

2012

Domestic and Subversive: The Roles of Women in the Children's Novels of Louisa May Alcott

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Introduction

In the past 150 years, a strange thing has occurred. Much of the world has incorrectly come to imagine Louisa May Alcott as a conservative icon and her most famous novel, *Little Women* (1868), as a text that creates an idealized domestic life for women to aspire to and endorses the traditional social hierarchy, with men on the top.

I noticed this trend as a middle school student reading *Little Women* for the first time. Many women describe this novel as a book passed from mother to daughter; Harriet Reisen even opens her recent biography of Alcott by describing this practice (1). Though I was exposed to many books in my childhood, no one ever recommended *Little Women* to me. I did not know much about it, but somehow I imagined the story would be old-fashioned and conservative, instructing me that a woman's place was in the house and home. I cannot say for sure where I got this idea, but I now think that this ignorant vision of Alcott's work is culturally prevalent. If one only encounters Alcott in flashes across the TV screen or articles in the newspaper, it is easy to get the wrong idea about her.

My copy of *Little Women* was a stolen one. It had been given to my older sister a few years earlier and it sat on her bookshelf, with the spine only partially cracked from the time she started to read it and found it too didactic to continue. I was home sick with nothing to do and plenty of time to kill, so I filched it from her room and jumped back into bed to read it. Like so many readers before me, I was swept into Alcott's world, immediately identifying with Jo (I, too, dreamed of being a writer) and breathlessly turning page after page as I waited to see what would happen to her. I felt pangs of disappointment when Jo rejected Laurie and again when she accepted Friedrich Bhaer. I hoped Jo would be happy and was pleased to see that she was when I checked *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* out of the library later that week.

When I reread Alcott's children's novels as a college student one summer, however, I was shocked when I realized how revolutionary they are. Alcott champions women's rights, questions the way male-dominated society functions, and lets her heroines dream about more than husbands and homes (though she says it is okay if they want those, too). As a writer, she manages to find a wonderful balance between telling a story and expressing her values. The American public imagines Alcott's novels laud the role of women in the domestic sphere (which they do) and reject the need for change in mainstream American society (which they do not); in this misremembering of Alcott they are taking part in a literary crime.

This literary crime of twisting the images of Alcott and her books to propagate conservative values has been done since the books were published. Alcott's publishers wanted to appeal to the largest readership possible, including the mainstream middle class who might consider Alcott and her family to be "a bunch of weirdo radicals" if they knew more about her (Trubek 56). So they focused on the family values of her stories. An advertisement for *Little Women* in back of the 1870 second edition of *Little Women* describes it as "the story of four young girls... This is a thoroughly natural and charming book, fresh and full of life, and we heartily recommend it to all young people, big or little." This contemporary advertisement ignores the complications and questions about women's roles Alcott raises in *Little Women* and shows what the publisher thought would appeal to the public.

Both the women's movement and the movement against women's suffrage used Alcott's image to further their causes, especially with the founding of the museum at Alcott's home, Orchard House. The suffragettes pointed to Alcott's works to show that it was possible to be political and domestic; there could be nothing scary about women voting if the woman who wrote the American classic *Little Women* was in favor of it. Anne Trubek explains how the

preservation of Orchard House “sentimentalized” the world’s view of Alcott. The house was turned into a museum by female volunteer clubs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (59-60). They saw the house as an “emblem of the virtuous and ostentatiously traditional domesticity that could establish a reassuring stability as they entered the new world of the twentieth century” (Trubek 60-1). The women’s clubs were divided on the issue of women’s suffrage; one founder of the Orchard House Museum was the president of the Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women (a title Alcott would surely have laughed at). The National American Women’s Suffrage Association wrote to the newspaper in Concord that the museum should discuss Alcott’s involvement in the women’s rights movement. To include this tidbit of Alcott’s biography would undermine the conservative and domestic agenda many women were pushing with the museum, but not including it would be rewriting or ignoring history and insulting Alcott’s memory. The museum staff compromised by allowing Alcott’s role in the fight for women’s suffrage to be told, but also making it clear that they did not approve of it and that it was only included because women’s suffrage seemed inevitable (Trubek 60-1).

Well after the opening of Orchard House Museum, Alcott has remained an important American writer, and *Little Women* has maintained its popularity with big and little women (and a few boys and men). Since I have been studying her, I have gotten in the habit of looking for Alcott’s books any time I enter a bookstore. I almost always find *Little Women*; if I do not, the shopkeepers assure me that they have just sold out of their copies and more are on the way. The curious thing about *Little Women* is that I often find it in both the children’s classics section and in the adult novel section. And I often see copies of the rest of the *Little Women* series, the Rose Campbell books, and *An Old-Fashioned Girl* on the shelves of the children’s classic section, as

well. However, I rarely find Alcott's adult books, *Moods* and *Work*, in bookshops, which makes me think they have made less of an impact than her children's books have.

Penguin recently released a new edition of *Little Women* as part of a collection of cloth-bound literary classics that includes *Great Expectations*, *The Odyssey*, *Middlemarch*, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Penguin's view seems to be that Alcott is a classic adult writer worthy of being on the same shelf as Dickens, Brontë, Flaubert, and Austen. Each book cover has an illustration by graphic artist Coralie Bickford-Smith. The artist captured the complexities of *Little Women* perfectly; the cover features a repeating image of open scissors, a sewing box item at once domestic and dangerous (Bickford-Smith).

Besides books Alcott wrote, it is easy to find biographies and novels about her and her characters. In 2006, Geraldine Brooks won a Pulitzer Prize for her novel about Jo's father in the Civil War, *March: A Novel*. John Matteson also won a Pulitzer in 2008 for his book about Alcott and her relationship with her father, *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father*. Harriet Reisen wrote an interesting and often scandalous biography of Alcott (and her drug use, among other things), *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*, which was released in conjunction with a PBS special in 2009. The quirkiest novel is *Little Women and Werewolves*, a parody of Alcott's story, inspired by *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, in which the Laurences are werewolves being persecuted by the town of Concord.

Beyond the bookshelf, Alcott fans or casual viewers can enjoy films and TV shows based on her books. *Little Women* has inspired three successful and excellent films. The first from 1933, directed by the great George Cukor, features Katharine Hepburn as Jo; the second features major stars of 1949: June Allyson, Janet Leigh, Elizabeth Taylor, Margaret O'Brian, Peter Lawford, and former silent-film star Mary Astor as Marmee. A film from 1994 is similarly star-

studded, with Winona Ryder, Christian Bale, Kirsten Dunst, Clare Danes, and Susan Sarandon taking on the lead roles. Alcott's books have also inspired some less well known adaptations: a 1998 Canadian TV series loosely based on *Little Men*, a 1949 American musical B-movie *An Old Fashioned Girl*, and a Japanese anime TV series titled *Wakakusa Monogatari Nan to Jō Sensei* or *Little Women II: Jo's Boys*.

There is also a world of merchandise available. Madame Alexander, the great doll company, has produced a set of dolls inspired by *Little Women* every year since the 1933 film was released. They like Alcott's work because, they say, "We never run out of inspiration for new designs, thanks to the rich detail of the book" ("Little Women"). A quick search on the e-commerce website Etsy, which is full of handmade and vintage items, leads to numerous results. One can purchase jewelry inscribed with Alcott quotes such as, "She is too fond of books and it has turned her brain," and, "I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship." One can also find purses made of vintage copies of her books and art prints inspired by her novels. A die-hard fan can even buy a lavender-scented sachet doll that is claimed to look like Alcott.

The continued relevance of Alcott's works in their amazingly diverse forms says a lot about her significance as a writer, which means it is vital that we remember Alcott and her works fairly and more accurately than American society has in the past. This thesis is my attempt to prove that Alcott's works for children are, like the scissors on the Penguin book cover, both domestic and dangerous. Alcott reinforces and subverts the domestic roles of women by celebrating and critiquing their positions in the private sphere and calling for the creation of new roles for women in the public sphere. My first chapter, "A Woman's Place," discusses women's suffrage and early forms of feminism in Alcott's children's novels. The next chapter, "The

Marrying Kind,” explores the male-dominated hierarchy found in marriage and suggests that Alcott often uses her writing to subvert this hierarchy. Following the second chapter is a note titled “Not the Marrying Kind,” which discusses the alternatives to marriages in Alcott’s children’s novels, from spinsterhood to non-heterosexual relationships. Finally, the last chapter, titled “Working Girls,” examines the concepts of ambition and success in Alcott’s stories and proposes that Alcott believed fulfilling, hard work led to happiness.

Chapter One: A Woman's Place

Louisa May Alcott's lifetime was a time of great debate about women and their roles in and out of the home. The women's movement, with which Alcott was involved, was often depicted as an attack on the home and on men. The media portrayed the movement in simple terms, making it appear that only two options were available for the public to choose from: to support women staying in the domestic sphere or to support women taking on men's roles. Alcott presents a more complicated view of the women's movement in her books, by creating realistic characters who discuss women's roles and show what women are capable of doing. Her books boldly praise suffrage and strong-mindedness in women, while at the same time encouraging girls to be "womanly" as homemakers and mothers. The wholesomeness and traditionalism in the stories make the books comfortable and familiar for young readers, yet the progressivism in the texts challenges readers to evaluate the state of society. Most likely, when Alcott's readers grew up, they would be more open-minded about women's changing roles.

Twenty years before the first volume of *Little Women* was published in 1868, the landmark women's rights meeting took place at Seneca Falls, where Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others wrote "The Declaration of Sentiments." Stanton wrote, "all men and women are created equal," using Thomas Jefferson's language from "The Declaration of Independence" to show how just and American this cause was. The sixty-eight women and thirty-two men who signed believed in more than women's suffrage; they believed women should participate in church, politics, and the workforce as fully as men do. Women should be able to sue and be sued. Married women should be allowed to own property and be the guardians of their children in the case of divorce. The "Declaration" closed with the promise that the signers will "use every instrumentality within our power to effect our object" (Stanton 226).

Many men and women disagreed with the women's movement. A popular argument against it was that women were the moral compasses of society and should not sully themselves with politics. Women were in charge of the family and home and should keep their role as "the civilizers of mankind," as Alcott's mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson put it at an 1855 women's convention (Marshall 62). Many women agreed with this sentiment and preferred to be the rulers of their homes while their husbands managed the world. Philadelphia's *Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*¹ wrote: "A pretty girl is equal to ten thousand men and a mother is, next to God, all powerful. The ladies of Philadelphia are resolved to maintain their (present) rights as Wives, Belles, Virgins, and Mothers, and not as women" (Severn 222).

In the Seneca Falls "Declaration," Stanton and her cohorts wrote that they anticipated "no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation, and ridicule," which was a correct prediction (Stanton 226). The women's movement was frequently depicted in a comical light, what historian Bill Severn calls a "national joke." Contemporary media were major culprits, claiming that women wanted to switch places with men and "wear the breeches," as the *Rochester Daily Advertiser* put it, while the men took care of the household. A great deal of the discussion was couched in fashion terms. One newspaper caption reads, "Petticoats vs Boots," revealing that this writer thinks the movement is a battle between men and women. The sexes are defined by their clothing: women in long, modest skirts, men in sturdy boots. James Gordon Bennett, the founder, publisher, and editor of the *New York Herald*, wondered if women could "doff the apron and buckle on the sword," which, once again, uses apparel to discuss women's roles. Like the

¹ This article was included in a text called *History of Women's Suffrage* written and compiled by Stanton and others. It is listed under the heading "The Women of Philadelphia" and no author information is given, unfortunately, though it seems to be written by a man. The full article is dismissive of women in Boston and New York who are clamoring for their rights and praises the women of Philadelphia for being "reasonable" enough not to ask for their rights. The writer argues, "women have enough influence over human affairs without being politicians... Their rule is absolute; their power unbounded. Under such a system men have no claim to rights, especially 'equal rights'" ("The Women of Philadelphia").

metonymic “Petticoats vs Boots,” Bennett’s apron and sword carry gendered meanings.

Bennett’s question also creates the image of women leaving the kitchen for the battlefield. There is a patronizing assumption that what women face in the home could not prepare them what they will face in their fight. This assumption is based on an idealization of the domestic sphere as a place free from conflict (Severn 222-3).

Those papers did not consider that a woman could wear boots under her petticoat or a sword over her apron, but Alcott did, because she had progressive views of women. She was raised by and around reformers. Her parents Abby and Bronson Alcott were part of the early movement for women’s rights in the 1830s, before the movement shifted to focus on abolition. Alcott biographer Harriet Reisen suggests that Alcott became greatly involved in women’s suffrage after her mother’s death in 1877. Her mother, Abby, had said, “I mean to vote before I die, even if my daughters have to carry me!” Just after her death, Massachusetts decided to allow women to vote in local elections regarding children’s issues and education. In 1879, Alcott, already a well-known writer, began to work to convince women to register by organizing women’s reading groups and circulating petitions to the women of Concord, Massachusetts.² When registration day arrived, Alcott became, in her words, “the first woman to register my name as a voter” (Reisen 265-266).

Alcott used her children’s books to share her passion for the women’s movement. Many of her beloved characters – Jo March, Nan Harding, Polly Milton, and Rose Campbell – speak about the importance of women in and out of the household. Some of Alcott’s commentaries on

² The people of Concord frustrated Alcott. When she tried to get the women, “timid sheep,” to register to vote, they followed the lead of Ellen Emerson, Ralph Waldo’s wife, who did not register. On the day of the election, Concord’s men refused to vote after Alcott and twenty other women cast their ballots (Reisen 266).

women's rights are pronounced and clear, like Nan's speeches on women's suffrage; her other commentaries are more subtle, like Alcott's use and examination of the word "strong-minded."

The women's movement has an unmistakable presence in *Jo's Boys*, Alcott's last work from 1886. Almost all of the characters speak in favor of women's suffrage, and the narrator, too, is on that side of the debate. Early on, in "Dan," Nan, a wonderfully modern woman, speaks about women's rights: "'The women of England can vote, and we can't. I'm ashamed of America that she isn't ahead in all good things,' cried Nan, who held advanced views on all reforms, and was anxious about her rights, having had to fight for some of them" (Chap. 4).³ This lays the groundwork for Nan's position in a conversation about women's roles that dominate the next chapter.

In "Vacation," young men and women, led by Nan, have a conversation about women's rights at an evening party at Mr. Bhaer's college (Chap. 5). The conversation stands out in the novel because it is an unusual conversation for the young characters to have at a party, and because it adds little to the plot. What it does do is allow the characters to voice their support for women's suffrage, after a respected character speaks eloquently about the cause. The characters in this scene are all familiar to and beloved by the readers of *Little Women* and *Little Men*. If the conversation took place between other, less loved characters, it would carry less weight.

Nan is an unusual character for the time period. She has little interest in keeping a home or having a family and pursues her childhood dream of being a doctor, which is declared in *Little Men* (Chap. 15), by attending medical school in *Jo's Boys*.⁴ Her childhood friend, Tom, follows her there, trying to win her heart, though she discourages him (Chap. 1). While they are at the

³ I used online texts from *Project Gutenberg*, which have no page numbers, for many of the novels I cite. The texts are simple to search, and I have provided the relevant chapter numbers in my parenthetical citations.

⁴ Alcott writes more about female doctors in her essay "Happy Women" (Matteson 330) and praises one in *Rose in Bloom* (Chap. 1). A further discussion of female doctors in *Rose in Bloom* is in Chapter Three: Working Girls.

evening party at Mr. Bhaer's college, Daisy Brooke, a quiet, traditional girl who represents domestic feminism in the novel, says Tom's love for Nan and his devotion in following her to medical school is beautiful. Nan responds,

My idea is that if we girls have any influence we should use it for the good of these boys, and not pamper them up, making slaves of ourselves and tyrants of them. Let them prove what they can do and be before they ask anything of us, and give us a chance to do the same. Then we know where we are, and shall not make mistakes to mourn over all our lives. (Chap. 5)

Another girl who is a student at Mr. Bhaer's college and "had chosen a career, like a brave and sensible young woman" agrees and says women need the same chances men have:

Only give us a chance, and have patience till we can do our best. Now we are expected to be as wise as men who have had generations of all the help there is, and we scarcely anything. Let us have equal opportunities, and in a few generations we will see what the judgment is. I like justice, and we get very little of it. (Chap. 5)

The young women's appeal for justice and an end to tyranny is similar to "The Declaration of Sentiments." By adopting the language of the American Revolution, Alcott and the women's movement imply that anyone opposed to women's suffrage is un-American.

Demi, Daisy's brother, asks whether the women talking are "Still shouting the battle-cry of freedom?"⁵ and offers to help their cause, jokingly. Nan answers seriously, praising him for remembering, "that you owe much to your mother and your sisters and your aunts" because men need to "own that they are not gods." She goes on to say, "How can we think them so when such awful mistakes are being made all the time by these great creatures? See them sick, as I do, then you know them." Demi asks her to be kind to men ("bless" them) and not kick them when they

⁵ Demi is quoting a popular Civil War song by George F. Root that was introduced as a "propaganda song" at a rally in July, 1862 and spread "like wildfire" with the troops, according to a Union soldier (Silber 7-10). The catchy song raised the morale of the troops and the people at home: "Oh we'll rally 'round the flag, boys, we'll rally once again, shouting the battle cry of freedom" (Root 17-20). The song was popular enough to inspire several Confederate versions with new lyrics linking freedom with succession and the right to own slaves. Alcott invokes this song to raise morale for the fight for women's rights and to draw a comparison between the women's movement and the abolition movement of decades earlier.

are down because women's mercy will set men up to "bless and believe" in women "evermore," by which he means: if women are kind, men will be kind in return (Chap. 5). Nan challenges that call for kindness:

We'll be kind to you if you will be just to us. I don't say generous, only just. I went to a suffrage debate in the Legislature last winter; and of all the feeble, vulgar twaddle I ever heard, that was the worst; and those men were our representatives. I blushed for them, and the wives and mothers. I want an intelligent man to represent me, if I can't do it myself, not a fool. (Chap. 5)

The fact that Nan has attended the suffrage debate shows how serious she is about the women's movement. Her speech is easy to take seriously because it is full of unsentimental good sense, for example, the importance of having intelligent people in government. Alcott was wise to have Nan address the role of women as the kind, moral half of population. Nan is not saying that women should be unkind to men; she says women will be kind *when men are just*.

Tom announces to everyone else at the party that "Nan is on the stump," behaving the way many people do when faced with a person who is passionately defending a controversial issue: instead of engaging with the speaker and dealing with the issue, he mocks her for her passion. Alcott is showing how discussions of women's roles happen in real life and how speakers deal with the challenges. Demi calls their discussion an "indignation meeting" and says, "Nan and Alice are on the rampage, and we are at the bar to be tried for our lives" (Chap. 5). Both men identify women's suffrage as an attack on men and continue to mock Nan, though not too unkindly.

Nan responds in the best way one can when faced with a person mocking one for being serious: she stays serious and asks the young men what they really think about women's suffrage, pointing out that some of the young men have seen the world and the rest have seen examples of fine, strong women. Dan, who is the "wild" one just returned to Massachusetts after

living in the American West, offers to “fight any man who’s mean enough to say you don’t deserve it.” Nat, the shy man in love with Daisy, blushes and speaks: “I should be the most ungrateful fellow alive if I did not love, honor, and serve women with all my heart and might, for to them I owe everything I am or ever shall be” (Chap. 5).

When Nan finally turns to Tom to ask where he stands on the issue, he speaks “solemnly”: “I believe in suffrage of all kinds. I adore all women, and will die for them at any moment if it will help the cause” (Chap. 5). But Nan can never resist giving him a cutting word:

Living and working for it is harder, and therefore more honorable. Men are always ready to die for us, but not to make our lives worth having. Cheap sentiment and bad logic. You will pass, Tom, only don’t twaddle. Now, having taken the sense of the meeting we will adjourn, as the hour for festive gymnastics has arrived. (Chap. 5)

Nan is perhaps unnecessarily harsh to Tom. This critique is necessary to close the discussion because it shows that Nan is in control, which makes her speeches seem strong. It also allows Nan to dismiss men who are against the women’s movement (those who do “not make our lives worth having”) as being full of “cheap sentiment and bad logic” without an anti-suffrage man being at the party.

The closest Alcott presents to an anti-suffrage character is Daisy Brooke, Nan’s counterpart. Daisy is a traditionally domestic woman and she begs Nan not to start talking about women’s suffrage at the party in *Jo’s Boys*, saying, “Oh, please don’t begin on that. People always quarrel over that question, and call names, and never agree. Do let us be quiet and happy tonight” (Chap. 5). She easily could be an anti-suffrage woman who prefers to rule her home and stay out of the public sphere. Instead, Alcott makes her a “traditional” woman who plans to vote along with her mother and aunts in the local elections, in which women were permitted to vote in Massachusetts (Chap. 4). Later, when Nan leads the suffrage discussion at the party,

Daisy does not speak up, but claps her hands after her beloved Nat's speech about owing what he is to the women in his life, which suggests to the reader that she is a supporter of the women's movement, even if she is not vocal about it (Chap. 5).

Daisy and her choice to be a part of the women's movement fly in the face of the idea that women suffragettes are a danger to the home and want to usurp the roles of men. Alcott uses Daisy to suggest that it is possible to be in favor of increasing women's roles in the public sphere while still revering the roles of women in the domestic sphere. In *Jo's Boys*, Daisy is the domestic ideal, identified as "a model housekeeper" (Chap. 1). This role was set up in *Little Men*, in which Daisy attends Jo's Plumfield School with her brother and other boys. Daisy's aunt, Jo March Bhaer, teaches her how to cook and housekeep by providing her with a toy kitchen (Chap. 5). Alcott's father, Bronson, was a believer in learning through play, a trait that Alcott passed to Jo, who reminds Daisy that this is "useful play" and that she must "study hard and learn to make all kinds of things" (Reisen 21). Jo is giving Daisy the skills she will need in life, which involve taking care of a home, regardless of political beliefs.

Jo invents the domestic game for her niece in *Little Men* because the boys will not let Daisy play football with them. "Patty Pans" opens with Jo asking Daisy, "what's the matter?" Daisy is upset the boys will not play with her and begs her aunt to invent a new game for her to play on her own. The boys do not let Daisy into their masculine sphere of football, so Jo gives Daisy entry into the female-dominated domestic sphere. Jo's new game for her niece is a miniature kitchen in the nursery where Daisy can learn to properly cook and play house. Daisy's mother, Meg, tells her daughter to "learn the nice new play Aunty has got for you. It's a most useful and interesting one." Meg's direction is for both Daisy and for the reader. Alcott is implying that it is important for girls to learn to take care of a home. Meg adds a comment about

her sister Jo, “it is very kind of her to play it with you, because she does not like it very well herself” (Chap. 5). The comment is both expected and unexpected. On the one hand, Alcott is staying true to Jo’s character by keeping her tomboy streak and unconventional side; on the other hand, she is showing that some wonderful women are not such good housekeepers as they could be.

Alcott dedicates pages and pages to detailed descriptions of the miniature kitchen. One reason for the detail is the reader. Just as a young girl would want to know what colors a protagonist’s hair and dress are, so she wants to know the minutiae of this play Jo invented. The stove is of particular interest:

A wide seat ran round the three sides of the window; on one side hung and stood all sorts of little pots and pans, gridirons and skillets; on the other side a small dinner and tea set; and on the middle part a cooking-stove. Not a tin one, that was of no use, but a real iron stove, big enough to cook for a large family of very hungry dolls. But the best of it was that a real fire burned in it, real steam came out of the nose of the little tea-kettle, and the lid of the little boiler actually danced a jig, the water inside bubbled so hard. (Chap. 5)

This play kitchen puts the Easy-Bake Oven to shame, despite its obvious dangers to modern eyes. In *Eight Cousins*, the heroine Rose burns her hand on a stove while learning how to cook and says one of her aunts warned her that she was “spoiling her hands” (Chap. 16). But Daisy’s kitchen is a toy to be envied. Alcott is making learning how to cook and keep house attractive to young girls, while emphasizing the importance of it. In *Little Men*, the miniature kitchen is even appealing to the boys of Plumfield. First, they are attracted to the mechanics of the stove, to the point where Jo has to forbid them to touch the stove without Daisy’s permission – a rule that emphasizes the point that women, not men, are the rulers of the home. The boys then become excited at the thought of what Daisy can cook for them, which places Daisy in the traditional role of a wife or mother (Chap. 5).

One is reminded of a comparable passage in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book Alcott read and admired (Reisen 118). In Chapter Thirteen of the 1852 bestseller, Stowe dedicates several pages to describing the house of the Quakers who accept George Harris as a guest. Stowe praises the housekeeper and matriarch, Rachel Halliday, for being a woman who runs her home smoothly and looks "truly and benignly happy at the head of her table" (Chap. 13). Her description of the kitchen is so pleasant that, like Daisy's kitchen, readers want to be there.

Everything went on so sociably, so quietly, so harmoniously, in the great kitchen, – it seemed so pleasant to every one to do just what they were doing, there was such an atmosphere of mutual confidence and good fellowship everywhere, – even the knives and forks had a social clatter as they went on to the table; and the chicken and ham had a cheerful and joyous fizzle in the pan, as if they rather enjoyed being cooked than otherwise ... This, indeed, was a home... (Chap. 13)

Mrs. Halliday's home is enough to kindle George's faith in God, which reflects Stowe's view that women had a good deal of power in the home. Alcott's scenes of Daisy in her kitchen are reminiscent of Stowe's Quakers. Learning how to be a good housekeeper is not boring or oppressive; it is a valued and even sacred art.

Unlike Stowe, moreover, Alcott increases the reader's respect for housekeeping by using pedagogical and scientific language as well. Jo uses language typically applied to academic education by calling her work with Daisy "cooking class." When Jo's husband, Friedrich, interrupts them, Jo reprimands him, asking if he would want her to interrupt his Latin classes. Jo is also aware of the science of cooking, which is seen in her discussion of measurements, like "two pounds of steak." When she teaches Daisy to make miniature pies, Jo admits, "I really don't know how to measure for such tiny pies; I must guess at it, and if these don't succeed, we must try again" (Chap. 5). Jo, a tomboy in her youth, now knows how to make regular pies and understands the value of women's work in the home.

In the mid-nineteenth century, science in the home was an important part of the professionalization of the home, and an Alcott family friend named Mary Mann took part in this movement by writing a “physiological” cookbook in 1857.⁶ Megan Marshall writes that Mann’s goal was to “professionalize the home” because it would give women “a sense of power and achievement that compensated for their lack of political influence” (62). Marshall’s word choice of “compensated” reveals her view that these women were being cheated out of something by not having political rights. It is a worthwhile perspective; but it has the potential to mislead a reader to think that women like Mann *thought* they were being cheated, which may not have been the case. Many women, like those in the Philadelphia article referred earlier in this chapter, believed they were above politics.

Alcott’s 1875 novel *Eight Cousins* also focuses on the importance and value of girls learning how to cook and housekeep. Unlike Daisy who begins her kitchen “play” because she is bored, Rose, a teenage heroine, decides to learn housekeeping because she would like to know a “trade.” She admires young women who are “happy and independent” because they have “something to make a living out of.” Her guardian Uncle Alec is surprised because Rose is a wealthy orphan who does not need to worry about money. Because Rose has no particular interest in any one occupation, he proposes she learn “housekeeping” from her Great-Aunt Plenty: a “very excellent, necessary, and womanly accomplishment that no girl should be without, for it is a help to rich and poor, and the comfort of families depends up on it.” Rose is disappointed that it is not a “romantic” skill, but her uncle reassures her that “it need not interfere with any talent you may possess, but it *is* a necessary part of your training” (Chap. 16). Alcott

⁶ It is interesting in this context that Jo makes a joke about not putting too much butter in the pie crust because the pie will be too rich and the dolls will get indigestion, which follows Mann’s belief that rich foods were “unchristian” because they led to indigestion and ergo were unhealthy (Marshall 62).

uses Uncle Alec, who is respected by the reader because of his education and intelligence, to explain to readers why the ability to make a home comfortable and happy is important, while also reminding her readers that it does not need to be the *only* job for women.

The chapter “Bread and Button-Holes” goes into far more detail about housekeeping than *Little Men’s* “Patty Pans” does. Rose spends her time with Aunt Plenty “attending to linen-closets and store-rooms, pickling and preserving, exploring garret and cellar to see that all was right, and learning, in the good old-fashioned manner, to look well after the ways of the household.”⁷ In her description, Alcott uses words that make the job sound important and fun. Instead of “tidying” the closets, Rose “attends” them. She is an explorer of the corners of the house, not a dull cleaner or organizer. The excitement of Rose and Aunt Plenty over housekeeping lessons carries over to the reader, too. Rose is so excited to start her lessons when Uncle Alec proposes them that she “dances” into the parlor; about Aunt Plenty, the narrator claims not even to need “to relate how energetically she set about her pleasant task” (Chap. 16).

Alcott focuses on practical accomplishments in “Bread and Button-Holes” by having Uncle Alec set goals for Rose: to make a good loaf of bread and to sew good button-holes. Aunt Plenty teaches her how to make bread with the precision of a college lab instructor: “Rose studied yeast first, and through various stages of cake and biscuit came at last to the crowning glory of the ‘handsome, wholesome loaf,’” winning her uncle’s approval. Rose’s bedridden Great-Aunt Peace teaches her how to sew and “fitted out a nice little mending basket for her pupil.” Rose succeeds in making button-holes, which are “even to a thread,” Uncle Alec notes, with “nice little bars across the end so I can’t tear them when I twitch the buttons out.” Alcott

⁷ “To look well after the ways of the household” is a quotation from Proverbs 31:27, a passage that glorifies the work women do as wives, mothers, and housekeepers. Alcott is quoting the Bible to show the importance and sacredness of women’s work.

makes sewing with Aunt Peace sound as enjoyable as housekeeping lessons with Aunt Plenty because the three women talk and laugh with each other as they work (Chap. 16). These household jobs are social and allow the women to form close relationships with each other.

In *Eight Cousins* and *Little Men*, female relationships are formed in the domestic sphere where men are not typically allowed; Alcott shows that these female spaces are attractive to men. In *Little Men*, Mr. Bhaer enters Daisy's kitchen while his wife and niece are working, until Jo tells him to stop interrupting her lessons. The Plumfield boys, too, want to be a part of Daisy's kitchen. Daisy permits her brother to be in her domestic sphere if he tends the fire and runs her errands; the narrator notes that they are "privileges few visitors enjoy" (Chap. 5). In *Eight Cousins*, Uncle Alec is drawn to Rose's housekeeping lessons like an iron filing to a magnet. Aunt Plenty and Rose order "him off the premises at the point of a rolling pin" or lure "him away with bribes of gingerbread, a stray pickle, or a tart that was not quite symmetrical enough to suit their critical eye" (Chap. 16). Alcott's women do not want their men in their way while they are working. This is interesting because while Alcott is advocating for women to take part in the public sphere, she is not advocating for men to enter the domestic sphere. Men are kept out of the domestic world unless they have the permission of the women in charge. Like Demi in *Little Men*, Uncle Alec is permitted to stay when he has a purpose: Rose's sewing lessons are "irresistible" to him, so he reads aloud or tells stories, and "no one had the heart to drive him away" (Chap. 16).

Alcott does not, however, only use her works to discuss the roles of women in and out of the home; she also examines the language that is used to describe modern women, above all, the word "strong-minded." She frequently uses the word "strong-minded" in her children's novels and the word has several different meanings that depend on the situation. Alcott plays with the

term, which often carries negative connotations, using it for humor at some points and rehabilitating the word at others.

“Strong-minded,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was used in the nineteenth century “with disparaging implication” to describe “women who have or affect the qualities and character regarded as distinctly masculine, or who take up an attitude of revolt against the restrictions and disabilities imposed on their sex by law and custom.” There is an alternative definition in the *OED*, which is “having a strong, vigorous, or determined mind,” which can be used admiringly of either sex. Alcott and the writers she read use “strong-minded” in both senses of the word; the two definitions are sometimes even blended, redefining a strong-minded woman as a capable woman who is admirable because she knows what she is doing.

One of the authors to influence Alcott was Charles Dickens, who uses the word “strong-minded” to mock a female character in his 1844 novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. In fact, he uses the word twenty-seven times to describe old Martin Chuzzlewit’s widowed sister-in-law, calling her “the strong-minded woman” or “the strong-minded lady.” He initially presents her as a female character “almost supernaturally disagreeable, and having a dreary face and a bony figure and a masculine voice ... in right of these qualities, what is commonly called a strong-minded woman” (Chap. 4). Dickens was well-known to Alcott; in *Little Women*, Meg, Jo, Amy, and Beth even have a “Pickwick Club” inspired by *Pickwick Papers*, with each girl taking the persona of one of the club members from the novel (Chap. 10).

Perhaps because of Dickens’s influence, Alcott adopts his use of “strong-minded” in her 1871 novel *Little Men* to discuss Nan as a child. On a summer day, Daisy and Nan do the laundry of their “children,” their dolls. They adopt the personas of married mothers: Nan is “Mrs. Giddy-gaddy” and Daisy “Mrs. Shakespeare Smith.” Mrs. Smith is a careful laundress,

while the dyes of Mrs. G.'s clothing bleed into each other when she carelessly washes them in the same basin. After ruining the doll clothes, Nan is bored and announces her intention of putting her dolls away to work on her farm because "I like it rather better than playing house." The narrator notes that Mrs. G. is "unconsciously expressing the desire of many older ladies, who cannot dispose of their families so easily," which reveals Alcott's judgment that some women want to escape from their families and have time to do something else. "Tender Mrs. Smith" tells Nan not to go because her children "will die without their mother." "'Let 'em die then; I'm tired of fussing over babies, and I'm going to play with the boys; they need me to see to 'em,' returned the strong-minded lady" (Chap. 15). Alcott uses Dickens's exact language of "strong-minded lady" and is taking part in some comedy tradition about strong-minded women being unwomanly.

In an earlier novel, *Little Women*, on the other hand, though Alcott uses the humor from the "strong-minded" female stereotype, there is a more complicated undertone. Ironically, the word is again linked to Dickens; "strong-minded" first appears in *Little Women* in "The Pickwick Portfolio," a March family newsletter published by their Dickens-inspired club. It is the first of a series of humorous advertisements, likely written by Jo: "Miss Oranthy Bluggage, the accomplished Strong-Minded Lecturer, will deliver her famous Lecture on 'Woman and Her Position' at Pickwick Hall, next Saturday Evening, after the usual performances" (Chap. 10). The advertisement satirizes the advertisement format and the lectures given by speakers for the women's movement. A lecture like this would probably not be "famous" and the public might not consider the speaker to be "accomplished." The nonsense name of "Oranthy Bluggage" alone is enough to make the reader smile. In spite of the satire, though, there is wistfulness beneath the advertisement, as if Jo, who likely wrote this ad, wished that she could see such a

woman speak and that such a lecture would be “famous.” Even here Alcott uses “strong-minded” with a greater awareness for its nuances and complications than Dickens does.

Alcott also uses another meaning for “strong-minded,” one which is applied solely to women and which undermines the negative associations with the word, in her work, like Elizabeth Gaskell does in her 1855 novel *North and South*. After the heroine Margaret begins to do social work in London, her cousin Edith begs her not to “go and have a strong mind,” i.e. to do her work without a footman escort and to dress “in brown and dust-colour, not to show the dirt you’ll pick up in all those places” (Chap. 49). Edith gives the word the negative associations Dickens does but without the humor. Margaret responds by saying,

“Don’t be afraid, Edith. I’ll faint on your hands at the servants’ dinner-time, the very first opportunity; and then, what with Sholto playing with the fire, and the baby crying, you’ll begin to wish for a strong-minded woman, equal to any emergency.” (Chap. 49)

Margaret does not mock “strong-mindedness,” nor does she limit it to being determined. She links the word to capability; her “strong-minded” woman is able to manage a household and family well because she is “strong-minded.”

Alcott establishes a similar link between domesticity and strong-mindedness in *Little Women*. At the end of the first volume, Jo and Meg discuss Meg’s plan to reject John Brooke’s proposal of marriage. Jo is disappointed when Meg changes her mind and decides to return Brooke’s affections:

Going in to exult over a fallen enemy and to praise a strong-minded sister for the banishment of an objectionable lover, it certainly was a shock to behold the aforesaid enemy serenely sitting on the sofa, with the strong-minded sister enthroned upon his knee and wearing an expression of the most abject submission. (Chap. 23)

Jo’s idea of strong-mindedness includes belief in equality between the sexes; for a woman to be submissive to a man is distasteful to her. This volume was published when Alcott intended Jo to

be a “literary spinster.” When the second volume was written, however, the public clamored for a love story for Jo (Reisen 218). Alcott gave Jo a husband, but she did not let her become submissive to him. When Jo accepts Friedrich, she says,

I may be strong-minded, but no one can say I’m out of my sphere now, for woman’s special mission is supposed to be drying tears and bearing burdens. I’m to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that, or I’ll never go... (Chap. 46)

Jo, unlike Meg, possesses a belief in her equality with her husband and makes it a required condition for her marriage.⁸ Jo, like Gaskell’s Margaret, will use her strong-mindedness as an asset to her home and family.

Alcott stresses the importance of strong-mindedness in *Little Men* as well; she links domesticity with strong-mindedness in the scene when “Mrs. Giddy-gaddy” abandons her family of dolls. Nan leaves her laundry game with Daisy to “play with the boys” because “they need me to see to ’em” (Chap. 15). Nan is trading taking care of her dolls for taking care of the boys; she is still taking the role of nurturer traditionally held by women. This is also an early indication that Nan will become a doctor in *Jo’s Boys* because she likes taking care of others. Nan takes her role as nurturer out of the household and into the professional medical world. Later in *Little Men*, Jo describes Nan as “strong-minded” to Laurie, adding that she is energetic and brave. Jo wants Nan to have “a fair chance to work out her will, seeing that she has sympathy as well as strength, and the power to do much in their small world” (Chap 21). Strong-mindedness is good, according to Jo, because strong-minded women are the ones who make a difference in the world.

⁸ For a further discussion of the difference between Jo’s and Meg’s marriages, please see Chapter Two: The Marrying Kind.

Miss Mills of *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, a novel from 1870, shares this belief with Jo and goes farther, linking the adjective to the women's movement. The novel uses the word "strong-minded" only three times, but each time re-appropriates it. The first use of the word is in a conversation between the heroine Polly and Miss Mills about the importance of women helping each other. Alcott shows the *need* for help by presenting Jenny's story. Miss Mills tells Polly "a very common story" of seventeen-year-old Jenny, who is sick, alone, and out of work, and who attempts suicide because, in her words, "there don't seem any room for me in the world." Miss Mills, who owns the genteel boarding house in which Polly lives, takes Jenny in and adopts her as a daughter. She then asks Polly to convince her wealthy friends to give Jenny work sewing for them (Chap. 9).

Polly's response reveals that Alcott is consciously trying to redefine the word "strong-minded." She says she wants to be "strong-minded in the real sense of the word, but I don't like to be called so by people who don't understand my meaning." Polly then confesses that she is afraid to bring up Jenny with the wealthy girls because she does not want to be laughed at and "be set down as a rampant woman's rights reformer" (Chap. 11). Miss Mills explains the importance of women working to help each other:

... women can do a great deal for each other, if they will only stop fearing what "people will think," and take a hearty interest in whatever is going to fit their sisters and themselves to deserve and enjoy the rights God gave them... I don't ask you to go and make speeches, only a few have the gift for that, but I do want every girl and woman to feel this duty, and make any little sacrifice of time or feeling that may be asked of them, because there is so much to do, and no one can do it as well as ourselves, if we only think so. (Chap. 11)

Miss Mills's speech is powerful and difficult to argue with because she invokes God's name and ties women's issues with moral and Christian ones. Her view is traditional and religious in that she calls all women her "sisters," but unexpectedly progressive in her admiration of women who

gives speeches and in her call to action for *all* women. Miss Mills, herself an “old and homely, and good and happy” spinster with a “stiff gray curl that bobbed on each temple,” is stable, good, womanly, and nonthreatening, which anticipates the claim that the women’s movement is dangerous (Chap. 9).

The ideas of women’s rights and the importance of women helping women come up again in the book, this time from young women who lead untraditional lives as artists. Polly takes her wealthy friend Fanny to visit her female artist friends in Boston. One is a talented sculptor, Becky Jeffery, and the other is Lizzie Small, an engraver. Becky is working on a statue of “the coming woman,” an idea prompted by a discussion among the girls about “what women should be.” Polly describes the statue as “bigger, lovelier, and more imposing than any we see nowadays; and at the same time, she is true woman. See what a fine forehead, yet the mouth is both firm and tender, as if it could say strong, wise things, as well as teach children and kiss babies” (Chap. 13). Like Alcott’s books that show women playing important roles in and out of the home, Polly gives the ideal woman of the statue the power to be smart, strong, and motherly. Women should not aspire to be only motherly or womanly, but also to display wisdom and courage.

The women in the studio then discuss what this new woman should have in her hands. Becky rejects Fanny’s suggestion of a sceptre because women have been queens before and have never had a worthwhile kingdom. Polly suggests “a man’s hand in her to help her along.” Alcott notes that Polly had the “happy fortune” of finding “friends and helpers in fathers and brothers.” This statement recognizes that not all women have had this luck and that many men are not kind to women. Becky rejects this suggestion, too, “decidedly” saying “my woman is to stand alone, and help herself.” Lizzie suggests a child, which Becky dismisses because her

woman is to be “more than a nurse.” The successful writer Kate King enters the room and suggests a ballot-box. Becky says she will use that as one of the objects at the statue’s feet, along with a needle, a pen, a palette, and a broom, to show that she has earned the right to use the symbols (Chap. 13). The problem of the item in the statue’s hands is never resolved or revealed. Maybe Alcott herself could not decide; maybe she wanted her readers to consider it for themselves. The women all long for the completion of the sculpture, as if it will show them how to be women. Alcott says that these women with their contributions and thoughts are helping “to bring the day when their noblest ideal of womanhood should be embodied in flesh and blood, not clay” (Chap. 13).

The negative associations surrounding the word “strong-minded” are directly tackled in this scene. In the midst of the conversation about the ideal woman statue, Fanny asks with a “lip curled” if this woman is to be “strong-minded,” which the narrator describes as “the misused words” (Chap 13). Alcott is reinforcing the lesson the readers received from Miss Mills about women’s rights and strong-mindedness being good things. Becky replies to Fanny:

Yes, strong-minded, strong-hearted, strong-souled, and strong-bodied; that is why I made her larger than the miserable, pinched-up woman of our day. Strength and beauty must go together. Don’t you think these broad shoulders can bear burdens without breaking down, these hands work well, these eyes see clearly, and these lips do something besides simper and gossip? (Chap. 13)

Alcott uses Becky to reclaim the word “strong-minded” from those who would mock it or claim it is bad. A truly “strong-minded” woman would be able to be a voter, a thinker, a worker, and a professional, in addition to being a wife and mother. In Alcott’s vision, this woman is not dangerous to society; she is someone who can improve society.

Alcott finds a balance between old and new roles for women in her children’s novels. Her engaging characters and their stories show the reader that it is possible to support the idea of

“old-fashioned” domestic women and also be in favor of increasing women’s roles outside of the home and in politics. Alcott was able to spread this message because her readers loved her books. Critic Michael Thurston argues in *Making Something Happen* that writers are able to effect political change through their art because of the way their works engage with readers:

Literary texts can illustrate, embody, and perform identities, experiences, and relationships alternative to those prescribed by the dominant culture. They hail readers, invite them to join the “imagined community” of other readers, and combine, in the crucible of the aesthetic experience, values readers already hold with others readers should hold. (17)

In *Little Women*, Alcott invites her young readers to explore the world of the March family, who possess wholesome values of love, education, and family. Children recognize these values from their own families and from their lives. Because the book supports values they already possess, they wish to share additional, new values (like a belief in equality) with the “imagined community” of other readers and also with the Marches’ community, the characters they love from *Little Women*. Alcott’s use of her art as literary activism to open minds was her greatest contribution to the women’s movement.

Chapter Two: The Marrying Kind

While Alcott's novels fight for women's political equality, her stories do not always portray equality in marriage. The fundamental fact about Alcott's representations of marriage is that they change over time. In *Little Women*, published in 1868 and 1869, Alcott creates teacher-student relationships for Meg and Jo, which lead to unequal marriages.⁹ The vision of marriage produced by *Little Women* is one of near-perfect men marrying young women and acting as father figures or teachers to help them grow up and overcome their personal failings. The problem is that the tables never turn; the women are not given opportunities to teach the men in this text, which creates an uncomfortable power structure and puts too much pressure on the women. Alcott examines this type of marriage and finds flaws in it, but the mere fact that she offers no other model of marriage in *Little Women*¹⁰ suggests to young readers that it is the way marriage is supposed to be. This paternalistic model of marriage is abandoned in Alcott's 1875 novel *Rose in Bloom*, in which Mac and Rose grow up together and help each other become good people, fostering mutual respect and creating an more egalitarian, healthy relationship. Bridging the gap between those two stories is the 1870 novel *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, which reverses many aspects of Alcott's teacher-student relationships by making the woman saintly and the man

⁹ Bauschinger discusses Alcott's relationship with one of her favorite writers, Goethe, in *The Trumpet of Reform*, heavily quoting from Alcott's journals and Ednah Dow Cheney's commentary on them (186). Cheney explains the fascination Alcott and other girls of her generation had with "Correspondence with a Child," a series of letters between Goethe and Bettine von Arnim, which inspired Alcott to "form an ideal attachment to a man far older than herself, but full of nobility and intellectual greatness" (Bauschinger 186; Alcott, *Her Life*, 58). Alcott did this by making Ralph Waldo Emerson her "master," and recorded her experience in her diary, titling it "The Sentimental Period" (Alcott, *Her Life*, 57). Bauschinger suggests that this Goethe-Emerson-type relationship shaped her work, *Moods*, but he does not explore its effect on her children's novels (189). Alcott's preference for such relationships is probably why she created teacher-student romantic relationships in *Little Women*. Meg and Jo (who notably marries a German professor) seem to be following Bettine's path by idealizing and having romantic feelings for older, intellectual men.

¹⁰ Laurie and Amy's marriage is less of a paternalistic relationship than Jo's and Meg's, but it still fits the model because Laurie is a big brother figure to Amy and there are gaps in their ages, social status, and education.

flawed. Polly even rejects an offer of a paternalistic relationship with Mr. Sydney and chooses to help Tom improve himself so that he is worthy of her love at the end.

Little Women's Meg is Alcott's first character to marry in her children's novels; she develops a relationship with John Brooke in the first volume and marries him at the beginning of the second. John is established as a paternal and pedagogical figure from the start of the novel when he is referred to as the tutor of the boy next door. The paternal and pedagogical nature of his relationship with Meg is established in "Camp Laurence" when their romance begins. At the start of the chapter, Marmee suspects John is in love with Meg and watches her daughter until she is "satisfied" that "girlish" Meg is "unconscious of the thought in her mother's mind." Meg's naïveté at the beginning of her romance places John in a superior position immediately. This sense of John's superiority is furthered by Meg's belief that John is "a walking encyclopedia of useful knowledge." Later in the chapter, the March sisters, John, Laurie, and some of Laurie's friends go on a picnic where Meg and John talk about a German translation he completed for her. When an English visitor is surprised that Meg cannot read German, Meg explains that her father taught her and is away due to the war. John, whom the narrator has suggested is in love with Meg, offers to help her study. He hands her a copy of *Mary Stuart* by Friedrich Schiller,¹¹ instructing her to read a love poem aloud. As Kathryn Manson Tomasek puts it, John "stands in for Meg's father as her German teacher," which sets him up to be her "father-husband" (246). Immediately after reading the German play, John and Meg discuss their occupations of tutor and governess. When he speaks, "Mr. Brooke looked so contented and cheerful that Meg was ashamed to lament her hard lot." This establishes John as Meg's moral superior, as well as

¹¹ Perhaps it is a sly joke on Alcott's part that *Mary Stuart* is a story about a woman who loses her power in part because of romantic and marital problems.

intellectual superior (Chap. 12). This chapter hints at the marriage to come, in which John is the dominant, better half and Meg must try her best to live up to him.

Meg's love for John is a little surprising, because she seems destined to be rescued by a rich man from her life as a governess. She looks like the heroine of such a story. She is described in the first chapter as being "very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands, of which she was rather vain," and her voice is deemed "musical" in the twelfth chapter. Her "sweet mouth" suggests a kindly nature; her plumpness, white hands, and musical nature make her seem refined. But Meg chooses a different path and rejects the wealthy lifestyle in "Meg Goes to Vanity Fair."¹² Meg samples and enjoys high society when she is invited to spend time with wealthy friends, the Moffats. The older girls, all debutantes, dress her for a ball in the latest French fashions, complete with earrings, high heels, and exposed décolletage (Chap. 9). Dressed like this at the ball, Meg could have a wealthy man sweep her off her feet and rescue her from the life of a governess, in a way similar to the plots of several of Alcott's thrillers, like "The Taming of the Tartar" and her first novel *The Inheritance*, in addition to other novels Alcott read, like *Jane Eyre* (Matteson 213). Instead, Alcott has Meg learn lessons about the evils of money and high society.

Meg adopts the evils of the rich for one night, drinking, flirting, and dancing with strange men. When she enters the ballroom, "Several young gentlemen, who had only stared at her at the other party, now not only stared, but asked to be introduced, and said all manner of foolish

¹² The name "Vanity Fair" is taken from Bunyan's Christian allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a book beloved by the March family. Vanity Fair is a place where sin is sold and the pilgrim and his companion must pass through it to get to the Celestial City. The pilgrim refuses to buy anything but the truth, so he is imprisoned, tortured, and put on trial (Line 215). Meg fails to resist the sins of vanity, flirtation, and drinking, but she realizes her errors and leaves Vanity Fair behind. To follow this metaphor, Meg's marriage to John would be reaching the Celestial City. John Matteson writes in *Eden's Outcasts*, "Home is the Celestial City toward which the March sisters always unconsciously strive" (340).

but agreeable things to her.” Laurie appears and is disappointed with Meg’s behavior. She tells him not to tell her mother, because she will “fess” to Marmee herself when she goes home. Though Meg realizes that her behavior is something wrong enough to confess to her mother, she continues it anyway. She tells Laurie, “I’m not Meg tonight, I’m ‘a doll’ who does all sorts of crazy things. Tomorrow I shall put away my ‘fuss and feathers’ and be desperately good again” (Chap. 9). This night is a chance for Meg to escape her ordinary, difficult life and get a glimpse of what life with money could be, good and bad. When she “fesses” to her mother, Marmee reminds her that the essential thing to her is:

...to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send. To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman... I’d rather see you poor men’s wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace. (Chap. 9)

Alcott, through Marmee, shows that there are better kinds of love stories than those in romance novels and thrillers, including the ones Alcott wrote.

Because Alcott is not writing a traditional romantic story, she does not make the “hero” a stock hero. John “was a grave, silent young man, with handsome brown eyes and a pleasant voice.” His description is a little too perfect (and perfectly boring). The first half of the description might fit a brooding Byronic hero like Mr. Rochester, but having a “pleasant voice” makes John seem gentle and kind. Those are wonderful traits to possess, but they make John seem less passionate and emotional than his romantic hero counterparts. Additionally, Alcott does not present any of John’s flaws. (Meg, on the other hand, has her flaw of vanity made obvious in her earliest descriptions.) Mr. Rochester of *Jane Eyre*, in contrast, is first presented swearing, and then: “He had a dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow; his eyes and gathered eyebrows looked ireful and thwarted” (Chap. 12). The darkness of his character and the

hints of his complicated past are revealed to the reader in this early description. There are no “red flags” in John’s description that would suggest a passionate side, let alone a mad wife hidden in the attic. John is kind and good, but boring. It is easy to see why he likes Meg, but harder to understand why she is attracted to him.

It is also hard for the reader to stay interested in John because he lacks flaws. In a romance based on a teacher-student relationship, the teacher must be close to perfect or the nature of the relationship, in which one learns from the other, is undermined. The problem this creates for the writer is that a flawless character is less interesting to read about because there is little to no room for growth. One of the great novels about love is *Pride & Prejudice*, which is similar to *Little Women* because it is about sisters in a bad financial situation (with even more limited options than those of the Marches) who are trying to find men with whom to spend their lives. The romantic leads, Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, learn lessons about pride and prejudice from each other and become better people by the end of the story. When they marry, the reader is confident that they will live happily in an egalitarian partnership, teaching “the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was,” because each respects the other and they can help each other for the rest of their lives (Chap. 50). If Mr. Darcy were as “good” as John Brooke is at the start of *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel would lose much of its power. John is incapable of growing like Mr. Darcy because his flaws have never been revealed to the reader.

Because of the problems with John as a hero, Alcott has to work to keep her readers engaged in the love story by adding exciting and sentimental scenes. In “Secrets,” Laurie reveals to Jo that John keeps one of Meg’s gloves, which he took in “Camp Laurence,” in his pocket, which calls to mind a chivalric knight wearing the handkerchief of his ladylove near his heart (Chap. 14). As the book progresses, John becomes a March family hero by helping Meg’s ailing

father (he even receive the moniker “Mr. Greatheart,” a name befitting a character from the Marches’ favorite *The Pilgrim’s Progress*) (Chap. 16). When he returns to Concord, Alcott tries to establish his passion for Meg; he kisses her “entirely by mistake, as he somewhat incoherently explained” (Chap. 22). (That is the last instance of physical passion the reader gets with Meg and John.) The most sentimental scene between them, however, is at the end of the first volume when Aunt March threatens to disinherit Meg if she marries John. Meg declares that she cares for love more than money: “I’m not afraid of being poor, for I’ve been happy so far, and I know I shall be with him because he loves me.” The scene seems torn from a theater comedy, because, while Meg is defending her love of John, he, uncertain of Meg’s feelings, is listening in the next room (Chap. 23). These sentimental moments in the book make the reader believe in Meg and John’s romance in spite of John’s flaw of flawlessness.

But then Alcott turns the first volume on its ear, by stripping John’s near-perfect veneer away in the second volume. Several chapters in this volume are dedicated to John and Meg’s married life and its problems. In “Domestic Experiences,” John spontaneously invites a friend to their home for dinner, unaware that Meg is unsuccessfully making jelly in the kitchen and is unprepared for visitors. John instructs his crying wife, “just exert yourself a bit, and fix us up something to eat” and makes a joke about her jelly, which prompts Meg to tell her husband to take the guest to her mother’s home. Meg meanwhile retreats to her own room to cry. John is “angry” and feels “that Meg had deserted him in his hour of need.” After time passes, John becomes more sympathetic and thinks, “It was hard upon her when she tried so heartily to please me. She was wrong, of course, but then she was young. I must be patient and teach her.” He decides to “be calm and kind, but firm, quite firm, and show her where she had failed in her duty

to her spouse” (Chap. 28). It is uncomfortable and disturbing that John adopts a tone more befitting a parent instructing a child than a spouse solving a dispute with his partner.

Meg takes a different view of the fight, but ultimately puts aside her pride and gives into her husband, which leaves the reader wondering whether John’s goodness might be a complicated charade, knowingly or unknowingly perpetuated by Meg and those around them. After the fight, Meg feels “a sense of shame at her own short-comings” and longs to “run to meet him, and beg pardon, and be kissed and comforted,” yet she is not ready to admit that she was the only one in the wrong (Chap. 28). She remembers advice Marmee gave her before her 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, be very careful, not to wake his anger against yourself, for peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect. 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.¹³ (Chap. 28)

Marmee, who readily teaches her daughters to be good and hold their tempers, does not expect John to improve his failings (or Meg to improve John). She teaches Meg how to placate her husband, as if men were less capable of growth. Meg swallows her pride and tells herself, “I’ll do my part, and have nothing to reproach myself with,” which makes the reader assume that the implied point is that John *will* have something with which to reproach himself. Meg’s “penitent kiss was better than a world of words, and John had her on his knee in a minute,” and Meg ends up literally in a child-like position on her husband’s lap. The ultimate message of the chapter is that Meg was right to sacrifice her pride and restore “family peace” (Chap. 28). Meg must

¹³ In “Alcott’s Civil War,” Judith Fetterley points to “covert messages” in *Little Women* about the dangers of being “economically dependent on men’s incomes and emotionally dependent on their approval.” Marmee’s advice to Meg is “frightening” because it tells the reader that “men’s love is contingent; be careful, very careful not to lose it, for then where will you be?” Because *Little Women* was written for children, one must wonder if the young readers would identify the “covert messages” in the text or would question Meg’s behavior at all (34).

accept her unequal role of wife and it is her duty to play it well, but Alcott is not going to let that happen without commenting on it first.

The blame for the fight is shared, according to Alcott. Meg has erred by telling her husband he can bring any guests over at any time, and John has made an error by assuming that his wife will always be ready for guests. The narrator mocks John for his confidence in his wife, not to laugh at Meg, but to laugh at John's self-congratulatory tone: "John quite glowed with pride to hear her say it, and felt what a blessed thing it was to have a superior wife" (Chap. 28). His invitation to his friend is about indulging his vanity:

Congratulating himself that a handsome repast had been ordered that morning, feeling sure that it would be ready to the minute, and indulging in pleasant anticipations of the charming effect it would produce, when his pretty wife came running out to meet him... (Chap. 28)

This is a shift from the old John who was presented as being near perfect. New John is flawed, even if his flaws are only implied by Alcott and not directly stated in the text. But John does not experience growth in the novel, because *Little Women* is about the March sisters growing up, not his need for growth. For Meg, growing up means learning how to deal with her husband and keep him thinking that he is in the right.

Though Jo later enters a similar teacher-student marriage, she is horrified when Meg gets engaged because Meg is leaving the family and abandoning Jo. Early on in the first volume, Jo views John as an outsider who is breaking up her family. In "Confidential," Jo informs Marmee that John carries Meg's glove in his pocket, saying, "isn't it a dreadful state of things?" After Marmee tells Jo that John has declared his intentions toward Meg to Mr. and Mrs. March, Jo is horrified and wishes she could marry Meg herself to "keep her safe in the family" (Chap 20). She envisions the future:

I see it all! They'll go loving around the house, and we shall have to dodge. Meg will be absorbed and no good to me any more. Brooke will scratch up a fortune somehow, carry her off, and make a hole in the family, and I shall break my heart, and everything will be abominably uncomfortable. Oh, dear me! Why weren't we all boys, then there wouldn't be any bother. (Chap. 20)

For Jo, marriage is the end of her relationship with Meg. Meg will be “no good to me any more,” which is selfish but true. Meg is accepting John as her new paternal figure; she is leaving the March family hierarchy where her father is on top. (It is worth noting that she still seeks her mother's help during her marriage, which suggests that it is harder or perhaps impossible to adopt a new maternal figure.) In “Aunt March Settles the Question,” when Meg and John get engaged, Jo feels “as if a cold shower bath had suddenly fallen upon her.” Her fears have become reality. She exclaims, “Oh, do somebody go down quick! John Brooke is acting dreadfully, and Meg likes it!” After seeking refuge in her garret, Jo emerges and tells Laurie: “I don't approve of the match, but I've made up my mind to bear it, and shall not say a word against it... You can't know how hard it is for me to give up Meg” (Chap. 23). Jo resists change and wants to keep her best friend close to her. She admits that she hoped to make Laurie marry Meg, because Laurie is essentially a member of the family and would not truly be able to take Meg away from her (Chap. 20).

While Jo certainly fears losing her sister, her disgust with her older sister's marriage also reveals her own fear of growing up and getting married.¹⁴ Independent and tomboyish, Jo has big dreams of becoming a writer. Her character has never been in love with a man and she does not appear to have any desire to get married. Growing up means that she will have to face the possibility of failure (whatever that means to her), instead of passively making “castles in the

¹⁴ Alcott biographer Matteson writes about Jo's “dread of growing up,” saying “at first Jo would rather be a boy than a girl. Later, Alcott shows that Jo would rather remain a girl than become a woman.” Matteson asks, “If childhood were all about self-discovery and adulthood were all about self-denial, who indeed would want to grow up?” (341). Besides having to control herself, it also seems that Jo is afraid of her life being disappointing.

air.” When she walks in on Meg and John after they get engaged, “it certainly was a shock to behold the aforesaid enemy serenely sitting on the sofa, with the strong-minded sister enthroned upon his knee and wearing an expression of the most abject submission” (Chap. 23). Jo fears being stifled in a marriage and being unable to pursue her dreams. Alcott wrote in an essay in 1868, before *Little Women* was published, “liberty is a better husband than love to many of us” and passes this sentiment on to Jo (Matteson 330). But Meg does not have the same dreams that Jo does and wants to be a wife, so Jo and the reader are able to tolerate her choice. Jo’s decision to follow the same path as Meg by marrying Friedrich Bhaer, however, is significantly more disappointing.

The disappointment readers feel when characters in coming-of-age stories make life-altering decisions is inevitable, because the readers are left with a final and limited sense of what a character’s life will be like once the book is finished. While Jo is unattached to a man, as she is in the first volume, there is an infinite number of Jo’s-who-might-be floating around in the literary world. She might be a wife and mother; she might be an actress, a journalist, a doctor, a nurse, an adventurer, or a great traveler. If *Little Women* had ended with the first volume, no reader would ever be disappointed with Jo’s decision to marry. Jo certainly accomplishes a lot as Mrs. Bhaer, but marriage closes many paths for her forever.¹⁵ She will never be fully independent and free to go after what she wants once she is married with children. The life she leads as Mrs. Bhaer may be rewarding and wonderful, but it is impossible to imagine sixteen-year-old Jo aspiring to have it.

¹⁵ In “A Greater Happiness: Searching for Feminist Utopia in *Little Women*,” Kathryn Manson Tomasek compares Jo’s marriage to the ending of an Alcott short story “Psyche’s Art,” which has an “unresolved” ending “offering her readers a choice” for the female artist to marry her mentor or to continue her career as an unmarried woman (254).

Many of Alcott's readers clamored for Jo to marry Laurie, to Alcott's disgust, which would have given Jo a life quite different from that of a "literary spinster" or Mrs. Bhaer (Reisen 218). Laurie is Jo's best friend; he is handsome, smart, adventurous, and artistic. As Mrs. Theodore Laurence, Jo could be an eccentric lady artist or philanthropist. At the very least, she could live comfortably and travel. Something stops Jo from accepting Laurie, however, though Alcott admits Jo has feelings for Laurie when her voice "quivers" as she says she wishes she did not have a heart. Jo rejects Laurie because "you and I are not suited to each other, because our quick tempers and strong wills would probably make us very miserable." She predicts: "I shouldn't like elegant society and you would, and you'd hate my scribbling, and I couldn't get on without it, and we should be unhappy, and wish we hadn't done it, and everything would be horrid!" Jo's writing and the freedom she needs to do it are her chief reasons for wanting to never marry: "I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man" (Chap 35). Yet Jo is willing to "get on" without her "scribbling" when she marries Mr. Bhaer.

Beth's death in "The Valley of the Shadow"¹⁶ is the cause of Jo's marriage. The immediate effect of Beth's death is that Jo puts aside her ambitions at her sister's insistence.¹⁷ Another effect is that Laurie and Amy get married after they are brought together in Europe by the news of Beth's death. The losses of Jo's remaining sisters and the loss of her writerly ambitions leave Jo "all alone" (the title of the forty-second chapter) and susceptible to falling in love, when Mr. Bhaer suddenly shows up and rescues her from her depression. Alcott is aware of the possibility that Jo's love for Mr. Bhaer springs not from feeling, but from timing when she

¹⁶ Psalm 23:4 in the King James Bible reads: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." In Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian must pass through the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" to reach the Celestial City (Line 155).

¹⁷ See the Chapter Three: Working Women of this work for further discussion.

asks, “Was it all self-pity, loneliness, or low spirits? Or was it the waking up of a sentiment which had bided its time as patiently as its inspirer? Who shall say?” (Chap. 42).

Jo’s sudden decision to marry and put aside her career plans is disappointing to many readers. Alcott biographer James Matteson imagined what the second volume of *Little Women* could be like: “Having created her main character in her own image, Louisa knew precisely the life that, from Jo’s point of view, would constitute a happy ending: the professionally satisfying career of ‘a literary spinster’” (345). A book like this could have been a groundbreaking feminist text and could have provided young women with a model of a single woman like Alcott herself.¹⁸ Perhaps, this decision would displease readers for whom marriage is the ultimate happy ending, but it would delight readers who seek a heroine who is independent and chooses to live her life differently.¹⁹

Alcott decided to make a “funny match” for Jo, since her publisher insisted Jo had to marry (Reisen 218). Jo meets “Professor Bhaer” in New York where they board in the same house. She writes to her family that when she first saw him, “I saw something I liked,” because she watched him carry a “heavy hod of coal” for a slight servant girl. Mr. Bhaer is praised by Jo’s landlady and employer for being “very learned and good, but poor as a church mouse” and for giving “lessons to support himself and two little orphan nephews whom he is educating,” which shows the reader how good Friedrich is. Jo assures her mother that she does not need to worry about him because, “He’s almost forty, so it’s no harm, Marmee” (Chap. 33). Jo later observes him through a glass window and writes to her mother of him:

¹⁸ Alcott did write about unmarried women in an essay “Happy Women,” which was published in the *New York Ledger* in April of 1868, right before *Little Women* was published. She advises, “Be true to yourselves; cherish whatever talent you possess, and in using it faithfully for the good of others you will most assuredly find happiness for yourself, and make of life no failure, but a beautiful success” (206).

¹⁹ In a Canadian TV show *Little Men*, the show’s creators kill Mr. Bhaer before the show begins (the opening scene is of Jo looking at Friedrich’s tombstone), as if to say that he should not have been in the story in the first place (“Changes”).

A regular German — rather stout, with brown hair tumbled all over his head, a bushy beard, good nose, the kindest eyes I ever saw, and a splendid big voice that does one's ears good, after our sharp or slipshod American gabble. His clothes were rusty, his hands were large, and he hadn't a really handsome feature in his face, except his beautiful teeth, yet I liked him, for he had a fine head, his linen was very nice, and he looked like a gentleman, though two buttons were off his coat and there was a patch on one shoe. (Chap. 33)

Friedrich is far from looking like a romantic hero, but there is something attractive about his personality that makes him difficult to dislike.

Alcott's "funny match" for Jo is unexpected but their romance feels surprisingly believable. The two are introduced by Jo's students, and their acquaintance improves when Jo's umbrella knocks Friedrich's door open, revealing him "in his dressing gown, with a big blue sock on one hand and a darning needle in the other." Jo is surprised to see him doing his own mending, which is clearly women's work, but Friedrich is unembarrassed. Jo quietly does his mending for him, fixing his socks "for they were boggled out of shape with his queer darns." Mr. Bhaer returns the favor by giving her German lessons, like John Brooke, during which their friendship grows. They exchange Christmas gifts and attend lectures and concerts together with an old lady as chaperon (Chap. 33). The reader learns that Mr. Bhaer has fallen in love with Jo when she is about to leave New York. She invites him to visit her family, and he agrees "with an eager expression which she did not see." When she proposes he attend Laurie's graduation from Harvard, he answers in "in an altered tone," now thinking that Laurie is more than her "best friend" (Chap. 34). When Friedrich finally visits the Marches' home, he rapidly wins the esteem of Jo's entire family from parents to toddler niece and nephew. At the end of his visit, he learns that Laurie is married to Amy, and his face becomes "suddenly illuminated with satisfaction" (Chap. 43). He and Jo finally get engaged in a romantic scene under an umbrella in a rainstorm. Though Jo is a wet mess "with her skirts in a deplorable state, her rubber boots splashed to the

ankle, and her bonnet a ruin,” “Mr. Bhaer considered her the most beautiful woman living.” Jo admits her love for him “though his hatbrim was quite limp with the little rills trickling thence upon his shoulders (for he held the umbrella all over Jo), and every finger of his gloves needed mending” (Chap 46).

Friedrich Bhaer is a vast improvement on John Brooke, but his relationship with Jo is still one of teacher and student, like John and Meg. (The Bhaers fit this model so well that it is difficult to imagine them having a sexual relationship, though they manage to produce two sons.) Friedrich is more palatable than his brother-in-law because he is more humble and less sanctimonious, and his goodness holds up well through the rest of the *Little Women* series. He is saved from being utterly boring because he is boyish and loves children, games, and fun. He has flaws, moreover, though they are not moral ones: he is absentminded, disorganized, and messy.

Friedrich’s role as teacher is established early in his relationship with Jo. In exchange for Jo’s “good fairy works” of mending his clothes, he teaches her Anderson’s fairy tales (Chap. 33). The German professor also helps her study Shakespeare. Though Jo is familiar enough with the works of Shakespeare to want to put on *Macbeth* with her sisters in the first chapter of the first volume of *Little Women*, she writes in the second volume, “I never knew how much there was in Shakespeare before, but then I never had a Bhaer to explain it to me” (Chap. 33). Mr. Bhaer plays Jo’s teacher again when they attend a symposium. Several philosophers debate religion and the existence of God. Usually brilliant Jo is a passive listener in this setting, unfamiliar with the theories and easily swayed. The debate makes Jo feel “so completely disillusioned” and wonder if “intellect was to be the only God.” Mr. Bhaer, however, gets angry and speaks in favor of religion with “an eloquence which made his broken English musical and his plain face

beautiful.” He quickly restores Jo’s belief in God because of his ability to keep up with and challenge the New York intellectuals (Chap. 34).

Friedrich’s most significant moment as a teacher and a father figure is when he throws Jo “the life preserver” when she writes sensational literature. Though she writes it to make money to help her sister’s health, the problem with her writing is that “she was living in bad society, and imaginary though it was, its influence affected her” and “she was beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character,” though Alcott does not sufficiently explain what that means. Friedrich suspects her secret, sensational writing and pities her: “He only remembered that she was young and poor, a girl far away from mother's love and father's care, and he was moved to help her with an impulse as quick and natural as that which would prompt him to put out his hand to save a baby from a puddle.” He not only takes on the role of a parent teaching a daughter; Jo is compared to a baby. Friedrich does not let on that he has guessed her secret, but tells her how dangerous the immoral stories are for readers. As a result, Jo feels ashamed of her work and burns the papers, thinking, “I’ve gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money.” After Jo stops writing her stories, she begins to lay “a foundation for the sensation story of her own life,” which is her romance with Friedrich (Chap. 34).

Jo and Friedrich’s marriage is more satisfying to the reader than John and Meg’s, though it is not faultless. While John is proud of his pretty wife, Friedrich is utterly devoted to his spirited one. Years and two sons into their marriage, in *Jo’s Boys*, Friedrich’s love for Jo is still clear: “the Professor forgot his piles of letters to admire the pleasing prospect of his wife” (Chap. 7). Friedrich gets some credit from the reader because the reasons he loves his wife are the same reasons the reader loves her: Jo is smart, lively, generous, and good-hearted. Another key

difference between the marriages is that Meg has a small home to run and her husband has a traditional nine-to-five job, while Friedrich and Jo are a team, running Plumfield School together. Meg's main problem is learning how to please her husband while she takes care of the house and her children; he does not provide her with as much guidance as he thinks he does, leading Meg to turn to her mother for advice. When Jo makes unspecified "queer mistakes" running Plumfield, however, she gets real support from her spouse who "steered her safely into calmer waters." The word "steered" makes it seem as if Friedrich is still parenting Jo, which does reveal an uncomfortable inequality in the marriage that stems from Friedrich's moral and intellectual superiority.

The way Plumfield is run both reinforces and complicates the inequality of Jo and Friedrich's marriage. The duties in their marriage and in the running of the school are split along gender lines, with the children calling them "Mother Bhaer" and "Father Bhaer." Friedrich is the academic educator and teaches the children about the world. Jo is in charge of their moral education, keeping an account book of the children's behavior to teach them the difference between right and wrong (Chap. 1). "Mother Bhaer" also teaches the girls housekeeping and generally runs the house from the kitchen to the bedrooms (pillow fights are permitted on weekends only) (Chap. 5). Jo is fulfilling the role of a traditional woman, though it is freer in Plumfield than it would be elsewhere, which is disappointing for the reader who hoped to see her follow an even less traditional path. What helps balance the power between Jo and Friedrich is that Jo is the one who has the idea and the means to start Plumfield School. Without her, Friedrich would still be teaching lessons in a New York boarding house.

Though Jo has a happy marriage and a good life with Mr. Bhaer, a conversation from the first volume of *Little Women* uncomfortably hangs over the entire series. Marmee admits to Jo,

“I am angry nearly every day of my life.” The cause of Marmee’s anger goes unexamined in the novel, beyond the statement that she has a “temper” (Chap. 8). Alcott does not say it, but it seems likely that Marmee’s temper stems from frustration with her limited options as a woman in nineteenth century America. Marmee and Jo say they need to control their tempers because good women are calm, quiet, and kind. They treat the symptom (lashing out at people) and do not cure the cause. Marmee explains how her mother used to help her stifle her temper, and, once she lost her mother, she asked her husband to do the same. Jo asks if that is why “Father sometimes put his finger on his lips, and look at you with a very kind but sober face, and you always folded your lips tight and went away” (Chap. 8). The husbands of women with tempers, Marmee suggests, should be better than their wives and should help them be good women. This is a problem in itself, because it suggests marriages should not be egalitarian. It is also problematic that Marmee tells Jo to conform to society’s expectations of women as mothers, nurturers, moral centers, and forces of calm. The role Jo creates for herself as “Mother Bhaer” is admirable, if not ideal, because she uses her creativity and ambition to form an excellent school, and then college, within the confines of what was expected of women of the era.

Polly Milton is a reversal of Jo March. She does not have the temper troubles of Jo and cheerfully works hard to be good and resist temptations from the start of 1870’s *An Old-Fashioned Girl*. The first half of the novel is about middle class Polly’s visit to her wealthy friends, the Shaws, in Boston. Because of her old-fashioned upbringing and natural proclivity for goodness, she wins the esteem of the entire family and shows them how to be happy without the materialism, hypocrisy, and frivolity of city life (Chap. 7). In the second half of the novel, the country mouse returns to the city six years later to teach music to help pay for her brother’s tuition at Harvard (Chap. 8). When she visits the Shaws’ home, Alcott reveals that Polly is in

love with Tom Shaw, though he has grown up to be “extravagant, reckless, and dandified.”

Later in the novel, Tom’s sister Fanny, not knowing Polly loves Tom, asks Polly about the man she loves:

“And is he very wise, good, and splendid, dear?”

“No.”

“He ought to be if you love him. I hope he isn’t bad?” cried Fan, anxiously, still holding Polly, who kept her head obstinately turned.

“I’m suited, that’s enough.” (Chap. 18)

This is a marked departure from Meg and Jo who are attracted to their husbands for their goodness and industriousness. Alcott shows that love is out of one’s control. When Polly learns that Tom is engaged to fashionable and cruel Trix, “Polly couldn’t unlove him all at once, though she tried very hard, as was her duty.... she could not help yearning over this faulty, well-beloved scapegrace Tom” (Chap. 15).

Wealthy, good, and generous Arthur Sydney is Tom’s romantic foil who falls in love with Polly. They meet in the first half of the novel when Polly is a little girl and he a young man; she impresses him with her goodness and unpretentious manners. When they meet years later, he falls in love with Polly to her surprise: “she had never thought of him as a possible lover for either Fanny or herself because he was six or eight years older than they, and still sometimes assumed the part of a venerable mentor, as in the early days.” Mr. Sydney is similar to Mr. Bhaer and Mr. Brooke because he is older, wiser, and possibly morally better than the woman he loves. Polly is tempted by the “easy life” she could have with “plenty of money, quantities of friends, all sorts of pleasures, and no work, no poverty, no cold shoulders or patched boots” if she married him; she even wishes she could love Mr. Sydney, but “unfortunately hearts are so ‘contrary’ that they won’t be obedient to reason, will, or even gratitude” (Chap. 14). Polly considers what her life would be like as Polly Sydney beyond having a large income:

Ah, but I don't love him, and I'm afraid I never can as I ought! He's very good, and generous, and wise, and would be kind, I know, but somehow I can't imagine spending my life with him; I'm so afraid I should get tired of him, and then what should I do? (Chap. 14)

Polly learns that Fanny is in love with Mr. Sydney (whom Fanny ultimately marries), which clinches her decision to “nip” Mr. Sydney's feeling for her “in the bud.” When Fanny later asks her why she rejected Mr. Sydney for Tom, Polly responds:

I don't want a “superior” person; he'd tire me if he was like A. S. Besides, I do think Tom is superior to him in many things. Well, you needn't stare; I know he is, or will be. He's so different, and very young, and has lots of faults, I know, but I like him all the better for it, and he's honest and brave, and has got a big, warm heart, and I'd rather have him care for me than the wisest, best, most accomplished man in the world, simply because I love him! (Chap. 18)

Little Women is full of marriages of the March sisters to “superior” men, but *An Old-Fashioned Girl* provides an alternative. Good Polly would be bored married to a flawless man; she loves Tom because of his spirit, humor, sense of mischief, and warmth. Importantly, she sees potential and can imagine what he “will be” like as a mature man. The word “tire” also suggests that she would become tired of having to live up to Mr. Sydney's example every day of her life, a feeling Meg and Jo might possess. With Tom, Polly can live her life without feeling pressure to be perfect.

Though Polly accepts Tom's flaws, Alcott does not let Polly marry Tom until he has improved himself through hard work and is worthy of her affection. Tom's wake up call is when (in just one day) he is expelled from Harvard, his father loses his money, and he realizes he owes many debts to college friends (Chap. 15). Polly's encouragement and his desire to be worthy of her inspire him to work in California with Polly's brother (Chap. 17). He returns months later looking more masculine with a “manly beard” and “a brisk, genial, free-and-easy air about him, suggestive of a stirring, out-of-door life, with people who kept their eyes wide open, and were

not very particular what they did with their arms and legs.” His physical masculinity is paired with masculine business sense and industriousness that make his father proud: “he talked business to his father in a sensible way, which delighted the old gentleman” (Chap. 19).

Newly industrious and masculine Tom proposes to Polly and tells her that she inspired him to change his life, which is a reversal of the relationship in *Little Women*. As Fanny prophesized earlier, Polly is “the making of him” and Tom’s savior. This is similar to Jo being the “making of” Friedrich, career-wise, but, unlike Jo, Polly is also Tom’s moral guide. Without Jo in his life, Friedrich would be faultless (morally, anyway); Tom, in contrast, needs Polly to be his inspiration. Before he proposes, he tells her that he loved her before he left, but he needed to work “like a horse” and satisfy himself “and others that I could get my living honestly” before he could return “to see if there was any hope for me.” Polly protests that he should have told her that he loved her before he left. He responds, “And how could I have the courage to say a word, when I had nothing on the face of the earth to offer you but my worthless self?” “That was all I wanted!” Polly insists. Despite Polly’s claim, Alcott is pointing out that love is not enough to ensure a happy marriage; Tom did need to become worthy of Polly’s love. Polly, unlike Friedrich, does not accept the role of morally perfect savior and tells Tom that she needs his help, too: “I’ve got ever so many faults, and I want you to know them all, and help me cure them, as you have your own.” This makes Tom and Polly’s relationship more equal than the marriages in *Little Women*, because each person admits his or her flaws and works to help the other overcome them.

Alcott writes about a relationship that is even more equitable than Polly and Tom’s in *Rose in Bloom*, a story in which the man and the woman truly do bring out the best in each other. This makes Mac and Rose’s relationship the most compelling, the most realistic, and the

healthiest relationship of all of Alcott's novels. Rose is a typical heroine for a sentimental novel, because she is pretty, blonde, wealthy, intelligent, and kind, in addition to being an orphan, which gives her a tragic back-story and an amount of independence (Alcott, *Eight Cousins*, Chap. 1). There is little indication that Mac is the man she will marry in the first book, *Eight Cousins*. Rose meets him when she meets her other six boy cousins. The oldest Archie introduces him: "This old fellow is Mac, the bookworm, called Worm for short" (Chap. 2). Mac is clever, academic, kind, and skeptical of high society. Bespectacled and often unkempt, he does not look like a romantic hero until his dandy brother gives him a makeover in *Rose in Bloom*. When he appears as "a young gentleman... in immaculate evening costume, with his hair parted sweetly on his brow, a superior posy at his buttonhole," Rose confuses him with their handsome and dashing cousin Charlie (Chap. 6). In *Eight Cousins*, Mac becomes her favorite cousin when she spends time reading to him while he recovers from severe eye problems (Chap. 11). In the second book, *Rose in Bloom*, Rose returns from travelling abroad, and both Charlie and Mac fall in love with her. Each tries to prove himself worthy of her affections, but only Mac succeeds.

Charlie, the dashing but lazy cousin whom Boston debutantes dub "Prince Charming," is the first cousin to love Rose, but he is unable to resist the temptations of alcohol, late night parties, and dangerous company, despite Rose's efforts to "save" him (Chap. 5, 15). Rose likes to be the savior of her cousins; in one example from *Eight Cousins*, she convinces her older cousins to stop smoking (Chap. 17). Though she is older in *Rose in Bloom*, she still feels the need to be the savior and enjoys the power of wielding her influence over her cousins. She tries to convince Charlie to take up an occupation: Rose "longed to inspire her brilliant cousin with some manful purpose which should win for him respect as well as admiration" (Chap. 5). Despite Charlie's

weaknesses, Rose is romantically interested in him, partly because “the thought that she might be his inspiration was growing sweet to her.” On New Years Day, she admits to Charlie that she might be falling in love with him and makes him promise not to drink too much. He visits her drunk late that evening and “something dear to her was dead forever” (Chap. 9). Rose stops being in love with Charlie when she sees that he has not kept his word, a flaw which she cannot fix, but she still agrees to act as his savior by helping him stop drinking.

The next day, her uncle tells her he wants to help Charlie alter his ways and asks Rose not to “love him yet” because “no woman should give her happiness into the keeping of a man without fixed principles” and “the hope of being worthy of you will help him more than any prayers or preaching of mine” (Chap. 10). Uncle Alec is wise in telling his ward to not marry Charlie yet, but he makes Rose’s love an incentive for good behavior. This causes Rose to view herself as a reward; for example, she offers to dance with Charlie at a ball when he is well behaved (Chap. 12). Charlie, like Tom, decides to change his life and go to work for his father in Asia. But he dies in a carriage accident after a rowdy going-away party. He is brave on his deathbed and “It seemed to Rose as if for one brief instant she saw the man that might have been if early training had taught him how to rule himself” (Chap. 15). Rose later tells Mac that it was hard on her that Charlie loved her because she “tried to love him... and found it so sad sometimes not to be able to help despising him for his want of courage” (Chap. 18). With this plot, Alcott is arguing that it is unfair to expect women to be a man’s savior.

Rose is not a savior to Mac but a helper, just as he is to her. As children in *Eight Cousins*, they study biology and read books together as equals (Chap. 11, 19). In the beginning of *Rose in Bloom*, he helps her keep perspective on what is important when she decides to spend a few months as a debutante in Boston society, and she helps him grow up and find his place in

the world by teaching him better manners, conversation skills, and tidier dressing (Chap. 6). They act as a team when Mac, a doctor, rescues an abused child whose mother died at his hospital and turns to Rose for help, not knowing what to do with her. Rose takes the child in as a “little sister” and cares for her (Chap. 16). Rose and Mac are fulfilling gendered roles of knight and adoptive mother, but the way each relies on the other shows that their friendship is built on mutual respect and equality.

Rose and Mac lay a good foundation for their marriage with their mutual respect, and what makes them Alcott’s best couple is that they support each other and help each other succeed in their professions. This is different from Tom, who improves himself and his life because of Polly, but does not help her to overcome her own faults or inspire her to live her life differently during the novel. When Rose shocks members of her family by telling them she has chosen the profession of philanthropist, instead of that of a “belle,” Mac tells her “You are fitted for anything that is generous and good, and I’ll stand by you, no matter what you’ve chosen” (Chap. 1). Mac is an ardent supporter of Rose’s work as a philanthropist, even naming the country home for Boston’s orphans she runs “the Rose Garden” (Chap. 16).

Rose, too, sees potential in Mac, and his poetry is partly what makes her fall in love with him. Though he graduates at the top of his class from Harvard and becomes a doctor in Boston, Rose pushes him to explore his artistic side as a poet (Chap. 1, 17). After he writes a poem for her birthday, Rose calls it “lovely” and insists he possesses “genius.” Mac pronounces, “It isn’t genius, it is love!” and tells his cousin, “I love you with all my heart and soul!” Rose demurs and says that she is still looking for her ideal, a man whom she can “trust and honor with my whole heart” and who will give her “strength and integrity to lean on.” This description seems to fit Mac already; the unspoken problem is that she is not sexually attracted to him. Mac realizes

this and says, “You said your love must be founded on respect, and that you have given me why can I not earn the rest? . . . I’ll make you love me, and be glad to do it.” This sentiment alone seems to stir some feelings in Rose: “It seemed as if another Mac had taken the place of the one she had known so long an ardent, ambitious man, ready for any work now that the magical moment had come when everything seems possible to love” (Chap. 18). Just as Rose began to fall in love with Charlie because he loved her, Rose begins to fall in love with Mac; the difference is that Mac is worthy of Rose’s respect and love, so the love sticks and grows. Mac wins Rose’s love by writing a book of poetry, showing that he followed her advice on writing and has capacity for great feelings. The book makes them both successful: he as a poet, she as one who can see potential in others. In the last chapter, Rose tells an unbelieving Mac, “You said you’d make me love you, and you’ve done it. Will you believe me now?” and throws herself into his arms (Chap. 22).

Rose and Mac’s relationship is more equitable than Alcott’s teacher-student relationships, but it still part of a different literary tradition, the relationship between artist and muse. This is established with their dialogue at the end of novel, when Mac begins by saying:

“You shall live the poetry, and I will write it, so my little gift will celebrate your greater one.”

“No you shall have all the fame, and I’ll be content to be known only as the poet’s wife.”

“And I’ll be proud to own that my best inspiration comes from the beneficent life of a sweet and noble woman.”

“Oh, Mac! We’ll work together and try to make the world better by the music and the love we leave behind us when we go.” (Chap. 22)

Mac and Rose are a team; the dialogue is evenly split between them. Each respects and admires the work of the other, which is important in any healthy relationship. Yet they fit into the trope of the passive, female muse inspiring the active, male artist. Alcott complicates this artist-muse relationship by having Mac remember that Rose leads a “beneficent life” with her profession of

philanthropy.²⁰ Rose is not an inactive muse; she is a busy and ambitious woman who inspires Mac to write.

Like many other aspects of Alcott's works, her portrayal of marriage initially seems to endorse conservative values, especially about women, but details in her plot and her writing subvert those values. As this chapter has discussed, Alcott often utilizes traditional types of romantic relationships, e.g. teacher-student, savior-sinner, and artist-muse, but she always complicates them. Because her marriages may appear at first glance to fit into accessible and culturally prevalent tropes, it is easy for readers, especially young ones, to miss Alcott's commentary on marriage and romance. For one who is willing to work to understand Alcott, the result is to know how a writer can both celebrate love and the home and remind the world how many problems are present in both.

²⁰ See Chapter Three: Working Girls to read more about Rose's philanthropy.

A Note on Chapter 2: Not the Marrying Kind

While all of the protagonists in Alcott's children's novels marry, the author also presents alternative paths for women (and men) through her secondary characters.

All of the young women in 1868's *Little Women* are neatly married off (except for Beth), yet Alcott gives the next generation of little women different opportunities in *Jo's Boys*. The chapter "Among the Maids" is a discussion of marriage and women's opportunities that Amy, Jo, and Meg have with their daughters and the young women of Laurence College. One student says, "Old maids aren't sneered at half as much as they used to be, since some of them have grown famous and proved that woman isn't a half but a whole human being, and can stand alone." Another says that she does not want to get married because, "My Aunt Jenny can do just what she likes, and ask no one's leave; but Ma has to consult Pa about everything" (Chap. 17). In the last paragraph of the novel, Alcott writes that her most famous spinster character, "Dr. Nan," lived to be happy and "independent" (Chap. 22). Alcott makes Maud Shaw another happy spinster in 1870's *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, instead of marrying her off to Polly's brother Will. Maud "remained a busy, lively spinster all her days, and kept house for her father in the most delightful manner" (Chap. 19).

In *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, Alcott rejects the idea that marriage is the be-all and end-all of relationships, by presenting a close female friendship between Becky and Bess, artists who "live together, and take care of one another... going halves in everything." Becky is described as traditionally masculine: "tall, with a strong face, keen eyes, short, curly hair"; while Bess is traditionally feminine: "frail-looking girl, with a thin face, big eyes, and pale hair" (Chap. 13). Though this relationship appears to be a Boston marriage and is similar to that of Alcott's friends Charlotte Cushman and Emma Stebbins, two lesbian artists (Faderman 218-20), Alcott does not

establish clearly sexual or romantic feelings between Bess and Becky; she even creates a male fiancé for Bess. But the two women say they will “never” “dissolve partnership,” telling Polly, “George knows he can’t have one without the other, and has not suggested such a thing as parting us” (Chap. 13). Relationships between women in Alcott’s works can be as valuable and strong as a romantic relationship between a man and a woman, whether or not sex enters the picture. This is female twist on homoerotic male friendships in works like “Friendship” and *The Friends* by Thoreau and Emerson, respectively, two writers Alcott admired and knew well (Fone 45-6).

Alcott does not show homoerotic male relationships in her children’s novels.²¹ She does, though, show a male alternative to marriage with Uncle Alec, a doctor and sailor, in *Eight Cousins* (1875) and *Rose in Bloom* (1876). His romantic back-story is never directly spoken of, certainly not by Alec, but the reader is led to believe that Alec was in love with Rose’s mother and decided to never to fall in love again when she married his brother (*Rose in Bloom*, Chap. 18). It is sentimental and melodramatic (and not quite in the style of Alcott’s children’s literature) to have Alec’s first love be his last. The narrator does not comment on Alec’s bachelorhood, though other characters find it strange and say so. When one of his sisters-in-law tells him he should marry in *Eight Cousins*, Alec says, “no, thank you,” and “abruptly” flees the drawing room to smoke in his study (Chap. 4). His favorite sister-in-law and friend Jessie wonders why he has not fallen in love with Phebe in *Rose in Bloom*, and Alec’s brother tells him, “it’s a pity so much romance and excellence as yours should be lost.”²² Alec looks

²¹ One of Alcott’s anonymously published thrillers, “My Mysterious Mademoiselle,” is a short story with themes of homosexuality, however. A man is attracted to a young woman on the train. Seeing that she is trying to evade someone, he pretends to be her husband and even steals a kiss. He learns the next morning that the woman was his estranged nephew in disguise. The man is angry at first, but decides to laugh it off as a “prank” (111-126).

²² On January 8, 1876, *The Sunday School Times* reviewed *Eight Cousins*, writing, “Not second in interest, to Rose, is Phebe, a sweet-singing girl from the poor-house, whom Rose, in a manner truly pathetic, adopts as her sister; and

“shamefaced” as he insists that he does not have “any heart to offer a woman” and “stood aghast at the mere idea” of loving Phebe (Chap. 3). While it is possible that sentimental Alec chooses to “be solitary all his life” because of having loved once, it is also possible that Rose’s mother is an excuse for him to not marry and a way to hide his non-heteronormative sexuality (*Rose in Bloom*, Chap. 18).

Alcott also complicates Alex’s masculinity, ergo his heterosexuality, by allowing him to step in and out of the female world. In *Eight Cousins*, he decorates a room for Rose using all of the pretty items he has purchased for her in his travels. When he first shows her the room, he pretends it is his, as a joke, and she examines the decor as if it belonged to him. Rose describes items on the toilet table, including “a plump blue silk cushion, coquettishly trimmed with lace, and pink rose-buds at the corners.” The description continues, “That cushion rather astonished Rose; in fact, the whole table did, and she was just thinking, with a shy smile, – ‘Uncle is a dandy, but I never should have guessed it...’” (Chap. 4). The strength of the word “astonished” signals something unusual is going on. The room is for Rose and it is a feminine space, but it is a feminine space created by Uncle Alec. Another signal is that Rose, as surprised as she is, is willing to believe the table could belong to Uncle Alec. Later in the novel, Alec is once again a part of the women’s world when he visits Rose during her sewing lesson with Aunt Peace. He surprises Rose by knowing how to sew buttons onto clothing. “He proceeded to sew on the buttons so handily that Rose was much impressed and amused.” Aunt Peace explains that she taught him before he went to sea (Chap. 16). This incident is similar to one in *Little Women* when Jo March sees Mr. Bhaer darning his own sock; she is embarrassed for him because he is

whom we shall look in the second volume to see made the grateful and loving bride of no less a personage than Uncle Alec. For Uncle Alec, after all, is only some twenty-five years the senior of Phebe and wonderfully young and buoyant, even for forty. But in such natural writing as Miss Alcott’s we can predict issues with as little certainty as in every-day life. So we will wait and see.”

doing women's work and is therefore emasculating himself. But Mr. Bhaer does not "seem at all ashamed," presumably because he is confident his masculinity will not be doubted (Chap. 33).

Chapter Three: Working Girls

Though her books are centered in the home and are generally considered to be “domestic fiction,” Alcott writes about women who work outside of the home and find personal happiness in jobs ranging from governess to philanthropist to artist. Unlike many novels in which a woman works solely to earn a living and is unfulfilled by her work, moreover, Alcott’s characters, whether rich or poor, are inspired to work because they desire independence, achievement, and enrichment. Alcott respects homes and the women who run them, but she also recognizes that for many women it necessary to have an outlet for their minds outside of the domestic sphere. Alcott also differentiates herself from other American writers, who endorse the “American Dream” of financial success, by questioning what success means. Many of her characters lead happy lives on shoestring budgets because they enjoy their work and have meaningful personal relationships. Some of her other characters meet failure when their life plans do not work out as they hoped, especially Alcott’s artists; but they take it in stride and find other ways to make their lives happy and rewarding.

The 1868 novel *Little Women* is a story about women who must work to survive and who learn how to find happiness through their work. The March sisters, unlike other girls of their social status in this era, must take jobs at an early age to help support their family because their father has lost his money. At the start of the novel, Mr. March is a chaplain in the Union army and has little personal wealth. He was wealthy when Meg and Jo were young, but he “lost his property in trying to help an unfortunate friend” (Chap. 4). No further details are offered, but, in “Aunt March Settles the Question,” the eponymous aunt tells Meg that her parents “have no more worldly wisdom than a pair of babies” (Chap. 23). Early in the novel, it is revealed that Aunt March offered to adopt one of March daughters once “the troubles came.” The Marches

refused her offer, saying, “We can’t give up our girls for a dozen fortunes. Rich or poor, we will keep together and be happy in one another” (Chap. 4). Early on, Alcott is establishing a theme common in her later books that family is more important than money.

In spite of this value, which Alcott tries to instill in her characters and her readers, she cannot deny the importance of money, which is a looming specter in the novel. “It’s so dreadful to be poor!” Meg says at the beginning of *Little Women* (Chap. 1). All four sisters complain about having to work. Beth does not like having to be the family housekeeper while their mother works outside of the home with the Soldiers’ Aid Societies. Amy hates being in school because she is made fun of for being poor. The oldest sisters have jobs outside of the home, like their mother, but both jobs are still in the domestic sphere. Meg is a governess for a wealthy family with “tiresome,” spoiled children. Jo is a companion to her Great-aunt March, where she is “shut up for hours with a nervous, fussy old lady, who keeps you trotting, is never satisfied, and worries you till you’re ready to fly out the window or cry” (Chap. 1). These are not their ideal jobs, but they allow Jo and Meg to keep their family safe and independent. In “A Telegram,” the reader learns how important the sisters’ jobs are to the family when Marmee says that Meg has spent all of her quarterly salary on their rent, and Jo hers on buying necessary winter clothing. In the same chapter, the family’s economic condition is brought to light with the story of Jo cutting and selling her hair for twenty-five dollars so that her mother can afford to travel to Washington D.C. to nurse Mr. March. Her decision to sell “what was my own,” foreshadows Jo’s decision to sell her stories to support her family later in the second volume (Chap. 15).

While Jo and Meg enjoy the sense of purpose and the financial opportunities their jobs provide, they and their sisters still dream of more fulfilling lifestyles, calling them “Castles in the

Air.”²³ Notably, when the March sisters imagine their futures, they think about more than just men to marry. Meg says she wants a “lovely house” with luxuries and servants and the opportunity to do philanthropic work. Laurie and Jo tease her about wanting “a splendid, wise, good husband and some angelic little children” as well, but Meg neither confirms nor denies their suspicion. Beth’s humble desire is also without marriage: to “stay at home safe with Father and Mother” and play her piano. Amy wants to study art in Rome and fancifully declares she wants to “be the best artist in the world.” Jo alone draws a distinction between what she would like in her fantastic castle in the air and what she would like to achieve in the real world. In her unrealistic dream, she would have “a stable full of Arabian steeds, rooms piled high with books, and I’d write out of a magic inkstand, so that my works should be as famous as Laurie’s music.” Her real world dream is to “write books, and get rich and famous,” something she does much later in life (Chap. 13). By writing about the ambitions of girls, Alcott is showing that women are capable of working hard and that it is all right for a girl to want more out of life than a husband and a baby.

It is easier for the Marches to have these grand dreams because they are not a typical poor family. They are in genteel poverty, possessing a lot of cultural and social capital, if little economic capital.²⁴ Alcott establishes this early on by presenting a truly impoverished family of German immigrants to whom the reader can compare them. The sisters, along with the reader,

²³ “Castles in the Air” is another reference to Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, where heaven is the “Celestial City” (line 107). While discussing Bunyan’s story in “Castles in the Air,” Jo asks her sisters and Laurie, “Wouldn’t it be fun if all the castles in the air which we make could come true, and we could live in them?” The castles represent a sort of heaven where the young people achieve their hopes and ambitions (Chapter 13).

²⁴ This poverty is similar to that which the Alcotts experienced. They were friends with the greatest minds of their time from Thoreau to Emerson and had many wealthy relations and friends, yet the Alcotts always lacked money. Alcott “went into service” at age eighteen, shocking her wealthier relations. She was hired to serve as a companion and housekeeper to a sickly woman in Boston, but became a household drudge after refusing the sexual advances of her male employer. She left the job after less than two months and later used this as material for “How I Went Out to Service” (Reisen 117-8).

realize how much better off the Marches are when Marmee tells her daughters on Christmas morning:

Not far away from here lies a poor woman with a little newborn baby. Six children are huddled into one bed to keep from freezing, for they have no fire. There is nothing to eat over there, and the oldest boy came to tell me they were suffering hunger and cold. (Chap. 2)

The sisters decide to give their Christmas breakfast to the Hummel family, who call them “good angels” (Chap. 2). The context the Hummels provide reveals that the March family is blessed by education and family status. The March sisters have the ability to work in positions, from governess to artist, that require a high degree of education and cultural knowledge that the Hummels would never have. When Jo and Laurie first meet, Jo tells him, “How I wish I was going to college!” (Chap. 3). If the March sisters had been born boys and inclined to study, Mr. and Mrs. March would have found a way to send their sons to universities like Harvard in spite of the family’s poverty. Those doors would be open to these hypothetical March boys because of nationality, social status, and education; it is only sex that keeps the daughters out of higher education.

As women, the March sisters are somewhat accepted by high society and considered potential wives for upper-class men because of their good background and education. According to Aunt March, Meg, being the prettiest and the oldest, is supposed to marry a rich man to restore her family’s fortune (Chap. 23). When she goes to “Vanity Fair,” Meg has a limited wardrobe supplemented by Marmee’s “treasure box,” which is “a certain cedar chest in which Mrs. March kept a few relics of past splendor, as gifts for her girls when the proper time came.” The box contains silk stockings, a carved fan, a set of pearl jewelry, and silk sashes. The box proves that the Marches belong to a grander, wealthier world, which still accepts them socially. Meg is

admired by high society for her beauty and is seen a potential (if not ideal) wife for rich men despite her day job as a governess and her father's lack of fortune (Chap. 9).

While Meg and her sisters are often accepted at the parties and events of the upper classes, Alcott makes it clear that workingwomen are not always treated with respect, and offers an unflinching look at the experiences of the genteel poor. The March sisters are often patronized or snubbed because they work. In "Camp Laurence," the English visitor Kate is rude and then "patronizing" to Meg when she learns she is a governess, making Meg feel as if her job were "degrading." When Kate leaves, Meg tells John, "I forgot that English people rather turn up their noses at governesses and don't treat them as we do" (Chap. 12). Alcott would have read about English governesses in novels like *Jane Eyre* and, when she was a teenager in 1849, she wrote *The Inheritance*, her first novel (which remained unpublished until 1997) about a governess in an English home. Several members of the family treat the beautiful and talented Edith badly and disrespectfully, until she saves the life of the daughter and wins their affections (12-3, 29). Edith's reluctance to stand up for herself is understandable because she is afraid of losing her livelihood, like the governess in Anton Chekov's "The Ninny" who takes what money she can from her employer because she is not in a position to fight back.

At a young age, Alcott addressed the issues of poor, ergo powerless, women with her novel *The Inheritance*, because they were issues she had faced herself. Alcott and her family struggled with their relationships with wealthy relations and friends, some of whom were kind and many of whom "disdained or exploited them" (Reisen 109). *The Inheritance* ends with the discovery that Edith is the true heiress of the family's estate. Edith feels obliged to them for giving her a home and job, and, though they do not deserve her sacrifice, she relinquishes her claim to the estate (138). When her decision to save the wealthy family is made known, her

employers accept Edith as part of their family, and she wins the heart of the handsome and good Lord Percy (146-7). This ending is fanciful and wistful, on Alcott's part; she can give power and happy endings to powerless women in the world of fiction, but not in real life. The ending is not altogether satisfying because it is unclear that anyone has learned a lesson,²⁵ unless the lesson is "be kind to governesses in case they turn out to be heiresses." Edith does not challenge the system that has kept her in a lowly position, but accepts a new role higher up in the hierarchy. Alcott has her American protagonists fight against the social system more than Edith by having them find ways to be happy and independent without a Cinderella plot twist.

Meg rejects the prevalent assumption that money and comfort lead to happiness by recognizing the value of a happy family. Being intelligent, kind, and beautiful, Meg could probably attract a wealthy husband, and many people, from her Aunt March to her friends the Moffats, expect her to do so. Part of young Meg wants to marry a rich man, too. Her job as a governess reminds her daily of everything she wants and cannot have:

Meg caught frequent glimpses of dainty ball dresses and bouquets, heard lively gossip about theaters, concerts, sleighing parties, and merrymakings of all kinds, and saw money lavished on trifles which would have been so precious to her.
(Chap. 4)

Alcott writes that this makes Meg "bitter" sometimes because she knows how close she has been to having this lifestyle: "she could remember a time when home was beautiful, life full of ease and pleasure, and want of any kind unknown." The narrator writes that Meg "had not yet learned to know how rich she was in the blessings which alone can make life happy" (Chap. 4). Meg is on her way to learning this at the start of the novel when she tells her sisters that they are happier

²⁵ This is particularly true in the case of Lord Arlington, a visiting lord who is attracted to Edith. After she rejects his advances, he tries to sexually assault her, something he would not dare to do with a woman with more protection and power. Lord Percy rescues Edith and yells at Arlington, though he later apologizes if he offended him (98-100). There is no punishment for Arlington's crime; he can continue to prey on powerless women who are unprotected and ignored by society.

than her employers' children who are "fighting and fretting all the time, in spite of their money." Her sisters and parents are her "blessings" because "though we do have to work, we make fun of ourselves, and are a pretty jolly set" (Chap. 1). Meg has realized that a loving family means more to her than money when she chooses to marry John instead of pursuing a wealthy man. She continues to face similar problems of material desire once she is married, but they are always conquered by the thought of her husband and children (Chap. 28). Meg's story challenges the notion that money and high social status lead to happiness.

Like Meg, Jo learns how to have a happy life without a lot of money, but her path is different from Meg's because she seeks fulfilling work beyond her family both as a girl and as an adult married to Mr. Bhaer. Early on in *Little Women*, Jo makes the best out of her situation as Aunt March's companion by taking advantage of Plumfield's library to improve her mind and her writing (Chap. 4). Later, when she first arrives to work as a governess for the owner of a boarding house in New York, Jo eats dinner at the main table in the dining room and overhears other boarders wonder why the governess is eating with them at the table. Instead of feeling put in her place and accepting it as Edith might have done, Jo is "angry at first," and then decides not to care, "for a governess is as good as a clerk" (Chap. 33). Alcott thus suggests that a way to deal with snubbing is to realize that those who critique Jo have little ground to do so. Jo does not allow others make her feel inferior. Even when Jo interacts with those with more money and social status, she is still unwilling to allow others to patronize her, which gets her into trouble, as discussed further below. Once Jo is married in the 1871 novel *Little Men*, moreover, she does not limit herself to her role as mother and wife. She uses her inheritance from Aunt March to open Plumfield School with her husband and works hard to run the building and instruct the children (Chap. 1). Jo would be bored if she were confined to a domestic lifestyle with no outlet

for her energy, but running a school (and later a college) with all of its unexpected adventures and new challenges keeps Jo invigorated and active throughout her life. The Bhaers have little money and are frequently in financial straits, but they get through them with hard work and self-respect, always aware of how lucky they are to have a happy family.

Alcott's 1870 novel *An Old-Fashioned Girl* similarly shows young readers that personal relationships and hard work lead to a happy life through Polly Milton and her friends. Polly is anything but old-fashioned in her desire to work. It would have been easy and socially acceptable to stay at her poor but happy home outside of Boston until she married, but Polly decides to leave home to teach music in the city. She is motivated to work because she wants to support herself so that her share in the family income can go to her brother, Will, who is a student at Harvard studying to become a minister. Polly is initially excited to be independent, giving lessons and living in a respectable boarding house in the city. Alcott does not sugarcoat Polly's reality: Polly gets bored with teaching and feels "lonely" and neglected by old, posh acquaintances who now "cut her" because she is a lowly music teacher (Chap. 8). Instead of going home or accepting her lonely position, Polly is proactive and makes new friends through Miss Mills, the owner of her boardinghouse. Polly's new friends are from "a little sisterhood of busy, happy, independent girls, who each had a purpose to execute, a talent to develop, an ambition to achieve, and brought to the work patience and perseverance, hope and courage." They are artists, teachers, writers, singers, and seamstresses, and Alcott lovingly discusses this female utopia, where "talent, energy, and character took the first rank; money, fashion, and position were literally nowhere; for here, as in the big world outside, genius seemed to blossom best when poverty was head gardener" (Chap. 11).

After reading the woefully few paragraphs that describe Polly's new friends in "Needles and Tongues," the reader does not want to go back into stuffy and vapid Boston Brahmin society when Polly goes to the opera in "Forbidden Fruit." Like Meg in "Vanity Fair" in *Little Women*, Polly borrows some finery from her friend Fanny, which makes her feel and act like a member of elegant society. Even her walk changes to a stylish one, which Alcott amusingly describes as "the true Boston gait, elbows back, shoulders forward, a bend and a slide, occasionally varied by a slight skip." Polly is certainly on display at the opera and men see her as a sexual object for the first time. Polly's party sits on the balcony and she is surrounded by admiring men, which makes the reader imagine Polly's lack of space and the stale air that requires Polly to use her borrowed fan (Chap. 12). Polly's boarding house, in contrast has trees that "rustled" outside and warm sunlight streaming in through the windows, suggesting fresh air and health (Chap. 8).

The next chapter, "The Sunny Side," returns to the world of Polly's friends and is one of the most engaging episodes of the novel as Polly introduces Fanny to her artist friends. The room they visit is large and full of light, a "queerly furnished" studio, which feels interesting and liberal. Fanny is first hesitant to like or respect the women, but she succumbs to their society "for there was a freedom about it that was charming, an artistic flavor to everything, and such a spirit of good-will and gayety, that she felt at home at once" (Chap. 13). The scenes with Polly's friends are bright spots, true breaths of fresh air, of the novel, and it is almost disappointing when Polly chooses to marry Tom (Chap. 14). While this is a "happy ending," one is left hoping that Polly will retain her spot in the free and interesting "sisterhood" after she becomes a wife and mother.

If *Little Women* and *An Old-Fashioned Girl* are about finding ways to be happy without money, the Rose Campbell novels are primers for how to be happy if one is rich. The key to

happiness in Alcott's books is doing meaningful and rewarding work, whether or not it is a financial necessity. Rose is a wealthy, beautiful, young woman who has no need to work, but she is determined to do something useful with her life. In *Eight Cousins*, from 1875, younger Rose tells Uncle Alec that she wants to learn "a trade, or something to make a living out of." One reason for her desire to learn how to work is that she wants to be prepared in case she ever loses her money and needs to earn her own living. The other is that she admires "happy and independent" young women whom she has met and wants to be one of them (Chap. 16). In *Rose in Bloom*, from 1876, Rose announces that she has chosen a "profession," a word that suggests that she has an almost divine calling to do a job outside of the domestic sphere. Her cousin Charlie says, "there is only one thing for a pretty girl to do break a dozen or so hearts before she finds one to suit, then marry and settle" (Chap. 1). Rose challenges him:

I believe that it is as much a right and a duty for women to do something with their lives as for men. . . we've got minds and souls as well as hearts; ambition and talents as well as beauty and accomplishments; and we want to live and learn as well as love and be loved. I'm sick of being told that is all a woman is fit for! I won't have anything to do with love till I prove that I am something besides a housekeeper and baby-tender! (Chap. 1)

Alcott is using the same technique she uses in the *Little Women* series to discuss women's rights: a popular heroine makes speeches in the novel to convince both the other characters and the readers. Rose uses plural nouns because she is talking about all women. When Rose says she needs to "prove" her ability to work, she means she wants to prove to herself and others that women are as capable as men and deserve the same opportunities. There is a righteous anger in her speech. In *Little Women*, Alcott objects to Jo being unable to control her anger or "temper," but here she valorizes Rose's anger because it is controlled and funneled into a valuable cause.

When it comes to choosing a career for Rose, Alcott considers several "trades," but chooses ones that will suit the needs of her novel. When the discussion of Rose's profession

opens in *Eight Cousins*, Uncle Alec suggests she learn how to be a housekeeper because it is a skill “that makes many happy and comfortable, and home the sweetest place in the world” (Chap. 16). Disappointingly, Rose is confined to women’s roles and society’s expectations with her housekeeping lessons. Unlike some of her readers, Alcott does not see this as problematic; her purpose is to highlight the importance of domesticity, not the oppressiveness of it. As the story continues, moreover, it becomes clear that Alcott believes a woman can be both a housekeeper and a workingwoman. In addition to sewing and cooking, Rose studies the sciences and the humanities (Chap. 19). Her interest in human anatomy and her admiration for a local physician, Dr. Mary Kirk, make her consider becoming a doctor in *Rose in Bloom*. Housekeeping and society alone will not suffice as Rose’s profession; she also wants “a better way for a woman to spend her life than in dancing, dressing, and husband-hunting.” This plan is derailed because “Uncle thought it wouldn’t do to have so many M.D.’s in one family, since Mac thinks of trying it” (Chap. 1). It is troubling that her uncle dissuades her from practicing medicine, because his reason for doing so does not seem strong enough. Alec likely wants to protect his niece by discouraging her from entering the challenging, male-dominated field of medicine. If Rose had gone to medical school, it would have made a fascinating and quite different novel about a woman breaking down barriers and possibly marrying a fellow doctor, her cousin Mac.

Alcott probably did not make Rose a doctor because she wanted to write a novel about how to be happy within the confines and expectations of upper-class society. Rose chooses a profession that permits her to be a respectable, if slightly eccentric, Boston heiress. When she returns from a grand tour of Europe in *Rose in Bloom*, she reveals to her family the profession she has chosen:

Philanthropy is a generous, good, and beautiful profession, and I've chosen it for mine because I have much to give. I'm only the steward of the fortune Papa left me, and I think, if I use it wisely for the happiness of others, it will be more blest than if I keep it all for myself. (Chap. 1)

The way she describes her choice, with religious terms like “blest” and “profession,” makes it seem like a divine calling. This link between Rose’s desire to work and religious calling is reinforced in “Old Friends with New Faces,” when Protestants Rose and Charlie discuss the merits of Catholic saints. Charlie, a “gentleman of leisure,” declares his favorite saint to be St. Martin, a dashing soldier who splits his cloak in half for a beggar. Rose points out that many saints “were not very successful from a worldly point of view while alive, they were loved and canonized when dead” (Chap. 2). Rose’s favorite saint is St. Francis:

St. Francis gave himself to charity just when life was most tempting and spent years working for God without reward. He’s old and poor, and in a dreadful place, but I won’t give him up, and you may have your gay St. Martin if you want him. (Chap. 2)

Alcott uses their discussion of saints to draw a heavy-handed metaphor, in which Charlie is the gay, leisurely soldier and Rose is the hard-working, devoted monk. Through Rose, Alcott is making a judgment about what kind of goodness is best: sacrificing what one has and working for the poor.

As good and even divine as Rose’s calling is, she divides her family members with her plan. Society matron Aunt Clara, who wants Rose to marry her son Charlie, asks Uncle Alec, “are you going to let that girl squander a fine fortune on all sorts of charitable nonsense and wild schemes for the prevention of pauperism and crime?” Many in their society probably share these views. The words “squander,” “nonsense,” and “wild schemes” reveal how small-minded Clara is, and her questions also show that she believes Alec will be controlling his niece and her money. Alec responds by quoting Proverbs 19:17, “They who give to the poor lend to the Lord.” Alec is showing his support for Rose’s plan, while also establishing with his noncommittal

answer that he is not in a position to be in charge of his adult niece anymore. Earlier in the same chapter, he tells the aunts: “I am no longer captain, only first mate now.” He is ready to provide support and advice, but relinquishes his patriarchal power (Chap. 1).

Rose pursues her profession with zeal and gets her high self-esteem from her philanthropic projects. Her uncle, serving as her advisor, “found it a little difficult to restrain the ardor of this young philanthropist who wanted to begin at once to endow hospitals, build homes, adopt children, and befriend all mankind” (Chap. 3). Her first project is to build affordable and healthy housing for respectable, poor women. She gets the idea after touring workingwomen’s homes in Europe. She tells Charlie, “There is a class who cannot afford to pay much, yet suffer a great deal from being obliged to stay in noisy, dirty, crowded places like tenement houses and cheap lodgings.” The rent is slender, so the women do not feel like “genteel paupers” (Chap. 5). Rose’s next project is a country orphanage where children can get fresh air and exercise away from the city. It is successful: “... squads of pale children came to toddle in the grass, run over the rocks, and play upon the smooth sands of the beach. A pretty sight, and one that well repaid those who brought it to pass” (Chap. 16). Rose is a philanthropist in other ways, too, teaching art classes to poor children, raising money for charities, and doing small, personal acts of generosity. Rose feels happy and purposeful when her projects go well. Alcott signals this by writing how “pretty” Rose looks when she is doing good works. A donor to one of Rose’s cause says, “Miss Campbell will give you her sweetest smile if you hand her a handsome check” (Chap. 7). The “Rose Garden” is “a pretty sight,” no doubt in part because of the beautiful blonde woman in charge of it. Mac compares Rose to one of “Correggio's young Madonnas” as she cares for an abused child he rescued (Chap. 16).

Not all of Rose's projects go well, "for, having to deal with people, not things, unexpected obstacles were constantly arising" (Chap. 16). Rose's sense of usefulness and her self-esteem rely on the gratitude of those she helps. When she builds her homes for workingwomen, she expects all of the women to be grateful, but that proves not to be the case:

Rose was disturbed to find that the good people expected her to take care of them in a way she had not bargained for. Buffum, her agent, was constantly reporting complaints, new wants, and general discontent if they were not attended to. Things were very neglected, water pipes froze and burst, drains got out of order, yards were in a mess, and rents behind-hand. (Chap. 16)

Wise Uncle Alec tries to explain to Rose, "If you do this thing for the sake of the gratitude, then it is a failure but if it is done for the love of helping those who need help, it is a success, for in spite of their worry every one of these women feel what privileges they enjoy and value them highly." Rose appears to understand and, still annoyed, says, "the least they can do is to say 'thank you.' I'm afraid I have thought more of the gratitude than the work, but if there isn't any, I must make up my mind to go without." Yet Rose promptly hands the women's housing project over to her agent and decides to devote "her energies to the little folks, always so ready to receive the smallest gift and repay the giver with their artless thanks" (Chap. 16). She abandons one project for another that will reinforce her vision of herself as a kindly patron and give her a sense of self-worth. Alcott likely included this story to show Rose's immaturity, making her a more realistic character. The story also serves to explore how people feel as the helpers and the helped. Uncle Alec seems to be speaking for Alcott, the recipient of charity at points in her life, when he says, "it is as hard to give in the right spirit as it is to receive" (Chap. 16).

Rose engages in a smaller act of charity in "Small Temptations," which ends more happily than her workingwomen's housing project because the recipient is full of gratitude. The episode begins when Rose is considering spending a large sum on a ball gown for herself. In the shop, she sees "a meek little Irishwoman looking quite lost and out of place among the luxuries

around her.” Seeing her being dismissed by the shop clerks, Rose escorts Mrs. Sullivan to the basement, a “darksome lower world,” where less expensive fabrics are sold (Chap. 11). She then purchases the fabric for the woman:

The presence of a lady made Mrs. Sullivan’s shopping very easy now, and her one poor “bit” of flannel grew miraculously into yards of several colors, since the shabby purse was no lighter when she went away, wiping her eyes on the corner of a big, brown bundle. (Chap. 11)

Alcott’s tone when she writes “the presence of a lady” shows the snobbery of the shop clerks and Rose’s awareness of her power as a member of the wealthy class. Mrs. Sullivan is moved by Rose’s generosity and is thankful to the young woman. Alcott writes, “it did Rose good and sent her up into the light again with a sober face, thinking self-reproachfully, ‘What right have I to more gay gowns when some poor babies have none, or to spend time making myself fine while there is so much bitter want in the world?’” (Chap. 11). The purchasing of fabric calls to mind Rose’s conversation with Charlie when she questioned St. Martin’s credentials for sainthood because he merely tore his cloak in half for a beggar. Rose is learning that small acts of charity can do as much good as large ones.

The problem with Alcott’s portrayal of philanthropy in *Rose in Bloom* is that she does not question or explore the fact that Rose’s good works provide immediate help to those who need it, but do little to foster true social change. For example, Rose’s housing project provides some relief for poor women, but it does not challenge the social order that discriminates against the poor and against females. No one in the book even seems aware that they should be working to change the way society works, not just spending money to fix the effects of the system. It is difficult to say exactly where Alcott stands on these issues, particularly since she was a women’s rights reformer; in any case, her book has problems. She does gently mock Rose’s desire to be the kindly patron, but she does not unpack what lies beneath Rose’s desire to be thanked. Rose

has a position high up in the American hierarchy, in spite of her sex, and wants her power to be recognized. She wants the poor to be grateful because the poor are supposed to be thankful to the rich people who aid them.²⁶

Alcott's handling of Mrs. Sullivan is even worse because she does little to give the woman dignity. She makes her "the other" with her Irish accent, rough manners, and "purple hands." Mrs. Sullivan attracts Rose's attention as a worthy candidate for her charity because she looks "meek" and promises to appear grateful so that Rose can be the powerful patron. It is doubtful that Rose would have exerted herself for a loud woman or one who acted proudly. While Alcott is criticizing shops for making poor people shop in the "darksome lower world" of the basement, there is also a sense that the basement is where Mrs. Sullivan belongs. Rose does not demand that Mrs. Sullivan be served on the floor she shops on; she takes her to her appropriate floor. After, Rose returns to "the light" upstairs and says to herself that she has no "right" to fashionable dresses when others live in poverty. It is good that Rose acknowledges that she is lucky to be born with money, but one is left wishing that Alcott had had Rose take it further by openly critiquing the way poor people are treated. The message of this chapter is that one should sacrifice personal pleasures for others, but Rose is trading the pleasure of consumption for the pleasure of patronage. This experience has not humbled Rose, but made her pleased with her own generosity (Chap. 11).

Alcott also writes about another group of women who feel called to do their work: artists. From painters to sculptors to writers, Alcott explores the lives of artists and the people around them in almost all of her stories. Her desire to focus on artists is not surprising because Alcott

²⁶ Charles Strickland offers an interesting commentary on Alcott's treatment of the "worthy" and "unworthy" poor (particularly her anti-Irish sentiments), arguing that Alcott had little understanding of true poverty and "assumed poverty could be traced to a failing of character, and that the salvation of the unworthy poor lay in their moral conversion to the ranks of the worthy" (153-5).

certainly had an unusually high number of them among her acquaintance. In addition to being an artist in her own right, Alcott was exposed to artists and writers from the time of her birth. Her father Bronson was a prominent member of the Transcendentalist movement, and, as a result, Alcott knew poets Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau well. She also knew Margaret Fuller, a book reviewer and the editor of *The Dial*; Elizabeth Peabody, an important Boston publisher and bookseller; and the author Nathaniel Hawthorne, among others (Reisen 3, 20). Alcott was not even the only artist in her family; her sister May was the artist on whom *Little Women's* Amy was based (Reisen 137).

Artists must have particularly fascinated Alcott because of the “genius” they possess, so she explores the concept of artistic merit in the stories of three artists in *Rose in Bloom*. Charlie is a jack-of-all-trades artist who dabbles in music, painting, and theatre without being exceptional at any particular one. He lacks drive, but occasionally has “artistic fits” when he works hard. When Charlie toys with the idea of going on stage, Rose discourages him, believing he does not have enough talent, and says, “With genius one can do anything without it one had better let the stage alone” (Chap. 2). Charlie might have turned into a good or even great artist, but he dies too young. Mac, unlike Charlie, does not at first appear to possess artistic gifts. He becomes a respected poet only after Rose tells him he should try writing. When Rose praises his work, he insists, “It isn’t genius, it is love!” (Chap. 18). In spite of Mac’s protests, Alcott is saying that Mac possesses some deep spark of genius and requires Rose to be his inspiration so that he can live up to his potential. The third artist is Phoebe, Rose’s best friend and former maid, who desires to become a concert singer. Rose discovers her talent at the very beginning of *Eight Cousin* when she hears the scullery maid singing in the kitchen (Chap. 1). She adopts Phoebe as a friend and raises her fortunes by giving her schooling and the chance to study music

in Europe (Alcott, *Eight Cousins* Chap. 9; *Rose in Bloom* Chap. 1). The common thread between the artists of this story is Rose; she is not an artist but is a tastemaker, able to encourage or destroy their plans. Perhaps because of her strong influence, both Phoebe and Mac leave her to pursue their art in a city (probably New York), returning to Rose after they are successful as a concert singer and a poet, respectively (Alcott, *Rose in Bloom*, Chap. 8, 20).

To turn to an earlier text, Alcott provides a richer and more complex account of artists in *Little Women* than *Rose in Bloom*; the artists are driven by their own desire to create, but are held back by the society in which they live. Alcott's famous literary heroine Jo March eventually becomes a writer, but she disappointingly fails as an artist because she continuously suppresses her feelings. In the first volume of *Little Women*, Jo declares, "I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream" (Chap. 13). She writes in the attic, truly a room of her own, and delights her family with her youthful literary attempts (Chap. 3). A notable scene between Amy and Jo (the two artists of the family) is when young Amy cruelly burns the book Jo is working on because she is mad at her. Jo is unwilling to forgive her sister for destroying her work and "felt that it never could be made up to her." Jo's work means more to her than her family understands, though young Amy, probably because of her artistic temperament, knew that destroying her sister's work would hurt Jo more than almost anything else. Jo forgives her sister after she and Laurie save Amy when she falls into cracked ice while ice-skating. Jo blames herself for Amy's accident, thinking that her temper prevented her from warning her sister about melting patches of ice. What Jo calls her temper is the anger of an artist whose work has been destroyed, a strong feeling caused by a serious offence. This feeling does not prevent her from saving her sister's life with Laurie, though Jo still thinks it does. Jo tells her mother, "Laurie did it all... Mother, if she should die, it would be my fault," as

she is “sobbing out her gratitude for being spared the heavy punishment which might have come upon her” (Chap. 8). Jo does not consider that Amy herself is at fault for following her to the ice uninvited and unwisely skating on the ice without an older person. Instead she invalidates her artistic feelings by blaming them for her sister’s accident and denying herself the right to be angry with Amy. This scene lays the groundwork for a time when Jo again decides to suppress her artistic feelings because she believes they are wrong.

There is a tantalizing sample of the life Jo could have as a writer when she moves to New York to be a governess and writer in “Jo’s Journal” in *Little Women*. She enjoys working for a living and learns about the publishing world as she tries to sell her works. Life is not easy, but it is rewarding. Though Jo publishes thrillers that Mr. Bhaer does not approve of, there is still a sense that her life as an artist is underway (Chap. 33-34). Alcott intended for Jo to be a “literary spinster” like herself and, in New York, the reader can imagine what that life will be like (Reisen 218). Jo is still an excellent daughter and sister, visiting and spending her money on them. She takes Beth and Marmee on a seaside holiday for their health (Chap. 27). But Jo’s life of interesting people, time to write, and governess work to do is derailed at Beth’s death.

Jo is willing to give up her ambitions of being a writer when Beth asks her to on her deathbed. Beth’s death in “The Valley of the Shadow” is a turning point of the novel:

“You must take my place, Jo, and be everything to Father and Mother when I’m gone. They will turn to you, don’t fail them, and if it’s hard to work alone, remember that I don’t forget you, and that you’ll be happier in doing that than writing splendid books or seeing all the world, for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy.”
“I’ll try, Beth.” and then and there Jo renounced her old ambition, pledged herself to a new and better one, acknowledging the poverty of other desires, and feeling the blessed solace of a belief in the immortality of love. (Chap. 40)

In this complicated and sentimental scene, young and sheltered Beth makes a harsh judgment about the nature of intellectual and artistic achievement, imagining that seeing the world or being

an artist would not be as fulfilling as being loved for behaving with extreme selflessness. It is difficult to imagine Beth fully understanding her sister's longing to see the world and thus be a part of it, or her desire for self-expression as a writer. Beth's definition of love, too, is questionable because it requires an extreme level of selflessness and a suppression of personal and artistic feeling. A selfless life might make Beth happy and is in keeping with women's values of the era, but it does not feel like the right path for Jo. It is surprising and even horrifying that the narrator agrees with Beth, calling this "a new and better" life. Alcott is aware of the hard hand she deals to Jo: "what could be harder for a restless, ambitious girl than to give up her own hopes, plans, and desires, and cheerfully live for others?" (Chap. 42). Sadly, she gives it to her anyway.

In spite of Jo's decision, Alcott lets her go against dead Beth's wishes and write again in *Little Women*. Jo writes a story for her own enjoyment, without thought of having it published.

Jo never knew how it happened, but something got into that story that went straight to the hearts of those who read it, for when her family had laughed and cried over it, her father sent it, much against her will, to one of the popular magazines, and to her utter surprise, it was not only paid for, but others requested. Letters from several persons, whose praise was honor, followed the appearance of the little story, newspapers copied it, and strangers as well as friends admired it. (Chap. 42)

Alcott emphasizes that Jo was not trying to be a writer; her father publishes her work "against her will," which seems like a violation of her work.²⁷ Alcott may not have intended this line to illustrate that Jo has little power to make her own decisions in a patriarchal society, but it does.

Jo's decision to write stories without intending to publish them might appear to be a case for "l'art pour l'art," because her work was completed without a desire for money or fame. But Jo

²⁷ This is similar to Alcott's own experience of writing. She wrote many short stories and a few books before she became famous for *Little Women*, and her father's publisher Thomas Niles asked Bronson to have his daughter write a girls' story, one to compete with Horatio Alger's boys' stories published by a rival. Alcott had no interest in writing for girls, but did it so that her father's book could be published with hers to improve its sales. Like Jo, Alcott's father drove her to write a children's work, which became surprisingly successful (Reisen 213).

writes her story for the approval of her audience. When Marmee suggests to Jo, still depressed by her sister's death and still determined to give up her dreams, that she write again, Jo responds, "I've no heart to write, and if I had, nobody cares for my things" (Chap. 42). An audience is necessary for Jo, so her parents tell her to write for them.

Though Jo is closer to realizing her old dreams than ever before, her writing victory feels hollow and disappointing because it is not the success of the old Jo, but of the new and selfless Jo. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser explains why new Jo is so unsatisfying: "Jo is a subversive figure in so far as she expresses a woman's legitimate longing for a large sphere of activity. But seeing no way to satisfy self, she adopts a policy of selflessness and, thus diminished, succumbs to the marriage proposal of fatherly Professor Bhaer" (90). Her later success as a writer of children's novels in *Jo's Boys* is similarly disappointing because Jo writes to "fill up the gaps in the income" when Plumfield needs money. The narrator writes that Jo had fallen "back upon the long-disused pen" and had become a successful and famous children's writer like Alcott (Chap. 3). She writes not because she wants to produce art or find personal fulfillment, but because she selflessly desires to financially help her family.

Amy, on the other hand, has opportunities to become an artist that are closed to Jo, which Alcott suggests is because of their different personalities. Amy receives artistic advantages because she knows how to and is willing to please those around her. In the second volume of *Little Women*, before Beth's death, unbeknownst to the March sisters, their wealthy Aunt Carol plans to choose one of them to act as a companion to her daughter as they tour Europe. Both Jo and Amy long to visit Europe. For Jo, travel to Europe means the opportunity to broaden her mind and see new people, so that she may improve as a writer. For Amy, travel to Europe means the opportunity to study with the best teachers and the chance to copy famous works of art. Jo is

the logical choice as the eldest, unmarried sister, but Aunt Carrol asks Aunt March for advice about which sister to ask anyway (Chap. 29-30).

Jo ruins her chances for the trip when she and Amy pay Aunt March a social call while Aunt Carrol is also present. When they discuss a neighbor patronizing Amy by asking her to work at a charity fair, Amy pleases her aunts by saying, "Patronage does not trouble me when it is well meant." Jo speaks frankly and horrifies her relatives: "I don't like favors, they oppress and make me feel like a slave. I'd rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent." Amy understands the rules of acceptable behavior for poor, genteel, young women far better than Jo does. The narrator writes, "By her next speech, Jo deprived herself of several years of pleasure, and received a timely lesson in the art of holding her tongue" (Chap. 29). Amy is chosen to go to Europe not just because she speaks French, studies art, and has elegant manners; she is chosen because she knows how to keep her mouth shut (Chap. 30). The moral of this story is that women are rewarded for holding their tongues and not challenging society.

What Amy accomplishes as an artist in Europe is not remarkable, though she does return to Concord with a husband. Before she leaves, she tells her sister this trip "will decide my career, for if I have any genius, I shall find it out in Rome, and will do something to prove it" (Chap. 30). Amy struggles from the beginning of the second volume of *Little Women* to "learn the difference between talent and genius" and experiments with a variety of artistic media, much to the amusement of her family (Chap. 26). When Amy studies in Rome, she comes to the conclusion that she has talent but no genius, and tells the visiting Laurie, "no amount of energy can make it so. I want to be great, or nothing. I won't be a common-place dauber, so I don't intend to try any more" (Chap. 39). This is similar to Rose's advice to Charlie that one should

only go on the stage when one possesses “genius.” Though Amy once planned to teach art if she could not be an artist, she now tells Laurie that she will marry wealthy Fred Vaughn and be an “ornament to society,” utterly giving up art. Laurie tells Amy that her plan to for marry money “sounds odd from the lips of one of your mother’s girls,” not because she would be giving up her art but because she would be marrying for money and not love (Chap. 39). After a couple of chapters and Laurie’s own discovery that he, too, possesses talent and not genius for music, Amy and Laurie realize they have fallen in love with each other, and Amy gets both love and money in her marriage, though no artistic career, in the later stories *Little Men* and *Jo’s Boys* (Chap. 41).

Amy’s story is strikingly different from May, the sister on whom Alcott based her. Twenty-eight year old May was still finding her way as an artist when *Little Women* was published in 1868, and she contributed some awkward illustrations to the first edition, in which all of the characters’ heads look unsettlingly baby-like (Alcott, *Little Women*, 1886). Unlike Amy, who stopped being an artist after early discouragements, May taught, travelled, studied, and produced art for the rest of her life. While May is perhaps best known for her tutelage and discovery of Daniel Chester French, the sculptor who later created the Lincoln Monument, she became a proficient and respected artist herself in Europe. In Paris, she led an interesting life, living with two other American female artists and becoming close friends with Mary Cassatt. In 1877, one of May’s still life paintings was selected to be shown at the Paris Salon, a high honor; two more were selected in 1879. In the time in between, in 1878 and at the age of thirty-seven, she married a twenty-one year old Swiss banker named Ernest Nieriker. Her big sister Alcott found it hard to imagine “a married woman operating freely in the world, pursuing art,” but May managed it just the same. May’s career stopped short when she died of post-partum fever after giving birth to her daughter Louisa, or Lulu, whom Alcott raised (Reisen 256-274). In Alcott’s

last major novel, *Jo's Boys* from 1886, she gives Amy a daughter, Bess, who pursues a career as a sculptor, wins "honors" in her field, and eventually happily marries a "worthy mate" (Chap. 22). Perhaps this was Alcott giving May the memorial she deserved, or maybe Alcott wanted to imagine a woman who has it all, as a role model for her young niece.

Alcott's greatest contribution with her novels was not her endorsement of suffrage or her examination of marriage, but her discussion of women's jobs and opportunities. She gives her female characters ambition and courage to decide what they want and to work to get it. The mere recognition of the fact that women need lives beyond their domestic roles makes Alcott an amazingly revolutionary writer. Alcott's reputation as a "realist," as G.K. Chesterton puts it, stems from her choice not to give her protagonists everything they want or plan (213). Life is not always kind, as Alcott well knew, and she uses her books to show how Rose, Jo, Meg, Amy, Polly, and Bess manage to find happiness and personal fulfillment in spite of the challenges that block their paths. With lessons like these, what books could be better for the world's little women?

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