away their work and sing, a household custom begun by Marmee, whose voice was ‘the first sound in the morning . . . and the last sound at night’ (14). It is not enough that little women be content with their condition; they must be positively cheery at the prospect.

The importance and value of renouncing the self and thinking of others is further dramatized in the second chapter. Armed with their presents to Marmee, evidence of their little effort to forget themselves, they arrive at the breakfast table only to find that Marmee has been visiting the Hummels, a poor family in the neighborhood, and wants her girls to give them their breakfast as a Christmas present. After a moment’s hesitation before the new level of sacrifice required, the girls enter into the project wholeheartedly, deliver up their breakfast to the poor, and discover that bread and milk and the sense of having helped others make the best breakfast ever.

The rebels that the girls must fight are clearly identified in these first two chapters; discontent, selfishness, quarrelsomeness, bad temper, thinking too much of worldly things (money, appearance, food). The success of their campaign depends on their acquiring one central weapon: self-control. They must learn to control the self so as to ensure that the self does in fact renounce the self. Conquer yourself, says Father, reminding them that their civil war must be fought at home. In the midst of domestic difficulties, Meg remembers ‘maternal counsels given long ago’: “Watch yourself, be the first to ask pardon if you both err, and guard against the little piques, misunderstandings, and hasty words that often pave the way for bitter sorrow and regret” (269). To turbulent, restless, quick-tempered Jo, Marmee offers the consolation of her most precious secret: “I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo, but I have learned not to show it; and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so” (78).

Conquer oneself and live for others are indeed the watchwords of this women's world.

Equal to the concern in *Little Women* for defining the ideal womanly character is the concern for defining woman's proper sphere and proper work. Early in *Little Women* there is a chapter entitled 'Castles in the Air,' in which each girl describes her life's ambition. The final chapter of the book, called 'Harvesttime,' makes reference to this earlier chapter, comparing what each of them dreamed with what each is now doing, clearly to the advantage of the latter. Meg's dream is from the start domestic: "I should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things – nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money. I am to be mistress of it, and manage it as I like, with plenty of servants, so I never need work a bit" (140). All that time and maturity need modify for Meg is her overvaluation of wealth and her desire to have a lot of servants. Meg must learn that love is better than luxury; she must learn to put a man in the center of her picture; and she must learn that without domestic chores to keep them busy, women will be idle, bored, and prone to folly. These are but minor adjustments, however, for Meg's dream, centered on home, is eminently acceptable. Thus she can say at the end, "My castle was the most nearly realized of all" (472).

In contrast, the lives of Amy and Jo are very different from their castles in the air. Neither Amy's ambition nor Jo's is domestic. Amy wants "to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world," and Jo wants to "write books, and get rich and famous" (141). In Rome, however, where Amy makes a real bid to realize her ambition, she comes to see that there is a difference between talent and genius, and that she has only the former. In the future, she decides, her relationship to art will be primarily that of patroness, encouraging and supporting the work of others. Through her experience with Laurie, she learns the truth of her mother's dictum that "to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman" (95), far better than being a famous artist. Although Amy never completely gives up her art, she places it in the service of home and family. In the final chapter she remarks that she has "begun to model a figure of baby, and Laurie says it is the best thing I've ever done. I think so myself, and mean to do it in marble, so that, whatever happens, I may at least keep the image of my little angel" (472). Amy's motivation has shifted ground. No longer working for fame or fortune, she is inspired by love for her child. Her figure is not intended for public exhibition, for Amy works not to produce great art or to define herself as an artist, but to create a private memorial to her dying

child. Her artistic impulses have been harnessed and subordinated to her ‘maternal instinct’ and thereby sanctioned.

Jo’s history is similar to Amy’s. In the final chapter she comments on her ‘castle in the air’ by saying, “‘the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely, and cold to me now. I haven’t given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait, and I’m sure it will be all the better for such experiences and illustrations as these,’” and she points to her husband, children, and the familial scene around her (472–3). Again, the connection is made between motherhood and ‘good’ art; when Jo writes her good book, if she ever does, it will be the product of her experiences as a wife and mother. Until then, like Amy, she is content to deploy her talents in the service of the domestic: ‘she told no stories except to her flock of enthusiastic believers and admirers’ and ‘found the applause of her boys more satisfying than any praise of the world’ (468).

Earlier treatments of Jo’s relation to writing have also served to identify the proper relation of women to art. When Jo at last finds her true style, the impetus to write has been provided by Marmee and the motivation is solace and comfort for the loss of Beth. In contrast is the picture we get when Jo determines to try for the \$100 prize offered in the columns of a newspaper for a sensation story: ‘She said nothing of her plan at home, but fell to work next day, much to the disquiet of her mother, who always looked a little anxious when “genius took to burning”’ (258). As Marmee’s anxiety is a barometer for the quality of Jo’s writing, there is evidently an inverse relationship between Jo’s interest in what she is doing and its acceptability. The more energetic Jo is in pursuing her writing and getting it published, the worse it is and the more anxious Marmee gets. But when Jo is finally brought to the point of saying, “‘I’ve no heart to write, and if I had, nobody cares for my things,’” then Marmee is all encouragement: “‘We do. Write something for us, and never mind the rest of the world”’ (419). So Jo does what her mother wishes and writes a story which her father sends, ‘much against her will,’ to a popular magazine and which becomes, ‘for a small thing,’ a great success. Understandably, Jo is bewildered by this turn of events and when her father explains it to her, she cries, “‘If there *is* anything good or true in what I write, it isn’t mine; I owe it all to you and Mother and to Beth”’ (420). Good writing for women is not the product of ambition or even enthusiasm, nor does it seek worldly recognition. Rather it is the product of a mind seeking solace for private pain, that scarcely knows what it is doing and that seeks only to please others and, more specifically, those few others who constitute the immediate family. Jo has gone from burning genius to a state where what she writes isn’t even hers.

At the end of the first volume of *Little Women*, Alcott refers to her book as a ‘domestic drama.’ Much of the popularity of *Little Women*, then and now,

derives from its embodiment of a cultural fantasy of the happy family – the domestic and feminine counterpart to the nostalgia in male American literature captured by Hemingway in the succinct ‘long time ago good, now no good.’ At the heart of the fantasy family is, of course, the fantasy Mom, the kind of Mom we all at some time or other are made to wish we could have had. The inherent contradictions in the patriarchal mythology of the family are present in *Little Women*, however; it is, after all, a girls’ book written from the perspective of the child. Being Marmee’s child is one thing; being Marmee herself is another. Resistances to growing up abound in *Little Women* and suggest attitudes in conflict with the overt messages on the joys of little womanhood.

There is a remark of Jo’s which reveals an attitude toward ‘women’s work’ in conflict with the doctrinal attempts to ennoble the domestic sphere through the endless endearing diminutives of ‘the little mop and the old brush.’ When Jo discovers Professor Bhaer darning, she is horrified: ‘think of the poor man having to mend his own clothes. The German gentlemen embroider, I know; but darning hose is another thing and not so pretty’ (325). But more important than the revelation that women’s work is ugly and degrading when done by men is the implication that women’s work is not real work. Before their marriage, John says to Meg, ‘“You have only to wait, I am to do the work”’ (226). This opposition between working and waiting defines the brutal truth about woman’s role. After marriage Meg is ‘on the Shelf,’ still waiting. Only when she gets rid of her servants and *makes work* for herself can she settle down, give up the foolish expenditures which are as much the result of boredom as vanity, and become a good wife. ‘Making work’ is the implicit subject of the chapter, which deals with Meg’s relation to her children. Much of what she does for them is unnecessary; the rest could be done in half the time and could indeed be done better by John: ‘Baby respected the man who conquered him, and loved the father whose grave “No, no,” was more impressive than all Mamma’s love pats’; thus, ‘the children thrive under the paternal rule, for accurate, steadfast John brought order and obedience into Babydom’ (378, 383).

The perception that women’s work is made work generates the encounter between Meg and John over her dress and his coat. In protest against the limitations imposed by John’s modest salary and desiring to impress a wealthy friend, Meg orders a fifty-dollar silk dress. Meg has been warned by her mother about John and here she discovers one of the sources of this warning. John ‘was very kind, forgave her readily, and did not utter one reproach’ (273). He simply cancels the order for his overcoat. In response to Meg’s inquiry, he comments, ‘“I can’t afford it, my dear”’ (273). Consumed with guilt, Meg swallows her pride and her desire, prevails upon her friend to buy her dress, and uses the money to get John’s coat. ‘One can imagine . . .

what a blissful state of things ensued' (273). This blissful state, however, is based on the premise that John needs and deserves a coat because he has to go out in the world and work. Meg, on the contrary, neither needs nor deserves her dress because, with no real work to do in the world, she has no basis for attention to the self.

Implicit in *Little Women* is an understanding of the genesis of the ideal womanly character far different from that overtly stated through the pilgrim's progress metaphor of the first chapter. "Women," says Amy, "should learn to be agreeable" (285). With no legitimate function in life, women will not be tolerated unless they are agreeable; only through a life of cheerful service to others can they justify their existence and assuage the guilt that derives from being useless. Women must watch themselves because they are economically dependent on men's income and emotionally dependent on their approval. Marmee's 'maternal counsels' contain an implicit perception of the politics of marriage: "John is a good man, but he has his faults, and you must learn to see and bear with them, remembering your own. . . . He has a temper, not like ours – one flash and then all over – but the white, still anger that is seldom stirred, but once kindled is hard to quench. Be careful, very careful, not to wake his anger against yourself, for peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect" (269). While Marmee schools Jo in the art of constricting her anger to a tightening of the lips, she admonishes Meg to accommodate herself to John's anger. Indeed, John's anger is "not like ours." It is male and must be attended to; Meg's Jo's Marmee's anger is female and must be suppressed. Little women must not be angry because they cannot afford it. Marmee's description of John is frightening for the veiled threat it conveys – men's love is contingent; be careful, very careful not to lose it, for then where will you be?

If the cover messages of *Little Women* suggest that the acquisition of the little woman character is less a matter of virtue than of necessity, so do they suggest that women's acceptance of the domestic sphere as the best and happiest place may be less a matter of wise choice than of harsh necessity. "To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman," says Marmee to her girls; but she might as well have said it is the only thing that can happen. There are no other viable options. When Jo first meets Laurie, she describes herself to him as a "businessman – girl, I mean." The accuracy of this implicit presumption against her chance for economic independence is clearly supported by her subsequent experience. To earn money for her sick father, Jo can only sell her hair. Selling one's hair is a form of selling one's body and well buried within this minor detail is the perception that women's capital is their flesh and that they had better get the best price for it, which is, of course marriage. Later Jo

discovers a source of income in her stories but the economics of her relation to writing are revealing. At first, she gets nothing for her work; she is satisfied simply to have it published. When she finally does get paid, it is because Laurie acts on her behalf. Jo does not assume that she should or will be paid for her work; when payment comes, she treats it as a gift. Thus she is ripe for the exploitation she encounters in the office of the *Weekly Volcano*: ‘Mr. Dashwood graciously permitted her to fill his columns at the lowest prices, not thinking it necessary to tell her that the real cause of his hospitality was the fact that one of his hacks, on being offered higher wages, had basely left him in the lurch’ (335). Eventually, even this minor source of income is denied because Jo comes to see that writing sensational fiction is a sordid and unwomanly activity and that good writing is not done for money. ‘“Men have to work and women to marry for money,”’ says Amy; and while her emphasis here is mistakenly on money, nothing in the book contradicts her assessment of what women must do to live.

Little women marry, however, not only because they lack economic options, but because they lack emotional options as well. Old maidhood obliterates little womanhood and the fear of being an old maid is a motivating force in becoming a little woman. Fear is one of several unpleasant emotions simmering just below the sunny surface of Alcott’s story and it plays a considerable role in determining the behavior of the ‘little women.’ Beth, for example, finds it necessary to invoke the fear of death in order to convince Jo of the primacy of loving service over writing ‘splendid books.’ Fear is always cropping up in Jo’s relation to writing – fear of being selfish, fear of losing her womanliness, fear of becoming insensitive, fear of making money, fear of getting attention – requiring that she periodically renounce, in rather violent and self-punitive rituals, her literary ambitions. And fear plays an important role in the larger drama of Jo’s conversion from disgruntled rebel to little woman. At the beginning of the book, Jo hates love, dislikes men and women in the romantic context, and has no desire to marry, unless it be to her sister. She finds Amy’s flirting incomprehensible and Meg’s capitulation to John disgraceful; she insists on viewing boys as equals and the only game she wishes to play with them is cricket. With Meg married, Beth dead, and Amy engaged, Jo begins to change her tune, for what has she to look forward to: ‘“An old maid, that’s what I’m to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps”’ (424). Alcott emphasizes the unpleasantness of this prospect for Jo as much as is possible, given her commitment to the doctrine that every situation in life is full of beautiful opportunities. Jo is surrounded by evidence of Meg’s ‘happy home’ and inundated by glowing letters from Amy about how ‘it is so beautiful to be loved as Laurie loves

me' (421). On the evening when this happy couple arrives home Jo is stricken with her worst fit of loneliness, for she sees that all the world is paired off but her: 'a sudden sense of loneliness came over her so strongly that she looked about her with dim eyes, as if to find something to lean upon, for even Teddy [Laurie] had deserted her' (433). Just at this moment Professor Bhaer arrives; Jo realizes that she is in love and capitulates to the description of herself as possessing a "tender, womanly half . . . like a chestnut burr, prickly outside, but silk-soft within, and a sweet kernel" (418). Far from being the "best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman," love is the court of last resort into which Jo is finally driven when all else fails and she must grow up.

The overt ideology of *Little Women* on the subject of marriage is undermined from still another direction. The reward for being 'love-worthy,' for acquiring the little womanly character of self-denial, self-control, accommodations, and concern for others, is not simply avoiding the fate of becoming an old maid; it is also getting the good man. As we have seen in the case of John, however, the good man is somewhat mixed blessing. Indeed, while there is a lot of lip service paid in *Little Women* to the superior value of the 'lords of creation,' and to the importance of male reward, the emotional realities of the book move in a rather different direction. The figure of Mr. March is representative. At the beginning of part 2, Alcott assures us that while 'to outsiders, the five energetic women seemed to rule the house,' the truth is that 'the quiet scholar, sitting among his books, was still the head of the family, the household conscience, anchor, and the comforter; for to him the busy, anxious women always turned in troublous times, finding him, in the truest sense of those sacred words, husband and father' (229–30). Yet this reputed center of power makes his first appearance 'muffled up to his eyes,' a broken man leaning on his wife's arm. While Beth's slow death takes place on center stage and occupies several chapters, the illness of Mr. March is consigned to the distant background and is only vaguely referred to. Literally absent during the first half of the book, during the second half he rarely emerges from his library and we are afforded brief glimpses into it to assure us that he is still there. If Marmee, on her departure to Washington, not knowing if her husband is alive or dead, comforts her girls by saying, "Hope and keep busy; and whatever happens, remember that you never can be fatherless," the true object of worship in *Little Women* is revealed in the description of Meg and Jo's vigil with Beth: 'all day Jo and Meg hovered over her, watching, waiting, hoping, and trusting in God and Mother' (161, 181). It is Marmee who does all the things putatively ascribed to her husband; it is Marmee who always has the right word of comfort, love, and advice. Indeed, Beth's miraculous recovery is implicitly attributed

to the fact that Marmee is merely on her way home. God may be a father but his agents on earth are women and the only worship we are privy to is that of Marmee and Beth. Similarly, in the question of love, the significance of men is essentially a matter of lip service. Despite Marmee's dictum about being loved by men, what we see and feel in reading *Little Women* is the love that exists between women: Marmee and her daughters; Jo and Beth. Thus while the events of Jo's life are determined by the book's overt message, her wish to resist the imperative to be a little woman and to instead marry her sister and remain forever with her mother is endorsed by the book's covert message.

The imaginative experience of *Little Women* is built on a paradox: the figure who most resists the pressure to become a little woman is the most attractive and the figure who most succumbs to it dies. Jo is the vital center of Alcott's book and she is so because she is least a little woman. Beth, on the other hand, is the least vital and the least interesting. She is also the character who most fully internalizes the overt values of *Little Women*; she is the daughter who comes closest to realizing the ideal of imitating mother. Like Marmee, Beth's devotion to her duty and her kindness toward others are never-failing and, like Marmee, she never expresses needs of her own. Beth is content with the role of housekeeping homebody; her castle in the air is "to stay at home safe with Father and Mother, and help take care of the family" (140). In her content, her lack of ambition beyond broom and mop and feather duster, Beth is the perfect little woman. Yet she dies. Implicitly, a connection is made between the degree to which she fulfills the prescription for being a little woman and the fact that she dies. The connection is reinforced by the plot since Beth gets the fatal scarlet fever from fulfilling Marmee's charge to the girls to take care of the Hummels while she is gone. Beth registers the costs of being a little woman; of suppressing so completely the expression of one's needs; of controlling so massively all selfishness, self-assertiveness, and anger. In Beth one sees the exhaustion of vitality in the effort to live as a little woman.

One also sees in Beth that negative self-image which is the real burden of the little woman. Such self-image is behind Beth's description of herself as "stupid little Beth" trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there" (360); and it is implicit in her identification with those broken dolls, cast off by her sisters, which she absorbs into her 'infirmary' and makes her special care. Yet, if Beth identifies with these broken bits of out-cast 'dollanity' that constitute her imaginary world, her posture toward them expresses the hope that the world may treat her with the same kindness as she adopts toward them; and we are brought again to the connection between a life of loving

service to others and the conviction of one's own worthlessness. Behind the paradox that Beth, the object of everyone's adoration, so thoroughly condemns herself that Beth, so apparently content, cannot accept her right to live, rests the ultimate tension of Alcott's story. Beth's history carries out the implication of being a little woman to its logical conclusion: to be a little woman is to be dead.

Yet the drama of *Little Women* is the making of a little woman; and much of the book must be read as a series of lessons designed to teach Jo the value of a more submissive spirit and to reveal to her the wisdom of the doctrines of renunciation and adaptation announced so clearly in the opening pages. Jo is constantly shown the nasty consequences of not following Marmee's model of selflessness and self-control. While Marmee, though angry nearly every day of her life, has learned to control her anger, Jo at the opening of the story is 'wild.' When Amy burns her book, Jo refuses to forgive and forget; she sticks to her anger despite warning signals from Marmee. The results of her contumacy are nearly fatal: she fails to warn her sister of thin ice; Amy falls in and is only rescued by the timely, and manly exertions of Laurie. The moral is clear. Jo's selfishness, followed by her anger, followed by her vindictiveness result in her sister's nearly dying. In the world of 'little women' female anger is so unacceptable that there are no degrees to it; all anger leads to 'murder.' The consequence for Jo is horror at herself which in turn results in contrition, repression, and a firm vow to follow in the footsteps of Marmee and never to let anger get beyond a tightening of the lips.

Jo pays for her quick temper and lack of self-control in a more tangible way later in the book. Amy has roped Jo into going with her to pay the family's social calls. Amy thrives on such activity; but Jo finds it intolerable and can only get through the experience by playing elaborate games at each place they stop. The final call is to their Aunt March. Both girls are tired, peevish, and anxious to go home; but when Jo suggests they skip the visit, Amy remonstrates that "it's a little thing to do, but it gives her pleasure" (285). So Amy devotes herself to being nice to Aunt March and to Aunt Carroll, who is with her, and to making the visit pleasant, while Jo gives vent to her peevishness and irritation in a series of decided remarks on the subject of patronage. Since Aunt March and Aunt Carroll are in the process of deciding which of the two girls should be offered the chance to accompany Aunt Carroll to Europe, Jo's testiness is costly indeed. Amy goes to Europe and Jo is left home to reflect on the fact that she has received a 'timely lesson in the art of holding her tongue' (287) and to draw the inevitable conclusion that in this world it is best to be a little woman like Amy.

An even more traumatic lesson is administered to Jo through her beloved sister Beth. Beth contracts scarlet fever because of the irresponsibility of Meg and Jo, but the burden falls primarily on Jo as she is the one particularly charged with responsibility for Beth. When Beth asks Jo to take over the job of seeing the Hummels, Jo is too busy, Jo is writing; and so Beth, who has never had scarlet fever, is exposed to the disease and catches it. Again there is the pattern of maximum possible consequences for a minimal degree of self-absorption and selfishness. It is a pattern well calculated to teach Jo a more submissive spirit. In fact, one can say that Beth's primary function in *Little Women* is to be a lesson to Jo; Beth's life is a constant reminder to Jo of her own inadequacies and failures and of what she ought to be, and her death is bitter testimony to the consequences of these failures. It is by no means accidental that Jo 'falls in love' shortly after Beth's death. She gets scared, she gets good, she gets Professor Bhaer.

Obviously, one of the major problem Alcott faced in writing *Little Women* was making up someone for Jo to marry since, as we have seen, marry she must. She cannot marry, as she cannot 'love,' Laurie, not, as Marmee claims, because they are too alike in temperament, but because they are too alike in status; they are too equal. If anything, Laurie is Jo's inferior, as her constant reference to him as 'the dear boy' implies. Unfortunately, perhaps, for Jo and Laurie, little women can only love up, not across or down; they must marry their fathers, not their brothers or sons. Thus Laurie gets Amy, who is a fitting child for him, and Jo gets her Papa Bhaer who, as the Germanic and ursine connotations of his name suggest, is the heavy authority figure necessary to offset Jo's own considerable talent and vitality. His age, his foreignness, his status as a professor, his possession of moral and philosophic wisdom all conspire to put him on a different plane from Laurie and John Brooke and to make him an appropriate suitor for Jo, whose relationship to him is clearly that of pupil to teacher, child to parent, little woman to big man. In exchange for German lessons, she will darn his socks; at their school he will do all the teaching and she will do the house-work; he has saved her soul by a timely warning against the effects of sensational literature and later we are told of Jo's future that she 'made queer mistakes; but the wise professor steered her safely into calmer waters' (467). It is clear, however, that such an excessively hierarchical relationship is necessary to indicate Jo's ultimate acceptance of the doctrines of *Little Women*. In marrying Professor Bhaer, Jo's rebellion is neutralized and she proves once and for all that she is a good little woman who wishes for nothing more than the chance to realize herself in the service of some superior male.⁴ The process of getting her out of her boots and doublet and her misguided male-identification and into her

role as a future Marmee is completed by placing her securely in the arms of Papa Bhaer.

We do not, of course, view this transformations with unqualified rejoicing. It is difficult not to see it as capitulation and difficult not to respond to it with regret. Our attitude, moreover, is not the result of feminist values imposed on Alcott's work but the result of ambivalence within the work on the subject of what it means to be a little woman. Certainly, this ambivalence is itself part of the message of *Little Women*. It accurately reflects the position of the woman writer in nineteenth-century America, confronted on all sides by forces pressuring her to compromise her vision. How conscious Alcott was of the conflict between the overt and covert messages of *Little Women*, how intentional on the hand was her subversion of the book's 'doctrine' and on the other hand her compromise with her culture's norms, it is impossible to say. What one can say, however, is that in failing to give Jo a fate other than that of the little woman, Alcott 'altered her values in deference to the opinions of others' and obliterated her own identity as an economically independent single woman who much preferred to 'paddle her own canoe' than to resign herself to the dependency of marriage.⁵ Clearly, her true style is rather less than true. When Professor Bhaer excoriates sensation fiction in an effort to set Jo on the road to attaining her true style, he exclaims, "They haf no right to put poison in the sugar plum, and let the small ones eat it" (342). It is to Alcott's credit that at least covertly if not overtly she recognized that the sugar plum was the poison.

Notes

1. Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 420. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included parenthetically within the text. *Little Women* was originally published in 1869.
2. *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*, ed. Ednah D. Cheney (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890), pp. 296–7.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 303.
4. It is hard for me to comprehend how Elizabeth Janeway can describe Jo as 'the one young woman in nineteenth-century fiction who maintains her individual independence, who gives up no part of her autonomy as payment for being born a woman – and gets away with it. Jo is the tomboy dream come true, the dream of growing up into full humanity with all its potentialities instead of into limited femininity. . . .' Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that her concept of 'full humanity with all its potentialities' reaches no further than the vision of a Jo who 'marries and becomes, please note, not a sweet little wife but a matriarch: mistress of the *professor's* school, mother of healthy *sons* [while Amy and Laurie have only one sickly *daughter*] and a *cheerful*, active manager of events and people' (italics mine). It is doubtful that such a vision would be asserted as 'full' if the character under consideration were male. Auerbach's analysis seems much more sensible and grounded in the facts of the novel. While giving more weight to the realm of matriarchal power which Jo enters on marrying Professor Bhaer than I am willing to do, she nevertheless recognizes that, even when 'stretched to its limit,' this power collides with and falters before 'the history it tries

to subdue. For . . . history remains where we found it at the beginning of *Little Women*: "far away, where the fighting was." Indeed, Alcott's recognition that she must write not about the external world of male power embodied in the Civil War but about the internal world of Jo's struggle between resistance and capitulation to the doctrines of little womanhood indicates her understanding of Jo's exclusion from the real sources of power. See Elizabeth Janeway, *Between Myth and Morning: Women Awakening* (New York: William Morrow, 1975), pp. 234–7; and Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 55–73.

5. Alcott, *Life, Letters, and Journals*, p. 122.

'Wake up, and be a man': *Little Women*, Laurie, and the Ethic of Submission

Ken Parille

During the past twenty-five years, *Little Women* has been at the center of the feminist project of reading texts by nineteenth-century American women. A primary reason for the extensive interest in Alcott's novel is its discussion of the cultural spaces women occupied, or were excluded from, during the mid- and late nineteenth century. Although critics have disagreed about whether the novel 'seeks a new vision of women's subjectivity and space' or argues for a 'repressive domesticity,' it nevertheless offers us a complicated and compelling picture of Alcott and her culture's understanding of girls and women (Murphy, 1990: 564). Yet an important story within *Little Women* remains largely untreated in recent criticism, one that will affect our understanding of the novel's exploration of gender: that of the male protagonist, Laurie. Although critics have done important work by drawing our attention to Alcott's exploration of patriarchal structures and their effect on girls and women, they have not looked in any detail at her concurrent examination of their effect on boys and men.

In many ways, Laurie's story is similar to that of many mid- and late nineteenth-century middle-class young men. Like the struggles of the March girls, his struggle and ultimate submission to cultural expectations for young men narrate a typical confrontation with the limitations of gender roles. Throughout *Little Women*, Laurie is subjected to a version of what critics often describe as the 'ethic of submission,' an ethic usually deemed relevant only to girls' and women's lives because only they were expected to submit to patriarchal authority: 'American women,' Jane Tompkins argues, 'simply

could not . . . [rebel] against the conditions of their lives for they lacked the material means of escape or opposition. They had to stay put and submit' (1985: 161). For Tompkins and many critics after her, this ethic meant that girls and women were expected to conform to very narrow roles (dutiful daughter, caring mother, obedient wife), in contrast to boys and men, who were free from such limitations.

In Alcott scholarship, the view of submission as a gendered phenomenon goes back to critics such as Nina Auerbach, Judith Fetterley, and Patricia Spacks, who, in her landmark work *The Female Imagination*, takes Jo at her word when she says 'Boys always have a capital time,' forgetting that the narrator and even Jo herself realize that this is often not the case (1975: 100). Although critics have begun to question this gendered understanding of submission as it applies to men's and boys' lives, in Alcott studies it still remains a prevalent assumption; Jo's story is seen as a paradigmatic example of this ethic, while the ways in which Laurie's story parallels hers are neglected. Only Elizabeth Keyser and Anne Dalke have noted that *Little Women* dramatizes Laurie's struggle with patriarchal expectations. Keyser observes that Laurie 'exemplifies . . . the masculine plight,' yet she does not explore at any length what 'the masculine plight' is, how Laurie represents this plight, and what cultural beliefs shape it (1993: 66–7). Dalke mentions that Laurie's narrative parallels the girls', but she does not examine this similarity or discuss its significance (1985: 573). Critics need to see that Laurie's experience, like those of the March girls, is at every point conditioned by the kinds of patriarchal and materialist pressures that affected girls' lives. For boys the pressure to live up to the standards and achievements of other males (especially the pressure to succeed in the market) has, in some sense, always circumscribed their field of possibilities, as it circumscribes Laurie's.

Using studies of masculinity in America during the nineteenth century by Michael Kimmel, Anthony Rotundo, Judy Hilkey, and Joe Dubbert, I will examine Laurie's capitulation to patriarchal and materialist pressures in the form of his grandfather's desire that he become a merchant and the way in which Amy March functions as the grandfather's agent. By repeatedly questioning his masculinity, Amy shames Laurie into acting in accord with his grandfather's wishes. Once we understand Laurie's story in this way – as submission brought about by shame – we can then revise the conventional critical position that the 'feminine quality of self-denial' is 'the novel's . . . message' (Gaard, 1991: 5). In order to understand more fully what Alcott and *Little Women* have to say about gender, we must recover Alcott's narrative of masculine self-denial.

Perhaps critics have not explored the parallels between Laurie's and the March girls' narratives because in letters and journals. Alcott often idealized

boyhood and set it in opposition to her life as a girl and a woman, a life filled with disappointments and restrictions. 'Boys are always jolly' she noted in 1860 (1989: 100) . . . Possibly in part because of such idealizations, critics believe that Jo articulates a truth about boyhood when she says that 'boys always have a capital time.' But in *Little Women*, Laurie's story shows us that Alcott's ideas about the lives of boys are much more complex; the text rarely makes any idealizing claims about boyhood. Laurie is definitely not 'always jolly,' and, puzzled that he could be wealthy and sad, Jo exclaims, 'Theodore Laurence, you ought to be the happiest boy in the world' (51). Laurie's unhappiness results from his place in a world of men and the concurrent pressure of proving himself a man to the novel's characters. According to Michael Kimmel, this pressure is a defining feature of American masculinity in the nineteenth century (ix), the era that the historian Joe Dubbert calls 'the masculine century' (13).

Gilded Age success manuals for young men published around the time of *Little Women* often depict a boy's life as fraught with anxiety. They present him as prone to worrying and suffering from 'dissatisfaction with . . . [his] destiny' and 'spells of melancholy' (cited in Hilkey, 1997: 76). Similarly, Alcott introduces us to Laurie as a lonely, frustrated young man. Unlike the nurturing domestic circle of the March girls and their mother, Laurie's world is an isolated male enclave composed of his grandfather and his tutor, John Brooke, both of whom are grooming him for a life he does not want; during a game called 'rigmarole,' Brooke even relates a thinly veiled allegory of Laurie's submission and his role in it. As a knight, Brooke must 'tame and train' Laurie, 'a fine, but unbroken colt' who is a 'pet of the king's,' Laurie's grandfather (125). Although Laurie eventually goes to work for his grandfather, he desperately wants 'to enjoy myself in my own way': 'I'm to be a famous musician myself, and all creation is to rush to hear me; and I'm never to be bothered about money or business, but just enjoy myself, and live for what I like' (31, 140). In spite of these fantasies, Laurie knows that his future involves a different kind of 'capital time' than the one Jo thinks boys always have, namely, one devoted to 'money and business'. As Dubbert observes, men 'were expected to cash in on . . . opportunities to maximize their gains and minimize their losses' and not, as Laurie says, 'live for what [they] like' (15). His grandfather fears that Laurie wants to pursue a materially unproductive and therefore unmasculine career: 'His music isn't bad, but I hope he will do as well in more important things' (55). What is important for his grandfather is that Laurie do well in business, as he had done. . . . :

I ought to be satisfied to please grandfather, and I do try, but it's working against the grain, you see, and comes hard. He wants me to be an India merchant, as he

was, and I'd rather be shot; I hate tea, and silk, and spices . . . Going to college ought to satisfy him, for if I give him four years he ought to let me off from the business; but he's set, and I've got to do just as he did, unless I break away and please myself, as my father did.

141–2

But this dream of breaking away, Alcott says, is difficult for both sexes to realize; pleasing oneself, to use one of her favorite phrases, is an 'air castle' that must be abandoned by little men and women alike. Here, as elsewhere, Alcott dramatizes a central claim of many critics who study masculinity: culture has its designs on male fulfilment (Dubbert, 1979: 1011; Kimmel, 1996: 1–10). So, like many young men, Laurie is not free to pursue the career he wants, for it would be 'working against the grain' of cultural expectations.

Dubbert's and Hilkey's discussions of advice literature for young men shows that manliness was synonymous with success in the market. A boy knew that he would never be viewed as a man unless he was fiscally productive (Dubbert, 1979: 27–8; Hilkey, 1997: 142–6); as success manuals repeatedly announced, 'character was capital' (Hilkey, 1997: 126). That a career as an artist would be counterproductive has already been forecast in the story of Laurie's father, a musician who 'please [d him]self' and ran away, only to end up dead (144). The narrator never tells us how and why he dies, but the implication is that his death results from his career choice; had he become an India merchant – as Laurie's grandfather surely would have wanted – a different outcome is easy to imagine. Though still only a young man, Laurie has been initiated into the male world of negotiation. He trades four years of his life in order to escape becoming an India merchant – a bargain that does not pay off.

Although many men likely fantasized about 'breaking away,' the pressure placed on them to succeed in business meant that most could not and did not. In reaction to pressure and violence directed at him by his grandfather, Laurie tells Jo he wants to run away to Washington. 'What fun you'd have!' Jo replies. 'I wish I could run off, too . . . If I was a boy, we'd run away together, and have a capital time; but as I'm a miserable girl, I must be proper, and stay at home. Don't tempt me, Teddy, it's a crazy plan' (206). In spite of the romance of escape, she believes that Laurie's interests are best served by remaining, so she orchestrates a truce to keep him at home. Critics tend to take Jo's comment as reiterating a cultural truth: boys can run away, but girls must submit. Ann Murphy, for instance, claims that 'as a boy, Jo would be . . . able to . . . "run away [with Laurie] and have a capital time,"' even though the text tells us in no uncertain terms that Laurie cannot (577). . . .

In a crucial and often-cited scene in *Little Women*, Mr Bhaer convinces Jo to give up her dream of being a 'sensational' writer. The scene begins with Jo's defense of sensation stories, but after listening to Bhaer's attack on such 'trash,' she feels 'horribly ashamed' (342). The shame Jo feels from seeing herself through, as she calls it, his 'moral spectacles' (342) causes her to throw all her 'lurid' stories into the stove. Though these stories are profitable and give her the opportunity to experience imaginatively a life she is denied, Jo must stop writing them because such a profession is incompatible with the way in which the novel conceives of 'womanhood' (343). Thus Mr Bhaer acts as a kind of enforcer for the text's values, shaming Jo into sacrificing her desires. But rarely referred to are the scenes in which Amy, acting like Mr Bhaer, shames Laurie into giving up his dreams of life as an artist, and the moment in which Laurie, echoing Jo's destruction, destroys his own manuscripts. The striking resemblance between these scenes suggests that Alcott wants to draw our attention to the similar sacrifices that boys and girls must make in order to fit into narrowly defined adult roles.

In order to make Laurie into a man, Amy constantly reminds him of his distance from cultural ideals of masculinity. Elaine Showalter observes that Jo's German husband, Mr Bhaer, is 'unconfined by American codes of masculinity' (1989: xxvii), but she misses the way in which Alcott shows us how Laurie, as an American boy, is all too confined by such codes. Amy sees it as her job to awaken the sleeping 'young knight' from his boyish illusions and bring him into conformity with these norms. She even concludes her sermon by promising, 'I won't lecture any more, for I know you'll wake up, and be a man' (395). As Jo's 'lurid' literary aspirations are in conflict with the way the text imagines her as a woman, so too are Laurie's boyish artistic dreams incompatible with the way it imagines him as a man.

An essential part of Amy's shaming of Laurie involves renaming him; as his friends had called him 'Dora' to emphasize his failure to measure up to their standards of masculinity, Amy calls him 'Lazy Lawrence' to feminize him by emphasizing how unindustrious, and therefore unmanly, he seems to her. Laurie's new name comes from Maria Edgeworth's didactic story 'Lazy Lawrence,' published in a popular collection called *The Parent's Assistant*. The tale features two boys, Jem, a model of masculine ambition, and Lawrence, a model of idleness. Like Laurie, Lawrence dreams, dismisses ambition, and enjoys 'amusements,' but eventually he converts to the ways of industry. As Anthony Rotundo observes, one of the key 'deficiencies of character that [was] thought to cause failure . . . was laziness. Again and again we have heard men exhort one another to "industry," "persistence," "hard

work.” . . . Each of these popular phrases stood not only as an exhortation to positive behavior, but as a warning against negative behavior’ (179). Amy’s appeal to Laurie to be industrious, then, represents a typical exhortation to be successful, but also a warning to him that if he continues on his present course he will be perceived as a failure. Like a success manual come to life, Amy attempts, as H.A. Lewis attempted with his *Hidden Treasures*, to ‘awaken dormant energies in ONE PERSON who other-wise might have failed’ (Cited in Hilkey, 1997: 75).

Though the name ‘Lazy Laurence’ implicitly feminizes him, Amy tries to make her assault on Laurie’s masculinity explicit: ‘instead of being the man you might and ought to be, you are only –’ (392). . . . But before she can finish, Laurie interrupts her. He likely believes that she would conclude with ‘a girl’ or ‘a woman,’ and in fact she soon says, ‘Aren’t you ashamed of a hand like that? It’s as soft and white as a woman’s, and looks as if it never did anything but wear Jouvin’s best gloves’ (393). . . .

Amy uses her art to further convince Laurie that he has yet to act ‘manfully’. She shows Laurie ‘a rough sketch of [him] taming a horse; hat and coat were off, and every line of the active figure, resolute face, and commanding attitude, was full of energy and meaning. . . [In] the rider’s breezy hair and erect attitude, there was a suggestion of suddenly arrested motion, of strength, courage’ (396). The image contains numerous codes of the ‘real man’ as Amy and the novel conceive of him: active, resolute, in command, and sexually powerful. . . . Even the kind of sketch Amy draws encodes manliness; it is ‘rough,’ in contrast to Laurie’s ‘soft’ feminine hands. She tells him that this picture represents him ‘as you were’ and then compares it to a picture that could have been an illustration of Edgeworth’s ‘Lazy Laurence.’ But it is clear that Laurie never was such a man. Amy makes this claim in order to shame him by calling his virility into question. As she had used Edgeworth’s story as a model for Laurie’s life, here she uses her drawing to teach him ‘a little lesson.’

When Amy says to Laurie, ‘instead of being the man you might and ought to be, you are only –,’ he concludes for her with ‘Saint Laurence on a gridiron’ (392). The narrator tells us that this insertion ‘blandly finish[es] the sentence,’ but Laurie’s invocation of one of the most famous Christian martyrs should not be so easily dismissed. That Laurie should see himself as Saint Laurence, a martyr who was burned to death, implies that he recognized the renunciation of his ‘boyish passions’ as a metaphorical death. The process of converting lazy Laurie into a man, the process that Amy begins, he concludes with a literal act of destruction – he destroys his manuscripts: ‘He grew more and more discontent with his desultory life, began to long

for some real and earnest work . . . then suddenly he tore up his music-sheets one by one' (406).

Laurie's destruction of his manuscripts and the fiery death of his patron saint both implicitly refer to Jo's similar act of martyrdom: the extinguishing of her writerly self by burning her sensational tales. . . . But Laurie knows that simply destroying the manuscripts is not enough. The best way to prove to Amy and his grandfather that he is not a 'humbug' is to do what men do: get a job. As critics have shown, male identity in the nineteenth century was intimately connected to work, and Laurie knows that if he fails to work he will be seen as unmasculine, as weak and feminine. He sends Amy a note addressed to 'Mentor' from 'Telemachus' in order to acknowledge the success of her 'little lesson': "'Lazy Laurence" has gone to his grandpa, like the best of boys' (397). Although Laurie literally goes to see his grandfather, the metaphorical 'going' is most important. He has finally left his boyhood 'air castles' and submitted to his grandfather. Like 'the best of boys' he embraces the values of the patriarchy and abandons idle dreams in favor of 'earnest work.' The boy who earlier said he never wanted to be 'bothered about money or business' now exclaims, 'I'm going into business with a devotion that shall delight grandpa, and prove to him that I'm not spoilt. I need something of the sort to keep me steady. I . . . mean to work like a man' (439). This is perhaps the novel's most compact formulation of the cultural connection between masculinity and material productivity: to be a man is to work. Acting as Mentor, Amy is (to adapt the title of Edgeworth's collection) the 'culture's assistant'; that is, she enforces its codes of masculinity. . . . And given Amy's use of Edgeworth's text in enforcing these codes, a use Laurie acknowledges when he says "'Lazy Laurence" has gone to his grandpa' – it is difficult to understand Beverly Clark's claims that Laurie can rebel 'against prescribed texts' (81). . . .

Amy thinks she is preparing Laurie to be a man so that he will be a suitable partner for Jo, but the novel has already told us that this pairing is not a possibility (395). Instead, she prepares him to fill the narrowly prescribed categories of middle-class husband, father, and businessman, the roles he ends up playing in her life. . . . Many critics have suggested that Jo's marriage to Mr Bhaer is a kind of punishment. Rather than marry the erotic young Laurie, she ends up with the asexual older man. Yet Laurie's marriage to Amy – the most traditional of all the March girls – instead of Jo could similarly be seen as a punishment. But, of course, Amy's conventionality is the point. His marriage to her signifies that he has proved his manhood to the novel's characters. He accepts convention by embracing domesticity and business. . . .

The parallel between Laurie's and Jo's submission makes it clear that he is as crucial to *Little Women's* exploration of gender as the March girls. As a novel about Laurie's and the March girls' submission, then, *Little Women* remains relevant to us as a story of how both boys and girls confront cultural limitations.

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Louisa May Alcott and the Rise of Gender-Specific Series Books

Sarah A. Wadsworth

Few gentlemen, who have occasion to visit news-offices, can have failed to notice the periodical literature for boys, which has been growing up during the last few years. The increase in the number of these papers and magazines, and the appearance, from time to time, of new ones, which, to judge by the pictures, are always worse than the old, seem to indicate that they find a wide market.

William G. Sumner, 1878

Girls, like boys, in recent years have been remarkably favoured in the matter of their reading. They cannot complain, with any justice, that they are ignored in the piles of juvenile literature laid annually upon the booksellers' shelves. Boys boast of a literature of their 'very own', as they would call it. So do girls. . . . [T]hat so-called 'girls books' continue to be published in shoals annually is sufficient proof that there is a market for them.

Edward G. Salmon, 1886

Writing in 1878 and 1866 respectively, William G. Sumner and Edward G. Salmon point to a newly emergent trend in British and American juvenile literature: the development of distinct categories of literature written expressly for boys or expressly for girls. To the twentieth-century reader, raised on Nancy Drew or the Hardy Boys, Trixie Belden or Danny Dunn, the Baby-Sitters' Club or Encyclopedia Brown, such a division may seem a natural and obvious one. As Salmon's observation suggests, however, the shift from a more or less homogenous body of literature for 'boys and girls' to a body of juvenile fiction bifurcated by gender was considered an innovation in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹ In the United States, the transformation began gradually in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s with popular authors such as Jacob Abbott, William T. Adams ('Oliver Optic'), and Rebecca Sophia Clarke ('Sophie May'), gaining momentum in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s with the contributions of Louisa May Alcott, Horatio Alger, and Mark Twain, and accelerating rapidly toward the close of the nineteenth century as a result of publishers'

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unflagging efforts in the fields of gender-specific periodicals, dime novels, and, especially, series books.

While many critics have noted that ‘adolescent or preadolescent boys and girls historically were not encouraged to share reading material’ (Vallone 122), few distinguish between books written for either gender but appropriated primarily by one or the other (for example, *Robinson Crusoe*) and books written with a single-sex target audience in mind. An exception is Gillian Avery, who observes, ‘[f]rom the mid-century onwards, as juvenile publishing became an industry, what had been unisex developed into two sharply differentiated categories. Writing for boys, and writing for girls, became professions in themselves’ (190). As Avery suggests, the segmentation of the juvenile fiction market closely parallels the development of children’s literature as a specialized branch of publishing.²

In this essay, I illustrate the relationship between the segmentation of the juvenile fiction market by gender and the commercialization of children’s publishing through an examination of the careers of William T. Adams and Louisa May Alcott. Perhaps more than any other writers in nineteenth-century America, these two authors exemplify how ‘[w]riting for boys, and writing for girls, became professions in themselves.’ As early practitioners of gendered juvenile series, Alcott and Adams together illustrate the separation of boys’ and girls’ reading in the United States in the mid- to late nineteenth century. A side-by-side study of these two authors and their juvenile series shows that Alcott was both responding to and writing against Oliver Optic’s books. At the same time, Alcott’s books for girls reveal that she simultaneously resisted and revised traditional models of femininity while mediating her readers’ desire for conventional female plots. As a result, Alcott brought about an important development in the history of juvenile literature: in shaping a new kind of fiction aimed specifically at adolescent girls, she ushered in realistic female characters and plots that were as distinct from previous models of femininity and womanhood in fiction, as from the characters and plots of the boys’ books against which they were inevitably defined. Ultimately, however, the impact of Adams and Alcott extended beyond the books they wrote to the audience who read them. For, in recognizing the changing roles of boys and girls in American society and their still-tentative presence in the maturing literary marketplace, they (and their publishers) effectively brought these segments of the juvenile fiction market into existence. Just as Adams helped to define not only boys’ series but also the audience for boys’ books, so Alcott, as the most important contemporary American author to write books specifically for girls, was instrumental in defining, shaping, reinforcing, and revising the qualities, interests, and aspirations of the girls who comprised that market.³

In the second volume of *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott describes Jo March’s efforts to produce a type of story that would be both saleable and

respectable. After her friend (and future husband) Professor Bhaer persuades her that sensational stories are morally corrupting to young readers, Jo abandons this lucrative genre and attempts a tale in the bland, unobjectionable style of Mary Sherwood, Maria Edgeworth, and Hannah More. The result, Alcott writes, ‘might have been more properly called an essay or a sermon, so intensely moral was it.’ After failing to find a purchaser for ‘this didactic gem’ (343), Jo turns her hand to juvenile fiction:

Then she tried a child’s story, which she could easily have disposed of if she had not been mercenary enough to demand filthy lucre for it. The only person who offered enough to make it worth while to try juvenile literature was a worthy gentleman who felt it his mission to convert all the world to his particular belief. But much as she liked to write for children, Jo could not consent to depict all her naughty boys as being eaten by bears or tossed by mad bulls, because they did not go to a particular Sabbath-school, nor all the good infants, who did go, as rewarded by every kind of bliss, from gilded ginger-bread to escorts of angels, when they departed this life with psalms or sermons on their lispng tongues. So nothing came of these trials; and Jo corked up her inkstand. . . .

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Unlike her semi-autobiographical protagonist, Alcott refused to cork up her own inkstand but instead went on to write numerous stories for children, beginning with fairy tales in the mid-1850s and continuing largely in the fantasy mode promoted by Hawthorne up until about 1868. Finally, in the spring of that year, she hit upon a combination of style and subject matter that succeeded in earning her the stacks of ‘filthy lucre’ she dreamed of, in addition to literary fame and respectability as the author of *Little Women*.

Louisa May Alcott did not want to write girls’ books, however. In fact, she was rather strongly opposed to the suggestion, offered by Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers, that she write a novel for girls. In retrospect, her distaste for the project (which she recorded in a journal entry of September 1867) is amusing:

Niles, partner of Robert, asked me to write a girls book. Said I’d try. Fuller asked me to be the Editor of ‘Merry’s Museum.’ Said I’d try. Began at once on both new jobs, but didn’t like either.

Journals 158

As it happened, the task of editing *Merry’s Museum* proved to be quite a drain on Alcott’s time and energy, and her progress on the ‘girls book’ was no doubt hindered as much by the demands of reading manuscripts and writing her monthly story and editorial as by her obvious resistance to the project Niles proposed.

While Alcott continued to favor fairy tales, writing for *Merry's Museum* an eight-part serial entitled *Will's Wonder Book* as well as several other fantasy stories, Niles renewed his interest in her 'girls book.' In May 1868, his prompting elicited another tepid response from Alcott:

Father saw Mr. Niles about a fairy book. Mr. N. wants a *girls' story*, and I begin 'Little Women.' Marmee, Anna, and May all approve my plan. So I plod away, though I don't enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it.

Journals 165–6

The following month, she again voiced her lack of enthusiasm, noting in her journal that she had

Sent twelve chapters of 'L. W.' to Mr. N. He thought it *dull*; so do I. But work away and mean to try the experiment; for lively, simple books are very much needed for girls, and perhaps I can supply the need.

Journals 166

Thomas Niles's persistence in the face of Alcott's continuing reluctance is perhaps surprising until we consider both the unprecedented success then being enjoyed by authors of 'realistic' juvenile fiction and the talent of this up-and-coming editor for assessing the literary market of the day. Alcott's biography reveals that a powerful incentive to Niles (and, by extension, to Alcott) was provided by the example of 'Oliver Optic' in the arena of boys' books. Niles's obituary in *Publishers Weekly* (9 June 1894) reported that '[t]he success of Oliver Optic's books suggested to Mr. Niles the thought of similar books for girls, and having been much pleased by "Hospital Sketches," by Louisa M. Alcott, published in 1867 by Ticknor & Fields, he sent for Miss Alcott and engaged her for this work' ('T. Niles' 859–60). More recently, Gene Gleason related that Niles asked Alcott to "do something like Oliver Optic," but for girls' (648). Madeleine Stern reconstructs the scenario in her biography of Alcott as follows:

From his office at number 143 Washington Street he [Niles] had seen vast quantities of books by 'Oliver Optic' leaving the rooms of Lee and Shephard at number 149. There must be a similar market for a full-length novel that would be as popular among girls as 'Oliver Optic's' narratives were among boys.

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Who was this paragon of juvenile authorship who reportedly inspired both Thomas Niles and Louisa May Alcott to experiment with realistic fiction

aimed specifically at adolescent girls? With approximately 126 books to his credit, ‘Oliver Optic’ was the enormously prolific Reverend William Taylor Adams (1822–97), whose most popular books sold at a rate of more than 100,000 a year (Gay 16). The indefatigable Adams also wrote approximately 1,000 short stories, used at least eight different pseudonyms, and was editor, at various times, of *Student and Schoolmate*, *Our Little Ones*, and *Oliver Optic’s Magazine (Our Boys and Girls)* (Gleason 647–8). By the time of his death, an estimated two million copies of his books had been sold, making the former principal and Sunday-school teacher one of the best-paid writers of his time as well as (according to at least one source) the most widely read (Jones xvi). Given that Niles evidently hoped that Alcott might provide a female counterpart to Adams’s fabulously popular boys’ books, a glimpse into the career of the illustrious ‘Oliver Optic’ provides some insight into the role of the *Little Women Series* in the nineteenth-century literary marketplace.

Just as Niles prompted Alcott with the suggestion that she write a book for girls, so Adams’s publisher provided the initial impetus for the young minister to write a book for boys. Although originally published by Brown, Bazin and Co., *The Boat Club: or The Bunkers of Rippleton. A Tale for Boys* (dated 1854), a story about two rival groups of boys and their boating adventures on a New England lake, was picked up by Phillips, Sampson in 1855 and later republished by William Lee, who spurred Adams on to produce sequel after sequel. Lee, as a partner in the newly established firm of Lee & Shephard, capitalized on the popularity of the six-volume *Oliver Optic’s Library for young People* (which he helped to create) and managed to keep Adams in his stable of authors for the next forty years.

Lee & Shepard had more authors writing for boys than for girls; . . . but their series for boys achieved a kind of a commercial success that none of their girls’ series managed to approach. Fueled by their success in the boys’ market and hoping to correct the imbalance, Lee & Shephard decided to enlist their most popular boys’ author in a bold attempt to jumpstart their lagging trade in girls’ books. ‘Adams was summoned to the publishers’ office and asked to prepare a new series for girls – which might also be read by boys!’ (Kilgour, *Lee & Shephard* 35). Adams agreed to give it a try. The promised volume for girls was *Rich and Humble; or, The Mission of Bertha Grant* (1864), the first volume of the *Woodville Stories*, in which Adams confirms:

the author presents the following story to his young lady friends, though he confidently expects it will prove as acceptable to the embryo ‘lords of creation’ as to those for whom it was more especially written.

What is perhaps most interesting about *Rich and Humble* is the explicit claim it makes to targeting a female audience. Despite its claims to addressing a female readership, *Rich and Humble* carries the subtitle ‘A Story for Young People,’ and the series is designated ‘A Library for Boys and Girls.’ Moreover, in his preface to the volume, Adams addresses male and female readers in turn, directing the attention of the two groups of readers to different aspects of the text:

The girls will find that Bertha Grant is not only a very good girl, but that her life is animated by a lofty purpose, which all may have, though they fail to achieve the visible triumphs that rewarded the exertions of the heroine of ‘Rich and Humble.’

The boys will find that Richard Grant was not always a good boy because his life was not animated by a lofty purpose; but the author hopes, in another volume, to present him in a higher moral aspect, and more worthy the imitation of those who, like him, have wandered from the true path.

5

Rich and Humble was not an immediate success; still, the long-term sales of this domestic novel eventually outpaced many of Adams’s boys’ books (Kilgour 39–40), providing persuasive corroboration that a ready market for girls’ series books awaited those prepared to meet its demands. In spite of these early beginnings, however, realistic fiction written specifically for the amusement of young girls was still uncommon a full decade after the appearance of Oliver Optic’s books for boys. While Lee & Shepard exhibited customary foresight in staking out a corner of the girls’ market, most publishers did not yet consider it necessary or sufficiently profitable to publish books for this particular subset of readers.

One reason for the recognition of boys as a separate audience well before girls was that the boys’ market was seen as including girls, while the girls’ market apparently excluded boys. In fact, it was a common perception that boys *required* a separate body of literature. Girls, however, could enjoy both domestic tales and adventure stories directed at a male audience. The popular British children’s author Charlotte M. Yonge (who had been producing novels for teenage girls in England since the mid-1850s and whom Alcott read as a young woman [Crisler 35]) explained her decision to include a category of ‘boys’ books’ without a complementary listing of ‘girls’ books’ in her compendium of *What Books to Give and What to Lend* (1887):

The mild tales that girls will read simply to pass away the time are ineffective with [boys]. . . . the works therein [this catalogue] are not merely suited to lads, for though girls will often greatly prefer a book about the other sex, boys almost universally disdain books about girls.

Alcott was well aware of this literary fact, for in *Little Women* she has Jo read boys' books, and even delicate Beth finds occasion to feel 'glad that she had read one of the boys' books in which Jo delighted' (152) Given these attitudes toward boys' and girls' reading, it is not difficult to see why entertaining novels conceived specifically for boys emerged earlier than comparable books for girls.

The belated discovery of girls as a separate audience was also influenced by a persistent misapprehension of what girls wanted to (or should) read. Long after the fading of the notion that boys must be spoon-fed didactic and moral tales of the type Alcott satirizes in *Little Women*, stories for girls continued to consist largely of sugar-coated lessons in morality and femininity. Many seemed to agree with Charlotte Yonge's assessment that '[i]f the boy is not to betake himself to "Jack Sheppard" literature, he must be beguiled by wholesome adventure,' while 'If the girl is not to study the "penny dreadful," her notions must be refined by the tale of high romance or pure pathos' (6).

The discrepancy between boys' and girls' literary fare reflects the divergent roles of boys and girls in nineteenth-century society. As Anne Scott MacLeod points out, 'Realistic children's literature nearly always bends toward socializing the young, imparting values, and distinguishing desirable behavior from the deplorable' (*American Childhood* 54). Boys' and girls' novels of the nineteenth century accomplished these tasks through plot as well as characterization: 'Where the boys' books increasingly revolved around a young man's encounter with the outside world – in the army, in the West, in the city – and around active, extroverted adventure, girls' novels focused on character and relationships, as, of course, girls' lives did as they approached womanhood' (MacLeod, *American Childhood* 14) Salmon's 1886 article 'What Girls Read' explicitly prescribed the manner in which juvenile literature should prepare British children for their future roles as grown men and women:

Boy's literature of a sound kind ought to build up men. Girls' literature ought to help to build up women. If in choosing the books that boys shall read it is necessary to remember that we are choosing mental food for the future chiefs of a great race, it is equally important not to forget in choosing books for girls that we are choosing mental food for the future wives and mothers of that race.

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Alcott's entry into the largely untried arena of realistic fiction for girls marked an important advance in the social function of girls' reading. Responding positively to the gradual widening of the female sphere and increasing opportunities for women, *Little Women*, and its sequels acknowledge girls as

more than future wives and mothers, advocate education and career opportunities for women, and celebrate the individuality of spirited, intelligent, independent young women. In *Little Women*, which was hailed as ‘[a] capital story for girls’ (‘New Publications’ 857), two of the three sisters who reach adulthood pursue careers other than (or in addition to) that of homemaker: Jo as a writer and Amy as an artist.

Although Alcott attributed the success of *Little Women* to its realistic portrayal of girls’ lives, Jo, the central character, has typically been regarded as an exceptional, rather than a typical, example of nineteenth-century girlhood. Certainly, Alcott’s portrayal of Jo flouts the characteristics ascribed by convention to nineteenth-century heroines. Alcott writes, ‘Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a fly-away look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman, and didn’t like it’ (*Little Women* 6). As MacLeod has recently argued, however, tomboyism, followed by its forced abandonment in the mid- to late teens, was far more widespread among American girls of the nineteenth century than convention has led us to expect. Drawing on diaries, letters, and memoirs, as well as fictional accounts, MacLeod suggests that girls of the later nineteenth century often enjoyed the same kinds of rough-and-tumble activities as their brothers, up until such time (typically between thirteen and fifteen) as society demanded that they become young ladies. MacLeod’s research helps account for the popularity of *Little Women*, and especially of the beloved Jo. Not only did Jo’s character exhibit many of the traits of MacLeod’s tomboys – independence, courage, an adventurous spirit, and a love of the outdoors – but the problem with which Jo contends throughout *Little Women* was evidently a pervasive and enduring one for American girls: the problem of how to bridge the gap between the relative liberty of girlhood and the potentially stifling constraints of womanhood.

The practice of spinning off sequels and series was a marketing innovation that flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – an indication that authors and publishers were becoming quite adept at catering to the demands of the marketplace – and, as indicated earlier, William T. Adams and his publisher, Lee & Shepard, were masters of the technique.

If Thomas Niles had indeed persuaded Alcott to follow the example of Oliver Optic and write books directed specifically at a single-sex juvenile audience, it is likely that he also had Adams’s success with series in mind when he urged the author of *Little Women* to follow up with subsequent volumes of the ‘March Family Chronicles.’ Alcott complained in a letter of February 1869, ‘I [d]ont like sequels, & dont think No 2 will be as popular as No 1, but publishers are very *perverse* & wont let authors have thier [*sic*] way so my little women must grow up & be married off in a

very stupid style' [Letters 121–2]). But Niles, who '[l]ike most publishers . . . felt that books sold better in series, since a few outstanding titles would carry a mass of trivia' (Kilgour, *Roberts Brothers* 65), had already decided, within a month of the publication of *Little Women*, that the story should have a sequel. Moreover, he encouraged Alcott to keep the ending of *Little Women* open to allow for such a possibility (Shealy 63), and when *Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy Part Second* was still in press, he was already urging Alcott to follow it up with a 'new story by Miss Alcott' (Shealy 71).

Alcott readily acknowledged her indebtedness to Niles in establishing her as a famous writer of books for girls, even referring to *Little Women* as a book that was 'very hastily written to order' (*Letters* 118). Her debt to Oliver Optic and the Lee & Shepard mode of mass production and marketing remained largely unacknowledged, however, by both Alcott and her publisher.

As the parallel and intertwining careers of Louisa May Alcott and Oliver Optic show, however, both authors succeeded in the rapidly expanding literary marketplace by staking out segments of the juvenile fiction market defined principally by gender and age. Both authors effectively responded to the literary tastes and interests of these audiences, and both paid heed to the aspirations of their readers, as well as to the expectations society placed upon them. The books of both authors were created and shaped by the markets they addressed, and, in turn, shaped, defined, and fostered a sense of community among these respective groups of readers.

Notes

1. John Newbery experimented with gender-based marketing gimmicks by packaging *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* (1744) with a ball for boys and a pincushion for girls, but this strategy was designed to make a *single* book equally attractive to both male and female children. Samuel F. Pickering, Jr. traces the first 'significant differentiation made between books for little girls and for little boys' to Mary Ann Kilner's *The Adventures of a Pin Cushion* (1783?) and *Memories of a Peg-Top* (1783) (qtd. in Segal, "'As the Twig Is Bent'" 168).
2. Jacob Abbott's *Rollo and Lucy* books (dating from 1835 and 1841, respectively) are the first American juvenile series of note to be clearly differentiated by gender. The series I discuss in this article targeted a slightly older age group than Abbott's series. For a bibliographical overview of series books for girls, see *Girls Series Books: A Checklist of Titles Published, 1840–1991* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992). For discussions of gender differentiation in the British market, see Kimberley Reynolds, *Girls Only? Gender and Popular Children's Literature In Britain, 1880–1910* and J. S. Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction*.
3. It is significant that Sheryl A. Englund refers to *Little Women* as a 'genre-defining "girl's book"' (201) and Cary Ryan pronounces it 'a book that redefines what it means to be born a girl' (Alcott, *Girlhood Diary* 36). I argue that her books for girls are both 'genre-defining' and audience-defining and that the two functions are, in fact, interdependent.

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