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"Women and Competition in Selected Fiction by Louisa May Alcott: 'Discontented, Proud, and Ambitious'"

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WOMEN AND COMPETITION

IN SELECTED FICTION BY LOUISA MAY ALCOTT:

"DISCONTENTED, PROUD, AND AMBITIOUS"

A Dissertation

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Title: Women and Competition in Selected Fiction by Louisa May Alcott: "Discontented, Proud, and Ambitious"

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This dissertation explores the competitiveness of female characters in selected fiction by Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888). Utilizing a feminist theoretical approach, this discussion shows how Alcott situates her characters in settings where she explores ideas of competition within emergent feminism and capitalism. Alcott, counter to the nineteenth-century norm, shows that women must assert themselves and learn how to compete in a patriarchal capitalist economy. Alcott's progressive strategy contributes to making women's need for self-assertion, with competition as the catalyst for change, more fully understood within a society immersed in the idea of separate spheres for women and men.

Alcott reflects her own feminist identity through the characters she designs in her short fiction and novels, including "Behind A Mask, *or* A Woman's Power," "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," "The Rival Prima Donnas," "Thrice Tempted," "Perilous Play," "Which Wins?," "Betrayed by a Buckle," *Moods, Work: A Story of Experience*, *Little Women*, *Eight Cousins,* and *Rose in Bloom.* This study includes references to Alcott's personal journals and letters that show the correlation between her personal and literary lives. It also includes a discussion of Alcott's publishers and several popular nineteenth-century periodicals in which Alcott's works appeared.

Feminist theorists including Judith Butler, Elaine Showalter, and Nancy Hartsock provide a theoretical basis for an examination of Alcott's works. Because of Alcott's own life experiences, she was acutely aware of the unfairness of woman's situation within a man's world. She revisited this topic through her female characters across her writing career who rebel against this unfairness by asserting their competitive ambitions to find identity and self-fulfillment.

The importance of competition as a theme in Alcott's fiction requires closer scrutiny in order to be fully appreciated in literary and biographical terms. Even though Alcott's female characters are shrouded in domestic or sensational settings, their competitive attributes hold a previously underestimated significance within nineteenth-century women's literature.

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Faith

Oh, when the heart is full of fears
And the way seems dim to heaven,
When the sorrow and the care of years
Peace from the heart has driven, –
Then, through the mist of falling tears,
Look up and be forgiven.

Forgiven for the lack of faith
That made all dark to thee,
Let conscience or thy wayward soul
Have fullest mastery:
Hope on, fight on, and thou shalt win
A noble victory.

Though thou art weary and forlorn,
Let not thy heart's peace go;
Though the riches of this world are gone,
And thy lot is care and woe,
Faint not, but journey hourly on:
True wealth is not below.

Through all the darkness still look up:
Let virtue be thy guide;
Take thy draught from sorrow's cup,
Yet trustfully abide;
Let not temptation vanquish thee,
And the Father will provide.

Louisa May Alcott

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will explore the competitiveness of female characters in selected fiction by Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888). The theoretical approach that informs my dissertation is feminist theory. Alcott situates her characters in settings where she explores ideas of competition within emergent feminism and capitalism. Alcott, counter to the nineteenth-century norm, shows that women must assert themselves and learn how to compete in a patriarchal capitalist economy. Alcott's progressive strategy contributes to making women's need for self-assertion, with competition as the catalyst for change, more fully understood within a society immersed in the idea of separate spheres for women and men.

The characters and the works for this study include Jean Muir in "Behind a Mask, *or* A Woman's Power" (1866), Pauline Valary in "Pauline's Passion and Punishment" (1862), Beatrice and Theresa in "The Rival Prima Donnas" (1854), Ruth and Laura in "Thrice Tempted" (1867), Rose St. Just in "Perilous Play" (1869), Thyra and Nadine from "Which Wins?" and Cecelia Stanhope in "Betrayed by a Buckle." Sylvia Yule in *Moods* (1864) and Christie Devon in *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873) are also featured. Alcott's most famous novel, *Little Women*, contains the antics and trials of the females in the March family. I will discuss how Alcott conveys a myriad of ways females, particularly sisters Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy and their mother Marmee, engage in aspects of competitive behavior. Two characters, Rose Campbell and Phebe Moore from *Eight Cousins* and its sequel

Rose in Bloom, will also be included to further explore competitive female characterizations in Alcott's novels.

Louisa May Alcott presented reasons why women should be permitted and even encouraged to participate and effectively compete in areas of life outside their domestic sphere which was centered on the home and family. Opportunities to explore and engage in activities heretofore reserved to men included business, law, publishing, medicine, education and politics. These slowly began to open to women during Alcott's lifetime. Alcott showed that women wanted, and were capable of, a variety of labors and pursuits depending on their individual talents and without regard to their gender, and that they were no longer contented to consent to confined roles. This sense of individualism was fueled by a capitalist economy that provided men with opportunities to accumulate wealth and be financially independent, but not women. The forces of production were changing from a predominantly agrarian society to a manufacturing society and people, including women, "went to work for shop and factory" (Ohmann 48). This desire to be a part of all that life had to offer, good and bad, required the ability of women to recognize and then assert their competitive natures within a growing capitalist society at a time when many people deemed these characteristics to be unfeminine, vain, and immoral, and against the laws of God and nature. If it was not necessary for a woman to work, "her ventures into the economic and political spheres broke rules and caused frowns" (269). Women wanted to be free of the oppression from capitalism and achieve positions wherein they could enjoy its benefits. To do so

required a change “in a set of relations between several elements” including “the economic organization of households and its accompanying familial ideology, the division of labour and relations of production, the educational system and the operations of the state” (Barrett 40).

Although best known and admired as an author of juvenile literature, Alcott also wrote fiction for adults throughout her career. In much of her juvenile literature, she focuses on teaching children right from wrong and encouraging virtues such as kindness and generosity. With many of her female characters, however, Alcott shows the emerging competitive natures of women in the nineteenth century and how and why it is important and necessary for women to assert positive competitive urges in order to make progress in their own development as well as in the fight for women’s rights, or as Mary Wollstonecraft put it, “to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect” (i).

Alcott’s heroine, Margaret Fuller, declares: “What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her” (20). She points out that:

> Plants of great vigor will almost always struggle into blossom, despite impediments. But there should be encouragement and a free genial atmosphere for those of a more timid sort, fair play for each in its own kind. Some are like the little, delicate flowers which love to hide in the dripping

> mosses, by the sides of mountain torrents, or in the shade of tall trees. But others require an open field, a rich and loosened soil, or they never show their proper hues. (27)

Fuller believed that women, just as men, must be regarded as individuals.

This sense of individualism for women is necessary to fully develop their talents in order to compete for and wholly establish their value in the world and thus claim their piece of the capitalist pie. An individual theory of value, however, runs counter to capitalism which draws upon labor for profit. Alcott was drawn to books and to intellectual conversations that included Fuller and others who espoused these developing theories of the self. Alcott herself struggled with what bell hooks describes as "desperately trying to discover the place of my belonging" (37). Alcott had a close family, yet she did not have the typical nineteenth century woman's life. She worked at many jobs, among which writing became the most lucrative, to support her family financially when it became clear that the male head of the household (her father) could not or would not. She never married. She wrote about women and, as Hélène Cixous would later advocate for women writers, she "put herself into the text – into the world and into history – by her own movement" (257). Alcott based her fiction upon what she saw in the world about her including people as well as important cultural and political issues such as temperance and suffrage in a world that was beginning to invite "the expression of human potential" (Rose 5). The Civil War was an economic war that divided a nation over the idea of garnering profit from human bodies. An end to slavery meant an end to profits. It

was also a time for recasting ideals. Anne C. Rose observes that "the dynamics of cultural change…come from people capable of reflection and choice" (6). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions that, "The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored" (243). Although Spivak was referring specifically to Imperialism, many women writers of the nineteenth century, including Alcott, wrote to promote an alternate representation of woman different from the Victorian model who lived only within her designated sphere; many nineteenth-century women wanted change, wanted the freedom to choose their mode of participation in capitalism and how they would live their lives, and they were prepared to work hard to achieve that independence. Alcott worked to encourage women who struggled, as she had, with what Susan Gubar describes as "the tension between biological and societal definitions of sex (142) within her Concord community, and also involved the female characters of her fiction in these struggles. All of these feminists have theorized about why something that is taken for granted by and for men is such a struggle for women to expect for themselves and to achieve successfully. This was difficult in the nineteenth century because, as Judith Butler explains, "women" were a category both "produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation [was] sought" (2).

This patriarchal norm, so strongly in place since Aristotle declared that "the female is a female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities" (qtd. in de Beauvoir xxii), met with increasing objections as women acquired educations and sought to more fully develop themselves and participate on equal footing with men during the

nineteenth century in America. This study centers on the idea that women had to learn to develop their competitive instincts in order to do so. Nancy Hartsock, in her search for a theory of power for women, explains that transformation of power relationships requires an examination of the ways women are dominated and what means they have at their disposal to alter their subjugation. Alcott's experiences and point of view encouraged her to use her "capacities, abilities, and strengths" to empower herself and successfully compete within the world of nineteenth-century publishing.[1] Athough in *Work* Alcott writes from a socialist perspective about women coming together and working to achieve a common goal, she admits in her journals that she writes her sensation stories for the money and will alter her writing, "anything to suit customers" (*Journals* 164). Alcott learns to successfully participate in a capitalist economy and mass culture by supplying a demand. She comes to understand the process that Richard Ohmann describes as "commercializing the 'product,' regularizing its availability, and attracting large audiences to it" (29). After Alcott achieves financial success with the publication of *Little Women*, she begins to invest in various stocks and fully realizes participation in the capitalist system (*Journals* 172).

With Leona Rostenberg's twentieth-century discovery of Alcott's anonymous and pseudonymous thrillers in nineteenth-century periodicals, Alcott scholarship was reborn and her work has been critiqued extensively. In light of this discovery, scholars have written about Alcott's short stories and reexamined her

[1]In "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" published as part of the conference proceedings *The Gender of Power* ed. Monique Lejnaar et al., Leiden: The University of Leiden, 1987.

novels, dissecting and analyzing the characters within these works from various perspectives, particularly feminist criticism. The specific idea of competitive engagement as a catalyst for change discussed in this dissertation has not previously been explored in Alcott scholarship. Alcott played an important role, both in her personal life and as an author, in the gradual process of change in women's lives during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

In *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals,* Ednah Dow Cheney presented Alcott's biography in conjunction with letters and journal entries. Cheney recognized as early as 1889 that it is "impossible to understand Miss Alcott's works fully without a knowledge of her own life and experiences" (iv). Cheney, however, "standardized spelling, grammar, and punctuation, removed what she considered potentially awkward references to contemporaries, replaced most proper names with abbreviations or dashes, and generally omitted a great deal of material she felt was unimportant or reflected poorly on her subject" (*Journals* xiii). *Louisa May Alcott,* Madeleine Stern's 1950 biography of Alcott (reprinted in 1996), linked "details of LMA's life and passions with the whole variety of her writing" thus providing a more widespread picture of Alcott as an author and as a woman (Wilkins).

This picture was made even more comprehensive with the publishing of *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* in1987 and *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott* in 1989, both edited by Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy with Madeleine B. Stern as associate editor. In *Louisa May Alcott: A Modern Biography,* Martha

Saxton presented "a woman oppressed and thwarted by her society and especially her parents" (Wilkins 37). Sara Elbert "emphasizes reform rather than oppression" in *A Hunger for Home* (Wilkins 37). In the Introduction to *From Jo March's Attic: Stories of Intrigue and Suspense,* editor Madeleine Stern says Alcott's characters in her sensation stories "delved in evil and traded in darkness" (xii). In *Alternative Alcott,* Elaine Showalter calls Alcott "a passionate spinner of feminist plots and counterplots" and "a sharp-tongued master of a racy and unladylike vernacular" whose domestic romances contain "suppressed radical elements" (x). Judith Fetterley proposes that Alcott was engaged in an inner "civil war" ("*Little"* 370) with her sensational and domestic selves, while Martha Saxton sees her as "depressed and sullen" (6). Sarah Elbert articulates that Alcott "rattled the bars of woman's gilded cage, inspiring her female readers to claim a freer sexuality, to work and earn the means of independence" and that this caged woman possessed a "dark demonic potential" (xiv). All of these and more are true and come to life in Alcott's writings. No longer would Louisa May Alcott be known solely as the "children's friend."[2] The breadth of her writing abilities had come to light.

Alcott would shut herself in her attic and enter into what she termed a "vortex" to allow her creativity to flow.[3] Within her "room of her own" she was free of domestic chores and the financial worries of her family.[4] She could indulge

[2] *Louisa May Alcott, The Children's Friend* by Ednah Dow Cheney was published in 1888.
[3] Alcott's description of Jo March's writing condition (*Little Women* 265).
[4] Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* advocates for the physical and metaphorical space that is necessary for creativity.

her "gorgeous fancies" that would compete for space in the periodicals of the day.[5] As Nina Baym explains, "[P]rint's invisibility, which allowed ideas to circulate independently of the bodies that created them, freed women from their sexualized identities and thus gave them a better chance to achieve parity with men" (336).

This study differs from prior Alcott scholarship in that it focuses on the examination of the author and her characters' behaviors from the viewpoint of women and competitive engagement within a capitalist economy. Alcott herself learned to compete in many forms during her own life and instilled these abilities in her characters that she sometimes wrote about anonymously. She also shows the darker side of what can happen when competitive urges in females are not tempered with virtue. Her characters were recognizable to contemporary women, and Alcott placed her characters within settings that actually created circumstances for the author to present feminist ideas of competition, self-hood, and independence to the growing reading public via her sensation stories, which appeared in many nineteenth-century periodicals, and through her novels.

In the Introduction to *Moods,* Sarah Elbert comments that in the sensation stories Alcott "boldly began her reclamation of woman's passion: for both good and evil" (xxiii). Alcott, counter to the norm of sentimental women's writing, showed that women needed to assert themselves, for better or for worse, in order to compete within, find their place within, and thus become effective participants in a man's world. Nineteenth century propriety dictated that men could engage in many types

[5] Alcott's description of her sensation fiction.

of competition and not be branded immoral, but women would have to temper their competitive urges carefully and make their way slowly to avoid condemnation. Alcott's characters both openly and subversively defy this norm in their attempts for self-assertion, reflecting the frustrations she encountered during her own journey toward the independent adulthood she desired but had to fight for because she was a woman. Some of her characters compete more openly for attention or love, for status or security, or for a chance to develop their talents or excel at what they do well. Some attempt to compete but are unsuccessful and ultimately surrender and conform to assigned roles, and still others fail to engage in competitive behavior at all. Alcott's subtle strategy contributed to making women's need for fulfillment through self-assertion more fully understood and so, perhaps, more readily considered and accepted in what was a somewhat reserved society. In so doing, Alcott serves as an important link in the early feminist movement within the popular sentimental literary style of her time.

The body of Alcott works is large and diverse and cannot completely be accommodated here, so for this study, I have chosen representative works from Alcott's fiction that depict female characters who do engage in various types of competitive behavior and some who do not. Those who do engage, do so for various reasons. They compete with each other to help establish a sense of self-worth. To readers in the twenty-first century, some characters fulfill what may seem to be the slightly petty stereotype of competing with each other for the attentions of men so that they might make the best match for themselves to ensure their social

and economic futures or what Sarah Elbert terms "pride of place" (*Moods* xxiii). With few lucrative careers open to women within nineteenth-century capitalism, a good match was hardly trivial. Female characters compete with men to gain employment so that they are able to make a living and have financial security. Perhaps most important, they compete within themselves. They strive for the equal opportunity to become their best selves within a society that prescribes what that best self should be according to dictated criteria. Transcending this formulaic approach to womanhood requires a grappling with the set ideas of what constitutes a woman's sphere in nineteenth-century America and the struggle that women endured to attempt to change those narrow philosophies. I will analyze Alcott herself as a woman writer in the nineteenth century as well as the qualities of the characters she creates in order to show how the ability to engage in competition helps shape women's sense of self and enables them to more fully achieve self-actualization despite the patriarchal capitalist norm.

In the nineteenth century, the world of publishing was open to women contributors. Publishers and editors competed for these women writers such as Alcott who bolstered their circulation numbers and increased their profits. Sometimes women signed their names to their work; other times they remained anonymous or used a pen name. Alcott's fiction appeared in many periodicals under various names including *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner, Frank Leslie's Lady's Magazine,* Elliot, Thomes, and Talbot's *The Flag of Our Union* and *American Union,* and William Worland Clapp, Jr.'s

Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette.* Names she used included Flora Fairfield and A.M. Barnard. Many of her stories were first serialized in periodicals then later published in book form. Publishers for her novels included Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers, James Redpath, and Aaron Loring.

In *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,* Frances B. Cogan discusses the inherent dangers in the "True Womanhood" ideal prevalent in nineteenth-century America and portrayed in Alcott's fiction. The Victorian ideal of "True Womanhood," that is to be "the angel in the house," is found in Alcott's domestic and juvenile literature such as *Little Women.* A woman was to remain dependent under the protection of a husband or male family member and be subservient to her family's needs. It was her charge to give up any sense of self in order to defer to the needs of her husband and children. The rearing of children in a proper home atmosphere was her responsibility regardless of any oppressive or even abusive conditions. She could not strive to be recognized as an independent individual. In fact, engaging in competitive behavior was sometimes considered a negative quality and was often treated as a disrupting force to domestic harmony (18).

To be independent, a woman had to have the means to earn an honorable, sustainable income; to do so she had to assert herself confidently in order to be able to compete within the capitalist world of men. Joyce Warren notes that it was difficult for people at this time to separate the ideas of women's economic independence from ideas of sexual promiscuity ("Fracturing Gender" 150). Women

joining the competitive fray and taking charge of themselves was contrary to the patriarchal norm which was only beginning to be countered in Alcott's time. Rather than equate an independent woman with sexual promiscuity, Frances Cogan posits that the more practical approach of taking control of one's own life and attaining a sense of self-hood through economic self-support (by means other than prostitution, of course) was indicative of "Real Womanhood." Both the "True Woman," the self-sacrificing angel and capitalist consumer, and the "Real Woman," the determined survivor and member of the labor force (12-14), can be found in Alcott's fiction, including the stories and novels considered here. But these characters sometimes engage in competitive behavior with maleficent intentions and negative consequences that are not indicative of essential "womanhood" at all.

Alcott is acutely aware of the delicate balance of women's place in their relegated sphere in the nineteenth century. Sarah Elbert states that, like Margaret Fuller, Alcott believed that women should not have to choose between private and public lives; women should "have significant public roles in a democratic society, and they could also share with men or other women in creating warm egalitarian homes," and that "Alcott's great gift lay in reaching ordinary women with the broad-ranging program of nineteenth-century feminists" (*Hunger* xiii). Their struggle to pursue development in various forms enables her to create female characters who strive to compete in a world that has changed enough to allow greater and varied participation by women. Fuller also believed that every aspect of an individual needed to be developed for the individual to grow as a whole (Bartlett

94). Alcott recognized that growth required a development process. In 1850 she wrote in her journal: "Seventeen years have I lived, and yet so little do I know, and so much remains to be done before I begin to be what I desire, − a truly good and useful woman" (*Journals* 61). Nineteenth-century society, however, created a conflict when it insisted on maintaining rigid control over women's development and over the scope of their participation in activities and employment under the protective umbrella of the physical limitations of gender. This conflict often left women, like Christie Devon in *Work,* feeling "discontented, proud, and ambitious" (10).

Ednah Dow Cheney, Alcott's early biographer, observed that Alcott used the occurrences in her own life for inspiration for her characters and story plots, most obviously in *Little Women*. She writes, "Of no author can it be more truly said than of Louisa Alcott that her works are a revelation of herself.…Her capital was her own life experiences and those of others directly about her" (iv). So it is important to have an understanding of the various influences that were a part of Alcott's life and frequently appear in her writings in order to understand Alcott's motivations for creating her characters as she did. In the Introduction to *Little Women,* Elaine Showalter states that these influences include Alcott's family, people she knew well including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, editors who published her work – Frank Leslie and Thomas Niles – and many other authors, speakers, actors, and playwrights (xi). They include the places she traveled and people she met, the performances she attended, books and periodicals that she

read, and fads such as occultism. Alcott was also influenced by what she observed, such as relationships between men and women, including her parents, by ideas gleaned from books that she read that women can have freedom, economic independence, and power and the different types of power they may wield, successfully or unsuccessfully (xii). They also include her own employment experiences, particularly those during the Civil War when she tended the wounded soldiers in the Union Hotel Hospital in Washington, D.C.[6]

In order to engage in any type of competition, one must acquire knowledge or skill. In "Women and Philosophy," feminist theorist Michèle Le Doeuff deconstructs the binary opposition between women and men in conjunction with women's access to philosophy. She discusses the position women were placed in because they were not taught philosophy, a male domain; or, if they approached it, grasped it, and excelled in understanding and discussing its ideas, they were perceived as "monstrosities" rather than women and would surely lose any femininity they had previously possessed. Le Doeuff notes that women who approached philosophy usually did so because "they all experienced great passions, and their relationship with philosophy existed only through their love for a man, a particular philosopher" (185). The female desires to please the male, the source of knowledge, and be a "good pupil." La Doeuff observes that "it is only through the mediation of a man that women could gain access to theoretical discourse" (185). Alcott had several such men in her life. Despite the fact that Alcott had little formal

[6] These experiences are chronicled in Alcott's *Hospital Sketches.*

schooling, she was taught at home by her father, a philosopher, whom she referred to as "the modern Plato" (Showalter, Introduction *Little Women* ix*)*. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was a staple in the Alcott household. Her neighbor, idol, and another philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson often advised her about what to read, particularly Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and *Faust*. Louisa May Alcott also spent a great deal of time with another philosopher-idol, Henry David Thoreau, and learned much from him regarding his philosophies of nature in and around Walden Pond (xii). But Le Doeuff cautions that a female exposed only to a particular type of philosophy is limited and may find herself in a stereotypical role. Alcott published much of her sensation fiction anonymously to keep it from her idols' scrutiny, and ceased writing thrillers altogether after the economic success of her domestic fiction, particularly *Little Women.* Though their philosophy broadened Louisa's capabilities, it also served as an artistic constraint.

Fortunately, she was an autodidact. She was a voracious reader and could readily satisfy her appetite in her father's and in Emerson's libraries. In a journal entry in 1845, Alcott writes: "Did my lessons, and in the P.M. mother read 'Kenilworth' to us while we sewed" (*Journals* 54). In another journal entry that year, Alcott pens: "Read the 'Heart of Mid-Lothian,' and had a very happy day" (55). Apparently, Sir Walter Scott was a favorite in the Alcott household. In an 1852 journal entry Alcott writes about her other favorites:

> List of books I like: −
>
> Carlyle's French Revolution and Miscellanies.

Hero and Hero-Worship.

Goethe's poems, plays, and novels.

Plutarch's Lives.

Madame Guion.

Paradise Lost and Comus.

Schiller's Plays.

Madame de Staël.

Bettine.

Louis XIV.

Jane Eyre.

Hypatia.

Philothea.

Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Emerson's Poems.[7] (67-68)

This is an impressive list for a twenty year old and shows the importance that was placed on reading quality literary works in the Alcott household.

In her Introduction to *Little Women,* Elaine Showalter writes that Alcott

[7] Many of the themes in these and other works that Alcott read later appear in her own stories and novels. For example, Goethe's *Faust* influences the bargaining in Alcott's *A Long, Fatal Love Chase* and *A Modern Mephistopheles,* and the mismatched lovers in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* influence *The Long, Fatal Love Chase* and the revised version of *Moods.* Alcott admired Emerson as a hero, just as Bettina admired Goethe (Doyle, "Goethe" 123); Adam Warwick in *Moods* is a more honorable Rochester than Brontë's, and in *Work,* Alcott's Christy Devon denounces "the Jane-Rochester match as an 'unequal bargain' (Elbert, Introduction xxviii-xxix). Like Rochester, Alcott's Rosamond in *A Long Fatal Love Chase* demands her "freedom and independence and a place in the world for herself" (Doyle, *Louisa* xv-xvi). Alcott was also influenced by the lives and philosophies of the women on her reading list as well as their works including the intellectual Hypatia, the self-sacrificing and generous Philothea, the spiritual Madame Guion and the realist Madame de Staël.

> read widely in American, English, and European women's literature: Madame de Staël, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, Fanny Burney, George Sand, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Yonge, Fredrika Bremer, Lydia Marie Child, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, Gail Hamilton, Margaret Fuller, and Harriet Prescott Spofford. (xi)

Showalter adds that Alcott's "main literary resource was her father's library, where she devoured Plutarch, Dante, Shakespeare, Carlyle, Dickens, Byron, Scott, and Goldsmith" (xi). Her journal entry of August 4, 1843, reads, "When I came home, I played till suppertime, after which I read a little in Oliver Twist, and when I had thought a little I went to bed" (*Journals* 43). An entry for Sunday, September 24, 1843 notes, "In the eve I read 'Vicar of Wakefield'" (45). An October 12 entry relays, "I read in Plutarch" (46). An entry for Thursday, October 29, her eleventh birthday, reports, "Mother read 'Rosamond' when we sewed" (47). An entry in January 1845 conveys, "I read 'Philothea,' by Mrs. Child" (55). A June 1861 entry reads, "'Charles Auchester' is charming, − a sort of fairy tale for grown people. Dear old 'Evelina,' as a change, was pleasant. Emerson recommended Hodson's India, and I got it, and liked it, also read St. Thomas More's Life. I read Fielding's 'Amelia,' and thought it coarse and queer" (105). In her March 1859 journal entry Alcott writes, "Life is my college. May I graduate well, and earn some honors!" (94). Alcott obviously enjoyed reading.

Because of the multitude and variety of her readings, references to characters from all types of literature appear throughout her writings. Elizabeth Keyser notes Alcott's Shakespearean influences: in *Work*, Christie Devon gives "a recitation … of Portia's 'pretty speech,'" and in *Moods*, Sylvia Yule presents a "chilling portrayal of Lady Macbeth" (xvii). In one of Alcott's short stories considered here, "Thrice Tempted," Alcott overtly alludes to sleepwalking Lady Macbeth in Ruth's confession of guilt. Alcott especially enjoyed Goethe; not surprisingly, the echoes of Romanticism appear in her writing as she describes her creative process in a letter to an inquisitive teacher, Viola Price Franklin, in 1885. She comments: "Never study. Have no special method of writing except to use the simplest language, take everyday life and make it interesting and try to have my characters alive. I take many heroes and heroines from real life – much truer than anyone can imagine" (*Letters* 295-96). Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, Alcott uses her imagination to write about her own experiences.

The Transcendentalist philosophies that Alcott was exposed to added to the element of finding one's true self. Her characters must rise above even themselves sometimes to discover their best selves, and they do not always succeed. Sometimes an overwhelming sense of an inability to compete sets in, a feeling Alcott personally wrestled with. Elaine Showalter notes that "Alcott habitually underestimated and denigrated her own work. She never entirely got over her awe for the masculine literary community of American Transcendentalist philosophy which her father represented, nor forgave herself for failing to measure up to his

moral and intellectual standards" (xlii). Her stories made money, but she could not publicly claim authorship of them for fear of embarrassment. She could participate in the capitalist franchise, but had to do so anonymously. The periodicals that some of her stories appeared in were not deemed suitable reading for literary circles even though people and elements from her surroundings and experiences that she wrote about in her journals are woven into her fiction, both the sensational short stories and the novels, in various forms, sometimes covertly and sometimes in plain sight.

While it may strike readers of works by the "children's friend" as a bit odd at first, a strong leaning toward socialist philosophy and the firm grip of early feminism appear throughout Alcott's writings. When one considers her early influences, primarily her father and mother, and the books she had access to in her father's library and in Emerson's which she visited and borrowed from regularly, it becomes easier to understand how theoretical approaches can be used to gain a deeper insight into the diverse and forward-thinking woman that Louisa May Alcott was. Viewing nineteenth-century female characters through the lens of a feminist theory of competition provides an opportunity to analyze social conditions and cultural ideologies that can contribute to a deeper understanding of Alcott's texts. It shows the particular challenges that women faced when they attempted to engage in any behavior that resisted the patriarchal norm or, in terms of economics in Alcott's case, reversed it since Alcott had to learn how to become the breadwinner for her family.

The fear of being outcast from one's everyday realm or being unwittingly taken advantage of simply because one strives for identity or self-fulfillment was a strong deterrent for many women. Joyce W. Warren explains that "Alcott knew that the portrayal of woman as power seeker was not socially acceptable – particularly in a married woman, but even in an unmarried woman" ("Fracturing Gender" 157). This may be partly why Alcott published her thrillers anonymously or under pseudonyms even though her editors tried to persuade her to do otherwise (157). She could not reveal her authorship since writing her characters as she did under her own name would have put her at risk of being labeled not only unfeminine or unwomanly, but also immoral (150). Feminist theory provides a fuller comprehension of the very real, gender driven factors that underlie the fictional plots and settings created by Alcott. It will also aid in the examination of social and economic structures and ideologies in place in nineteenth-century America and in these characters' lives that encouraged or discouraged women's individual development, thus their participation in competitive activities in many forms. Warren states, "The construction of women as financially dependent ensured the maintenance of patriarchal capitalism, and the association of female independence with immorality was an insidious way of preventing women from attempting to change the status quo" (152). It would take time for women to establish convincingly that they could be independent wage earners in a developing feminist capitalism and still keep their morals intact.

Alcott's characters, including Sylvia Yule and Christie Devon, convey the frustration that women in the nineteenth century endured as they acquired educations and learned skills but had few outlets in which their talents or skills could allow them to compete for sustainable employment. Fortunately for Alcott, she made her living as a writer, one of the acceptable occupations for women, and successfully competed in writing stories for various periodicals. But she published anonymously rather than risk the admiration and the financial support of her reading public. Elaine Showalter notes that Alcott "censored and denied her own imagination in order to conform to external and internalized patriarchal expectations of seriousness, duty, and high-mindedness" (xlii). She competed successfully within the world of men, but sometimes had to do so on their patriarchal terms.

Alcott's independent nature emerged early in her life. She was born on November 29, 1832, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, to Amos Bronson Alcott and Abigail May Alcott who were her first and most effective influences. Her father was a leader in the Concord Transcendentalist movement along with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Despite the fact that Bronson Alcott never could earn enough money to properly support his wife and four daughters, which caused them immeasurable amounts of stress, embarrassment, and hardship, Bronson was held in high regard by those in his immediate circle. In 1938, in the Introduction to Bronson Alcott's *Journals*, Odell Shepard writes that had it not been for Emerson's esteem for Bronson Alcott, "the reputation of Alcott would have

entirely succumbed, long since, to an environment either hostile or indifferent" and that his contemporaries indulged him "because he happened to beget a daughter who wrote good stories for children" (xvi). Shepard asserts, however, that those who knew Bronson best had a very different opinion from that of the general public:

> Emerson, his closest friend during more than four decades, called him "the most extraordinary man and the highest genius of the time." Henry Thoreau said that Alcott was "the sanest man" he had ever known. Hawthorne wrote of him: "There was no man…whose mere presence, the language of whose look and manner, wrought such an impression." (xvi-ii)

Shepard paints a portrait of Bronson Alcott that includes many aspects of his life. When viewed separately, they are "unimpressive and dull"; however, when considered together, they create an image of a multifaceted man of substance who was admired by his peers. He spent much time teaching his daughters when they were young and used the Socratic Method to draw them and all of his pupils into conversation, a learning tool for what Shepherd calls "true teaching" that would cause an "ascent to a common spiritual level" (xxv). Bronson's spiritual influence on Louisa and lack of competitiveness that manifests itself in the character of Christie Devon will be discussed in Chapter Four's analysis of Alcott's novel *Work.*

From her mother, Louisa learned to think independently. Abigail May, her maiden name, was from a wealthy family in Boston, and it was her cash inheritance that sustained her family through many hardships. Accepting Bronson for the free

thinker that he was, she rarely showed any opposition to his plans. When Emerson offered to pay for Bronson to travel to England, Mrs. Alcott consented and found that she managed quite well while he was gone. Mrs. Alcott was the foundation that the young family had to depend upon since Bronson was incapable of providing for them even when he was not traveling. Louisa would later assume this role as her writing career progressed.

During his trip to England, Bronson met Charles Lane, a strict reformer, and returned to Concord with him to undertake a grand experiment in communal living at "Fruitlands" which Louisa never forgot and later satirized in *Transcendental Wild Oats* (1873). Few of Abigail May Alcott's writings have survived, but on one particularly trying occasion, Mrs. Alcott writes in Bronson's journal regarding the family situation during the failed "Fruitlands" experiment: "Circumstances most cruelly drive me from the enjoyment of my domestic life… .I am almost suffocated in this atmosphere of restriction and form….And so I wait, or rather plod along, rather doggishly" (148-49). Mrs. Alcott's mental health is being tested, and no one seems to notice that she appears emotionally incapacitated at times:

> They all seem most stupidly obtuse on the causes of this occasional prostration of my judgment and faculties. I hope the solution of the problem will not be revealed to them too late for my recovery or their atonement of this invasion of my rights as a woman and a mother. Give me one day of practical philosophy. It is worth a century of speculation and discussion. (149)

In her December 1860 journal entry, Louisa writes, "All the philosophy in our house is not in the study; a good deal is in the kitchen, where a fine old lady thinks high thoughts and does kind deeds while she cooks and scrubs" (101). But Mrs. Alcott was not inclined to keep her philosophy to herself. Madeleine Bedell describes Louisa's portrayal of her mother as "Marmee" in *Little Women* as "one of the few female authoritarian figures in American literature" (326). Louisa had witnessed her mother's anger at her authority being usurped by Lane, especially with regard to her children. Mrs. Alcott also had an extremely strong opinion on the value and rights that all women should possess, which was strongly impressed upon the young Louisa. In another entry in Bronson's journal Abigail clearly articulates the frustration of women:

> Wherever I turn I see the yoke on woman in some form or other. On some it sits easy, for they are but beasts of burden. On others, pride hushes them to silence; no complaint is made, for they scorn pity or sympathy. On some it galls and chafes; they feel assured by every instinct of their nature that they were designed for a higher, nobler calling than to "drag life's lengthening chain along."
>
> A woman may perform the most disinterested duties. She may "die daily" in the cause of truth and righteousness. She lives neglected, dies forgotten. But a man who never performed in his whole life one self-denying act, but who has accidental gifts of genius, is celebrated by his

contemporaries, while his name and his works live on from age to age. He is crowned with laurel, while scarce a stone may tell where she lies. (154-55)

It is interesting to note that Alcott's mother, Abigail May Alcott, helped indigent women find work through an employment service, or "intelligence office," in 1848 when the nearly destitute Alcott family lived in Boston (Matteson 197-98). Mrs. Alcott was able to earn a small amount of money to help the family in their dire circumstances, but helping and sharing what little they had with others who had even less was always an overwhelming theme in the Alcott household. Early in her life, Louisa becomes determined to break this chain of poverty and dependence by taking it upon herself to provide for her family. She finds a way to compete in the world of publishing. She reports in her journal that she sold her story "Love and Self-Love" to the *Atlantic Monthly* and "[g]ot a carpet with my $50, and wild Louisa's head kept the feet of the family warm" (98). Even though she saw that her sister Anna was very happy in her marriage, Alcott claimed that she would "rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe" (99). In an 1852 journal entry, Louisa May Alcott briefly writes about the family's difficulties and includes a list of her recent income:

Still at High St.

Father idle, mother at work in the office, Nan & I governessing, Lizzie in the kitchen, Ab doing nothing but grow.

Hard times for all.

School 75

Rival Prima Donnas 10

Sewing 20 (*Journals* 68)

Not only was Alcott "governessing," she was also writing a story for publication and doing sewing for money, two things she did well that reinforced her drive to contribute to the family income. Louisa would increasingly assume this role as her writing career became more and more successful and her father traveled with Emerson and lectured. This independent, self-reliant, competitive attitude sustained her throughout her life and the income from her writing helped to meet the needs of everyone in her circle.

That Alcott was troubled by the way women were often expected to live within nineteenth-century American society is evident throughout her writings. She grappled with the ongoing and often extreme poverty of her own family and the frustration her mother, and later she and her sisters, were faced with when they attempted to become the breadwinners that Bronson Alcott was not. In nineteenth-century America, the ideals at the early stages of the feminist movement rang true for Louisa May Alcott.[8] Her own trials of making little money for hours of sewing and her demeaning experience of working as a servant made her see that change for

[8] There was as yet no name for a woman's view of the world other than "the woman question" and "women's rights," usually used in conjunction with the suffrage movement and property rights, respectively. These early years are now referred to as the first wave of feminism. The second wave blossomed with the broad feminist theories of the mid-twentieth century in France, Britain, and North America, and continued with the development of feminist literary criticism in the 1970s and 1980s ("Feminist Criticism" 171). The third wave is the globalization of women's experience that permits a voice for women within cultures that formerly required them to be silent, such as those in Asian, Middle Eastern, or Third World countries. Such a broad range of women's experience raises many questions about the feasibility of attempting to address all women's issues together under one definition of feminism and challenges the concept of "shared" women's experience in the world of 2011 (175-76).

women was imperative. Chapter Five includes a discussion about how Alcott lent her efforts and her name to the progressive causes of the times that she thought would enable women to become independent, to not have to rely on marriage for security if they did not desire to marry, and to be able to earn a living and thus be in control of their own lives and their own selves. The characters Alcott created in her fiction showed her understanding of women's issues and her desire that the world be open to the possibility of change. Her own "woman's experience" is the basis for many of the characters and plots in her fiction that will be discussed in Chapters Three and Four.

She knew that the career path of "author of thrillers for the weeklies" was best kept secret by the use of pen names so as to preserve her status as a tasteful author as well as her family's good name. She never wanted Emerson, whom she referred to as "the god of my idolatry" (*Journals* 99), to find out that the stories were hers lest she lose the esteem he had for her. She wrote her sensation fiction to earn money. It sold well and provided a very necessary income for her family. Editors of the weeklies who competed for Alcott's sensation stories and the female authors she competed with for print space will be discussed in Chapter Two. The sensation fiction, which Ednah Dow Cheney claims that Alcott "wisely renounced as trash," (395) also provided an outlet for her imagination of what women could be and do when they had choices. The motivations for their actions, as well as the actions themselves, were often shocking and will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three, as well as feminist critics' responses to the stories in terms of Alcott's covert

agendas. For example, in her biography of Alcott, Martha Saxton contends that Alcott "suffered from a sullen, vaporous rage that smoked from a pit of disappointment, long-cherished grievances, sorrow, and loneliness" (6) and these manifested themselves in her stories.

Chapter Three will also include an analysis of the competitiveness of seven female characters within five of Alcott's anonymous and pseudonymous thrillers: Jean Muir in "Behind a Mask, *or* A Woman's Power," Pauline Valary in "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," Beatrice and Theresa in "The Rival Prima Donnas," Ruth and Laura in "Thrice Tempted," Rose St. Just in "Perilous Play," Thyra and Nadine in "Which Wins?" and Cecelia Stanhope in "Betrayed by a Buckle." Alcott clearly illustrates what can happen when power is misused (Jean Muir), competitive urges flow unbridled (Pauline; Beatrice and Theresa; Thyra and Nadine; Cecilia Stanhope), jealousy results in being overprotective of what one holds dear (Ruth), and lack of confidence makes one resort to measures that they normally would not (Rose). Alcott draws upon her own life experiences and the novels, stories, and plays that she read for elements of these characters and their actions.

Chapter Four addresses competitive aspects of Alcott's characters in several of her novels: Sylvia Yule in *Moods,* Christie Devon in *Work,* the females of the March family in *Little Women,* and Rose Campbell and Phebe Moore in *Eight Cousins* and *Rose in Bloom.* Alcott gives her female characters qualities of competitiveness that allow them to explore their deeply held moral beliefs, evident in Sylvia Yule, and to gain power and to be in control, instilling hopefulness in

readers, as does Christie Devon. Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March compete with the perfect model of the self that their father has tried to instill in them as Marmee unceasingly reminds them to be kind, generous, and selfless. Drawing inspiration for these characters from her own life, Alcott recalls a visit by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller to the Alcott home. After a discussion with Bronson about the philosophies of education that he has used to teach his own children, Fuller asks to see the "model children":

> She did in a few moments, for as the guests stood on the door-steps a wild uproar approached, and round the corner of the house came a wheelbarrow holding baby May arrayed as a queen; I was the horse, bitted and bridled, and driven by my elder sister Anna; while Lizzie played dog, and barked as loud as her gentle voice permitted.
>
> All were shouting and wild with fun, which, however, came to a sudden end as we espied the stately group before us; for my foot tripped, and down we all went in a laughing heap; while my mother put a climax to the joke by saying, with a dramatic wave of the hand, ---
>
> "Here are the model children, Miss Fuller." (Cheney 51)

Alcott infuses many of the life lessons instilled in her by her parents directly into her characters in *Little Women.* In *Eight Cousins* and its sequel *Rose in Bloom,* Rose Campbell and Phebe Moore must engage in their own reserved types of competitive behavior in order to reach their goals. Through all of the characters in

her fiction, Alcott shows both the positive and negative effects that engaging in competitive activities can have for women and for the people around them.

Chapter Five concludes this project with a view of women's advancement regarding competition and the great strides that women were finally able to take because of the difficult groundwork that Alcott and others had tirelessly laid. Both Alcott's fiction and her own life promote this much needed advancement of the women's cause. An assessment of the effects of women's continuing engagement in competition raises several questions: How did competitive endeavors by women develop after Alcott's time? What are some of the benefits derived by women from these endeavors? What are some of the negative outcomes of females engaging in competitive activities? One question is central to the purpose of this study: has presenting characters as competitive women fulfilled Alcott's original hope that women might find identity and self-fulfillment from within themselves rather than have them assigned as roles to simply play-act or as spheres to mechanically occupy? Even though Alcott's characters are often shrouded in sentimental emotions or sensational circumstances, their competitive drives serve an important precursory role in nineteenth-century feminist literature.

CHAPTER TWO

COMPETITION IN THE WORLD OF PUBLISHING

The capitalist literary world of the nineteenth century abounded with publishers, editors, and writers and suffered no shortage of reading material in the forms of books, newspapers, and magazines. Alcott published in all of these mediums from 1851 until her death in 1888, sometimes beginning as a serialized work, then eventually being set or collected in book form. After her death, a few remaining original works were published for the first time and prior works were reprinted, some of which are still in print today.

In the nineteenth century, Alcott competed with other writers for publishers for her books, for the amount of column space and the placement she would receive in periodicals and newspapers, and for the salary and royalties she would receive. This chapter will discuss these competitive issues that Alcott had to face during her professional writing life. It will focus on Alcott's ability to attract publishers for her works and her relationships with her publishers, particularly the publishers of the works discussed in Chapters Three and Four. A number of authors she competed with whose works appeared alongside hers in periodicals, and several authors whose books were being published at about the same time as Alcott's are also presented. Some of the information presented here was gathered by accessing the periodicals via microfilm, and some is from observations from original print newspapers and magazines. While microfilm and electronic access to historical

documents and books is convenient, they cannot compare with holding the originals in one's hands, flaking pages and musty odors notwithstanding.

Even though women, including Alcott, exerted competitive attitudes in the nineteenth century, it is important to understand that part of their difficulty in being competitive in the fullest sense of the word was that their efforts met with a strong cultural resistance. In *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century*, Susan Coultrap-McQuin observes that although nineteenth-century publishers of periodicals and books welcomed submissions by female writers, women had to deal with a culture "that both created the possibility of *woman writer* and devalued her efforts" (3). Many women had successful writing careers, were widely read, and made substantial amounts of money, yet they and their works were still regarded as being inferior to those written by men.

Patriarchal attitudes strongly prevailed; yet, as much as they are scorned by feminists today, these attitudes were often extremely beneficial for nineteenth century women writers and their literary careers. Coultrap-McQuin notes that their relationships with their "Gentlemen Publishers," who acted in traditional male roles as protectors, advisors, and even friends, complemented the Victorian ideal of True Womanhood which made it easier, more comfortable, and more socially acceptable for women to develop careers as writers as a means to support themselves (28). Although women made money for themselves and for their publishers, their work was not elevated to the same levels as writing by men. The fact that Alcott never acknowledged publicly the thrilling stories that she wrote for money indicates that

she was acutely aware of the need for anonymity regarding authorship of her thrillers, particularly after the success of *Little Women* and the notoriety it brought her as a writer of children's literature. It also indicates that Alcott espoused, to a degree, the ideals of True Womanhood, but was more than willing to stray from them in her imaginative stories. At seventeen she wrote in her journal, "I fancy 'lurid' things, if true and strong also" (Cheney 63). To be associated with stories like these filled with scheming plots and murders, even if they did teach a moral lesson, would be incongruent with the image projected by the publishers for the author of *Little Women,* but suited Alcott's independent, creative, and adventurous mind quite nicely.

Although she was enormously successful in competing to have her thrillers published, Alcott had to hide this success from the public and, in essence, deny herself the satisfaction and enjoyment of her ability to compete well within a variety of publishing venues. If not for the tenacious sleuthing of two Alcott devotees, readers around the world would never have known about this aspect of Alcott's writing: that the stories she appeared to have created for Jo March's authorial career in *Little Women* had actually been written by Alcott and had been published in various periodicals. At the suggestion of Carroll Atwood Wilson, an avid collector of Alcott first editions, letters, and other Alcott memorabilia, friends Leona Rostenberg and Madeleine Stern began to search for some sort of evidence that would provide an answer to the somewhat vague clues in Alcott's journals and letters and in some of her writings including *Little Women,* about stories that were

written and published and had earned money for the struggling Alcott family, and for the fictional March family. Carroll and others suspected that Alcott had used an alias for her stories, but no evidence was known to exist that divulged what that alias was.

In the Introduction to the new edition of *Louisa May Alcott: A Biography*, Stern recalls that as she and Rostenberg poured over journals and letters in Harvard's Houghton Library, Rostenberg suddenly let out a "war whoop." A letter from James R. Elliott to Alcott divulged

> a secret that had been kept for more than three-quarters of a century. "We would like more stories from you," he wrote, "like 'Behind a Mask' or 'V.V.' or 'A Marble Woman.' And if you prefer, you may use the pseudonym of A.M. Barnard or any other man's name if you will. And, if we like them, we will publish them." (xvii-xix)

Rostenberg had found proof that Alcott had published her stories using the name A.M. Barnard, and divulged it to the world in an article entitled "Some Anonymous and Pseudonymous Thrillers of Louisa M. Alcott." The article was first published in 1943 in the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America.*[9] Madeleine Stern wrote a biography about Louisa May Alcott in 1950 which is still considered the standard. She spent time doing research for her other projects while working with Rostenberg as partners in a rare-book business. Stern, with the aid of "Literary

[9] 37 (2nd Quarter 1943), 131-40.

Detective"[10] Victor A. Berch, later unearthed more stories from nineteenth-century periodicals and published them in various collections (xx-xxi). As Leona Rostenberg discovered, Louisa May Alcott's relationships with her publishers and editors are revealed in her letters and journals where she discusses possible delivery dates for stories, the length of book chapters, and the fact that she was encouraged by her publisher to retain ownership of the copyright to *Little Women,* a business move that made her fortune.

In a 1977 article "Louisa M. Alcott in Periodicals," Madeleine Stern estimates that Alcott's literary output during her lifetime consisted of "about 210 poems and sketches, stories and serials … published in some forty different periodicals" (369). Although many of Alcott's anonymous and pseudonymous stories have been found, there may still be some that have yet to be discovered. Using hints from her journals and letters, literary prospectors continue to recover Alcott's long-lost tales within the fragile pages of nineteenth-century periodicals. The digitalization of many of these publications and the published collections of Alcott's journals and letters by Stern and two other Alcott scholars, Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, no doubt aid in the ongoing search. In Shealy's 1987 article "The Author-Publisher Relationships of Louisa May Alcott," Shealy places Alcott's published literary output at "more than 300 works in various periodicals and newspapers as well as more than two dozen books" (73). Identification problems can arise, however, when works are republished. In 1999, literary prospector

[10] The dedication page of *From Jo March's Attic* reads, "To Victor A. Berch, Literary Detective."

Stephen Hines renamed "Patty's Place" as "The Quiet Little Woman," ostensibly for the connection it instantly raises to it being a work of Alcott's (Burr 189). This practice, though certainly not a new one, leaves a strong sense of mercenary (rather than literary) enthusiasm in its wake, but at the very least, it does bring stories to the public's attention that might otherwise be lost. The totality of Alcott's works may never be known since copies of some of the newspapers she is believed to have published in have not survived, such as editions of the *American Union* from the 1850s (Christopher). Items sent to individuals occasionally surface; for example, a poem written in Alcott's hand across a photo of herself that she sent to the Sewall[11] family, probably in the early 1870s, reads:

> There's a glare on her nose,
>
> Deep gloom in her eye.
>
> She looks half asleep
>
> Or just about to die.
>
> A mourner she seems
>
> Though she tried to be gay,
>
> But in spite of it all
>
> This is L.M.A.[12]

Certainly not to be taken as an sample of her writing or be compared to her published works, this personal correspondence does, however, provide unique

[11] The Sewalls were neighbors of the Alcotts and Thoreaus in Concord.
[12] This item, "Original Cabinet Photographic Portrait with a Ms. Poem," was listed for sale for $13,500 on the *Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America* website on July 4, 2011.

insight into the personality of Louisa May Alcott. Her journals and letters, written in this same genuine style and voice, allow readers to see the precocious young girl grow into a mature, responsible woman. Though sometimes self-deprecating, Alcott developed into a savvy, confidant writer who understood her numerous audiences and mediums well. She took everyday occurrences and wove them into her tales for adults and children alike, as she established the ability to write for each audience according to what was expected regarding the customary content and voice of that medium.

Alcott's first publication was the poem "Sunlight" in *Petersen's Magazine* in September of 1851 under the name "Flora Fairfield" (Stern, Introduction *Selected Letters* xx). Her first story was "The Rival Painters" which appeared anonymously in the *Olive Branch* in 1852 (xx). She was sixteen years old and was paid $5 (Cheney 68). The publisher, Thomas A. Norris, produced "a family-oriented general-information Boston paper" which was "devoted to Christianity, agriculture, and the arts" (Copley-Woods 245). In 1855, George Briggs of Boston published Alcott's *Flower Fables,* a collection of stories Alcott had written in 1848 for her neighbor Ellen Emerson, the daughter of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Stern Introduction *Selected Letters* xxi).

One of the first major papers Alcott wrote for was the weekly Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette* founded by William Burdick, the uncle of Wealthy Stevens, a woman Alcott was working for as a seamstress. Ironically, the work Alcott disliked most, sewing, turned out to be her entryway to competition in the

publishing world (Stern, "Louisa May Alcott and the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette*" (64). Later edited and published by William Warland Clapp, Jr., the *Gazette* "featured gossip of Boston life, humor, and especially narratives short or long that appealed to its readership" (Stern, "Louisa May Alcott and the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette*" 65). Alcott was paid ten dollars for "The Rival Prima Donnas" which was printed across three columns on November 11, 1854, under the pseudonym of Flora Fairfield (Stern, "Louisa May Alcott in Periodicals" 370-71). Madeleine Stern relates that the *Gazette*, "like many American Periodicals at mid-century, was the reflection if not the embodiment of its proprietor" ("Louisa May Alcott and the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette*" 64). Clapp was considered an authority on American theater, making this periodical an ideal venue for Alcott's theatrical thriller. Stern states that Alcott's "rival prima donnas were modeled after the great sopranos Jenny Lind, and Henriette Sontag, whom she had heard at Boston's Music Hall (*Selected Fiction* xiii). "The Sisters' Trial," considered to be a forerunner of *Little Women* since it is a story of four impoverished sisters, was published by Clapp on January 26, 1856, and earned six dollars (Cheney 83).

In a letter to Clapp dated October 9, 1856, Alcott realizes the popularity, hence increased monetary value, of her stories and asks for a higher rate per story. She lets Clapp know that he must now compete with other publishers for her stories:

> I am anxious to know if the popularity of my contributions to the Gazette will warrent [sic] you to engage with me for a story each month for

the coming six at fifteen or twenty dollars each as the length or excellence may vary.

I have had other offers in advance of this but am not sure of their reliability & prefer the Gazette as it circulates among a class of readers with whom I have other agreeable connexions [sic] than those of a literary character.

Please let me hear from you at your earliest convenience, & shall be glad of the usual compensation for the last two stories. (17)

Alcott is not satisfied with just her rising popularity; she wants the accompanying monetary gains as well. She retains her humility, however, gladly accepting ten dollars each for "Ruth's Secret,"[13] "Mabel's May Day,"[14] and "The Lady and the Woman."[15] Her allotted space in the *Gazette* grew to a consistent "five columns of page 3" (Stern, "Louisa May Alcott and the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette*" 70).

In a letter dated October 27, 1856, Alcott thanks Clapp for a twenty dollar payment and for his critiques of her writing saying, "I find it difficult to make them interesting & yet short enough to suit your paper. But hope to improve in both points" (*Letters* 18). Apparently, Clapp agreed that there was much room for improvement. In a letter to Anna Alcott dated 28-31 December 1856, Alcott writes how she "received a blow in this wise":

[13] Published in the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette* 24 May 1856.
[14] Published in the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette* 4 October 1856.
[15] Published in the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette* 6 December 1856.

> My N Year's Tale was sent back with these remarks from Clapp "My Dear Miss Alcott. I don't think the publication of this story would add to your literary reputation, & tho [sic] I dislike to say so I must tell you that I think it inferior to anything you have written. Pardon this freedom & believe me, Yrs [sic] Truly W.W. Clapp."
>
> I was very much taken aback, not knowing that I had any "literary reputation" to sustain, and not caring much for his opinion for he didnt [sic] like "Lady & Woman" & Parker[16] did, so though rather disturbed at seeing my $10 vanish I "possessed my soul in patience" & thought I'd send the story some where else & let Clapp ask for another before I sent it. I know he will for Ham. says he likes my wares and now he may wait for them. Dont be alarmed, I've three stories ready to be disposed of & Lovering for a mainstay, my wits are getting sharpened, & I can sew like a steam engine while I plan my works of art. (*Letters* 27)

Humility aside, Alcott is gaining confidence in her writing talent and in her general ability to earn enough money to support herself. Her tone is rather sassy when she indicates that since Clapp has severely criticized her writing, she will not offer him any further stories; he will have to ask her for them.

Meanwhile, Alcott intends to approach other publishers whom she is certain will be interested in publishing three stories she already has written. Confident in her ability to compete, she assures Anna that she will continue to have an income

[16] Theodore Parker (1810-1860). Alcott ranked this Unitarian minister along with Emerson and her father as one of her most important teachers (Tomasek 254).

from working for the Loverings[17] and from sewing. Apparently, her idea worked. Later stories published by Clapp earned twenty-five dollars each for Alcott. As her fame grew, so did her paydays. She even found ways to reuse some early stories to make money from them again through different publishers. Alcott slightly reworked the 1857 tale "Agatha's Confession," which Clapp had published for ten dollars under her full name, into "Thrice Tempted" which earned Alcott fifty dollars and was published anonymously by Frank Leslie on July 20, 1867 in his *Chimney Corner,* a New York "gaudy story paper" (Stern, Introduction, *Selected Fiction* xviii). Through her association with Clapp and the *Gazette,* Alcott learned much of the "proper knowledge of contracts, copyrights, and the duties of publisher and author toward one another" that she warned other female authors to cultivate (qtd. in Stern, "Louisa May Alcott and the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette*" 75).

Like Clapp, Frank Leslie and his publishing empire increased Alcott's popularity, albeit anonymously, as well as her income. Leslie published at least seventeen different periodicals,[18] but those that contained Alcott's stories are mainly *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, Frank Leslie's Lady's Magazine,* and *Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner.*

"Pauline's Passion and Punishment" appeared anonymously in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in the January 3 and 10 issues of 1863. It was the

[17] A Boston family for whom Alcott worked as a teacher and a governess (Eiselein 188).
[18] For a comprehensive listing of titles, see *A History of American Magazines 1865-1885* vol.3 by Frank Luther Mott, Index, p. 614 at *books.google.com*

winner of a contest for the best short tale and a one hundred dollar prize. Leslie announces this story as the winner just under the masthead of the October 3 issue:

OUR AMERICAN PRIZE STORY

> In conformity with previous announcement we this week commence the publication, with spirited illustrations, with the best of our series of American prize stories entitled,
>
> PAULINE'S PASSION
>
> AND PUNISHMENT,
>
> which has been selected from upwards of 200 different tales put in competition by American writers. The story will be concluded in our next number, when the title of the second prize tale will be announced. These stories, as well as those which will follow them, are various in character, appealing to different tastes, but all of them of high merit as well as absorbing interest, purely American and excellent in moral. They will form an interesting as well as striking feature in our paper, and the public will do itself a service by securing them from the commencement.

Alcott's story was judged the best from a field of over two hundred manuscripts. It was "a story 'of exceeding power, brilliant description, thrilling incident and unexceptionable moral'" (Stern, *Louisa May Alcott* 125). Alcott's competition for space in these issues[19] includes chapter thirty-four of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's[20]

[19] See *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 3 Jan. 1863 and 10 Jan. 1863.
[20] Braddon is best known for her novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862).

novel, *Aurora Floyd*, and chapter thirty-five of *Verner's Pride* by Mrs. Henry Wood, who, Leslie tells us, has also authored *East Lynne* (1861). There are also anonymous poems, one entitled "Impatience," and another entitled "The Widow's Reply to Her Suitor." "At Saratoga" is a poem about a man falling in love while he dances a waltz, by J.K. Griffith, a Kansas City attorney. "The Battle of Gaines's Hill" by Amanda T. Jones,[21] a poem lamenting the loss of life at the bloody Civil War Battle of Gaines's Mill, is also published in the January 10 issue, next to chapter three of "Pauline's Passion and Punishment." Another serialized novel appears in the November 28, 1863 issue, *Pendarves Grange; or, The Scapegoat*, by William Dalton. Leslie notes that Dalton is an author of boys' adventure books including *The Wolf Boy of China* (1857). An advertising notice appears for E.D.E.N. Southworth's novel *The Fatal Marriage* saying,

> Mrs. Southworth has won the highest reputation in America as a novelist of great power and beauty. Her delienations of character are good, her dialogue well sustained, and her *morale* always high. The Fatal Marriage, just issued, is one of her best. She merely needs English praise to stand in the highest rank of American novelists.

Since many books were serialized before being published as books, Alcott faced some formidable competition to get her writing published both in serial form and as books, and sometimes, despite the reputation of Leslie's paper as sensational, found

[21] Author of several volumes of poetry, and inventor of a vacuum preserving process for fruits and vegetables ("Jones").

herself in somewhat acceptable surroundings in certain parts of the paper. In others, however, the unbelievable and exaggerated atmospheres are distasteful.

The front page is, of course, concerned with news of the Civil War. Above the mastheads in several issues, readers find a brief but dramatic promotion of various aspects of "Barnum's American Museum" which promises visitors "the TALLEST GIANT BOY in the world, eight feet high, the most beautiful Aquaria and Moving Wax Figures; the largest Snake and Grizzly Bear; and the best DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE and GHOST twice a day. Enough, surely, for a quarter." Another describes "COLORED TROPICAL FISH swimming in the Aquaria, just obtained at a cost of over $ 7,000, are a great acquisition. They are to be seen at all hours." Another guarantees a view of "GEN. TOM THUMB and his BEAUTIFUL LITTLE WIFE, late MISS LAVINIA WARREN; COM. NUTT and the TINY MINNIE WARREN, four of the smallest Human Beings ever seen, every day and evening." Yet another heralds, "THE GREAT SPECTRAL ILLUSION; THE GHOST! Every afternoon and evening, Introduced in an appropriate and thrilling drama. THE SIOUX AND WINNEBAGO INDIAN CHIEFS, WARRIORS, AND SQUAWS," along with "The Monster Python, Living Sea Serpent." Ads such as these clarify why Alcott published in this paper anonymously. Although she had a far-reaching imagination and her stories could easily compete with others published, she did not desire to be counted among those who supported these sorts of outlandish displays, particularly within the conservative circles in which she lived.

Other regular features of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* include: a "General Summary" of the national and European news; "Walks and Talks," an opinion column that responds to letters from readers on various topics as diverse as impartiality in journalism and the duties of mothers toward their daughters; "The Idler About Town," which includes commentary about local activities and incidents such as the use of "dead heads" to fill a theater for a poorly sold play by giving tickets to anyone who will take them, regardless of their actual interest in or knowledge of the theater, and the interesting idiosyncrasies one can encounter at an artists' reunion; "Book Notices"; the "Epitome of the Week," which is divided into subheadings including "Domestic," "Western," "Military," "Naval," "Personal," "Chit-Chat," "Foreign," "Accidents and Offences," "Art, Literature and Science," and "Obituary." These subheadings include short notes about memorial services that were held for various distinguished people, facts and figures about various topics, the condition of the fall crops, news briefs of the Civil War, newspaper startups, and honorary dinners that were given.

One amusing anecdote in the October 31, 1863 issue written by "an English traveller, who is an interesting writer, and who has been 'vagabondizing' in Algeria" describes a "singular addition to the harem of an Arab Chieftain." The chieftain's messengers who were sent to the city of Constantina repeatedly recounted to him the extraordinary beauty of a certain shopkeeper's daughter, who sat in a window all day amusing the passersby. Since the Chieftain's favorite wife had recently died, he sent an envoy with a great sum of money to Constantina to

arrange for the exquisite daughter to return to his kingdom and marry him at any cost. The envoy finds that the splendid creature is only an ornate mannequin, but buys her anyway in fear for his life and takes her to the Chieftain. The Chieftain, "who was a man of pleasant humor and also of vast matrimonial experience, has been heard to say – so the story goes – that there were worse wives, so far as peace and quietness were concerned, than the one he got from Constantina." The headline reads, "The Dummy Wife."

The front page of the January 10, 1863 issue explains, but does not exactly apologize for, an interruption in the publication of the *Illustrated Newspaper* due to a shortage of paper:

UNAVOIDABLE DELAY.

> In consequence of difficulty in obtaining paper, and the intervention of the holidays, our paper has been delayed in its delivery to News Agents and Subscribers. Arrangements have been made which will prevent a recurrence of this difficulty – more annoying to us than it can be to our friends.

Just below the masthead in the December 5, 1863 issue is a notice that reveals the paper's attitude toward itself and its ability to compete in the marketplace:

Notice to Advertisers.

> The value of our paper as an advertising medium has become so generally known, that we are compelled every week to refuse columns of advertisements. The vast increase of our circulation, penetrating as it does

> into the most profitable channels, renders our space doubly valuable, and justifies us in the course we have determined upon – that of increasing our rates of advertising.

Some of the advertising included Leslie promoting his own publications including *Mr. Merrymen's Monthly* , "A Melange of agreeable reading by the first Authors of the day, and *Frank Leslie's Pocket Tax Bill,* "The neatest thing ever published" if one wishes to "know what your taxes are." One notice about the publishing of "Our Seventeenth Volume" (of the *Illustrated Newspaper*) boasts:

> The Sixteen Volumes of FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED PAPER form a pictorial History of the Country and of the World unequalled in the annals of the Newspaper Press. Since the beginning of the present war we have exceeded even our own anticipations, and in the number, variety, beauty and truthfulness of our illustrations have not been approached by any other journal, even in England and France.

In essence, Leslie asserts that his publication is the best in the world, no small claim with the abundance of printed reading material readily available in the nineteenth century.

Lending proof of the competitive, capitalist society of the nineteenth century are the advertisements in Leslie's paper. A great many column inches are dedicated to advertisements for a wide variety of goods including an "Onguent" [sic] for "Luxuriant Whiskers or Moustaches" which "will force them to grow heavily in six weeks (upon the smoothest face) without stain or injury to the skin." There are ads

for sewing machines that are "the best machines for family use," wines and brandies for "friends of sick and wounded soldiers," washing machines which stand "unrivaled as the cheapest, best, and most reliable for Hospitals, Hotels, and Families generally," an assortment of ointments and treatments to "cure" a vast range of physical ailments of "nervous sufferers of both sexes," and a "miracle" food additive made from corn called "Duryea's Maizena." The advertising rate increase did not appear to have had any ill effects on the paper as the profusion of ads for various and sundry items continued in subsequent issues.

Alcott's sensation tales appear to be a good fit for the *Illustrated Newspaper*. Her first-prize story, like others, is accompanied by elaborately detailed illustrations of key moments in the action of the plot, with appropriate captions such as "Gilbert's Despair at Pauline's Final Rejection," and "Scene in the Balcony of the Hotel." Another Alcott story, "A Whisper in the Dark," appears anonymously in the June 6, 1863 issue as "Prize Story No. 17" in the same contest that "Pauline's Passion and Punishment" was named first-prize winner. Alcott had written *two* prizewinning stories in the Leslie competition. "Whisper in the Dark" is also accompanied by detailed drawings with captions that read, "The Morning Ride on the Moors" and "Sybil imprisoned in the Madhouse." Alcott's story, "A Pair of Eyes; or Modern Magic" appears in the October 24, 1863 issue with illustrations of "The Artist and his Model." The artist is seated in a chair while the model attends to him, wiping his brow as though he is exhausted or has fainted. In another, the artist and the model are viewing "The Painting Finished." Other dramatic artist's

renderings depict the scenes, "You have conquered, I am here!" and "The Domestic Feud culminates." Leslie improved the speed of the process of producing intricate drawings for his papers by having several artists collaborate on one engraving with the use of "floating" woodblocks, then joining the sections together as a whole.[22] This process greatly reduced the time needed to produce the oversized pictures for which the Leslie papers became famous.

Alcott, perhaps unwittingly, left clues that she had published works in several Leslie periodicals. Using these hints from Alcott's accounting books, literary detective Victor Berch located a group of Alcott thrillers within the pages of *Frank Leslie's Lady's Magazine* issues of 1868, 1869, and 1870. These were collected and edited by Madeleine B. Stern and Daniel Shealy and published in 1993 as *From Jo March's Attic: Stories of Intrigue and Suspense*. The same group of stories was published in 1995 as *The Lost Stories of Louisa May Alcott.* The collection includes such titles as "Dr. Dorn's Revenge," which Alcott had referred to in her account books as "Dr Donn," and "Countess Varazoff," referred to as "Countess Irma" since the heroine's first name was Irma. Two other accounting entries referred to "Mademoiselle," which Berch traced to "My Mysterious Mademoiselle," and "Betrayed," which Berch discovered was "Betrayed by a Buckle" (Stern, Introduction, *From Jo March's Attic* xiii-xiv).

There may be more Alcott stories waiting to be found within other Leslie publications such as *Frank Leslie's Pleasant Hours.* Touted as "A Monthly

[22] For a detailed description of this process, see Gambee 46-50.

Magazine Devoted to Useful and Entertaining Reading," it is much like other Leslie publications in which Alcott stories were published. A May, 1867 original edition, for example, includes fiction such as "The Peri of The Pyrenees; or, The Prince, The Peasant, and The Pearl" by Harry Hazleton who also wrote for other Leslie periodicals. Alcott proved a worthy competitor.

Other fiction is included with titles such as "The Fate of the Refugee," complete with a signature Leslie illustration captioned "Death of Black Davy, the Outlaw," and another tale, "The Hand of Glory" with an illustration of "The Duel" that takes place between two of the characters. There are descriptions and illustrations of current fashions for dinner dresses and millinery. There is even a "Fun for the Family" page at the end. One notable difference is that the only advertising that appears is for Leslie publications. An original July, 1867 issue is much the same, including the continuation of Hazleton's story, travel stories from England and Scotland, and graphic depictions of trapping elephants in India and martens in Canada. It is not unrealistic to venture that future literary sleuths might be able to identify more Alcott stories in this and similar Leslie publications.

Several of Alcott's works appeared in *Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner.* "Perilous Play" was published in the *Chimney Corner* on February 13, 1869 and later in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* in November of 1876. A short piece, "Companion," which was Chapter Five of Alcott's novel *Success,* later to be titled *Work,* was serialized in *Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner* in 1865 and 1866. A print original of the February 26, 1870 masthead encourages readers,

> *Let all your friends know the merits of our CHIMNEY CORNER, and double our subscription list. It is a feast of good things, of the purest kind, for family reading – Stories, Biography, the Romance of History, Travel, Adventure, Manners and Customs, Essays, and entertaining and instructive matter of all kinds.*

Leslie took advantage of every opportunity to inspire his readers to purchase even more of his gaudy publications, and for them to encourage their acquaintances to do the same. A print original of the masthead in the January 7, 1871 issue of the *Chimney Corner* states,

> *Established especially to meet a want of families throughout the land, the CHIMNEY CORNER is especially a FAMILY PAPER combining instruction of the most varied and interesting character, illustrating the work of the most celebrated living artists and engravers in both hemispheres, and the purest, most elevating and attractive fiction. The continued stories or novels are by authors of acknowledged merit and ability, while the shorter Stories, Sketches, Adventures, etc., are from the pens of almost every American writer of note in this path of literature.*

Leslie also provides brief descriptions of the stories printed in each particular issue. Authors with whom Alcott was competing for space in the *Chimney Corner* include Annie Thomas,[23] George L. Aiken,[24] and M.T.

[23] British short story author.
[24] Boston author of short stories and plays.

Caldor,[25]but others are unknown since many stories were printed anonymously. Leslie also gives a summary of the other items the paper includes:

> *To this attractive array of fiction are added other departments – Travels in various lands, with the wonders of Nature, Art, Scenery, Architecture, Strange Manners, Costumes and Customs; Shipwrecks, Adventures of all kinds; Natural History in its most attractive forms; Biographies of the great of other days, and of our own Self-made Men; Anecdotes; Essays of social Character – Matter for the Young, Grandfather Whitehead's Lectures, Fairy Tales, Charades, etc.*

The "Charades" section seems the most conducive to family entertainment with its puzzles, but even here a word game in one section is entitled "Decapitations." In trying to be everything to everyone, Leslie exposes his youngest readers to vocabulary and sensation stories inappropriate for children such as "Dead or Alive?" and "My Father's Wife; or, One False Step Deserves Another." On the other hand, the children's stories, such as "The Toad Girl," "Bobby the Sharp and Billy the Flat," and "What Santa Claus Did for the Doctor" may not have appealed to many older readers.

The Leslie publishing empire that was so beneficial to Louisa May Alcott's career has a colorful history spanning several decades of the nineteenth century. Briefly, Henry Carter, a British woodcarver, emigrated to America and took the name of Frank Leslie. He founded a series of successful magazines known for their

[25] Novelist and playwright.

depictions of ladies' fashions and events of the day in detailed illustrations, and also for their sensational stories. The flamboyant Leslie was befriended by E.G. Squire and his intriguing wife Miriam who both later worked for him. A September 17, 1866 letter from Miriam Squire to Louisa Alcott informs Alcott "that Leslie would be glad to receive a sensational story from her monthly at fifty dollars" (Stern, *Purple Passage* 220). Leslie eventually married Miriam who took over his empire upon his death and legally changed her name to Frank Leslie. Madeleine Stern, Alcott's biographer, researched the life of Miriam Squire and published it in *Purple Passage* in 1953. Stern comments that "much of that life would have fascinated A.M. Barnard" (Introduction, *Behind a Mask* xx), and that Miriam "could have sat for the portrait of heroine in the Alcott shockers" she helped to publish (Introduction, *From Jo March's Attic* xv).

Miriam had challengers for the Leslie empire and was near financial ruin. She shrewdly took advantage of the shooting of President James Garfield on July 2, 1881, by presenting all the gory details for the public to devour over several issues of the *Illustrated Newspaper*. The *Illustrated Newspaper* issue that saved the day for Miriam Leslie was the October 8, 1881 graphic depiction of events surrounding the death of President Garfield (Gambee 32). An original of this issue shows the front page bearing a representation of the swearing-in ceremony making Chester A. Arthur president. Another drawing shows Garfield lying in state in the Capitol rotunda with Arthur and others looking over his corpse. Other illustrations show the post-mortem examination of Garfield's body and his embalming. Though certainly

less offensive than actual photographs, some may wonder at the need for public viewing of such events; Miriam Squire was a competitor and apparently had a knack for understanding human nature. This edition sold extremely well and enabled Mrs. Leslie to easily pay off all remaining debts and retain sole control of her late husband's publishing empire (Stern, *Purple Passage* 104). Mrs. Leslie, like Alcott, was a feminist in a capitalist economy. They both had learned how to compete successfully within the publishing world of men. They both were well aware of their audience and gave them what they wanted to read while they made ample money to support themselves at the same time. Like Alcott, Mrs. Leslie also supported women's suffrage, and upon her death bequeathed two million dollars to the cause (Stern, Introduction, *From Jo March's Attic* xvi).

Several Alcott stories appeared in *The American Union*, a weekly newspaper published in Boston. The original publishers were Graves and Weston, and later, Elliot, Thomes and Talbot who published Alcott's "Marion Earle" between July and September of 1858. Additional Alcott stories are believed to have been published in this newspaper during the 1850s, but copies are rare (Christopher 19). One original issue that survives dated July 28, 1849, shows the publisher as "R.B. Fitts & Company, No. 22 School Street, Boston." Across the front page the paper describes itself as "Devoted to Human Character, Literature, Education, Political and Moral Science, Art, Agriculture, Trade, Health, Society, News, &c." According to the masthead, it features

> Original and Selected Stories, Humorous Sketches, Tales of Travel, Romances, Sketches of Real Life, Valuable Biographies; Poetry, Serious, Sentimental, and Humorous; A Column for the Curious; Gems from New Works; Local Matters, Reviews of New Publications, Agricultural Treasures, Scientific Novelties, Anecdotes, Opinions, Glimpses at the Law; Foreign Correspondence; and Foreign and Domestic News to the Latest Hour.

Alcott stories would have been acceptable for the editors of this paper since it claimed to be "a general family paper" that was

> unsurpassed for the variety and completeness of its contents, and for the great care that is taken, while it shall amuse, to instruct and elevate the mind to a sense of its natural dignity. For the old, it will be found stored with experience – for the young, it will possess a charm that will not contaminate or cloy the taste.

This issue features a front page story touted as "An Original Local Romance" entitled "The Two Purses; or, The Successful Stratagem" by E. Emery, author of "Norton; or, Lights and Shades of a Factory Village." The title of Chapter IX is "Revenge, Suicide, Conclusion," not unlike Alcott's sensation stories. It also includes original poetry, marriage and death notices, news of ships arriving in port, a "Finance and Commerce" section, a "Ladies' Department," a "Science and Agriculture" column, and a section dubbed "The Family Circle." The editors publicly acknowledge the receipt of stories and poetry from their contributors with

both favorable and unfavorable critiques of these items, whether or not they intend to publish them, and if so, when. A few quietly tasteful advertisements appear for men's clothing, for a doctor's office promising "Consumption Prevented and Cured," and for a "Furniture and Upholstery Establishment" that offers goods "in any style, from the most common material to the richest article in use." Even though this issue pre-dates any known Alcott publications in *The American Union*, her works appear to be in the same vein as those that are published in this particular issue and most likely would have been enjoyed by readers.

Stories by Louisa May Alcott were also published in *The Flag of Our Union* between 1865 and 1867 (Alcott, *From Jo March's Attic* 163-64). According to Madeleine Stern, its "Editors and Proprietors,"[26] James R. Elliott, William Henry Thomes, and Newton Talbot, published "a chain of periodicals to bring romance and adventure to a nation at war." The *Flag of Our Union* was purportedly "a miscellaneous weekly designed for the home circle," but "scarcely lived up to the publishers' boast that it contained 'not one vulgar word or line,'" since it specialized "in violent narratives peopled with convicts and opium addicts" ("Louisa May Alcott in Periodicals" 373). Alcott's sensation stories proved to be a good fit for this Boston paper. "Behind a Mask, *or* A Woman's Power" was serialized over four issues on October 13, 20, and 27, and November 3 in 1866. It was preceded by "V.V.: or, Plots and Counterplots"[27] by "A Well-Known Author"

[26] The Masthead of *The Flag of Our Union* reads, "Elliott, Thomes, & Talbot, Editors and Proprietors."
[27] Later reprinted as a Ten Cent Novelette, also called Brilliant Novelettes, by Elliot, Thomes and Talbot in 1865 (Stern, *Imprints* 214).

over four issues in February of 1865, "A Marble Woman; or, The Mysterious Model" over four issues in May and June of 1865, and followed by "The Abbot's Ghost, *or* Maurice Treherne's Temptation" over four issues in January of 1867 (Alcott, *From JoMarch's Attic* 163-66).

An examination of microfilm of *The Flag of Our Union* shows that the masthead of *The Flag* lists the contributors to each issue. Writers competing with Alcott for space in the 4 February 1865 issue include Mrs. C.F. Gerry and her front page story "Across the Plains," Emma Mortimer Babson and her poem "Foul and Fair," which appears just above Alcott's story on page 73, Augustus Treadwell and his poem "Life," and Mrs. L.S. Goodwin and her story "Maud's Waterfall." Regular articles include "Marriages" and "Deaths," a list of currently available "Ten Cent Novelettes," "Our Curious Department," "The Housekeeper," "The Florist," "Next Week's Paper," "New Publications," "Our Young Folks' Department," and many brief articles concerning freemasonry, health, and fashion. Advertisements include those for "Wistar's Balsam of Wild Cherry," which guarantees to cure "every affection of the throat, lungs, and chest," and "Redding's Russia Salve," which claims to cure a host of ailments such as corns, warts, ringworm, sore nipples, bunions, ingrown nails, and shingles.

It also includes ads for publications including itself, advertised as the "THE BEST LITERARY FAMILY JOURNAL," and for *The Dollar Monthly*, "The Cheapest Magazine in the World." The front page story of the October 13, 1866 issue is not A. M. Barnard's *Behind a Mask* but "Gawain Crebassett's Inheritance"

by Hester Earle. In addition to the regular weekly features, this issue includes "Poetical Quotations" regarding the topics of "Riches" and Avarice" compiled by George H. Seymour, a poem entitled "Autumn" by Ellen Malvin, and a children's story, "Little Benny Goes Berrying," by George Jay Varny. Alcott was not the only author publishing anonymously. The October 20, 1866, issue's masthead lists A.M. Barnard, but also "A Southerner" and "an Old Officer" among its contributors. A continuation of the "Poetical Quotations" compiled by George H. Seymour is included, this time featuring the topics of "Honor" and "Fortune." These appear just above the second installment of Alcott's *Behind a Mask.* Alcott does not make the front page of the October 27, 1866, issue either. That space is occupied by "Beauty for Ashes" by Mrs. R.B. Edson. This issue also includes a poem, "The Scottish Lover" by George H. Coomer and even more "Poetical Quotations" on the topics of "Liberty" and "Gold," once again situated just above *Behind a Mask.*

The November 3, 1866 issue follows suit with another author taking the front page space, Miss Camilla Willian and her story "The Wreck of Agnes Coberg." The topics of "Love" and "Courtship" guide the choice of quotations featured by Seymour just above the fourth and final installment of "Behind A Mask." Each issue includes many short articles about various topics deemed by Elliott, Thomes, and Talbot to be of interest to their readers, but unlike the Leslie publications, few illustrations are presented.

Another weekly newspaper that published Alcott's writing was the New York *Independent,* which included "national, international, and missionary news, as

well as articles devoted to science, religion, music, literature, fine arts, education, and agriculture." It featured many well-known writers including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Emily Dickinson, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Alcott was paid $100.00 each for children's stories and autobiographical stories including "How I Went Out to Service" and "Transcendental Wild Oats" (Agosto 146).

Alcott's association with the publishers Horace B. Fuller, George W. Carleton, James Redpath and Aaron K. Loring were disappointing ones. According to Madeleine Stern, Fuller, publisher of *Merry's Museum,* employed Alcott as editor for $500.00 a year in 1868. He took Alcott's "charming collection of animal stories for children" that had been serialized in *Merry's Museum*, and published them in book form "without the author's knowledge or consent" while she was on "a grand tour abroad" celebrating the success of *Little Women* ("Louisa May Alcott in Periodicals" 375-76). Stern also notes that Carleton had published an abridged edition of Alcott's *Morning-Glories* in 1867 without Alcott's consent (*Selected Letters* 208n). Susan S. Williams writes that Redpath wanted Alcott to donate a portion of her earnings from *Hospital Sketches*[28] to war orphans, money Alcott could scarcely afford. She had become a somewhat successful competitor, but had not reached a level of financial comfortability. He credited Alcott with more fame than she had yet acquired and thought her signature would make his publications famous. Williams notes that "Alcott had good reason to worry about Redpath's business abilities, since he often lacked the capital to complete projects he had

[28] "Hospital Sketches" first appeared in *The Commonwealth*, an "emancipation weekly" begun by Moncure Daniel Conway and edited by Frank Sanborn (Stern, "Louisa May Alcott in Periodicals" 378).

agreed to take on" (268-69). Loring wanted Alcott's novel *Moods* shortened by omitting much of the description and dialogue. He preferred action stories like those of Horatio Alger, Jr., that contained moral lessons. Sarah Elbert notes that the first edition of *Moods* in 1864 "revealed the contradictions between romantic love with its validation of companionate marriage, and the nineteenth-century reality of troubled marriages burdened by female dependency and prescribed spousal role obligations." The publishing of *Moods* with its topics of unhappy marriages and divorce "troubled, even angered critics" and it did not sell well (xiv). Loring took advantage of the success of *Little Women* in 1868 and 1869 and issued a second edition of *Moods* in 1871 without Alcott's permission. After going bankrupt in 1871, Loring transferred the copyright to Alcott for one dollar enabling her to publish her revised version of *Moods* in 1882 with the more trustworthy firm of Roberts Brothers (xv).

It was Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers who suggested that Alcott write a book for girls, an area in which she thought she could not successfully compete. Ironically, the result was not one book, but several that would guarantee Alcott literary immortality and financial security for life. They include *Little Women or, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy* (Parts 1 and 2) were published in 1868 and 1869, *An Old-Fashioned Girl* in 1870, *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys* in 1871, *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag: My Boys* in 1872, *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag: Shawl Straps* in 1872, *Work: A Story of Experience* in 1873, *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag: Cupid and Chow-Chow* in 1874, *Eight Cousins; or, The Aunt Hill* in 1875, *Silver Pitchers, and*

Independence: A Centennial love Story in 1876, and *Rose in Bloom. A Sequel to "Eight Cousins"* in 1876. Alcott's authorial output was astounding, and Roberts Brothers reaped the rewards of Niles' encouragement of an author who doubted her ability to write a book for girls. Daniel Shealy comments, "Not only did Niles handle Alcott's literary affairs, but he also served as her personal financial advisor, investing her earnings in stocks ("The Author-Publisher" 73). Alcott was fortunate to have so honorable an editor and friend.

As Shealy notes in *Alcott in Her Own Time,* Roberts Brothers published Alcott's novel *A Modern Mephistopheles* in 1877 as part of its "No Name Series" of anonymous books. Readers were invited to participate in a contest to guess the authors. Many were surprised that Alcott, the author of *Little Women,* had written "this dark, Hawthorne-like tale" (183). In a conversation with LaSalle Corbell Pickett,[29] Alcott confessed that the style of *Little Women* was not exactly her "true style" as Mrs. Pickett had thought. Alcott divulged, "I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies and wished that I dared inscribe them upon my pages and set them before the public" but she dared not "interfere with the proper grayness of old Concord." Alcott could not imagine "the infinite horror of dear Mr. Emerson" if he knew of her unseemly characters. She could not own them publicly because "To have had Mr. Emerson as an intellectual god all one's life is to be invested with a chain armor of propriety" (184).

[29] Excerpted from Corbett's *Across My Path: Memories of People I Have Known* (1916), which she wrote to earn money to support herself after the death of her husband, General George Edward Pickett, leader of "Pickett's Charge" in the battle of Gettysburg (Shealy, *Alcott in Her Own Time* 183).

One periodical whose propriety no one would argue with was the *Atlantic Monthly.* Alcott's stories published here include, "A Modern Cinderella: or, The Little Old Shoe" in October of 1860, "Debby's Debut" in August of 1863, "The Brothers" in November of 1863, and her poem "Thoreau's Flute" in September of 1863. Edited by James Russell Lowell from 1857 to 1861, and by James T. Fields from 1861 to 1871, the *Atlantic Monthly* was one of the most prestigious publications in which Alcott stories appeared, proving that she could, indeed, compete with the best. Ironically, it had earlier been Fields who had told Alcott to stick to teaching because she could not write (Stern, Introduction, *Letters* xxxi). Competing authors in this publication included such notables as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Lucy Larcom, Mrs. A.D.T. Whitney, and Gail Hamilton (Mary Abigail Dodge). For "Louisa M. Alcott" to appear in their company was a clear indication that her career as an author was blossoming.

One woman with whom Alcott had an editor/contributor relationship was Mary Mapes Dodge, author of *Hans Brinker, or the Silver Skates: A Story of Life in Holland* (1865) and editor of *St. Nicholas*, *Scribner's Illustrated Magazine for Girls and Boys* to which Alcott was a contributor. The cover of an original 1878 *St. Nicholas* issue, dated simply "October," lists the phrase "Conducted By" rather than "Edited By" before Dodge's name, followed by "Scribner & Co., New York," then "Sampson, Low, Marston & Co., London." It is indeed, as Madeleine Stern describes, "a handsome periodical, finely printed by the DeVinne Press and profusely illustrated by distinguished artists and engravers" ("Louisa May Alcott in

Periodicals" 380). Several of Alcott's novels were serialized in *St. Nicholas* including *Under the Lilacs* in 1877 and 1888 and *Jack and Jill* in 1879 and 1880 (*Selected Letters* liii). The table of contents shows that the October 1878 issue includes the final installment of "Under the Lilacs" by Louisa M. Alcott on page 780. Other authors in this issue include Edith Hawkins, Mrs. J.G. Burnett, William O. Stoddard, Mary N. Prescott, Katherine B. Foot, Olive Thorne, and Professor Leo H. Grindon. The stories and poems are accompanied by soft, pleasing illustrations of the action in the articles. Advertisements include one for "Kingsford's Oswego Cornstarch, Unequaled for Delicacy, Variety of Use and Healthfulness. Adapted alike to the Taste of the Epicure and the Wants of the Invalid." The accompanying illustration of a partially husked ear of corn exudes freshness and purity that certainly will be found in the product. Another ad for "Waltham Watches" cautions buyers to be certain to check for the "A.W. & Co." trademark:

> This caution is rendered necessary by reason of the fact that our cases are frequently separated from our movements and put upon worthless movements of other makers, and vice versa, thus affecting injuriously the performance of the watches and vitiating our guarantee, which is intended to cover only our complete watches wholly made by us. It is necessary also because it is so notorious as to be a public scandal, that there is great fraud in the metal quality of both gold and silver cases as now generally sold.

It seems odd that such a notice of a public scandal and a warning of potential fraud should appear in a children's periodical.

Alcott is able to compete and again finds her works in good company considering the authors whose works appear in *St. Nicholas.* Announcements for future issues divulge that portraits of Abraham Lincoln and William Cullen Bryant will be included as well as Thoreau's "Days and Nights in Concord," and stories by Bret Hart, Henry James, Jr., Julian Hawthorne, and Rebecca Harding Davis. Of course, the largest ads in the magazine are used to enhance its own image and its plans for the future:

> For the marvelous and steadily increasing patronage given to their enterprise, for the generous and discriminating comments of the Press both at home and abroad, and for the crowning satisfaction of the children's love for ST. NICHOLAS, the publishers beg to return hearty acknowledgement, at the same time assuring one and all that their plans for the coming year are broader than ever before, – an enlargement of the Magazine is in contemplation, – and no possible expenditure of time, thought or money will be spared toward maintaining the acknowledged position of ST. NICHOLAS as the best Magazine for young people in the whole world.

This declaration is followed by the magazine's cost: "Subscription Price, $3.00 A Year." After four pages of advertisements, the magazine is ready to begin.

Alcott's "Under the Lilacs" is the fourth story into the magazine, and it is signed "By Louisa M. Alcott." Alcott was paid three thousand dollars for it (qtd. in *Selected Letters* 223). It is a continuation from prior issues and begins at Chapter XXIII entitled, "Somebody Comes." It is accompanied by finely detailed

illustrations by Mary Anna Foote that have a soft effect with titles such as "We Came, – We Saw" as a small boy and a bunny come upon one another in some tall grass, and next to it, "We Left" as the boy and bunny, frightened of and by each other, run in opposite directions as the boy's hat goes flying off his head (223). The effect for readers is charming. Another illustration for Alcott's story shows a woman standing in a doorway. She is beautifully framed by the leaves of the nearby trees, presumably lilacs, creating the aura of the "Angel in the House." The caption reads, "Mrs. Moss Welcomes Ben's Father." Another illustration depicts, "Ben and His Father Open the Great Gate," again with a softness of style and no lack of detail. Readers can almost hear the creaking of the oversized gate that requires two people to swing it open. [30]

A regular feature of the monthly magazine was "Jack-In-The-Pulpit," which in this issue included commentary by an editorial voice on various topics, such as "Catching Birds on the Wing" and "Frangipani Scent and Puddings." These are interspersed with letters from readers asking how to make an Eolian Harp, or wondering what would happen if a man the size of Goliath of Gath were to live among us. The writer of the letter creates his own wondrously amusing scenarios of competition: "If he joined a boat-club, a curious six-oared crew could be made up, with him on one side and five other men opposite." He continues: "If he joined the champion Nine, and hit a ball, where would that ball go to? If he called for a 'shoulder-high' ball, would n't the catcher have to climb a step-ladder to catch

[30] Alcott felt "a natural wish to have one story prettily adorned with good pictures" (*Selected Letters* 223).

behind the giant? And if he threw a ball to a baseman, would n't he be apt to throw it clean through him?"

Another monthly feature was "The Letter-Box" which in this issue included not only letters from readers, but suggestions for fun activities for bored children. One activity is a puzzle in the form of "beheaded rhymes," lines of poetry with the final word in the lines missing, to be filled in by readers. Other puzzles include "Anagram Word-Squares," an "Easy Amputated Quotation," a "Complete Diamond," a "Poetical Rebus," and an "Easy Cross-Word Puzzle." The solutions to all of the puzzles are provided in the issue following; this October issue carries the "Answers to Puzzles in September Number." In addition, advice is given about where to buy sturdy wood toys with a recommendation for building blocks, of which "Crandall's are the best, for they admit of an endless variety of combination." One enterprising reader named "Harry" requests instructions for building a boat, and another, signed only "G.B.C.," wants to build a "yatch" that won't get "beat bad" as his schooner does. They are both directed to the July 1875 issue of *St. Nicholas* where "Harry will find full directions how to make a serviceable boat at small cost; and G.B.J., whose letter we print *verbatim*, also may find hints that will enable him to build an all-conquering "yatch." One reader, said to be nine years old, shares a delightful story about her cat and writes as if the cat were speaking. It is evident that children enjoyed this magazine and that Mary Mapes Dodge had drawn them in and established a trusting relationship, enough that they felt comfortable writing letters about the things most important to them in

their childhood worlds. Alcott's stories are a good fit for *St. Nicholas* and for the children's homes into which the magazine found its way.

The final pages of the magazine include the entire "Contents Volume V." of *St. Nicholas* for November, 1877, to November, 1878 over eight pages, which included poems by Celia Thaxter[31] in several issues. The final four pages and the inner and outer back covers are devoted to advertisements for such items as "Royal Baking Powder" which is "universally used by the best families throughout Europe and the United States and adopted in the Royal House holds of Great Britain, Germany, and Brazil. It is peerless and unapproachable in quality, and any family who once uses it will not be without it." There are also ads for "Toilet Soap," "Tar Soap," "The Rubber Pen 'No. 1,'" and "The New Fall Styles" from "Rogers, Peet & Co." There are ads for organs, pianos, dictionaries, wheelchairs, stamps, trusses, teeth cleaners, games, and a self-teaching penmanship book. Three ads appear in large print on the coveted back cover. One is for "Grateful, Comforting, Epps's Breakfast Cocoa" sold by "James Epps & Co., Homeopathic Chemists." Another is complete with an illustration for the "Lester Saw," which "has been greatly improved and is now about as nearly perfect as a saw can be made." The final ad at the bottom of the back cover is for Mrs. Frances Hodgson Burnett's new novel "Haworth's," which will begin serialization in the next issue of *St. Nicholas*. It will be "more profusely illustrated than any serial that has ever appeared in *Scribner,*

[31] Celia Leighton Thaxter was an acquaintance of Alcott's. Thaxter wrote poems about her life on the Isles of Shoals and held salons in her hotel on Appledore Island. An Alcott journal entry for Monday, November 16, 1868, tells of Alcott and Thaxter having lunch just after the publication of the first part of *Little Women* (*Journals* 167).

and its publication is likely to be one of the literary events of the season." Despite other authors' successes, Alcott had no dearth of publishers for her own works.

There also was no shortage of articles written about Alcott both during her lifetime and after her death. But it is in Louisa May Alcott's personal correspondence that we gain first-hand insight into her philosophy of writing, her kindnesses to strangers whom she befriended, descriptions of the unromantic life of a busy and often overworked author, and even a brief history of her publishing career as she lived it. An original April, 1896 issue of *The Ladies' Home Journal* includes an article by its editor, Edward W. Bok, entitled, "Louisa May Alcott's Letters to Five Girls." Alcott began her correspondence with the five Lukens sisters of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, in August of 1872. Bok writes that one of the sisters read Alcott's *Little Women* and

> was much impressed with the book, particularly with that part of the story where the author represents the "March girls" as writing the "Pickwick Portfolio." The thought instantly came to the youthful reader to copy the example of the "March girls," and the idea was laid before her four sisters. By them it was enthusiastically received, and it was not long before the five little girls began their career as journalists. In a few months the first two numbers of their paper were issued, but only in manuscript. Then the father of the youthful editors became interested, bought some type and a small printing press, and in a short time the first printed issue of "Little Things" appeared, edited by Carrie, Maggie Nellie, Emma, and Helen Lukens, the

> eldest of whom was barely seventeen. The first printed issue consisted of four pages. (1)

The desire to compete that Alcott instilled in her young characters in *Little Women* is passed on to real-life young women in the persons of the Lukens sisters. Bok continues:

> It was only natural that the young journalists should wish to send one of the first copies of their paper to Miss Alcott, and so a copy was dispatched to the author of "Little Women," with an explanation of the circumstances which had led to the starting of the enterprise.
>
> In a few days came an acknowledgement from Miss Alcott – the first of this series of letters. (1)

In her response, Alcott states, "I admire your pluck and perseverance and heartily believe in women's right to any branch of labor for which they prove their fitness" (1). Alcott goes on to extol the delightfulness of independence and the satisfaction that should be derived from work of any type as long as it is done cheerfully and well. In subsequent correspondence, the Lukens sisters address their questions about the financial matters of their paper to Alcott and she kindly responds:

> I remember the dear little "Pickwick Portfolio" of twenty years ago, and the spirit of an editor stirs within me prompting me to lend a hand to a sister editor. I like to help women help themselves, as that is, in my opinion, the best way to settle the woman question. Whatever we can do and do well

> we have a right to, and I don't think anyone will deny us. So best wishes for the success of "Little Things" and its brave young proprietors. (1)

Alcott adds a serious "P.S." to this note regarding the thoughts of suicide in *Work* that the Lukens sisters must have mentioned in their letters:

> I did not like the suicide in "Work,"[32] but as much of that chapter was true I let it stand as a warning to several people who need it to my knowledge, and to many whom I do not know. I have already had letters from strangers thanking me for it, so I am not sorry it went in. One must have both the dark and the light side to paint life truly. (1)

Alcott follows this seriousness with a comment in her usual self-deprecating but humorous manner. In response to the sisters' apparent request for a photograph, she writes, "I send you the last style of photograph I have, not very good, but you can't make a Venus out of a tired old lady" (1).

They send their photos to Alcott and in return, Alcott offers encouragement and shares some of the wisdom she has accumulated about writing as well as living with the Lukens sisters when she writes, "I waited till the five were all here before I sent my thanks for them. They make a very pretty little 'landscape,' as Jo used to say, all in a group on my table, and I am glad to show such a posy of bright, enterprising girls. Long may they wave!" (1). Alcott cautions the Lukens girls about the physical hazards and hard realities of being a dedicated writer:

[32] See discussion of suicide in *Work* in Chapter Four on pages 121-22.

> Of one thing let me, and old scribbler, warn you: Don't write with steel pens or you will get what is called "writer's cramp," and lose the use of your thumb, as I have. I have to wabble around with two fingers while my absurd thumb is folded under and no good for pen work, though all right for other things. Look at my wild scribbles and use cork pen-holders or gold pens, and don't write fourteen hours at a stretch as I used to do. I'm glad there is ironing and preserving to rest the busy brains with good wholesome work. I believe in it so heartily that I sweep my eight rooms twice a week, iron and scrub round for health sake, as I have found it better medicine than any doctor ever gave me. Keep the bodies strong and healthy and the nerves won't get out of order or the spirits turn blue. Old ladies *will* advise. (1)

Alcott's ability to describe painful experiences with humor and lightheartedness is also evident in this October 2, 1873 letter. Here she reveals some of her frustrations with readers of *Little Women.* Bok notes, "A more delightfully characteristic letter than this one it would be hard to imagine" (1). Alcott writes,

> I will not go West this fall as I am not well enough to travel. My father has already started, but I am in my winter den, 17 Beacon Street, Boston, spinning away at "The Aunt Hill" or "Rose and the Rest"– haven't decided which the name shall be. [33] I'm afraid it will be a dull story for my head is not in it a bit and my bones ache like fun most of the time. However, as I wrote "Little Women" with one arm in a sling, my head tied up and one

[33] Alcott chose *Eight Cousins; or, The Aunt Hill* and titled its sequel *Rose in Bloom.*

> foot in misery, perhaps pain has a good effect upon my works. I sympathize with the disappointment of your friends on seeing my picture, for I remember I was so upset when I saw Frederika Bremer, whose books I loved, that my sister, Nan, and I went into the closet and cried, though we were great girls of sixteen and eighteen. Why people *will* think "Jo" small when she is described as tall, I don't see; and why insist that she must be young when she is said to be thirty at the end of the book? After seeing the photograph it is hardly necessary to say that "Jo" and L.M.A. are *not* one, and that the latter is a tired-out old lady of forty-two with nothing left of her youth but a yard or more of chestnut hair that *won't* turn gray, though it is time it did. (1)

Alcott goes on to say that she is sorry to hear that the Lukens sisters are no longer going to publish their paper, but agrees that they are "wise to give it up."

Alcott invites them to contribute to a temperance tale that she plans to write for the *Youth's Companion,* and to call on her if they should visit Boston. The correspondence continues through the death of May and Mrs. Alcott and even one of the Lukens sisters. As time passes, Alcott continues the correspondence with only Maggie Lukens. The content of one of these letters is serious commentary on what she had discovered about faith:

> I will tell you my experience and as it has stood the test of youth and age, health and sickness, joy and sorrow, poverty and wealth, I feel that it is genuine, and seem to get more light, warmth and help as I go on learning

> more of it year by year. My parents never bound us to any church, but taught us that the love of goodness was the love of God, the cheerful doing of duty made life happy, and that the love of one's neighbor in its widest sense was the best help for one's self. (2)

She shares what she learned from her mentors with Maggie:

> Theodore Parker and Ralph Waldo Emerson did much to help me see that one can shape life best by trying to build up a strong and noble character, through good books, wise people's society, an interest in all reforms that help the world, and a cheerful acceptance of whatever is inevitable; seeing a beautiful compensation in what often seems a great sacrifice, sorrow, or loss, and believing always that a wise, loving and just Father cares for us, sees our weakness and is near to help if we call. (2)

In other letters Alcott shares with Maggie her views on immortality, spirituality, and what Bok calls "the power of mind over bodily ails" (2).

Alcott and Maggie Lukens exchange ideas about books, and Alcott even sends Maggie a book, a copy of Emerson's *Essays,* saying, "I hope it will be as helpful to you as it has been to me and many others" (2). The increasingly intimate correspondence continued until February of 1886. It had been fourteen years since that first letter from five little girls who wanted to be like the March sisters. Although she adamantly disliked readers who invaded her privacy, Louisa May Alcott appeared happy to lend her experience and advice to those who sought it for the right reasons in a spirit of collaboration rather than competition.

This article by Edward W. Bok in *The Ladies' Home Journal* appeared as a special feature on pages one and two with two photographs of Louisa May Alcott, one photograph of Mrs. Alcott, "A Sample Page from One of Miss Alcott's Letters," and no advertisements. Alcott was in fine company in this issue. "A Change of Heart" by Sarah Orne Jewett is on page four, and "Neighborhood Types" by Mary E. Wilkins appears on page six. Julia Magruder's "The Violet" is featured on page nine, the third part of the *From a Girl's Standpoint* series by Lilian Bell entitled "The Philosophy of Clothes" is on page eleven, and "The Colonial Dames Waltzes" by John Philip Sousa occupy pages twelve and thirteen. Other articles include a discussion of "This Country of Ours," advice for "The Young Man Entering Life" (an odd article for a ladies' magazine), instructions about how to make "Some Easter Dinner Cards," and several fashion articles. There are articles about floor coverings, house plans, crafts, flowers, and aquatic gardens. Advertisements are tasteful for items such as bicycles, wire screens, bouillon spoons, steam cookers, breakfast cocoa, and even "Dr. Lyon's Perfect Tooth Powder" which has been "used by people of refinement for over a quarter of a century" (30). Even after her death, Alcott was competing and winning major space in the top magazines of the day.

Additional personal correspondence of Alcott's shows her willingness to help a new author's career, perhaps just as hers was helped, by offering important advice. In two letters, believed to have been written by Alcott on Christmas Day of

1878 and on December 27, 1878, Alcott offers encouragement and guidance to a Miss Churchill,[34] apparently a budding author, and to

> the many young writers who ask for advice – There is no *easy* road to successful authorship; it has to be earned by long & patient labor, many disappointments, uncertainties, and trials. Success is often a lucky accident, coming to those who may not deserve it, while others who do have to wait & hope till they have *earned* it. That is the best sort and most enduring.
>
> I worked for twenty years poorly paid, little known, and quite without any ambition but to eke out a living, as I chose to support myself and began to do it at sixteen. This long drill was of use, & when I wrote Hospital Sketches by the beds of my soldier boys in the shape of letters home I had no idea that I was taking the first step toward what is called fame. It nearly cost my life but I discovered the secret of winning the ear & touching the heart of the public by simply telling the comic & pathetic incidents of life.
>
> "Little Women" was written when I was ill, & to prove that I could *not* write books for girls. The publisher thought it *flat*, so did I, & neither hoped much for or from it. We found out our mistake, & since then, though I do not enjoy writing "moral tales" for the young, I do it because it pays well.
>
> But the success I value most was making my dear mother happy in her last years & taking care of my family. The rest soon grows wearisome &

[34] Alcott provides no other identification or information regarding this aspiring writer.

seems very poor beside the comfort of being an earthly Providence to those we love.

I hope you will win this joy at least, & think you *will*, for you seem to have got on well so far, & the stories are better than many sent me. I like the short one best. Lively tales of home-life or children go well, & the Youth's Companion is a good paying paper. I do not like Loring as he is neither honest nor polite. I have had dealings with him and know. Try Roberts Brothers 229 Washington St. They are very kind & just & if the book suits will give it a fair chance. With best wishes for a prosperous & happy New Year I am your friend

L.M.A. (*Selected Letters* 232-33)

Alcott generously offers the wisdom acquired through personal growth and experience to an emerging writer, a further affirmation of the conviction she held that women must learn how to compete in a capitalist economy. She reveals the hard work she endured as well as the stroke of luck she had with the success of *Little Women*. She cautions against corrupt publishers, even mentioning one by name, and highly recommends the firm which helped her to acquire her fame and fortune. In a subsequent letter, Alcott appears to answer Miss Churchill's inquiries about how much money Miss Churchill could expect to be paid for her writing:

Beginners must take what they can get. Papers usually have a fixed price & till one grows well known one must be content with that. So much a

column or page. The True Flag[35] used to pay me $25 or $30 for a long story. Frank Leslie at first $25 for short ones, then $100 for anything I would send. Bonner once paid me, without my asking, $100 for one short column. Now I never write a short tale for less than $100. Serials $3000.

The Evening Gazette used to pay me $10 for a story a month when I began twenty five years ago.

My first story gave me $5.00 & I felt very rich. I was 16 and considered my fortune made.

Now I can ask what I like & get it, but have not time or health to do much & refused $400 for some Xmas tales. A name is considered in the price.

The Atlantic used to pay $10, a page. Mr Ford of the Youth's Companion offered $50 for very short tales such as I could do two of in a day & I sometimes send him a couple and use them in "The Scrap Bag" later. A dollar a page used to be called good pay & Leslie gave me that.

Short stories are harder to do than long ones & it is an art to write good ones. Try Ford, but he wont pay more than $10 $15 or 20 I think.

Please do not speak of these prices in *public*, as I find publishers dont like the big ones mentioned. Do something really good & you can command your own prices. (*Selected Letters* 233)

[35] A periodical published by James R. Elliott.

Alcott's openness and frankness regarding her business matters is surprising. Perhaps if the identity of "Miss Churchill" were known, it might shed light on the circumstances of these somewhat personal revelations. Regardless, it is clear that Louisa May Alcott earned her success through her determination and her hard work and was willing to share what she had learned to help other women become competitive. She learned difficult lessons about whom to trust and about the unforeseen costs of a successful career. Alcott had proven, albeit at times anonymously, that she could write for a wide variety of audiences and that the "lady of Massachusetts"[36] was a worthy competitor who could command extraordinary remuneration for her contributions to literature within the nineteenth-century male publishing world.

[36] An announcement in the January 3, 1863 edition of Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper* proclaims that the $100 dollar first prize for what it dubbed "Our American Prize Story" is awarded to "a lady of Massachusetts" for "Pauline's Passion and Punishment" (9).

CHAPTER THREE
COMPETITION IN ALCOTT'S THRILLERS

Madeleine Stern correctly stated that "the publication of Alcott's sensational narratives in 1975 and 1976 was to prove pivotal to much of the Alcott reevaluation that followed" (Introduction, *Critical Essays* 3). Alcott had written to James Redpath that "[t]here are many other tales of the 'thrilling' style but they are not worth reprinting" (*Letters* 89), as many of her domestic stories had been. Of course, Alcott scholars disagreed. The secret writing life of "the children's friend" had been discovered.

Not only could Alcott produce what she once referred to as "moral pap for the young" (*Journals* 204), she could also weave intricate, action-packed plots of deception, manipulation, and murder. Alcott found that these sold well. Since she published anonymously or pseudonymously, she had free rein to indulge her own fantasies as well as those of her reading public. She had found a way to compete in the male world of publishing.

The female characters in Alcott's short stories often appear to be unusual specimens of nineteenth-century women. Since their competitive tendencies are not always positive qualities to possess, they always have to be careful to maintain at least an appearance of the decorum necessary to be considered well-bred. While exhibiting some of the usual traits of females of the time period, Alcott's characters possess capabilities that range from the art of subtle persuasion to the detailed creation of intricate and sometimes devious plots in order to achieve their goals. I

will discuss seven competitive Alcott characters from five representative thrillers: Jean Muir in "Behind a Mask, *or* A Woman's Power" (1866), Pauline Valary in "Pauline's Passion and Punishment" (1863), Beatrice and Theresa in "The Rival Prima Donnas" (1854), Ruth and Laura from "Thrice Tempted" (1867), Rose St. Just from "Perilous Play" (1869), Thyra and Nadine from "Which Wins?" and Cecelia Stanhope from "Betrayed by a Buckle." Alcott's vivid imagination combines with her attention to detail in these stories of the sometimes ruthless, always exciting competitive behaviors of her female characters.

Jean Muir in "Behind a Mask, *or* A Woman's Power"

"Behind a Mask, *or* A Woman's Power" was published in the *Flag of Our Union* under the pseudonym of A.M. Barnard in October and November of 1866. Madeleine Stern suggests that perhaps "A.M." stands for Alcott's mother, Abigail May, and "Barnard" for a family friend, educator Henry Barnard of Connecticut (Introduction, *Behind a Mask* xix). Published in Boston by Elliot, Thomes, and Talbot, the *Flag of Our Union* actively sought stories from Alcott. While Alcott was comfortable writing thrillers under the name A.M. Barnard, Elliot encouraged her to use her own name to take advantage of her notoriety from the acclaim garnered by *Hospital Sketches* (xxii). She apparently declined since her stories continued to appear anonymously or under a pen name. Her secret writing life would remain so until well into the following century and the Rostenberg unveiling.

Jean Muir is one of Alcott's most competitive female characters from the recovered thrillers. Alcott injects her own love of the theatrical into this actress'

superb performance for the Coventry family, making it possible for a thirty-year-old worldly woman to masquerade as a nineteen-year-old inexperienced governess.

Jean plays the part well as she arrives at the Coventry estate disguised as a young governess for Mrs. Coventry's daughter, while her actual intent is to compete for a husband among the males of the family. She is introduced to the members of the family: Mrs. Coventry and her sons Gerald and Edward, her daughter Bella, and niece Lucia; then she promptly faints at the piano. This seemingly weakened creature, who acknowledges that she has not been well and is only a week out of the hospital, covertly conveys pointed comments and observations, one at a time, to those in the company, relating to each person precisely what they need to hear in order to believe her story. She has descended upon the unsuspecting Coventry family to achieve a goal since she heard about them through an old acquaintance. What Jean ultimately desires, and will go to any lengths to attain, is a wealthy husband who can give her a title of nobility. This story she must keep to herself until the time is right. Jean's competitive nature lends itself well to this challenging undertaking.

With her refined mannerisms and charms and her adeptness at reading character, she masterfully manipulates each family member to think her exactly who and what she desires them to think. Only when she retires to her room and is alone is her true self revealed. She is seated on the floor of her room by her trunk and is sipping a drink she has just mixed from the contents of a flask. Alcott describes the scene as the façade comes undone:

> Still sitting on the floor she unbound and removed the long abundant braids from her head, wiped the pink from her face, took out several pearly teeth, and slipping off her dress appeared herself indeed, a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least. The metamorphosis was wonderful, but the disguise was more in the expression she assumed than in any art of costume or false adornment. Now she was alone and her mobile features settled into their natural expression, weary, hard, bitter. She had been lovely once, happy, innocent, and tender; but nothing of all this remained to the gloomy woman who leaned there brooding over some wrong, or loss, or disappointment which had darkened all her life. (11-12)

Jean practices her "art," as Alcott calls it, on everyone around her by recognizing the most effective way to win the admiration and confidence of each. She easily discerns the weaknesses of each family member and plays upon them one by one.

She meets Sir John Coventry, Edward and Gerald's uncle, and compliments him on the grandeur of his neighboring estate, knowing that he is extremely proud of his ancestral home:

> "I always wanted to see this fine old place, and ran over the first thing to satisfy myself."
>
> "And are you satisfied?" he asked, with a smile. "More than satisfied – I'm charmed; for it is the most beautiful spot I ever saw. (14)

Jean pretends that she does not know that this gentleman is Sir John, an eligible bachelor, and then acts as if it has just occurred to her. Her practiced gestures and mannerisms are executed to perfection.

In a premeditated scene, Jean manages to calm the elder brother Edward's magnificent horse as he watches. Alcott writes, "It was a pretty sight – the slender figure in the grass, the high-spirited horse bending his proud head to her hand. 'Good morning, Miss Muir. If I had not seen your skill and courage proved before my eyes, I should be alarmed for your safety'" (16). Jean is aware from the beginning that he sees her but pretends that she does not see him.

Bella loves flowers, so Jean uses her creative abilities to the fullest to win her admiration and trust. She makes a bouquet and gives it to Bella saying, "Take them to your mother, then, and ask her if I may have the pleasure of making her a daily nosegay; for I should find real delight in doing it, if it would please her" (17). Jean knows that being kind to Bella's mother will help to gain a valuable ally in her quest to achieve her goal.

Lucia falls under Jean's spell when Jean mentions how much Lucia resembles the painting of her mother hanging in a hallway and how beautiful the woman in the portrait is. "'It is the likeness of my mother' was the reply, given with a softened voice and eyes that looked up tenderly" (18). As with Bella, Jean is aware of Lucia's weakness and plays upon Lucia's pride in herself and her love for her mother in order to gain her trust.

Gerald Coventry, the younger brother, pretends to be unfazed the longest, but Jean finds a way to attract even his attention:

> It was a rich, sweet voice, singing a brilliant Italian air, and singing it with an expression that made the music doubly delicious. Stepping out of the French window, Coventry strolled along the sunny terrace, enjoying the song with the relish of a connoisseur. Others followed, and still he walked and listened, forgetful of weariness or time. As one exquisite air ended, he involuntarily applauded. Miss Muir's face appeared for an instant, then vanished, and no more music followed, though Coventry lingered, hoping to hear the voice again. (20)

Here Jean employs yet another of her talents, her voice, in her plan to achieve her goal. Jean actually takes to the stage when the family gathers for entertainment one evening by putting on several skits. Jean portrays the biblical Judith about to behead Holofernes in his tent. She needs no acting skills to exude the hatred she feels toward a gender that prevents her from attaining what she wants, yet at the same time can provide all that she desires. Jean's frustration with her lack of social status and the poverty she has known manifests itself in this scene. Elizabeth Keyser suggests that by having Jean Muir "pose as Judith beheading Holofernes, Alcott implies that her ruthlessness is justified" (xvii). In biblical times, women had no legal power, but through trickery and her powers of female seduction, Judith gains entrance into the enemy camp and the tent of its leader, Holofernes, and slays him while he sleeps. Judith is justified in this murder because she saves her people

from certain destruction. In another scene, Jean's competitive acting penetrates Gerald's formerly shielded emotions, and he feels what Alcott terms "the indescribable spell of womanhood" (53). Alcott relates: "She felt his hands tremble, saw the color flash into his cheek, knew that she had touched him at last, and when she rose it was with a sense of triumph which she found it hard to conceal" (53). Her competitive drive is getting her closer to her ultimate goal, but she must curb a tendency to celebrate too soon lest she jeopardize her pending success. Competition here requires not only talent, but a strict sense of discipline in order to be effective.

Jean is particularly careful in her manipulations of the elder Coventry, Sir John. Seeing that complete and lifelong protection is possible only by marrying the elder Sir John, Jean masterfully plots to attain her prize of not only wealth, but the noble title that he can give to her. Knowing that she does not want either of the younger men for her husband, she works the brothers against each other to the point where Edward stabs Gerald in the arm with a knife. Even in the midst of this altercation, Jean turns to nurse and gains praise from Mrs. Coventry's family doctor. They do not yet realize that every word, movement, expression, and gesture is carefully calculated for a desired effect, and that Jean is in complete control.

Jean's anticipatory powers are put to the test at the height of the story's deception when she is found out by Edward. He makes the mistake of giving Jean three days to vacate the Coventry home before he reveals her true self to the family. Being the ultimate competitor, Jean manages to accomplish in three days what most women could not see completed in a lifetime. She convinces Gerald to break his

engagement to Lucia and propose to her, tricks Edward into thinking that she has left the estate to catch a train, and woos Sir John into a quick marriage before he can speak to Edward about Jean's past. Letters are discovered from Jean to a confidant which describe her plan in detail, but before the family realizes what has happened, Jean Muir becomes Lady Coventry, forever protected and out of the reach of any punishment of which they might have deemed her deserving.

At the beginning of the story when Jean first meets the Coventrys, Gerald suspects that Jean is play acting and whispers a remark to Lucia, "Scene first, very well done." He does not realize that Jean has overheard it until she replies, "Thanks. The last scene shall be still better" (7). Gerald does not know that Jean really is an actress, nor does he understand the irony in his own choice of the word "scene." Jean remembers this exchange between Gerald and herself at the end of the story when Sir John and she are leaving the astounded family members. The story closes with Sir John calling for "Lady Coventry's carriage." Alcott writes,

> And as he gave the order, a smile broke over her face, for the sound assured her that the game was won. Pausing an instant on the threshold before she vanished from their sight, she looked backward, and fixing on Gerald the strange glance he remembered well, she said in her penetrating voice, "Is not the last scene better than the first?" (104)

Jean's skill at navigating in and around these people's lives during the course of playing her game is self-serving and even cruel at times, but she does seem sincere in her desire to devote herself to Sir John. Her many kindnesses to Bella and Mrs.

Coventry should not be overlooked either, although there is a strong argument to be made that Jean was kind and servile only to get what she wanted in the end: a wealthy, titled man to love her and provide for her for the rest of her life.

Readers are left to decide whether Jean is a cold, calculatingly selfish human being or simply a woman who has adapted well to the times in which she lives. It can be argued that she merely uses what skills she possesses to make the most of each opportunity for bettering her lot in life. Her superb skills and her delight in competing for what she wants are evident as she meets and gloriously conquers each challenge as it presents itself.

In "Behind A Mask" the character of Jean Muir endeavors to be what Judith Fetterley calls "the woman who can do it all, who can be all things to all people"; Fetterley goes on to suggest that in Jean Muir, "Alcott created in fact an idealized self-image" ("Impersonating" 3). Jean "became" everything that everyone seemed to need just as Alcott became everything each person in her family required of her: dutiful daughter, confidant, educator, bread winner, and even mother to her niece. Although Alcott's motives were not deceitful as were Jean's, they were advanced by a strong competitive drive, a healthy measure of determination, an abundant reservoir of creativity, and a limitless willingness to sacrifice herself for the sake of attaining the goals she set in order to provide for her family. Fetterley also suggests that Alcott's message in *Behind A Mask* is that the nineteenth-century middle class woman lacks an honest way to make a living, and like Jean Muir, her "survival depends upon one stratagem or another – sell your hair, sell your body, sell your

soul; all are equivalent moves in the same game" ("Impersonating" 2). Jean Muir is a skilled competitor in this desperate game.

Elaine Showalter suggests that "Jean's well-timed and carefully staged swoons, raptures, tears, and songs reveal the secret of feminine social and literary pretense" (Introduction, xxx). Showalter goes on to say that by overacting or "active appropriation, as the French feminist Luce Irigaray has argued, women can 'convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus … begin to thwart it'" (xxx). Showalter adds that, "Alcott makes use of the narrative conventions of Victorian sensation fiction, such as theatricals … to underscore her theme of feminine appropriation" (xxx). Jean was adept at reading people, finding their weaknesses, and then exploiting them for her own gain, certainly not a healthy type of competitive behavior.

Healthy competition encourages the giving of the best that one has to offer. Even if one loses a contest, the knowledge that nothing more could have been done – the best person won or a personal best was achieved – provides immense satisfaction. When the desire to win at all costs overcomes one's sense of fair play, the notion of competition can quickly take on an extremely negative quality. In the Introduction to *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott's Place in American Culture*, Sarah Elbert writes that "Muir threatens to bring down an entire genteel household if she is denied access to its domestic warmth and security on her own terms. Those terms include acceptance and understanding of the disguises and confidence games she has played to survive and remain free." She adds, "Jean

Muir, in the end, wins the right to her own individuality and her own home" (xv). Madeleine Stern describes Jean as "a woman filled with anger directed principally against the male lords of creation" (Introduction, *Behind a Mask* xviii). Gail K. Smith suggests that Jean's "vengefulness represents Alcott's anger against the patriarchal restrictions of her own family and the American literary marketplace" (34). Perhaps Alcott is sympathetic to Jean, the child of a single mother, who was poor and powerless throughout her life because she was a woman and allows her this victory over her enemy, the wealthy class, in the form of the Coventry family.

Pauline Valary in "Pauline's Passion and Punishment"

In this story of love, betrayal, and revenge, Alcott presents Pauline Valary, a former heiress who has lost not only her inheritance but the man who claimed to love her as well. Gilbert leaves Pauline to marry a wealthy woman, Barbara or Babie, as she is called, and only lets Pauline know in a letter some time later. Alcott writes that Pauline possesses "the energy of a nature that could wring strength from suffering, and dare to act where feebler souls would only dare desire" (109). This is a woman to be feared; she will not stop until her plan for revenge against Gilbert is executed completely. Her strong competitive drive will not permit her to accept gracefully that which she perceives as defeat.

Pauline will use any means or anyone to ensure the success of her plan. She enlists the aid of a very young, very wealthy man, Manuel, who loves her but thinks she is unattainable because of their age difference. Pauline shows Manuel the letter that she received from Gilbert telling Pauline of his deceit. Manuel sees the deep

hurt and the sharp pain that Gilbert's betrayal has caused her and almost politely comments, "'Traitor! Shall I kill him?'" She replies,

> "Why should you? Such revenge is brief and paltry, fit only for mock tragedies or poor souls who have neither the will to devise nor the will to execute a better. There are fates more terrible than death; weapons more keen than poniards, more noiseless than pistols. Women use such, and work out a subtler vengeance than men can conceive. Leave Gilbert to remorse – and me." (110)

Pauline constructs a plan to be the victor rather than victim, and as Manuel declares, "I would die for you!" Alcott notes how "A look of triumph swept across her face" (113). Phrases including "'weak, wicked, and unwomanly'" and "'a revengeful woman'" describe Pauline, who promises, "'[T]hat man must be taught that two can play at the game of hearts, taught soon and sharply. I can do this, can wound as I have been wounded, can sting him with contempt, and prove that I too can forget'" (114). This ill-fated competition will be won with the help of Manuel.

It is interesting to note that Alcott provides a male helper to enable her female character to carry out her plot of besting the lover who jilted her. This is an often-repeated scenario: women using men to get what they want; but Manuel is a willing partner, whereas Jean Muir played the Coventry family members against each other. Alcott gives both women almost hypnotic powers in their arsenal of weapons to use in their competitive quests. Of Gilbert, Pauline claims, "'I know his nature, and can stir him to his heart's core with a look, revenge myself with a word,

and read the secrets of his life with a skill he cannot fathom'" (118). Pauline seems the victor when she and Manuel greet Gilbert and Barbara at a resort, but Gilbert unexpectedly seizes the opportunity to confront Pauline when they are alone. He gets a favorable reaction from her that she did not intend, and she drops a glove in protest of his touch. As he retrieves it he says, "I have confessed my love. You scorn it. I have possessed myself of your secret, yet you deny it. Now we will try our strength together, and leave those children to their play." Pauline replies, "'We are the children, and we play with edge tools. There has been enough of this, there must be no more'" (127). Pauline tells Gilbert to leave with his wife, but Babie refuses. After a heated exchange of words between Gilbert and Pauline, readers deduce that a fierce and ominous competition in their future is certain

So begins the contest of wills and what Alcott describes as "the tournament so often held between man and woman – a tournament where the keen tongue is the lance, pride the shield, passion the fiery steed, and the hardest heart the winner of the prize, which seldom fails to prove a barren honor, ending in remorse" (131). This type of competition can only be brutal and destructive; there will be no winner here. Pauline schemes that Manuel should befriend Gilbert's wife while Pauline convinces Gilbert that she is still in love with him, only to drop him as cruelly as he did her. Her plan works perfectly. Not able to accept his loss in the contest, Gilbert fights with Manuel, sending Manuel over the edge of a cliff with Babie clinging to him. Gilbert and Pauline are left standing alone. Alcott closes, "And with that moment of impotent horror, remorse, and woe, Pauline's long punishment began"

(152). Alcott shows the destructive power that the excessively competitive goal of winning at any cost can have and how empty such a victory can be, a common seventeenth-century plot.

Beatrice and Theresa in "The Rival Prima Donnas"

In this story, Alcott portrays one of the most basic competitive urges of women: as rivals for the affections of a man. Petty schoolgirl jealousies are generally a harmless confusion of fiction with reality, but as girls grow into women and the stakes are raised, the competition takes on a new seriousness, and the consequences are real. Both of Alcott's female characters in this story are strong women with clear ideas about what they want from life, and both possess the competitive drive to do whatever is necessary to get it. This rivalry, however, goes to the extreme and ends with life-changing outcomes for all involved.

Beatrice, the much beloved, reigning prima donna at the opera, is ready to retire and marry her lover Claude, who is a painter. She has chosen her replacement, the previously unknown Theresa, who is younger and even more beautiful than Beatrice. Graciously, Beatrice prepares to step aside, content that fame and fortune were hers and happy in the knowledge that she will now spend her life with the man she loves. Alcott writes, "[S]he has long been the pride and favorite of the public as much for the blameless life she leads, as for her beauty and unequalled voice" (10). The man she has chosen to marry does not enjoy an equally stellar reputation, however. He is described as "'a worthy person, but not a fitting

husband for a true-hearted woman like Beatrice; he is gay, careless, and fickle too'" (11).

Theresa goes on stage and is triumphant in her debut. Beatrice is happy with the choice of Claude. Unfortunately, Claude shows his true colors when tempted by the lovely Theresa and falls under her spell when she presses him to choose between her and Beatrice. Because Beatrice has loved him so fully and been so kind and supportive toward Theresa, Claude feels a sorrow "that almost turns my pity into love again" (14). Upon hearing this, Theresa gives Claude an ultimatum. He wants to choose Beatrice because of Theresa's haughty and proud manner, but Theresa begins to cry, and her tears are too much for him. Claude relents and declares that he chooses Theresa, unaware that Beatrice is watching them.

Beatrice shows her graciousness once again when she gives Claude a chance to admit his betrayal, but he presses on with his deception: "'Look in my face, dear Claude, and answer truly, *do* you love Theresa?'" Claude replies, "'Foolish Beatrice, you can doubt me then, but do not fear, Theresa is no more to me than yonder picture, a lovely thing to look upon, and then forget'" (16). Beatrice pleads with him to be honest, giving him a chance to redeem himself in her eyes even if the response is not the one she prefers to hear, but he cannot be truthful and continues the deception. Beatrice attempts to play fairly and Alcott gives readers the sense that Beatrice would be able to accept the truth if only Claude would speak it. Beatrice is a more rounded character than Theresa and displays an air of competitive fairness that is missing altogether in Theresa, who depends on her

strong powers of persuasion, including tears, to get what she wants. Beatrice's fairness has limits, however. After this second display of Claude's false speech, Alcott's lovely leading lady loses whatever good graces she had remaining and plots the end of her rival. She plans a most unpleasant death for the ungrateful Theresa as she sits in Claude's studio and weaves a crown of roses to drop worshipfully onto Theresa's head at that evening's performance. The unsuspecting Claude cautions her not to make it too heavy since she will be dropping it from her box high above the stage. Unbeknownst to Claude or the fated Theresa, Beatrice also attaches an iron crown inside the flowered ring.[37] At the appointed time, the crown is tossed and Theresa suffers a horrible, crushing blow to her head from the iron crown and dies. Alcott's ending describes Claude as an old man who dies in a convent and Beatrice as an old woman who dies, still singing, in a home for the insane. In these characters, a spirit of competition fueled by deceit and uncurbed jealousy quickly accelerates into physical harm. Again, Alcott uses the theme of unchecked competitive urges resulting in a hollow victory.

Ruth and Laura in "Thrice Tempted"

Alcott again uses the love-triangle formula in this story, and again it successfully produces a thrilling tale of two women competing for the affections of a man. In this story, Laura uses her competitive abilities and her beauty to selfishly attempt to acquire a husband for herself who is already promised to someone else. Laura is instantly unlikable because she flaunts her beauty and denigrates her friend

[37] Alcott alludes to Medea. In Greek mythology, Medea used her talents both for good and for evil purposes (Bullfinch).

Ruth, who is not as physically attractive but has an old family name while Laura does not. Laura has been successful in garnering several offers of marriage, but none of the suitors has been wealthy enough or handsome enough to satisfy her desire for a comfortable economic and social future. Walter Strathsay is both. Laura sees the Strathsay family jewels that Ruth's fiancé has bestowed upon her and is jealous. She cannot understand how a woman as plain as Ruth, "a slight, dark girl, with no beauty but much strength of character in her face" (99), could have attracted a wealthy and handsome man like Walter when Laura, as beautiful and as mesmerizing as she is, has not.

Laura focuses her magnetic charms upon the fiancé of her trusting friend. Laura's competitive urges are fed by her conceit and by her wounded pride. She acts pleasantly enough on the surface, but her deception is discovered by Ruth in several letters that Laura and Strathsay have exchanged. Laura appears innocent in the letters, yet she hints to Walter that Ruth is boasting about winning him as though he were some sort of prize. Ruth sees in the letters that Walter eventually admits to Laura that their correspondence has been a mistake, and he will not continue their dangerous friendship because he loves Ruth. In Ruth's mind, she instantly forgives him for his flirtation with Laura. Alcott directs readers' sympathy to Ruth, who did not engage in a competition with Laura over Walter and even pleaded with Laura to "not take my one lover away, for the pleasure of adding another conquest to the many you have already won" (106). If only Ruth had been patient and not taken matters into her own hands with her own sense of competition

as revenge, things would have worked themselves out splendidly. But, human nature being what it is, she remains angry with her competitor and contemplates a way to cause Laura the same pain, or worse, that Laura has caused her.

Ruth is tempted to exact revenge several times as the story progresses. She handles her first opportunity for revenge admirably by warning Laura of the danger of a contagious disease that is present in the community where Ruth knows that Laura regularly goes to secretly receive Walter's correspondence. Laura has already contracted the disease, however, but Ruth has the personal satisfaction of knowing that she did what she could within her breadth of knowledge to try to prevent it. Her sense of morality and the tugging of her conscience bid her to do the right thing, but with an interesting slant: Ruth did not even entertain the idea of competing with Laura for Walter perhaps because she has no confidence that she would be chosen over Laura, but she does pause to consider that a twist of fate, such as Laura dying, would solve her problem for her. Ruth hated Laura, but perhaps did not consider herself capable of competing against her. Another reason may be that Ruth feels that competing is not something that a lady does and so does not engage in it. Laura, however, seems to view competing over men as a game she enjoys immensely.

Ruth's second chance for revenge occurs as Ruth is nursing Laura back to health in her room, and the draperies blowing in the breeze are about to catch fire. Ruth is unmoving as "[a] dreadful clam possessed her, and when a sudden blaze lit the room, she only smiled – an awful smile – she saw it in the mirror and trembled

at herself" (111-12). Laura awakes and screams for Walter, bringing Ruth to her senses. Tragedy is averted as Ruth puts out the fire and realizes that she is "[b]urdened with the weight of the nearly-committed crime, and conscious of the power her unhappy love possessed to lead her into evil" (112). She frees Walter from his promise, but Laura dies. Just before she is buried, Ruth is saying her final goodbyes to Laura and forgives her for all she has done to make Ruth miserable. She notices dampness on Laura's face indicating a possibility that she might be alive. This is Ruth's third opportunity for revenge: should she tell someone what she has seen and possibly save Laura's life, or should she remain silent and let her be buried since everyone assumes she is dead?

Ruth must make a choice whether to follow her conscience or her desires. Alcott describes the scene: "For several minutes Ruth stood white and motionless as the dead girl, while the old struggle, fiercer than ever, raged in her heart. Fear whispered that she was not dead. Pity pleaded for her, lying helplessly before her, and conscience sternly bade her do the right, forgetful of all else" (113). But Ruth decides to tell no one what she suspects, and Laura is buried.

Ruth's competitive urge to be rid of her rival is satisfied, but only temporarily. In her mind she cannot put aside that in her anxiousness to continue with her promised happy life with Walter free from Laura's interference, she may have been responsible for Laura being buried alive. Ruth's passive-aggressive nature to do nothing when she suspected that Laura might be alive is a covert form of competition. Ruth fights a battle within herself trying to justify what she wants

against the reality that exists. Her inaction changes the reality; it ensures that Laura will be dead. Ruth takes no responsibility at first, because she feels she has devised no scheme, taken no action to cause Laura's death. The result is that Walter discovers the truth the night before their wedding when Laura confesses while sleepwalking, a reference to "Macbeth," a play Alcott knew well (*Journals* 14). In his opinion, Ruth killed Laura with her silence. Walter confirms what Ruth has known in her heart all along: Laura died a horrible death because of Ruth's unwillingness to act. Her unhealthy passive-aggressiveness is the only form of competitiveness in which Ruth was able to engage.

Rose St. Just in "Perilous Play"

Just as it may seem unusual to readers of "the children's friend" to read stories by Louisa May Alcott that include murder and mayhem, it may be even stranger still to read those created around the idea of using powerful drugs for recreational pleasure. "Perilous Play" is a title that is still apt in 2010; that is, consuming strong drugs with no knowledge of their potency and side-effects is a perilous activity in which to engage. In this story Alcott sets drug use as only a slightly daring activity since the hashish is provided by a "young doctor." It can even have unexpected benefits as long as no one gets hurt while under its influence. Her characters could have died during the course of the story, but they survive, and in the rather light-hearted ending, two characters even praise hashish for bringing them together as a couple. Madeleine Stern notes that Alcott was most likely treated with narcotics when she became ill while serving as a nurse during the Civil War,

so in “Perilous Play” Alcott is probably speaking from experience when she describes a “heavenly dreaminess” followed by a period of excitement when “every nerve was overstrained, every pulse beating like a triphammer” (Introduction, *Selected Fiction* xviii).

A request for something to do to relieve *ennui* leads Dr. Meredith to produce hashish for the entertainment of his party that includes both young ladies and young men. The discussion centers on a competition to see who can consume the most, and an agreement is reached to meet later in the day to discuss their individual experiences. Only two members of the party, Rose St. Just and Mark Done, appear to refuse the hashish. They go out in a boat to look for some of their friends who have taken the drugs because they fear for their safety and end up getting caught in a storm themselves. Readers later learn that both Rose and Mark have ingested some hashish, and Alcott describes the effects they feel. Rose admits that she took it to overcome her inhibitions and hoped it would make her “soft and lovable, like other women.” She was tired of being “a lonely statue” (127). Mark admits that he was unable to speak to Rose about his feelings for her until he took the hashish, but his overtures are perceived as threatening to Ruth until the drug wears off.

Ruth’s desire to be able to compete with other women for the attention of men was almost her undoing in this story. Her competitive nature was not controlled, and so unexpectedly led her to succumb to peer pressure to do things, including drugs and becoming intimate with Mark, that she normally would not have done. They are rescued by a lighthouse keeper and return home safely vowing

to each other to tell no one of their hashish experience since it could have ended badly for both of them. Since it did not, but actually led them into a harrowing experience that they endured together, Mark celebrates their happy ending by declaring, "'Heaven bless hashish, if its dreams end like this!'" (127). Alcott provides an important lesson for her readers, but gives a happy ending to what could have been a disastrous tale of misguided competitive urges. Alcott's ending to another short story entitled "Which Wins?" is not so pleasant.

Thyra and Nadine in "Which Wins?"

First published in the March 1869 issue of *Frank Leslie's Lady's Magazine* then reprinted in *From Jo March's Attic* in 1993, "Which Wins?" focuses upon a competition between two women. Thyra and Nadine should be more than satisfied with the gifts of beauty and poise they possess, but instead choose to "cordially hate one another" (75) as they compete to see who can procure the most lavish lifestyle with the highest title of nobility. Alcott describes Thyra as "the handsomest" and as

> a stately blonde with magnificent hair, sleepy blue eyes, and the figure of a Juno. She was neither very witty nor wise, but her slow smile was pronounced 'divine.' The movements of her white arms rendered speech unnecessary, and she had sufficient sense to make the most of her charms. (77)

Alcott gives an equally revealing description of Thyra's rival Nadine:

> Nadine was a brilliant brunette, with eyes like diamonds, vivid red lips, a slender figure, and a foot that won her more compliments than her

> witty tongue. She possessed that natural grace which is often more attractive than beauty, and a face so arch, piquant, and bewitching, that few could resist its charm. (77)

The women are not competing over one man; their ambition is to outdo each other and "make the best match" which leads each of them to engage in deception and treachery. Several young women who are serving as hostesses at the Paris exhibition[38], including Thyra and Nadine, hope to meet and marry wealthy visitors to the grand event. The plot is fueled by a wager between two gentlemen, Delmar and Albany, concerning which once-humble beauty will marry which wealthy and titled man. Albany suggests that they might divulge some information to help one of the young women, but in a perverted sense of admiration, Delmar states, "These gay butterflies know how to take care of their own interests with a worldly wisdom which amazes me" (76). He continues, "Say nothing, but stand aside and watch the play; it is almost as interesting as roulette" (76). The casual comparison of the drama of these women's lives to a game of chance is strongly indicative of the plight of the nineteenth century woman lacking a means to support herself. Alcott suggests that to place one's fate into the hands of another, to relinquish power over oneself to avoid a life of poverty, is true deprivation.

In "Which Wins?" Alcott provides a cautionary tale for her readers regarding not only the negative aspects of competition, but the dangers inherent in

[38] This event was visited by almost all the aristocracy of Europe. Madeleine Stern suggests that Alcott set the story at the Paris Exposition of 1867 because of the attendance at that event by Alcott's publisher, Frank Leslie, Alcott's editor and Leslie's mistress, Mrs. Miriam Squire, and Mrs. Squire's husband (Introduction *From Jo March's Attic* xxiv-xxv).

reaching too far above one's social class, and depending on fleeting beauty to achieve a life of social and financial security. Rather than work to earn a living for themselves and be in control of their lives, these young women set out to marry well regardless of the lack of feelings of love or a sense of freedom of will or choice. Wealth and position are what they both desire and each plots to achieve them to a greater degree than the other. It is a competition to win not just a prize, but the best possible prize that the other cannot match.

In their quest to best each other as the story progresses, contentment at winning the contest will no longer satisfy the young women; they want the ruin of their rival also. Nadine initially outmaneuvers Thyra by revealing that Thyra's fiancé, a count, is a former convict. A smoldering discarded cigarette strategically placed on the lace of Nadine's headpiece by Thyra condemns Nadine, now married to a marquis, to a life of physical disfigurement; Nadine is deprived of the enjoyment of her "victory." Thyra then breaks her engagement with the count and declares, "*I* preserve my beauty and my freedom still, and it is *I* who win at last!" (91). But there is no victory here either, as Thyra vanishes, "never to be seen by them again" (91). She has lost her chance to marry well now that she is an outcast from high society because of her malicious deed. The desire of a woman to attain position and wealth is also explored in Alcott's tale "Betrayed by a Buckle."

Cecelia Stanhope in "Betrayed by a Buckle"

Another Alcott short story first published in *Frank Leslie's Lady's Magazine* in February of 1870 and reprinted in *From Jo March's Attic* in 1993 is "Betrayed

by a Buckle." Cecelia Stanhope is the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy man and uses subterfuge to gain an inheritance that legally belongs to her cousin Cecil. Alcott creates a female character who cannot legally compete for an inheritance of her father's estate because she is a female and is illegitimate. This exclusion of women from family lineage is a stronghold of patriarchal societies. It also emphasizes the plight of women who engaged in illicit affairs with wealthy masters: paternity carried no obligation and only the charity which the master chose to bestow.

In order to share in what Cecelia feels should be her rightful inheritance, she contrives with her grandmother to impersonate a child who died, the real Cecelia Stanhope, and so inherits the estate fraudulently. Her cousin, Cecil Stanhope, visits Cecelia and they fall in love. Before they can be married, Cecil discovers Cecelia's deception and confronts her. He no longer wishes to marry her (even though he said he loves her), but he "freely offered her safety and a maintenance" (142). She declines saying, "Not even the offer of a favor will I accept from you, for I have a kinder friend to fly to. Take your rightful place, and enjoy it if you can, haunted as it must be by the memory of the stain I have brought upon the name you are so proud of " (143). Cecil watches as Cecelia takes a palette knife and scores a painting he had been creating of her, tearing the image into strips. It is an indication of Cecelia removing herself from the world; her next action is to run to a balcony and throw herself over to a courtyard below. Cecil goes to her, but she brushes him away saying, "Let me die here; I have no other home" (143) and "Forgive me, for I

loved you!" (144). Within the imaginative scenarios in Alcott's sensation fiction, she brings forth the issues that women like Cecelia are faced with in a society in which they have few rights and privileges unless born to wealth and position. Cecelia's competitive desire to better her situation when she really cannot compete at all causes her to resort to dishonesty. When discovered, she feels her only recourse to remain independent and in control of her destiny is to commit suicide. She has once again been negated by the society in which she lives; she will not remain within that society and effectively removes herself from it.

The calm detachment of Cecil reflects little real love or concern for his blood relative whom he condescendingly refers to at the end of the tale as his "unhappy cousin" (144), perhaps Alcott's representation for many men's lack of concern for women's issues of her day. Alcott strongly supported any measures, such as suffrage and education for women, that would empower women and enable them to make adequate wages to support themselves. Unlike Cecelia's false empowerment attained through deception, real empowerment would bring women choices.

Through the characters in these stories, Alcott provides readers with distinct personalities who choose their life paths, sometimes in error, then adapt as needed and as is possible to compete in the situations in which they find themselves. Their competitive instincts have differing motivations and varying strategies resulting in outcomes as individual as the characters themselves. Their competitive natures are free to explore and achieve in a positive way or to contrive deviously in a negative

way to attain what they wish; either is contrary to the social norm of remaining solely within a confining sphere. They can attain security for a lifetime as with Jean Muir, pursue revenge as with Pauline Valary and Cecilia Stanhope, inflict punishment as with Beatrice, Theresa, Ruth, Thyra, and Nadine, or seek momentary pleasures as with Rose. The intertwining of positive and negative connotations that these women's actions put on the idea of competition may make readers think twice about competing and what happens to real competitive urges that become subject to weaknesses of human nature such as jealousy and greed. Alcott gives her female characters qualities that result from the positive use of competitive energies; she also assigns unfeminine and even criminal attributes that result from some competitive tendencies being permitted to develop without discipline or restraint. A strong competitive drive can foster great accomplishment and success. If unchecked, however, it can also result in destruction, disfigurement, and even death.

CHAPTER FOUR

COMPETITION IN ALCOTT'S NOVELS

This chapter will focus on female characters in five of Louisa May Alcott's novels, Sylvia Yule in *Moods* (1864), Christie Devon in *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873), the March daughters and Mrs. March in *Little Women* (1868), and Rose Campbell and Phebe Moore in *Eight Cousins* (1874) and its sequel, *Rose in Bloom* (1876). While Alcott's other novels such as *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877) and *The Inheritance* (1849) include several female characters, I limited this study to these representative works by Alcott that deal specifically with women and competition. Several different types of competition that arise include women competing with each other for the affections of men, women competing with men to establish equal or superior ability, and women competing within themselves to establish their self-worth. Although *Work* and *Eight Cousins* first appeared in serialized forms, and Alcott's publisher did require her to shorten her original manuscript of *Moods*, these longer works by Alcott generally allowed her to fully develop her female characters within more detailed plots since she was not as constrained by the space limitations of the periodicals in which her short stories were published.

Sylvia Yule in *Moods*

Sylvia Yule in *Moods* is young and innocent and has been raised in a wealthy, sheltered environment and so has difficulty channeling her need to prove

herself into appropriate scenarios. She is an adventure seeker whose immaturity and competitive tendencies serve as hindrances to her attempts at self-fulfillment.

For this discussion, I am primarily using Alcott's first version of *Moods* published in 1864. I am focusing on this earlier version because it is Alcott writing before acquiring fame as the writer of *Little Women,* at a time when she was not as concerned with upholding the image of a writer for children; in fact, she was writing her sensation stories at this time and was quite successful in selling them to various periodicals. Her exploration of marriage ideals and divorce realities had an unbridled quality about it, perhaps owing to the sensation stories, that was tempered in the later version. Sarah Elbert describes the later 1882 version as "a tidier, more formulaic work" (xv), but Elbert posits that "it is in the early, romantic version of *Moods* that Alcott steps out from behind a mask and presents little women, true women, and scheming fallen women – all in one novel under her own name" (xvi). This is not a novel written for children and hardly seems as though its author could be one who writes for children as well. Alcott's diversity is remarkable.

Moods explores the difficulties that strong-willed women faced in the struggle for self-hood. Saxton claims that "*Moods* registers a quiet complaint against the restraints imposed on active women" (272). These constraints will have consequences for certain women, whose very natures cannot accept them, making it impossible for these women to adhere to them. Ruth K. MacDonald writes, "Sylvia is only uncontrollably moody as compared to the rigid, confined model of womanhood to which she is bound to compare herself" (79). Not only is Alcott's

heroine active, she openly confronts her struggle with marriage and divorce in terms of her self-hood: first and foremost, she must be true to herself, a difficult pursuit within a patriarchal society.

As a young woman experiencing her first encounters with the opposite sex, Sylvia naively goes on an overnight excursion with her brother Mark and two of his friends, Adam Warwick and Geoffrey Moor. She tries to hide that "a most intense longing had taken possession of her," but "a mute appeal in the wistful eyes that looked across the glittering bay to the green hills beyond" proves to be a force that cannot be denied (29). She shows the young men that she is quite capable of accompanying them by working the "three miracles" her brother requires: permission from her father, appropriate clothing, and a modest pack. That she is permitted to go seems unusual considering that "trips like this are not the fashion for young ladies," but Sylvia has "ruled the house ever since she was born" and easily extracts permission from her father (30). She dons "a gray gown, with a jaunty jacket of the same" over a green skirt, "the pedestrian length of which displayed boots of uncompromising thickness" (31). At the appointed time she waits for her companions, "sitting on the piazza, with her hammock rolled into a twine sausage at her feet, her hat firmly tied on, her scrip packed, and her staff in her hand" (31-32). Sylvia is headstrong and not used to being told that she cannot do things, so she is prepared to meet and overcome any objections or concerns that may remain which would question her ability to keep up with the young men on their sojourn. Sylvia is determined to prove herself an equal partner in their

adventure and is prepared to compete not only on an intellectual level, but on a physical level as well.

This feminism in Louisa May Alcott's fiction is drawn from her life experiences. Her characters take on her athletic abilities including riding, running, and rowing as well as her sense of adventure. Sylvia Yule is permitted to go on an overnight excursion with three young men because one of them is her brother. Alcott places the bulk of the trip in the wilderness where few other people are encountered, perhaps an indication of the deep effects that the German Romanticism of Goethe, which she had read in Emerson's collections, had on her writings. Feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir comments on the sense of freedom in, and communing with, nature experienced by a young female in her last stage of freedom before marriage. In *The Second Sex* (1949), de Beauvoir attaches this freedom and nature to a young woman when she writes, "It is not without some regret that she shuts behind her the doors of her new home; when she was a girl, the whole countryside was her homeland; the forests were hers" (450). After marriage, de Beauvoir writes, "Reality is concentrated inside the house, while outer space seems to collapse" (450). This concurs with the Victorian cult of "True Womanhood" that isolates the family unit in order to provide a shelter and safe haven from the outside world. It is interesting to note the lack of change in attitudes across this span of time from Alcott in 1864 to Beauvoir in 1949. Neither Alcott nor her feminist character Sylvia Yule can quite conform to being "True Women" because of their competitive natures, a problem that Alcott recognizes because she

is personally familiar with it and a problem that appears to continue for women, according to de Beauvior, well beyond the nineteenth century.

Even engaging in simple, everyday competitive activities can be construed as being anti-feminine or man-like. Sylvia struggles between wanting to be her competitive self and wanting to maintain the manner of a young lady. Sylvia is at first content to sit and listen "to the musical dip of well-pulled oars" (32) as the trio takes to their boat for a journey upriver, but her complacency does not last long. Alcott herself had spent enough time rowing on the Concord River and on Walden Pond to know what constitutes well-pulled oars and gives this knowledge to her character Sylvia. Not to be outdone by her companions, Sylvia attempts to take part in everything they do; she even "demanded her turn and wrestled with one big oar" (34), but Alcott acknowledges the futility of Sylvia's contribution, adding, "while Warwick sat behind and did the work" (34). Sylvia's competitive nature gives her the desire to equal her companions, but she is physically inferior; Warwick is the stronger and is bound to be a gentleman and do the rowing.

In the group's first night in an old barn , Sylvia is forced to choose between restraining her almost overwhelming sense of fear of the strange noises in the barn or being viewed by her traveling companions as weak and lacking in emotional fortitude and therefore, once again, inferior. During the night Sylvia awakens startled by movements close by her in the hay. She realizes the movements could not be caused by any of her companions who are some distance from her. Alcott describes Sylvia's fright thus: "A strong desire to cry out possessed her for a

moment, but was checked; for with all her sensitiveness Sylvia had much common sense, and that spirit which hates to be conquered even by a natural fear" (39). She recalled "her scornful repudiation of the charge of timidity" (39), and she kept her emotions in check by promising, "'I'll not call if my hair turns gray with fright, and I find myself an idiot to-morrow. I told them to try me, and I won't be found wanting at the first alarm'" (40). She waits alone in her fear until first light and is quite relieved to see that the rustling is caused by a small calf. She triumphs silently since "having fought her fears alone she enjoyed her success alone" (41). Sylvia endures personal discomfort rather than sacrifice any measure of equality and capability that she can claim with her brother and his friends. She does not share this experience with them when they awake in the morning for fear of ridicule, and thus avoids being made to feel inferior. Sylvia will not risk the possibility of falling short of their standards of bravery.

Despite any fear, the competitive desires are recurring, and they continue through episodes of basket weaving and berry picking.[39] The baskets take on seemingly male and female qualities: Warwick's basket is strong and capable, yet ugly and made with grass, while Sylvia's is weak and inadequate, but attractively shaped like a canoe. Warwick discourages Sylvia's suggestion that he row their boat across the river to find berries to put in the baskets, but she is insistent in a challenging tone and he complies (43). Sylvia finds a mass of berries on the bank and lets him know in no uncertain terms that she was right about their presence.

[39] In her journals, Alcott refers to going "berrying" (*Journals* 43).

She picks the berries in a frenzy: “Vines caught at her by sleeve and skirt as if to dishearten the determined plunderer, but on she went with a wrench and a rip, an impatient ‘Ah!’ and a hasty glance at damaged fabrics and fingers” (47). The basket that Sylvia makes comes apart when filled, however, scattering the bounty that she had gathered just as she brags how she had outdone Warwick in berry picking. His laughter both wounds and irritates her: “Hot, tired, disappointed, and, hardest of all, laughed at, it was one of those times that try girls’ souls” (48).

Warwick’s response to Sylvia’s competitive tendencies is the kindness and gentleness of a teacher. He shows her how to mend her basket with techniques he learned from Indians. He is mindful that in her excitement to gather lilies she nearly falls overboard, and finishes the gathering himself (49). He notices the bruises on her arms from the frantic berry picking, yet no berry stains on her lips from eating any of the berries. He tries to compliment her on her selflessness and offers the lilies as comfort. Sylvia does not hesitate to admit openly, “I don’t deserve that compliment, because I was only intent on outdoing you if possible; so you are mistaken again you see” (49). Again, Warwick’s response is not that of victor in one of Sylvia’s contrived competitions; rather, it is the response of a compassionate, admiring friend. He espouses that “[s]ome faces are so true an index of character that one cannot be mistaken. If you doubt this look down into the river, and such an one will inevitably smile back at you” (50). If she will but look into the river, she will see a face of character: her own.

Alcott allows them a few moments of serenity before Sylvia's need to compete with Warwick arises once again. They spy a forest fire in the distance that Sylvia feels compelled to investigate since it "must be a grand one," and she naively suggests, "[L]et us go nearer and enjoy it" (50), oblivious to the dangers it presents. Warwick tries to tell her it is too far away for them to walk to easily, but Sylvia asserts herself by retorting, "Not at all. I am no helpless, fine lady. I can walk, run, and climb like any boy; so you need have no fears for me" (51). Alcott keeps the competitive edge of her character alive to a fault as Sylvia quickly realizes that Adam was right but she cannot admit it, not even to herself:

> Sylvia had not walked five minutes before she was satisfied that it *was* too far; but having rebelled, she would not own herself in the wrong, and being perverse, insisted upon carrying her point, though she walked all night. On she went over walls, under rails, across brooks, along the furrows of more than one ploughed field, and in among the rustling corn, that turned its broad leaves to the sun, always in advance of her companion, who followed with exemplary submission, but also with a satirical smile, that spurred her on as no other demonstration could have done. Six o'clock sounded from the church behind the hill; still the wood seemed to recede as she pursued, still close behind her came the steady footfalls, with no sound of weariness in them, and still Sylvia kept on, till breathless, but successful, she reached the object of her search. (51)

Sylvia presses on despite her physical discomfort and will not even consider telling Warwick he was right about the distance and the terrain and that she was wrong to insist that they proceed.

In a glaring display of immature triumph, she finally beholds the ravages of the forest fire and exclaims, "Ah, this is grand! I wish Mark and Mr. Moor were here. Aren't you glad you came, sir?" (51). Warwick does not reply because he hears a cry for help and instructs Sylvia to wait where it is safe until he investigates and returns. Once again Alcott shows her character's competitive impulses: "For ten minutes Sylvia waited, pale and anxious; then her patience gave out, and saying to herself, 'I can go where he does, and women are always more helpful than men at such times,' she followed in the direction whence came the fitful sound of voices" (52). Sylvia loses her way and quickly finds herself surrounded by fire. Warwick rescues her and delivers a chiding speech about obedience, saying that Sylvia would never "make a Casabianca" (53). This reference to the character in the poem of the same name by Felicia Hemans infuriates Sylvia. She insists that Casabianca was silly for staying on a burning boat simply because he was told never to leave his ship; rather, he should think for himself and save himself.

Sylvia recognizes and espouses the value of independent thought, but she misses the point that had she remained at the site where Warwick had told her to wait, she would have avoided the peril that required rescue. Since she overextends herself in her desire to compete with the young men and goes beyond her physical limits, she faces certain death unless aided by a stronger male. Sylvia simply cannot

admit she was foolish and wrong even though her argument is not logical. She later tries to make amends and prove that she is knowledgeable about something, in this case first-aid, by insisting over his protests that Warwick allow her to dress his burns sustained in the fire.

Sylvia's companions have their own views of her competitive activities. Before Sylvia retires for the night, she leaves her boots by the fire to dry. Warwick comments to Moor, "The wearer of those defiant looking articles is the most capricious piece of humanity it was ever my fortune to see. You have no idea of the life she has led me since you left" (57). His exasperated tone gives no acknowledgment of Sylvia's physical or mental capabilities except that they have the effect of mystifying men. Moor is in agreement with this tone as he replies, "I can imagine it" (57).

Warwick continues his assessment of Sylvia: "She is as freakish, and wears as many shapes as Puck; a gnat, a will-o'-the-wisp, a Sister of Charity, a meek-faced child; and one does not know in which guise she pleases most. Hard the task of him who has and tries to hold her" (57). His description reflects the sense of woman as belonging to a man that is common in the time period as well as the notion that her role is to please a man, in this case, the one who "wins" her.

Moor is a little kinder in his reply: "Hard yet happy; for a word will tame the high spirit, a look touch the warm heart, a kind act be repaid with one still kinder" (57). The notion that a woman's spirit, most certainly including any competitive inclinations, needs to be put, and kept, under the control of her husband appears to

be a matter of course within any union so that happiness and harmony may reign. Sarah Elbert comments that *Moods* "claimed a special role for women's moral influence, but in a transcendental mode. Its author insisted upon a woman's right to selfhood; without it, she could not develop her natural spiritual powers."

Alcott shows, according to Elbert, that it is necessary for women to first "possess themselves" (*Hunger* 119). Elbert also emphasizes that they must be free to learn and grow in order to become self-reliant and achieve self-respect (142). If under another's control, even a husband's, there can be no freedom, hence no chance for the cultivation and subsequent growth of the self.

Alcott again makes rowing a competitive activity in Chapter Five of *Moods* and her personal familiarity with rowing clearly emerges. She uses the terminology of the sport easily in her depictions of the actions from the opening line: "Hitherto they had been a most decorous crew" (59). The morning after the fire finds the group feeling renewed and back in their boat on the river when they notice an approaching vessel.

Sylvia's competitive side again emerges as she declares, '"Mark, there is a boat coming up behind us with three gentlemen in it, who evidently intend to pass us with a great display of skill. Of course you won't let it'" (59). As the oarsmen row faster,

> Sylvia watched both boats, yearning to take an oar herself, yet full of admiration for the well-trained rowers, whose swift strokes set the river in a foam and made the moment one of pleasure and excitement. The blue shirts

> did their best against competitors who had rowed in many crafts and many waters. They kept the advantage till near the bend, then Mark's crew lent their reserve strength to a final effort, and bending to their oars with a will, gained steadily, till, with a triumphant stroke, they swept far ahead, and with oars at rest waited in magnanimous silence till the Juanita came up, gracefully confessing her defeat by a good-humored cheer from her panting crew. (60)

Sylvia would like to join in by taking an oar, but cannot; she is not well trained in rowing, as readers witnessed earlier, but she has enough knowledge of the sport to appreciate the superior skills of her boat mates.

Alcott recognizes the notion of a friendly, collegiate rivalry when she describes the scene just after the race: "For a moment the two boats floated side by side, while the young men interchanged compliments and jokes, for a river is a highway where all travelers may salute each other, and college boys are 'Hail fellow! well met' with all the world" (60).

A briefly mysterious conversation ensues when a rower from the opposing vessel recognizes Warwick; Mark quizzes Warwick about this exchange and is surprised by one of Warwick's answers. In describing Mark's reaction, Alcott writes, "Mark caught a crab of the largest size" which is rowing terminology for getting one's oars caught in the water. The force created by the dragging oar strongly jolts the rower. Alcott's familiarity with rowing terms is obvious; several

references to rowing appear throughout her works and she is comfortable with the use of a phrase that is unfamiliar to most people.[40]

This boat race does not appear in the revised version of *Moods.* In the later version, the "decorous crew" races only a storm (and loses); Alcott substitutes a footrace between Sylvia and Max (Mark in her earlier version) while Moor and Warwick watch:

> When they turned to follow, they saw the girl running down the long slope of meadow as if excitement gave her wings. Max raced after her, but the others tramped on together, enjoying the spectacle; for few girls know how to run or dare try; so this new Atalanta was the more charming for the spirit and speed with which she skimmed along,[41] dropping her cloak and looking back as she ran, bent on outstripping her brother. (249)

Alcott pens Warwick's surprised reaction to this display of feminine quickness and agility: "'A pretty piece of energy. I didn't know the creature had so much life in her,' said Warwick, laughing as Sylvia leaped a brook at a bound and pressed up the slope beyond, like a hunted doe" (249). Warwick and Moor both stopped "to give a cheer as Sylvia reached the road and stood leaning on a gate-post panting, flushed, and proud" (249). The "hunted doe" simile Alcott uses here is surprising in that it indicates that for a female to excel, in this case run fast, she must have a

[40] How many readers of *Moods* thought there actually were crabs in that river? Upon my first few readings of this novel, I mentally related catching crabs to catching fish and thought nothing more of it. Subsequently, my daughter enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh and joined crew, so the term "catching crab" came into my vocabulary. The next time I read *Moods*, I readily understood the meaning Alcott intended in this particular scene and had a markedly increased appreciation of her knowledge of this sport as well as her sense of humor.

[41] In Greek mythology Atalanta agreed to marry the suitor who could outrun her (Bullfinch).

compelling exterior reason to do so. Alcott portrays Sylvia as a female deer being chased by a hunter, most likely male. Unlike a man, she cannot simply run fast for the immense personal joy and satisfaction it brings her. In fact, this interpretation relegates the female to an inferior position of the fearful and powerless hunted, while it elevates the male to the superior position of the fearless, powerful hunter who is in control. This depiction is surprising because Alcott's own enjoyment of running is noted in her journals and other writings and is without sexual references that denote any sense of female inferiority. In her journal she writes, "After breakfast I washed dishes, and ran on the hill till nine, and had some thoughts, – it was so beautiful up there" (*Journals* 45), and "I ran in the wind and played be a horse, and had a lovely time in the woods with Anna and Lizzie" (45), and "Had a splendid run, and got a box of cones to burn" (51), and "I had an early run in the woods before the dew was off the grass. The moss was like velvet, and as I ran under the arches of yellow and red leaves I sang for joy, my heart was so bright and the world so beautiful" (57). Walpole, New Hampshire, is described as a "[l]ovely place, high among the hills" where she was "[s]o glad to run and skip in the woods and up the splendid ravine" (74). She was "[u]p at five, and had a lovely run in the ravine, seeing the woods wake" (75). In "Recollections of My Childhood" (1888) Alcott ties her love of physical exercise with her love of nature and shows the strong sense of self that is the result of the combination of the two:

Active exercise was my delight from the time when, a child of six, I drove my hoop around the Common without stopping, to the days when I did my twenty miles in five hours and went to a party in the evening.

I always thought I must have been a deer or a horse in some former state, because it was such a joy to run. No boy could be my friend till I had beaten him in a race, and no girl if she refused to climb trees, leap fences, and be a tomboy.

My wise mother, anxious to give me a strong body to support a lively brain, turned me loose in the country and let me run wild, learning of nature what no books can teach and being led, as those who truly love her seldom fail to be −

"Through nature up to nature's God."

I remember running over the hills just at dawn one summer morning and, pausing to rest in the silent woods, saw through an arch of trees the sun rise over river, hill, and wide green meadows as I never saw it before.

Something born of the lovely hour, a happy mood, and the unfolding aspirations of a child's soul seemed to bring me very near to God, and in the hush of that morning hour I always felt that I "got religion," as the phrase goes. A new and vital sense of His presence, tender and sustaining as a father's arms, came to me then, never to change through forty years of life's vicissitudes, but to grow stronger for the sharp discipline of poverty and pain, sorrow and success. (217)

Alcott derives faith, courage, and a sense of empowerment from her physical activity in nature and shows no sign of weakness whatsoever. An entry from her time spent at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown in January 1863, from which *Hospital Sketches* sprung, reads,

> My work is changed to night watching or half night & half day, from twelve to twelve. I like it as it leaves me time for a morning run which is what I need to keep well, for bad air, food, water, work & watching are getting to be too much for me. I trot up & down the streets in all directions, some times to the Heights, then halfway to Washington, again to the hill over which the long trains of army wagons are constantly vanishing & ambulances appearing. (*Journals* 115)

Even though a sense of fear and dread pervades this passage, it is borne of a desire to preserve her health and is a significant contrast from the "hunted doe" analogy Alcott employs for her character Sylvia Yule.

Louisa May Alcott's enjoyment of the simple act of running is evident throughout her younger years, although women runners of the twenty-first century might wonder how she ran comfortably in her nineteenth-century attire. Perhaps it was this love of running that inspired her to include the scene in the revised version of *Moods* wherein a girl could actually run, enjoy it, and be challenged by it. She could be herself and experience a simple, independent, physical pleasure wherein she could appreciate her physical capabilities and limits. A girl could have the same type of exhilarating physical experience as boys or men. Whatever her reasons for

this substitution, Alcott retains the idea that, as in war, the giving of one's best is the ultimate, most noble effort, and it is an insult to proffer anything less.

From the serious conviction in her longing to follow the soldiers into battle to the anniversary celebration in *Moods* where Alcott writes, "Every one sang as every one had danced, with all their might" (70), her insistence on being and giving the best that one is able is clear. This is the aspect of competition that pervades Chapter V of *Moods* entitled "A Golden Wedding" when, shortly after the boat race, the travelers take shelter at a family's farmhouse during a storm. Unlike competing factions attempting to outdo each other, the family members offer the guests the best they have, and Sylvia and her companions volunteer their best efforts to contribute to the party to show their appreciation. Although Alcott presents this family as welcoming the guests with open arms, there are clear status differences between the family and the guests; although not outright competition, there is an underlying acknowledgement that, as in the setting of the table, whatever the guests add will be done with a style unavailable in the everyday lives of the family members. Even so, Sylvia is offered the daughter Phebe's best dress, but takes the "second best" instead. The family members, however, impact the travelers deeply, also. Their warmth, closeness, and obvious outward caring and love for each other are a different kind of treasure to be desired by the guests, especially Warwick who declares, "I envy that old couple as I never envied anyone before" (69). This chapter's message shows how a strong, enduring, and successful union built upon love and commitment contrasts sharply with a marriage based upon

uncertainties between the partners that only serves to divide. Sylvia's inability to continue commitment once she realizes her mistake in marrying Geoffrey begins the unraveling of her marriage.

In *A Hunger for Home,* Sarah Elbert states that "Alcott is seriously concerned with two aspects of marriage in *Moods:* the personality each marital partner brings to the relationship and the dynamic interaction between married people" (138). The dynamics between Sylvia and Moor, which is more of a guardian and child relationship, will not allow for Sylvia's growth within the marriage. Through Sylvia, Alcott shows that a woman cannot achieve her best self and acquire the confidence and self-actualization needed in order to compete on an equal playing field within a marriage; that is, to feel like an equal while she is married. This kind of growth must take place prior to a marriage for the union to be made up of truly equal partners.

Faith Dane, ironically a single woman who serves as confidant to Geoffrey, Adam, and Sylvia regarding marriage, later helps Sylvia see that she had not developed enough as a person in her own right as she should have before getting married. She did not love Geoffrey as she had loved Warwick, full of spontaneous passion, and should not have married Geoffrey simply because Warwick was no longer available and she wanted to be taken care of. First she must learn to understand her passionate sexuality and learn to take care of herself. She cannot hide herself within a marriage, neglecting her development as a person, and expect to have a complete, individual self to offer in that marriage. Faith Dane's

implication that Sylvia should not be married to either Geoffrey or Adam makes clear Alcott's position on the crucial importance of a woman's self-growth and self-development.

This theme of becoming one's best self in conjunction with one's conscience and doing what is right in the eyes of God permeates the rest of Sylvia's existence through the end of the novel. In the ending of the early version of *Moods*, Sylvia competes with her childlike self, which includes a sense of selfishness that strives to prove that she can become whatever she wishes to become regardless of the true person she knows must be within her. In this struggle, she finds her integrity but becomes ill and dies, perhaps Alcott's conclusion that a woman who wants it all, individual integrity, equality, and marriage, simply cannot exist. There is no compromise to be made because too much will be lost. She must limit herself, that is, not fully compete either as a person or as a wife, in order to live. In the later version of *Moods*, as Sylvia grows, her mature self, based upon principle rather than impulsive passion or emotion, prevails. Alcott's conclusion as a more mature writer in the later version of *Moods* suggests that compromise is possible and Sylvia can successfully give up something of herself so that she may also fulfill her wifely duties. While either fate is unacceptable to feminist readers, these endings show Alcott's own struggle for individual fulfillment and economic independence. Her personal frustration was created by the combination of her philosophical beliefs ingrained by her upbringing, and by the nineteenth-century patriarchal capitalist

culture in which she lived that was only slowly changing to allow more options for women to compete as individuals and as equals.

Christie Devon in *Work: A Story of Experience*

Alcott creates the character of Christie Devon for a story about a young woman's quest to find a meaningful life. In 1861, the novel, initially called *Success,* began as an autobiographical account of Alcott's experiences in Boston; it was changed, according to Joy Kasson, to reflect Alcott's "changing attitudes toward social justice, women's work, domesticity, and community" (xi-xii), thus the recurring theme of women helping women It was first published as a serial entitled "Work; or Christie's Experiment" in the *Christian Union* from December of 1871 to June of 1873. The title was changed again to *Work: A Story of Experience* and published as a novel by Roberts Brothers in 1873 Kasson states that after the changes were made, "*Work* emerged as a novel of strong but conflicting feelings, shifting perspectives, and unresolved contradictions" (xii). In the beginning of the novel, Alcott's Christie Devon represents the initial stages of competition wherein a woman experiences dissatisfaction with her state in life, desires something more, and is willing to apply her abilities and talents to achieve independence. She believes she is capable of some sort of achievement that will develop her as an individual person, but she lacks the knowledge to compete in a capitalist economy.

For Christie Devon, the strength and duration of her competitive drive only partially determine her ability to succeed. As the novel progresses, cultural and economic factors have serious effects on Christie's sojourn from her humble

beginnings toward her goals of selfhood and independence. Christie tries her hand at several different occupations, one of which is sewing. Alcott herself was an accomplished seamstress and there are many references to her creative sewing projects throughout her letters and journals. She earned "four [dollars] for the pile of sewing" she did (*Letters* 8), and hopes that May "will like the bonnet and the frills I made her and some bows I fixed over from bright ribbons" (9). In a letter she wrote to her family in October of 1858, Alcott refers to a job she acquired "at the Reform School Winchester. Sew 10 hours a day, making and mending for 30 girls" (35). She refers to a "ball dress" she made for May in a March 1860 journal entry (98), and two riding habits that she made in April so that she and May could go riding together (98). While she eminently preferred writing rather than sewing for a living, Alcott was determined to pay her own way in life as well as help her family in whatever ways she could. She models many of Christie's struggles on those in her own life.

In *Work*, Christie wants nothing more than to have a life that, "whether it be long or short, it will be useful and cheerful while it lasts, will be missed when it ends, and leave something behind besides ashes." Christie makes this comment as she gazes into the fireplace and equates her life to that of a log in the fireplace of her aunt and uncle's home (9). She offers the following explanation to them about why she desires to leave the home they have provided for her since her parents' deaths. She desires to seek a life of her own:

> You say I am discontented, proud, and ambitious; that's true, and I'm glad of it. I am discontented, because I can't help feeling that there is a better sort of life than this dull one made up of everlasting work, with no object but money. I can't starve my soul for the sake of my body, and I mean to get out of the treadmill if I can. I'm proud, as you call it, because I hate dependence where there isn't any love to make it bearable. You don't say so in words, but I know you begrudge me a home, though you will call me ungrateful when I'm gone. I'm willing to work, but I want work I can put my heart into, and feel that it does me good, no matter how hard it is. I only ask for a chance to be a useful, happy woman, and I don't think that is a bad ambition. Even if I only do what my dear mother did, earn my living honestly and happily, and leave a beautiful example behind me, to help one other woman as hers helps me, I shall be satisfied. (10-11)

Alcott is revealing her own sense of discontent through Christie. In a letter to Maggie Lukens, Alcott writes, "Food, fire & shelter are not *all* that women need, & the noble discontent that asks for more should not be condemned but helped if possible" (*Letters* 278). Alcott's phrase "noble discontent" raises the desire for self-improvement from the whim of a lazy ingrate to the worthy goal of an independent spirit. Christie's discontent, pride, and ambition are the result of her desire to find a way to compete for happiness and self-worth in a world that is only beginning to have a place for her to do so; her uncle refers to her state of mind as her "higher nater" (11), which he seems to give a certain amount of credence to as he agrees to

allow her to try living at a boarding house and even promises, "I'll give you a little suthing to start off with" (8). Her uncle knows that she will need money to succeed; he has had experience within a capitalist economy.

Christie feels that if she stays in their small town she will have no opportunity to pursue any sort of life that would be bearable for her. She will be forced to marry a man she neither loves nor respects "and become a farmer's household drudge," grow old as a "sour spinster, content to make butter, gossip, and lay up money all her days," or try to bear a life wherein she must keep her spirit in check, and eventually "in a fit of despair end her life, and leave a tragic story to haunt their quiet river" (13).

Even though she "scorned the thought of failure" (13), Christie takes a room in a boarding house far from home. Finding her education lacking in foreign languages and the fine arts, she acquires a position as a household domestic in the home of a wealthy couple rather than as a governess as she had hoped. She bonds with Hepsey, the cook, despite their age, class, and race differences and even tries to help her however she can. Hepsey hopes to someday save enough money so that she can be reunited with her mother who is a slave in Virginia. Eventually, Christie teaches Hepsey to learn to read and write. Since Christie sees herself as superior and as helping someone of inferior stature, no sense of competition enters into their relationship. Christie is, however, extremely observant of the customs and behaviors of her employers and their society friends. She is critical of their repetitive existence that, in her mind, serves no useful purpose. Their gossip and

fine clothes do not help alleviate any problems of society or further any humanitarian goals. If their society would include some greater purpose, it could be the society in which Christie promises herself to someday share: "My father was a gentleman; and I shall never forget it, though I do go out to service. I've got no rich friends to help me up, but, sooner or later, I mean to find a place among cultivated people; and while I'm working and waiting, I can be fitting myself to fill that place like a gentlewoman, as I am" (24).

Christie cannot compete socially because she has no financial backer to support the requisite lifestyle; neither can she compete on her own since she is a woman forced to work as a servant within precisely the type of household she wishes to be the mistress of someday. She insists on some sort of equality, however, in that she is a gentlewoman, not coarse or uneducated, and she hints that she would do things better than they if she were in their position. At times, the pride that fuels Christie's sense of competition also hinders her progress toward her goals. For example, her desire to read her employers' books late into the evening causes her to lose her position as a domestic when she falls asleep while reading, and her falling book knocks a candle into a garment which catches fire. Her irresponsibility and carelessness could have cost her her life. She is saved by her employers but is summarily dismissed as the lady of the house cries, "She is too fond of books, and it has turned her brain" (29). Alcott provides this noble excuse for Christie's lapse in judgment, and she even attaches a sense of humor to the episode regarding Christie's employers, as they shout hysterically and jump about to stomp out the

flames. In excusing Christie from responsibility, Alcott does little to help Christie learn how to be more competitive and make faster progress toward her goals. When Christie befriends Hepsey, the black cook, and teaches her reading and writing, she holds strongly to other prejudices based on ethnicity – "She knew well she could never live with Irish mates" (30) – and physical handicaps – "she mildly objected to waiting on a nervous cripple all day" (30). Alcott's character, like Alcott herself, is sympathetic to the abolition of slavery. Hepsey's story of her family's bondage impacted Christie greatly. Alcott writes that "it made a deep impression on her, bringing home to her a sense of obligation so forcibly that she began at once to pay a little part of the great debt which the white race owes the black" (26). Perhaps Alcott has never forgotten her early experience of being "rescued by a black boy" after falling into the Frog Pond and "becoming a friend to the colored race then and there" ("Recollections" 215).

The prejudices regarding the Irish and the infirm seem incongruent with the kindness and benevolence toward those in need that pervades *Little Women* and is also present later in *Work* in Christie's relationships with the diverse contingent of characters at the end of the novel, but the strongly held nineteenth-century stereotypes, especially the anti-Irish sentiment, are present nevertheless.[42] These particular prejudices do suggest, however, a type of ambition that seems cold and self-serving and may even conceal a mild feeling of superiority, held by Alcott and

[42] Irish Catholics, who made up forty percent of the population of Boston in 1853, were shunned by Protestants because of their religious beliefs, and were generally regarded as lazy, violent, and prone to alcoholism ("Irish" 150).

instilled in her character Christie Devon, masked as the gentility of the middle and upper classes of the era. Pride is the source of feelings of prestige and entitlement that fuel the actions of the middle and upper classes. For example, Sarah Elbert notes that neither Alcott nor her character Christie did the factory work that was so common for girls like Christie in New England in this time period (xiv). Alcott sewed for money out of necessity, and Christie avoids it as long as she can. Christie would rather be a household servant than sew for a living.

Christie's competitive spirit dictates that she can change her inferior station and achieve some sort of upward mobility if she tries harder, but she encounters the competitive nature of a co-worker and the jealousy that ensues. The more experienced actress, Lucy, is instrumental in introducing Christie to the local theatre manager who gives Christie a part in a show despite her inexperience. Christie is subsequently successful in playing several roles for the company; when Christie wins a role that Lucy had hoped to fill, Lucy is envious and can no longer be Christie's friend because "Christie had passed her in the race" (40), and Lucy cannot catch up. During her three-year stint as an actress, Christie's competitive spirit becomes enshrouded in vanity which almost overcomes her:

> Pride and native integrity kept her from the worst temptations of such a life, but to the lesser ones she yielded, growing selfish, frivolous, and vain, − intent on her own advancement, and careless by what means she reached it. She had no thought now beyond her art, no desire beyond the

> commendation of those whose opinion was serviceable, no care for anyone but herself.
>
> Her love of admiration grew by what it fed on, till the sound of applause became the sweetest music to her ear. She rose with this hope, lay down with this satisfaction, and month after month passed in this feverish life, with no wish to change it, but a growing appetite for its unsatisfactory delights, an ever-increasing forgetfulness of any higher aspiration than dramatic fame. (41)

This obsession continues until Christie closely examines her image in a mirror one day and asks herself, "Am I what I hoped I should be? No, and it is my fault. If three years of this life have made me this, what shall I be in ten? A fine actress, perhaps, but how good a woman?" (43).

She eventually comes to realize that there is more to what she desires from life than fleeting fame from performances as a second-rate actress. Christie becomes a hero when she suffers an injury while saving Lucy from a stage accident. During her recovery, she decides to pursue other avenues of employment, thus removing herself from an atmosphere of competition that she feels is not only unworthy of her efforts, but one that will lead her morally astray.

Recognizing her weakness for the sinful temptations of life as an actress, Christie chooses a more conservative and sheltered way to earn her living. She becomes a governess for a wealthy family and catches the eye of a young member, Mr. Fletcher. Christie deeply resents Mr. Fletcher's attitude that she should be

grateful for his attentions toward her and his proposal of marriage since she has no social standing and cannot compete for the attentions of other wealthy men. Mr. Fletcher grossly underestimates Christie's sense of personal worth and cannot compete with her vision of what an honorable human being should be. For all of his money and class advantages, he does not measure up to her standards. To his disbelief, when he proposes she refuses him. He responds, "I've made many blunders in my life and this is one of the greatest; for I believed in a woman, was fool enough to care for her with the sincerest love I ever knew, and fancied that she would be grateful for the sacrifice I made" (69). All of Christie's beliefs regarding social standing, wealth, and honor are apparent in her reply:

> The sacrifices would not have been *all* yours, for it is what we *are*, not what we *have*, that makes one human being superior to another. I am as well-born as you in spite of my poverty; my life, I think, has been a better one than yours; my heart, I know, is fresher, and my memory has fewer faults and follies to reproach me with. What can you give me but money and position in return for the youth and freedom I should sacrifice in marrying you? Not love, for you count the cost of your bargain, as no true lover could, and you reproach me for deceit when in your heart you know you only cared for me because I can amuse and serve you. I too deceived myself, I too see my mistake, and I decline the honor you would do me, since it is so great in your eyes that you must remind me of it as you offer it. (70)

Christie does feel a pang of guilt when she realizes that she may have misled Mr. Fletcher when he first began to appear interested in her. Her prideful and competitive natures conflict, but they help her to make the right choice: to decline his proposal and to seek employment elsewhere.

Christie had enjoyed serving as a governess and felt that it suited her abilities. She had made many friends during her employment with Mr. Fletcher's sister, and one of these friends helps Christie to find another job. Again, in *Work*, Alcott injects the theme of women helping women to succeed in a competitive world. Christie's next placement is in the home of another wealthy family. She is employed to serve as a companion to Helen, a young woman who has a mental illness akin to depression. Christie's self-confidence and assertive nature allow her to believe, and rightly so, that she can be of help to comfort and entertain Helen in ways that her family members cannot. Christie is determined that she will dedicate herself to making Helen well and will win the battle over depression.

Christie relieves much of Helen's despair simply by being a friend. Helen is "won by patient tenderness and the cheerful influences all around her" (83). Alcott continues, "Christie's heart was full of pride and satisfaction, as she saw the altered face, heard the tone of interest in that once hopeless voice" (83). Christie claims these successes for her own, a direct result of her efforts to bring Helen out of her melancholy mood. She is victorious only for a brief time, however; the madness with which Helen is genetically cursed resurfaces. Christie learns that Helen's mother knew that if she got married to Helen's father and had children, those

children might be carriers of a mental illness which could develop as they aged. Helen confides in Christie that, "When she was beautiful and young she married, knowing the sad history of my father's family.[43] He was rich, she poor and proud; ambition made her wicked, and she did it after being warned that, though he might escape, his children were sure to inherit the curse" (87). Christie helps to convince Helen's sister, Bella, to cancel her engagement so that she will not bear children who may develop the same affliction as Helen. Christie's good sense prevails. When Bella is told of the family affliction, she exhibits a similar trait of her mother's, "the pride that can bear heavy burdens, if they are borne unseen" (98). But unlike her mother, Bella relinquishes the idea of getting married and having children.

Not only are discontentment, pride, and ambition prominent traits in Alcott's major female characters, but in her minor characters as well. Helen takes her own life because she is not content to be a source of grief and division in her family and too proud to continue to be a burden on everyone any longer. Her parting wish in her final days is that her family members find peace once she is at rest. Christie cannot triumph over such a relentless foe as mental illness, but finds consolation in her loss and small victories in that Helen is finally free of the burden that was her existence, and that Bella will not continue the chain of mental illness in her family by having children.

[43] The hereditary insanity.

Christie finds strength in a non-competitive and unselfish gesture amid the sorrow over Helen's death and the joy of knowing that Helen is free of her affliction. Christie receives a sum of money from Helen's estate; rather than use it for her own advancement, she shares it with Hepsey so that Hepsey can buy passage,[44] hence freedom, for her relatives in the South. Alcott writes, "The thought of that investment lay warm at Christie's heart, and never woke a regret, for well she knew that every dollar of it would be blessed, since shares in the Underground Railroad pay splendid dividends that never fail" (101). Alcott's heroine is generous, sharing whatever she has with others and, acutely aware of social justice, is willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of another, a deeply ingrained and often-practiced trait of the Alcott women. To keep the money for herself and use it to raise herself to a better class standing is no longer important to Christie. Her desire to help others trumps her need to compete on a social level. It is interesting to note the similarities in how Alcott used her income to help her family throughout her writing career and how she instills these same social virtues into the character of Christie Devon.

Helen's death serves as a turning point in Christie's life. She decides that she would like "to divert her mind from that last sad experience by entirely different employment and surroundings" (102) rather than be placed in the midst of a family's affairs again. Christie's desire for a change in the type of employment she secures, her wish to be independent and self-supporting in a home of her own,

[44] A reference to the Underground Railroad. The Alcott home in Concord served as one of its "stops" (Alcott, "Recollections" 219).

and her confidence in her sewing ability lead her to enter the competitive job market as a seamstress. Christie takes what she believes to be a temporary position in a large sewing shop and becomes close friends with Rachel, a fellow seamstress. They experience what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg identifies as societal factors that "permitted women to form a variety of close emotional relationships with other women." She notes that rigid gender roles lent to an emotional segregation of men and women and argues that "a specifically female world did indeed develop," wherein networks evolved among women to deal with all of the important events in women's lives. Smith-Rosenberg also relates that because of the severe social restrictions on intimacy between men and women, women's "devotion to and love of each other became a plausible and socially accepted form of human interaction" (9).

Alcott's inclusion of the character of Rachel allows for the presentation of another view, in addition to Christie's situation, of the nineteenth-century single young woman's dilemma of self-support. Joyce W. Warren explains that "if a woman had sufficient education and the correct manners, she could find a post as a teacher, a governess, or a paid or unpaid companion. Otherwise her choices included prostitution, work at subsistence wages, or humble dependency as an unpaid servant in the home of a relative" (148). Through the character of Rachel, Alcott shows that sometimes, despite one's best efforts, unfortunate situations do occur. Rachel, once entrenched in prostitution and so labeled a "fallen woman," has escaped this life with the help of other women, but cannot escape her past. Ruthless

and destructive female gossip by jealous coworkers results in Rachel's dismissal from her position at the sewing shop. In Christie's determination to support her friend and to forgive her past indiscretions, Christie finds that she, too, might be dismissed so that the shop owner's reputation for employing only girls of good moral character can be upheld.

Christie argues unsuccessfully with the shop owner about the unchristian reasoning that refuses to help a sinner repent and turn her life around and how it is counter to the feminine ideal of womanhood of helping a sister in need. Rachel tries to encourage Christie to continue her employment with the shopkeeper, but Christie strongly declares, "I'll do slop-work and starve, before I'll stay with such a narrow minded, cold-hearted woman" (*Work* 111). Christie's moral victory extracts a price: ironically, both of these young women of good character are dismissed so that they will not be a morally poor influence on any of the destructive gossips working at that establishment.

Unfortunately for Christie, a downward spiral occurs when she loses this position as a seamstress and loses her only friend when Rachel goes to another city to find work. With the unrelenting stress of working constantly at all sorts of menial jobs to try to make ends meet, Christie's health rapidly declines; she loses her ability to compete for work and she finds she has lost what little sense of self-sustaining independence she had acquired since leaving her aunt and uncle's home. Filled with despair at her inability to collect money owed to her for her sewing and overcome by an all-encompassing weariness, Christie is about to welcome death as

a passage from despair and loneliness to peace by drowning herself, but her old friend Rachel intervenes to save her. Christie's experience is the mirror of an incident that Alcott hints about in a letter to her family in October 1858 that "reports Louisa's despair when she could obtain no employment" (Stern, Introduction, *Letters* xxi):

> Last week was a busy, anxious time, & my courage most gave out, for every one was so busy, & cared so little whether I got work or jumped into the river that I thought seriously of doing the latter. In fact did go over the Mill Dam & look at the water. But it seemed so mean to turn and run away before the battle was over that I went home, set my teeth & vowed I'd *make* things work in spite of the world, the flesh & the devil. (*Letters* 34)

Critics debate whether she was serious or just voicing a temporary depression; regardless, Alcott does not grant her character the same individual inner strength that she possessed in real life in the competitive struggle with herself that she squarely faced and won. In *Work,* A friend must rescue Christie, another indicator of Alcott's desire to see women helping each other rather than struggling individually. Christie had aided Rachel in her time of need, and now the favor was returned as Rachel lets Christie know that she will take care of her until she is well. Rachel tells Christie that she has been spending her time in service to other women who were alone and destitute, and through helping them, she has developed a steadfast inner strength. Alcott writes, "So beautiful and brave she looked, so full of strength and yet of meek submission was her voice, that Christie's heart was

thrilled; for it was plain that Rachel had learned how to distil balm from the bitterness of life, and, groping in the mire to save lost souls, had found her own salvation there" (126). Rachel and Christie have both struggled with the darker side of life and won victories for themselves. By helping others, they increased their own sense of self-worth and added meaning and purpose to their lives.

This idea of service to others rather than to oneself is reinforced strongly again in *Work* when Rachel sends Christie to the home of Mrs. Wilkins to recuperate. Here Christie encounters an atmosphere overflowing with generosity and devoid of any type of competition whatsoever, since Mrs. Wilkins's entire existence revolves around service to others in whatever way she can provide it. Christie learns that Mrs. Wilkins's appreciation of family and devotion to duty are the result of a past standoff between the woman and her husband: Mr. Wilkins's perceived unwillingness to help with familial and child raising responsibilities, and Mrs. Wilkins's desire for the finer things and a life of ease that a gossipy neighbor encouraged her to pursue as her "right." Husband and wife compete to see who will win a battle of wills. How long can Mr. Wilkins manage the household and care of all of the children while his wife lives at the neighbor's in protest? Can Mrs. Wilkins stay away from her family when she knows they were not being cared for properly and that her once-tidy home is a wreck? The withholding of motherly and wifely duties in order to show exactly what is involved in maintaining a home is the only edge Mrs. Wilkins has in this competition. Her husband's lack of culinary skills and his inability to keep up with the care of the children and the household

duties are to her advantage to get him to see that she should not be taken for granted, and that he should be a part of a partnership in the work necessary for the household to run smoothly.

The competition comes to an abrupt halt when there is a flood and Mrs. Wilkins is told that her husband has drowned; she faints, and then awakes to find him there, obviously alive. They both agree to never allow anything like this to happen between them again. They pay a high price for their competitive stubbornness, however. One of their children who has been ill since birth dies, and, even though there is nothing they could have done to prevent it, they blame themselves. Ever since this incident, Mrs. Wilkins has been the picture of wifely and motherly contentment, going about her daily tasks without complaint and giving thanks for her husband and children.

The female character of Mrs. Wilkins has no reason to engage in competitive behavior except to prove a point to her husband. Mrs. Wilkins may well be a reflection of Alcott's support of women having a choice in their lives about whether to have families or to pursue careers where they would be required to compete in the business world, that is, in the world of men. Alcott herself cherished her independence as the many references in her journals and her fiction to "paddling her own canoe" and "sailing her own ship" testify. She learned how to compete successfully within the publishing world. But she also knew that many women could be satisfied and happy being homemakers. Alcott knew how hard many women worked at their housekeeping and motherly duties, and she shows a

large measure of respect for them and the example they set for others simply by going about their daily routines and helping others whenever there is a need. In *Work,* Alcott describes Christie's reaction to Mrs. Wilkins:

> It was a very humble little sermon that Mrs. Wilkins had preached to her, but she took it to heart and profited by it; for she was a pupil in the great charity school where the best teachers are often unknown, unhonored here, but who surely will receive commendation and reward from the headmaster when their long vacation comes. (152)

Mrs. Wilkins was living the life she loved as wife to Lisha and mother to her own children and anyone else, such as Christie, who was in need of a mother's care.

Mrs. Wilkins arranges with her pastor, Mr. Power, to send Christie to work for Mrs. Sterling and her son David who operate a greenhouse. Christie finds comfort in the beauty of the flowers and great satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment in the work of arranging them to suit the particular needs of customers. Again Alcott describes a joy and fulfillment that women can find within their work when they give it their best, unselfish efforts:

> This was what she needed, the protection of a home, wholesome cares and duties, and, best of all, friends to live and labor for, loving and beloved…. No task was too hard or humble; no day long enough to do all she longed to do; and no sacrifice would have seemed too great for those whom she regarded with steadily increasing love and gratitude. (189)

Following David and his mother's example, Christie then engages in a form of positive competition within herself bringing out the best she has to offer to those around her rather than submitting to the brooding melancholy that still finds its way into her consciousness now and again.

A former boarder, Kitty, returns to Mrs. Sterling's home, and Christie and Kitty both mistake David's brotherly attention toward Kitty for love. Christie refuses to engage in a competition with Kitty for David's affection, preferring to exit quietly with her feelings a secret and her pride intact. There is no effort on her part to pursue what she wants; she regards competing for David as a negative pursuit. She will keep peace even if it means a great loss for herself. She wrestles with herself to contain her emotions and to find satisfaction in others' happiness, even though she feels she knows that David will realize he has made a mistake after he marries Kitty. The only competition is within Christie herself as she tries to make a new life for herself away from Mrs. Sterling's household by working for Mr. Power. Again, work serves a vital role in Christie's life, here as a soothing diversion from her disappointment in love. She is too busy to think of herself and her pain:

> Mr. Power received Christie so hospitably that she felt at home at once, and took up her new duties with the energy of one anxious to repay a favor. Her friend knew well the saving power of work, and gave her plenty of it; but it was a sort that at once interested and absorbed her, so that she had little time for dangerous thoughts or vain regrets. As he once said, Mr.

> Power made her own troubles seem light by showing her others so terribly real and great that she was ashamed to repine at her own lot. (239)

During the course of this employment, she encounters Mr. Philip Fletcher, whom she had previously refused and once again must deny his advances, as he insists that he loves her more now than ever.

Christie enjoys the power she can exert over Philip, and uses it to try to ease the hurt from what she perceived (incorrectly) was a rejection from David. She especially delights in the possibility that men might compete for her affections when Philip and David meet:

> In the midst of an apparently absorbing discussion of one of Raphael's most insipid Madonnas, she was conscious that David had approached, paused, and was scrutinizing her companion with unusual interest. Seized with a sudden desire to see the two men together, Christie beckoned; and when he obeyed, she introduced him, drew him into the conversation, and then left him in the lurch by falling silent and taking notes while they talked.
>
> If she wished to wean her heart from David by seeing him at a disadvantage, she could have devised no better way; for, though a very feminine test, it answered the purpose excellently. (244)

While "Mr. Fletcher was a handsome man, and just then looked his best," Christie notes in stark contrast that, "David never appeared so ill" (244). She knows that Philip, his fortune, and a life of ease are hers for the taking.

Even though she cannot reconcile herself to marriage with a man she does not love, she allows this brief competition to continue and makes a point-by-point comparison of the two men:

> Even in the matter of costume, poor David was worsted; for, in a woman's eyes, dress has wonderful significance. Christie used to think his suit of sober gray the most becoming man could wear; but now it looked shapeless and shabby, beside garments which bore the stamp of Paris in the gloss and grace of broadcloth and fine linen. David wore no gloves: Mr. Fletcher's were immaculate. David's tie was so plain no one observed it: Mr. Fletcher's, elegant and faultless enough for a modern Beau Brummel. David's handkerchief was of the commonest sort (she knew that, for she hemmed it herself): Mr. Fletcher's was the finest cambric, and a delicate breath of perfume refreshed the aristocratic nose to which the article belonged. (244-45)

Christie's setup is purposefully designed for her own benefit, to help her forget David by accentuating Mr. Fletcher's advantages over David in courtly mannerisms, dress, and status. David simply cannot compete. What Christie underestimates is her own sense about what is valuable and important for happiness:

> Christie despised herself as she made these comparisons, and felt how superficial they were; but, having resolved to exalt one man at the expense of the other for her own good, she did not relent till David took

> advantage of a pause, and left them with a reproachful look that made her wish Mr. Fletcher at the bottom of the sea. (245)

Christie realizes that she will not be happy if she marries Philip, whom she does not love, and refuses him again. David decides to tell Christie that he loves her, not Kitty, and that he has found Rachel who is his sister, so Christie happily returns to the Sterling home to be a part of that community.

The family is on the verge of complete happiness and peace when the Civil War ensues and Christie is faced with David's enlistment. Rather than encourage him to take the exception he is entitled to as the only son of a widowed mother, Christie says that she will become his wife and enlist as well. Rather than having Christie attempt to compete with the Civil War and David's overwhelming sense of duty, Alcott manages to instill strength of character and a noble purpose in her heroine's actions. Competition, in this instance to keep David at home, would have been perceived only as selfishness, since all around them husbands and fathers were leaving their safe and secure homes to fight for the Union cause. Christie's decision to enlist can be construed as a competitive gesture from the viewpoint of someone who feels that they, too, have something to contribute to the war effort, and they do not want to be left behind. Alcott draws upon her own experiences as a nurse at the Union Hotel hospital in Washington, D.C. in 1863 and gives her own strong sense of dedication and desire to serve to Christie. The spiritual influence from Alcott's father is clear in Alcott's character Christie when she says, "Help me to be brave and strong, David: don't let me complain or regret, but show me what lies beyond,

and teach me to believe that simply doing the right is reward and happiness enough" (291). Simplicity and purity of thought and action was instilled in Alcott from a young age, and she gives this same philosophy to her character Christie Devon.

This type of selflessness often extracts a high price: David is wounded and dies. Christie visits her Uncle Enos, who has summoned her to discuss his own final wishes. He seems to be quietly impressed by her character and her quest for independence in her life. He is "vainly trying to discover what made Christie's manners so agreeable in spite of her plain dress, and her face so pleasant in spite of the gray hair at her temples and the lines about her mouth" (325). He has difficulty understanding the person Christie has become when finances are discussed:

> "You haven't made much money, I guess. If you don't mind tellin', what *have* you got to live on?" asked the old man, unwilling to acknowledge any life a success, if dollars and cents were left out of it.
>
> "Only David's pension and what I can make by my garden."
>
> "The old lady has to have some on't, don't she?"
>
> "She has a little money of her own; but I see that she and Letty have two-thirds of all I make."
>
> "That ain't a fair bargain if you do all the work."
>
> "Ah, but we don't make bargains, sir: we work for one another and share everything together."

> "So like women!" grumbled Uncle Enos, longing to see that "the property was fixed up square." (325)

Alcott's ending to the novel gives readers a female character now devoid of selfish competitiveness, and instead, one who contributes what she can for the good of all.

At the end of the novel, Christie speaks to groups of women about various aspects of women's rights and encourages solidarity in their efforts to improve their lives. Christie evolves from a self-centered "discontented, proud, and ambitious" girl, as she is described early in the novel (10), to hoping that "the coming generation of women will not only receive but deserve their liberty, by learning that the greatest of God's gifts to us is the privilege of sharing His great work" (344). Interestingly, Alcott also gives this attitude to several of her male characters which results in a diffusion of any competition between the sexes, so that peace and harmony may reign and discord is happily abolished. Whether this is realistic is left for readers to decide. If it is considered as sentimental musings, Nina Baym contends that sentimental novelists "claim a place for women in the public sphere—that is, the imaginary arena where public opinion takes shape, is debated, and influences national policy-making—and advise women on how to occupy this place effectively for their own good and for the good of others" (335). Alcott effectively accomplishes this through her female characters in *Work.* Their competitive drives allow them to reach a place of inner peace and achieve success somewhat as individuals, but most effectively within a community of women. Ruth MacDonald notes that, "[t]hrough all the trouble that Christie experiences, her one salvation is

work. In fact, throughout her life and books, Alcott consistently recommends hard, honest work as virtuous and redemptive and even compensatory for the lack of love and happiness" (87). In *Work,* Alcott indicates that this work is done best when it has a purpose for the greater good and is not an isolated pursuit.

It is Christie's spirituality that draws people together to achieve a common happiness and satisfaction in life, whatever their social status and economic circumstances. Throughout the novel, Christie is well aware of social conventions with regard to class but does not allow class status to influence how she associates personally with people on an individual basis. Christie discerns a person's character separate from their economic or social status to decide whom she will call friend.

Although Christie Devon in *Work* exhibits feminist traits that indicate a strong desire for independence when she is young, she never really achieves it on her own. She comes to the understanding that a better hope is to rely on a circle of women for mutual support. Individually, as Christie had learned, tragedy can easily overcome the best laid plans and efforts. The lack of a support system had almost cost Christie her life. But Alcott shrouds Christie's contribution to the working woman's cause within a pleasant cloak of ambiguities. She never really tells readers what Christie says when she speaks. Alcott describes several other speakers who are rich in "general theories," but "poor in practical methods of relief," and so cannot quite reach their audience. Yet another speaker at the meeting relates

> statistics, giving the exact number of needle-women who had starved, gone mad, or committed suicide during the past year; the enormous profits wrung

> by capitalists from the blood and muscles of their employees; and the alarming increase in the cost of living, which was about to plunge the nation into debt and famine, if not destruction generally. (331)

These are specific, strong words, but Alcott describes them as "interesting, but entirely futile" since the speaker was talking about changes that had occurred in some foreign land. Readers wait in anticipation of what Christie will offer, but acquire only the general impression that Christie, because of her background, experiences, and sincere demeanor, is the person who can bring hope and unity to the crowd.

When Christie is moved to speak to the gathering of women, she prefers to stand on a lower step rather than on the platform saying, "I am better here, thank you; for I have been and mean to be a working-woman all my life" (332). Alcott injects criticism of society women and their propriety issues concerning socializing with working women when she paints Christie as a woman who, because of her gentleman father's background coupled with her farmer mother's practicality, is able to bridge a gap between classes of people. Alcott writes, "Such women were much needed and are not always easy to find; for even in America the hand that earns its daily bread must wear some talent, name, or honor as an ornament, before it is very cordially shaken by those that wear white gloves" (334). Bridging the gap between these classes of women was the first step in eliminating barriers for working women and gaining for them the wages and working conditions they needed to be able to maintain themselves in an adequate manner.

Elaine Showalter notes that the end of *Work* finds "the widowed Christie dedicating herself to a new vocation as a woman's rights activist, whose special mission it will be to bring together women from different classes and races" (xxxiv). The school of Marxist thought focuses on these divisions of class and the oppression and exploitation of laborers (such as those Christie speaks to at the end of *Work)* in the working class by the state for the benefit of the wealthy elite. Alcott may or may not have been familiar with Marxism; nevertheless, when this part of the novel is analyzed, a Feminist-Marxist Theory approach is useful in considering Alcott's purpose for advancing her character to this public arena in defense of the working woman. In Murfin and Ray's discussion of Marxism, "economic factors and the class divisions they reflect and reinforce play a primary role in determining social institutions and actions" ("Marxism" 281). Alcott does recognize the need to address class issues in order to further the cause of nineteenth-century women.

Alcott understands what poverty is and how anyone could find themselves in dire circumstances through no fault of their own merely by a twist of fate or a sudden illness. Alcott infuses Christie Devon with a great sense of social justice for people in need, especially women. When Christie speaks to the crowd of women, it is theorist Georg Lukác's moment of reflection, a stage in society wherein a degree of consciousness in themselves helps them to overthrow the objective forms that shape them (83). Christie infers that it is the duty of everyone to help. This is the essence of Karl Marx's classless society which advocates against the ability of one class to oppress another and encourages "the free development of all" (262).

A moderate version of this socialist state combined with the development of spirituality from her transcendental influences is what Alcott is sowing through Christie Devon and the crowd of women at the conclusion of *Work.* Alcott's revolution is not as radical as Marx's since Alcott is not looking to abolish classes, but is only trying to begin changes to the class struggle from within them. A deficiency here is that Alcott does not address specific cultural differences within class groups and, what Homi Bhabha refers to in internationalism as, "the process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience" (5). The crowd of women would have included immigrants from several European countries and freed slaves who could not identify with their working sisters on many levels. Alcott's rather superficial "solution" focuses only on class and what Christie Devon perceives as a shared spirituality which may or may not exist. In *The Political Unconscious,* Frederic Jameson discusses the idea of Utopian class consciousness. If we think of this possibility in terms of the women who attend the meetings with Christie Devon, we see the division of the classes of women and how even Christie does not raise herself up to the highest step to speak. She views herself as "just" a working woman, and separate from, as well as different from, the women with the gloved hands. She is not necessarily inferior, because she has worked hard which carries a sense of noble pursuit. Each group has its own idea of what constitutes Utopia for its members, as Jameson notes, depending on or "deriving from its mode of production." Jameson writes,

> On such a view, those who must work and produce surplus value for others will necessarily grasp their own solidarity – initially, in the unarticulated form of rage, helplessness, victimization, oppression by a common enemy – *before* the dominant or ruling class has any particular incentive for doing so. Indeed, it is the glimpse of such sullen resistance, and the sense of the nascent political dangers of such potential unification of the laboring population, which generates the mirror image of class solidarity among the ruling groups (or the possessors of the means of production). (289-90)

Through Christie Devon, Alcott tries to breach the divide between classes of women for the advancement of all women. Alcott is realistic in that she has Christie ask her upper-class friend to approach the upper-class women.

Jameson cautions against this division, however. He suggests that "class consciousness of whatever type is Utopian insofar as it expresses the unity of a collectivity." It holds for oppressors and oppressed alike who both practice what Jameson describes as "an essentially negative hermeneutic function" of collective solidarity toward their own ends (291). In other words, a mentality of "every group for itself" is not really collectivity. A group within a group weakens the whole. In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson writes,

> But for a Marxist criticism, the work is precisely not complete in itself but is handed down to us as a kind of gesture or verbal thrust incomprehensible unless we are able to understand the situation in which the

> gesture was first made, and the interlocutors to whom it was a reply. This is to say that for Marxism, the passage from the literary to the socio-economic or to the historical is not the passage from one specialized discipline to another, but rather the movement from specialization to the concrete itself. (377)

Marxism provides alternate views and makes readers ask questions about what Alcott intends to relate to readers through her story and whether she is successful.

In addition to a social entreaty, Alcott makes a strong spiritual appeal as well. Reunited with the wealthy Bella Carrol, Christie charges her to "set a new fashion…I only want you to provide employment and pleasure for others like yourself, who are now dying of frivolity or *ennui*" (338). Christie asserts that Bella would be able to effect real changes within her upper class social circle while Christie would not because Christie is not a part of the same social class. The spiritual changes in women so that they want to help other women, followed by the social reforms that enable the lower classes to help themselves, must first come from within social groups. This combination of communal support for all, both physical and spiritual, has its underlying philosophy in the ideas of spiritual transcendence that Alcott was continuously exposed to during her lifetime.

Consideration of the social, economic, and political factors that affect the characters in a novel is crucial to any in-depth understanding of a writer's work. Alcott had a message to send, that women could support each other in a collective effort across classes within an atmosphere of mutual respect and harmony for the

benefit of all, and she did so to readers through her characters in *Work.* Again, whether this is realistic or utopian is for critics to argue and for readers to decide.

Uncle Enos's surprise by Christie's early declaration of a desire for independence is understandable in their nineteenth-century world. In *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917,* Meredith Tax comments that "[t]he working-class struggle and the struggle for women's liberation developed simultaneously in the vortex of changing relations of production and changing family and gender patterns" (277). Christie Devon is determined to be something more than the farmer's wife that her uncle thinks she should be and be satisfied with. But her struggle for independence was almost her undoing. Tax also notes that, "the particular form that women's oppression takes is determined by class and national factors as well as by general cultural and economic ones" (279). Christie's choice to try to be independent does not lead to an easy life; through the many twists and turns of various employers, acquaintances, friends, and lovers, and even through sickness and poverty, Alcott gets the point across that, unless many factors come together in precisely the right way and at the right time, it is extremely difficult for a woman in the patriarchal nineteenth-century capitalist economy to truly be independent.

Alcott inserts her wish for equality among men and women into the novel when she charges her friend Bella to invite men and women to her home for intellectual conversation rather than empty pursuits. Bella replies, "But few of the women I know can talk about anything but servants, dress, and gossip. Here and

there one knows something of music, art, or literature; but the superior ones are not favorites with the larger class of gentlemen." Christie challenges,

> Then let the superior women cultivate the smaller class of men who do admire intelligence as well as beauty. There are plenty of them, and you had better introduce a few as samples, though their coats may not be of the finest broadcloth, nor their fathers 'solid men.' Women lead in society, and when men find that they cannot only dress with taste, but talk with sense, the lords of creation will be glad to drop mere twaddle and converse as with their equals. (340)

Christie does not want intelligent women to feign ignorance simply to please men who feel threatened by them. Women needed to be educated, not just to be able to engage in conversations about art and literature, but to be able to be perceived as equals by men.

Women who did work to provide an income needed to be educated so they could command a fair wage and safe working conditions to enable them to even begin to approach equality with men. Alcott had to exercise restraint at the frustration she felt with her father's inability to provide financially for his family. They knew real poverty and real hunger which fueled Alcott's resolve to write her stories, make money, and make something of herself. Despite a limited formal education, Alcott had the rare benefit of a creative imagination and a mind that absorbed and retained the storehouse of knowledge she found in books. In *Work* when Christie Devon's uncle asks her how she will afford to educate her child,

Christie replies, "I shall earn the money, sir. If the garden fails I can teach, nurse, sew, write, cook even, for I've half a dozen useful accomplishments at my fingers' ends, thanks to the education you and dear Aunt Betsey gave me" (325). Christie's assurance that her daughter will be educated through the generosity of Uncle Enos[45] also emphasizes Alcott's early recognition of the importance of education for women, whatever their working status. Alcott is almost a century ahead of Beauvoir who writes, "Only independent work of her own can assure woman's genuine independence" (475). Alcott knew the drudgery of work that was physically exhausting but did not yield enough money to sustain her family; it was her writing that finally got the family on its feet, surpassed all expectations, and gave her the independent means to provide for everyone in her circle. Alcott's novel *Little Women* was the literary success that made this possible.

Marmee and the March Sisters in *Little Women*

It is no secret that Louisa May Alcott modeled the character of Marmee in *Little Women* after her mother, and that Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy are representations of Alcott and her sisters. In a journal entry dated August 26, 1868, regarding the characters and events in *Little Women,* Alcott writes that they "really lived most of it" (*Journals* 166). What may be surprising to many readers is that this story, so simply told, has delighted readers for over a century and has never been out of print, a clear affirmation of Alcott's ability to please her reading public. It contains many overt references to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* that help guide the sisters to

[45] Christie inherits her uncle's estate.

make wise choices and lead good, wholesome lives filled with self-sacrifice and service to others. But more than this, *Little Women* allows the girls to be less than perfect in their thoughts, actions, aspirations, and desires, a somewhat different approach than the perfectionist lecturing of some children's literature of the period. Readers are permitted inside the March family relationships to see the sibling rivalry and how it is handled by both children and parents alike. Mrs. March, affectionately called Marmee, serves as the womanly example for her girls to follow, but she often admits that she is not perfect and must continually strive to overcome her shortcomings. Mr. March, modeled upon Bronson Alcott, is not always physically present in the novel, yet his influence on his family is clear throughout. Often his guidance and encouragement can be heard in his letters and in the references to his teachings when the young women need a reminder regarding inappropriate behavior.

Alcott's female characters in this novel are realistic portrayals of young women who engage in positive and negative competitions with each other and with their friends, but the most genuine contests take place within themselves as they strive to grow and mature within the sometimes conflicting constrictions and mores of the nineteenth century, their transcendentalist upbringing, and the beginnings of the women's movement. Alcott's characters are clearly individuals who each possess imperfections that they struggle to overcome. It is this struggle that requires their competitive traits to emerge so that change and growth that contribute to the

never-ending quest for self-improvement can take place for each of them in their own way and on their own timeline.

Mrs. March is the sentinel of this timeline, carefully watching for an action or a response that helps her gauge her daughters' states of mind, especially when young men are involved. Though quick to offer advice when asked, she often waits for her daughters to come to her when they are ready to share a burden, and she lets them come to realizations by themselves about the true meanings of the morals taught in the household. In the chapter entitled "Experiments," Marmee allows the girls to try a vacation away from their household tasks. The girls expect to enjoy having no household responsibilities for a week, but Marmee cautions that they may find "that all play, and no work, is as bad as all work, and no play" (109). The girls learn just how much work is required to keep their household running smoothly and that "the comfort of all depends on each doing their share faithfully" (117). These are the lessons, skillfully presented, that children do not soon forget.

In *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction,* Nina Auerbach writes, "Mrs. March allows her girls a great freedom that may explain why the book has been so unreasonably beloved for over a century: the freedom to remain children and, for a woman, the more precious freedom *not* to fall in love" which, "endows the sisters with an independent selfhood which is a rare dowry in any century" (62-63). In this way, Mrs. March competes with the other mothers in the novel in that she prepares her daughters more completely through a superior method of instruction. They are better equipped (than other young women) to handle the many choices they will

have to make within the varied circumstances in which they might find themselves as they widen their social and economic circles. When Mrs. Moffat gossips that "Mrs. M. has laid her plans," Mrs. Moffat does not realize that those "plans" are not for Meg to marry Laurie, but for each of the March girls to marry for love rather than for money and to be content to remain at home unmarried if they do not find love. In this lesson, Marmee declares, "One thing remember, my girls, mother is always ready to be your confidant, father to be your friend; and both of us trust and hope that our daughters, whether married or single, will be the pride and comfort of our lives" (98). Rather than imposing pressure upon the girls to marry, Marmee presents marriage as an offer that may or may not be made to them and as a conscious choice for the girls to either accept or reject based on love alone. They need not participate in the marriage-driven economy of the nineteenth century, but may achieve a life of value independently.

Feminist critics decry Alcott's decision to have Meg, Amy, and especially Jo, marry as being contradictory to the message that Alcott sent in her own life that women can be self-supporting and need not feel forced to marry just because it is what is expected of them. The nineteenth-century conviction was strong that women could neither be successful in life nor be fulfilled without a husband, both of which Alcott herself proved untrue. Alcott's variant is a woman's right to choose. Alcott also nicely circumvents her readers' popular belief that Jo should marry Laurie by showing they are not well-suited to be husband and wife even though they are good friends. Jo does eventually choose to marry, but she chooses

the older, more compatible professor Bhaer. Alcott's characters each choose to marry and they choose to marry for love. That Alcott does eventually have Meg, Amy, and even Jo marry, but marry for love, is clearly indicative of what makes a good story that will sell by satisfying several audiences, a skill that Alcott learned early in her writing career.

The character of Jo March is competitive on several levels. She enjoys physical activities such as skating, running, and rowing, and generally acts like a tomboy. She protests being a young lady and cries,

> It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boys' games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy, and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with papa,[46] and I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman. (3)

Jo is clearly not happy being female, and her discontent is amplified by the secondary position she feels she is forced to occupy. Alcott writes that Jo had "the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman, and didn't like it" (4). She is expected to take on the duties of women, but prefers the more active and romantic lifestyle of men.

Jo competes with her sisters when each declares that they want to buy new slippers for their mother:

> "I thought I'd get her some with my dollar," said Beth.
>
> "No, I shall!" cried Amy.

[46] Mr. March is serving as a chaplain during the Civil War.

> "I'm the oldest," began Meg, but Jo cut in with a decided –
>
> "I'm the man of the family now papa is away, and *I* shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of mother while he was gone." (5)

She is not the oldest daughter, but the manliest one. Yet, Jo was not exceptionally good at some boys' tasks. Alcott writes, "Jo brought wood and set chairs, dropping, overturning, and clattering everything she touched" (7). Jo regularly competed with her inner pilgrim, in her own version of *Pilgrim's Progress,* to be good. She angered easily, a trait she struggled to overcome, but vowed that she would try to be what her father loved to call her, "a little woman," and "not be rough and wild; but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else" (9). Jo thought that "keeping her temper at home was a much harder task than facing a rebel or two down South" (9). When Amy burns Jo's manuscript in protest over not being permitted to go to the theater, Jo is torn between the anger she feels toward her sister and the anguish she would like to relieve with tears, "but tears were an unmanly weakness" (76). Jo is not a man, yet she values many characteristics of males. When Amy falls through the ice, however, it is Laurie who remains levelheaded and gives rescue orders to Jo who is paralyzed with fear and guilt about her anger. Laurie, not Jo, has the physical strength to pull Amy out of the water. Jo is engaged in a competition she cannot win. She simply will always be a girl, and she must find a way to accept it. Jo realizes what the consequences of her temper might have been and sees the value of maturity and self-control for women and for

men. She puts her new knowledge to the test in the chapter entitled "Camp Laurence," when Fred Vaughn cheats during a croquet match. Jo holds her temper and rallies to win the game for her team despite Fred's dishonesty. Meg congratulates her for how she handles the situation, but Jo replies, "Don't praise me, Meg, for I could box his ears this minute. I should certainly have boiled over, if I hadn't stayed among the nettles till I got my rage under enough to hold my tongue" (126). Jo wisely realizes that this inner battle is not yet won.

When Laurie and the March girls are discussing their dreams, their "castles in the air" for the future, Jo's is characteristically ambitious:

> I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle, - something heroic, or wonderful, - that won't be forgotten after I'm dead. I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you all, some day. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous; that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream. (143)

Jo does not state her wish vaguely, but with an air of cautious confidence as she claims, "I've got the key to my castle in the air; but whether I can unlock the door, remains to be seen" (143). Jo is prepared to meet any challenges ahead, and will give them her best efforts in her determination to succeed. From her mother's teachings, Jo recognizes that Laurie lacks motivation when she declares to him, "You need a motive, mother says; and when you get it, she is sure you'll work splendidly" (144). Jo has motive and purpose pushing her drive forward. She wants to be famous and to have the money that results from fame. Jo does engage in a bit

of competition with John when she thinks that he is going to take Meg away from her family. Jo comes to accept him as a brother rather than a foe, and as an addition to the family unit she cherishes and wishes to provide for. Throughout the novel, Jo has a reason to work hard and a goal to reach, both a source of inspiration and essential elements in a competitive attitude.

When Jo encourages Laurie to follow his own desires in rebellion against his grandfather's wishes for him, it is the mature and maternal Meg who steps in to keep things in check claiming, "That's not right, Jo; you mustn't talk in that way, and Laurie mustn't take your bad advice" (144). Meg competes on a quiet level, wanting to present herself at her best to garner some attention and be admired by others. Her attempts at competing, however, sometimes go awry. When Jo is helping Meg curl her hair in preparation for the Gardiner's party, the iron tongs are too hot and burn Meg's hair, causing her hair to detach along with the curling papers. Meg construes her misfortune as a punishment for her pride as she says, "Serves me right for trying to be fine. I wish I'd let my hair alone" (26). To Meg, engaging in competitive behavior means succumbing to weakness.

She has the same sort of experience when she is invited to spend time at the Moffat's. While assembling her own things and those her sisters are lending to her, Meg wishes for more and finer things so that she will be as well-dressed as the other girls at the gathering. She suddenly realizes that "it does seem as if the more one gets the more one wants, don't it?" (85). At the Moffat's, Meg realizes that she cannot compete and is demoralized with her shabby clothing. Despite her "sensible

resolution to be contented with the simple wardrobe which suited a poor man's daughter," Meg allows Belle to dress her up for the large party and is at first pleased that she is "a little beauty" (90). Even Sallie Moffat is envious of Meg, as Meg acts "the new part of fine lady" (91). But when Laurie sees Meg and voices his disapproval of her low-cut dress, he comments, "I don't like your gown, but I do think you are – just splendid" (93). Meg understands that their mutual discomfort lies not merely in what she is wearing, but in the attempt to be someone other than her true self.

When Meg confesses to her mother that, even though she looked like a "fashion-plate" at the party and was even called "a doll," she likes being praised and admired (95-97). Marmee responds that it "is perfectly natural and quite harmless, if the liking does not become a passion, and lead one to do foolish or unmaidenly things" (97). Competition for attention in and of itself is not regarded as an admirable motive and garners only empty praise. Meg is instructed to "[l]earn to know and value the praise which is worth having, and to excite the admiration of excellent people, by being modest as well as pretty" (97). Mrs. March imparts that engaging in competitive behavior that is degrading just to attract a rich husband is wrong. She encourages her daughters to marry for love rather than money; if they don't find love it is better to "be happy old maids than unhappy wives" (98). In other words, they should be ambitious in a feminine manner and for the right reasons, and always within a spirit of cooperation rather than competition.

Marmee's lesson on competition teaches Meg that only sincere praise and admiration for one's genuine qualities holds real value.

Meg carries these ideas forward when she plans a simple wedding and declares to Aunt March, "I'm not a show, aunty, and no one is coming to stare at me, to criticise my dress, or count the cost of my luncheon. I'm too happy to care what anyone says or thinks, and I'm going to have my little wedding just as I like it" (250). Meg clearly has no desire to compete with anyone else's wedding celebrations, but she does still harbor feelings of inadequacy regarding John's income after their wedding. In her desire to compete with Sallie Moffat's abundance of pretty things, Meg purchases fabric for a dress which she does not need and cannot afford. After her embarrassment in finding that John will have to cancel an order for a coat that he truly needs, Meg persuades Sallie to purchase the expensive dress fabric, then surprises John with his coat. Meg realizes the responsibility she has to handle money wisely, rather than using it to impress friends.

Amy, too, learns this lesson when she tries to purchase the affection of her peers and earn a place among them by bringing delicious limes to school. Even though her teacher has forbidden them, Amy uses precious monies to buy the fruit and brings it to school to secretly share as a treat. She is punished severely by her teacher when discovered. Although Marmee dislikes the corporal punishment Amy's teacher bestows, she remarks,

> I'm not sure that it won't do you more good than a milder method. You are getting to be altogether too conceited and important, my dear, and it is quite time you set about correcting it. You have a good many little gifts and virtues, but there is no need of parading them, for conceit spoils the finest genius. There is not much danger that real talent or goodness will be overlooked long; even if it is, the consciousness of possessing and using it well should satisfy one, and the great charm of all power is modesty. (70)

Mrs. March's comment could be construed as stifling a competitive urge by suggesting that the outward demonstration of one's skills is immodest. The real lesson here, however, is the power and respect that humility can command and how it can diffuse an unnecessarily competitive situation.

Amy still has an unrealistic sense of her own importance when she is furious at not being permitted to go to the theater when Laurie invites only Meg and Jo. Meg feels sorry for Amy and tries to figure out a way that she might go, too, but Jo claims she won't go if Amy does. The only way for Amy to compete with her older sister's power is to hurt her, as she has done in the past by upsetting Jo's dresser drawers and other relatively harmless pranks. The destruction of Jo's manuscript, however, which Amy knew was precious to Jo, is indicative of the rising level of competitiveness Amy feels with her sister. Jo is older and is permitted to do things that Amy is not, which makes Amy feel somewhat less important. Amy regains her self-importance briefly when she sees Jo's reaction to the loss of the manuscript, but does not obtain forgiveness from her until Jo realizes that, if not for Laurie,

Amy could have died when she fell through the ice. Though never as serious as this episode, Amy and Jo continue to have competing ideas about how things should be done.

While enrolled in a drawing class, Amy once again tries to compete with wealthy classmates by providing them with a fancy luncheon which she really cannot afford. Jo declares, "Why in the world should you spend your money, worry your family, and turn the house upside down for a parcel of girls who don't care a sixpence for you? I thought you had too much pride and sense to truckle to any mortal woman just because she wears French boots and rides in a *coupé*" (259). Amy retorts, "The girls do care for me, and I for them, and there's a great deal of kindness, and sense, and talent among them in spite of what you call fashionable nonsense" (259). Amy continues her defense of herself and her personal attack on Jo: "You don't care to make people like you, to go into good society, and cultivate your manners and tastes. I do, and I mean to make the most of every chance that comes. *You* can go through the world with your elbows out and your nose in the air, and call it independence, if you like. That's not my way" (259). Rather than present this heated exchange as a divisive battle, Alcott has the sisters recognize their differences and see that "Amy's description of Jo's idea of independence was such a good hit, that both burst out laughing, and the discussion took a more amiable turn" (260).

The entire family helps Amy with the luncheon, but on the first day it rains, so no one comes. The following day has been set as a rain date, but since some of

the food was perishable, Amy must go to buy another lobster. She is humiliated to admit to a young gentlemen friend of Laurie's on the omnibus that the lobster is hers. Amy is further mortified and saddened that only one of her classmates comes to the luncheon. Her family helps her get through the party and offers some condolences, but Amy is distraught over all her generous preparations for only one guest. As with the limes episode, Amy over-extends her means to try to make a good impression and to be accepted. Her attempt to compete in fashionable society flops, and to her chagrin, the only reminder of the event is a gift from Laurie in the form of a small lobster charm.

When asked what her "castle in the air" is, Amy replies, "I have lots of wishes; but the pet one is to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world" (143). Amy and Jo unknowingly compete for the opportunity to go abroad with their aunt and Amy is chosen. She does go to Rome, but her dream of being a great artist does not materialize. In response to Laurie's query about her art when they meet in Nice, she replies, "Rome took all the vanity out of me, for after seeing the wonders there, I felt too insignificant to live, and gave up all my foolish hopes in despair." Laurie asks why she would give it up when she has so much energy and talent. Amy gives a glimpse into exactly what it means to her to be competitive when she replies, "That's just why, because talent isn't genius, and 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 anymore" (405). Amy competes only when her chances of winning what she desires are high.

Since she regards her artistic dream as being unattainable, she devotes her energies to self-improvement and uses all the means at her disposal to snare a wealthy husband in Fred Vaughn. She does solicit a proposal from Fred, but declines when she realizes she loves Laurie. Rather than compete with Jo for Laurie's affections, Amy patiently waits for Laurie to recover from the hurt of Jo's refusal. There is no brash moment of victory for Amy, only the quietly mature observation, "How well we pull together, don't we?" as Alcott once again uses a rowing scene in her fiction, but this time not for a competitive purpose. Laurie responds, "So well, that I wish we might always pull in the same boat. Will you, Amy?" Her acceptance softens the blow somewhat for Alcott's readers who had read the first part of *Little Women* and were anxiously awaiting part second and assumed that Laurie would marry Jo. In a journal entry dated November 1, 1868, Alcott affirms her disapproval: "Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I *won't* marry Jo to Laurie to please any one" (*Journals* 167).

Of course, we know that each of the March girls does marry except for Beth. Her character lacks any sense of competitive motivation save that of striving to make others comfortable and happy, a clear illustration of the nineteenth-century "angel in the house." Beth devotes all of her time and energy to the care of her family. She finds her satisfaction in providing a clean, warm, and congenial atmosphere in the March home and in doing kind deeds for those in need. It is this desire to help those less fortunate that causes her to contract scarlet fever and slowly deteriorate, but even in dying, Beth consoles Jo saying,

> I have a feeling it never was intended I should live long. I'm not like the rest of you; I never made any plans about what I'd do when I grew up; I never thought of being married, as you all did. I couldn't seem to imagine myself anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use anywhere but there. I never wanted to go away, and the hard part now is the leaving you all. I'm not afraid, but it seems as if I should be homesick for you even in heaven. (375)

Beth encourages Jo to be happy and to enjoy the time they have left together. She reassures Jo stating, "I don't suffer much, and I think the tide will go out easily, if you help me" (375). Rather than draw attention to herself, Beth keeps her decline a secret for as long as possible to spare her family. Throughout the novel, they remain her most pressing concern while Beth March as "the angel in the house" completes the ultimate pilgrim's journey.

Little Women concludes with the girls revisiting their original "castle in the air" plans for their lives from when they were young. Jo admits that her former plan "seems selfish, lonely and cold" now compared to the life she has since she inherited Aunt March's Plumfield and has made it into a school with her husband Professor Bhaer (489). Meg had hoped for "splendid things," but she is content with her twins and her husband John, and declares herself to be "the happiest woman in the world" (489). Despite all of their wealth, Amy and Laurie's only daughter Beth is in fragile health, but they learn to be face adversity and grow strong together. Amy states, "So, in spite of my one cross, I can say with Meg, 'Thank God, I'm a

happy woman'" (490). Lastly, they thank their mother for her generosity and kindness of spirit and for all the lessons she worked to teach them as they grew. Marmee gratefully and humbly replies, "Oh, my girls, however long you may live, I can never wish you a greater happiness than this!" (491). Readers feel the sense of individual achievement that permeates each character's proclamation. Alcott makes comparisons at the end of *Little Women* only in the spirit of showing how each character is doing her best with the gifts she has been given, which is perhaps the greatest and most meaningful competitive endeavor of all.

Rose Campbell and Phebe Moore in *Eight Cousins* and *Rose in Bloom*

In *Eight Cousins* and in its sequel, *Rose in Bloom*, Louisa May Alcott follows the growth and development of her heroine Rose Campbell from a young orphan to a grown heiress and philanthropist, and Rose's friend Phebe Moore from household maid to professional singer. Unlike the March sisters, Rose is free from monetary worries and does not have to work to contribute to the household income; nevertheless, she is taught to value all work and is taught the importance of giving one's best effort. She is the ward of her Uncle Alec, a doctor who shuns the Victorian fashions of corsets and medicines for women. Each of Rose's six aunts offers to help raise her, and she is caught within their competing ideas of child-rearing. Alcott again uses rowing terms in her fiction, this time to describe how the competitive behavior of the aunts makes Rose feel. Alcott writes that Uncle Alec "could entirely understand how the good ladies had each put in her oar and tried to paddle her own way, to the great disturbance of the waters and the entire

bewilderment of poor Rose" (28). With her uncle as "captain of this little craft" and no more interference from the aunts, Rose flourishes (29). Uncle Alec assumes control of her upbringing as he instructs her in proper foods to eat and vigorous exercise to engage in to be healthy, and he even suggests loose-fitting clothing to wear that is comfortable for movement.

Alcott's support of physical activities for women appears in a familiar form in *Eight Cousins.* Alcott has both Ruth and Phebe running in the novel. Phebe states, "[A]ll the spare time I get I run off into the woods" (6), and Rose runs outdoors when Uncle Alec directs her to "Take a smart run round the garden and get up a glow" (48). He states, "If you dear little girls would only learn what real beauty is, and not pinch and starve and bleach yourselves out so, you'd save an immense deal of time, and money, and pain" (51). He is extremely practical even to the point of creating placebo pills out of brown bread to placate the aunts' insistence that Rose take various medications. In *Victorian Domesticity: Families in the Life and Art of Louisa May Alcott,* Charles Strickland observes that, "Even where the rearing of girls is concerned, Alcott allowed that masculine influence might be essential" (126). As with Mr. March in *Little Women,* the wisdom of a male family member is highly regarded in *Eight Cousins* and helps to quell competitive female behavior which, in Rose's case with her aunts, was not constructive.

But Alcott also allows her female characters to help curb the negative aspects of male competition. Aunt Jessie worries that the boys will be adversely

influenced by sensation stories[47] and declares that the "love of money is the curse of America, and for the sake of it men will sell honor and honesty, till we don't know whom to trust" (202). Rose makes a pact with her cousins that she will give up wearing earrings if they will stop smoking, strive to read only good books, and promise always to be honest men. Uncle Alec declares that "when girls give up their little vanities, and boys their small vices, and try to strengthen each other in well-doing, matters are going as they ought" (203). Negative competitive activities indulged in by either sex garner only negative consequences, but hearty, healthful activities and wholesome competition are beneficial to all.

As in *Moods,* Alcott includes a boat race in *Eight Cousins* that also contains a reference to catching a crab. Rose is in a boat with her uncle and sees her cousins in another. She cries, "Row, uncle, row! oh, please do, and not let them catch up with us!" Rose does not row, but enjoys the thrill of the race until her hat flies into the water. Because Uncle Alex stops rowing to retrieve Rose's blue hat, the cousins inquire, "Did you catch a crab, uncle?" He replies, "No, a blue-fish" (82). Once again, just as in *Moods,* readers can appreciate Alcott's amusement with competitive activities and her wit.

Alcott also imparts a mischievous sense of humor to Rose. When Aunt Jane tries to scold Uncle Alec for spoiling Rose and being too lenient with her studies, to her aunt's consternation, Rose recites a litany of topics she has learned about just that day along with considerable details about many of them. The aunt leaves,

[47] Perhaps one of the reasons why Alcott stopped writing them.

feeling disturbed, as Alcott writes, "She would have been more so if she had seen her reprehensible brother-in-law dancing a triumphal polka down the hall with Rose in honor of having silenced the enemy's battery for once" (92). Alcott allows her characters the enjoyment of celebrating their small victories.

Rose grows to enjoy physical activities of all sorts "that would have caused the aunts to cry aloud if they knew of them" (162). Uncle Alec is amazed by her progress and declares, "[H]ere you are growing up like a bean-stalk, and I shall find I've got a strong-minded little woman on my hands before I can turn round" (162). Alcott also uses the phrase "little women" in *Rose in Bloom.* Several additional similarities to Alcott's novel *Little Women* appear in the writing. There is a rephrasing of Christie Devon's "highest aspirations" speech (*Work* 202) by Mac when he and Rose are discussing Mac's future (*Rose in Bloom* 43), but there is a greater degree of certainty that Mac will reach achieve his goals because he is a man. When Alcott relates Rose's plan to have Phebe for her pupil, Uncle Alec cautions Rose to start slowly and build gradually with Phebe's lessons. He warns, "You shall do it all yourself, only don't go too fast, or make too many castles in the air, my dear" (263). "Castles in the Air" is a title of one of the chapters in *Little Women,* and the phrase appears in the beginning of *Rose in Bloom.* Alcott also has Rose exclaim, "I really don't see how other girls get along without an Uncle Alec!" In *Little Women* Jo voices this same sentiment about Marmee. Alcott allows her characters to step slightly outside the norm for their gender and time, but cautions that they should not venture too far, and never go alone. This aspect of Alcott's

writing makes her characters admirable in their strength and accomplishments, but preserves their femininity by keeping them within acceptable limits of competitive activity and the goals they may attempt in their nineteenth-century world.

In *Rose in Bloom*, Alcott continues the story with Uncle Alec, Rose, and Phebe returning from a trip abroad. The family sees that Rose has changed. She is "sweet and spirited" and "not quite like other girls, and rather startled them now and then by some independent little speech or act" (17). Rose and Phebe are described as "firebrands," and one of the aunts is already planning Rose's "coming out." Uncle Alec laments the lack of preparation for life that young women have when he says, "the poor little women are seldom provided with any armor worth having; and, sooner or later, they are sure to need it, for everyone must fight her own battle, and only the brave and strong can win" (19). He personally has succeeded, however, in instilling a sense of independence, confidence, and purpose in Rose, making her into a "Real Woman," according to Frances Cogan's definition previously discussed in Chapter One. She imparts to the family that she and Phebe "believe that it is as much a right and a duty for women to do something with their lives as for men; and we are not going to be satisfied with such frivolous parts as you give us" (20). She continues by declaring,

> [W]e'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 beside a housekeeper and a baby-tender! (21)

She goes on to say that this is only the beginning of her "strong-mindedness" and that she will not be "cheated out of the real things that make one good and happy" (21).

In a bold reversal, Rose requests a line-up of the cousins for a sort of "review" to see how they have changed while she was abroad. This is the converse of the scene early in *Eight Cousins* when the cousins "inspect" Rose. During the inspection in *Rose in Bloom*, one of the cousins reveals that the family has plans for Rose to marry one of them to "keep the property in the family." Rose responds with "a look they had never seen before" and a command: "Break ranks, − the review is over" (29). Her brief reign of confidant authority and independent thought is undermined by the patriarchal notions of inheritances and family legacies, reminding Rose that her situation is only made possible by the "tiresome money" she inherited from her father and the fact that her uncle took responsibility for her and taught her much. Kitty is without this sort of guidance as she confides to Rose, "I know I'm a little goose; but lately I've felt as if I might come to something if I had the right sort of help" (249). Kitty cannot talk candidly with her family, so cannot benefit from their wisdom.

Unlike Alcott's character Christie Devon in *Work,* Rose has no concept of poverty and the kinds of work some women have to do merely to survive; they do not have the opportunity to choose a career for themselves as Rose does. Phebe's

work in the Campbell household gives Rose some inclination, but Rose neutralizes Phebe's poverty by elevating her from the status of servant to the status of friend. Only after Archie's proposal to Phebe, which horrifies the aunts, does Rose realize the extent of her family's engrained, traditional views on prestige and social rank. Phebe utilizes her competitive spirit to make herself worthy of the Campbell family before she can marry Archie. She becomes a famous singer and helps Uncle Alec recover from a near-fatal sickness; only then is she welcomed into the family. Rose struggles as she competes with her desires and resists the temptations of frivolous society that wealth provides.

Alcott engages her characters in a wide variety of competitive situations throughout these novels. Women compete for the affections of men, women compete with men to establish equal or superior ability, and most important, women compete with themselves to establish self-worth. Through these characters Alcott vents some of her own frustrations with the nineteenth-century patriarchal constrictions that women were subject to: the expectation to marry, and marry well; the belief that women should be educated, but only in those arts which will make a happy home once she is married; and the acceptance that a woman's place was in the home, the sphere in which she both ruled and was ruled with grace. Alcott had difficulties with all of these as she struggled to find her place in the nineteenth century capitalist economy and establish a life for herself as a practically self-taught, intelligent, and independent female author.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The social mores of the nineteenth century dictated female behavior to an astounding degree. This chapter will discuss several competitive activities for women that were condoned by society and some that were not. Competition for women generally was not frowned upon as long as it was held within a woman's traditional sphere. Since the home was the center of a woman's sphere, competition in domestic activities was commonplace. Sewing, cooking, and gardening were areas in which women were expected to have a competency, at least, in order to be able to take proper care of their families and their homes. Local county fairs were often held and always included such competitions for women.

Some women engaged in various types of physical activity as part of their everyday routine, such as riding and rowing, but would not do so publicly as part of a contest since that would be considered unfeminine. For the most part, physical competitions requiring strength and endurance were not readily encouraged for women until the late nineteenth century with the development of social sports for women such as lawn tennis and golf, and the advent of intercollegiate athletic teams for women in sports such as basketball, track, and swimming. Some women, however, performed physical labor as a way to make a living. Women who lived on farms were expected to contribute to a myriad of laborious tasks. There were shoe factories, mills, and typesetting offices that all employed women and required them to perform strenuous physical labor. In the newly emerging professions, women

competed for publishers for their writings, they competed to enter medical and law schools, and then competed even harder to be able to practice in their fields. Women took up the fight for the abolition of slavery, for temperance, and for the right to vote. They wanted to be able to compete in the capitalist economy according to the talents and desires they possessed, just as men could, and many, including Alcott herself, did just that. From county fairs to the courtroom, women were proving themselves to be worthy advocates and competitors.

One of the long-standing venues in which women openly and enthusiastically competed was the county fair. In an article entitled, "'A Fair, Without *the* Fair, is No Fair at All': Women at the New England Agricultural Fair in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," Linda Borish notes that women were an important factor in making the fairs interesting places to go for a family day of enjoyment and "peaceful competition" (163). Women were encouraged to bring their finest samples of baked goods, needlework, and flowers and lay them against their neighbors' best efforts in competitions for the coveted blue ribbons. Winners claimed small cash prizes called premiums and earned the high esteem of their peers.

Some organizers advertised that there would be "special accommodations for ladies" including special seating, and that the fairgrounds would be relatively manure-free (161). After particularly poor female attendance at one cattle show held on a Monday in Barre, Massachusetts, organizers quickly realized that for women, Monday washday had to take precedence over a cattle show, and planned

future events accordingly (162). Judges were mostly men, however, and "held the power in the structure of the fair, and in this forum they could influence the nature of female participation in certain categories of competitions" (156). Some managers, according to Borish, encouraged women to participate in nontraditional competitions such as female equestrianism, not so they could show what they were capable of as athletic racing jockeys, but to draw larger crowds in order to produce higher profits (156). Even though these competitions allowed women to exhibit their talents, the women were actually being used by men as objects and oddities to be displayed. Borish writes,

> Reformers objected to the public exhibition of women's athleticism to entertain fair-goers and produce financial rewards for managers. Because female equestrianism provided a very different sort of competition in which male judges had a minor role and little influence on the outcome of the events, female horse racers actually undermined male authority and challenged the traditional role of the female gender. (171)

Reformers wanted to open doors of opportunity for women, but not at the cost of their dignity as a sort of freak show or side-show in a carnival just to make money for men. Such activity for women was highly frowned upon by traditionalists also, and, according to Borish, "greatly jeopardized the moral character of the fair" since the agricultural fair was supposed to be "an extension of women's work and gender relations on the farm" (172).

In another article about farm women by Borish entitled "Benevolent America: Rural Women, Physical Recreation, Sport and Health Reform in Ante-Bellum New England," she comments that farm women were encouraged to take long walks and go horseback riding (958), ice skating (960-61), swimming (962), sailing and fishing (963), and gardening (964), for healthful exercise and recreation. This would be activity separate from the health-depleting physical labor of their chores, but doing those things within a competitive atmosphere as athletes was usually deemed rude, unfeminine, and eminently inappropriate.

Nevertheless, some women broke with tradition and participated despite disapproval. In "You Couldn't Keep an Iron Man Down: Rowing in Nineteenth Century Pittsburgh," John Kudlik notes, "By no means was the aquatic scene wholly dominated by men. This was quite an achievement, given Victorian America's preoccupation with the social conventions of patriarchy." At the Head of the Ohio Regatta each fall in Pittsburgh, the Lottie McAlice Woman's Junior 1x Race is held which commemorates the day in 1870 when female rower Lottie McAlice, then sixteen years old, beat Maggie Lew in a one mile sculling contest on the Monongahela River. Her prize was a gold watch and two thousand dollars cash. Kudlik writes, "A headline in Frank Leslie's popular *Illustrated Newspaper* read: 'The Women's Rowing Match at Pittsburgh, Pa.' An illustration showed throngs of fans lining the shore and hanging from trees" (Kudlik 58).

Basketball was introduced into a women's physical education class at Smith College shortly after its invention in 1891. By 1895, many colleges nationwide had

competitive basketball teams for women. In "History of Women's Basketball" on the WNBA website, Sally Jenkins writes,

> But no sooner had basketball taken hold in women's colleges that an outcry arose that it was eroding sacred concepts of woman-hood. Previously well-bred young ladies could be seen running and falling, shrieking in excitement and, worst of all, calling each other by nicknames. Games would end with handkerchiefs and hair pins scattered all over gymnasium floors. One article in the *Los Angeles Times* had a headline that said: "Sweet Things Have Scrap." It went on to furnish details of a high school game that included a lot of hair-pulling, tumbling and sliding. The reporter wrote: "There was something disquieting in the grim and murderous determinations with which the young ladies chased each other all over the court."

Clearly, American women wanted outlets for their spirited energies and proved they could be great competitors. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, American women were competing in public in basketball, rowing, horse racing, baseball, mountain climbing, hot-air ballooning, boxing, swimming, running, walking, tennis, table-tennis, trap shooting, fencing, bicycling, ice hockey, volleyball, bowling, golf, and croquet ("History of Women").

Some traditionally male employments were slow to admit women such as medicine and law, but one traditionally male trade that had opened to women early on and that Alcott refers to in her fiction is typesetting. Races were often held, sometimes with a beer to the winner, to see who could typeset the fastest with the

fewest errors or revisions needed. In "A Showdown of 'Swifts': Women Compositors, Dime Museums, and the Boston Typesetting Races of 1886," Walker Rumble provides an account of women participating in public, female-only typesetting races who actually set more type with fewer errors than their much celebrated male counterparts had within the men-only competitions. Rumble notes that the races ceased soon after this realization. Not only could women do an excellent job, but they could perform with a greater degree of speed and accuracy. Rumble explains that women had been setting type for many years prior, but only in lower-paying jobs that were less desired by men, so they had no venue in which to compare their skills with those of men until the amusement hall races. The women's event at the "dime museum" was intended only to be a sideshow, but instead became a huge embarrassment to men. Even seasoned compositors had to admit the ability the women possessed for typesetting and their relentless stamina throughout the six-day race. Their powers of dexterity and concentration were seriously put to the test when type cases were not refilled after the men's races, and live monkeys, which had been removed from the area of competition for the men's races because they were a distraction, were returned during the women's races for entertainment. The women remained unfazed and went about their tasks, determined to beat the men's records. Not one, but *three* of the women succeeded.

Printing unions slowly began allowing women members but limited their training on the new linotype machines to purposely create a barrier to their progress within the printing trade. Joyce W. Warren writes, "Not only did organized labor

discriminate against women, but American Marxists did not help the cause of women either. Ironically, the Marxists adopted the same values as bourgeois society with respect to women, idealizing woman in her domestic role" (149).

Alcott recognizes female compositors in her group of assembled workingwomen that includes "seamstresses, typesetters and shop-girls" at the end of her novel *Work* (330-31). After the heroine Christie Devon gives a speech to this group, Alcott writes, "Christie's hand was shaken by many roughened by the needle, stained with printer's ink, or hard with humbler toil" (333). This "humbler toil" included any manual labor that could generate some sort of income. As a child, Lucy Stone, one of the foremost activists in the early women's rights movement, "did piecework for a local shoe factory" (McMillen 10), and writer Lucy Larcum worked for years in the Lowell Mills and was a regular contributor to the *Lowell Offering* (Albertine 421-22). Since, according to Horace Greely, all women could not be married because there were more women than men, Greely's "large female surplus" needed ways to make money. He proposed that it was actually in the best interest of society to educate women and allow them the means to support themselves, rather than have them resort to prostitution because they had no other way to earn a living (qtd. in Smith 229). Education would prove to be the key to women's participation in a patriarchal capitalist economy.

As educational opportunities increased, women wanted no restrictions on what they could try to achieve; not surprisingly, getting admitted to professional schools met with great resistance. The first woman to earn a medical degree in the

nineteenth century was Elizabeth Blackwell. She applied to Geneva College in New York. Sally G. McMillen writes,

> Students at Geneva College saw Blackwell's application and decided that a young man or a rival institution had submitted it as a joke. School officials admitted the applicant, and when Blackwell showed up in the fall of 1847, they let her stay and attend classes though they required her to sit at the back of the classroom so as not to distract the young men. Townspeople were less tolerant and ridiculed this young woman who dared to become a doctor. (51)

The Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania was founded in 1850 and became "a longtime refuge for women students and faculty who faced quotas and discrimination elsewhere" ("Women"). It was one of three medical schools for women. By the 1890s, 390 women were practicing medicine in twenty-six states (Smith 278).

The legal field was also slow to accept women as professionals within its ranks. Upon applying for admission to the Wisconsin Supreme Court in 1875, Lavinia Goodell met with steadfast opposition from Justice Edward Ryan despite the fact that Miss Goodell had apprenticed for three years with a law firm, established a practice of her own, and had tried cases at the local court level in the Circuit Court of Rock County, Wisconsin, for the past year. In his opinion, Judge Ryan wrote, "We cannot but think the common law wise in excluding women from the profession of law. The law of nature destines and qualifies the female sex for

the bearing and nurture of the children of our race, and for the custody of the homes of the world, and their maintenance in love and honor" (qtd. in Morello 24). He goes on to say that women would be subjected to "all the nameless indecencies" if they were in the courtroom as attorneys, and that his court would take no part in making that a reality (25). Judge Ryan echoed the stubborn sentiment of the times that women were too delicate to be subjected to the unsavory details of court cases during trials. The fact that women were actually deeply involved in almost all of the atrocities that Judge Ryan mentioned was ignored.

Women went on to prove that they could indeed handle difficult situations in the courtroom. Esther McQuigg Morris was responsible for attaining the right to vote for Wyoming women in 1869, the first women to gain suffrage. In 1870, Morris became the first woman judge in the United States. She dealt with her husband's courtroom outburst in opposition to her career choice by assessing a fine, and, when he refused to pay it, finding him in contempt of court and putting him in jail (219-20). Women also had to prove that they were capable of competing at the highest levels. Belva Lockwood, a Washington, D.C., attorney who traveled from her office to court on a tricycle, was granted admittance to the United States Supreme Court in 1879 and even ran for President on the Equal Rights ticket in 1884 and in 1888 (Morello 31, 35-6). But the path was not always an easy one. In California, Clara Foltz fought for and gained admission to law school. Karen Berger Morello writes, "Late in life when Clara Foltz was asked to describe her thoughts about practicing law, she said she had found it, 'hard, unpoetic, and

relentless.' When they had to be, so were these early women lawyers" (65). Many nineteenth-century Americans believed that if women insisted in engaging in activities traditionally reserved for men, they would lose their femininity and cause irreparable harm to society and to their families.

Another group of women who were accused of pursuing the breakdown of society and the ruin of the American home in the latter half of the nineteenth century were the suffragists. Many women, including Louisa May Alcott, worked diligently to help people understand why women should vote, but some of the hardest to convince were women themselves. In a journal entry of July 1879, Louisa May Alcott writes, "Was the first woman to register my name as a voter," but her August entry reads, "Trying to stir up the women about Suffrage. So timid and slow" (*Journals* 216). Her lack of patience with the women of Concord shows clearly in her September entry: "Drove about & drummed up women to my Suffrage meeting. So hard to move people out of the old ruts. I haven't patience enough. If they wont see & work I let em alone and steam along my own way" (*Journals* 216).

Alcott shares her frustration in a letter to Ednah Dow Chaney dated September 4, 1879, when she writes, "Our meeting last eve. was a small one, & nobody had registered because of 'jelly-making, sewing, sickness or company.' So I gave them a good scolding & offered to drive the timid sheep (in a van) to the fatal spot where they seem to expect some awful doom" (*Letters* 235). Alcott voices her disappointment to Chaney about the notable women of Concord who refuse to

embrace the voting process: “Ellen Emerson has decided not to register. I don’t know why but am very sorry for she has much influence in C. & some already back out because she does. Is n’t it a pity? Yours disgustedly L.M.A.” (236). In her October 11, 1879, letter to the *Woman’s Journal,* Alcott expresses hope that more women will get involved:

> We still hope to have a meeting, for it is not too late to stir up the class of women who seem slowest to register. I am ashamed to say that out of a hundred women who pay taxes on property in Concord, only seven have as yet registered, while fourteen have paid a poll tax and put their names down in time.
>
> A very poor record for a town which ought to lead if it really possesses all the intelligence claimed for it.
>
> Yours for reforms of all kinds,
>
> L.M. ALCOTT. (238)

In yet another letter (date unknown), Alcott again writes of the prevailing attitudes of Concord:

> … Concord is a conservative old town & the people slow coaches about reform of any kind.
>
> A few black sheep like the Emerson’s, Alcott’s & Thoreaus are the only come outers here.
>
> I cant imagine who the “Female Political Party” was. Not natives I’m sure, for the good ladies nearly died of horror when my blessed mother, with

> the blood of all the Mays & Sewalls "a bilin" in her veins, once said at a Bee that she hoped to live to vote in the Town Hall with her four daughters at her back.
>
> It embittered many "dishes of tea" that night & we did not hear the last of it for a long time.
>
> I hope the stout old lady will yet have her wish, & *one* daughter at least will be there to give her a "boast" & a cheer.
>
> Sorry I cant throw more light, but we sit in darkness here, & Concord is a classical humbug as the world will find out someday. (338)

Apparently, other residents of Concord did not share Alcott's sensibilities toward many of the prominent issues of the day, including women's suffrage. These women could not see, as Alcott did, that participation in the franchise was the key to their being able to compete for jobs, economic security, and a voice in their community and country, but most important of all, in the very idea of selfhood.

Alcott's wit is evident in a letter to the *Woman's Journal* dated March 30, 1880, describing the first time women vote in Concord. They had registered to be eligible to cast ballots for the local school committee. Alcott writes,

> Twenty-eight women intended to vote, but owing to the omission of some formality several names could not be put upon the lists. Three or four were detained at home by family cares and did not neglect their domestic duties to run to the polls as has been predicted. Twenty, however, were there, some few coming alone, but mostly with husbands, fathers or brothers

> as they should, all in good spirits and not in the least daunted by the awful deed about to be done. (*Letters* 265)

Included in the report are moments of disagreement among the men "with occasional lapses into bad temper or manners" and the actual learning of "how the mystic rite was performed" (246). Bronson Alcott suggested that the ladies be permitted to vote first while the gentlemen watched "in solemn silence" (246). Alcott remarks, "No bolt fell on our audacious heads, no earthquake shook the town, but a pleasing surprise created a general outbreak of laughter and applause, for, scarcely were we seated when Judge Hoar rose and proposed that the polls be closed" (246). The newly enfranchised women of Concord alone decided the election of the school committee that year. Alcott describes these new voters and those who chose to abstain:

> Among the new voters were descendants of Major Buttrick of Concord fight renown, two of Hancock and Quincy, and others whose grandfathers or great grandfathers had been among the first settlers of the town. A goodly array of dignified and earnest women, though some of the "first families" of the historic town were conspicuous by their absence.
>
> But the ice is broken, and I predict that next year our ranks will be fuller, for it is the first step that counts, and when the timid or indifferent, several of whom came to look on, see that we still live, they will venture to express publicly the opinions they held or have lately learned to respect and believe. (247)

Being permitted to vote for the school committee members was a small beginning for the women of Concord, but a good one. It led to the raising of the next question, that of municipal suffrage – when would women be permitted to vote in municipal elections or run for office themselves if they so desired? Several motions had been made and tabled, and Alcott voices her dismay in a February 4, 1882, letter to the *Woman's Journal:*

> You ask what we are going to do about Municipal Suffrage for women in Concord? and I regret to be obliged to answer, as before – "Nothing but make a motion asking for it at town meeting, and see it promptly laid upon the table again."
>
> It is always humiliating to have to confess this to outsiders, who look upon Concord as a representative town, and are amazed to learn that it takes no active part in any of the great reforms of the day, but seems to be content with the reflected glory of dead forefathers and imported geniuses, and falls far behind smaller but more wide awake towns with no pretensions to unusual intelligence, culture, or renown.

Alcott is not afraid to clearly voice her opinion of those who stand quietly by and refuse to help bring about beneficial change. As an avid proponent of the temperance movement, Alcott calls to task those who do not follow through with what they proclaim in their religions to believe:

> While a bar room door stands open between two churches, and men drink themselves to death before our eyes, it seems as if Christian men and

> women should bestir themselves to try at least to stop it, else the commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" is written over the altars in vain, and the daily prayer "Lead us not into temptation" is but empty breath.
>
> If the women could vote on the license question I think the bar room would be closed, but while those who own the place say, "It would lessen the value of the property to make a temperance house of it," and the license matter is left to the decision of those men who always grant it, the women can only wait and hope and pray for the good time when souls are counted of more value than dollars, and law and gospel can go hand in hand. (*Letters* 256-57)

Alcott wonders why her town, known for its intellectual circles, seems so ignorant regarding the evils of the over-consumption of alcohol and so fearful regarding women's rights. The ladies who want the municipal vote have proven their organizational abilities over years of fundraisers and church teas; will their talents be confined, even wasted, in these trivial stations forever? Alcott insists that women will not actually run for office as is greatly feared, completely abandoning their delegated spheres, but instead will prove to be great contributors to the smooth running of municipal affairs. Ladies can vote and still remain ladies. Alcott couples her desire to see women vote in a larger capacity with her desire to enforce temperance. She places the vote for women as the key to closing bar rooms in order to put an end to family disharmony and the devastation caused by the consumption

of alcohol. To Alcott, the separation of church and state in this case can be perceived as condoning corruption. The state has the power to help the church in its work and should do so rather than allow human greed to destroy lives when bar owners take advantage of men who cannot control their own behavior.

In May 1884, Alcott again writes to the *Woman's Journal* regarding women voting in Concord, saying, "There is very little to report about the woman's vote at Concord Town Meeting, as only eight were there in time to do the one thing permitted them" (281). Alcott complains that the women could not vote simply because they were late. She laments that they do not take their voting responsibilities as seriously as their domestic duties. She continues,

> Their delay shows, however, that home affairs are *not* neglected, for the good ladies remained doubtless to give the men a comfortable dinner and set their houses in order before going to vote.
>
> Next time I hope they will leave the dishes till they get home, as they do when in a hurry to go to the sewing-society, Bible-class, or picnic. A hasty meal once a year will not harm the digestion of the lords of creation, and the women need all the drill they can get in the new duties that are surely coming to widen their sphere, sharpen their wits, and strengthen their wills, teaching them the courage, intelligence and independence all should have, and many sorely need in a world of vicissitudes. (282)

Alcott's understanding of the process and that the ladies need to organize their efforts to teach and inform the new voters is clear. She shows a gentle tolerance and

a wry sense of humor in her encouragement of these newly empowered women and in her hopes for their future.

Alcott's declining health severely limited her active participation in the women's movement. In a letter dated August 31, 1885, written to Lucy Stone who was one of the earliest organizers in the movement, Alcott explains,

> I should think it was hardly necessary for me to write or to say that it is impossible for me ever to "go back" on Womans Suffrage. I earnestly desire to go forward on that line as far & as fast as the prejudices, selfishness & blindness of the world will let us, & it is a great cross to me that ill health & home duties prevent my devoting heart, pen & time to this most vital question of the age.
>
> After a fifty years acquaintance with the noble men & women of the Anti slavery cause, & the sight of the glorious end to their faithful work, I should be a traitor to all I most love, honor & desire to imitate, if I did not covet a place among those who are giving their lives to the emancipation of the white slaves of America.
>
> If I can do no more let my name stand among those who are willing to bear ridicule & reproach for the truth's sake, & so earn some right to rejoice when the victory is won.
>
> Most *heartily* yours for *Woman's Suffrage* & all other reforms,
>
> LOUISA MAY ALCOTT. (291)

Alcott is willing to do what she is physically able to do for the cause and is not afraid to take the town to task for sitting on its laurels. In effect, Concord is stopping its own growth while the tourist trade picks up as curiosity seekers flock to see the city of Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, and Hawthorne. Alcott was irritated by tourists who wanted to meet her or even just catch a glimpse of her as she sat in her garden or went outside for any reason. She resented being sought after and was disturbed by her loss of privacy. In a December 18, 1885 letter to a schoolteacher, Viola Price Franklin, Alcott writes,

> I dislike to receive strangers who come out of mere curiosity, as some hundreds do, forgetting that an author has any right to privacy…If you can teach your five hundred pupils to love books but to let authors rest in peace, you will give them a useful lesson and earn the gratitude of the long suffering craft, whose lives are made a burden to them by the modern lion hunter and autograph fiend. (296)

To Louise Chandler Moulton, who was writing a biographical sketch of Alcott for *Our Famous Women*, she writes, "Don't forget to mention that L.M.A. does n't like lion hunters, does n't send autographs, photographs & autobiographical sketches to the hundreds of boys & girls who ask them… " (267).

To Alcott, asserting herself in the public sphere and her subsequent fame did not give the public any right of ownership over her, her family, her time, or her property. Despite her dislike for autograph seekers, she did enjoy the fact that she received letters that told her that "my little books are read and valued in a way I

never dreamed of seeing them" (*Letters* 161). Despite her monetary earnings, she claims that "[t]his success is more agreeable to me than money or reputation" (161). This speaks volumes about Alcott's character since her reputation has endured for over a century, and her earnings over her lifetime were significant, especially when compared to those of other notable authors of her time. In the Introduction to *Alcott in Her Own Time*, Daniel Shealy states,

> Under the imprint of Roberts Brothers, Alcott earned approximately $103,375 on her book publications alone during the years 1868 to 1886. This amount did not even include royalties from European sales. By comparison, during the same eighteen-year period, the prolific author Henry James would earn royalties from book sales, both in the United States and Europe, amounting to just $58,503. Herman Melville would earn only $10,444.33 from total book sales during his lifetime. (xiv)

Alcott obviously learned how to compete successfully within the patriarchal capitalist economy of the nineteenth century.

Alcott lived during a time of great change in the opportunities afforded to American women to remove the barriers that hindered them from exploring, developing their talents, and competing outside their sphere. Finally, women were beginning to be able to participate in education, sports, and careers that would open the world to them. The "web of connections" of home, workplace, community, socialist and feminist groups, street and kitchen, school and bedroom, according to Meredith Tax, "can be like a spiderweb, preventing her [woman] from moving. Yet

when a strong enough wind is blowing, the whole web and all the women in it can be seen to move together, and this is a new kind of movement, a new source of power and connectedness" (7). In her own life, Alcott advocated for the positive use of this kind of power within the suffrage and temperance movements. Through the characters in her short stories and novels, Alcott shows both the positive and negative aspects of competitive human nature and how this drive for achievement can be used for less than noble purposes, even by women. Because of the education provided for her by her father and his circle of intellectuals, and because of the life experiences she endured due to her family's economic circumstances, Alcott herself was a willing and capable participant in these transformative times for women within a patriarchal capitalist economy. She shows through the individualism in her own life, and through the lives of her characters, that women might find identity and self-fulfillment from within themselves rather than mechanically occupy designated spheres or play-act assigned roles. Even though Alcott's characters are often shrouded in fantastic plots and sentimental emotions, her fiction serves an important role in feminist literature. Through the characters in her fiction, Louisa May Alcott relates the hardships and frustrations that women are able to overcome and what they can achieve, for better or for worse, when they learn to channel their competitive natures toward a goal.

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