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UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

PERFORMATIVE DESIGNS:

FEMALE IDENTITY IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S SENSATIONAL AND SENTIMENTAL FICTION

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

KAREN MALEE SHERIFF LEVAN
Norman, Oklahoma
2000

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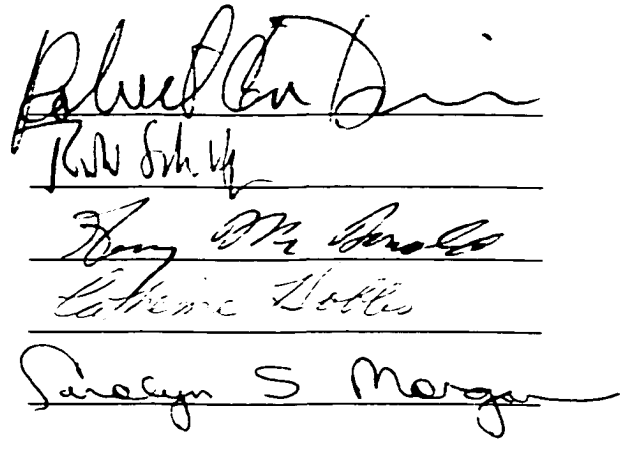
FEMALE IDENTITY IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S SENSATIONAL AND SENTIMENTAL FICTION

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY



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would recognize as fully the empowering pedagogy expressed in Alcott's depiction of performance as a collaborative practice within her characters' lives if it were not for the learning experiences afforded me by my work as a teacher at the University of Oklahoma and the Newton Dance Center. I am indebted to David Mair of the OU English Department, Annette Thornton, the former director of the Newton Dance Center, and Carolyn Morgan and Melanie Wright, both of the OU Honors College, for the teaching and learning opportunities they have made available to me.

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Introduction

Louisa May Alcott's Performative Identity:

Performance Theory, Motives, and Frameworks

Prior to 1943, when Leona Rostenberg discovered letters proving Louisa May Alcott's authorship of sensational fiction published in weekly magazines of the 1850s and primarily 1860s, the name "Louisa May Alcott" readily brought to mind sentimental tales of "wholesome domesticity" written primarily for an adolescent readership (Stern, "Introduction to Unmasked" xi). Before Rostenberg's unveiling, Alcott's identity as an author of sensational fiction remained only a suspicion, raised primarily by Jo March's, Alcott's most famous autobiographical persona's, publication of sensational fiction in her masterpiece, Little Women (1868-1869). Despite suspicions of Alcott's other literary identity, Alcott's name has been a synonym for portraits of domestic relationships and activities, female self-denial and moral influence, and female servitude within the home and public spheres. Her sentimental, adolescent tales, such as the March Trilogy, are famous for depicting stories of female development and characteristics of women's lives commensurate with nineteenth-century separate sphere ideology. Women-centered culture and stereotypical female concerns, such as feminine transparency, concern with physical appearance, the marriage imperative, and an obsession with relationships rather than self-development, comprise Alcott's literary identity to a great extent. Since Rostenberg's discovery and the initial publication of Alcott's recovered sensational fiction in 1975 in a collection edited by Madeleine Stern, however, Alcott's literary identity has enjoyed significant reevaluation.

Reinterpretation of Alcott's feminist philosophy, in particular, has been a subject of significant revision. After being revealed as the author of sensational fiction, Alcott is now interpreted in her complexity as a critic of women's socially prescribed role. Repeatedly throughout both her sentimental and sensational fiction, Alcott plays off of nineteenth-century feminine stereotypes and social expectations of the female role to forge a cultural critique of gender identity in nineteenth-century America. Drastic discrepancies between Alcott's depictions of female identity in her sentimental, adolescent fiction and her sensational, adult fiction have brought attention to contradictions even within what have been considered her more traditional texts, such as Little Women, her childhood autobiography, and Work, her adult autobiography. Discovery of Alcott's literary performances behind the masks of the pseudonym "A. M. Barnard" and her anonymous publications has brought attention to Alcott's interest in, in fact participation in, performance as a subversive practice and culture defining activity.

Repeatedly, Alcott spotlights or underhandedly incorporates discrepancies between her female characters' private and public identities. One of her sensational heroines, Cecil Bazil Stein, asks directly: "Is that what you wish me to be in public?" ("A Marble Woman" 212). Such attention to the presentation of self in everyday life allows significant connections to be made between Alcott's depictions of female identity and the cultural climate of nineteenth-century America and its strong interest in social hypocrisy and female influence. Publications of Alcott's journal writings also reveal her as a "stage-struck," theatre-going, woman who even conceived of her personal writings as an opportunity to "stage" her sense of self for a scrutinizing audience—her parents, Amos Bronson Alcott, the famous transcendental, educational reformist, and Abba Alcott, who

regularly read and commented on Louisa's journal entries. In addition, actress personas and theatrical frameworks are integral to the plot of nearly every one of Alcott's sensational thrillers.

This project examines Alcott's attention to performance as an activity and framework and argues for its relevance in reinterpretations of her fictional works and, therefore, her literary identity and feminist philosophy. The performance-perspective so prevalent in Alcott's narratives and character development, however, has by the twenty-first century's beginning become a subject that has gained significant theoretical attention apart from literary production in particular. This project has a strong interest in demonstrating the benefits of applying performance-oriented analysis to literary scholarship. Performance Studies as a field has gained critical attention since the early 1960s, and this project's analysis of Alcott's literary "performances" is indebted to the theoretical work comprising this field. Performance and its theoretical counterpart, performativity, have been used by critics in very diverse fields to theorize human activities integral to the development of cultural and individual identity. The first section of this introduction, "Moving In/To a Performance Perspective," characterizes the work of Performance Studies and discusses the theorizing of particular critics whose works contribute to an understanding of Performance Theory methodology.

This introduction's second section, "19th and 20th Century Performance Frameworks," explains similarities between mid-nineteenth-century American culture's concern with social hypocrisy and feminine artifice and twentieth-century critics' theorizing of identity as a performative act. The third section, "Alcott's Literary Performances," introduces the plots and characters of the fictional works analyzed in this

project, drawing attention to the cultural significance of these literary works as "performances" of literary and cultural norms and stereotypes. The final section of this introduction, "Performance Motives," addresses a few of the motivating factors for my own work on this project. One of performance theory's most important tenets is that a "historicity of norms" accompanies, in fact makes possible, any act that is discursively and socially and personally recognizable (Butler, Bodies 187). Reflecting on my own process of recognizing my interest in and the relevance of Alcott's attention to female performance provides insight into the nature of this prōject as a "performance." In addition to foregrounding antecedents to this project, "Performance Motives" also introduces themes that remain relevant throughout this project's other chapters. As the sections of this introduction demonstrate, individual "performances" are cumulative and their legibility entangled with other cultural performances; they are not made up of arbitrary choices nor are they independently willful (Butler, Bodies 187).

Moving In/to a Performance Perspective

Like many methodologies in vogue right now in literary and cultural studies, Performance Studies is interested in transgressive moves and ideas, revisionary and envisionary practices, and strategies for, on the one hand, exposing normalizing agents that perpetuate oppression and power, and, on the other hand, for creating new and alternative ways of thinking and living in the world. Richard Schechner, one of the field's founders, also posits Performance Studies' improvisational and creative attitude as one of its most defining characteristics. The field, according to Schechner, is interested in "what is performance and the performative—and the myriad contact points and

overlaps, tensions and loose spots, separating and connecting these two categories" (Schechner, "What Is Performance Studies Anyway?" 362). The performative speech act—a linguistic act that carries enough cultural force via repetition, context, and tradition to accomplish what it names—was first defined by J. L. Austin in How to Do Things With Words, but the concept of "performativity" has grown to include consideration of all cultural activity as itself a kind of speech act. Althusser's notion of "interpellation" wherein language inaugurates one's identity, and Foucault's explanation of discursive determination wherein dominant practices and social contexts police and shape one's conscience, behavior, and self- and social identity are but two well known examples of linguistic and social performativity.[1] The meaning of "performance" maintains its traditional association with the theatre, but it also has expanded to include all social activity as a kind of cultural staging.

Moving in/to a performance perspective involves focusing on performance and the performative at the same time, considering how individual and cultural activities of all kinds (both material and immaterial) collide with various language and cultural practices within specific historical and social contexts. In addition, this double-focus assumes that each collision (again, whether material or immaterial) includes a repetition, a re-citation, that either initiates a different possibility of meaning, relation, or identity, or emphasizes an affiliation with an existing meaning, relation, or identity.[2] In The Interpretation of Cultures (1973), Clifford Geertz identifies the "drama analogy" as one of the major trends in anthropological thinking in his exploration of the relationships between lived experiences, interpretations or studies of human experience, and the cultural contexts in which such behaviors occur. His discussion stages different cultures

and people as audiences for one another and draws attention to cultural expression and interpretation as a dramatic, performative act. He points out that while the difference between the object of study and study of it is obvious, critics still have a strong desire to discern culture from the "actor's point of view" (245)—from a perspective that embodies first-hand knowledge, or, better yet, an authoritative point of view. Expression and interpretation are, Geertz emphasizes, inevitably influenced by one's imagination, motivations, expectations, and cultural identity. As importantly, expression and interpretation are shaped by the meaning-making frameworks in which they occur. Meaningful structures inform how, or even *if*, one's words and gestures exist in a specific cultural moment or whether they are understood as genuine, fake, impulsive, parody, or rehearsal (Geertz 242). Geertz's notion that culture and the interpretation of culture are inseparable—that both culture and understandings of it are "made" and "fashioned" (Geertz 245)—helped initiate further attention to criticism as cultural practice and cultural practices as dramatic endeavors.[3] Richard Schechner's Between Theatre and Anthropology (1985), one of the seminal works of Performance Studies, explains how Victor Turner further developed this drama analogy, seeing "social conflict following the structure of drama and adapting its subjunctive 'as if' mood." Turner's ideas were paralleled by critics, such as Erving Goffman, who, "at the level of scene and 'character' (who is being, or pretending to be, who), found theatre everywhere in everyday life" (Schechner, Between 3). Turner paid particular attention to institutionalized performances such as rituals and ceremonies, as well as to what Goffman refers to as "the presentation of self in everyday life" (Goffman, Presentation 245). It has become a familiar idea to think of ordinary and scholarly practice as performative—as cultural acts

that *do* things rather than just methodologies that allow people to *observe* things or experience things in an objective manner. Human practice has come to be understood as inherently dramatic.

It has also become commonplace in contemporary cultural discourse to assume that cultural norms are not natural, but, rather, cultivated, practiced, rehearsed, and repeated. Social activities and belief systems reinstate and substantiate themselves via their repetition, their use, as well as private and public responses to their ascribed meanings and values. Performance studies affirms this sentiment by conceiving of all activities as performative—as cultural performances that initiate, sustain, and reflect identity-shaping practices. Cultural Studies, as manifested in the thinking of Raymond Williams, understands culture as "a signifying system through which. . . . a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored" (13). Culture then is an activity that communicates something, a production or event that reproduces something, the equivalent of one of our senses or the culmination of all of them (an experience), and a method of inquiry or means of discovery that encourages exploration and diverse interpretations. Such a description presents culture *as* performance, especially as it is traditionally understood in relation to the theatre: as an event set apart, highly specialized, and rarified, that is, meant to call our attention to specific subject matter for contemplation, speculation, and discovery. Performance is also expected to elicit as many diverse interpretations as there are audience members. The simultaneously collective and individual experience of a performance event is one of the characteristics most valued by performance scholars. Tolerance, negotiation, and diversity are integral dimensions of performances.

It is no wonder that Williams, as a drama professor, strove to connect the material productions of culture, such as manufacturing or other physical endeavor, to signifying and symbolic systems, such as literature, media, and theatre (Reinelt and Roach 11). Performance scholarship considers cultural activity as cultural performance, or, in Williams' words, as "signifying system[s] through which. . . . a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored" (13). In John MacAloon's words, performance studies asks us to assume that cultural performances

> are more than entertainment, more than didactic or persuasive formulations, and more than cathartic indulgences. They are occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others. (1)

Performance research, consequently, assumes that although everything doesn't necessarily have to *be* performance, it is certainly enlightening to consider all phenomena *as* performance.

Characteristic of postmodernist studies, current cultural analyses tend to embrace notions of constructedness, and, thus, the negotiability or mutability, of any boundary—linguistic, geographic, or social. Social boundaries, be they geographical, ethnic, economic, racial, gender, or sexual, have been the focus of postmodern and cultural studies. While cultural studies has produced and maintained an immense interest in investigating the categories of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation within specific time periods and cultures and in conjunction with the production and repercussions of power relationships, performance research has asked what cultural performances and practices--what rituals, memories, spaces, arrangements, and discursive practices—create, reproduce, sustain, affiliate themselves with, or challenge these

categories and power relationships. Cultural performances are seen as reproducing and comprising the categories of race, gender, sex, and class as well as the relationships between the various groups of people delineated by these markers. Performance lends itself readily to such a strategy of interpretation (Reinelt and Roach 12). Like cultural studies, performance studies "resists the view of art and life as autonomous experiences and insists, instead, that [art and life] are inextricably entangled in history and that they are both products of and productive of dynamic cultural processes" (Reinelt and Roach 10). Focusing on rituals and practices of individual and social transformation, performance studies usually analyzes the "inbetweenness" or interactive characteristics of times, places, people, and activities. Rather than only focusing on gender, class, race, and sexuality as categories of difference, performance studies focuses on the identity-shaping practices that sustain and create such categories. Such analyses often reveal conflicting categories as sustained by common identificatory practices, social structures, and ideological apparatuses.

Culture includes, as Bruce McChonachie explains in his discussion of theatrical production and Marxism, both "material and nonmaterial phenomena, both of which are central to the process of affirming and reproducing (as well as challenging) hegemonic social relations. These historical formations produce cultural products much as they produce automobiles and race relations" (161). McChonachie also points out, however, that Williams differentiates art, literature, and theatrical performances from other products of hegemony that are consumable goods. "Williams enjoins critics and historians," he explains, "to shift their definition of a `work of art' from an object to a practice" (McChonachie 161). Embracing and building on this tenet suggested by

Williams, performance studies conceives of the nature and conditions of historical practices as performances. For the theatre historian, for instance, this means "close attention to the social relations and means of producing the material realities of historical theatres (scripts, acting companies, playhouses, scenery, etc.) as well as to the nonmaterial response of situated audiences in historical periods" (McChonachie 173). For the literary critic, a methodology might include close attention to the means and, in particular, the necessary social relations and linguistic strategies for producing a particular narrative (an author's background, social climate, language use, narrative strategies, readers' response to characters' developmental patterns, publishers' concerns and pressures) as well as the nonmaterial (emotional and philosophical) responses of readers in particular historical and contemporary situations and social subject positions.

For performance theorist Joseph Roach, literature serves as an "archive of restored behaviors," a place where patterns and habits of representation may be observed (153). This perspective suggests that literary texts provide not only a means for considering our own world and the worlds depicted in specific texts, but also for exploring our own habits of interpretation and our own identities. Such a view of literature asks us to consider it *as* performance. Admittedly, such a view of literature, like performance, has a "delicate status" and double function. As Suzanne Rohr explains, it is "simultaneously an important participant in the ongoing process whereby a culture interprets and refocuses itself, as well as the medium that painstakingly reveals the very necessity of doing so" (105). This double function, however, is precisely what "gives literary texts the status of anthropological discourses on human creativity" (Rohr 105)

and makes them an especially enlightening medium through which to explore identity as a concept and, more importantly, as a practice or performance.

Speech act theory, queer theory, gender theory, and performance theory have embraced the term "performance" as a way of conceiving the development and dynamics of human identity. However, these areas of study have embraced the term in somewhat contradictory ways, so it is helpful to consider their use of the performance framework in terms of a progression. As mentioned earlier, speech act theory, beginning with the work of J. L. Austin in the early 1960s, suggests that words always *do* things; they are performatives in that they perform specific tasks.[4] And, more often than not, what they do is to reinforce or repeat cultural norms or societal rituals and traditions. Queer and Gender Studies, building on the work of performers and critics who occupy or else critically analyze marginalized subject positions and theorize transgressive activity, utilize the notion of performativity—the notion that a word or action *does* something and is itself an activity indicative of cultural processes of exchange and construction—in order to emphasize the extent to which gender and sexual identity are the result of the repetition of societal and individual norms/performances. And, performances in this case are understood as activities, words, social formations that incite specific kinds of public and private positions and exchanges. One of the most prevalent arguments of queer theory and gender theory is that society encourages, even enforces, sexual and gendered identities through its word choices, its media images, and its fashions, to name only a few outlets for sexual and gender performativity. Ironically, the very same methods of patriarchal and heterosexual transmission that displace homosexuality or encourage sexist ideology are available for resignification and disruption of patriarchal and heterosexual

bias. Repeating heterosexual norms, for instance, in a homosexual or androgynous context destabilizes the line between "natural" and "constructed" sexual identity. Queer theory and gender theory have been informed by performance theory's attention to ways in which cultural practices "stage" transgressive activity. Once popularized or privileged for its rebellious activity, the foregrounding of transgressive activity provides the opportunity for scrutinizing normalizing practices because its "constructed" status highlights the very socially normalizing processes that first made the transgressive activity's disruptive capacity possible. Resignifications of heterosexual norms, for instance, are themselves vulnerable to normalization.

Gender theory, Queer theory and Performance theory all have an interest in "staging" cultural processes of exchange as identity-shaping activities. Gender theory's use of performance highlights the understanding of gender as constituted by either deliberately or unconsciously repeatedly embodying traits or activities commensurate with a particular gender construction in any given community. Gender is "performed" in that it requires the repeated embodiment of specific characteristics, roles, and activities commensurate with a particular gendered identity within particular, culturally discursive, contexts. Embodied, discursive activities, not just bodies, comprise gendered identity. The performer-audience relationship has also been useful to gender theory's analysis of identity because it emphasizes the important role social recognition plays in the signification of gender identity. Embodied, discursive acts comprise gendered identity most readily *when they are recognized as doing so* by witnesses. However, performance theory pays attention to, perhaps even privileging at times, the performer's perspective. Consequently, conceiving of gender from a performance perspective encourages the

acknowledgement of individual, even private, activity as shaping one's gendered identity as well as the understanding of one's gender as being an inevitably collective or public act.

Performance theory has embraced speech act theory's notion of words, symbols, and activities as *doing* things with at least one major qualification. It is not just that words, symbols, or activities *do* things—in short, signify—but that they also *undo* cultural norms, stereotypical constructions, and subject positions that are often taken for granted or objectified. In addition, *doing* doesn't necessarily mean that the act has to be or else produce something material. On the contrary, notions of doing and undoing need to be qualified by the admission that often times what performatives *do* is reject—not inscribe, not signify—other performatives. Sometimes performatives erase *doing*. The idea of doing and undoing, signifying and re-signifying, or "signifyin(g)" in a Gatesian sense, is called *liminality*; in fact, the "liminal norm" is used by some critics to characterize the entire field of performance studies itself.[5] As Jon McKenzie notes, "performance scholars have come to consistently define their object and their own research, if not exclusively, then *very* inclusively, in terms of liminality—a mode of embodied activity whose spatial, temporal, and symbolic 'betweenness' allows for dominant social norms to be suspended, questioned, played with, transformed" (218). Judith Butler, who through her work on gender has perhaps done more than any other critic to express and evaluate the significance of performance and performativity, points out performance studies' susceptibility to its own terms and suggests a reconsideration of its methodology by critiquing the attitude toward repetition manifested in the works of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, two of performance studies' most noteworthy

founders.[6] As Jon McKenzie has so clearly pointed out, Butler counters what he has named "the liminal-norm" with her theory of performative normativity (McKenzie 219, 221). Butler has especially paid attention to what performatives and cultural performances fail to do or purposefully do *not* do in her analysis of the discursive nature of power.

Turner was one of the first critics to introduce cultural ritual *as* performance—as a means of social and individual *transformation*.[7] Weddings, funerals, and graduations are dominant rituals easily associated with this idea. These rituals include linguistic performatives that can be easily identified, such as "I pronounce you. . ." and gestural performatives, such as the handling of a diploma or switching one's tassel to the opposite side of one's graduation cap. Importantly, for Turner, these rituals are always sacred, never banal or ordinary, and provide opportune, even staged, moments of individual and social transformation. Butler, however, as McKenzie has explained very clearly, "turns to Turner—*with a twist*" (222). Butler emphasizes that Turner's view of ritual requires "a performance which is repeated" ("Performative Acts" 277) with "pomp and circumstance," to use a well-known musical performative indicating graduation from one stage of life or school into the next. Repetition is certainly implied within Turner's ritual performance, but not the kind of habitual, even impulsive, repetition that Butler pinpoints. Butler suggests compulsory routine rather than sacred enactment as the kind of repetition that supports performativity. In her article, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Butler explains the basis for much of her gender theory:

> In what senses. . . . is gender an act? As anthropologist Victor Turner suggests in his studies of ritual social drama, social action requires a performance which is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of

> their legitimation. When this conception of social performance is applied to gender, it is clear that although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this "action" is immediately public as well. (277)

Not only is the repetition compulsive, it is also volatile, dynamic, even uncontrollable. The repetition is also textual—both citational and open to multiple possibilities of meaning. Most importantly, the embodied repetition is public even if it is unselfconscious.

Butler deals with this issue of public performance as an inevitable part of gender constitution further in her citation of Richard Schechner, the other founder of performance studies. When explaining what she sees as the differences between theatrical and social acts, Butler further highlights the importance of recognizing the possibility of performative normativity in addition to performative liminality. Schechner is famous for arguing for liminality, for the idea that the "world that was securely positional is becoming dizzyingly relational. There will be more 'in-between' performative genres. In-between is becoming the norm" (Between Theatre and Anthropology 322). For Schechner and many performance critics, as I noted earlier, liminality assumes positive transgression. Butler, however, warns that the liminal norm can be rearticulated in much more realistic, and even, unfortunately, more threatening ways. "[G]ender performances in non-theatrical contexts," she explains, "are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions" than those in non-theatrical contexts ("Performative Acts" 278, McKenzie 222). As she explains:

> Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence. . . . On the street or in the bus, the act becomes dangerous, if it does, precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act, indeed, on the street or in the bus, there is no

> presumption that the act is distinct from a reality; the disquieting effect of the act is that there are no conventions that facilitate making this separation. Clearly, there is theatre which attempts to contest, or, indeed, break down those conventions that demarcate the imaginary from the real. ("Performative Acts" 278)

Performativity is dependent upon conventions that facilitate particular understandings and responses or reactions. Therefore, performativity is quite vulnerable to context; it is, in fact, dependent upon human interpretation and use. As McKenzie explains, the paradox of the performative can be summarized in this way: "liminality can be theorized not only in terms of a time/space of anti-structural normalization, but also in terms of a time/space of structural normalization" (223). Whether or not the liminality in question exists inside or outside of a demarcated performance space has a significant influence on its effects. Butler's transvestite example highlights the significance of considering all cultural activity *as* performance. More importantly, it emphasizes the difficulty, even impossibility, of bringing this theoretical idea into lived experience without transforming its own possibility and effects.

Butler's explanation of performative normativity demonstrates that the "task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (Butler, Gender Trouble 148). Gender ontologies, as Butler explains, "always operate within established political contexts as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as intelligible sex, invoking and consolidating the reproductive constraints on sexuality, setting the prescriptive requirements whereby sexed or gendered bodies come into cultural intelligibility"(Gender Trouble 148). Part of what makes Butler's investigation into the performative so important is that she theorizes the *discursivity* of performatives.

"Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech"; "the performative is "one domain in which power acts as discourse" (Bodies 225). While performativity may act as a disruptive or revisionary, its very presence as an idea and activity still incites an exposure of authoritative norms, or performance normativity, because for "discourse to materialize a set of effects, 'discourse' itself must be understood as complex and convergent chains in which 'effect' are vectors of power" (Bodies 187). Butler's reading of "performativity" addresses the very complicated fact that the "power of discourse to materialize its effects is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility" and that such a notion of performative discourse also means that there is inevitably a "'constitutive outside'—the unspeakable, the unviable, the nonnarrativizable that secures and, hence, fails to secure the very borders of materiality" (Bodies 187-8). Performativity works through both reiteration and exclusion, producing at the same time that it relies on the "the historicity of discourse and, in particular, the historicity of norms" (Bodies 187).

Performance and performativity have a very complex relationship in that "performance" relies on performativity—on discursive legibility—and, as Butler's theorizing makes clear, this means that analysis of "performance" cannot assume "willful and arbitrary choice" (Bodies 187), cannot assume necessarily intentional or predictable effects. In fact, the idea that "performance" is driven by "willful and arbitrary choice misses the point that the historicity of discourse, and the historicity of norms . . . constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names" (Bodies 187). Performance studies attempts, nevertheless, to identify the historicity of discourse and the archive of norms comprising culturally recognizable "performances" and then carry these

"discoveries"—"performances"—one step further by analyzing how they contribute to, in fact exist *as*, identity-shaping experiences and forces. After going through at least a forty year theoretical revision period, "performance" is now commensurate with an incredibly wide range of discursive activities, including cultural rituals, public events, mass media events in both local and inter-continental contexts, personal habits, private interfaces, and individual presentations in nearly every imaginable context and medium. Everything from the ways and places in which we drive our cars, to the organization of museums and grocery stories and the way these environments encourage people to view and interact with various sorts of productions, to the way one puts on lipstick and wears one's clothes, is now open for consideration *as* performance. Again, critics and performers who align themselves with performance studies seem not so much interested in arguing that everything *is* performance as they are in arguing that there are insights to be gained by considering everything *as* performance. Nevertheless, much of the value of considering an event or text *as* performance is it raises questions of performativity—of what is and what is not discursively intelligible.

Schechner's all encompassing definition of performance as "twice-behaved behavior" or "restored behavior" captures this notion that activities which at first may exist as mere repetitions of cultural habit or impulse gain historical, social, and individual relevance when considered as "performance" largely because of the positions and relationships such analysis exposes.[8] Performances and performatives are capable of transforming, even re-aligning, cultural and individual understandings and practices but they do so while at the same time repeating and affirming cultural impulses. This project aims to expose (to repeat) the relevance of performance and performativity within the life

and writings of Louisa May Alcott by adapting Joseph Roach's attitude toward literature as an "archive of restored behaviors" (153) wherein we may find vestiges of tradition, ritual, and habits of interpretation that repeatedly shape text's and readers' identities.

19th Century and 20th Centuries Performance Frameworks

Studies of mid-nineteenth century American middle-class identity and Performance Studies share central interest and terms: self-identification, social ritual, and liminality. One of the primary concerns of mid-nineteenth century middle-class culture was how social rituals and codes of conduct and appearance contributed to the formulation of one's social and self-identity. As noted earlier, this is also one of the most prevalent concerns of performance studies. Performance critics and nineteenth-century scholars both identify the repetition and embodiment of cultural codes—whether linguistic, physical, psychological, or philosophical—as activities that shape social and individual identity as well as the opportunities afforded by particular social positions. Both fields of study also focus on the import of conceiving of identity as fluid, in a constant process of formulation and clarification. Twentieth-century performance scholarship focuses on identity as performative. Self- and social identity are performative to the extent that they are constantly interacting with past, present, and anticipated ideological constructs and social practices, forging familiar as well as possibly revisionary self- and social identifications at the same time. Nineteenth-century society anticipated this attitude toward identity with a paranoia attuned to the possibility of social disguise and hypocrisy. One of the results of the social angst in nineteenth-

century America was an increased public interest in performance as an identity shaping activity and social framework.

Superficiality as a characteristic of nineteenth-century feminine identity and a strategy of nineteenth-century women's writing in particular has become a popular topic in study. Superficiality has even been described as the "specialty" of arbiters of nineteenth-century feminine ideals (Douglas, Feminization 59). This project adds to the investigation of the significance of feminine artifice in nineteenth-century depictions of female identity by focusing on the influence of the use of performance as a theoretical framework and an identity-developing activity within the texts of Louisa May Alcott. I focus on the import of performance frameworks and the activity of performance in Alcott's sensational novel, Behind a Mask: Or, A Women's Power (1866), her adult autobiography, Work: A Story of Experience (1873), her childhood autobiography, Little Women (1868-69), and several of her recently discovered sensational narratives with the underlying intent of demonstrating Alcott's anticipation of current interests in performance as a theoretical framework and cultural activity within discussions of female socialization in both the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries. In all of these stories, Alcott utilizes performance is a method of self-theorizing, a tool for social critique, and a means of suggesting empowering alternatives to traditional conceptions of the female role.

Sentimental ideology was a defining influence in the development of nineteenth-century female identity. Developed in the midst of the residual influence of Victorian ideals of female self-denial, servitude, and virtue and concurrent with the development of feminist demands for female education and social rights associated with the American transcendental movement and natural rights philosophy, sentimentalism has been

interpreted as both stifling and empowering to American women. Sentimental literature was one of the primary means by which American women writers exercised female "influence" as it was understood in nineteenth-century culture. However, sentimental literature is now understood as having significant ramifications for understandings of nineteenth-century social identity because of its depictions of stereotyped domesticated and spiritual female roles. As Jane Tompkins explains, in her seminal work Sensational Designs (1985), stereotypes function as means of cultural definition because they involve social negotiation and invite diverse opportunities for identification (xv-xvi). Use of stereotypical character-types, for instance, provides opportunities for reinstating traits already valued in the dominant social structure while at the same time subtly recording instances where characters transgress social boundaries and ideals. The sentimental ideal of female transparency—the female sex's supposedly involuntary display of inner sentiment through outward appearance—was one of the primary ways by which the female role was defined in mid-nineteenth-century America. Transparency is also one of the feminine characteristics associated with sentimentality that now incites controversy because it aligns the female role with both social power ("influence") and social vulnerability. Social belief in the transparency of feminine transparency invited female subterfuge and deceit at the same time it assumed involuntary sincerity. Within American sentimentalism, notions of female passivity and vulnerability collide with theories of female influence and self-reliance, and an underlying skepticism about the theatricality of social life informs a practical philosophy of self- and social development. Louisa May Alcott wrote in the midst of this cultural context, helping to produce as well as critically responding to this culture milieu. Readily associated with the sentimental

genre because of her fame as the author of Little Women but also now gaining popularity because of her sensational and adult works, such as Behind a Mask and Work, that tell stories of female revenge, education, and empowerment, Louisa Alcott's life and writings are fertile ground for exploring the influence of sentimental ideology on conceptions of the female role.

In mid-nineteenth century America a general feeling of liminality—a sense of living in a "constant state of flux," as Karl Marx described the relation of social classes at mid-century—caused quite a bit of angst about social hypocrisy and self-identity that resulted in the "sentimental demand for a transparent display of feeling," for the belief in the congruence between outward appearance and inner character (Pesson 79, Halttunen Confidence Men 193). Though the sentimental demand for transparency, particularly in relation to female role in nineteenth-century society, is often interpreted as a response to changes in nineteenth-century society, it was also a significant force in shaping nineteenth-century American culture and identity. The concept of transparency and its influence upon the conceptualization of American social and self-identity continues to demand attention particularly because of its implications for interpretations of the nineteenth-century female role.

Seminal studies of nineteenth-century culture, such as Karen Halttunen's Confidence Men and Painted Women and Ann Douglas ' The Feminization of American Culture, highlight the significance of performance as an identity-shaping concept and activity. Halttunen describes nineteenth-century society as one of "men and women on the make, of geographical and social movers, of men and women who are constantly assuming new identities and struggling to be convincing in new social roles" (Confidence

Men 190). Douglas emphasizes the effect-based interpretation of female identity. Young women in nineteenth-century society were, according to Douglas, "educated to be themes for thought, not thinkers; they were to be muses not practitioners of the arts, aesthetic or practical"—a woman's "significance was to lie in her connotations rather than her actions"—in her influence rather than her self (Feminization 60). The cults of domesticity, True Womanhood, and domestic ideology confirm such a view of female "influence." Women were to morally influence others through their work in the home or through their manipulation of themselves—their bodies and minds—so as to embody a model of transformation for others. Moral influence was ambiguous enough to encompass psychological, economic, and philosophical influence as well. Women were to embody ideals of feminine virtue, beauty, and constraint *and* they were to embody transformative potential itself through their very own demonstration of such ideals. In part, they were actors enacting their own superficiality, their socially and spiritually prescribed image; such conception of self-in-role has been analyzed as both stifling and empowering to female development. The female burden of influence in nineteenth-century America existed psychologically as well as materially because the female role was associated with moral, inner life and with the outward display of social value.

The female role in mid-nineteenth century American was defined by sentimental and domestic ideology in terms of its moral and visual influence in large part to counteract male anxiety concerning social identity. Halttunen's description of the mid-century middle-class American characterizes the general feeling of anxiety concerning social identity: he "had no status in the strict sense of the term; he occupied no fixed position within a well-defined social structure, and his vague sense of restlessness and

dread sprang from his liminality, his betwixt-and-between social condition" (Confidence Men 192). Nineteenth-century sentimentality and its accompanying codes of conduct and social ritual were meant to resolve "this antebellum crisis of social confidence," but as Halttunen has pointed out sentimental codes of conduct somewhat backfired by prescribing exact formulas for how to dress and behave (Confidence Men 193-196). Basically choreographing and directing social success, arbiters of social ideals made sincerity and hypocrisy increasingly more difficult to distinguish, and such liminality was a significant threat to traditional social structures.

Twentieth-century performance scholarship has interpreted this same sense of liminality as a useful tool for investigating constructions of identity. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, Jon McKenzie explains that "performance scholars have come to consistently define their object and their own research, if not exclusively, then *very* inclusively, in terms of liminality—a mode of embodied activity whose spatial, temporal, and symbolic 'betweenness' allows for dominant social norms to be suspended, questioned, played with, transformed" (218). Liminality has become a convention and condition of criticism if not life. Performance as a framework and activity is liminal because it is understood as both an event set apart, rehearsed, and rarefied but also as an event not in complete control of its immediate effects or the occasions of its subsequent recollection and effects. In addition, as the earlier discussion of Butler's theorizing of gendered identity makes clear, gender exists *as* performance in that it is a set of *effects* brought about by the impulsive as well as ritualistic repetition of cultural norms. As a conceptual framework performance has been useful in analyzing identity as a construct because of the kinds of questions it raises about *agency* (Who is speaking or acting?),

context (What is the cultural situation being depicted? And what is the cultural situation in which it is being depicted?), *audience* (Who is interpreting? Who is the anticipated audience? Who is being influenced?), *commodification* (What is being valued and by whom?), *conventionality* (How are meanings being produced?), and *politics* (What ideological positions are being reinforced or contested?) (Diamond 4). Cultural activities are now analyzed *as* performances with the expressed purpose of revealing cultural identity and self-conception as simultaneously socially-influenced as well as creative and self-directed activities. As MacAloon has explained, cūltural performances, whether they be staged performances or ordinary encounters, are persuasive formulations of cultural identity that in which "we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others" (1). For twentieth-century critics, such as MacAloon, cultural and self-identity *are* liminal, and advantageously so.

Tompkins analyzes literature in this same performative capacity: Texts do "cultural work"—they "express what lay in the minds of many or most of their contemporaries" and "operate as instruments of cultural self-definition" (Sensational Designs xv-xvi). When texts are considered in this light, Tompkins explains, they "offer a blueprint for survival under a specific set of political, economic, social, or religious conditions" and the ideological underpinnings and motivations behind modern responses to the novel are exposed for their own "cultural work" as well (Sensational Designs xvii-xviii).

Sentimentalism, or the "s word," as Nina Baym calls it, has a double meaning that complicates its use and has made many women somewhat uneasy with their identification

with sentimental literature. This uneasiness illustrates its current significance as a genre and ideology. Associated primarily with the female sex and with "private, excessive, undisciplined, self-centered emotionality" and "self-absorption," sentimentality indexes the nineteenth-century social belief in female inferiority and subordination; in short, sentimentality seems to confirm belief in separate sphere culture and insurmountable gender differences (Baym xxix). Associated with interiority, involuntary emotionality, and the ideal of transparency, sentimentalism is often stereotyped as an ideology and genre disempowering to women. However, sentimentality also "denotes public sympathy and benevolent fellow-feeling" (Baym xxx); it infers "socially cohesive emotion" and knowledge of social decorum. Sentimentality can be understood as both "evasive self-absorption" and direct social interaction. According to Baym, the combination of these characteristics makes American sentimentalism a "practical philosophy of community designed to operate in a variety of social contexts to complement or modify social interactions that are otherwise calculating and instrumental" (xxx). Baym points out the philosophical role of the sentimental tradition by relating it to Enlightenment and transcendental values: "grounded by Enlightenment thinkers in the universal psychological capacity of human being to respond to others' distress," sentimentality was "compatible with universal Reason, since it was quite reasonable for people to help the less fortunate" and to "help themselves" (xxx). Sentimentality ultimately "links `woman' and `self,'" "brings women into public life," and connects her with the ideals of self- and social improvement associated with transcendental philosophy (Baym xxxi). The sentimental ideal of female transparency, however, also brought women who were keenly aware of the role of female influence and impression management into the forefront of

public life; in short, sentimental ideology may also be understood as raising female awareness of self-in-role and inspiring women to work subversively within the codes of conduct established by Victorian and sentimental feminine ideals.

The idea that novels can alter lives fueled much of women's writing during the mid-nineteenth century. Generally characterized as didactic, "domestic" and "sentimental," writing by women in the nineteenth century was believed to be performative, *to do something* to culture, to make a difference, in several ways. First, sentimental or domestic fiction was believed to "forward the development of young, female readers to a specific kind of character," namely that of a modest, domestically trained, caregiver who would make an excellent friend, mother, and wife (Baym xix). Second, given the ideological distinction between, but practical interdependence of, the private (female, domestic) and public (male, market) spheres, these young women were believed to have a large influence on national identity. Loyal to the country's founding principles of community based interests but also promoters of individual responsibility and survival skills, female sensibility embodied the "patriotic concept of `republican motherhood'" (Baym xxix). As Tompkins has argued, the domestic ideology promoted in sentimental literature also served as an alternative model for the male-dominated, market economy. Rather than existing as an escape from the male, economic sphere, the domestic realm existed in direct engagement with the public domain and actually forwarded a rather revolutionary ideology. If women were in charge of the domestic sphere and the domestic sphere had a large influence on public life and the world, then women were in charge of the world. An often-overlooked detail from one of the sentimental genre's quintessential works, Uncle Tom's Cabin, illustrates this female-

centered, revolutionary ideology. Tompkins points out the significance of Stowe's casual description of an Indiana kitchen: "While the women and children are busy preparing breakfast, Simeon Halliday, the husband and father, stands 'in his shirt sleeves before a little looking-glass in the corner, engaged in the anti-patriarchal activity of shaving" (Tompkins, "Sentimental Power" 100, Stowe 141-142).

> With this detail, so innocently placed, Stowe reconceives the role of men in human history: while Negroes, children, mothers, and grandmothers do the world's primary work, men groom themselves contentedly in a corner. The scene, as critics have noted is often the case in sentimental fiction, is 'intimate,' the backdrop is 'domestic,' the tone at times is even 'chatty'; but the import, as critics have failed to recognize, is world-shaking. (Tompkins, "Sentimental Power" 100)

Stereotypical views of women's "place" (the domestic and private) and their sensibility (associated at the time with excessive emotionality and sensitivity) have everything to do with why sentimental fiction's "world-shaking" views have not always been acknowledged. In other words, because it has always been associated with the home and interpersonal relationships, the personal not the public, sentimental literature wasn't seen as a body of writing attempting to undermine social, global ideologies. Its supposed innocence, however, is arguably precisely what allowed sentimental literature, much like the women who wrote it, to be revisionary.

A third way in which sentimental fiction is performative is that it emphasizes female activity as something that is always done for the benefit of someone else or for the enhanced development of one's self. In short, female activity is characterized as performance. Though the role of women established by the dominant ideology of the time accorded women primarily a "spiritual," inner, private self-identity, her domestic role and her increasingly public role made her body "insofar as it was a site of

signification. . . . [] an effect of her being seen, a trick of the eye, of the other's eye, to which this body was presented" (Baym xxxvii). Social *decorum* and moral *conduct* in the *public* sphere became increasingly more important and increasingly more associated with female knowledge. Taught and practiced within the home but exercised both inside and outside of it, social manners became more and more contributory to social success. Women, the experts on moral conduct, became more and more contributory to the social consciousness (perhaps more aptly described as social *self*-consciousness).

The fact that sentimentalism was associated with attention to female interiority and self-identity at the same time it emphasized women's public role and social influence makes it a practical social philosophy particularly attuned to female development. Its emphases upon relations between inner and outer frames of identity, human impulse as well as social rituals, also make sentimentality very fertile ground for considering the import of performance ideology within nineteenth-century American culture and within conceptualization of the female role.

While liminality resulted in nineteenth-century social angst concerning sincerity and hypocrisy, in the twentieth-century it is promoted as a habit, in fact condition, of identity development. Juxtaposing liminality in these two contexts highlights performance as a social practice contributory to investigations into nineteenth- and twentieth-century American identity. Social fluidity—the seemingly equal opportunity of men and women to fashion themselves as what they would like to be regardless of their traditional or genuine social status—caused quite a bit of alarm in Victorian America. The liminality of mid-nineteenth-century social identity resulted in public sensitivity to what Halttunen describes as the threat of the "confidence man"—the archetypal figure of

the "man-on-the-make who threatened to contaminate all he encountered with the depravity of his own nature" (Confidence Men 192). On-the-make, the nineteenth-century confidence man symbolized a threat to the very development of American life because of his ability to adopt and convincingly perform social norms that would give him claim to a new and higher social status that he did not deserve.

Conduct literature of the time expressed concern primary with the vulnerability of youth trying to develop a sense of self within a growing liminal world: "Detached from his family, friends, and local community, alone and placeless," the American youth "stood on the threshold of a dangerous social world roamed by hypocritical strangers who would dupe and destroy him if he so much as looked at or spoke with them" (Confidence Men 193). Hypocrisy was the major threat of the confidence man; with no fixed positions or predetermined social roles traditional hierarchical social structures were threatened by the very same social codes of conduct and communication they used to define themselves. The changing social and economic conditions in mid-century American—including increased geographical mobility, the publication of hundreds of conduct manuals, the movement of women into the workforce, and the growing force of consumer society—"disrupted older norms and left a vacuum of prescriptive guidance on how to interact safely with others" (Halttunen, Confidence Men 193). As Halttunen explains: "Traditional norms governing face-to-face conduct had operated in a world where men and women came to know one another gradually over a long period of time, within a well-defined social context of family and community," but in the liminal social world of "life in the marketplace and on the city street," mid-nineteenth century America everyone was vulnerable to efficacy of performance (Halttunen, Confidence Men 193).

In traditional social structures, Halttunen explains, "confidence might be offered or denied to another on the basis of long-term mutual knowledge," but in a transitory, growingly public and etiquette-driven society sincerity became a commodity as well. More importantly, it was a commodity that was self-fashioned, self-achieved; there was little control over who could obtain it. As Halttunen suggests: "To some extent sentimentalism was destroyed by its own internal contradictions: the sincere ideal subverted itself by establishing fixed formulas governing proper middle-class dress, etiquette, and social ritual, formulas which intensified middle-class concern about the problem of hypocrisy" because it permitted "passing" in the "guise of the sincere ideal" (Confidence Men 195-96).

Assumed to be the moralistic arbiters of society and incapable of hypocrisy because of their involuntary transparency, nineteenth-century women bore the brunt of the social correction made necessary by the threat of the "confidence man" phenomenon. Pages of the nineteenth-century women's magazine *Godey's Lady's Book*—edited by Sarah Hale, one of the primary arbiters of nineteenth-century feminine ideals—were filled with attitudes toward feminine expression such as "the body charms because the soul is seen" ("Health and Beauty" 209). As Halttunen clearly explains in Confidence Men and Painted Ladies, the concept of female beauty in nineteenth-century America was one and the same as the sentimental ideal of transparency—the belief in the correspondence of female inner character and outward appearance and behavior. The feminine responsibility of moral influence coincided with this transparent ideal as well. *Godey's* repeatedly informed readers that any woman could become beautiful through moral self-improvement, and "might then use her beauty to enhance her moral influence

over others." "Every woman in the American republic had a social responsibility to cultivate her own beauty" because every woman was also assumed to be involuntarily transparent (Halttunen, Confidence Men 71). Inescapably influential, women were responsible for self- and social-improvement. Emphasis upon female effect, however, complicates assumptions about feminine sincerity. Without attention to the reasons for feminine moral and visual influence, a subversive possibility lies within the notion of feminine transparency. Appearance and behavior as female specialties and primarily feminine concerns have been both limiting and empowering to female development. While nineteenth-century feminine ideals were certainly restrictive, today we realize the disruptive potential inherent in the nineteenth-century attitudes toward feminine transparency and influence: performance was an imperative and reality in nineteenth-century women's lives, but it was also an activity that encouraged women to perceive of themselves in role, and while roles were readily prescribed to nineteenth-century women, conceiving of one's self in role also provided a subversive influence.

An 1830's description of the "well-bred female" from the *Ladies' Magazine*, the precursor to Sarah Hale's *Godey's Lady's Book* illustrates the conceptualization of female identity that, however unintentionally, provided opportunities for such subversive influence:

> See, she sits, she walks, she speaks, she looks—unutterable things! Inspiration springs up in her very paths—it follows her foot-steps. A halo of glory encircles her, and illumines her whole orbit. With her, man not only feels safe but is actually renovated. For he approaches her with an awe, a reverence, and an affection which before he knew not he possessed. (qtd. in Douglas, Feminization 46)

As Douglas observes, "The first word, and the key to the whole statement is `See'": look at her, believe in her, the writer is unconsciously urging." Such belief has to occur "so

she can exist" (Feminization 46). "She is of value because she is able to work a kind of religious transformation in man; she represents nothing more finally but a state of susceptibility to very imprecisely spiritual values" (Douglas, Feminization 46). Analyzing the communicative process of a "well-bred female" image such as this, however, reveals the disruptive possibility inherent within nineteenth-century constructions of ideal feminine types. Significantly, the woman's actions and words are "unutterable things!" If her words and the manner of her sitting, walking, and looking were included in the description, one could address the causes of her influence. However, such consideration could not occur without also providing the opportunity for evaluating the one looking, without providing the opportunity for addressing the cause-effect nature of the encounter. Why is the man inspired? Are her actions and works reasonably connected with her "halo of glory" and her illumination or are they just projected by the man who is described as approaching the woman or by the writer who has constructed the scene? The woman's actions cannot be included without undermining the entire described effect.

With the absence of public action associated with the nineteenth-century feminine image in mind, it is also possible to *see* very insidious relationships comprising the nineteenth-century belief in women's influence. The insidiousness of the construct of women's influences lies in the fact that the doctrine of influence always defined femininity "in terms of its effects, never in terms of its causes" (Douglas, Feminization 46). Clearly, however, a significant amount of female thinking went into the manufacturing of the *impression* that women were themes for thought and muses rather than practitioners of practical and aesthetic arts.

The *Ladies' Magazine* image discussed above dramatizes the performance-like context of nineteenth-century conceptualizations of the female role. The image presents the woman as having the effects or influence that the seer wants her to have or that she can have without disrupting the social order that exists. If the "well-bred" female embodies the seer's values, then his values and ideas are confirmed—revered in affective, inspiring ways. However, if the viewer would begin asking questions about what the women was thinking, what intentions exist behind her image, what aspirations she has, and what plans she is making to fulfill these desires and make her ideas come to life, the status quo is disrupted and her "influence" is a self-directed activity rather than only a socially conceived notion. Enlightenment and transcendental feminism, such as that promoted by Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller, were very interested in promoting the idea that women needed to ask such questions about their own lives and that society should allow women opportunities for developing a sense of self apart from the essentialized image of strictly defined sex-roles and the sentimental ideal of transparency. The feminist ideology expressed within Alcott's works discussed in this project also demonstrates these interests as well. Sentimental literature and transparent sentimental feminine ideal were supposed to calm and help re-establish a traditional sense of nineteenth-century social identity, but their intended, even assumed effects, offered disruptive possibility. In the guise of conduct literature and traditional storytelling, Alcott's texts offer social theorizing.

Alcott's texts include female characters that are very aware of themselves as social actors, as people of influence. The narrators of Behind a Mask, Work, Little Women, and the various sensational texts discussed in this project repeatedly call

attention to the interaction of their characters' bodily activities and social and self-attitudes toward these activities. Consequently, readers are also offered the opportunity for considering their own attitudes toward the female activities and social values depicted in these narratives.

Alcott's Literary Performances

Alcott's strong interest in theatre and performance informs the feminist ideology expressed in her works and her attitude toward the development of female identity within nineteenth-century domestic and public spheres. Most of her novels and short stories, both her sentimental ones and her more recently discovered sensational ones, include performances in their plot, either on the stage or off, and heroines as actresses who participate in performance frameworks both physically and psychologically. This attention to the performance framework situates Alcott's writings within the mid-nineteenth-century social concern with the exploitative potential underlying the theatricality of domestic and public activity. Alcott's portrayal of the significance of performance within the lives of her female characters confronts performance as a psychological habit with subversive and empowering potential in the midst of the dual potentials of sentimentality within nineteenth-century culture.

The subject matter and anticipated audiences of Alcott's texts shape this project's interpretation of Alcott's performative intentions. Her works focus on female development in both private and public spheres and both adolescent and adult terms and address attitudes toward women's work in both domestic and public settings. Writing simultaneously in both sentimental and sensational genres, Alcott wrote for both middle-

class and working-class audiences, providing entertainment as well education. As Richard Brodhead has observed, she wrote "toward the whole audience that was divided up in her time," aware that literature served as a method of "social management" and "social reform" (106). Indulging her imagination and rebellious attitudes in sensational lore and incorporating transcendental ideals of work and self-improvement in her sentimental fiction, Alcott directly confronted female discontent with the feminine role and complex social issues related to female opportunity and choice still relevant today.

Behind a Mask (1866), the earliest of the novels considered in this project, and the focus of Chapter One, plays off of residual Victorian and dominant sentimental beliefs in female transparency and feminine virtue. It dramatizes Alcott's sensitivity to nineteenth-century concern with the hypocrisy and social mobility made possible by the performance of cultural ideals. Jean Muir, the novel's heroine, embodies the threat of female performance made possible by the sentimental belief in women's involuntarily transparent nature. Although not as overtly autobiographical as Work and Little Women, Behind a Mask, to date probably the most famous of the sensational thrillers Alcott wrote behind the pseudonym of A. M. Barnard, has been interpreted as Alcott's literary autobiography—her depiction of the subversive possibility of female performance in her own life and writings. The novel depicts a nineteenth-century woman who subtly and skillfully re-creates herself by exploiting the sentimental belief in female transparency—of women's involuntary sincere display of their inner character and feelings. Muir escapes her socially marginal position as a divorced, thirty-year old, lower-class, former actress by taking the job as a governess for the socially elite Coventry family and pretending to be precisely what they expect her to be—an unself-interested woman who

is genuinely what she appears to be. With her skillful self-presentations she manipulates the patriarch of the family into marrying her and reverses sentimental norms by utilizing marriage as a means of gaining financial female independence and a way of exercising self-definition. Muir's superficial observance of essentialist rules of female definition involves unexpected intentions and produces subversive effects that connect her actions with twentieth-century interpretations of nineteenth-century public and textual definitions of female possibility.

Behind a Mask can be interpreted as Alcott's literary autobiography because it performs precisely what Susan Harris has described as the ideologically based writing strategies of nineteenth-century sentimental women writers: "By and large, reviewers and publicists subscribed to an essentialist definition of female nature, while the texts attempt to persuade women that they can re-create themselves" ("*But is it any good?*" 47). Harris continues, directly connecting nineteenth-century women's writing with a traditional sense of performance: "Given the nature of public discourse and the power it had in the marketplace, writers aiming for a popular audience had to observe, at least superficially, essentialist rules for inscribing female protagonists and for their narrators' attitudes toward their heroines' adventures" (47). Female and social angst caused by the belief in the simultaneous display of the female psyche and body is a major theme in much of Alcott's writing (both personal and fictional). Displays of female modesty suggested one's understanding of social propriety and the feminine role of the sentimental woman within mid-nineteenth-century, middle-class American society, but as Alcott demonstrates in Behind a Mask such understanding also opened up the possibility of subtly and skillfully manipulating such norms.

What would happen if subterfuge and hypocrisy rules feminine behavior, if females were self-consciously taught to be skillful impersonators rather than proponents of social ideals? The fate of Muir and the Coventrys in Behind a Mask provides one answer to this question. My argument in Chapter One is that Muir embodies the threat of social hypocrisy brought on by social decorum and the promotion of female self-denial and psychological disguise in nineteenth-century culture. The possibility of subversion brought about by some of the main tenets of nineteenth-century womanhood is, in fact, one of the primary reasons I believe Alcott thought performance was a main characteristic of American female identity, even an apt analogy for nineteenth-century social behavior.

Alcott's sensational heroines, such as Muir, are particularly well-known as ingénues who threaten social conventions in their embodiment of the female version of the nineteenth-century "confidence man"—a figure who takes on social guises and conventions so convincingly that he appears genuine and trustworthy when he is really manipulating impressionable, trusting people for his own benefit. As Halttunen explains, the sentimental view's belief in the natural sincerity of women and the impossibility of female hyposcrisy given the involuntary transparency of woman's inner character and outward appearance, granted women the "special responsibility for counteracting the pervasive deceit of the larger society . . . Because she was involuntarily transparent, she served as a natural foil to the villainous confidence man, who was dangerous insofar as he contrived to be emotionally opaque" (Confidence Men 57-8). Alcott's heroine, Jean Muir, like many of her sensational heroines discussed in this project's final chapter, exploits belief in the idea that the "woman of sensibility involuntarily expressed her

feelings in swoons, illness, trances, ecstasies, and most important, tears, the 'infallible signs of grace in the religion of the heart'" (Halttunen, Confidence Men 57) by staging this involuntary bodily expressions *voluntarily* and strategically manipulating an elite nineteenth-century family into believing she is the nineteenth-century feminine ideal. A socially marginal woman due to the fact that she is a thirty-year-old, divorced, former actress of lower-class origins, Muir uses the performance of feminine stereotypes to achieve economic and social success—in essence social mobility.

A central concern of antebellum popular self-improvement literature for both males and females was "impression management," the "art of engineering all outward appearances," and the "presentation of self in everyday life" (Halttunen, Confidence Men 40, 42, Goffman, Presentation 26, 245). Many critics, including Halttunen and Goffman, have theorized this "construction and maintenance of a consistent, idealized self in the presence of others" as particularly important in societies such as nineteenth-century America that are characterized by social mobility (Halttunen, Confidence Men 40). Although, sentimental feminine ideals of moral influence and transparency were meant to "counteract the hypocrisy of a deceitful world" for the sake of the republic" (Halttunen Confidence Men 58), as early as 1799, well over sixty years before the writings in question were published, Hannah More, in Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education, was already warning against women learning to behave like actresses who memorized desired lines and the actions to incite the proper appeal without ever genuinely identifying with their own words and behavior (Elliott 301). Muir's ability to keep her public and private identity completely separate and unaffected by one another despite the fact that she lives both identities indicates Alcott's firm belief that women are

trained to have this understanding and view of themselves. Like many nineteenth-century and twentieth-century females, Muir is aware that if she performs correctly, she can have the benefits associated with ideal womanhood despite her own feelings of social inadequacy and alternative interests.

Significant connections have been made between Alcott's own life experiences and those of Jean Muir. Many of these parallels have to do with their white, middle-class, working woman status. Similar to Muir who adopts a feminine mask to secure financial independence, Alcott arguably adopts first thē mask of A. M. Barnard to publish and sell her sensational thrillers to survive economically without publicly admitting her interest in female rebellion and then the mask of the "Children's Friend," "little woman," and quintessential sentimental writer to gain financial security and social acceptance within the literary and social world of nineteenth-century America as well as receive the moral approval of her family (Fetterley, "Impersonating" 1-2). Despite accusations of writing only for financial gain, however, Alcott's depictions of sentimental stereotypes may also be interpreted as genuine expressions and critiques of nineteenth-century womanhood. One of the elements of Alcott's writings that makes her works so intriguing to even a twentieth-century audience is that one is always aware of the possibility of performance and (mis)representation in her works; her works are richer when read skeptically with this subversive possibility in mind.

Alcott's own upbringing involved performance in various forms. Bronson Alcott, Louisa's father, used play-acting as a teaching device for familiarizing his daughters with the practices of female self-discipline. Mimicking the roles of self-denying women, Bronson believed, would help his daughters internalize the psychological demands of

feminine ideals promoted by the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood as well as the female work ethic promoted by Transcendental ideology. For Louisa Alcott, performance was a domestic, public, and psychological habit—an identity-shaping and philosophically charged activity that was transposable from her lived life into her literary imagination. In her adult, autobiographical novel Work, the focus of Chapter Two, Alcott creates a heroine, Christie Heron, who enacts this very transportation of performance experience into her self-perception and professional work. Alcott emphasizes the import of performance-based knowledge by depicting Christie as participating as an actress on stage and then using the self- and social perspective she gains in this profession to theorize her experiences as she develops identity within both the domestic sphere and the public work force.

Work is the story of Christie Heron, a twenty-one year old orphan, who leaves the home of her uncle and aunt and rejects a marriage offer to establish independence within the public work force. Clearly based upon Alcott's own experiences, the book can be interpreted as a guide book of sorts for what to think about as one deals with the complexities brought about by women's movement in to American workplace—complexities brought about mainly by trying to bridge constructions of female sensibility resulting from domestic ideology with identity constructions associated with marketplace values. The power of language within the spheres of domestic and market place activity and relationships receives special attention in Work. Conversations between women of disparate, often conflicting, backgrounds and social positions serve as the subjects or plot defining activities of key scenes in the novel. In addition, Work's plot and character-types repeat those associated with traditional literary genres, such as the *Bildungsroman*

model of male development (leaving domestic and social relationships to establish Individualism), the Jane Eyre model of sentimental, female development (a woman's search for self-identity culminating in marriage), and Horatio Alger's Ragged Dick stories (how to make it rich in American tales). Alcott's emphases on language use and the comparison of Christie Heron's development with traditional narratives of identity development demonstrate her anticipation, in fact utilization, of what has been described in the twentieth-century as the concept or phenomena of performativity—the ability of a speech act or social activity *to do* something automatically, to achieve a particular effect simultaneously with a specific action or to eventually cause something by happen by deliberately or unintentionally exploiting the power of the repetition of convention. Alcott's anticipates performance studies' identification of the phenomena of performativity as a key element of identity formation. Preempting twentieth-century theorizing of identity construction, Alcott introduces knowledge of the performative import of one's language use and one's work as essential to female success within the American workplace and the development of an empowering sense of female identity in general. She does this by presenting speech acts and various forms of work as definitive of Christie Heron's development of meaningful self-identity within nineteenth-century American society.

Work engages the feminist and transcendental philosophies of Alcott's time, including those of Margaret Fuller, in effect, educating her readers about the feminist implications of transcendental ideology. In addition, Work manifests Alcott's interest in revealing performance as a tool for theorizing social identity and developing a more empowering sense of self-identity. Moving out of the domestic sphere and into the

public workforce, the novel's heroine, Christie Heron, performs one of the cultural changes foremost in nineteenth-century readers' minds. Participating as an actress and then applying the perspective she gains from this experience to the development of her identity in both domestic and public spheres, she also experiences many of the complexities and opportunities brought about by using performance as a conceptual framework. The novel's repetition of traditional literary models of development and feminine roles allows it to depict performativity in both its subversive and culturally supportive capacities. In addition, the novel's repetition of literary stereotypes *with a difference* allows readers to reflect on the underlying intentions of Alcott's performance. As Alcott's adult autobiography, connections between Alcott's lived life and the life she imagines for Christie Heron contribute to the novel's guidebook status. Work is perhaps one of Alcott's most straightforward feminist tracts.

As the daughter of the famous transcendentalist and education reformer, Bronson Alcott, Louisa also grew up in the midst of some of nineteenth-century's most famous philosophers, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Theodore Parker. Though she often denied having any particular agenda in her own writing, other than exercising her own pleasure and establishing economic independence, Alcott deserves to be considered as feminist philosopher and social critic. In fact, writing for her own pleasure and independence was a significant female act in nineteenth-century America. The fact that she achieved literary success and fame primarily as the author of her childhood autobiography, Little Women, a "girl's tale" about growing up in a fairly mainstream American family and for the most part following socially prescribed female roles, helped secure Alcott a fairly innocuous reputation. But her supposedly

culturally mainstream social identity actually added to the subversive possibility of her work. As Shirley Foster and Judy Simons point out, Little Women established Alcott as an author of *children's* fiction, thus providing her with an "apparently 'innocent' and non-central arena" in which to "speak in disguise, as it were" about her attitude toward female socialization in nineteenth-century America (25). Interpreted *as* performance, even Little Women, Alcott's most traditional text, includes an underlying subversive attitude toward female possibility and work.

Little Women, the focus of Chapter Three, highlights performance as an activity central to the March girls' socialization process. The March sisters use performance to entertain their interests and embody alternative roles they imagine for themselves, but they also use literary narratives, such as Pilgrim's Progress, as models for behavior, trying to emulate idealized feminine roles. Including characters that utilize performance both figuratively and literally as a means of developing self- and social identity, the novel's own popularity and stereotyping also bears the brunt of performance expectations as well. It has been interpreted as "*the* American female myth" (Bedell, "Beneath the Surface" 146) and stereotyped as the prototypical sentimental novel, but Little Women hardly presents a uniform theory of female experience. Instead, competing versions of female independence within the novel and the novel's duplicitous depiction of performance as a contrived *and* ordinary activity, as a limiting *and* empowering female activity, provides the opportunity for exploring current attitudes toward female appearance, behavior, and self-conception in both the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. The fact that current theorists of the female socialization process utilize performance language—such as the "imaginary audience syndrome" and female habit of "false self-

training"—to discuss female identity indexes the relevance of Alcott's anticipatory feminist ideology (Pipher 44. 60). Little Women performs Alcott's hindsight theorizing of her own adolescent and adult experiences, depicting mainstream experiences in critical ways. Reflecting on her own socialization process, Alcott engages conceptions of the female role in dominant and emergent philosophical movements of her own time, including the feminist ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller and their relation to Enlightenment Liberal Feminism, Cultural Feminism, and American Transcendentalism. Wollstonecraft and Fuller's attitudes toward the female role and their interest in improving female education and better understanding women's simultaneous interest in community and self-development are dominant concerns in Little Women as well. Because Little Women continues to be reinterpreted in light of Alcott's recently discovered sensational fiction, the novel now provides the opportunity for engaging present day residual, dominant, and emergent attitudes toward female self- and social identity as well.

Behind a Mask, Work, and Little Women, and the sensational short stories discussed in Chapter Four, depict the sentimental female role as involving strategic self-presentations that anticipate specific public responses. This view of the female role also makes it possible for these novels to be read as a strategic theorizing of self- and social presentations in literary form. The manufacture and defense of a theory of female influence in nineteenth-century America was, according to Douglas, "a kind of pseudo-profession" meant to compensate a "feminine crisis in self-confidence" (Feminization 45). "Repeatedly throughout American history, the sentimental impulse has returned to convince middle-class men and women of the hypocrisy of their social lives and to stress

the importance of establishing sincere social forms as a way of restoring confidence to the entire American social order" (Halttunen, Confidence Men 190). I believe Alcott proposes performance ideology as an accompanying, sincerity inspiring framework for critical endeavor; saturating her stories with the nature and effects of performance inspires sincerity by revealing the complex, sometimes dissatisfying, and often tragic nature, of life as subterfuge. Alcott's attention to bodily, linguistic, and philosophical performativity encourages what Diana Taylor calls "witnessing"—attending to one's participation as a contributory "spectator" (181-182).

Viewers and readers have a tendency Taylor explains to over-identify or even mis-identify with either the positions of the hero, the perpetrator, or the victim (181-84). As critics, Taylor asserts, we especially tend to mis-identify with the hero position, thinking we make sense of situations we encounter and even call attention to solutions that would easily eliminate characters' crises and problematic situations. Diane Crittendon, the author of What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us: Why Happiness Eludes the Modern Woman (1999), also argues that young women today inherit a feminist tradition that encourages them to over-identify with the victim-role (189). Instead of over-identifying or mis-identifying with traditionally prescribed roles, Taylor suggests "[recognizing the performative frame of the encounter" and recognizing that we are "caught in the spectacles" we critique and live in (183-84). Relating her suggested perspective of "witnessing" to Lacan's field of the "gaze" that locates the viewer or interpreter within the frame of her own perspective and social position—making the critic as much of an object of interpretation as the text she is critiquing—Taylor suggests that perceiving of ourselves as "witnesses," as contributory spectators, will help us better

understand how readers and spectators enable and disrupt the narrative and lived scenarios we encounter. This project's discussions of Alcott's life and works demonstrate the critical perspective Alcott shared with performance critics such as Taylor. Alcott's depiction of performance as an identity-defining activity and framework draws attention to the performative traditions that help define fictional and theoretical accounts of American female identity.

Alcott's tendency to identify with male and actress roles is an overt way to index her affinity for the performance context. Louisa Alcott longed to be a boy and an actress and within the Alcott home and her own writings she was able to enact these roles. Though she appeared briefly, one evening, as a professional actress and participated in parlor theatricals throughout her childhood and teenage years, she never earned a living as a stage actress. As noted before, however, her fiction is full of women who are actresses either on the stage or off, and Alcott herself participated as an actress to some extent when she published under various pseudonyms, most notably, the gender-neutral name, A. M. Barnard. Never a boy either, Alcott's adolescent and adult stories still manage to achieve a negotiation of gendered identity that disrupts essentialist versions of male and female identity, instead promoting a combination of stereotypically masculine and feminine characteristics as the most rewarding behavioral schema for female identity.

The fusion of masculine and feminine sensibilities in her most famous character, Jo March, and Alcott's own performances as a male narrator in several of her sensational short stories, allows Alcott to embody and identify with the male perspective, though, as she expresses through her persona as Jo in Little Women, "she never quite got over the disappointment of not being a boy" (3). Combining her interests in performance and

writing, Alcott creates for her readers a world in which gendered identity enjoys a liminal status and the performance framework becomes much more than a playground in which to feign identity. Instead, performance becomes a way of experimenting—a word often used by Alcott and her famous father, Bronson Alcott—with one's self-conception and public appearance, a way of rehearsing, demonstrating, and modifying conceptions of gendered behavior.

In addition to wishing to be a boy and an actress, Alcott also yearned to be a writer, and she was able to participate as one from a very young age. In fact, her father required her to keep a journal as soon as she was old enough to write, and, as mentioned earlier, her entries were read and commented on by each of her parents. She herself would add to her journal entries when she read them, whether it was days or years later. Journal writing was a way of confronting and constructing self-identity and social context, a way of performing for herself and for others—her mother and her father, and now, her readers.

Alcott's tendency to imagine herself with a performance context is apparent in a 1850 journal entry where she says, ". . . I don't *talk* about myself, yet must always think of the willful, moody girl I try to manage, and in my journal I write to her to see how she gets on" (Journals 61). Like her journals, Alcott's fiction can be interpreted as her performances of self-theorizing, of experimenting with possible ways of understanding and expressing one's identity and perspective. "Writ[ing] to *her*," Alcott writes to an ambiguous but also oddly identifiable audience. She writes to an image of herself that she tries "to manage" and to a persona that is "get[ting] on"—growing up. Such descriptions signify Alcott's understanding of her identity as in process, as capable of

being self-informed and shaped, as full of potential that is to be self-directed, but that will also "get on" without her through her readers' interpretations.

While "managing" the self indicates the repressive habit of self-masking, of psychological disguise, encouraged by the nineteenth-century feminine ideal and civilization, managing the self also insinuates an empowering sense of self-authorship. It is this sense of management one finds in the autobiographical links apparent in her adult and adolescent literature. While Alcott's obscure and recently discovered adult and sensational stories, explicitly foreground female performance and the performance framework within nineteenth-century life, Alcott's adult autobiography, Work, and her famous adolescent autobiography, Little Women, include these emphases as well but in a less explicit manner. After becoming familiar with the complexity of psychological disguise and social performance illustrated in Behind a Mask and her other sensational short stories, Alcott's attitude toward the influence of social conventions in the development and expression of female identity exhibited in her more traditional novels is revealed as much more complex than originally recognized.

Parallels between the specialty of the term performative and the nineteenth-century view of feminine influence, superficiality, and transparency as specialties of female nature and women's writing intersect enough to keep performativity from being a theoretical imposition in considerations of Alcott's works. Alcott demonstrates that in many ways theoretical imposition was a defining factor in nineteenth-century women's lives. The idealizing of feminine behavior and all of the requirements and expectations placed upon the female role in nineteenth-century America are in fact the result of theoretical imposition. In many ways, theorizing embodies the idealization of behavior

or the degradation of behavior—either rationalizations or corrections of human philosophical and bodily activity. Though male activity is certainly vulnerable to and emblematic of theoretical conjecturing and social definition as well, female behavior has probably been considered with more discriminatory and deterministic aims. Because women have historically been situated in less empowered and more socially dynamic roles, it is fair to consider Alcott's conceptions of female identity as comprising a very informative template of social belief because at least in terms of the nineteenth-century such conceptions are being re-theorized in ways that emphasize their original insidiousness and their socially disruptive while at the same time socially powerful roles.

The performance framework and the terms of performance theory are useful for thinking about literature in general as well as literary renditions of female identity because they offer a language that aptly describes literature as if it were live performance, forcing readers to realize their own participation in a text's meaning at the time they are considering a text. Narrative strategies become staging devices that draw readers' attention to particular characters' actions, themes, habits of interpretation, and meanings. Characters are highlighted as types of cultural formulations of identity. Plot becomes central not only to a particular narrative but within the context of larger narrative traditions. Understood as comprising literary performances of American female identity, Alcott's narrative strategies and character and plot developments draw attention to the performative frameworks and traditions apparent in Alcott's feminist ideology. Alcott's literary performances also provide a particularly rich context for considering twentieth-century responses to nineteenth-century female identity. In many ways, academic interest in Alcott's life and works is a fairly new phenomenon. While there is much

written on Alcott, a complex consideration of her social critique and theorizing of American female identity is just beginning. One of the most important results of Alcott's critical reevaluation has been attention to the possibility that her interest in performance informed her attitude toward and her depiction of female identity in her adult and adolescent fiction alike as well as to the possibility that performance ideology itself continues to inform our understandings of American female identity.

Performance Motives

Judith Butler's statement that it is a mistake to think of performativity as "willful and arbitrary choice" (Bodies 187) and Joseph Roach's conception of literature as an "archive of restored behaviors" ("Bodies of Doctrine" 149) are both ideas that come to mind immediately when I reflect on the relevance of performance ideology in the production of this project. Butler's idea foregrounds the definitive role of chains of norms and habitual behaviors in shaping what one recognizes as the historic and discursive conditions in which one gains a sense of cultural identity and self-expression. Roach's idea spotlights the fact that cultural mediums, such as literature, provide us both with a means of demonstrating understandings of self and world at the same time that they serve as a means of recognizing ourselves in the world or our own experiences in the lives and ideas of others. These ideas embody for me what Richard Schechner refers to as "contact points" or "overlaps" of performance and the performative ("What Is Performance Studies Anyway?" 357). Butler's ideas force me to acknowledge the "historicity of norms" that determine what I do and do not recognize in the world—what is and is not consciously performative to my sensibility (Bodies 187). What habitual

behaviors, interests, and ideas repeatedly play a recognizably prevalent role in my interpretation of what I encounter in the world? Roach's idea has helped me acknowledge that, to counter Butler's idea, arbitrary and willful choices, happenstance and deliberately planned experiences, have and do contribute to what I recognize as "performance" categorically and what I recognize as "performances" that have played a significant role in my life—in short, what I recognize as "performative."

Many of the motivating factors for this project were experiences, depictions and discussions of female identity that I encountered prior to my familiarity with Alcott's interest in theatre and performance ideology and certainly before I examined the import of these interests within her literary works and life. They include magazine articles, books, and essays that I read because of my interest in female body image, self-esteem, and dance, or that I encountered by happenstance. They also include interests that stem from my status as a recently married woman, a first-time mother, an aspiring scholar, and an experienced teacher of dance, literature, and writing. The following discussion presents a re-visitation of a few of these motivating factors with the intentional purpose of revealing a "historicity of norms" that readers, even more so that I, may recognize in the scope and observations of this project.

* * *

At the beginning of my work on this project, I was strongly opposed to focusing on Louisa May Alcott. Why go back to the middle of the nineteenth-century when what I wanted to do was address female identity at the end of the twentieth-century? Not only did nineteenth-century women's texts seem too moralistic, too sentimental, but the criticism seemed so condemning as well. Almost a decade ago, in her article "*But is it*

any good?': Evaluating Nineteenth-Century American Women's Fiction," Susan Harris addresses similar concerns. She expresses a dissatisfaction with criticism of nineteenth-century American women's fiction and particularly with what she identifies as an "unspoken agreement not to submit nineteenth-century women's novels to extended analytical evaluation" ("'*But is it any good?*'" 44). She blames this critical move on the "evaluative modes most of us were taught" that "devalue this literature *a priori*" ("'*But is it any good?*'"44). Harris suggests that one way to improve criticism of nineteenth-century women's texts is to develop ways of describing noncanonical American women's literature "in terms of process—that is to see it within the shifting currents of nineteenth-century American ideologies," and to acknowledge that "imaginative literature is both reactive and creative" ("'*But is it any good?*'" 44).

Rather than assuming that sentimental fiction supported, and still promotes, misogynistic values and practices, Harris suggests that we consider thematic, structural, and rhetorical conflicts in nineteenth-century women's texts and the various ways in which female characters and narrators struggle to articulate and create new subject positions for themselves. "If we look at them as both reactive and creative rather than asking them to self-consciously embody 'timeless truths,'" Harris asserts, "we can understand their aesthetic, moral, and political values, both for their contemporaries and for us" ("'*But is it any good?*'" 45). Describing the method of study she advocates, Harris explains:

> While traditional criticism tends to examine literary works either historically, rhetorically, or ideologically, the method I am calling process analysis investigates all three axes in its contemplation of any given work. Consequently, although specific analytical tasks may look the same as they always looked (pursuing metaphors, for instance), the final mosaic produced by process analysis looks very different because it has shifted the hermeneutic and evaluative projects

> into a far more complex socio-temporal scheme. And unlike traditional Anglo-American criticism, process analysis foregrounds the relationship of the literary-critical task to the critic's stance in her own time. ("'*But is it any good?*'" 45)

When reflecting on the ideological basis of her own observations, Harris makes three insightful observations: 1)"What teleological shape the literature we are examining has is imposed by us, retrospectively; it is not inherent in the material itself"; 2) "[W]e are drawn to nineteenth-century women's texts despite their antithetical values and want to find some way of talking about them"; and 3) "[W]e are searching for antecedents to ourselves and the future we envision that we have not found in canonical texts and canonical ways of reading them" ("'*But is it any good?*'" 45). Harris' comments inspire me.

I identify with many of the challenges and concerns faced by Alcott's more famous heroines. Jo March of Alcott's March Trilogy was dissatisfied with being a girl because boys had so many more exciting adventures and liberating opportunities as well as publicly advertised social and familial support for self-development. Jo March snubbed social conventions and has gained the affiliation of women for well over a century because she chose to be more interested in herself than in others. Christie Heron sought work within the public workforce and struggled to find a balance between family and professional life. As she succeeded professionally, her intimate relationships and self-respect suffered. Success cost her familial support and friendship, and isolation led to nearly fatal depression and self-neglect. Jean Muir longed for economic and social opportunities other than the ones afforded her by her class and gender status. She knew what she needed to do and whom she needed to appear to be in order to be adored and embraced by the elite, but she also realized there is a very insidious bias against the aged,

poor, socially marginalized, perhaps even the honest. Social decorum often precludes honesty. No matter how pretty or how talented she might be, no matter how much she might appear to be the "ideal," social prejudice and sexual discrimination still limit her possibilities. All three of these characters as well as the femme fatales of Alcott's sensation stories identify a split between their socially ascribed identities and the roles and possibilities they imagine for themselves. All of Alcott's heroines struggle to develop and maintain a strong sense of self in the face of social expectations, especially those concerning women's work, marriage, and family. For purposes of rebellion, entertainment, survival, and revenge, most of Alcott's heroines participate as actresses and many of them feign identities. All of them confront problems of identity and relationship, challenging readers to consider tensions between self-development and affiliation with others.

Like Alcott's heroines, I, too, am interested in understanding the complexities of negotiating how to be an independent, self-empowered woman at the same time that I value and spend much of my time involved with others in various sorts of relationships that give significance to my life. Furthermore, I am interested in being able to think critically about my choices and the effects of my relationships and activities on my life and on the lives of others. I am also interested in better understanding how to balance and value individual and community time and how to balance the value of work inside and outside of the home as well as inside and outside of professional relationships. I am well aware of the magnitude of the process one goes through when choosing one's career or choosing when and if to marry or have children. All of these dilemmas involve what roles male and female relationships, and specific men and women, have played, currently

play, and will play in my life. As a scholar, I am extremely interested in understanding historical and contemporary arguments about why a particular cultural sphere—female or male, domestic or public—should be prioritized or is just more appealing than the other.

As a writer and teacher, I study and encourage experimentation with persona. Constructing identity through language and creating impressions via physical gesture or ideological posturing are integral parts of writing and teaching. Learning environments are often "staged"—set up to foreground particular learning opportunities and interactive relationships. Eliciting meaningful audience (readers' or students') responses is the goal of writing and teaching. Performance, writing, learning and teaching, even living in general, share structural and substantive characteristics and behaviors. Alcott appears to have recognized such overlaps and tensions.

Yet, as a person of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, I can feel a bit uncomfortable relating to heroines of nineteenth-century domestic, sentimental fiction. Maybe more aggressive heroines seem more appropriate to contemporary sensibility. Alcott's sensational femme-fatales make me less paranoid in some ways. They aren't satisfied with their lives, and such dissatisfaction seems to be a somewhat obligatory characteristic of twentieth- and twenty-first century womanhood. Ironically, however, even Alcott's sentimental texts address modern conflicts between individual accomplishment and affiliation with others despite their traditional stereotyping. Alcott's adult and children fiction dramatizes several issues relevant within discussions of present-day female identity. Furthermore, Harris' "process analysis" approach also advocates a reconsideration of what we expect from and how we approach imaginative literature such as Alcott's. As a student of literature, I appreciate the suggestion that I

seriously consider my motives for reading and studying literature and the opportunities such activity affords me.

Harris's notion that one of the main motivating factors for reading nineteenth-century women's literature is to find antecedents to my own situation particularly intrigues me. Is it possible that Alcott's texts provide an explanation for my own attitude toward female development? Harris' comments include the notion that literature can be read as theory, in fact, that literature is theory and cannot be separated from the perspective one brings to the text. I hold this idea dear as well, completely convinced of its reality and import. My discomfort with going back to nineteenth-century sentimental texts has become replaced by intrigue because I assume Alcott believed in literature as theory as well and that her heroines serve as surrogate theorists who experiment with female experience and feminist ideas for the benefit of their readers.

Harris aligns herself with Richard Rorty to explain her belief in the significance of viewing imaginative literature as both reactive and creative. She argues that such a view of literature allows one to "examine the ways that it springs from, reacts against, or responds to the plots, themes, languages in the discursive arena that engendered it at the same time that it creates new ones" ("*'But is it any good?'*" 44). For Rorty, she explains, "this happens through the creation of new metaphors that evolve over time into new ideas" ("*'But is it any good?'*"44). Since my goal is to pursue the metaphor of performance within Alcott's life and works, I find Harris' and Rorty's quite significant. Summarizing Rorty in his article "Contingency of Selfhood," Harris explains, "What we know, believe, is dependent on our ability to speak it, and our ability to speak it depends on the slow historical conjunction of ideas, images, and metaphors that evolve into the

languages available to us" ("*'But is it any good?* "44).[9] Part of what this project argues is that a language of performance pervades our own time and our discussion of female identity itself. We can find antecedents of this development in Alcott's own life and in the lives of her heroines.

My critical interest in Alcott was further aroused by several, diverse comments recently made by and about American women. Wendy Shalit, a 21-year old graduate of Williams College, recently made a call for a "return to modesty" in a book of the same title.[10] A cursory summary of her argument is that without rules of social decorum that adhere to a respect for female "modesty"—and by "modest" Shalit means sexually discrete and self-protective—and rules that demonstrate male compliance with this ideal, present day women are left without any protection from the carnal desires of men to objectify and violate women's bodies and sensibilities. Shalit seems appalled that the antidote for female powerlessness is "to become like men." In her estimation, this means that women have to join men as exploiters and violators of their own and the opposite sex. Sounding a bit unreasonable at times, Shalit still caught my attention. At the time I was reading a book by Alcott titled Hospital Sketches where the main character, Tribulation Periwinkle, continually attributes male characteristics to herself and female characteristics to the men she is taking care of while she works as a civil war nurse. As I noted before, Jo March also repeatedly expresses a desire to be a boy. The first and only play of Alcott's ever to be performed in a professional theatre, "Nat Bachelor's Pleasure Trip: or, The Trials of a Good-Natured Man," also focuses on male experiences. The March girls in Little Women also use the male *bildungsroman* Pilgrim's Progress as a model for behavior. Many of Alcott's sensational stories include male narrators who

embody stereotypical, socially empowered positions. I am quite intrigued by the fact that Alcott, well over a hundred years ago, was interested in the gender appropriation Shalit was raising.

Part of what this project considers is what it was like, according to Alcott, to live and participate as a woman interested in empowering herself (and, therefore, also interested in how to negotiate and re-negotiate gender roles) in nineteenth-century America. A larger aim, however, is to push Alcott's conclusions one step further by relating them to the position of women today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Shalit's comments inspired me to question the role of female modesty in Alcott's fiction. As mentioned earlier, my discussion of Behind a Mask in Chapter One of this text reveals modesty as a mask adopted and exploited by Jean Muir, the novel's controversial heroine, to achieve female revenge and power.

My interest in Alcott was also spawned by a recent book by Joan Jacobs Brumberg titled The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls (1997). Focusing on body issues, ranging from menstruation, to personal hygiene, to eating disorders, to body piercing, Brumberg argues that the presentation of the body has become the main "project," the defining factor, of female identity today. Furthermore, the female body is now also interpreted by society as a prominent forum for expression of female identity. Brumberg reaches this conclusion by discussing how girlhood has developed from the nineteenth-century's end to the present. She remarks that young girls in nineteenth-century American society were more concerned about female inner character than outward appearance. After reading and studying several works by Alcott where her main female characters both suffer and benefit from their identification with

the role of a performer/actress, I'm convinced that Alcott offers a significant and alternative explanation for how women experienced life in nineteenth- century America. Part of what nineteenth-century American ideology required was that girls *appeared* to have a specific kind of inner sensibility. Brumberg's analysis of a cultural shift between the 19th century girls' concern with inner character and 20th century females' obsession with outward appearance is important and insightful, especially given the mirage of media images young girls now receive that influence how they think about their own bodies and the kinds of bodies they desire, but nineteenth-century females' attitudes toward outward appearance deserve more attention.

However unfortunate it may be, it is possible to argue that inner sensibility and outward appearance are inseparable in some ways, especially in the appearance-obsessed culture that existed in nineteenth-century America and that continues to exist at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Though one's appearance is not and should not be a determinative force of one's identity, it is undeniably, nevertheless, a factor that influences one's impressions and experiences. More importantly, to deny the import of appearance is in part to deny one of the more significant factors of women's lives in particular. More important still are the opportunities afforded by directly addressing the import of the appearance imperative in women's lives.

The relationship between female identity inside and outside of representation is central in many of Alcott's texts. Her novel Work, discussed in Chapter Two of this project, addresses the import of the inner/outer dichotomy by focusing on its heroine's, Christie Heron's, movement from the domestic, private sphere and into the American workforce. This dichotomy is also present in terms of Christie's self-conception inside of

various social and familial roles. The novel's focus on Christie's work as a stage actress and on her habit of conceiving of herself-in-role even outside of the theatre also foregrounds this dichotomy as a defining aspect of her identity. Brumberg's explanation of the magnitude of "body projects" within the lives of young girls today deals with the same conflict confronted by Christie Heron. How does one's public reputation and activity, in this case women's work, affect one's self- and social identity? How does a concern with public appearance affect women's lives and self-conception? Little Women, the focus of Chapter Three, also addresses this concern with its attention to conflicts between the March girls' aspirations and social expectations and performance as an identity-shaping activity. Several of Alcott's sensational heroines, including Cecil Bazil Stein of "A Marble Woman," Clotilde of "A Double Tragedy," Natalie Nairne of "La Jeune," and Thrya and Nadine of "Which Wins?" also directly confront the disillusioning results of their "body projects," and their concern with the social effects of their appearance.

My interest in connections between Alcott's nineteenth-century texts and present day women's culture was further developed by a profile in the April 1999 edition of Vanity Fair magazine, titled "The Three Graces," that depicts Michelle Pfeiffer, Jodie Foster, and Meg Ryan. The profile raises several questions for me concerning current attitudes toward female self-denial and women's public role. In the photo all three women wear black tops and blue jeans, lean close to one another, in fact on one another, with their arms folded across their bodies, and sit with their legs entwined in one another's. Looking at the photo one recognizes their intimacy and solidarity, but one also is also confused by the manner in which their bodies intertwine. Viewers are presented

with female community and autonomy at the same time. Moreover, the women's unified image is appealing at the same time that it is disconcerting. Their closeness is inviting, but the similarity of their clothing creates a somewhat disturbing effect: one cannot tell where their individual bodies begin and end.

The women disappear into one another, their physical positions creating several visual illusions. Foster is the only one whose arms are clearly visible. Only Ryan's left elbow and forearm are visible, and Ryan also has her right leg turned so that it looks like it is Foster's. Foster's, Pfeiffer's, and Ryan's legs are intertwined so as to give one the initial impression that Pfeiffer and Foster are both sitting cross-legged, when, in fact, neither one of them is in this position. As mentioned before, Ryan's right leg looks like it could be Foster's left, and Pfeiffer's left leg gives the impression that it might be Foster right. Pfeiffer's left arm is also tucked under her right leg so that it takes the place of where her left leg would be if she were sitting cross-legged. Upon closer inspection, however, one notices Foster's legs pulled up tight in front of her. The darkness of her blue jeans, however, makes her legs blend into her black top.

The three women also stare, with almost the exact same colored eyes and teary-eyed, glazed-over expression, straight into the camera—demonstrating an odd combination of vulnerability and confidence. The profile explains that Pfeiffer is the "most beautiful woman in Hollywood" and has "cornered the market on . . . [m]elancholic beauty." Foster is "the smartest woman," the epitome of "[s]earing intellect," and Ryan is "the most lovable" with "[b]oundless spunk." The profile's conclusion explains that these three women "maintain sanity by . . . revealing nothing personal." Repeated three times, following each of the actress's names, the phrase

"revealing nothing personal" is the only common attribute or habit of self-presentation that is not strictly appearance-oriented shared by the three women and the only linguistic phrase other than "the most" and "in Hollywood" repeated more than once in the profile. If Pfeiffer, Foster, and Ryan maintain sanity by *revealing nothing personal*, then their accomplishments—beauty, intelligence, and lovability—must be at least partially the result of this behavior as well. The profile suggests that Pfeiffer, Ryan, and Foster—diverse but also similar women—achieve success and are most comfortable with themselves and one another by not being themselves in the public eye. Their expertise in creating illusions and alternative roles for themselves through the use of their bodies as well as minds is also communicated in the profile.

Mixed messages occur within this profile. All of a sudden, self-restraint, not talking about one's self, but only expressing interest in others, and privacy, maintaining a "proper," but suggestive and mysteriousness, persona—traits also associated with nineteenth-century femininity—are held up as exemplary at the twentieth-century's end. Given my interest in actresses and the theme of performance in Alcott's fiction and personal writings, this profile understandably interests me. Pfeiffer, Foster, and Ryan are successful actresses in addition to being successful in other aspects of their lives—as producers, mothers, wives, and humanitarians, among other roles. Does their refusal to acknowledge publicly their individual beliefs and feelings (need I say self-denial?) benefit them only because they are famous, or is this a characteristic that all women should adopt so that we may be less vulnerable and more powerful? The former is reasonably the case. However, suggested in this profile is the idea that self-denial or at

least self-masking now facilitates power and independence. How does this idea compare with nineteenth-century attitudes toward female self-denial and behavior?

We find within Alcott's texts women, such as Jean Muir in Behind a Mask, who are capable of hiding behind performances of roles in order to get what they really want: female independence. Muir pretends to be the ideal nineteenth-century women when she is actually the opposite. Texts such as Behind a Mask clearly demonstrate the possibility that faked self-denial can, in fact, become female self-reliance. The Vanity Fair profile suggests that the idea that "The Victorian Cult of True Womanhood actually encouraged women to subvert it" (Keyser, Whisper 49) may be relevant in discussions of twentieth-century conceptions of female identity as well. Female self-denial itself encourages unusual female insight into the lives of others (knowing where others are, what they are doing, what they like and dislike) and even manipulation of others' lives (making all things seem as if they are the way they are "supposed" to be or the way that a particular person would like them to be even if they aren't). Perhaps appearance-obsessed and public-oriented life at twentieth-century's end also encourages such self-awareness versus social awareness and even subversion. Questions raised by the Vanity Fair profile—for instance about what sorts of private and public personas provide women with power and protection—are also raised by Alcott's focus on the actress persona and the performance framework in her sensational short fiction. This project's final chapter takes Alcott's strategic use of the actress persona and performance in her sensational fiction as its focus.

A 1990 novel, Other Women's Children, by Perri Klass, a pediatrician, also raises several questions for me about Alcott's attitude toward women's work and modern

women's identification with Louisa Alcott and her novels. The narrator and main character of the novel, Amelia Stern, keeps a copy of Little Women by her bed, reading from it regularly to remind her self of domestic harmony and the moral uplift of hard work, but also of the conflicting realities that shape women's identity. Repeatedly throughout the novel, Amelia reflects on similarities and differences between her own life, Alcott's life, and the lives of Alcott's heroines. For Klass's character, Alcott is a comforting reminder that one's life is not always as tidy as the impression one gives, one's identity and reality are often more complex than might appear, and contradiction does not necessarily indicate instability: "Blood and death and excrement had not been swept under the rug of Louisa's life, to keep the parlor neat. She must have see suffering and pain and death [at the Civil War hospitals], and then she went home to Orchard House and wrote her stories for girls," Klass's character explains (231). At a particularly low point in her life, when a three-year-old AIDS patient of hers is dying and she and her husband, Mark, are having marriage difficulties due to demands of her work (long, unpredictable hours as well as psychological and emotional strain), Amelia visits Orchard House, the Concord home Alcott moved to when she was twenty-six. When she returns home that night to an empty house, her husband having moved out and taken their three-year-old son, Alexander, with him, Amelia "got through the evening on the strength of Louisa May Alcott" (234). What comprises the strength of Louisa Alcott? Why is she still so appealing, even comforting, to Klass's narrator and other modern women?

The unconventionality of Alcott's familial life and controversy surrounding her ideological identity add to her appeal and strengths from Amelia's perspective. Amelia reminds herself of Alcott's unconventional family life and personal adventures, including

her work as a war nurse, at several points in the novel when she is questioning the effects of her vocation on her family life. "The fact is, of course, that it's nonsense to think of the Alcotts as in any way proper, standard, normal people," Amelia says. "They were weirdos from start to finish. The father most of all, dragging them from one utopian community to another, one failed school to another . . . and his girls went out to work as soon as they could" (218). Louisa "had gone off into Civil War hospitals, which surely must have been charnel houses. No antisepsis, little or no analgesia, no antibiotics," but she was also able to imagine "all the cozy domesticity of [Amelia's] fantasies, the Little Women mix of loving family, hard work, and moral uplift" (Klass 231). While Alcott family life may have been difficult, especially financially, at times, it did elicit female independence and adventure.

Klass's narrator emphasizes Alcott's appeal as a woman who exposed herself to unconventional female experiences. Amelia refers to Alcott's description of Jo March's education to emphasize how much she, and by association Alcott, values female resourcefulness and self-directed behavior:

> Jo soon found that her innocent experience had given her but few glimpses of the tragic world which underlies society, so regarding it in a business light, she set about supplying her deficiencies with characteristic energy. Eager to find material for stories, and bent on making them original in plot, if not masterly in execution, she searched newspapers for accidents, incidents, and crimes; she excited the suspicions of public librarians by asking for works on poisons; she studied faces in the streets, and characters, good, bad, and indifferent, all about her; she delved in the dust of ancient times for facts or fictions so old that they were a good as new, and introduced herself to folly, sin, and misery, as well as her limited opportunities allowed. (Little Women 349)

Klass's depiction of the significance of Alcott and her characters in the life of her modern woman narrator raised my curiosity about how I relate to Alcott's characters. Amelia Stern hints at the possibility that Alcott may provide antecedents to current

understandings of female identity other than the ones traditionally associated with her. In fact, for Amelia, Alcott embodied some very real conflicts present in her own life and her characters provide healthy models for female development rather than just domestic fantasies too idyllic to achieve consistently. My analysis of female characters in all of Alcott's "performances" considered in this project explores the importance of self-directed behavior and experimentation characterized in Alcott's description of Jo's attempts at self-education and Amelia's idealization of Alcott. In Alcott's sensational fiction, her characters often have extremely distorted senses of self, but their identities are instructive even in their failures at developing empowering senses of self-identity.

One more facet of Klass's treatment of Alcott that I found particularly significant was her narrator's attitude toward death tableaus in nineteenth-century women's texts. Repeatedly throughout the novel, Amelia directly discusses the unreal nature of nineteenth-century death bed scenes and expresses her frustration at not being able to provide her patients with the peaceful, spiritually perfect, painless last breaths depicted in sentimental novels. Dr. Amelia Stern admits the incongruity between her own life experiences and those depicted in sentimental novels and questions the value and purpose of both nineteenth-century fiction as well as the incongruities it depicts. Although it is unnecessary to make an argument about the similarities and differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century attitudes toward death in the present context, this conflict in Klass's novel foregrounds the relevance of women's relation to their work, be it literature or medicine. Like Amelia Stern who as a pediatrician feels it is her responsibility to save young children's lives, Alcott, because of when she lived, also assumed significant influence over the lives of young people, however figurative her

influence on their "health" was to be. Also, like Stern's use of nineteenth-century women's writing as a model for her own behavior, Alcott's interest in theatre and female performance serves as a model of behavior and human interaction for her own work.

Arguably, Alcott intended her works to be read and interpreted with performance in mind. Performance as it is traditionally associated with theatre is one way in which Alcott understood and employed performances in her works. In addition, however, Alcott had a very personal and alternative notion of how one might understand performance; in short, Alcott closely linked women's lives with performance. Part of what Alcott achieves by foregrounding performance as a framework and activity in her texts is a reversal of terms: everyday activity becomes performance and artistic activity, literature in this instance, becomes a means of rehearsing traditional, alternative, and emergent possibilities for female identity and development.

Chapter One

Stretching the Bounds of Maiden Modesty:

Performances of the Feminine Ideal in Louisa May Alcott's Behind a Mask

Louisa May Alcott's interest in theatre and performance is mentioned in many critical assessments of her life and work, but its relevance within her feminist philosophy has yet to be explored in its complexity. In her novel Behind a Mask; Or, a Woman's Power (1866), for instance, Alcott challenges the glorification of the nineteenth-century feminine ideal by creating a heroine who disguises herself "behind the mask" of this ideal so that she may reverse its social aims and achieve female independence. In addition, Alcott's fascination with specific actresses, such as Sarah Siddons, informs narrative and character development in several of her novels, including Behind a Mask. With interests in the inherent theatricality of nineteenth-century life, Alcott was especially attuned to the habit of psychological disguise in both adolescent and adult females brought on by the nineteenth-century belief in the transparent relationship between one's inner sentiment and outward display. Female and social angst caused by the belief in the simultaneous display of the female psyche and body is a major theme in much of Alcott's writing (both personal and fictional). Displays of feminine modesty suggested one's understanding of social propriety and the feminine role of the sentimental woman within mid-nineteenth-century, middle-class American society, but as Alcott demonstrates, such understanding also opened up the possibility of subtly and skillfully manipulating such norms.

Early in her life, Louisa May Alcott "began to see theatre as an outlet for her pent-up emotional impulses" and as an outlet for rebellion and self-definition (Halttunen "Domestic Drama" 238). Nineteenth-century Victorian American culture, with its firm

separation of characteristics and behaviors appropriate for male and female sexes, left Alcott, who had many "male" desires such as wanting to be financially independent, socially recognized, and individually powerful, with many "pent-up" impulses. Often, to express the alternative possibilities she imagined for herself and other young girls and women within nineteenth-century America, she organized family tableaux and parlor theatricals for her sisters and herself to perform. As author-director of the "Louy Alcott troupe," Louisa, as early as the age of ten, would regularly choose for herself the role of the villainous or heroic male lead or the rebellious, independent female counterpart, rather than that of the saintly, virtuous heroine (Stern xi-xii). As her older sister, Anna, explained, "No drama was perfect in [Louisa's] eyes without a touch of the demonic or supernatural," and Louisa "reveled in catastrophe, and the darker scenes were her delight" (Bedell, The Alcotts 252-53). Of course, these interests stood in stark contrast to those associated with the domestic, vulnerable, modest, unself-interested, feminine ideal promoted by nineteenth-century sentimentalism, and are certainly not the interests most readily associated with the author of Little Women. Nevertheless, Alcott's interests in theatrical practices and actresses shape much of her writing, and more often than not her heroines are actresses either on the stage or off who question the social conventions supporting the nineteenth-century feminine ideal.

Similar to the moralistic and social aims of the sentimental genre with which she is so readily associated, Alcott also wished that theatricals might actually change real life attitudes.[1] Her belief in theatrical efficacy is displayed by her attempt to ward off the real life suitor of her younger sister, May, by disguising herself as an Englishman and flagrantly "courting" her sister on the street in front of the Alcott home (Meigs 82-3).

Louisa's propensity for the dramatic and her commitment to female power can be found in her sensational narratives where theatricals serve as a means of rebellion and self-definition for her female characters as well. Not published until nearly one hundred years after her death, Alcott's sensational narratives reveal her feminist critique of nineteenth-century society and have significantly influenced reinterpretations of her sentimental novels such as the March trilogy (Little Women, Little Men, and Jo's Boys) and her adult autobiographical novel Work. Her interest in theatricals and their inclusion in her narratives provide an apropos means of critique for a society that was becoming more and more aware of its own inherent theatricality as it became more and more interested in fashion, etiquette, and social impressions.[2] Emerson, one the Alcott family's neighbors and closest friends, described the nineteenth-century social climate by saying, "So in this great society wide lying around us, a critical analysis would find very few spontaneous actions. It is almost all custom and gross sense" ("Experience" 256). In a similar vein, he characterized his contemporaries by saying, "We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them" ("Experience" 261).

Louisa's use of theatrical performance for personal rebellion was completely opposite to that taught her by her father, Bronson Alcott, a Transcendental visionary famous for his theories of child rearing and education, who utilized play-acting as a form of allegorical instruction. In his article, "Pictures of Thought Comprising Fables, Emblems, Parables, and Allegories Intended Principally to Aid the Young in Self-inspection and Self-culture," Bronson describes allegories as "symbols of the ideal, as represented in nature and embodied to the senses. They are types of the human spirit, depicting in sensible imagery, the invisible by the visible . . . the perfect and substantiated

by the imperfect and shadowy . . ."(qtd. in Halttunen, "Domestic Drama" 236). As the title of his writing indicates, allegories were intended to incite "self-inspection" and "self-culture" on behalf of their characters and audience members. Also, as the title suggests, self-inspection included the cultivation of a transparent relationship between outward display (pictures) and mental activity (thoughts), a popular conceptual relationship in nineteenth-century America. "Self-culture" had a double meaning. On one hand, it represented self-development and intellectual investigation. On the other hand, this self-development also had a rather ominous meaning in that one was to aim to make one's self-identity and one's cultural-identity one and the same. One's outward expressions were to reflect only a "culturally approved, monolithic, and ideologically-sound interiority" (Elliott 302).[3] For young girls such as Louisa, "self-culture" was perhaps one of the first ways they began to learn about self-discipline, self-control, and self-denial. In other words, developing self-culture was not necessarily always a liberating experience.

In the Alcott home, Bronson carried the desired correspondence between outward display and inner sentiment one step further by having his daughters perform allegorical dramas (one of his favorites was Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress) so that they might internalize qualities associated with the roles they played, such as passionlessness, self-denial, and self-control (Halttunen, "Domestic Drama" 236).[4] Theatrical embodiment, he believed, could incite practical understanding and even self-transformation. In his own words, he staged allegorical dramas for his daughters to enact so that he might "fit [them] for the drama on which they have entered" (Morrow 160).

Alcott's contemporary audience was particularly attuned to the practices of performance because private theatricals were a popular form of entertainment for mid-century, middle-class America. Karen Halttunen has argued "parlor theatricals reflected the growing theatricality of face-to-face conduct in polite parlor society and eased the mid-century transition from the sentimental sincerity of early Victorian culture to the proud social display of high Victorian culture" ("Domestic Drama" 234). Bronson utilized theatrical performance for the purpose of inciting within his daughters a "self-culture" that would hopefully suit them for both private, domestic life and public, social display.

His strategy for preparing his daughters and students for this life of dueling private and public concerns and mannerisms was to teach children what he called "the Philosophy of Expression" (Halttunen "Domestic Drama" 236). As Halttunen explains, "After explaining how sculpture, painting and language were only different forms of expression, Bronson went on to discuss what we would call 'body language'" ("Domestic Drama" 237).

> Then they were led to consider gestures, and the *rationale* of manners; and were shown that as the positions and motions of their bodies were produced by the mind, the mind could control them, and they were responsible for the impressions they conveyed in this way; especially while they were forming their habits and had not yet become wonted to any particular ones. (qtd. in Halttunen, "Domestic Drama" 237)

The need to be self-conscious of one's role and behavior, to be aware of the performative effects of one's actions on others, was a lesson Louisa Alcott learned early in life. The notion that children were responsible for the bodily impressions they made on others is quite significant; it meant one was always performing at least when one was in public, and that one was to understand one's body as always open to the gaze and interpretation

of others. To a great extent, one's bodily behavior and presentation were always *for* others. Such attention to bodily presentation led to a habit of psychological disguise for both adolescent and adult females and has much to do with the inherent theatricality associated with nineteenth-century female identity. Female angst caused by the social belief in the simultaneous display of the female psyche and body is a major theme in much of Alcott's writing (both personal and fictional).

Bronson Alcott's linking of bodily behavior with inner sensibility and social character was characteristic of nineteenth-century American ideology, not just his own idiosyncratic philosophy. A central concern of antebellum popular self-improvement literature for both males and females was "impression management," the "art of engineering all outward appearances," and the "presentation of self in everyday life" (Halttunen, Confidence Men 40, 42, Goffman, Presentation of Self 26, 245). Many critics, including Halttunen and Goffman, have theorized this "construction and maintenance of a consistent, idealized self in the presence of others" as particularly important in societies such as nineteenth-century America that are characterized by social mobility:

> Surface impressions were essential to success in the world of strangers, according to the advice writers, because appearances revealed character. In a theory that may be called the sentimental typology of conduct, they asserted that all aspects of manner and appearances were visible signs of inner moral qualities . . . the word character literally meant `a mark made by cutting or engraving,' and inner virtues and vices cut their mark on the outward man. (Confidence Men 40)

The reverse was true as well. Professing that the body reflected the mind, Bronson Alcott's philosophy of expression also had quite significant behavioralist implications: "outward self-restraint was intended to enforce inward self-restraint" (Halttunen "Domestic Drama" 237). One's daily activities then were quite important because bodily

activity and posture could shape or reshape one's inner qualities. As Halttunen points out, although Alcott's appeal to the child's imagination through the use of dramatic performance was somewhat educationally progressive, "his use of allegorical theatre was part of an effort to harness the child's imaginative powers to the pursuit of the passionless life" ("Domestic Drama" 237).

Despite Bronson's attempts to control Louisa's imagination and behavior along the lines of nineteenth-century womanhood, Louisa continued to use her father's private theatricals to the liking of her own imagination. Plotting against the saintly heroines played by her sisters, she continued to display the "anger, discontent, impatience, evil appetites, greedy wants . . . [and] rude behavior" on stage that her father identified in her off stage character as early as her tenth birthday (Herrnstadt 93). The imaginative skills fostered by her father flourished as Louisa grew older, pursued a career in acting, and aimed at being a famous actress or writer. In 1862, after experiencing a lack of opportunities as an actress and working as a nurse during the Civil War, Louisa returned home and found her family financially desperate due to her father's inability to keep a paid position.[5] Over the next five years, in order to support her family, Alcott published an extensive series of sensational stories either anonymously or under the pseudonym ("behind the mask") of A. M. Barnard.[6] These thrillers included tales of mind control or "magnetism," hashish experimentation, feigned identity, cross-dressing, seduction, madness, and murder, and, not surprisingly, generated money quite quickly.

Exploiting conventional beliefs and activities to achieve unconventional advantages for themselves, characters in Alcott's sensational novels regularly surprise readers with their skillful and subtle manipulation of social norms. Louisa's affiliation

and experience with the theatre and acting inform every one of her sensational tales; self-concealment and disclosure, role-playing and problems of character are central to her sensational stories. "In the best of [her thrillers]," Halttunen notes, "Louisa boldly made explicit her adolescent view of theatre by depicting evil women who use theatrical acts to secure for themselves financial independence and personal power ("Domestic Drama" 240). One of these stories, Behind a Mask, directly exploits and criticizes Bronson Alcott's view of theatrical performance as a way of transparently revealing or rigorously shaping inner sentiment and the nineteenth-century belief that outward display may be equated with inner sensibility.

Written two years before Little Women (1868), the novella is the story of Jean Muir, a thirty-year-old, divorced, former actress who secures herself a job as a governess in the Coventry household, a prototype mid-nineteenth-century upper class family (with the exception of an absent father, an exclusion common in Alcott's novels and nineteenth-century literature in general). Muir pretends to be the nineteenth-century domestic, feminine ideal promoted by what Barbara Welter has described as the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood: a vulnerable, modest, subservient, morally and spiritually inclined woman with no self-empowering designs.[7] She feigns this identity so that she may land herself a title (financial security) and prove "What fools men are!" by manipulating one of the Coventry men into marrying her (Behind a Mask 427).[8]

The aims of Muir's performative project firmly align her with what Frances Cogan has called the Cult of Real Womanhood, an ideology promoted by a group of nineteenth-century women writers that readily acknowledged and were interested in

women's need to be concerned with their self-development rather than self-abnegation.[9] The Cult of Real Womanhood promoted physical fitness and health, extended education, the "right reasons" for marriage, skeptical and cautious views of courtship, a healthy balance between family and career, critical consumerism, and financial self-reliance (Cogan 26). Cogan offers this view of womanhood as the nineteenth-century alternative to the Cult of True Womanhood's promotion of the woman who "dedicates her life to the ladylike consumption of luxury goods and practices devotions at the shrine of fashion and beauty, the former in whose service she distorts her rib cage and internal organs with corsets, the latter for which she becomes a 'delicate flower' and a passive parasite" (Cogan 3). Cogan also identifies the Cult of Real Womanhood as specifically an American movement that occurred in response to male self-reliance and capitalistic values. Such critics as Gerda Lerner and Anne Douglas first seriously suggested the tenets and real lives of American women indicated by the Cult of Real Womanhood, but Cogan provides the first book-length argument and coins the phrase "real womanhood."[10]

Many of the characteristics associated with the Cult of True Womanhood comprise Muir's "mask" of femininity. Behind a Mask reverses and subverts many of the ideological postures associated with this nineteenth-century domestic, feminine ideal, such as separate sphere and domestic ideology and the cult of domesticity. Because Muir's manipulation of the "mask" of femininity is the crux of character and plot development in Behind a Mask, I will briefly describe the ideological identity of the mask itself before going on to discuss exactly how Muir embodies and manipulates social conventions associated with the nineteenth-century feminine ideal. Female identity, along nineteenth-century lines of gender construction, was closely linked with, if not defined

by, what critics have come to call "sentimental power," the "cult of True Womanhood," the "cult of domesticity," and "domestic ideology."[11] Since Muir's "mask" of femininity is derived from these ideological postures, they serve as useful ideological markers to describe Muir's unmasking of the effects of female subterfuge within nineteenth-century society.

Gillian Brown borrows Jane Tompkins's phrase "sentimental power" to describe women's work that promoted "virtues of maternity, cooperation, sympathy, and charity" and opposed the "the masculinist, capitalist, individualistic, and imperialist values operating in American culture" at the time (211 n.1). The "cult of domesticity," according to Elliott and Halttunen, was a "feminine moral force," firmly attached to women's work within the home, which must "counteract the hypocrisy of a deceitful world" for the sake of the republic (Elliott 301, Halttunen Confidence Men 58). The "cult of true womanhood," formulated by male society of the early to mid-nineteenth century, denoted, according to Carroll Smith-Rosenburg, "a female role bounded by kitchen and nursery, overlain with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience" (13). Self-denial and self-control were sister virtues of the "true woman," or as many Alcott scholars rephrase it, of the "little woman."[12] Father March, in Little Women, expresses this sensibility quite succinctly when he instructs his daughters to "do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and *conquer themselves so beautifully*, that when [he] come[s] back to them [he] may be fonder and prouder than ever of [his] little women" (8, my emphasis).[13]

Lora Romero has designated Hannah More's 1799 Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education as providing the first formulation of "domestic ideology."

"Using the home as a metaphor for interiority (in the sense of 'selfhood')," More attempts to re-define women's value in terms of internal qualities such as sound judgment and moral tendencies (Romero 119). In addition, Elliott points out, "More warned against women's learning only to become ornamental and specifically warned against their behaving like actresses" (301). More's concern about women behaving like actresses stems in part from her concern with women's authenticity. According to Elliott, More's sense of selfhood "appears to denote sincere expression of moral feeling" (Elliott 301). Alcott's Muir, however, refuses to be authentic with the Coventrys, and achieves "an absolute separation of inner purpose and outer display" (Elliott 301). Muir's sentiment and strategy is in line with that expressed in Florence Harley's Ladies' Book published six years before Behind a Mask: "If politeness is but a mask, as many philosophers tell us, it is a mask which will win love and admiration, and is better worn than cast aside" (qtd. in Elliott 309).[14]

Female self-censure brought on by nineteenth-century views of women's work and sensibility is indicated in Alcott's adult autobiographical novel Work where Christie Heron, after achieving great success as an actress, asks: "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 a good woman?" (43).[15] As Elliott has asked, "How 'good' can a public working woman be within the conventions and expectations of prevailing mid-nineteenth-century social norms, today variously referred to as 'the cult of domesticity,' 'the cult of true womanhood,' and 'domestic ideology'"? (299). Alcott presents this view and position of women as a startling critique of the economic situation of the white, middle-class woman in late nineteenth-century society.

Muir's view of marriage as an enterprise and means of social mobility is one of the ways in which Alcott merges male and female spheres and reverses gender norms in Behind a Mask. Muir's singular goal during her time at the Coventrys is to gain economic independence through marriage. The title is primary, the husband secondary. Contrary to the contemporary convention that she be chosen by a man and subservient to his interests, Muir is self-interested and out shopping for the best catch for herself. Though Alcott's use of marriage as the event toward which the plot of the novel moves and with which it concludes is in line with the practices of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction and its standard view of female development, Muir's use of marriage stands in stark contrast to convention. In short, marriage is an enterprise to Muir, and she is an enterprising young woman. Equipped, as Fetterley explains, "with certain material goals hardly surprising in any participant in an age of rampant capitalism—she would like her survival to be pitched at the highest possible material level," Muir sees marriage as a means of securing female independence by gaining financial security (10). In order to achieve economic independence through marriage, Muir dupes the Coventry family by appearing to be the quintessential version of the mid-nineteenth-century female ideal—a vulnerable, modest, subservient woman with no self-empowering designs. In actuality, Muir is the opposite of this ideal.

Alcott refuses essentialist gender constructions by creating a heroine who is a divorced, former actress to *play the role of* a transparently-virtuous governess who gains economic security by finally manipulating not just one of the Coventry men, but the oldest and richest Coventry man, into marrying her. Not only is Muir's feminine identity complicated by her work outside her own home, it is further complicated by the fact that

she is *self-employed* within the confines of the supposedly sacred domestic sphere (Elliott 303). Furthermore, she brings market values into the domestic sphere, thereby destroying notions of the inherent separateness of male (market) and female (domestic) spheres.

The separation of male and female spheres in nineteenth-century America has been analyzed as merely a conceptual one by a large number of critics. As Susan Strasser, a historian of women's work in America explains, "Paradoxical in itself, the separate-spheres idea could not endure because the spheres were not separate; although women might be denied entry into men's sphere, the home existed to educate and rehabilitate those who operated in the outside world" (183). In addition to the illusory separation of the spheres that existed when women were primarily situated within the home and associated with moral influence, development away from the home and into the marketplace further threatened their separation. American society became more and more publicly oriented and its citizens more and more aware of "impression management," to use Goffman's words.

Many aspects of society threatened the separation between male and female spheres in mid-nineteenth-century America, but the most formidable was the movement into a more and more mobile, industrial, public, "networking" society. Face-to-face interaction gave rise to threats against the transparent relationship of inner sentiment with outward display. Etiquette and fashion became more and more important in the development of one's character, and the possibility of social hypocrisy was a major concern of advice manuals for both men and women during this period. In her book Confidence Men and Painted Ladies, Halttunen identifies a particular "republican bias" in

Godey's Lady's Book prior to mid-century, against "the fashionable excesses of the Old World aristocracy," whose members had reportedly "worn actual masks in apparent (to the sentimental mind) mimicry of existing social hypocrisy (67, Elliott 300). As Elliott has pointed out, this bias provides an historical pretext for the concern about the threat of female subterfuge in nineteenth-century society (300).

In her 1839 *Godey's Lady's Book* article, ""Who is Happy?", a Mrs. Harrison Smith wrote, "The exterior of life is but a masquerade, in which we dress ourselves in the finest fashions of society, use a language suited to the characters we assume;--with smiling faces, mask aching hearts . . . The part once assumed must be acted out, no matter at what expense of truth and feeling" (214). Fashion and social etiquette, as Smith bluntly states, were a threat to sincerity. As Halttunen explains, "For the advice writers, it was one thing to assert that appearances are important because they reveal inner character; it was quite another to say that appearances might be deceitfully manipulated to convince others of inner character" (Confidence Men 43).

What would happen if subterfuge and hypocrisy ruled feminine behavior, if females were taught how to be skillful impersonators rather than proponents of social ideals? The fate of Muir and the Coventrys in Alcott's Behind a Mask provides one answer to this question. Muir presents such a convincing performance of the feminine ideal that she ends up married to the richest of the Coventry men, Sir John Coventry, the grandfather of the other Coventry men she seduces. With this accomplishment she accomplishes the American ideal of becoming economically and emotionally self-reliant. She also, however, ends up friendless after her only friend (a woman, nonetheless) sells the letters she has written to her during her stay at the Coventrys to Muir's former lover,

Sydney. With this female betrayal, Muir fails to experience the female solidarity and community so celebrated in nineteenth-century women's writing and ideology.

Sydney, anxious to expose Muir's disguise due to his earlier experience of her deceit, gives the letters to the youngest of the Coventry sons, Edward, who had fallen in love with Jean early in the story and then suffered the refusal of his marriage proposal. Edward reads Jean's letters detailing her strategy and the progress of her plot against the Coventry fortune letters to his family, thus ruining Jean's disguise. The letters arrive too late to stop the marriage of Miss Muir and Sir John. Miss Muir is too quick, too manipulative, and too good of an actress. By the time the letters arrive, Jean Muir is Mrs. John Coventry, and there is nothing to be done except deal with the result of Jean's exquisite performance of the feminine ideal. Sir John genuinely loves Jean and, due to his belief in the inherent goodness of women and Jean's sincerity (her "true womanhood"), won't accept any possibility of wrong doing on her part. Muir, quick enough to burn the letters right in front of the Coventrys before they could realize it in time to stop her, leaves no proof of her feigned identity. She gets away with her ruse completely. In a twist of the affiliation between one's inner sensibility and outward display, Muir publicly becomes what she privately schemed to be, and what she had publicly appeared only serves as a means to social mobilization. Though she actually does possess the skills of a "a capital little woman," as Edward Coventry so aptly called her, she also possessed the mentality and strategies that threaten the very same role (371). Without any proof that she is, or rather *was*, a conniving, poor, money- hungry, capitalistic, divorced, former actress, the Coventrys are left having to accept her as a

member of their family. The transformation is complete by the time the rest of the Coventry family realizes what has happened: Muir *is* a rich, soon-to-be widow.

Successfully duping the Coventrys, Muir embodies the hypocrisy so feared and abhorred by nineteenth-century middle and upper class society. "Confidence men" and "painted women" are the descriptions used by Halttunen to describe the men and woman, such as Muir, who "sever[ed] the connection between inner character and outward appearances by consciously manipulating the impression [they] made on others" (Confidence Men 42). Archetypal figures, such as that of the feminine ideal Muir pretended to be, threatened ultimately "to reduce the American republic to social chaos" precisely because people were so well trained in the behaviors that gave the impression of such character (Halttunen, Confidence Men xv). Impersonating the ideal, however, did not eliminate it. Though impersonation proved that the ideal could be mimicked and therefore wasn't essential or *natural*, impersonation did not eliminate its appeal or utility in culture. In fact, the notion that the ideal could be accomplished or performed made it all the more a commodity or asset in the burgeoning American, capitalistic marketplace. Nevertheless, the ability to fake socially desirable characteristics was still a threat as much as an asset in American society.

Muir's public self-masking for the benefit of her private, calculated self-interests exhibits the reason for anxiety about female performance in nineteenth-century society. Since Muir is, for all intensive purposes, a *self-employed*, middle-class, woman working, both literally and figuratively, to manipulate and destabilize upper-class social norms that exclude her and define social propriety, she embodies a threat to both nineteenth century gender and class constructions by destabilizing the notion of separate spheres. More

importantly, she in effect conquers the domestic sphere by bringing in marketplace values.

Conversely, as a woman who wrote to earn money to support her parents and sisters, Alcott brought domestic concerns into the marketplace. The fact that Alcott continued to perform domestic tasks in addition to her work as a writer is quite significant. In her journals and letters, she writes of nights without sleep, feelings of helplessness, anxiety in trying to handle her workload, and physical pain caused by the overworking of her body (Letters 177-78, 282-83). In fact, her right hand suffered permanent partial paralysis due to copying four copies of her novel Work at the same time (Journals 184). A combination of responsibilities and activities associated with the "separate spheres," rather than their separation, was the reality of Alcott's life as a working woman. Though this combination is analyzed as subversive, and actually did give women some power, it was also an extremely harsh and demanding reality of many women's lives in the nineteenth-century.

Muir differs from Alcott in that she is simply out to take care of herself. But even with her selfish ambitions, she is still a sympathetic character. The narrator clearly identifies with her in an early description of Muir's real identity:

> 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. For an hour she sat so, sometimes playing absently with the scanty locks that hung about her face, sometimes lifting the glass to her lips as if the fiery draught warmed her cold blood; and once she half uncovered her breast to eye with a terrible glance the scar of a newly healed wound. At last she rose and crept to bed, like one worn out with weariness and mental pain. (367)

Muir's letter to Hortense at the time demonstrates Alcott's sympathy with the plight of middle-class, working women such as Muir and also emphasizes her frustration with sentimental expectations of women.

> I was very miserable that night when I got alone. Something in the atmosphere of this happy home made me wish I was anything but what I am. As I sat there trying to pluck up my spirits, I thought of the days when I was lovely and young, good and gay. My glass showed me an old woman of thirty, for my false locks were off, my paint gone, and my face without its mask. Bah! How I hate sentiment! (425)

Jean's unmasking rituals further familiarizes readers with her private intentions, feelings, and habits. Before removing her wig, several of her teeth, make-up, and dress, Jean "drew out a flask, and mixed a glass of some ardent cordial, which she seemed to enjoy extremely as she sat on the carpet, musing, while her quick eyes examined every corner of the room" (367). "Not bad!" she exclaimed, "It will be a good field for me to work in, and the harder the task the better I shall like it. *Merci*, old friend. You put heart and courage into me when nothing else will. Come, the curtain is down, so I may be myself for a few hours, *if actresses ever are themselves*" (367, my emphasis). Making the attitude with which she approaches her work clear, she emphasizes the influence of her work on her self-identity. Even though she may not be the person she is pretending to be, her role-playing will determine the kind of life she leads after the "last scene" is over. Though her words indicate a certain level of uncertainty concerning her identity, her actions and thoughts indicate a strong sense of purpose and a familiarity with the routine she performs. After removing her "mask," the narrator explains, "she appeared herself indeed, a haggard, worn, 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" (367). In other words, performing is a characteristic of Muir's, is an

aspect of her female identity. Making Muir's performance seem even more powerful, the narrator points out that expression was in her "art," not her costume or false adornment, and therefore more difficult for others to detect or control. Performing is something she does, not something that articles of dress or disguise do for her. The "mask" of domestic, feminine perfection is something Jean puts on and takes off at her own discretion.

While Muir's mask of domestic, feminine perfection derives from the social theories and practices of interior and exterior behaviors described by "domestic ideology" and the Victorian norms, her self-identity is not determined by her enactment of them. While she may not be authentic with the Coventrys, she does have a strong sense of her own identity. Likewise, Alcott never confuses Muir's performances with the authentic Muir. In fact, as Elliott points out, "Muir's violations of the ideals of domesticity through the device of the mask enables authenticity precisely because she can deploy and withdraw the mask at will" (301). Muir's ability to keep her public and private identity completely separate and unaffected by one another despite the fact that she lives both identities indicates Alcott's firm belief that women are trained to have this understanding and view of themselves. Like many nineteenth-century females, Muir is aware that if she performs correctly, she can have the benefits associated with the ideal womanhood despite her social inadequacies and alternative interests.

Muir's self-acceptance, however, is apparent in her decision to unmask herself whenever possible (whenever she is alone). In addition, Muir continues to write to her friend, Hortense, about her experiences. Keeping Hortense apprised of the success of her adopted persona demonstrates Muir's recognition of the difference between her own identity and that which the mask confers.

Significant connections have been made between Alcott's own life experiences and those of Jean Muir. Many of these parallels have to do with their white, middle-class, working woman status. Stern and Fetterley have argued that Behind a Mask provides insight into the path of Alcott's career. Similar to Muir who adopts a feminine mask to secure financial independence, Alcott arguably adopts first the mask of A. M. Barnard to publish and sell her sensational thrillers without publicly admitting her authorship and then the mask of the "Children's Friend," "little woman," and quintessential sentimental writer to gain financial security and social acceptance within the literary and social world of nineteenth-century America (Stern, "Introduction to Behind a Mask" xvii-xviii, Fetterley, "Impersonating" 1-2).

It is clear, however, that Alcott did not only write for financial gain, and we find in her writings what appear to be *genuine* critiques and celebrations of nineteenth-century womanhood. Perhaps one of the elements that makes Alcott's writings so intriguing to even a twentieth-century audience is that one is always aware of the possibility of performance and (mis)representation in her works; her works are richer when read skeptically with this subversive possibility in mind. Clearly, however, Alcott enjoyed lurid subjects and wrote her sensation tales for more than just money. When speaking of her own work on Behind a Mask, Alcott wrote to Alf Whitman, the young man whose character she would one day use as a model for Laurie in Little Women, saying:

> I intend to illuminate the Ledger with a blood & thunder tale as they are easy to 'compoze' & better paid than moral . . . works . . . so don't be surprised if I send you a paper containing a picture of Indians, pirates, wolves, bears, and distressed damsels in a grand tableau over a title like this "The Maniac Bride' or The Bath of Blood A Thrilling Tale of Passion. (Stern, "Introduction to Behind a Mask" vii).

Though Alcott insinuates she is writing "blood & thunder" tales because they are "better paid," and "easy to 'compoze'," she also clearly identifies with the lurid style. More importantly, her plan to "illuminate the Ledger" insinuates that she intends for her tale to provide insight perhaps peculiar to the sensational genre. Free of any commitment to female moral influence, Alcott's sensational tale can highlight the disturbing complexities involved in the gendering of work and female authenticity in nineteenth-century culture (Elliott 300).

Alcott's sensational stories may have been "necessity stories," but the necessity was perhaps not only monetary (Stern, "Introduction to Behind a Mask" xxvi). Sensation stories provided a fitting outlet for her imagination and the tales of feigned identity and deceit it produced. When she was eighteen she wrote in her journal that she "fanc[ied] lurid things . . .if true and strong also" (Cheney 45), and much later in life, she explained: "I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies and wish that I dared inscribe them upon my pages and set them before the public" (Pickett 107-8). In her preference for lurid things that are "true and strong also," Alcott bridges some of the concerns with female authenticity in nineteenth-century society. Behind a Mask illuminates the desperate measures Muir takes to survive in middle- and upper class nineteenth-century society and the social conventions that actually support her *in*authenticity.

Alcott explains the difficulty of associating herself with material such as Behind a Mask, by asking: "How should I dare interfere with the proper grayness of Concord?" (Pickett 107).

> The dear old town has never known a startling hue since the redcoats were there. Far be it from me to inject an inharmonious color into the neural tint. And my

> favorite characters! Suppose they went to cavorting at their own sweet will, to the infinite horror of dear Mr. Emerson, . . . To have had Mr. Emerson for an intellectual god all one's life is to be invested with a chain of propriety . . . And what would my own good father think of me . . .if I set folks to doing the things that I have a longing to see my people do? No, my dear, I shall always be a wretched victim to the respectable traditions of Concord. (Pickett 107-8)

Unwilling to threaten Concord values, offend friends, or disappoint family, Alcott calls herself a victim of tradition, insinuating she could never publish what she wished she could. We now know that she could publish it; she just had to publish it without her name attached. Clearly, as Fetterley has argued, the only truth Alcott could tell was a lie: the truth was a lie. The conventions of middle-class nineteenth-century America required women to fake their identity, to hide behind masks of propriety, to lie. Muir's experience, much closer to the truth, could be told by A. M. Barnard, but not by Louisa May Alcott.

Sentimentalist ideology and the sentimental tradition of women's writing in nineteenth-century America precluded the possibility that Alcott would feel comfortable exposing herself as the writer of Muir's tale. As a white, middle-class, working woman, Muir, had to be conscientious about preserving the facade of her womanhood. When Lucia learns of her ruse at the end of the story from one of Muir's letters, she exclaims: "She never wrote that! It is impossible. A woman could not do it" (425). Muir's motives and methods make her vulnerable to social rejection. Likewise, Alcott had to be careful not to offend the employers for whom she worked and the audience for which she wrote. Much like Alcott's necessary loyalty to Concord values, Muir has to pay homage to the Coventrys' values as well. Alcott's publishers knew she was the author of sensational thrillers such as Behind a Mask and did not mind, but they also knew they needed to protect Alcott's name for the future selling of her works and the future income

of their publishing company. Similar to Alcott who could not attach her name to tales such as Behind a Mask, Muir cannot be who she really is--a poor, divorced, actress--or her mere presence in the Coventry home would be offensive.

The disparity between the acceptability and influence of Muir's public appearance and private identity is one of the most significant aspects of the novella's design because of the relationship it sets up between readers and the text. Alcott reveals Muir's real identity to readers at the end of the first chapter in the privacy of Jean's room. The first chapter is especially significant because it is the only part of the book where readers are not completely certain of Jean's ruse. While readers are aware of Jean's double-identity after the opening chapter, the Coventrys do not learn of Jean's real identity until the last chapter of the novel when they obtain the letters written by Muir to her friend Hortense. The design of public and private identity and insider knowledge that readers enjoy makes the cultural norms and values that support Muir's adopted persona the focus of scrutiny rather than the dishonesty of Muir herself. Such a design allows readers the opportunity to evaluate the utility of Muir's feminine mask. As Fetterley explains, "Since Jean's behavior is clearly identified as a role she assumes, we are continually engaged with the issue of its utility. Examining the interests which it serves, we are lead [sic] to uncover the nature of the culture in which it occurs" (8).

The story begins with the Coventrys expressing their dislike for the need of a governess. Miss Muir is to be a governess to the youngest Coventry child, Bella, who, at sixteen, "*must* not be neglected," as Mrs. Coventry explains (361). After several of the family's expressions of dislike for the situation, Bella blames herself and asks for the family's understanding, explaining that a governess will "be a help to poor stupid me, so

try to like her for my sake" (361). From the very beginning the Coventrys look a bit insidious in that they are unwilling or unable to pay attention to Bella despite the fact that to all appearances they have no other pressing matters whatsoever. Mrs. Coventry is somewhat ill, but it appears that all other family members just aren't interested. Given that Alcott is well known as a writer of adolescent fiction and a "children's friend," the Coventry family's lack of interest in participating firsthand in Bella's development is quite significant. Bella's apology also emphasizes the kind of female self-rebuke common in an age that praised female self-discipline and self-denial. Mrs. Coventry sets a fine example of "impression management" for Bella, when she explains that she has "nerved [her]self to endure this woman [Muir]" (361).

Though motherhood and family were two of the mainstays of female identity and worth in nineteenth-century America, neither of the adult women in the Coventry family, a prototype of the nineteenth-century upper class family, choose to serve as a mentor for Bella. Admittedly, hiring a governess to help teach and train children was not an uncommon practice in nineteenth-century society, but Alcott's inclusion of this practice allows her to emphasize some of the complexities surrounding the nineteenth-century view of women's work and the training of young girls. Lucia, the cousin engaged to the oldest Coventry son, is designated as the one who will "attend" to Muir (361). One wonders why she can't pay attention to Bella instead. This familial (or lack thereof) set up is a long ways from the recuperative view of female relationships and family presented in works such as Little Women.

The mere presence of a governess within the Coventry home allows Alcott to spotlight the training of adolescent girls and the extent to which feminine characteristics

are the result of learned behavior. At first, it is a bit disturbing to realize that Bella is placed into the care of someone who has her own more than Bella's interests in mind. However, after one realizes that Muir is out to reclaim female power by masking and then unmasking the idiom of nineteenth-century femininity, one sees that Bella will eventually learn an important lesson from Muir after all. The Coventrys, fortunately for Muir, just don't realize it yet. The lesson Bella, along with the rest of the Coventrys, will learn is the inherent danger of automatically identifying one's character with one's outward appearance. With a focus upon the kind of woman Mūir *is* versus what she *seems*, Alcott expresses her concern for the kind of women girls like Bella will be brought up to emulate.

Stern insightfully points out that in Alcott's thrillers readers are introduced to problems of character rather than problems of plot. "The suspense," she explains, "lies less in what the heroine will *do* that in what the heroine *is*, although both considerations become entwined as the character develops and the plot advances" (xv). The mid-nineteenth century view of female work has much to do with the hiring of Miss Muir as a governess. During the period surrounding the publication of Behind a Mask, "women's labor and selfhood both appear to be characterized by social historians and theorists as 'unwomanly' at best" (Elliott 302). According to the nineteenth-century view of women's work, what a woman *does* and what a woman *is* are quite similar. As Thorstein Veblen explains in Theory of the Leisure Class (1899):

> [T]he upper leisure class has accumulated so great a mass of wealth as to place its women above all imputation of vulgarly productive labor (107) . . . The good and beautiful scheme of life, then—that is to say the scheme to which we are habituated—assigns to the woman a 'sphere' ancillary to the activity of the man; and it is felt that any departure from the traditions of her assigned round of duties is unwomanly. (230)

In other words, work can undo a woman's character, can make her *be* unwomanly. Conflicts also existed between qualities associated with women's work as mothers and homemakers and those associated with the ideal, feminine wife. As Strasser explains: "The qualities that defined the ideal wife—dependence, gentleness, emotionality—destroyed the ideal mother, who performed heavy housework duties and prepared children for the demands of the outside world" (183). Lucia can't take on the work cultivating Bella's femininity because she needs to focus on her own development of the characteristics associated with the ideal wife.

Since the governess position is a laboring position albeit a high ranking one, Muir embodies the conflict between work and feminine influence inherent in nineteenth-century womanhood. The position of a governess is somewhat ambiguous within this schema of women's work because Muir is hired to perform both "motherly" and "womanly" duties. The fact that Muir is working outside of her own house is "unnatural" and compromises her feminine identity (Smith-Rosenburg 13). However, she is hired because of her expertise in several areas associated with feminine identity (manners and the arts). She is hired to make a "little woman" out of Bella.

Nineteenth-century women were supposed to provide valuable influence within the home was by figuring out others' needs, obsessions, and weaknesses and then adjusting their own behavior to facilitate the reform and satisfaction of others. This was one of the primary tasks of the "true woman." Ironically, it is precisely Muir's position as a governess (as a model of "little womanhood") that makes it possible for her to gain the knowledge and access she needs to manipulate the Coventry family. Using the means necessary for accomplishing the tasks of the ideal domestic, self-effacing "little

woman,"--being aware of each of the Coventrys' obsessions, insecurities, desires, and daily routines and then adjusting her own performance to fulfill or accompany these concerns--Muir is able to become what appears to be the ideal wife and exercise her independence at the same time.

Lucia's fate, on the other hand, emphasizes the threat of ideal wifehood: dependence and lack of self-identity. In one of the saddest, but most sincere, revelations of Muir's performance, Lucia, the opposite, more traditionally "wifely" side of the ideal, is left to address her own lack of development and self-interest, suffering, Muir explains, "the sharpest pain a proud woman can endure" (426).

While Muir embodies the role of the "true woman," or "little woman," she also proves that it is somewhat of a "joke" and "fantasy" and reveals the unfair biases that support the (mis)treatment of women different from the ideal (Fetterley, "Impersonating" 3). The job is so strenuous and psychologically demanding that anyone fulfilling its requirements would have to have "a level of self-consciousness and consciousness of others which borders on the supernatural and a level of self-control which borders on the superhuman" (Fetterley, "Impersonating" 6).

As Fetterley so clearly explains:

> To be a good "little woman," one must possess acute consciousness, consummate acting ability, psychological strength, self-control and a capacity for hard work. Yet the role of little woman demands that the person playing it appear to be totally unself-conscious and even unconscious, completely "natural," weak, timorous, out of control, and passive. . . Jean must manage to get everyone obsessed with her while appearing neither to desire nor to attract attention. The self-control required to play this part is certainly equal to, if not beyond, that demanded for the most heroic of male activities. ("Impersonating" 7)

While Lucia may be embarrassed because of her lack of self-care and self-interest, the Coventry family as a whole suffers humiliation for even believing that Muir could be

such a perfect "little woman." Alcott basically makes the Coventrys (and by association nineteenth-century society) foolish for believing Muir could naturally, without any extra effort or incentive, be such a "capital little woman"--the consummate hostess, storyteller, singer, nurse, and teacher of music, drawing, and French who learns each of their individual desires and obsessions (and doesn't even expect to be paid!). With all the time and effort involved in fulfilling the position of the consummate governess and "little woman," it is actually much more realistic to assume that Muir would be out for her own interests. In a demonstration of class and gender bias, the Coventrys pay Muir for her services only after learning of her ruse, only after learning that she is not really a "capital little woman."

Gillian Brown has described how the view of women's work led to a conceptual split between spiritual and physical spheres as well, "resulting in a 'disembodiment' of woman's work from the working female body" (Elliott 304, Brown 79). Such a split somewhat explains the Coventrys' ability to accept Jean's feminine mask as her "real self"; moreover, it emphasizes the male belief that women are radically different creatures (Fetterley, "Impersonating" 10). Domestic ideology, as described by Hannah More's Strictures (1799), promoted a female self that privately, modestly, and piously generated the moral fortitude of the male republic from within her own home.[16] Women's work was therefore associated with spiritual work, rather than physical endeavor, so there wasn't much attention paid to the physical effort extended by women within the home. Exactly one hundred years later, bourgeois values, as described by Veblen, identified the ideal, feminine wife with the same characteristics.[17] Only this time the feminine ideal privately, modestly, and piously regenerated the economic success of

the same male republic (Elliott 302). Muir fulfills the role of a spiritual and moral influence by bringing the family together with nightly gatherings full of storytelling and music, gathering a daily nosegay for Mrs. Coventry, and teaching Bella not to speak of the family's personal business. However, when it comes to generating the economic success of the male republic, Muir twists the ends of social approval to serve herself. She captivates and pleases the Conventrys to ensure her own economic success. Ironically, as the following discussion highlights, one of the primary ways she convinces the Coventrys of her *spiritual* virtue, thereby assuring herself economic security, is through *physical* activity and presentation.

Jean's arrival, exactly on time with the striking of the clock, emphasizes the physical codes of conduct available for Muir's manipulation. When young Bella cries, "There she is!" and turns to run to the door to meet her, Lucia "arrest[s] her, saying authoritatively, `Stay here, child. It is her place to come to you, not yours to go to her" (99). While Lucia is intent on instructing Bella on one's proper place and behavior, Alcott underhandedly emphasizes that these are *learned* not natural beliefs and behaviors, and thus more easily adopted or faked. In fact, withholding her enthusiasm, Bella fakes her feelings towards Jean's arrival, showing her culture's early influence on female social identity and even the tendency of young, adolescent girls to struggle with conflicts between their outward behavior and inner feelings.

From the very beginning Alcott highlights household interactions as "performances," beginning with Muir's initial entrance into the Coventry home. Upon Muir's arrival, social positions are immediately jumbled, especially if we remember the

economy of looking associated with Sarah Siddons, one of Alcott's theatrical idols. When she was eighteen years old, Alcott opened one of her journal entries by saying, "[I] shall be a Siddons if I can" (Cheney 63). Twenty-three years later, when she published Work, her heroine, Christie Heron, takes a job as an actress and, after opening night, goes home with a friend "predicting for themselves careers as brilliant as those of Siddons and Rachel" (37). In addition to her career as an outstanding British actress, Siddons was well known for her behavior and performance during a specific October 1784 performance. Through the influence of cultural memory, Alcott was probably aware of Siddons's actions during this particular performance. Though the significance of Alcott's reference to Siddons has been unexplored up until this point, it provides important insights into Alcott's attitude toward female performance.

Muir's entrance into the Coventry home bears a very close resemblance to Siddons's actions during this performance. Since the relationship between Muir's mask of femininity and manipulation of the Coventry family bears a significant resemblance to accounts of Siddons' performance on this particular evening, I will include a fairly lengthy discussion of connections between Siddons' performance and the utility of the role of the "little women" in Behind a Mask.

Siddons's performance on the evening of October 5th, 1784 was particularly significant because, due to circumstances surrounding the event, Siddons was forced (or perhaps chose, for her own protection) to directly address the audience outside of her assigned theatrical role. This was a rather disruptive act, for, as Nancy Cott explains, "Women's public life generally was so minimal that if one addressed a mixed audience she was greeted with shock and hostility" (5). Accused of misconduct by people jealous

of her power within the theatrical system, Siddons chose to overtly discuss with the audience the tension between her identity as a working woman (actress) *inside of representation* and her identity as a woman *outside of representation* or formal performance.[18] Ellen Donkin credits this confrontation with disrupting and even redefining the possibilities available to women on the eighteenth-century British stage and by extension within eighteenth-century British culture.

Donkin describes this exchange as Miss Siddons "looking back in anger" at the audience that initially jeered her off the stage that night. Reports commented on the "astonishing firmness" and the "male dignity" with which Siddons defended herself (Oulton 1:134, Boaden 2:116). However, as Donkin has pointed out, borrowing a phrase from Joan Riviere, Siddons also displayed "a masquerade of womanliness," thus pacifying the audience's need to feel somewhat familiar with her role and making them comfortable enough to consider her alternative actions and self-protecting words (281-82).

Sue-Ellen Case explains Riviere's use of the phrase a "masquerade of womanliness" as signifying the actions of women in positions of power who "perform a certain coquettishness or helplessness in order to 'avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men'" (291, Donkin 288-89 n. 17). Siddons was able to have a profound effect upon her audience in part because of her "masquerade of womanliness." Siddons placated her audience's need to feel superior at the same time that she exposed, thus disrupting, the very conventions that left her vulnerable to their definition. As Donkin explains,

> Mrs. Siddons, an actress whose reputation had been built upon never breaking character, stepped outside of both character and dramatic narrative, turned in

> righteous anger, and looked back at her audience. In the moment she registered what she thought of them. She forced her audience to deal with her, not as object but as speaking subject. She expressed personal indignation and disdain, without the benefit of a recuperative plot. In other words, she reversed the direction of the gaze. The audience now had the experience of being the object of a female gaze in the theatre, and it created a shift in power relations. (285)

As Miss Muir stands in the doorway of the Coventry home upon her initial arrival, we see many of the characteristics of Siddons's famous October 1784 performance repeated: "For an instant no one stirred, and the governess had *time to see and be seen before* a word was uttered. All looked at her, and she cast on the household group a keen glance that *impressed them curiously*; then her eyes fell, and bowing slightly she walked in" (99, my emphasis). Taking time to "to see and be seen" and "cast[ing] on the household group a keen glance that impressed them curiously," Muir establishes herself in a position of power over the Coventrys that is powerful precisely because she is vulnerable at the very same time that she casts a "keen glance." "All looked at her," as she stood there, and no words were uttered to help define the dynamics of the situation. The significant twist in the situation is that the Coventrys *and* Muir are both subjects (objects) on display. Doubling the direction of the gaze, Alcott disrupts traditional power relations and introduces quite dramatically Muir's performative possibility and disruptive influence.

A "curious mixture" of stereotypical male aggressiveness and female modesty combine in Muir's entrance into the Coventry home; her "keen glance" and docile bow impress the Coventrys "curiously," and "something in the lines of the mouth betrayed strength, and the clear, low voice had a curious mixture of command and entreaty in its varying tones" (363). Donkin describes the effect of this economy of looking and masquerade as playing off of an audience's voyeuristic desires to know private information about public performers and to confront discrepancies between people's

private and public identities. The theatrical framework, whose purpose is to incite identification, provides a seemingly safe forum in which to exercise this desire.

Donkin uses the stage terms "hits" or "points"—moments during a play where an audience relishes the very behavior it usually rejects or finds unappealing—to describe the consequences of an audience's voyeuristic desires within the theatrical setting and to analyze Siddons' effect upon her audience on the night of October 5th, 1784. "Hits" and "points" of a performance directly relate to the relationship between a play's *textual* existence and its dramatic *embodiment*. Siddons' theatrical role on the evening in question was that of Mrs. Beverly in Edward Moore's *The Gamester*. Mrs. Beverley is "egregiously," almost illogically loyal to Mr. Beverley who has a gambling problem and is seriously neglectful of Mrs. Beverley and their son. At one point in the play, a Mr. Stukely propositions Mrs. Beverley, hoping "to seduce her in a moment of weakness and desperation" (Donkin 284). Similar to the contradictory nature of Muir's role as a governess described by the narrator of Behind a Mask (a job requiring one to be both submissive and authoritative), Siddons's role also included a "curious mixture of command and entreaty" (363). While Muir was able to utilize the characteristics of a "little woman" to her own advantage, Moore's text provided Siddons with a character whose experience provided her with an opportune "hit"—the ability to directly address her financial and moral interests as a woman both inside and outside of representation (formal performance).

Though Mrs. Beverley's character is submissive and unquestioning throughout most of the play, one of her "hits" allows her to express "a blaze of righteous fury" (Donkin 284). She responds to Stukely's attempt to seduce her by saying: "Would that

these eyes had Heaven's own lightening [sic], that, with a look, thus I might blast thee! Am I then fallen so low? Has poverty so humbled me, that I should listen to a hellish offer, and sell my soul for bread? Oh, villain, villain!" (Inchbald 46). This is an especially significant speech or "hit" because it directly addresses one of the reasons Siddons had initially been jeered off of the stage. In public newspapers, a Mr. Brereton had (wrongly) accused Siddons of charging an unreasonable amount of money to perform and then refusing to perform for less money. Coincidentally, Brereton had gained fame as Siddons' co-star, and Siddons had recently begun to fill his roles with her brother, John Phillip Kemble. This moment within the play allowed Siddons to address her financial situation as a working woman (inside of representation) and as a woman who has to try to establish an identity alongside social expectations that encouraged her to act in ways counter to her own financial survival (outside of representation). With a powerful position within the theatre system itself, Siddons also presented a professional threat to Brereton. Nevertheless, the public believed Brereton's account, and, in a significant reversal of the cultural norm, believed Brereton to be the victim and Siddons the powerful victimizer.

Siddons' own account of the evening indicates the conflictual relationship between her identity as an actress and her identity off-stage as a mother. She explains: "I fainted . . . I was besought by husband, my brother, and Mr. Sheridan to present myself again before the audience by whom I had been so cruelly and unjustly degraded, and where, but in consideration of my children, I never would have appeared again" (Donkin 31). Her commitment to her children places her in a role familiar to and supported by her audience. Her explanation also incites her female vulnerability and male dependence in

addition to her determination. As another account of the evening explains, she was helped off stage "by the hand" of her brother; "discomposed" by the audience's reception, and "bowed respectfully" as she "retired" (Oulton 134). Only after "friends . . . obtained silence" for her was she able to make her own speech (Oulton 134). An account by James Boaden, Siddons' first major biographer, provides a careful reconstruction of Siddons' address to the audience. His account indicates a female dual subject position such as that manifested in a "masquerade of womanliness" and in Muir's entrance into the Coventry home.

When she returns to the stage, Siddons, like Muir, enters *alone* (Boaden 2:115, Boaden's emphasis). As Boaden explains:

> After some interval, calls for her became less mixed with opposition and she came again onstage, but *alone* and thus addressed the audience: 'Ladies and Gentlemen: The kind and flattering partiality which I have uniformly experienced in this place would make the present interruption distressing to me indeed, were I in the slightest degree conscious of having deserved your censure. I feel no such consciousness. The stories which have been circulated against me are calumnies. When they shall be proved to be true, my aspersers will be justified: but till then, my respect for the public leads me to be confident that I shall be protected from unmerited insult.' (2:115)

Siddons's speech calls attention to two frames or positions for the audience's interpretation. Offering up the logic of two different positions—one that is conscious of deserving censure and one that is not—Siddons, like Muir, placed both herself and the audience in the mutual position of observation and censure. Again, Siddons is presented as boldly standing her ground *alone* but also pleading for the audience's protection. Relying upon her reputation to sustain her, Siddons also keenly emphasizes the importance of the audience's opinion of her as an actress *and* a woman. Emphasizing her position as both a woman (and in this context one might be tempted to capitalize the

term—Woman to signify "true woman") and as a successful, well-appreciated actress/worker (one might say "real woman"), Siddons places herself in a somewhat precarious position. On one hand, calling attention to this split is quite ingenious on her part because she is at least partially protected by the mythology of women's vulnerability. On the other hand, the association of actresses and "working" women with prostitutes and wanton women has plagued women throughout theatre history, and Siddons was not immune to this association.[19]

Siddons highlights her public position and the history of the display of herself and her body *on stage* at the same time that she is arguing for a new kind of understanding between the public and herself, a new consideration of her identity as a female subject existing in an on/off stage position. At the very moment of her speech, her split subject position is particularly emphasized. Baden's emphasis upon the word "alone" in his description of her actions is significant as well. No one accompanies or supports the position she takes. Even to her co-workers and back stage support system she is on display. Like Muir who is continually having to filter her own and others' experiences through the filters of exposed and concealed identity, accounts of Siddons' experience emphasize on stage, off stage, and back stage spaces as separate locales that filter Siddons' identity in conflicting ways.

Baden's commentary following his citation of her speech raises the relevance of Siddons' behavior as a challenge to gender norms. He points out how unladylike Siddons acts on this occasion. He writes:

> It was not very usual to hear a lady on such occasions; the delicacy of the sex, while it becomes accustomed to repeat the sentiments of others, shrinks from the seeming boldness of publicly uttering their own. But there was a male dignity in the understanding of Mrs. Siddons that raised her above the helpless timidity of

> other women; and it was certainly without surprise and evidently with profound admiration, that they heard this NOBLE BEING assert her innocence and demand protection . . . if I were to mark the moment, which I should think she most frequently revolved, as affording her the greatest *satisfaction*, the fortitude of this night and its enthusiastic reception by all who heard and saw it, seem most worthily to claim so happy a distinction. (2:116)

As Boaden indicates, a titillating mixture of "male dignity" and female "innocence" comprise the strongest impression of Siddons' career. As Muir enters the Coventry home, Alcott indicates precisely this kind of contradictory impression.

Donkin explains that "hits" or "points" of a play's text allow an actress to "explode into a vitality and power that were absent from the rest of her role" (278). When describing the peculiar power of actresses over the audience, Donkin explains:

> The irony of their position was that, although audience demanded from the text the comfort and familiarity of the norms of Womanhood, *what in fact they responded to in performance was something that potentially ruptured that comfort and familiarity* . . . For the audience this kind of performance was a form of voyeurism. Under no circumstances were they interested in seeing this unpredictable and powerful presence work itself free of the constraints of the narrative. But they were captivated nonetheless by the potential for danger, the ripple of excitement, the spectacle of agony, as the actress gave them a glimpse of the power inside. (278)

In other words, there is a certain amount of social pleasure associated with *inside* knowledge of one's, for example an actress', inner feelings and personal identity. It is precisely this desire and pleasure that Muir exploits throughout her time at the Coventrys'.

We are clearly introduced to this strategy in Muir's initial interview upon her arrival at the Coventry home. Physical display and voyeuristic opportunity comprise much of the interview. When Mrs. Coventry apologizes for no carriage being sent, Miss Muir replies, "'Thank you, no apology is needed. I did not expect to be sent for.'. . . and meekly sat down without lifting her eyes" (99). We see in this moment a woman who

directly addresses her audience with her own controlling gaze and then afterwards won't repeat the confrontation, even with a glance. Miss Muir is well aware that averting her eyes will signify modesty, and that modesty is a "mask" that will work to her advantage. Nearly a century after Alcott wrote Behind a Mask, Erving Goffman described displaying modesty through the movement of one's eyes in these terms:

> Civil inattention: What seems to be involved is that one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design. (Behavior in Public Places 84)

The "inattention" described by Goffman is significant when associated with both Muir and the Coventrys. Muir wants to demonstrate "civil inattention," but to do so she has to be the subject (object) of the Coventrys' visual attention. Muir continues to play off this strategy of performing modesty and other characteristics associated with the feminine ideal as her initial interview continues, and Alcott's own attentive descriptions of characters' acts of looking have a significant impact upon the progression of Muir's ruse.

Repeatedly, Muir designs moments of interaction where various members of the Coventry family think she is unaware of the fact that they are watching her. Since she really is aware of their gaze, however, she repeatedly gets to "watch" them without their knowing it, thus doubling the subjects of the voyeuristic gaze. Such strategy allows Muir to demonstrate female modesty at opportune times, directing theatrical performances in which the Coventrys are unknowing participants/actors.

In addition to complicating the conceptual distinction between male and female spheres and the view of women promoted by domestic ideology, Behind a Mask also

depicts the cult of true womanhood as riddled with theatricality and even deceit, especially in terms of its expectations for female modesty and selflessness. Muir's masked behavior "displays a full palette of the 'sentimental typology' of inner states and outer dress and attitude listed in *Godey's Lady's Book* of 1861" (Elliott 307):

> There is the timid glance of modesty, the bold stare of insolence, the warm glow of passion, the glassy look of indifference, the light of intellect and genius, the leaden gaze of stupidity, the calm serenity of innocence, the open frankness of candor, the furtive look of hypocrisy. (Haltunnen, Confidence Men 83)

In addition, Muir displays modesty by "color[ing] beautifully" (blushing) no less than five times in the novella (381). Modesty, as the recent, controversial, conservative Wendy Shalit has explained, can have the odd effect of inciting intrigue and arousal. When Shalit explains the idea of modesty as power, she does so in a somewhat contradictory way. For example, codes of modesty are powerful on one hand because they can protect women by keeping them from having to acquiesce to social practices that objectify and exploit them. On the other hand, modesty is also powerful because it incites female sexual power over men: men find women more attractive simply because they seem unattainable, simply because they seem more difficult to objectify and exploit sexually (Shalit 112, 223).

Within the mid-nineteenth-century, middle-class society, displays of modesty suggested one's understanding of social propriety and the feminine role of the sentimental woman. As Elizabeth Keyser suggests, what nineteenth-century society was just beginning to understand and what Alcott emphasizes is that female modesty can incite female power because of passionlessness and vulnerability signified by its display. As Keyser explains,

> Passionlessness was thought to exempt women from certain temptations, including the temptation to resist patriarchal authority, but in Jean's case it only removes her scruples. While sentiment of the sort that kept women self-denying and vulnerable was thought to be compatible with, even dependent upon, passionlessness, Jeans 'immunity' frees her to affect whatever sentiment serves her interest. (Whispers 50)

Haltunnen also backs up this idea when she argues that Muir "commands total sway over the lives of others by means of a monstrous perversion of the sentimental concept of woman's influence" ("Domestic Drama" 241).

> Whereas influence works through sincere affections, Muir's power operates through calculated deception; while influence is the product of loving self-denial, Muir's power stems from selfish ambition. Most important, although the sentimental woman exercises influence through her vulnerability, Muir seizes power through her complete immunity to emotion. ("Domestic Drama" 241)

The first chapter of Behind a Mask draws our attention to public acts of looking and staged instances of voyeuristic opportunity that exploit the kind of power Shalit attributes to modesty and Keyser and Halttunen attribute to Muir's passionlessness.

Narrative descriptions emphasize the activity of looking as Miss Muir's interview is initiated, making readers acutely aware of the staged nature of the event: Gerald's watching the "fireside group with languid interest" as if they have turned into a dramatic ensemble and Mrs. Coventry "taking a second survey" preempt the readers' witnessing of the interview. Alcott draws our attention to watching Muir's audience as much as she draws our attention to Muir's performance. The Coventrys, of course, aren't aware they are performing; Muir, on the other hand, knows she is being watched.

The interview begins fairly smoothly as Jean makes herself completely available to Mrs. Coventry's inquiries, saying: "'Ask anything you like, madam," in a "soft, sad voice" that insinuated resignation to her position (363). Already appearing vulnerable, she further gains their sympathy by sharing that she has "not a relation in the world," and

is only nineteen, though she wishes she was thirty and does her "best to look and seem old" (363). This admission made everyone look at her and feel

> a touch of pity at the sight of the pale-faced girl in her plain black dress, with no ornament but a little silver cross at her throat. . . . Poverty seemed to have set its bond stamp upon her. . . But something in the lines of the mouth betrayed strength, and the clear, low voice had a curious mixture of command and entreaty in its varying tones. (363)

Just as with Siddons, Muir is appealing both because she appears to be vulnerable and because there was a "curious mixture" in her performance that is disruptive to her audience's familiar and comfortable superiority. She admits that she does her best to seem what she *wishes* she was, but is not, telling the truth much more than the Coventrys realize.

The Coventrys interpret Muir's admission of trying to seem what she is not as knowledge of expectations and learned lessons of adolescence, not conniving deceit. At the time, readers, and certainly the Coventrys, are not aware that Miss Muir is lying about her age and familial identity, but as her letters to Hortense, her friend who is in on her ruse, later reveal, she is at this point pretending to be exactly what she is not. She is actually thirty hoping to look and seem a much younger nineteen, and she is the orphaned daughter of a man well known for marrying a rich widow simply for her money. Her father is now dead, however, and, having been disowned by his widow, Jean has been working as an actress. Her training as an actress, works to her advantage as her "trial," as Gerald called it, continues with her being asked to perform at the piano (361). Her acting experience works to her advantage in that it allows her to double the subject of the voyeuristic gaze by making the Coventrys think she is not watching them when in actuality she is testing their impulsive, supposedly "unwatched," reactions.

When it comes to the testing of her skills at teaching music, Miss Muir impresses the Coventrys with her piano playing and singing. In this phase of her interview, narrative descriptions of a visual relationship between audience and performer continue to be a prominent subject of focus.

> Miss Muir rose, looked about for her instrument, and seeing it at the other end of room went toward it, passing Gerald and Lucia *as if she did not see them*. Miss Muir played like one who loved music and was *perfect mistress of her art*. She charmed them all by the magic of this spell; even indolent Gerald sat up to listen, and Lucia put down her needle, while Ned watched the slender white fingers as they flew, and wondered at the strength and skill which they possessed. (363, my emphasis)

When the overture ended, Bella pleaded with her to sing, and "[w]ith the same meek obedience Miss Muir complied, and began a little Scotch melody, so sweet, sad, that the little girl's eyes filled, and Mrs. Coventry looked for one of her many pocket-handkerchiefs" (363-64). Jean's actions and voice not only command each of the Coventrys' attention, but they are also disruptive; they divert each member's attention away from their initial self-absorbed positions and activities. Gerald sits up and quits ignoring her and becomes a participating audience member; Lucia stops her knitting and also pays attention to Miss Muir; Bella cries, and Mrs. Coventry's attention is switched from evaluating Jean to thinking about her own emotions. Miss Muir is a "perfect mistress of her art" in that she is able to have a "magical," almost spiritual influence over her audience. In this scene, Muir is also a skilled artist because she manipulates the visual economy of the situation.

Miss Muir's passing of Gerald and Lucia *as if she did not see them* is particularly significant because it allows her to incite voyeurism on their part and to create for herself an instance of staged performance. Throughout her time as a governess, Jean takes

advantage of moments where others assume that she isn't aware of their presence or isn't aware that she is being watched. In this instance in particular, Jean assumes that Gerald and Lucia will be more likely to pay attention if they think she doesn't think they are doing so. And it works. The voyeuristic gaze includes the power of enjoying another's subject position without having to make any real commitment to the experience or identification. Such a gaze allows Alcott to enact a woman's conscious manipulation of others without insinuating that her own audience (readership) has to deal with such manipulation. Since we are watching other people be deceived, we feel involved only as (absent) witnesses. Nevertheless, unaware of Muir's adopted persona at this point in the novel, readers are also being manipulated or tricked by Muir and the narrator who continue on without feeling the need to let us in on what is really going on. They continue on *as if they don't see us* either.

Muir also uses the strategy of staging supposedly unconscious displays of private sentiments she knows are appealing to her audience when she pretends to faint in the midst of her piano and singing performance during her initial interview. Though she demonstrates her own manipulative control of the situation by ending her "interview" by pretending to faint, she plays the role of victim and innocent adolescent in this scene.

> [S]uddenly the music ceased, for, with a vain attempt to support herself, the singer slid from her seat and lay before the startled listeners, as white and rigid as if struck with death. Edward caught her up, and, ordering his brother off the couch, laid her there, while Bella chafed her hands, and her mother rang for her maid. Lucia bathed the poor girl's temples, and Gerald, with unwonted energy, brought a glass of wine. Soon Miss Muir's lips trembled, she sighed, then murmured, tenderly, with a pretty Scotch accent, as if wandering in the past, `Bide wi' me, Mither, I'm sae sick an sad here all alone.' (364)

Muir calls out to her mother in the guise of not knowing what she is saying, pretending to be unconscious of her actions. In her pretended, unselfconscious status she reiterates at

least two norms of nineteenth-century culture: the significance of the motherly role and the childlike necessity of women to not be alone.

Believing that Muir's "real self" is a vulnerable one, the Coventrys no longer find it difficult to relate to her. Seeing her as a victim, every family member takes action to comfort and take care of her. Her performance transforms even Gerald whose usual laziness is replaced with "unwonted energy." Miss Muir recovers quite quickly from her fainting spell, and with a "pathetic look and tone," said: "Pardon me. I have been on my feet all day, and, in my eagerness to keep my appointment, I forgot to eat since morning. I'm better now; shall I finish the song?" (364). Again, Jean appears so pathetic and yet so pleasing all at the same time. She makes it sound as if her fainting is the result of not having eaten because she didn't have time to think of herself when she was so busy thinking about her responsibilities and others. Underhandedly, she implies that because she was not sent for, because no one thought about her, she too neglected herself. Seen as commendable on one hand, this self-neglect is also a bit disturbing. It has the effect of inciting "pity and remorse" at least on the part of Bella who says, "By no means. Come and have some tea" (364). Faking fainting results not only in relief from her performance but also relief from servitude. As Fetterley points out, Jean exploits her very real susceptibility at several key points in the novel. "Implicit in Jean's fainting, as in her entire handling of the performance situation, is the imagery of victimization" ("Impersonating" 8). Keyser insightfully points out the significance of Fetterley's analysis of the Coventrys' identification with Muir as a victim:

> Fetterley makes explicit what in Behind a Mask is implicit: men have no sympathy with victims of patriarchy such as the destitute, disreputable, and aging actress Jean truly is, but they do sympathize with and derive erotic gratification

> from the sufferings of young, well-born, and attractive victims such as Jean appears to be. (Keyser, Whispers 30)

Muir uses the appeal of the voyeuristic gaze to her advantage many times during the novel.

In the beginning of the second chapter, just after readers have learned of her faked identity, she tames Edward's wayward horse simply by pretending to be distracted and unconscious of its behavior and attention to her. Though pertaining to a horse, this description provides insight into Muir's strategy for manipulating the Coventry family.

> Seating herself in the grass, she began to pull daisies, singing idly the while, *as if unconscious* of the spirited prancings of the horse. Presently he drew nearer, sniffing curiously and eyeing her with surprise. She took no notice, but plaited the daisies and sang on *as if he were not there*. This seemed to pique the petted creature, for, slowly approaching, he came at length so close that he could smell her foot and nibble at her dress. Then she offered the clover, uttering caressing words and making soothing sounds, till by degrees and with much coquetting, the horse permitted her to stroke his glossy neck and smooth his mane.
>
> It was a pretty sight—the slender figure in the grass, the high-spirited horse bending his proud head to her hand. Edward Coventry, who had watched the scene, found it impossible to restrain himself any longer and, leaping the wall, came to join the group. (369, my emphasis)

Expressing his shock at Muir's accomplishment, he says, "If I had not seen your skill and courage proved before my eyes, I should be alarmed for your safety. Hector is a wild, wayward beast, and has damaged more than one groom who tried to conquer him " (369). Muir calmly replies, "Your grooms did not know how to win his heart, and so subdue his spirit without breaking it" (369). Muir admits that her strategy is to appear to be distracted and uninterested, to be doing what she would naturally be doing, but in the meantime be "subdu[ing] . . . without breaking" male propriety and social decorum. Echoed in Muir's words, we hear Father March's instruction in Little Women to "do [your] duty faithfully . . .and conquer [yourselves] so beautifully," but in a significant

reversal of terms; Muir conquers *others* beautifully by performing (faking) the feminine illusions that exalt them (12).

Descriptions in the above passage also reveal a somewhat erotic view of submission relevant to Muir's plan because it is appealing to the Coventrys and so useful in Jean's manipulation of them. The "pretty sight," the "slender figure in the grass, the high-spirited horse bending his proud head to her hand" is the scene that makes it impossible for Edward to control himself any longer. He joins Muir thus breaking the social convention of separation between masters and servants.

Staging voyeurism is a strategy also used by Muir to finally seduce Sir John Coventry to ask her to marry him. When she is trying to decide how to quickly manipulate him into proposing to her before Edward reveals her real identity to him, she says to herself, "Has all my skill deserted me when I need it most? How can I make him understand, yet not overstep the bounds of maiden modesty? He is so blind, so timid, or so dull he will not see, and time is going fast. What shall I do to open his eyes?" (413). Muir's survival depends on her fulfilling the norms of modesty and then stretching them one step further to serve her interests. She has to make it appear, however, that her own desires are ancillary to the ideal of modesty. The Coventrys feel protected by the norm of female modesty, but Muir shows how vulnerable they are to such illusions by performing what appears to John Coventry to be a moment of unmasked, genuine identity. When trying to figure out how to bend the bounds of maiden modesty, Muir's art of deception is enabled by the use of another work of art: a miniature of Sir John. As the scene continues, Muir stages a display of uncontrollable emotions that leads to an act of private submission for Sir John to see, and then fakes shame upon the (staged) discovery of his

witnessing her act. Pretending she doesn't want to be seen, Muir allows Coventry to see exactly what she wants him to see (or what she knows *he* wants to see): a modest, vulnerable girl overcome by her love for him.

> Affecting unconsciousness of [his watching], Jean gazed on as if forgetful of everything but the picture, and suddenly, as if obeying an irresistible impulse, she took [the miniature] down, looked long and fondly at it, then, shaking her curls about her face, as if to hide the act, pressed it to her lips and seemed to weep over it in an uncontrollable paroxysm of tender grief. A sound startled her, and like a guilty thing, she turned to replace the picture; but it dropped from her hand as she uttered a faint cry and hid her face, for Sir John stood before her, with an expression which she could not mistake. (476)

Part of what is so erotic about submissions such as this is that like the role of the feminine ideal, Muir's "natural" (but faked) emotions coincide with the female behavior desired by male power. When apologizing to Sir Coventry for not "hid[ing] this better" and asking why he looked when he should not have, Muir says, "It is I who am presumptuous, to dare to love one so far above me. . . . I ought not to accept this happiness. I am not worthy of it; and you will regret your kindness when the world blames you for giving a home to one so poor, and plain, and humble as I" (414). Muir appears innocent, and Sir John is "too honorable and upright himself to suspect falsehood in others, [so] he saw only the natural impulse of a lovely girl" (415). Not only does Jean get to appear to be so innocent (why did he look?), she also gets to chastise herself without ruining her design. Her act of self-discipline and reprimand appeals to Sir John's manhood and sense of social order, making her, of course, even more desirable.

Muir uses this same strategy with Gerald, the one most suspicious of Muir, throughout her time at the Coventrys' home, first when she appears not to pay any attention to him (since she is so clearly beneath him), and second when she tells him exactly what she knows he wants to hear. When Gerald asks Muir: "Do you consider me

master here?" narrative commentary describes Alcott's and Muir's knowledge of the power of female performance in the face of male power: "'Yes,' *and to the word she gave a sweet, submissive intonation* which made it expressive of the respect, regard, and confidence *which men find pleasantest when women feel and show it*. Unconsciously, [Gerald's] face softened, and *he looked up at her with a difference glance* from any he had ever given her before" (389, my emphasis). Female performance provides the opportunity for revisiting and revising the way men and women view and think about women.

Though Muir embodies the explicit threat within the novella, it's clear that the Coventrys and the social order they represent are implicitly the ones to blame most directly for the need for *and* success of Muir's performance. For Muir, protecting herself and masking her real identity are one and the same. She had to adopt an alternative, more socially acceptable persona, or she didn't stand a chance with the Coventrys. As a divorced, poor, former actress, she has at least three strikes against her acceptability within upper class society. Muir's public self-masking and private unmaskings "reflect on a physical level the ideological possibilities for and limitations of woman's authenticity within the democratic culture of this time period" (Elliott 299). The effectiveness of Muir's performance is also due, however, to her understanding of what Fetterley calls the "essential pornography of her culture," the "cultural turn-on[s]" of voyeurism, victimization, and the male mythologies of female nature in general (Fetterley, "Impersonating" 9). More importantly, as the preceding discussion has argued, *all of these "turn-ons" are involved in and facilitated by the very social relations and conventions of performance.*

This view of the possibilities provided by female performance places Alcott's aims in line with late-twentieth-century performance critics, such as Della Pollock and others, who describe one of the aims of performance as repetition *with a difference*.[20] Repetition of cultural situations and behaviors can denote affiliation or counterpressure to conventional constructions of female identity (Pollock 92). Alcott and Muir provide a performance of female identity that produces counterpressure rather than affiliation with nineteenth century ideals of womanhood. As Fetterley explains,

> Jean knows that in a world inherently suspicious of women the most successful impressions are those made when the observer thinks the observed is not aware of being seen, for this fosters the illusion that one is seeing the woman as she really is. Obviously the ultimate mask for a woman is that of her 'real self'—i.e. true womanliness. ("Impersonating" 6)

For a nineteenth-century upper-class family, the idiom of performance was familiar within the Coventry home. Implicit within the effects of Muir's plot, however, is Alcott's commentary that nineteenth-century society was not necessarily aware of the subversive possibilities of performance.

It appears that one of the reasons Alcott found performance such an apt metaphor for female behavior and conception of self in the nineteenth-century was that adolescent girls were taught to think of themselves in terms of an interior-exterior split, and, of course, this opposition carried over into their public and private adult lives. The "mid-century shift" described by Halttunen and others as a movement away "from a sentimental feminine ideal in which women's bodies and dress transparently reflect[ed] private thought and feeling to a splitting of public display and private affect" is precisely what Behind a Mask performs and critiques (Elliott 299). Furthermore, this shift and the ensuing tension between public display and private sentiment "resulted in an external

performance of conventions of conduct protecting (no longer masking) a socially-illegible interiority" (Elliott 300). Behind a Mask explicates a burden of performance shouldered by many nineteenth-century American women. The relevance of Alcott's view of performative identity within considerations of twentieth-century identity is unquestionable but beyond the bounds of this particular discussion.

By focusing on what can be accomplished by a woman who knows that her survival depends on her ability to impersonate the kind of woman society expects or at least desires her to be, Alcott provides a radical view of nineteenth-century female identity. One of the benefits of the performance framework is that it inherently raises questions of what interests are being served by the subject matter and nature of the performances. Joseph Roach has described this aspect of performance as its ability to bring into focus the social values of a culture "with clarifying force" (Reinelt and Roach 295). Behind a Mask examines the interests served by the performance of the feminine ideal. Consequently, Muir's performance brings into focus the social values of mid-nineteenth-century culture with the kind of "clarifying force" described by Roach.

Richard Schechner has suggested that one of the most important lessons of performance is that "Appearances are actualities," and "so is what lies beneath appearances" (362). This is true for Alcott who wrote behind the mask of A. M. Barnard, for Muir who was both an ideal, "little woman" and a enterprising, capitalistic, American middle-class woman seeking the best possible life for herself, and for the nineteenth-century socio-cultural systems and biases that supported the feminine ideal promoted by the cult of true womanhood at the same time they feared its hypocrisy and performative possibility.

Chapter Two

'A New Declaration of Independence':

Performativity at Work in Louisa May Alcott's Work: A Story of Experience

The first edition of Louisa May Alcott's adult autobiographical novel Work: A Story of Experience (1873) includes a title page that displays an engraving of a bee sipping nectar from a flower, together with a quotation from Carlyle: "An endless significance lies in work; in idleness alone is there despair."[1] Associating Work with the repetition of this well-known symbol of the American work ethic, Alcott confronts one of the foremost cultural debates of her time: the import of the female role in the public workforce. Staging her heroine's, Christie Heron's, self-development in work settings as diverse as the kitchen and theatrical stage, Alcott theorizes female self-perception and social experience as her heroine works (and the pun works quite effectively here) to establish her own understanding of the female role in nineteenth-century society. The opening emblem and the Carlyle subtext also indicate Alcott's interest in creating a conversation between her novel and nineteenth-century ideologies and literary traditions influencing social attitudes towards women's work. Anticipating what has been described in the twentieth-century as the performativity of linguistic and bodily behavior--or the power of human action to draw upon past usage and present context to direct and redirect its meaning, sometimes deliberately and sometimes unintentionally--Alcott uses narrative strategies that highlight the literary and social conventions that her heroine's actions either affirm or reinterpret in order to further emphasize her own suggestive revisions as well as the meaning making structures at play in the developing understanding of American female identity.

Working in a number of occupations available to nineteenth-century women, including being a domestic servant, governess, actress, nurse, and seamstress, Alcott knew first hand the struggles women faced as they sought employment outside of the home. Clearly based upon Alcott's own experiences, Work can be interpreted as a guide book of sorts for what she thought her readers should think about as they considered the complexities brought about by women's movement into the American workplace (complexities brought about mainly by trying to bridge domestic and market place values).

The novel is the story of Christie Heron, a young middle-class, white American woman who, like Alcott, enters the mid-nineteenth-century workforce in an attempt to earn her own piece of the American dream. Participating in many of the same occupations as Alcott, Christie learns that one's work has a strong influence on one's identity and that, as Joy Kasson has put it, work is "transformed by the spirit of the community in which it takes place" (xviii). Work may be Alcott's most developed and direct commentary on the changes in nineteenth-century female identity brought about by women's movement into the public workforce. Rather than seeing work only as a means of achieving economic independence, Alcott presents work as the foundation of one's communal identity and as the means by which a person immerses herself in interaction with the world. This attitude toward work aligns Alcott with Margaret Fuller's theory of human development as it is expressed in Woman in the Nineteenth Century. A close friend of the Alcott family, Fuller and her teachings were quite familiar to Louisa Alcott. Alcott's citation of many of Fuller's views concerning human relationships and female development is but one more way that Alcott situates Work within the changing ideology of nineteenth-century American culture.

As a product of her work as a writer, this novel appropriately expresses Alcott's keen sense of the dynamics of language use and its significance within the discourse and ideology of the specific communities with which Christie comes into contact during the course of the novel. From Christie's announcement that "there's going to be a new declaration of independence" in the opening sentence of the book to the closing chapter of the book where Christie speaks at a women's rights meeting, the novel highlights speech acts as a shaping agent of social relations and individual identity, emphasizing repeatedly the performative power of language that has become a popular and important topic of interest in the late twentieth-century. Addressing the role of language and communicative relationships within the workplace and other social settings as well as within the private, domestic sphere, Work argues that one's language and the dynamics of discursive relationships are similar to one's work: like one's work, they are transformed by the spirit of the community in which they take place. Work demonstrates that both work and language are performative in that they shape one's identity and social relations primarily by situating one within the social and historical conventions of particular communities. Conversations between people of disparate, often conflicting, backgrounds and social positions serve as the subjects of plot defining activities in key scenes of the novel.

As in the majority, if not all, of her writings, Alcott's interest in theatre and performance informs the philosophy of work, language, and identity formation espoused in Work. Christie Heron works as an actress, and much of the novel's primary messages are concentrated in the chapter titled "Actress." In this chapter, Alcott focuses specifically on the tension between individual success and communal relations and conflicts between the beliefs one embodies in the performance of one's daily work activities and the beliefs one

genuinely believes and wishes to promote. The novel as a whole may also be interpreted as Christie's growing understanding of performing as a nineteenth-century woman and her developing theory of how she may best express and model the set of beliefs she comes to cherish and use to define herself.

The concept of performing is present in the novel in terms of literally acting, in terms of fulfilling and manipulating roles socially determined for women, and in terms of creative production itself. Alcott's interests in performance and literature collide to "perform" beforehand many of the tenets of speech act theory established in the twentieth-century by theorists such as J. L. Austin, Judith Butler, and Shoshana Felman who argue that "speech acts" have performative efficacy because of convention and that "speech acts" do not have to be verbal: we have speaking bodies, habits of intellect, and cultural conventions that bring extra-linguistic meaning to events and activities.

Among the most significant aspects of Alcott's philosophy of work provided in the novel is the importance of having a critical and all-encompassing view of language. Though Christie doesn't have this understanding until late in the novel, Alcott's narrator comments on its importance throughout. Through the character of Christie, Alcott shows that as women move from the domestic sphere out into the world one of the main lessons they learn is the performative role of verbal and bodily language in one's everyday life. The following discussion argues that Work demonstrates that understanding the dynamics of language is one of the best ways to understand human relationships and improve the likelihood of mutually respective relationships. After all, attempting such understanding leads one to pay attention to the effects of what one does (one's everyday activities, such as working and interpreting one's self and others), how one communicates (verbally and

physically), and the mirage of conventions that support the meanings one performs. Such aspects of human life and signification are precisely the subjects of studies of performance, the performative, and performativity in the twentieth-century.

Sensitive to the role of literature and writing as ways to consider one's own and others' lives, Alcott's Work may be read as an example of self-theorizing through autobiography, or what bell hooks has described as thinking about one's self *in performance* (209). When hooks describes her own experience of writing about herself she explains that doing so reminds her of the people she has mimicked and the social models she has emulated (209-210). Written over a twelve year span (1861-1873), between when Alcott was twenty-nine and forty-one, Work depicts the influence of American transcendentalism, separate sphere culture, and True Womanhood ideologies in her characters' lives and chronicles Christie's experiences emulating both male and female models of development. The novel's narrative strategy of repetition with revision, or repetition with a difference, is first indicated in Christie's announcement that she is going to make "a new declaration of independence," revising perhaps *the* defining document of American identity, but this pattern of identifying with a traditional position or model of development is used throughout the novel to first ground Christie within nineteenth-century culture then to demonstrate Christie's own performance of self-identity within the same environment. While Christie's development is somewhat contrived as a version of Alcott's own experiences, Alcott's and Christie's self-theorizing are important because they address the cultural complexities white, middle-class, Victorian, American women faced as they bridged (both realistically and idealistically) their domestic and professional lives.

Alcott's representation of Christie's female experience allows her to address these complexities from a realistic *and* idealistic point of view. Often the narrator of Work seems didactic and intercepts Christie's experiences so that we get what Alcott wants us to rather than what a woman like Christie was likely to experience. Other times, however, Christie's experiences are more realistic and seemingly not as interesting or impressive. For instance, at a turning point in the novel, the narrator interrupts and says:

> If [Christie] had been a regular novel heroine at this crisis, she would have grown gray in a single night, had a dangerous illness, gone mad, or at least taken to pervading the house at unseasonable hours with her back hair down and much wringing of the hands. Being only a commonplace woman she did nothing so romantic, but instinctively tried to sustain herself with the humble, wholesome duties and affections which seldom fail to keep heads sane and hearts safe. (239)[2]

Nevertheless, Alcott includes both "romantic" and mundane versions of Christie's experiences to emphasize many of the tensions nineteenth-century American women faced. In fact, the kind of "humble, wholesome duties and affections" the narrator mentions are often more complex or more difficult to accomplish than some readers might anticipate.

Although Alcott wouldn't have known that the contemporary reception of Work's emphasis upon female work would not be overwhelmingly favorable when she wrote the novel, the public attitude toward her own work demonstrates one of the tensions women faced within the American workforce: the association of inner female character (i.e. virtue) with one's outward behavior and activity. Work outside of the home connoted a level of female independence and individuality unacceptable in nineteenth-century America. As Thorstein Veblen explains in The Theory of the Leisure Class, "The good and beautiful scheme of life, then—that is to say the scheme to which we are habituated—assigns to the woman a `sphere' ancillary to the activity of the man; and it is felt that any departure from

the traditions of her assigned round of duties is unwomanly" (230). Veblen also defends this idea by saying that women should be "above all imputation of vulgarly productive labor" (107). Mary Elliott points out that it was considered a masculine trait simply to be yourself; she emphasizes the gender polarities of nineteenth-century society with Gillian Brown's explanation that "the nineteenth-century advanced and delimited individualism by identifying selfhood with the feminine but denying it to women" (Elliott 302, Brown 4-5). These negative attitudes toward female work and independence influenced the reception of Work.

One critic objected to the lack of cohesion in the novel. "Miss Alcott," he wrote, "appears to have sat down to write the first chapter without knowing what the next chapter would be, and to have drifted along in the current of her thoughts till she found a novel growing under her hands" (qtd. in Stern, Critical Essays 12). *The London Anthenaeum* "found the hardships endured by the heroine almost unnatural": "The story of 'Work' is too restless; and the result is so fatiguing, that we should not be surprised if the reader, after finishing it, gives up, and refuses to do anything whatever for the rest of the day" (qtd. in Stern, Critical Essays 12). Other contemporary reviews of the novel made more personal attacks, directly questioning Alcott's character. A critic from the Lakeside Monthly was especially negative, asserting that Work was "the story of a female who was not a woman, married to her choice which was not a man, . . . this book has not a heart. We trust the author has" (qtd. in Stern, Critical Essays 12). The lack of cohesion, restlessness, and fatigue associated with the novel is fairly fitting; these are the same characteristics Alcott associated with women's lives. Alcott herself was dissatisfied with the novel—"Not what is should be—too many interruptions. Should like to do one book

in peace, and see if it wouldn't be good" (Journals 187). Rather than assuming the inferiority of the novel, perhaps it is more appropriate to consider the novel as plagued by and iconic of the same complexities that tormented its author's and other nineteenth-century women's lives.

Alcott also explicitly situates Work within a tradition of fictional representation of the successful *male* American-type. As Mary Rigsby has pointed out, Alcott borrows from a literary tradition of the male *Bildungsroman* model of development and Horatio Alger's Ragged Dick stories, raising familiar plot expectations but not fulfilling them (107).[3] Instead, Alcott offers models of identity development that are for the most part gender-neutral and based upon communitarian rather than capitalistic values. Christie's citation of the creed of the Founding American Fathers and the announcement of her intention to add to it, situates her within a tradition of male heroes, both literal and fictional, that take on the challenge of self-invention and self-reliance (Rigsby 116). In addition, her participation as a women's right's activist insinuates her resistance to this same male tradition, but it also shows her affiliation with the tenets of self-improvement and self-fulfillment and the belief in the importance of opportunity, experience, and self-expression within the discourse of a participatory community.

By using a narrative model that repeats a traditional narrative mode only to borrow from it what she needs to create a new model of identity development and present language as both a product and producer of social relations, Alcott preempts the linguistic strategy of performativity described by Judith Butler. According to Butler, the force of an utterance depends upon its citation and use of convention. Citation makes it possible to affirm or destabilize and redirect conventional forms of power through strategies of

repetition and delimitation (Excitable 39). The same influence of repetition occurs, Butler argues, in relation to the stability of a social position or the social recognition afforded particular subject positions. Alcott spotlights the influence of such repetition by repeating familiar character-types, such as the heroic individualist, the orphan-type, the oppressed slave, and socially-marginal or socially-rejected woman.

Exploiting convention in order to reveal the effects of the roles we play and the power structures which limit us at the same time they also provide meaningful definition is part of what Alcott achieves in Work. Butler's description of performativity is an apt analogy for Alcott's strategy of representation throughout the novel in that Alcott posits a female heroine who attempts to repeat for herself the opportunities available to American males in her culture only to find them somewhat dissatisfying or at least in need of redirection.

The following seven sections trace the development of female identity and Alcott's narrative designs as Christie confronts the diversity of nineteenth-century social values practices in her works as a domestic servant, actress, governess, companion, nurse, and women's rights activist. Each of the following sections focuses on a key theme in the novel, such as male versus female models of development, tensions between individual and communal interests, female discontent, the subversive power of marginalized women, the dynamics of theatrical space and activity, gender conflicts within the mid-nineteenth century workplace, sexual stereotyping, and linguistic and bodily communication. In addition, these sections examine the interconnectedness of these key themes as they develop in the novel.

Male and Female Stories of Development: Individual vs. Communal Interests

Alcott's own description of Work, written to one of her publishers, James Redpath, in 1863, indicates her interest in sharing her own experiences in hopes of furthering her readers' understanding of young women's experiences as they moved into the public domain, but also points out that her novel demonstrates or performs female experience rather than overtly criticizing nineteenth-century society. The novel was begun, she explains:

> . . . with the design of putting some [of] my own experiences into a story illustrating the trials of young women who want employment & find it hard to get. From time to time I see articles on the same subject & various people have begged me to finish "Success" as I at first christened the book.
>
> The story is made up of various essays this girl makes, her failures & succeses [sic] told in chapters merry or sad, & various characters all more or less from life are introduced to help or hinder her. (Selected Letters 87)

Illustrating the "trials" and "failures & sucesses" of "young women who want employment and find it hard to get" in "chapters merry or sad" that depict a girl's relationships with people that either "help or hinder" her makes the novel sound like a collage of character-types and possible situations a girl might get herself into. In many ways, this inexact and haphazard description characterizes the novel quite well. However, Christie's ambition to make a "new declaration of independence," introduced in the opening sentence of the book, counters this design with an exact plan. This intent to revise a significant representation of American identity in the midst of a mirage of possibilities and plots is precisely what Alcott expresses in Work. Both narrative descriptions and characters' actions employ a method of repetition, characterized as "performativity" in twentieth-century parlance, that recites traditional ways of understanding how people develop identity in nineteenth-century America while at the same time commenting on the effects

of these traditions and introducing new possibilities and understandings of this development. Christie's non-traditional and in-between or hybrid social positioning as she moves from job to job is one of the ways Alcott highlights the performative nature of Christie's experiences.

Taking twelve years to finish the novel, Alcott clearly struggled with much of Work's content, and in the novel we find what may be her most developed and direct commentary on the changes in nineteenth-century female identity brought on by women's movement into the public workforce. Relationships that "help or hinder" the novel's heroine, Christie Heron, in her search for self-identity comprise the focus of the novel, making it a female *Bildungsroman* that revises some of the conventions of the traditionally male genre. Alcott relies heavily on the view of development espoused in the traditional male narrative of establishing independence and success, such as the importance of gaining experience by leaving home and exploring the world. However, her female-hero doesn't flee domestic and social relationships like her male counterpart. Instead, much of the book is about the negotiation of self-identity within relationship.

The same method of raising familiar plot and genre expectations only to disrupt the inevitability of such designs is used in Alcott's recitation of the Jane Eyre orphan-type and in her use of the formulaic, sentimental model of female development leading to and ending with marriage. As an orphan, Christie has both the Jane Eyre and the Ragged Dick models to follow. However, as the following discussion reveals, Work doesn't end up affirming the notion that one should marry-for-a-living or security, thus altering the Jane Eyre model, or the idea that being rich means being happy, thus leaving the Ragged Dick model unfulfilled as well. Several marriages in the novel, including that of Christie's Aunt

Betsey and Uncle Enos, depict female self-suppression rather than self-assertion and development, as convention would have had it. Christie does marry in the novel, but her marriage does not occur at the end of the novel or indicate the end of her self-development. As Elizabeth Langland explains, Christie's story closely resembles that of the male *Bildungsroman* until she marries. However, "while traditionally the male finally marries and finds some accommodation in society, Christie must look beyond the male *Bildungsroman* plot for her fulfillment" because marriage so easily signified self-abnegation rather than assertion (Langland 115). Instead, Alcott conveniently removes Christie's husband, David Sterling, by killing him off in the Civil War, and has Christie discover ultimate fulfillment within a diverse female community made up of women who are doing various sorts of work amenable to their individual desires and common communal concerns. Avoiding replacing one male authority figure for another, Christie's husband for her Uncle Enos, Alcott still introduces the threat of the authoritarian figure's power to Christie's female search for self-definition and independence in several of her jobs where *both* male and female employers take on the role of the controlling, all-powerful employer.

Interestingly, Christie's ambition to seek independence recites a traditionally male desire associated with the establishment of individuality, but her desire to establish independence so that she may do something "useful and cheerful," "leave something behind other than ashes," and provide an example might help at least "one other woman" reverses the aims of individualism, expressing communal rather than individual or market concerns. On one hand, as Mary Rigsby has explained, Christie's ambition is the same as Ishmael's need in Moby Dick: "to sail about a little and see the watery part of the world"

(21). Through Ishmael, Herman Melville is able to assert: "If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings"—the need to experience the world first-hand, unaccompanied and undirected (21). With the creation of Christie Heron, Alcott designates exploration as integral to female fulfillment and development as well, but in the course of doing so she also exposes the difficulty and threat to community experienced by nineteenth-century American women, such as Christie, in their attempt to "sail about a little." Fleeing community is not Christie's aim, and so tensions between individual exploration and communal participation remain a challenge to her throughout the novel.

As the title's emphasis upon "Experience" indicates, Work focuses more on the effort and process involved in female self-development and psychological well-being, than on opportunities for women's professional development. As Rigsby has pointed out, this view of work firmly aligns Alcott with the transcendental philosophy of Margaret Fuller, and presents a view of work that is certainly still relevant within discussions of the politics of the American workplace. In Women in the Nineteenth-Century, Fuller argued that self-development, education, and participation in the world were three ways women could help shape the world into a place conducive to male and female equality and mutual respect.[4] First, "one must develop one's own character, become a whole person through experience in the world"; second, "women as well as men need access to education" so they may make informed decision between past traditions and future possibilities; and third, one will develop "individual genius" through "'fit action,' from getting out in the world and working" (Rigsby 122). Susan Harris' characterization of Work's radical message also links the novel with Fuller's interest in expanding women's self-perception and redirecting

society's capitalistic habits. "The truly radical emphasis of the novel lies," Harris explains, "in its advocacy of women's freedom to explore the world and to determine the shape of their own lives. Rather than fighting for open job markets, in Work Alcott is trying to redefine women's possibilities and to lay the foundation of a society based on cooperation rather than competition, nurturance rather than manipulation" (19th Century 175).

As Rigsby points out, Alcott's view of social reform is in line with Fuller's emphasis upon interdependence among individuals and demands a social conscience that values communal prosperity over individual success. Fuller "asserts that only a fraction of humanity's 'purpose' can be accomplished in the life of any one [individual]" and that "[Humanity's] entire accomplishment is to be hoped only from the sum of the lives of men, or Man considered as a whole" (Fuller 325). Individual development, however, is half of the whole. As Fuller explains, "union is only possible to those who are units" (284). Equal opportunities for self-actualization and individuals' "abilities to join with each other in mutually supportive ways" comprise the definition of liberty that Alcott seeks through the character of Christie Heron (Rigsby 113). Work, in Alcott's view, whether salaried or not, has to be individually- and communally-oriented into order to achieve anything extraordinary.

Articulating Female Discontent and the Perils of "Successful" Womanhood

Christie explains that she wants to seek employment and an independent life so that her life will be "useful and cheerful while it lasts, will be missed when it ends, and leave something behind other than ashes" (9). These aren't insignificant or uncommon desires, but even voicing her desire to leave home is a challenge. Narrative description

and Christie's dialogue with Aunt Betsey in the opening chapter of the novel emphasizes the impact of one's work upon one's use of language, one's imagination, and one's identity in general, and the difficulty of communicating ideas dissimilar from the cultural norm. We see this especially well when Christie tries to explain to Aunt Betsy why she wants to leave home and establish independence.

Alcott embeds within Christie's and Aunt Betsy's discussion metaphors of domestic work that indicate the extent to which female identity and communication are influenced by domestic activity and ideology. Annette Kolodny has identified women's domestic community as having its own language and way of "reading" the world and argued that this has provided women with a means of asserting their own view of the world without suffering male retribution.[5] In this section, we see Alcott making use of what we might call the rhetoric of domesticity to ward off the patriarchal biases of her Aunt Betsey without devaluing her aunt's worldview and self-identity. The narrator explains that Christie emphasized her new declaration of independence speech with "demonstrations in the bread-trough, kneading the dough as if it was here destiny, and she was shaping it to suit herself" (5). Embodying the desire for expansion and Transcendental self-reliance rampant within mid- to late-nineteenth century America, Christie makes it clear that she cannot feel the same productive possibility that Aunt Betsy does within the domestic sphere and a marital relationship, but she does so while preparing bread, "a task closely associated with domestic accomplishment" (Harris, 19th Century 182). Expressing vocally her dissatisfaction with the domestic sphere but also expressing her affiliation with it through her bodily activity, Christie is able to express herself without offending Aunt Betsey. Alcott also represents in this scene, however, the difficulty Christie has

articulating her ideas apart from domestic definition.

After Christie finishes, with a "deciding thump," Aunt Betsy asks her, "What crazy idee you got into your head now?" (5). Christie's first argument appeals ineffectively to Aunt Betsey's understanding of the injustice of gender biases. Christie says, "I'm old enough to take care of myself; if I'd been a boy, I should have been told to do it a long time ago. I hate being dependent . . . I can't bear it any longer" (5). Aunt Betsey 's reply demonstrates the extent to which she only thinks of herself in relation to others: "I don't see why you can't be contented; I've lived here all my days, and never found the place lonesome, or the folks unneighborly" (6). Christie's next argument makes more headway with Aunt Betsey since she uses rhetoric associated with domesticity.

> You and I are very different, ma'am. There was more yeast put into my composition, I guess; and, after standing quiet in a warm corner so long, I begin to ferment, and ought to be kneaded up in time, so that I may turn out a wholesome loaf. You can't do this; so let me go where it can be done, else I shall turn sour and good for nothing. Does that make the matter any clearer? (6)

After Christie finishes saying this, "her aunt's eye went from her to the nicely moulded loaf offered as an illustration," demonstrating her understanding of the connection Christie makes between the bread dough and her own destiny (6). Aunt Betsy continues, "curiously interlard[ing] her speech with audible directions to herself from the recipe-book before her" (6):

> I see what you mean, Kitty; but I never thought on't before. You be better riz than me; though, let me tell you, too much emptins makes bread poor stuff, like baker's trash; and too much workin' up makes it hard and dry. Now fly 'round, for the big oven is most het, and this cake takes a sight of time in the mixin'. . . .I ain't no right to keep you, dear, ef you choose to take (take a pinch of salt). I'm sorry you ain't happy, and think you might be ef you'd only (beat six eggs, yolks and whites together). But ef you can't, and feel that you need (two cups of sugar), only speak to Uncle, and ef he says (a squeeze of fresh lemon), go, my dear, and take my blessin' with you (not forgettin' to cover with a piece of paper). (4-5)

Aunt Betsey's "interlarded" speech represents how her female identity and activity are completely guided by already established cultural directives. Conflating her own identity with the view of her male counterpart, Aunt Betsey can hardly understand Christie's desires and refuses to give her consent without Uncle Enos' approval. Later when asked by Christie whether she ever wanted to or thought about doing anything else, Aunt Betsey expresses her lack of self-identity quite directly when she replies: "Shouldn't wonder ef I did; but Enos came along, and I forgot 'em" (9). Following the lines of the traditional critique of the institution of marriage, Uncle Enos, unfortunately, signifies the end of Aunt Betsey's individual development.

By the end of chapter one, Alcott has clearly established her interest in redefining female possibility and her narrator as a commentator interested in clarifying the need for such revision. The narrator clearly exposes Uncle Enos as a representative of the capitalistic patriarchy insensitive to women's human needs against which Christie hopes to define herself. When Enos hears of Christie's plans, he says she is "Jest like her mother, full of hifalutin notions, discontented, and sot in her idees. Poor capital to start a fortin' on" (10). Aunt Betsey's role is that of women whose lives are primarily defined by the cultural mandate to marry and then please their husbands. As the narrator explains, Aunt Betsey has "a most old-fashioned and dutiful awe of her lord and master" (11), but Christie defines her desire to leave and "try [her] fate," in fairly non-gender-specific terms: "I don't find any friends to help me as I want to be helped, or any work that I can do well; so let me go, Aunty, and find my place, wherever it is" (14, 6). She says that she wants to "help herself"; "I want work that I can put my heart into, and feel that it does me good, no

matter how hard it is," she tells her Uncle Enos when he criticizes her "redic'lus notion and independence and self-cultur" (10-11). She doesn't degrade work within the domestic sphere, but she is unhappy with work that she doesn't enjoy, that doesn't utilize her talents, or that leaves her as voiceless as Aunt Betsey who cannot even finish complete sentences during her "interlarded" speech.

In defense of her actions to her Uncle Enos, Christie also expresses a desire to participate in a more positive tradition of female identity and leave behind a different kind of "fortin'" than that that imagined by Uncle Enos or perpetuated by capitalistic values. "I'm sick of this dull town," Christie tells Aunt Betsey, "where the one idea is eat, drink, and get rich" (6). Christie hopes to offer another idea and example for recitation and emulation, to establish a new tradition. "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" (11).

While Work's focus is on Christie's experiences, its focus on relationships and work relations displaces its focus from gendered or even individual terms. Revising the male *Bildungsroman* tradition by displacing even its heroine in favor of relationships, Work challenges nineteenth-century American practices and conventions, social and artistic (literary), supporting the glorification of individualism and "condemns practices of capitalism that thrive on it" (Rigsby 109). This is especially true in terms of Alcott's portrayal of the effects of market values on women who were perceived and did participate as the primary consumers of many of the goods beginning to be mass produced and used to define social characters in mid-nineteenth-century America.

Alcott emphasizes the inadequacy of a money-oriented world (or one obsessed

with "fortin" as Uncle Enos called it) and capitalistic society against which Christie rebels in her portrayal of the women who have supposedly achieved such success: Mrs. Stuart, the women who employs her as a domestic servant; Mrs. Saltonstall, her employer while she is a governess; and Mrs. Carrol, the mother of the girl she takes care of while a nurse. None of the women Christie works for has a strong sense of identity; all of them are trapped within a society that "drains them of the will to question themselves and the roles that have been prescribed for them" (Harris, 19th Century 179). More importantly, all three have traded a strong sense of self-identity and self-worth for social prestige and financial security. Both Mrs. Stuart and Mrs. Saltonstall are wealthy married women who define themselves in terms of an economic system that makes them "vain, frivolous, superficial, and ultimately ludicrous" (Harris, 19th Century 178-9).

Narrative descriptions of Mrs. Stuart are quite humorous in that they show her being vulnerable to her own pretendings and confusing the theatricality of some of the different roles she imagines herself performing. In addition, Alcott's use of humor points to something quite tragic: Mrs. Stuart can't function part of the time and doesn't have a clear sense of self-identity or even control of her social comportment. As the narrator explains:

> Mrs. Stuart possessed some beauty and chose to think herself a queen of society. She assumed majestic manners in public and could not entirely divest herself of them in private, which often produced comic effects. Zenobia troubled about fish-sauce, or Aspasia indignant at the price of eggs will give some idea of this lady when she condescended to the cares of housekeeping. (18)

In addition, Mrs. Stuart's judgement is quite flawed. As the narrator points out, "Madame was intent on a water-color copy of Turner's 'Rain, Wind, and Hail,' that pleasing work which was sold upside-down and no one found it out" (18).

Mrs. Saltonstall, Christie's employer during her time as a governess, isn't any better: "she appeared to be the illustration of each new fashion as it came, and she performed it with a devotion worthy of a better cause . . .

> Her time was spent in dressing, driving, dining, and dancing; in skimming novels, and embroidering muslin; going to church with a velvet prayer book and a new bonnet; and writing to her husband when she wanted money, for she had a husband somewhere abroad, who so happily combined business with pleasure that he never found time to come home. (53)

Unable to maintain relationships with her husband or children, Mrs. Saltonstall is really quite lonely and unengaged. "Skimming novels," obsessing on her appearance, replacing spiritual satisfaction with the luxury of a velvet prayer book, and driving but not really ever going anywhere, Mrs. Saltonstall's existence seems like that of an automaton that lacks even the benefit of self-efficiency. Noting that Mrs. Saltonstall is particularly obsessed with her appearance and particularly unengaged with written language (skimming novels and only identifying with her prayer book in terms of its velvet covering), the narrator shows how compounded Mrs. Saltonstall's problems are by emphasizing that she only writes to her husband for money. Linguistically, socially, and spiritually, Mrs. Saltonstall is bereft, but she *looks* good. With this portrayal, Alcott clearly aligns herself with what Frances Cogan has called the Cult of Real Womanhood, questioning the effects of the feminine ideal upon the everyday, intimate lives of American women. Alcott's portrayal of these "successful" women indicates that she believes women who aspire to the traits promoted by the Cult of True Womanhood, such as an uncritical consumption of luxury goods, devotion to fashion and beauty, and passive vulnerability, are silly, even inadvertently threatening, and lead quite empty and confusing lives.

Ironically, Helen Carrol, a young woman suffering from hereditary madness who

Christie takes care of while employed as a nurse, identifies why these women's lives are so dissatisfying and why it is so important that society works to better women's perceptions of possibilities for themselves and social opportunities available to them. Helen blames her mother for marrying and bearing children with her father, whom she knew was infectious, because she could imagine no other way to secure financial security or to define herself. Helen's and Alcott's point is that women who refuse to struggle for their own sense of identity and social structures that support such self-denial are a threat to others not just themselves. Women would be much better off, Alcott insinuates, if they abided by the values of Real Womanhood that promoted physical fitness and health, extended education, the 'right reasons' for marriage, skeptical and cautious views of courtship, a healthy balance between family and career, critical consumerism, and financial self-reliance (Cogan 26). These are precisely the lessons learned by the socially-marginalized women depicted in the novel who out of necessity have had to learn to make opportunities for themselves and define their own self-worth.

Acting One's Part: The Subversive Power of Marginalized Women

The socially-marginal women Christie meets, such as Hepsey (a black American woman working as a domestic servant), Rachel (a fallen woman due to a sexual indiscretion), and Cynthy Wilkins, a lower-class, physically unattractive woman) provide a significant alternative to the confused and seeming meaningless existences of the women of "fortin'" described above. These socially-marginal characters were not uncommon in women's nineteenth-century fiction. As Harris points out, "the lower-class woman often stands as an unsung model for middle-class heroines, and escaped slaves and fallen women

were also common in mid-century fiction, generally functioning to illuminate some social ill" (19th Century 183). What is uncommon, according to Harris, is the "legitimacy of their voices" in Work and the narrator's complex understanding of the social structures that led to and that are affected by these characters' oppression and self-liberation; Hepsey, Rachel, and Cynthy "form the chorus of women's voices Alcott employs to explicate her themes and illustrate some of the methods of female development promoted in the novel (19th Century 183). Alcott uses Hepsey to comment on racial injustice and the importance of tolerance and self-respect, Rachel to point to society's sexual double-standard, and Cynthy to illustrate the "strengths of women who have always had to provide for their own protection" (Harris, 19th Century 183).

Alcott's narrator also uses Christie's point of view to articulate some of the radical values of her own project for social change. Couching these values behind Christie's somewhat confused or at least developing voice and perspective, Alcott somewhat softens her alternative views of the ideologies with which American women shape their lives, nevertheless also sharing these views of alternative possibilities for human interaction with an audience that might otherwise be too offended to read on. We see this in her comic portrayal of Mrs. Stuart and Mrs. Saltonstall, and in her account of the relationship Christie develops with Hepsey, a black woman, during her first job as a domestic servant. When Hepsey prepares a table setting for Christie, saying she will eat after her, Christie explains that she would like for them to eat together, saying:

> . . . I suppose Katy thought her white skin gave her a right to be disrespectful to a woman old enough to be her mother just because she was black. I don't; and while I'm here, there must be no difference made. If we can work together, we can eat together; and because you have been a slave is all the more reason I should be good to you now. (22)

In this passage, Christie conflates class and race issues, harshly critiquing nineteenth-century racism, but at the same time, she also expresses her desire for female solidarity despite difference.

Throughout this chapter, and in fact throughout the novel, Alcott presents the empowering impetus of domestic work, and in fact any kind of work, as coming from viewing it as work that is communal, bodily, and creative. In fact, Hepsey and Christie benefit from their work in ways hardly imaginable to the Stuarts, their employers.

From Hepsey, Christie begins to learn "what many women and slaves have long known--how to perform the duties of a faithful servant while harboring a rebellious spirit, how to exploit a role that is foisted on one, and how to preserve a sense of identity even when the identity is continually denied" (Keyser, Whispers 103). On Christie's first day of work as a domestic servant, Mr. Stuart commands her to remove, clean, and polish his soiled rubbers. Christie is appalled: "It isn't the work; it's the degradation; and I won't submit to it," she says (21). Hepsey replies:

> Dere's more 'gradin' works dan dat, chile, and dem dat's bin 'lidged to do um finds dis sort very easy. You's paid for it, honey; and if you does it willin, it won't hurt you more dan washin' de marster's dishes, or sweepin' his room. . . .I'se shore I'd never ask it of any woman if I was a man, 'less I was sick or ole. But folks don't seem to 'member dat we've got feelin's, and de best way is not to mind dese ere little trubbles. You jes leave de boots to me; blackin' can't do dese ole hands no hurt, and dis ain't no deggydation to me now; I'se a free woman. (22)

Hepsey explains the importance of seeing one's activities as "an actor's part," rather than a determinate activity of submission (Keyser, Whispers 103).[6] Proclaiming herself a "free woman," Hepsey's self-definition precludes Mr. Stuart's ability to exercise control over her self-worth.

The narrator's participation in the novel also highlights the performative power of interpretation. Regularly interpreting and commenting on the meaning and import of characters' actions, the narrator participates as a character interested in foregrounding for the novel's readers the performative power of language to recreate or revise a past usage of a word, image, or activity simply by reinserting it into the circumstances of a particular experience or interpretation of an event. We see this in Hepsey's speech that defends her own integrity despite the fact that she would never ask a woman like herself to do the things she does for Mr. Stuart and in the narrative descriptions of Christie's developing identity at the Stuarts'. Hepsey's speech indexes what Elliott has described as social conditioning that dehumanizes the laboring body and obliterates it from sight, but then subverts the very same social practice by suggesting that "de best way is not to mind dese ere little trubbles." Self-definition triumphs over social definition in the grand scheme of things, according to Hepsey. In addition, Alcott's narrator gives particular attention to Hepsey's black body at the same time that she deters attention away from it and onto female relationship. Rather than obliterating Hepsey's body from sight, she has Hepsey's body literally obliterate the mark (influence) of the polish that "blackin's" Mr. Stuart's boots—"blackin' can't do dese ole hands no hurt," Hepsey says, as she relieves Christie of the work she finds difficult to perform.

In her experience as a servant to the Stuarts, Christie participates in the same kind of activities she performed at home, but this time she repeats them within a more public framework and amidst the connotations of a salaried position. Exposed to lifestyles she does not automatically understand and to new ways of seeing her work, Christie learns to value the domestic skills taught to her by her Aunt Betsey and fosters a community with

Hepsey, complete with rituals each participates in separately and together. "Thanks to her own neat-handed ways, learned from Aunt Betsey, and Hepsey's prompting through the slide, Christie got on very well" (22). After finishing serving dinner the evening of Christie's "deggydation," Christie even takes the boots back from Hepsey and cleans them herself, saying, "Mr. Stuart may call for his boots whenever he likes, and we'll go to dinner like fashionable people, as we are" (23). As with the boots, Christie learns to take self-pride in her cleaning and tidying of the house, foreseeing the distinction between servant self and her creative, productive self. Like Hepsey, Christie learns to define her own position, asserting herself as a "fashionable" person rather than hired help. To some extent, Christie even co-opts the Stuarts' luxuries for herself and redefines the purpose of her position: "Christie loved luxury, and was sensible enough to see and value the comforts of her situation," but she also learned to love Hepsey and saw the greater value in working to help Hepsey free her mother (23).

Alcott portrays Hepsey and Christie's relationship and creative improvisation as far more valuable than the Stuarts' riches and social success. Christie spent a great deal of time reading in the attic next to her room which was full of books, but for a time the most enjoyable kind of "reading" she participated in were her "studies of the rich and great on parade" (27). After a while, however, she tired of this due to the "elegant sameness about these evenings. . .

> Night after night the wag told his stories, the poet read his poems, the singers warbled, the pretty women simpered and dressed, the heavy scientific was duly discussed by the elect precious, and Mrs. Stuart, in amazing costumes, sailed to and fro in her most swan-like manner; while the lord stirred up the lions he had captured, till they roared their best, great and small. (25)

Noting them all as " a set of trained canaries," Christie emphasizes the theatricality and

inherent artificiality and meaninglessness of the Stuarts' genteel life (25). By presenting theatricality as subversive and genuinely enabling for Hepsey and herself, but at the same time inherently present in a false and negative way in genteel life, Alcott is able to both idealize the domestic realm and express her skepticism about its organization (Keyser, Whispers xix).

As soon as Christie is hired by the Stuarts she begins the process of struggling to maintain control over her own identity at the same she begins to practice subversive, performative strategies. One such instance in which we can see her beginning to suffer from as well as practice the exploitation of performative power is when Mrs. Stuart changes Christie's name, calling her "Jane" simply because she "accustomed to it" (19). Though Christie doesn't care for this, she endures it and then responds by exercising the same power by playing with Hepsey's name. Once her friendship with Hepsey is well established, she calls Hepsey, "Aunty . . .using the name that came most readily to her lips" (29). While the re-naming of Christie erases meaningful individual identity, Christie's use of the name "Aunty," equalizing the respect Christie has for Aunt Betsey and for Hepsey, implies the highest sort of female compassion and regard. Alcott's depiction of Christie's use of "Aunty" emphasizes yet one more way in which Christie's linguistic performativity rebels against social practices of exclusion and marginalization.

This strategy of performative repetition with reversal gains further importance as the narrator emphasizes Christie's ability to reverse the meaning of work that "wears one out" as she begins to recognize the importance of self-expression and individual creativity within community. In the passage above and in the following passage, both the narrator and Christie display changes in their use of language as their interactions with the world

around them change. "Novels lost their charms" in comparison with Hepsey's stories of slavery, survival, and identity (27). "The select receptions upstairs seemed duller than ever," and "watching Hepsey laboriously shaping A's and B's, or counting up on her *worn* fingers the wages they had earned by months of weary work, that she might purchase one treasure--a feeble, old woman, *worn out* with seventy years of slavery comprised her happiest moments (27, my emphasis). Comparing the wearing out of elaborate dresses by the attendants at the "select receptions upstairs" and the wearing out of woman's life and body, Alcott emphasizes the different aspects of identity at stake in these women's lives.

The idea of wearing out Hepsey's body is particularly significant. Her blackness worn as a visual cultural marker makes it necessary for an adult woman such as Hepsey to learn her ABCs from a young girl such as Christie. In fact, the reason Hepsey asks Christie to teach her is because, as she says, "I must know little 'bout readin' and coutin' up, else I'll get lost and cheated" (27). So her efforts to save her mother won't get worn out by cultural prejudice, Hepsey asks Christie to help her become more literate. With the venture to educate, Alcott once again asserts the importance of education promoted by Fuller who asserted that women needed educational opportunities so that they might develop self-dependence and habits of self-help (244-46).

Alcott also uses the notion of wearing one's self in her narrator's and Christie's own descriptions of her rebellious behavior early in the book. One of the reasons Christie's Uncle Enos is unhappy with her at the opening of the story is that she refused to marry Joe Butterfield and "*wear [her]self* out in a district-school for the mean sum they give a woman" (14). Wearing one's self out can mean tiring, boring, and denying one's self in unfulfilling daily tasks. Christie also uses the explanation that "I never *lived out* before:

that's the reason I made a fuss" when she apologizes to Hepsey for refusing to clean Mr. Stuart's boots (23). This use of "living out" distinguishes her xperience at home from that of earning a wage and being self-supportive. It also makes reference to the nineteenth-century concern with the transparent relationship between outward behavior and inner sensibility. "Living out" can be connected to Christie's new understanding of the distinction between her inner, rebellious female self and her "actor's part" as a servant. The following passage connects this notion of "living out" with experience and work, but more specifically with Christie's search for self-definition, by describing the costume-like effect of Christie's apron:

> With this ambition in mind, Christie took notes of all that went on in the polite world, of which she got frequent glimpses while `living out.' Mrs. Stuart received one evening of each week, and on these occasions Christie, with an extra frill on her white apron, served the company, and enjoyed herself more than they did, if the truth had been known. (24)

The narrator tops off Christie's subversive "acting out" (appearing to just be serving but really "taking notes" and enjoying herself) with the detail that Christie, with her "extra frill," in effect, *wears out* her the traditional signification of her apron and subverts her submissive status in favor of her developing identity as an independent woman able to manipulate social convention to her own advantage (for her own education and pleasure).

Co-opting their marginalized status with actor's parts, Hepsey and Christie "amused themselves with privy conspiracy and rebellion at home," while "Mr. and Mrs. Stuart spent their evenings in chasing that bright bubble called social success, and usually came home cross because they could not catch it" (28). "If masters and mistresses know hoe skillfully they are studied, criticized, and imitated by their servants," the narrator suggests, "they would take more heed to their ways, and set better examples, perhaps"

(24). Part of the "living out" described by Christie and the narrator has to do with the chasm drawn here between inner happiness and social "success." While Hepsey and Christie learn to conflate these two spheres of self by seeing themselves as rebellious, strategic performers, the Stuarts, failing to acknowledge the distinction between inner selves and outward role-playing, remain unhappy and stuck in their role as, in Christie's words, "trained canaries" (25).

The Stuarts recognize Christie's female rebellion when they arrive home one evening to a burning attic caused by a book that had slipped from Christie's hand when she fell asleep and knocked over a candle. Mrs. Stuart exclaims, "I forbade her to keep the gas lighted so late, and see what the deceitful creature has done with her private candle!" Their panicked response to the fire, described in theatrical terms, causes Christie to laugh out loud, thus betraying her submissive role. Christie's "private candle," blamed for the fire and associated by Mrs. Stuart with Christie being "too fond of books" causes her to lose her job. Clearly, however, Christie's "private candle" is more significantly "her possession of a life beyond her servant role, a life independent of her mistress's will" (Keyser, Whispers 103). Indeed, the evening Christie announced her "new declaration of independence" to Aunt Betsey and Uncle Enos she had likened herself to the flames in the fireplace. When Aunt Betsey had asked, "What do you want child?", Christie said, "Look in the fire, and I'll try to show you."

> Do you see the two logs? Well that one smouldering dismally away in the corner is what my life is now; the other blazing and singing is what I want my life to be . . .I know the end is the same; but it *does* make a difference how they turn to ashes, and how I spend my life. (8-9)

Christie loses her job with the Stuart's when her private "fire" is exposed, and she is no

longer able to keep up her "act" as servant. In the midst of the fire Christie laughs at Mrs. Stuart—"the comic overpower[ing] the tragic"—thus ruining the distinction of authority between her mistress and herself (29). Images of fire are often used to express the threat of Christie's desire for independence and participation in the workforce. Christie's desire for independence is described in terms of not wanting to "smoulder[] dismally" but to be the one "blazing and singing"; fire, in fact, not only disrupts Christie's employment by the Stuarts but also destroys a portion of the Stuarts' house, one of the primary markers of their social superiority. This is an underhanded way of directly addressing the performative power of seeing female participation in the workforce as a way to redirect female identity and work away from conventionally restrictive possibilities.

Ironically, in this scene where Christie acts outside of her assigned role, the staged nature of Mr. and Mrs. Stuart's roles is emphasized at the same time their superiority is obliterated by Christie's "fire." Mr. Stuart "was skipping among the fragments with an agility which contrasted with his stout figure in full evening costume," while Mrs. Stuart, "though in her most regal array, seemed to have left her dignity downstairs with her opera cloak, for with skirts gathered closely about her, tiara all askew, she stood upon a chair and scolded like a shrew . . .'Look at her! Look at her!' cried Mrs. Stuart gesticulating on her perch as if about to fly . . .She must go, Horatio, she must go!" (29). Connected back to the "trained canaries" with her position on the perch and her repetitive speech, she exclaims, "I cannot have my nerves shattered by such dreadful scenes" (29). For Mrs. Stuart, the artifice surrounding her superior position is her only comfort; in this instance, 'the real' is a scene that cannot be incorporated into her polite play of social superiority.

Christie not only threatens Mrs. Stuart's home—a marker of her domestic identity,

she also threatens her public identity as well. Christie's fondness for books, or more precisely her ability to imagine empowering possibilities for herself and formulate critiques of her social surroundings, is indeed disruptive of the Stuarts' illusions. Mr. Stuart expresses the desire for a bit of the comfort resulting from the routine provided by social decorum when he begs Mrs. Stuart to wait until after breakfast to fire Christie: "Not till after breakfast, my dear. Let us have that in comfort I beg, for upon my soul we shall need it" (29). Mr. Stuart also suggests pardoning Christie, but Mrs. Stuart has to fire her, "for she had so completely forgotten her dignity that she felt it would be impossible ever to recover it in the eyes of this disrespectful menial" (29). Having stepped outside of their roles, it seemed impossible for Mrs. Stuart and Christie to go back to "actor's parts" with one another as audience.

The Theatrical Venue as an In-between Space: Narrative Performance as Social Critique

Christie's next job as an actress provides a significant counter plot to the view of performance as a rebellious activity. The theatrical venue allows Alcott to present a complex view of roles available to women in the workplace and within literary texts themselves while keeping her social critique located within a venue traditionally understood as being *about* social and intimate relations but still *separate from* the everyday world of social interaction. The theatre space's ambivalent connection with everyday life has been exploited by performance artists and performance studies in the twentieth-century in their attempt to expose the underpinnings of social structures and meanings. We see Alcott taking advantage of this venue in her "Actress" chapter.

The opening paragraph of the "Actress" chapter includes an intertextual reference

to the closing lines of Milton's Paradise Lost and the information that Christie had decided "not to be a slave to anybody" (30). Both of these narrative descriptions call attention to Alcott's sensitivity to her audience's values and expectations as she asserted the revisionary tenet of female individualism and equal opportunity. The chapter opens with the sentence: "Feeling that she had all the world before her to choose, and that the next step ought to take her up at least one round higher on the ladder she was climbing, Christie decided not to try to go out to service again." (30). Turning away from the nineteenth-century ideal of female servitude, Christie instead is interested in serving herself and providing herself with experience and the opportunity to be self-reliant.

Modern readers are aware that Christie's decision to not be a "slave to anybody" will be somewhat frustrated due to the association between womanhood and servitude in Alcott's time and the fact that "master-servant" relationships are often an inherent part of the market place hierarchy and employer-employee relationship. Casting Christie's desire for independence in the light of slavery, however, allows Alcott to couch her critique of nineteenth-century values of true womanhood and power relationships embedded within the capitalistic marketplace in terms of slavery; this displacement of her critique somewhat lessens its severity while still asserting important connections between communitarian, antislavery, and women's rights concerns. In her discussion of Alcott's Hospital Sketches, Elizabeth Young discusses how Alcott often uses African American characters and their experiences to "form a site of psychic release . . . a screen on which she can project her own unruly desires while safely displacing them elsewhere" (451). Alcott's allusion to Paradise Lost also employs this strategy of displacing her critique.

"Feeling that she had all the world before her to choose, and that the next step

ought to take her up at least one round higher on the ladder of social success" is Christie's capitalistic revision of the closing line of Paradise Lost that describes Adam and Eve's departure from the Garden of Eden: "The World was all before them, where to / choose / Their place of rest, and Providence their guide: / They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and / slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way" (Milton 281). This opening sentence contains one of the central paradoxes of identity: the idea of one's free will to choose among multiple possibilities in the world and against the regulatory norms which produce hierarchies of existence and seemingly determinate social identities and practices. As Alcott's rendition of this passage makes clear, Christie understands the world before her as a ladder, a hierarchy. At the same time that the narrator makes an intertextual reference to the wandering steps of a man and woman walking hand in hand, she erases the equality of partnership and exploratory movement with the metaphor of a ladder and the restricted, carefully balanced movement of climbing its steps. The contradictory bodily activities of wandering and climbing conflated in this descriptive passage also signify the possibility that Christie's experience of climbing the ladder of success will not be easy. By explaining that Christie conceives of herself as climbing a ladder, but also including the allusion to Paradise Lost and her feeling of having "all the world before her" and "wandering" according to her desires, Alcott presents two conflicting venues for interpretation. The opportunities Christie imagines for her life exist in excess of the ladder's (nineteenth-century womanhood's) boundaries and the activities nineteenth-century American society requires for one to succeed or move "up." The tension between Christie's intentions and the values inherently embedded in this allusion to Paradise Lost further emphasize the fact that Transcendental values and self-reliance were hardly as applicable or available to

women as they were for men in nineteenth-century America. If Christie had maintained her space in the domestic sphere or participated more readily in female self-effacement, as nineteenth-century convention would have encouraged her to do, the influence of "Providence" and the singularity of her place would also seem more applicable. Beginning a career as an actress, however, moves her into an arena of public participation, a more directly social form of "influence" (one not so strictly attached to the moral and emotional "influence" concomitant with nineteenth-century womanhood). In fact, her participation as an actress involves her in a socially marginalized role in Victorian society—a role often used to represent the antithesis of nineteenth-century feminine virtue. It is possible that Alcott's choice of occupation for Christie (one that she was drawn to as well) was meant to place female "influence" on display and question traditional views of the female role.

Christie's bodily wandering conflated with the strict steps of a ladder also signifies her bodily jeopardy (both in terms of being a woman in the workforce and in terms of the workforce's effect upon her womanhood). Alcott's allusion to a departure from "paradise" in the opening lines of a chapter that depicts Christie's departure from the domestic sphere has an ironic and double-meaning, making it seem both sarcastic and appropriate that Alcott presents Hepsey and Christie's version of domesticity as both an empowering and a restrictive endeavor. Connecting the domestic sphere with paradise also allows her to preserve a dominant moral value of her time at the same that she presents the appeal of the domestic realm in a sarcastic light as she leaves it. Important to note is Alcott's emphasis upon the play of language, for instance the intertextual reference to "paradise," at the same time she emphasizes Christie's bodily signification. Bodily activity and linguistic markers make meaning simultaneously and often contrarily in Work,

perhaps demonstrating tensions that her female readership was likely to readily recognize.

In the "Actress" chapter, the narrator repeatedly describes Christie's body and ideas as resisting the roles ascribed to her within the public domain of the theatre. Such tensions emphasize the complexity of Alcott's attitude toward the conflict between female desire and social expectations. Christie and the theatrical system take turns resisting her changing identity; both seem perplexed and neither completely to blame for the dissatisfying relationships and confusion existing in the theatrical work place. Rather, bodily activity embodied and interpreted by characters and descriptions of bodily activity provided by the narrator comment on one another and emphasize the complexity of the theatrical venue throughout the chapter. Combined with the fact that Christie is a fictional character—already an actress of sorts—this dialogue between characters' actions and the meaning the narrator ascribes to it allows Alcott to comment directly on Christie's experience as an actress and comment indirectly on the social construction of women's identity in other forms of art, such as literature, and within the theatrical workplace with which most of her readership will be interested but not feel affiliated.

Before Christie even secures her job as an actress, the narrator uses tensions between Christie's outward behavior and inner feelings to signify Christie's discontent. This attention to the disparity between Christie's body, ideas, and verbal communication allows Alcott to highlight the complexity of individual and social identity, both of which are inherently shaped by language usage and bodily activity (whether vocation or ordinary). Able to secure a place to live with two other boarders, Mrs. Black and her daughter Lucy, Christie is unable to secure a job, and her "despondent face, as she came in day after day from her unsuccessful quest, told its own story, though she uttered no

complaint" (31). Christie's body speaks in excess of what she says, or rather does not say. As Butler explains, the body can act as the "blind spot of speech, that which acts in excess of what is said, but which also acts in and through what is said" (Excitable 11). As Shoshana Felman explains, "The [speech] act, an enigmatic and problematic production of the speaking body, destroys from its inception the metaphysical dichotomy between the domain of the `mental' and the domain of the `physical,' breaks down the opposition between body and spirit, between matter and language" (94). Alcott's narrator describes and Christie demonstrates the same phenomena Felman and Butler theorize: the inability of language or social convention to completely restrict or control the expression of the body and the possibility of what Susan Foster describes as *bodily writing*—the ability to signify meaning extra-linguistically (3-9). As Butler explains, "there is what is said [or not said], and then there is a kind of saying that the bodily `instrument' of the utterance [or lack thereof] performs" (Excitable 11).

By repeatedly focusing on Christie's bodily behavior in the "Actress" chapter, as well as throughout the book, Alcott also provides a preempting illustration of Butler's theory of the importance of repetition in the constitution of gendered identity by demonstrating such repetition within an everyday setting rather than only within the framework of a cultural rite of passage of some sort. Of course, gaining a job is a very important rite of passage in American society. Alcott's focus upon mundane repetitive behaviors, or habits of interaction, within both domestic and public work spaces, only serves to further highlight her interest in the relevance of performance within all venues of American life. As Butler points out, Victor Turner, who along with Richard Schechner is credited with establishing Performance Studies as a field of study in the second half of the

twentieth-century, highlights the importance of repetition within cultural rituals such as socially definitive rites of passage that have either sacred or totalizing effects. Butler, however, suggests compulsory routine and unintentional habit as a kind of repetition that supports performativity ("Performative Acts" 277). As she explains,

> In what senses . . . is gender an act? Victor Turner suggests in his studies of ritual social drama, social action requires a performance which is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. When this conception of social performance is applied to gender, it is clear that although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this "action" is immediately public as well. ("Performative Acts" 277)

Christie's body acts as a "blind spot" of her speech or "instrument" that signifies extra-linguistic, unvoiced, and even unintentionally public, meaning is a significant assertion on Alcott's part. As Butler points out, "[G]ender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions" than those in theatrical contexts ("Performative Acts" 278). Christie's "speaking body," as Butler and Felman would call it, can work to or against her advantage. Alcott depicts both of these possibilities in the "Actress" chapter. More importantly, Alcott depicts both of these possibilities within Christie's public/profession *and* personal life, emphasizing how imperative it is for Christie (read nineteenth-century working women) to understand the performative power of her linguistic and physical signification if she is to define her own space and identity within the American workforce.

Alcott's main motive early on in the chapter appears to be to highlight the extent to which social activities, such as applying for a job, are physically communicative. While Christie is waiting to secure some sort of job, she helps Mrs. Black with one of her

costumes. "Sewing mock pearls on a crown" for Mrs. Black, Christie is interrupted by Lucy shouting, "I've got it! I've got it! All hail to the queen!" As if to be assuming the performative nature of speech has achieved its illocutionary effect of creating that which it names, Christie asks "What have you got? Who is the Queen?" (31).[7] Nevertheless, the performative power of speech is not produced at this instance, even though Christie holds a crown in her lap. However, Lucy continues the performance, following the convention of lowering her umbrella and laying her bonnet at Christie's feet, and begins to situate Christie closer to her new role: "You are to be the Queen of the Amazons in our new spectacle, at half a dollar a night for six to eight weeks, if the piece goes well" (31). Interestingly enough, according to the Greeks, the Amazons were a race of warlike African women who supposedly "cut off their right breasts, the better to draw their bows" (Lauter 72 n.3). Though Christie is seeking self-reliance, success as an independent woman, her first role requires her to participate in a role that removes one of the most womanly aspects of her body—her breasts.

At conflict at this moment in the text are emphases upon acting as artistic activity that achieves effects only within a designated performance realm and speech acts as performatives that create within the everyday world the effects they name or initiate processes that will eventually lead to the effects they name. The narrator says that Lucy had just come back from rehearsal, and Christie watches her go "through a series of pantomimic evolutions suggestive of a warrior doing battle with incredible valor, and a very limited knowledge of the noble art of self-defence [sic]" (31). While the narrator implies that Christie sees the discrepancy between the artifice of Lucy's bodily actions and the real art of self-defense, Christie's response implies, or at least stages, a lack of

awareness in terms of the performative nature of speech. Whether Christie's confusion is genuine or not, this scene presents a failed performative—of course, Christie doesn't turn into the "real" Queen of the Amazons. What this failed performative does accomplish, however, is an attention to the effect of role-playing; Lucy's hailing to the Queen does reveal the social codes of conduct she imagines would be in place if the Queen were actually there.

Underhandedly, Alcott includes the notion that if Christie were really to become powerful as it is conventionally understood within the confines of the traditional nineteenth-century literary script, she would have to become at least partially unwomanly. More importantly, she would have to gain enough experience and knowledge in "the noble art of defence" so that she doesn't end up undermining her own "valor" as Lucy does with her unsuccessful imitation of self-defense and authentic power. On the other hand, however, maybe Alcott's point is that traditional heroic scripts include a dehumanization that ends up looking as silly and inauthentic Lucy's unsuccessful imitation—"going through a series of pantomimic evolutions suggestive of . . . doing battle with incredible valor," but with "a very limited knowledge of the noble art of self-defence" (31) isn't the most flattering metaphor for the male role.

Implied early on in this chapter is the inherent vulnerability of Christie's nineteenth-century womanhood as she departs from the domestic and into the public sphere and the difficulty of establishing any sense of positive independence within the confines of traditional theatrical scripts and practices. With "theatrical volubility," Lucy explains that Mr. Sharp wants "tallish girls" and she had told him Christie was the "perfect dear" (31). Lucy encourages Christie not to "look wild, and say no," explaining that the "dress is

splendid! Red tunic, tiger-skin over shoulder, helmet, shield, lance, fleshings, sandals, hair down, and as much cork to your eyebrows as you like" (31). Offered the job because of her socially appealing body-type (primarily her height), but promised artistic license with her eyebrows, Christie is placed in two contradictory positions: in the status of an object-ified, but qualifying, body, and in the position of being able to inscribe her own appearance at least to some extent (a very limited sense). Acknowledging two human needs—to be socially accepted and individually empowered—Lucy's attempt to convince Christie to participate as Queen of the Amazons still makes the job and role seem somewhat dissatisfying. Yet, it also might cause readers to evaluate the value they place upon one's opportunity to fashion one's own appearance independently. Artistic license with one's eyebrows might seem more valuable to some than others. The possible insignificance of such "freedom," however, subtly points to the inequality of male and female opportunity and integrity within the marketplace, as it is represented in the theatre.

Despite "many secret misgivings," Christie was "the perfect dear," as Lucy had promised her employer (31). The narrator says that Christie held to her resolution and "followed Mrs. Black's advice on all points with docility which caused that sanguine lady to predict that she would be a star before she knew where she was" (32-3). This prediction becomes quite important because up until this point, based on the teaching of Hepsey, Christie had perceived of "actor's parts" as venues for rebellion and self-definition; now she begins to reflect upon Uncle Enos' view of "'play-actin' as the sum of all inequity" (32). Losing control of the parts she will play, Christie does indeed begin to lose the ability to know her self and to realize the effect of social biases upon the interpretation of her public and even private behavior. In addition, as the chapter unfolds,

Mrs. Black and Lucy lose the ability to tell the difference between when Christie is performing and when she is not. Instead of providing rebellious, self-empowering possibility within female community, the confusion brought on by female performance alienates her from female community and any positive sense of self-identity.

Christie's failing sense of identity and her difficulty identifying with the working environment of the theatre is apparent from the very beginning of her initial interview. When Christie first enters the theatre after hearing of her new job, she asks Lucy, "Is this the stage? How dusty and dull it is by daylight!" It looked nothing like the spot where "she had seen Hamlet die in great anguish two nights before" (33). In response, Lucy compares the stage to a woman, saying "Bless you, child, it's in curl-papers now, as I am of a morning" and hurries across the stage to meet Mr. Sharp (33). Christie, running behind her "wearing anything but an Amazonian expression just then," is nevertheless introduced by Lucy to Mr. Sharp with the words, "Mr. Sharp, here's an Amazon for you" (33). The transformation of the stage likened to the transformation of a woman through the use of curl papers presents performance as a substitute for the real at the same time that Christie's facial expression deters the efficacy of the performance. Likewise, Lucy's introduction of Christie as an "Amazon for you" demonstrates how readily Lucy knows Mr. Sharp, a representative of socially and professionally successful American, will be impressed by a clear-cut separation between or substitution of performance for the real. This view of performance is not so much a critique of Mr. Sharp as a telling characteristic of the American nineteenth-century marketplace that encouraged a separation between profit motives and rationality, between a job-well-done and anyone's personal feeling of moral responsibility, between a marketing strategy that sells and any responsibility to

represent a product authentically. "It is as if all America were but one gigantic workshop," commented foreign traveler Francis Grund, in 1837, thirty-six years before Work was published. "Over the entrance . . . there is the blazing inscription, `No admission here, except on business'" (II:5).

Narrative description of Christie's audition for Mr. Sharp pinpoints the self-control and self-discipline associated with nineteenth-century womanhood and female ambivalence about how to deal with the social assumption that they are what they *appear* to be. Christie's audition for Mr. Sharp includes him commenting audibly upon his expected correspondence between her ability to control her body and her ability to control her ideas and expressions. He asked Christie to walk across the stage and notes aloud, "Good tread; capital figure; fine eye. She'll make up well and behave herself, I fancy" (33). The narrator notes that Christie feels a strong desire to flee, "but remembering that she had presented her self for inspection, she controlled the impulse, and returned to him with no demonstration of displeasure, but a little more fire in `the fine eye,' and a more erect carriage of the `capital figure'" (33). The "fire" in her eye may cause readers to remember Christie "private fire" of dissent from Mrs. Stuart and her "new declaration of independence" to her Uncle Enos and Aunt Betsey, but the primary effect of the scene is for Christie to display her self-control and for the narrator to express Christie's struggle to maintain a positive sense of self-identity despite the social and professional pressure to deny such development on behalf of "business."

As the chapter proceeds, readers are able to see Christie's loss of self-awareness and identity at the same time that they see her body responding in rebellious ways. When Christie returns to Mr. Sharp after being angered by his comments, it is her body that

responds with more fire in the eye and a more erect carriage of the "capital figure." This controlling of self, this "behaving," insinuates the existence or impending creation of a boundary between what can and cannot be articulated about the self according to the nineteenth-century ideal of "true womanhood." The excluded feelings, actions, and ideas, however, as Butler explains of exclusionary practices, "come to bound the 'human' as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation" (Bodies 8). Christie's bodily responses to her own actions and her conceptions of her body exist as disruptive agents and possibilities through out the "Actress" chapter.

Rehearsing Womanhood: Narrative Resistance and Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

Christie's audition experience presents for readers a foreshadowing glimpse of how Christie's developing sense of self will have to adapt to its new cultural condition if she is to succeed as a literal actress and have to resist its inculturation if her declaration of independence is to succeed. Interestingly enough, perceiving of her self in an "actor's part" as the Stuarts' was much easier than actually participating as an actress. Alcott uses tensions between verbal and bodily language to highlight Christie's struggle for identity throughout the chapter. At the same time that Christie's body begins to respond in a "behaved," self-controlled manner, Christie also protests against being called something other than her name, thus demonstrating a change in her self-interest since her experience as "Jane." When Christie's audition is finished, Mr. Sharp replies, "All right, my dear. Give your name to Mr. Tripp and your mind to the business and consider yourself engaged" (33). After he leaves, Christie turns to Lucy and asked, "Did you hear that

impertinent `my dear'?" (33). The narrator notes this as Christie's "first shock" to her "sense of propriety" (33). Christie receives, however, little sympathy from Lucy who says, "Lord, child, all managers do it. They don't mean anything; so be resigned, and thank your stars he didn't say `love' or `darling,' and kiss you, as old Vining used to" (33-4).

Alcott's own experience as a domestic servant, recounted in her story "How I Went Out to Service," includes a version of the sexual harassment and the potential for female mistreatment hinted at in Christie's protest to Sharp calling her intimate names and Lucy's compliant and dismissive reply. In "How I Went Out to Service," a young woman, aptly named Louisa, secures a job as a domestic servant in the home of "Mr. R" (later known as Josephus) who is looking for a companion for his sister, Eliza. Louisa says she secures this job thanks to the help of her mother "who never lost her faith in human nature, in spite of many impostures" (351). Her mother's faith in human nature despite social hypocrisy is proven to be somewhat foolish by Louisa's tale. Josephus basically stalks Louisa, assigning her tasks that repeatedly lead to the two of them being alone in his room, and he follows her everywhere else she goes. At one point in the story he says to her: "It pleases me to see you here and lends a sweet, domestic charm to my solitary room. I like that graceful cap, that housewifery apron, and I beg you wear them often; for it refreshes my eye to see something tasteful, young, and womanly about me" (357). Louisa's job as a servant ends when she, "freed [her] mind in a declaration of independence," connecting Louisa with Christie's ambition. Louisa's account of her declaration is described in terms that demonstrate her acute awareness of the "staging" of her action.

I bore it as long as I could, and then freed my mind in a declaration of

> independence, delivered in the kitchen, where he found me scrubbing the hearth. It was not an impressive attitude for an orator, nor was the occupation one a girl would choose when receiving calls; but I have always felt grateful for the intense discomfort of that moment, since it gave me the courage to rebel outright. Stranded on a small island of a mat, in a sea of soapsuds, I brandished a scrubbing brush, as I indignantly informed him that I came to be a companion to his sister, not to him, and I should keep that post or none . . . I sat upon my island, with the softsoap conveniently near . . . emphasizing my words by beginning to scrub with a zeal that made the bricks white with foam. (359)

The domestic situation of the event also highlights the fact that Louisa attempts to use the very artifacts and customs that eliminate her control over her situation to protect and empower herself. Literally creating a boundary between herself and Josephus with her soapsuds, Louisa refers to the terms of her initial employment, hoping that the professional nature of the relationship will outweigh the personal indignation both she and Josephus had suffered. Louisa's treatment gets worse as more and more tasks are assigned to her following her declaration. The experience she relates "lessen[s] [her] respect for mankind immensely," but due to the begging of Eliza, she says, she "groaned, submitted, and did regret it all the days of my life" (361, 362).

Alcott's depiction of Christie's experience of climbing up the ladder of theatrical success suggests the sexist terms and lack of control over one's life depicted in "How I Went Out to Service." Christie begins to adapt to the role of an actress quite quickly, and by the end of the first rehearsal is praised for her quickness and comprehension. In addition, her identity as an actress is subsumed under her identity as the Queen of the Amazons, just as Louisa's identity as Josephus' lover/companion was nearly affirmed by her temporary compliance with her conditions. At the end of Christie's first rehearsal, the narrator explains, "Mr. Sharp popped his head out of a palace window to watch the Amazon's descent from the Mountain of the Moon" (34). With her identity completely

consumed under the identity of her dramatic role, Christie is interpellated in the role she is assigned. Along the lines of Althusser's theory of all- powerful Ideological State Apparatuses that control individuals' habits of identification and feelings, Christie "enjoyed the novel sights and sounds about her," becoming what she had linguistically been named (34).[8] Narrative descriptions of her interpretation of the experience of other actors during the rehearsal, however, present a dialogue between the view of action as comprising affiliation with an assigned role and action as representing the possibility of mis-recognition or a "theory of conscience," as Butler puts it, that challenges the notion that Christie's identity as a social subject can be totalized linguistically (Psychic 5). Butler points out that one can mistakenly, unconsciously, or half-heartedly identify with a role. In fact, Butler suggests one might even identify with a role for one's own protection or purposes (Psychic 95-96).[9]

At her first rehearsal, Christie further learns that "the stage, rather than revolutionizing patriarchal society, merely replicates it" (Keyser, Whispers 104) for she discovers her Amazons to be a "most forlorn band of warriors . . .huddled together . . . looking as if afraid to speak, lest they should infringe some rule"(34). This insight on Christie's part occurs right after the narrator describes her as too forlorn and afraid to speak to Mr. Sharp as he "surveyed" her for fear that she might offend him and not get the job (33). At this point, Christie can critically "read" the limiting and inauthentic social construction of others' identities, but lacks the ability to critically reflect on the implications of her own identification with the role of Sharp's "little dear." Christie does not observe any similarity between the warriors' inability to speak up for themselves and her own inability to stand up for herself. At the same time that Alcott presents Christie as

somewhat successfully making the transfer into her new identity as an actress. Christie's observations run directly counter to any notion of reality going on behind such performance roles. All the other performers Christie notices are remarkably unaffected by their performances or else seemingly without purposeful action or meaningful effect. She notes:

> Yellow-faced gentlemen and sleepy-eyed ladies roamed languidly about with much incoherent jabbering of parts, and frequent explosions of laughter. Princes, with varnished boots and suppressed cigars, fought, bled and died, without a change of countenance . . . Demons, guiltless of hoof or horn, clutched their victims with the inevitable `Ha! ha!' and vanished darkly, eating pea-nuts. (34-5)

All of these unaffected roles are contrasted sharply with the "ubiquitous Mr. Sharp" who "seemed to pervade the whole theatre; for his voice came shrilly from above and spectrally from below, and his active little figure darted to and fro like a critical will-o-the-wisp" (35). Significantly, as a worker/actor, Christie remains fairly unrecognized throughout the first rehearsal: "No one had spoke to her; few had observed her; all were intent on their own affairs" (35).

Despite the ways in which Christie feels personally unaffected by her first participation in a literal "actor's part," narrative descriptions emphasize the fact that although she may possess all sorts of power in her assigned role as queen, the theatre as a performance space does not necessarily provide her with any real sense of self or of power. Without any past experience in the theatre, or any real sense of community, Christie is unable to find rebellious spirit behind her "actor's part" in the theatre. While she had been able to with Hepsey in her domestic servant role, she is unable to provide any empowering subtext or "private" text in her role as Queen of the Amazons. Nevertheless, Alcott offers a somewhat subversive sub-text by emphasizing Christie's lack of

engagement with her role and Mr. Sharp's editorial comments and ubiquitous surveillance. In other words, Christie doesn't "turn around" like Althusser's linguistically determined subject. Instead, she can be seen as falling into the categories of subject-identification Butler suggests as alternative possibilities. It is possible, the narrator implies, that Christie misinterprets the implications of the call, mis-recognizes herself, or responds to the call in fear of not getting or keeping her job.

Elizabeth Young has argued that Alcott, the daughter of Bronson Alcott who helped to teach Emerson's credo of self-reliance, was "brought up on this culturally sponsored plan," and "governed by a self-regulating pedagogy that rewrote the implicitly male credo of Emersonian self-reliance as female self-denial" (447). Christie's audition and rehearsal experiences foreshadow her developing confusion in respect to her identity and the self-denial she begins to participate in. To be a success, Christie has to *become* provisionally the Queen and deny her feelings. As Mr. Sharp had explained before, she has to "give her mind to the business," and as Lucy had pleaded with her, she has to "prove an honor to her country" (33, 35). Rather than engaging her role with her own feelings and body, Christie has to envision her self as representative of the business and her country. She has to ignore her body that feels too exposed by her costume and her desire to flee the situation as she "climbed to her perch" and awaited the Queen's entrance (42). Paralleling Christie's position in the theatre with Mrs. Stuart's position the night of Christie's "private fire," readers can't help but wish that Christie would flee the theatre. One hates the idea of Christie, like Mrs. Stuart, might become a "trained canary."

Narrative descriptions of Christie's feelings as she awaits her initial entrance during her first performance highlight the tensions between Christie's identity and social influence

inside and outside of the performance event.

> The gilded breast-plate rose and fell with the quick beating of her heart, the spear shook with the trembling of her hand, her lips were dry, her head dizzy, and more than once, as she waited for her cue, she was sorely tempted to run away and take the consequences.
>
> But the thought of Lucy's good-will and confidence kept her, and when the cry came she answered with a ringing shout, rushed down the ten-foot precipice, and charged upon the foe with an energy that inspired her followers, and quite satisfied the princess struggling in the demon's grasp . . . the scene closed with a glare of red light and a 'grand tableau' of the martial queen standing in a bower of lances, the rescued princess gracefully fainting in her arms, and the vanquished demon scowling fiercely under her foot. . . . (36)

In the opening of this passage, Christie's quick breathing and trembling move her costume, and her body is described in conflict with her costume. Her own desire to run is also articulated, but her loyalty to Lucy and her involvement in this particular production keep her from acting as the Christie we knew before. Christie's mental "bond of womanhood"—her loyalty to female solidarity—is as binding as her costume. She can't flee either in this instance. Instead, as the narrative detailing of her effects upon each of the characters in the scene makes clear, she appears to slip fairly easily and effectively into her assigned role.

However, Alcott follows this passage with a narrative transition that avoids the effectiveness of Christie's performance and instead imbues her with what is considered a "natural" talent or female tendency. The narrator interrupts the story to say:

> It would be a pleasant task to paint the vicissitudes and victories of a successful actress; but Christie was not dramatic genius born to shine before the world and leave a name behind her. She had no talent except that which may be developed in any girl possessing the lively fancy, sympathetic nature, and ambitious spirit which make such girls naturally dramatic. This was to be only one of many experiences that were to show her her own weakness and strength, and through effort, pain, and disappointment fit her to play a nobler part on a wider stage. (37)

The notion of girls being "naturally dramatic" seems even offensive, and "the nobler part

on a wider stage" somewhat nebulous. Lively fancy, sympathetic nature, and ambitious spirit, however, are traits readers can easily associate with Christie based upon her past activities, and the idea that the purpose of providing herself with the opportunity to experience various roles is so that she may learn more about her own strengths and weaknesses is in line with Christie's desire to gain experience in the world so that she may establish her "new declaration of independence." Butler's theorizing of sex as a regulatory norm and cultural force is a twentieth-century parallel to the nineteenth-century process of "fitting" that the narrator envisions for Christie. Alcott anticipates Butler's view of sex as a regulating norm by creating a character who is becoming more and more attuned to the possibility of subversion within conventional structures. Only after many experiences of dramatic performance both on and off the "stage," both satisfying and painful, does Christie begin to gain a sense of self in relation to performative possibility—in relation to the traditions and rituals of her culture and her own recitations and embodiments of their effects. Interestingly, by the end of the novel, as I will discuss later, Christie refuses to get back up onto a stage because of the performative power it incites, because of the associations between womanhood and inauthentic performances.

According to Butler, regulatory norms, such as sex, have "the power to produce--demarcate, circulate, differentiate--the bodies it controls," and sex is not simply a "fact or static condition of the body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize `sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of norms"--a reiteration that is necessary because such materialization is never quite complete, "because bodies never quite comply with the norms by which materialization is impelled" (Bodies 1). The "naturalness" of Christie's acting ability is connected to Christie's female status in the

previous narrative passage, but Alcott also presents the process of Christie's struggle to gain a sense of independent identity as inextricably linked to her growing understanding of the possibilities of female performance within nineteenth-century America.

Performance Trouble: Actresses and Women

As Christie's theatre experience continues, she tires of her roles, but not of the profession: "She was not tired of the profession, only dissatisfied with the place she held in it, and eager to attempt a part that gave some scope for power and passion" (37). As the narrator explains, Christie did especially well playing parts which Mr. Sharp and Kent thought "suited" her sensibility—parts such as Tilly Slowboy, a nurse to Mr. and Mrs. Perrybingle in Dickens' novel The Cricket on the Hearth, or Miss Maggie, a minor character in Dickens' novel Barnaby Rudge, who holds the male sex in contempt and always sides with her mistress against her master. In fact, Kent, an actor who belonged to "the old school, and rarely condescended to praise of modern actors," said, "I'll tell you what it is, Sharp, that girl is going to make a capital character actress. When her parts suit, she forgets herself entirely and does admirably well . . . She's got that one gift, and it's a good one" (39-40). Such forgetting of self, is an important insight on Alcott's part because this is precisely what keeps women, such as Christie, from having control over the dramatizing of their own lives. Aligned with the "old school," and unwelcoming to the "modern actors," the efficacy of Kent's statement is somewhat undermined in Alcott's presentation (39). Pinpointing one of the central paradoxes of nineteenth-century women's lives—the "let me seem until I be" imperative-- it is when Christie's parts begin to *appear* to suit her the most that she loses herself entirely.[10]

With a stereotypical role determining her identity with her co-workers and employers, she has few options for developing or even faking a sense of identity apart from cultural norms. What "suits" others' impressions of her sensibility certainly does not necessarily suit her interests. Granted, she did hold some spite against her uncle for trying to pigeon-hole her into the role of a wife and domestic servant and towards Mr. Sharp for objectifying her body, but her goal was never to only hold men in contempt, but rather to empower herself.

Nancy Cott's description of one's work as definitive of one's social identity and one's approach to life is particularly relevant in relation to the roles Christie is repeatedly assigned as an actress. As Cott explains, "A characteristic occupation enforces habits that tend to dominate a person's whole approach to life" (20). However, Cott also explains that in a diversifying society occupations become less definitive of a person's social identity: "[T]he more complex and specialized a society becomes, the more numerous and diverse kinds of work are required, and the more discrete the relations between work and social identity" (20). Bound within traditional character roles, Christie's identity is assumed to be stereotypical, and she doesn't experience the benefits of a society that assumes relations between work and identity are more discrete and complex.

With her inclusion of Christie's dissatisfaction with her assigned theatrical roles, Alcott makes a significant critique of fictional roles available for women within the larger literary tradition as well. Given that this is Alcott's adult autobiographical novel, Alcott's critique can be understood as firmly grounded in the traditions, both literary and lived, of nineteenth-century womanhood. With no good female parts to play, as Joyce Warren has put it, the tradition of nineteenth-century American women's writing has been charged

with perpetuating weak, self-effacing rather than strong, self-promoting women. As Warren explains:

> If I were a serious actress looking for a good strong role to play, I would be hard pressed to find such a part in nineteenth-century American fiction. There would be plenty of subordinate roles—ingenues, character parts (usually old ladies), or colorless romantic leads—but there would be no female Captain Ahabs, Huck Finns, or Natty Bumppos . . . because most American female fictional characters are not people. (1)

This charge has been used to explain the devaluing of the tradition of American women's writing. As Rigsby points out, however, perhaps this line of criticism is wrong: "Much of our critical discourse begins with assumptions that turn our attention away from nineteenth-century women's writing, in the same way that the women writers themselves were confronted with a literary culture that failed to represent their experiences" (110). We tend to stereotype women's writing (often sentimental and autobiographical) as "touchy-feely," formulaic, and unconcerned with or irrelevant within discussions of social politics. Maybe there is an alternative but equally important female political rhetoric at work in women's writing that values one's communal role over individual success that has not been adequately recognized. Maybe, as Rigsby suggests, there are "no female Captain Ahabs, Huck Finns, or Natty Bumppos" because nineteenth-century women writers imagined forms of "strength" and methods of actions other than those manifested by isolated individual characters who flee domestic and social relationships to establish their own destinies (112-14).

As Rigsby also points out, Warren's characterization of women being included only as "uninteresting nonpersons" in American novels stands as a fairly accurate assessment of fiction written by nineteenth-century male writers, but is hardly a fair

assessment of nineteenth-century women's writing across the board (Warren 2, Rigsby 111). Despite the fact that the dominant ideology of culture and its stories of individual heroism and social success, impose "a climate of repression on [women's] `experiences,' women wrote about themselves. And within their self-representations exists the possibility of a competing feminist aesthetic" (Rigsby 111). The competing aesthetic Rigsby suggests is one that values communitarian values over capitalistic and individualistic ones. I would add to this aspect of a competing feminist aesthetic Alcott's interest in female opportunity to help shape the world simply by participating in as many complex capacities as they can.

Part of what Alcott emphasizes for both male and female characters in the book is the performative power and possibility of even the most mundane of daily activities. How people perceive their own and others' work is what matters, and Alcott points out that if the only measure of success of one's work is the amount of money and individual attention one acquires, then one's life can be very lonely and meaningless. With this idea we see the influence of Fuller and Henry David Thoreau, another family friend of the Alcotts, who asserted that "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (5). It is when Christie is most successful (financially secure and experiencing social fame as an actress) that she is self-deluded and unhappy. Christie's Uncle Enos who laughs at Christie's view of communally minded work habits and expenditures, saying that is "So like women!," and that he would rather make sure the property "was fixed up square," is the character still in need of community at the end of the book. Sadly, he admits, he doesn't know much about what is going on in society, and the narrator explains that he "moved uneasily in his chair, as if he wanted to get up and finish the neglectful job that made his helplessness so burdensome" (327-28). "Wounded soldiers, destitute children, ill-paid women, young

people struggling for independence, homes, hospitals, schools, churches, and God's charity all over the world . . . I don't know much about any of 'em," Enos says, and Christie replies, "Whose fault is that, sir?" (327).

In critique of American individualism, Alcott presents "success" as alienating, self-absorbing, and even self-delusional. As Christie becomes a more and more popular actress, the female community that had just started to thrive amongst Mrs. Black, Lucy, and Christie is for the most part gone, substituted with faces "half `made up'" (40). Though "they preserved the peace outwardly the old friendliness was quite gone" (41). Performances became both a public and private affair and the difference between the two quite blurred.

As Christie becomes a more successful actress, both her sense of self-control and her sense of community are sacrificed; to a great extent, the nineteenth century ideal of womanhood simply did not readily support a female's independent success. As Keyser explains, Christie's success and progress within the theatre allows her to enjoy "the economic and psychological benefits that men have long derived from work outside the home, especially a never-failing excitement in her attempts to reach the standard of perfection she had set up for herself." Simultaneously, however, she finds herself in the "classic double bind" of women's lives (Keyser, Whispers 104). Keyser points out that this is not only characteristic of nineteenth-century women's lives, but continues to hamper women's full development and happiness today. The "classic double bind" according to Keyser, is "the forced choice between self-fulfilling achievements and affiliation with others" (Whispers 105). As the narrator of Work explains, with Christie's success in the theatre, "She had no thought now beyond her art, no desire beyond the

commendation of those whose opinion was serviceable, no care for any one but herself" (41). Keyser's analysis is again insightful: Christie realizes that "the stage, no less than domestic servitude, deprives her of an identity. Just as she became `Jane' at the Stuarts', so in the theatre she is known as `Miss Douglas'. And just as the fashionable household erected barriers between mistress and maid, so the theatre divides successful from less successful actress" (Whispers 105).

Events surrounding Christie's choice of play for her first benefit performance, Charles Reade's play Masks and Faces (1852), allow Alcott to express the complexities brought about as women began to try to change the power structure of the American workplace and privilege communal interests over individual success. The first conflict has to do with situating one's action within a tradition of representation that has already established conventional roles. Alcott highlights the influence of tradition by depicting the performative power speech to bring about a set of conditions that is not obviously present in a situation but that is capable of being inserted because of a repetition or citation of an element—be it a word, gesture, plot device, or image—that is associated with a prior situation similar enough the present one to be reasonably related. The first conflict over Christie's choice of Masks and Faces occurs because it includes a love triangle that Lucy, unbeknownst to Christie, thinks exists offstage between herself, Christie, and a male co-worker named St. George. From Lucy's point of view, Christie is choosing to repeat the love triangle on-stage so as to display it to the public and rub it in Lucy's face. In opposition to this version of reality espoused by Lucy, Alcott presents Christie's choice of play as being motivated by self- *and* communal- interest: she chooses the script because she has always wanted to play the lead role, that of Peg Woffington, but also because it

"has good parts for [Lucy] and Kent, and St. George" (41-42).

Lucy's response to Christie's choice reveals the threat of Christie's individual success to communal relations. Alcott expresses the hostile relation between Lucy and Christie most effectively in her portrayal of their linguistic banter; the way Lucy and Christie talk to one another displays the threatening view of linguistic vulnerability described in Butler's explication of performative hate speech. Alcott's sensitivity to the efficacy of citational speech acts is worth noting for its foresight. Christie's choice of a play stages the power of speech acts and bodily acts to reinstate situations that disrupt the very sets of relations they employ. When Christie is offered her first benefit she rushes to tell Lucy the news begging for her support and happiness. Lucy asks, "What shall we have? . . . trying to look pleased, but failing decidedly." "Masks and Faces," Christie replies, and the unsuccessfully performed smile vanishes from Lucy's face entirely upon hearing this sentence. Christie "is suddenly seized with a suspicion that Lucy was not only jealous of her as an actress, but as a woman" (42). St. George was an attractive young actor who often played lovers' parts with Christie and with whom Lucy is in love in real life. The text explains: "They had never thought of falling in love with each other, though St. George wooed and won Christie night after night in vaudeville and farce. But it was easy to imagine that so much mock passion had a basis in truth, and Lucy evidently tormented herself with this belief" (42). Lucy sneers back, "Why didn't you choose Juliet; St. George would do Romeo so well?" (42). The arsenal becomes that of play written roles inciting a confusion between speeches and actions associated with characters' parts versus 'real life' words and actions. Christie says, "I should think you'd be satisfied with 'Masks and Faces,' for you know Mabel gets her husband safely back in the end,' *watching*

the effects of her words" (42, my emphasis). "As if I wanted the man! No, thank you, other people's leavings won't suit me," cries Lucy "tossing her head, though her face belied her words" (42). "Not even though he has `heavenly legs,' `distracting legs,' and a `melting voice'?" asks Christie, "maliciously, quoting Lucy's own rapturous speeches when the new actor came" (42). The various acts of mimicry and citation fuel the fight between Lucy and Christie, demonstrating the power of citation described by Butler when she says, "The speaker assumes responsibility through the citational nature of speech. The speaker renews the linguistic tokens of a community, reissuing and reinvigorating such speech. Responsibility is thus linked with speech as repetition, not as origination" (Excitable 39). Christie is responsible for reinstating Lucy's amorous affections for St. George at the very same time that Lucy is trying to preserve her dignity by distancing herself from that part of her identity. With this speech act, Christie demonstrates how "words wound," as Butler puts it (Excitable 4); Christie "watches the effects of her words" (42), signifying her knowledge that within this particular discursive community her words can gain material force (Excitable 4).

The confusion of play-written speeches, actions, and identities with "real" life ones, particularly the substitution of one for the other, is another rendition of the effect Aunt Betsy's "interlarded" speech had upon Alcott's readers earlier in the book. The theatre, still controlled by patriarchal conceptions of female identity, is not conducive to Christie's desire for rebellious self-definition; Lucy, proceeding along the lines of the patriarchal and conventional belief with the marriage/relationship imperative, cannot envision the type of independent exploration and womanhood Christie desires. Christie seems to believe that her work as an actress, like theatrical production itself, goes through the actions of

relationships, but does not produce any "real" ones. Lucy's belief in Christie and St. George's "Romeo and Juliet" relationship suggests the performative power of Christie's work as an actress—the possibility that by going through the motions repeatedly that Christie and St. George really have fallen in love. Significantly, it is Christie's success as an actress that makes her vulnerable to this accusation of failure as a virtuous, modest, sexually inexperienced, self-denying woman.

Conversely, however, Alcott also presents Christie as a woman who is able to go through the actions of being involved with a man—to actually present herself as being involved with St. George, and to some extent to actually experience these sensations—without having to be held accountable for her body's actions. This type of freedom is substantiated in Christie's theatrical experience and further validated by Lucy's belief in her relationship with St. George. Christie's "staged" experiences allow Alcott to imbue her with at least some of the sexual experiences of the male *Bildungsheld*. Because this would have been so scandalous to Alcott's contemporary audience, she strategically employs the *as if* framework of the theatre. Significantly, Christie is able to maintain a "professional" separation between her work on- and off-stage, a separation hardly imaginable along nineteenth-century view of female identity, but one that should not be surprising in hindsight. Female inauthenticity encouraged by what I am calling the "seem until I be" imperative brought on by the tenet female self-denial and self-control would understandably include the development of the kind of philosophy Hepsey had taught Christie: how to perceive of one's self in an actor's part and maintain a separation between one's self-identity and the kind of work one does for a living.

One begins to see, however, that while this philosophy is somewhat empowering,

it can also be dissatisfying. Faking social relationships isn't that much more satisfying than actually abandoning them. In this instance, we see Alcott's revision of the male *Bildungsroman* model as somewhat inadequate. Perhaps the performance framework of this chapter, and indeed of the whole novel in that it is an artistic representation of experience, saves the inadequacy of its revision. The "Actress" chapter asserts the possibility of women developing a professional, empowering, and positive sense of identity within the American workforce, but also points out the need for women to have the opportunity to figure out how to negotiate tensions between values traditionally associated with domesticity and capitalistic, market-based values. In this way the novel asserts its own significance: women need the opportunity to, as Fuller put it, to think and act "till they know what they need" (and, one might add, until they know what they *do* and need *to do* in a performative sense).

Confusion between what words and actions are genuine and which ones are "performed" is presented as both a limiting and empowering ambivalence. On one hand, it is disruptive of female friendship, but on the other hand, it inspires Christie's desire to work and gain experience in the world. Alcott connects the threat of women's experience specifically to the female sexual identity in a later chapter where Christie's closest friend, Rachel, is ostracized from society and community because she has gained sexual experience. Christie's even faked involvement with St. George surprisingly does not put her womanhood in jeopardy in this chapter. Later, however, she is discriminated against as an ex-actress. In this chapter, Christie is punished to some extent for the believability of her staged sexual escapades with St. George because her female community is lost.

Alcott also insinuates that women's work in the public venue can cause them to

question their own identity because it forces them to confront social constructions of womanhood they otherwise might not directly challenge. After Christie and Lucy's argument over St. George, Christie catches the reflection of her figure in the mirror. She wipes the rouge off her cheeks, pushes back her hair, and studies her own face for several moments, participating in a "private" performance for herself and readers.

> [Her face] was pale and jaded now, and all its freshness seemed gone; hard lines had come about the mouth, a feverish disquiet filled the eyes, and on the forehead seemed to lie that shadow of a discontent that saddened the whole face. If one could believe the testimony of that countenance things were not going well with Christie, and she owned it with a regretful sigh, as she asked herself, `Am I what I hoped I should be? No, 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 a good woman?' (43)

Recognizing the threat to her womanhood, Christie's thoughts are countered by the narrator's questioning of whether one can "believe the testimony" of Christie's countenance and the line between acted and "real" identity called into question. Nevertheless, the possibility that the body gives forth its own expression apart from language and convention, that it creates its own meaning, is present. Even if its only effect is calling into question the force of her actions and words, its presence is purposeful. Narrative commentary in this scene indicates a split between Christie's bodily and mental identity:

> With gloomy eyes fixed on her altered face she stood a moment struggling with herself. Then the hard look returned, and she spoke out defiantly, as if in answer to some warning voice within herself. `No one cares what I am, so why care myself? Why not go on and get as much fame as I can? Success gives me power if it cannot give me happiness, and I must have some reward for my work. Yes! a gay life and a short one, then out with the lights and down with the curtain!' (43)

The narrator explains that Christie eventually "threw her whole heart into the work" (44). But as her speech indicates, she is depressed and disillusioned, and in the spirit of self-

denial, loses the ability to dramatize her own experience and instead replaces it with others' ideas about her.

In spite of her performance for herself, she "sobbed herself to sleep that night like a child who know it is astray, yet cannot see the right path or hear its mother's voice calling it home" (43). The disillusioning effect of her theatre experience further emphasizes the paradoxical role play-acting performs in Alcott's fiction. As Keyser explains:

> [W]omen's comparative powerlessness predisposes them to acting, which both protects by disguising their true identity and enables them to express it in another guise. Through acting women can vicariously—and sometimes actually—experience power, but they can also, as Christie often comes close to doing, lose all sense of self. (Whispers 105)

The possibility of self-destruction is a huge threat in Work and in Alcott's own life. Early in the novel, the narrator explains that Christie imagines three possibilities for herself: marriage, spinsterhood, or suicide (13). Later in the novel Christie reaches a point of despair similar to her feelings of despair during her time as an actress and attempts suicide. Alcott herself admits to contemplating suicide because of her own feelings of worthlessness due to her inability to find work and friendship.[11]

While the patriarchal framework of the theatre in some ways decreases Christie's ability to successfully re-fashion her identity, her choice of play and character role for her benefit performance provides her the opportunity the step beyond this framework both literally and figuratively. The plot of Masks and Faces allows Christie to express the complex understanding of work and identity that she is just beginning to understand: the tendency of people to be totalized by conventional understandings of occupational and social roles. Playing off of one the primary concerns of nineteenth-century culture, the possibility of hypocrisy and inauthentic self-presentation, the plot turns on Peg's

extraordinary skills of impersonation. When she chose this play, her intentions may have been to provide good parts for everyone, but in the end, she appreciates the play for its ability to expose the complexities of a nineteenth-century, working woman's identity.

The plot of Charles Reade's play Masks and Faces, later published as Peg Woffington in novel form, depicts Peg's impersonation of her own portrait. At one point in the play Peg substitutes her own face for the face of her portrait and then leaves its frame. Christie chooses to play the role of Peg, and Lucy is given the role of Mabel, St. George's character's wife who loses her husband temporarily because of his infatuation with Peg. Prior to the opening night performance, Christie believes that Lucy is just jealous of her and intolerable of her "success." Opening night begins with Christie, "actress-like," gaining courage with "every curl she fastened up, every gay garment she put on," her heart beating high with the resolution to "make a hit or die" (43). Encouragement came from this habitual routine and the applause which greeted her from "the full house, which proved how kind a regard was entertained for her by many who knew her only by a fictitious name"—Miss Douglass (44). Behind the scenes, however, Christie and Lucy taunted one another with "all the small slights and unanswerable provocations which one actress has it in her power to inflict upon another" and "threatening asides when a moment's by-play favored their delivery," again inciting the kinds of citation of conventional meanings and practices of degradation that create the possibility of injurious speech—the efficacy of speech to perform hate and inflict injury (Work 44, Butler, Excitable 52). Christie was able, nevertheless, to play Peg better than she had ever played another part with "frolicsome *abandon*" and "for a moment forgot her grandeur and her grief" (44).

Christie's forgetfulness of herself, her "actress-like" self this time allows her to see the Lucy's genuine love for St. George. If Christie had not been able to forget her off-stage resentment, the narrator insinuates, her recitation of female conflict might have precluded her ability to see Lucy's genuine grief. However, as Lucy kneeled and begged Peg to give her back her husband's heart, Christie "was amazed to see real tears roll down Lucy's cheeks, and to hear real love and longing thrill her trembling words with sudden power and passion" (45). Christie sees through Lucy's "performance," and perceives "real" tears and trembling coming from Lucy's, not Mabel's, body. But seeing "through" performance in this instance does not mean removing its frame or dismissing its significance. Instead, it means looking at "real" life conditions through the *as if* perspective of performance and using the knowledge one gains to better understand the conditions of one's own life.

Replacing the narrative voice with Christie's own thoughts, the text erases its own narrative performance at this point, thus re-performing on a literal textual level the same strategy of representation performed in the play production of Masks and Faces by conflating Christie's activities with the novel's narrative "performance." In this instance, the story of the actress becomes the story of female experience. Able to dramatize her genuine feelings, Christie finally communicates successfully with Lucy and restores their friendship. The text reads:

> That is not acting. She does love St. George, and thinks I mean to keep him from her. Poor dear! I'll tell her all about it to-night, and set her heart at rest," thought Christie; and when Peg left the frame, her face expressed the genuine pity that she felt, and her voice was beautifully tender as she promised to restore the stolen treasure. (45)

Christie, able in her role as Peg to express genuine pity towards Lucy/Mabel, begins to

recover her identity and her friendship with Lucy, for "Lucy felt comfortable without knowing why, and the piece went smoothly on to its last scene" (45). Impersonating her "portrait," her actress-like self, Christie, like Peg, is able to step beyond its limitations by exploiting its frame. In this particular scene, Alcott is able to exploit the threat to identity experienced by working women such as herself whose private (non-staged) and public (staged) identity have a contrary relationship. By depicting Christie as choosing the role of Peg, Alcott is able to "perform" this conflict and foreground its complexities for reader's consideration: subjected to her role as an actress, this choice of roles allows for subjection and performance to be presented as forms of power that not only act on subjects or activate subjects, but which also designates what Butler refers to as "restriction in production" (Psychic 84). Christie is able to recover her conscience and identity by choosing a self-reflexive role for herself—one that provides her with the opportunity to reflect on one of the primary tensions forged on nineteenth-century women: the tension between the effects of her outward behavior and her inner sensibility and motives. This provides her an opportunity to reflect on her self and to confront her co-workers and audience with a complex role.

Though Christie is able to mediate the tension between herself and Lucy by taking advantage of the performance framework, Christie's genuine expression of her concern for Lucy is achieved by her prematurely leaving the frame of the theatrical production itself. Just as Peg was turning over "repentant husband to his forgiving wife . . . down crashed one of the mechanical contrivances used in a late spectacle" (45). Seeing Lucy's impending danger, Christie hurled her body to save Lucy from its weight. In the process, Christie was struck and injured by the contrivance. Keyser suggests that her resulting

injury and retirement from the stage suggest that women "step outside the male framework . . .at their own professional peril" (Whispers 105). In stepping from her own "frame"—her actress identity—Christie does recover her identity, but she also loses her job, her independent livelihood, in favor of a conventional view of womanhood and female community. Alcott doesn't clearly side with the career-minded imperative or the communal-minded perspective, instead depicting the genuine ambivalence within nineteenth-century women's lives as they tried to bridge their personal, professional, and social relationships.

If we think of this tension in relation to Warren's assertion that the literary tradition provides "no good parts" for women, we might reinterpret Christie's decision to forsake her career for the benefit of her relationship with Lucy. In fact, one doesn't have to interpret Christie's actions in this light at all. Clearly, Alcott depicts attempting professional success while at the same time maintaining intimate relationships as quite complicated and self-revealing; all of a sudden, the male literary tradition of fleeing social and domestic relationships to establish identity seems a bit dissatisfying, even self-delusional. Existing as an experience that gets intertwined with her identity as a woman in relation to men, in relation to other women, and her various experiences in the work force, Christie's experience as an actor achieves a reversed foil effect. Instead of providing a strong contrast or underscoring or enhancing the distinctive characteristics of vocations other than acting, Alcott is able to emphasize the performance strategies and performative effects common among her characters' experiences and identities in different vocations.

Negotiating Capitalist and Feminist Frames of Experience

In her next job, as a governess, Christie almost agrees to marry-for-a-living an older man whom she does not love, Phillip Fletcher. While trying to decide whether or not to get married, Christie is reading Jane Eyre, a story about another orphan such as herself that wants to make a better place for herself in the world. The narrator characterizes her as being "tempted to play Jane Eyre to Philip Fletcher's Rochester" (Keyser 105). When Fletcher characterizes his marriage to her, a former actress, a fact she had tried to keep concealed from him, as a sacrifice, Christie rebukes him and declines his offer for marriage. The narrator says that Christie "was no actress off the stage, and wanted to be very true just then" (69), but the truth was more convincing because of "her old dramatic fervor in voice and gesture" (70). Fletcher acknowledges her power as an actress in an attempt to disempower her. "Very well done! . . I am disappointed in the woman, but I make my compliment to the actress," he says (70). Keyser interprets Fletcher's comment as implying that Christie's "air of authority and command of language expose a lack of femininity" and that such an assumption "exemplifies how men, by creating a disjunction between woman and actress, have attempted to keep women in their place" (Whispers 106). In this scene, however, Christie's power as an actress is not at odds with her womanhood. Instead, her power "derives from the very delicacy that Fletcher accuses her of lacking" (Keyser, Whispers 106). The loss of self that acting had seemed to inflict in her theatre experience now allows her to reclaim her own womanhood, rather than sacrificing it for more servanthood, however luxurious it may have been. She says to herself as she prepares to tell Mrs. Saltonstoll, Fletcher's sister, that she is resigning her

job: "now a short scene with my lady and then exit governess" (71). By presenting Christie as a woman capable of objectifying herself in a role that does not fit her sensibility—that of Fletcher's "Jane Eyre" and Mrs. Saltonstall's governess—Alcott once again introduces impersonation as a form of power.

Rigsby has pointed out that Christie's rejection speech to Fletcher is very similar to Jane Eyre's speech to Rochester. Repeating almost exactly the sentiments expressed by Bronte's heroine, Alcott revises female possibility by having Christie refuse rather than marry Fletcher. Rigby points out, however, that Christie delivers her speech after Fletcher proposes, while Jane delivers hers before Rochester proposes. Consequently, the efficacy of each speech is equally self-assertive and empowering. Similarities between the two are noteworthy though because by repeating Jane's sentiments so closely, Christie's revision of the romantic, marriage plot is even more emphasized:

> Jane: . . .Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,--and full as much heart! . . . I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, or even of mortal flesh:--it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal,--as we are! (qtd. in Rigsby 119, Bronte 318)

> Christie: . . . 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. (70)

Though Jane says she is not speaking through the medium of custom and conventionalities, it is precisely her and Christie's experiences with such social conventions that allows them to identify the need to rebuke or challenge their social

degradation. Both heroines substitute their socially assumed dependence with self-dependence and self-respect. Alcott, however, emphasizes that female identity doesn't have to be confirmed by marriage at all and, in fact, that marriage doesn't affirm female identity if it is not based upon a mutually respectful relationship.

Having gained this knowledge and having rejected the conventional view of romantic love, we might expect Christie to go out and make her way in a capitalistic world quite successfully. In other words, we might expect her to prove to be the female version of the Ragged Dick type, but her job as a seamstress is short lived as well because she quits when her new found friend, Rachel, is publicly ridiculed and fired by Mrs. Cotton and Mrs. King, "whose names connect their cruelty with that of the male-ruled textile society," because of rumors that she is a "fallen woman" (a woman with sexual experience) (Keyser, Whispers 108). As Christie finds out, one of the primary difficulties faced by women in nineteenth-century America was the tension between domestic and capitalistic values in the American marketplace.

Domestic values integral to the formulation of their identity, such as teaching adolescent girls the virtues of self-denial, lack of self-interest, duty to others, and asking women to emulate communal rather than competitive values, were actually seen as a threat to efficiency and competition in the American workforce. In her portrayal of Christie's job at a textile factory where she worked as a seamstress, Alcott depicts the quandary women faced in deciding whether or not to be loyal to the patriarchal values that encouraged sexist values within the market place or loyal to communal, domestic values that valued compassion and forgiveness. Her depiction of this quandary reflects the difficulty and even silliness in developing a clear-cut distinction between these two sets of

values. Christie's friend, Rachel, one of the most efficient and skilled seamstresses, is fired because Mrs. King and Mrs. Cotton learn of a sexual indiscretion she committed long before gaining employment from them. Christie ends up quitting in support of her friend after Mrs. King is unable to follow her inclination to forgive Rachel because of Mrs. Cotton's adamant loyalty to the patriarchal ideal of female sexual modesty and virtue. Ironically, Alcott demonstrates that market place values are actually compromised by patriarchal rather than domestic values: Mrs. King and Mrs. Cotton lose one of their best workers simply because of a possible sexist threat to their own reputation.

Work depicts conflicts between capitalistic and communal values and shows how the worth of domestic values may be reconsidered in light of the failings of capitalistic ones. Through her portrayal of Christie's relationship with various characters, such as Rachel, Mrs. King, and Mrs. Cotton, Alcott shows that capitalistic values can cause people to fail as human beings, substituting the glorification of individualism and market success for genuine, mutually respectful human relationships. Christie's experiences with professional success and failure teach her to understand domestic and communal values as promoting rather than limiting the development of self-identity and self-worth.

Alcott also situates her philosophy of work within the ideology of the women's rights movement developing at the time, directly confronting nineteenth-century views of gender, instead offering a philosophy of work that was gender-neutral. Christie's (Alcott's) project of establishing "a new declaration of independence" aligns her project with the "Declaration of Sentiments" produced by a group of women's rights activists at the Seneca Falls convention in 1848. Their revision echoed the Declaration of Independence, one of American culture's foundational documents: "We hold these truths

to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal" (Kasson xxi-xxii). Some writers responded in a very negative way to these women's assertion of their political, legal, and economic rights. One writer in Harper's New Monthly Magazine in 1851 stated: "'Women's rights,' they cry, and so loud the cry, that even women's ambition has conquered her judgement and her delicacy, and she has gone forth, out of her appointed and fitting sphere" (qtd. in Kasson xxii). Theodore Parker, a well-known radical clergyman, however, invited a woman to preach in his pulpit and lectured on the "Public Function of Women.' (Kasson xxii). Mr. Power, the clergyman whose church Christie attends during the second half of the book, is modeled after Parker, and his church provides one of the most democratic and benevolent communities represented in Work, complete with a gender-neutral God and a congregation made up of young and old, black and white, rich and poor, male and female.

One of the lessons Christie learns from Mr. Power is not to abide by social conventions of "scripts" if they are dissatisfying or threatening to one's self and one's livelihood in the broadest sense of the term. Christie learns this lesson from Power when he points out that she is a "hero-worshipper," trying to change David Sterling's ambitions to make him more romantically appealing. From the council of Power, who asserts that it is much more important for individuals, such as David, to do the kind of work he finds fulfilling and important, rather than that supported by social stereotypes and a story told by Cynthy Wilkins, the "Clear-Starcher," who Christie's friend takes her to stay with after rescuing Christie from trying to drown herself, Christie begins to figure out that "the simple truth was better that the sentimental fiction" or hero-tales, one might add (179). The moral of Cynthy Wilkins's story about her own "hero-worship" and near marital

breakup is that it was important for her to try her "own way," make her own mistakes, and value her own work because they led to a sense of independence. The marital conflict Cynthy tells Christie about occurred because one of Cynthy's friends, Mis Bascum, convinced her that she should shun her work as a mother and wife and instead expect her husband to take care of her and provide her with the latest fashions of the day. What Cynthy finds, however, is that Lisha, her husband, was doing the best he could while she was spending a great amount of effort "scorn[ing] [her] best blessins," her active participation in the daily development of her own and others' lives (148-49).

Keyser suggests that neither the moral nor the substance of Cynthy's story is as important as the telling of the story. This assertion affirms Rigsby's belief that women telling stories about the work it takes to create meaningful, mutually enhancing relationships is as significant a subject as tales of male heroics apart from relationship. As Keyser puts it, "Cynthy possesses one key to women's power—the capacity to see and present their lives as drama or story" (Whispers 109-10). For Christie, who had lost the ability to see the difference between the real and imaginary Christie and almost attempted suicide, this is a very important "cure for despair," as the title of Mrs. Wilkins' chapter is aptly titled.

The moral of Cynthy's story is worth noting, however, because it allows Alcott to affirm Fuller's theory of the importance of individual development inside of meaningful relationships: "We must have units before we can have union," Fuller asserts (284). Expressing dissatisfaction similar to Alcott's dissatisfaction with the male model of development that eschews relationship for a self-delusional sense of individuality, Fuller addresses the tendency represented by Alcott's Mis Bascum, and other female characters

such as Mrs. Stuart and Mrs. Saltonstall, to mistake lack of work for liberty and lack of relationship for independence. People interested in self-development, Fuller explains, are "in constant danger of being accused of slighting what are called 'the functions,'" assuming that domestic work is without social value (248). Instead, Fuller explains, she "has high respect for those who cook something good, who create and preserve fair order in houses, and prepare therein the shining raiment for worthy inmates, worthy guests. Only these 'functions' must not be drudgery, or enforced necessity, but a part of life . . . done in thought and love, *willingly*" (248, my emphasis). Alcott's portrayal of Mrs. Wilkins's house, full of work, children, business, and meaningful conversation provides even more prestige that the "functions" described by Fuller. However, whether domestic work is valuable or not is not Alcott's main concern. Rather, she is interested, as Fuller is, in emphasizing the importance of women's choosing their own vocation, working "in thought and love, willingly" (Fuller 248).

As Alcott makes clear, both domestic and professional spheres were socially (relationally) *and* individually influential. One's work, whether it was inside of the home or not, was one of the primary ways a person engaged him- or herself with the world. As nineteenth-century women experienced work outside of the home, they faced many of the complexities twentieth-century women are still thinking about today. In part, Alcott foregrounds a tension that is not unique to nineteenth-century society, but one that was particularly pronounced in the separate-sphere framework disrupted by burgeoning female possibility: the tension between one's individual success and the well-being of one's intimate and social relationships. As Sarah Elbert explains,"[I]t was in the contradictions between the promise of individual fulfillment and the awareness of domestic social

relationships as both limiting and fulfilling of human beings' deepest needs that Alcott struggled to define nineteenth-century womanhood for her readers" ("Introduction" xxiv). Significantly, Betty Friedan theorizes many of the same issues in her books The Second Stage (1981) and Beyond Gender: The New Politics of Work and Family (1997). Arguably, Alcott, like feminists such as Friedan, intended to provide cultural criticism that would improve the conditions of American women's lives and their self-perceptions.

Literature as Performance: Staging Linguistic and Bodily Performativity

Alcott chose as her medium fiction rather than criticism, but the final chapter of Work reveals her interest in literature *as* criticism and her belief that, as Suzanne Rohr has explained, "it is in and through literature that an interpreting mind can explore its own cognitive capacities most pointedly" and that a culture can reflect on its own "necessity for endless cultural self-fashioning" (105, 104). In the opening of the final chapter of Work, Christie sits on her fortieth birthday remembering her participation at a recent meeting of working and non-working class women and trying to decide whether or not she will go again. A quotation of Christie's thoughts begins the chapter and several points in the chapter include narrative markers such as "Christie was thinking of all this as she sat alone that day" (333). The final chapter, given over to Christie's reflecting on her participation at the meeting rather than the narrator's interpretation of Christie's development, acts as a meta-narrative of Alcott's view of her own work as a writer, feminist, and cultural critic. In this way, Alcott reenacts Christie's Peg Woffington role, to some extent stepping outside of the frame of her own story, having Christie reflect upon her speech at the women's rights meeting in the same manner she would like her readers to reflect upon

Work and their own life conditions and stories.

First off, Christie notes the discrepancy between the discourses of the two groups of women and the difficulty they had communicating with one another: "whether wisely or foolishly each proved how great was the ferment now going on, and how difficult it was for the two classes to meet and help one another in spite of the utmost need on one side and the sincerest good-will on the other" (330). At one point, she likens the speeches of the non-working class women at the meeting to "telling fairy tales to hungry children" (330). With "unconscious condescension," the "educated" women at the meeting demonstrated "how little they knew of the real trials of the women whom they longed to serve, how very narrow a sphere of usefulness they were fitted for in spite of culture and intelligence, and how rich they were in generous theories, how poor in practical methods of relief" (330).

Narrative descriptions turn overtly excessive and even sarcastic at this point in the novel, expressing dissatisfaction with the non-working women's perspective. With phrases such as, "One accomplished creature with learning radiating from every pore, delivered a charming little essay on the strong-minded women of antiquity," Alcott successfully initiates a conversation between the women whose lives she is depicting, her own novel and writing career, and "educated" attempts to improve the world only through theory (330). Part of Christie's (Alcott's) critique is that the non-working class women do not know about the lives of working class women, and, therefore, find it difficult to help them. After one woman told of "Aspasia discussing Greek politics with Pericles and Plato reposing upon ivory couches, or Hypatia modestly delivering philosophical lectures to young men behind a Tyrian purple curtain," the crowd of seamstresses, type-setters, and

shop-girls became quite anxious and said, "ungratefully amongst themselves, `That's all very pretty, but I don't' see how it's going to better wages among us *now*" (331).

Alcott is equally critical, however, of the working class women who after one speech get so upset that they are "eager to rush t the State-house *en masse*, and demand the ballot before one-half of them were quite sure what it meant, and the other half were unfit for it as any ignorant Patrick bribed with a dollar and a sup of whiskey" (331). She characterizes the workers' speeches as telling of their own limitations as well, but also points out that this is all the more reason for their relief and education.

> The workers poured out their wrongs and hardships passionately and plaintively, demanding or imploring justice, sympathy, and help; displaying the ignorance, incapacity, and prejudice, which make their need all the more pitiful, their relief all the more imperative. (330)

Christie remembers one non-working class "well-wisher" who "closed with a cheerful budget of statistics, giving the exact number of needle-women who had starved, gone mad, or committed suicide during the past year" (331). Alcott effectively critiques the "educated" sisters' impersonal attempts to help without taking their white gloves off as well as the working class women for being such "impressionable creatures" who "believed every word and saw no salvation anywhere." For them, "immediate starvation seemed to be waiting at the door to clutch them as they went out" (331). Alcott again aligns herself with Fuller in the narrative's details about how Christie is able to effectively communicate with the working class women: she effectively relates to them by engaging herself with them. This echoes Fuller's argument that women can gain knowledge and self-identity through experience in the world, by working in a vocation of their choice that encourages familiarity with one's self-identity and mutually respective relations in the world.

With biting satire, the narrator describes how, "As the statistical extinguisher retired, beaming with satisfaction at having added her mite to the good cause," Christie is overcome with a "sudden and uncontrollable impulse" that "moved [her] to rise in her place and ask leave to speak . . .her first speech in public since she left the stage" (331-32). Finally, many years after she had first attempted to climb one step higher on the ladder of success as an actress, Christie's body rises on its own in an uncontrollable impulse, and her bodily and speech acts unite once again in a public arena—a bit melodramatically perhaps, but genuinely nevertheless. Significantly, however, when the president of the Women's league asks her to step up to the stage, Christie declines, saying, "I am better here, thank you; for I have been and mean to be a working-woman all my life" (332). By not taking the stage, Christie recognizes the performativity of her actions. If Christie had taken the stage, her action might have had performative effects counter to her intentions. Her bodily actions might have repeated the effect of the non-working class women's speeches, further separating the two classes of women. Not taking the stage, her body will be more easily interpreted in its inscriptive capacity; the women will see her face, hands, and gestures within their own realm. She won't be taking on an "actress-like" stance. She will be stepping from the frame of class and patriarchal limitations. Her body will not "write" or model patriarchally and hierarchically inscribed differentiations. Instead, she re-writes, re-embodies her own experience as a working woman in all its complexity.

The women's responses to Christie's speech is telling as well of Alcott's emphasis upon bodily writing, or the ability of Christie's body to signify apart from and in addition to her words. This knowledge is the result of her work and experience throughout the

novel, her lived experiences rather than the result of general abstractions and impersonal theory. Assuming that Alcott desires a parallel between Christie's speech and Work itself, the following description is rather important:

> The women felt that this speaker was one of them; for the same lines were on her face that they saw on their own, her hands were no fine lady's hands, her dress plainer than some of theirs, her speech simple enough for all to understand; cheerful, comforting, and full of practical suggestion, illustrations out of their own experiences, and a spirit of companionship that uplifted their despondent hearts. (333)

Considering that Work is the product of Alcott's work as a writer within the American literary tradition, this description provides an alternative standard to more traditional, heroic models of male development where one achieves individual validation by separating one's self from relationship.

Keyser suggests that Christie's speech and its manner of delivery "bridges the gap not only between working- and middle-class women but between female private and male public performance" (Whispers 119). What Christie said in her speech "she hardly knew: words came faster than she could utter them, thoughts pressed upon her, and all the lessons of her life rose vividly before her" (332). Christie's unconscious, outpouring narrative combines the impulsive nature and value of dramatizing one's own life taught to her by Hepsey, Cynthy Wilkins, and Mr. Power. As women were leaving the meeting,

> Christie's hand was shaken by many roughened by the needle, stained with printer's ink, or hard with humbler toil; many faces smiled gratefully at her, and many voices thanked her heartily. But sweeter than any applause were the words of one woman who grasped her hand, and whispered with wet eye: "I knew your blessed husband; he was very good to me, and I've been thanking the Lord he had such a wife for his reward! (333)

Alcott's gender-neutral philosophy of work is exhibited in the wet-eyed woman's remark to Christie concerning her husband, David. With this remark, Alcott recites the

nineteenth-century marital norm in which women serve their husbands, but by designating David, a man, as the model community member at a women's rights meeting, Alcott revises traditional notions of nineteenth-century gender polarity.

Several critiques have noted the women-centered population of Alcott's closing vignette—Hepsey, Bella (Helen Carrol's sister), Cynthy Wilkins, Mrs. Sterling (David Sterling's mother), Rachel (by then revealed as Letty, Christie's husband's long lost sister), and Christie's daughter by her deceased husband, Pansy, holding hands as they sit around a table discussing the value of work—as revealing Alcott's alignment with the traditional utopian image of female community presented by much nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. Rigsby also suggests that Alcott's closing scene repeats Fuller's notion that "women need to separate themselves from men for a while, 'till they know what they need'" (Rigsby 123, Fuller 328). Fuller does suggest that "at present, women are the best helpers of one another" (328), but Work posits that this is the case only because women are assumed to be more knowledgeable of one another's experiences than men. Highlighting that women's lives have a wide variance in her representation of the speeches at the women's rights meeting, Alcott asserts being aware of the performativity of one's words and actions, the fact that they are transformed by and transformative of the community in which they take place, as more important than maintaining strictly gender-specific communities. Work demonstrates that both work and language are performative in that they shape one's identity and social relations primarily by situating one within the social and historical conventions of particular discursive communities. Consequently, disrupting yet one more nineteenth-century sentimental stereotype, a specifically female community doesn't necessarily solve the problems Alcott is interested at all.

If Alcott does participate in any Utopian longing, it is in her inclusion of somewhat feminized male characters, such as Mr. Power and David Sterling, to participate in the novel alongside women who were somewhat masculinized by their mere presence within the nineteenth-century public work space. This model of blurred gender identification is used, I believe, to illustrate the kind of conversation, and dare I say intellectual work, Alcott champions in Work. It is Fuller's injunction for society to "Let [women] think; let them act; till they know what they need" (328) that Alcott echoes in Christie's argument for why women should make their way into the public sphere: "Women who stand alone in the world, and have their own way to make," Christie explains, "have a better chance to know men truly than those who sit safe at home and only see one side of mankind" (207). We can see this same sentiment echoed at the women's rights meeting: women who only know the working-class side or the "educated," non-working class perspective of female experience in nineteenth-century America were ineffective at working to better women's situation.

The novel asserts the possibility of women's development of a professional, empowering, and positive sense of identity within the American workforce, but it also points out the need for women to have the opportunity to figure out how to negotiate tensions between values traditionally associated with domesticity and capitalistic, market-based values. In this way, Work, like Christie's speech, asserts its own significance: people need the opportunity to, as Fuller put it, think and act "till they know what they need" to do (328).

In Christie's words to Bella in the closing pages of the novel, Alcott insinuates that men as well as women need to participate in this "experiment," as Christie calls it (340).

"Women lead in society," Christie argues,

> 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 . . . Why keep up an endless clatter about gowns and dinners, your neighbors' affairs, and your own aches, when there is a world full of grand questions to settle, lovely things to see, wise things to study, and noble things to imitate. (340)

"Bella, you must try to the experiment, and be the queen of a better society than any you can reign over now" (340). And with this call to action, Alcott brings back to the surface of her readership's memory Christie's experience as an actress (Queen of the Amazons), her experience with the shallow artificiality of genteel life, and the performative value of mutually respective relationships and conversations that she learned from Hepsey, Cynthy Wilkins, David Sterling, and Mr. Power. All of these memories culminate to depict the performative import of Christie's "experiment": readers realize that throughout the whole novel, while struggling to get and keep a job, Christie has also been confronting "grand questions" she might otherwise, like her Aunt Betsey, have never considered. By the end of the novel, Christie's "new declaration of independence" has revealed the significance of female work as well as demonstrated its own "cultural work"--its transformative possibility. As Jane Tompkins explains, such speech acts, or novels in this case, are valuable because they provide "powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment" (Sensational Designs xi). Christie's life, and the lives of others around her, is more fulfilling because of her "new declaration of independence." This was a significant and inspiring message for Alcott's nineteenth-century, predominantly female, readership that had angst about women's movement into the public sphere and quite a few "hero"-

complexes to negotiate.

Alcott introduces knowledge of the performative import of one's language use and one's work as essential to female success within the American work force and to the development of an empowering sense of female identity in general. She does this by presenting both of these activities (speech acts and various forms of work) as definitive of Christie Heron's development of meaningful self-identity within nineteenth-century American society.

Chapter Three

The Appeal of Little Women:

Competing Versions of Female Independence

> 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.
>
> ---Louisa May Alcott, Little Women

The above epigraph—Amy's retort to Jo when Jo resists participating in the social "fête" Amy designs for her art class in the Little Women chapter "Artistic Attempts"—is indicative of a central tension in the novel and in criticism of the novel: competing versions of female independence. The title of the chapter in which this confrontation occurs—"Artistic Attempts"—also connects tensions between different feminist philosophies with Alcott's literary attempts in Little Women itself. The novel's focus on conflicts between its adolescent and adult characters' creative attempts to fashion their own senses of female independence and identity dramatizes key tensions in nineteenth-century conceptions of the female role.

Differences between Alcott's characters' approaches to self-development add to the complexity and continued relevance of Little Women and Alcott's theorizing of female identity, self-expression, and socialization. Conflicts between Amy, Jo, the other March sisters, and their Mother, Marmee, act as plot-defining devices throughout the novel. This narrative design spotlights the girls' conflicting activities and philosophies, dramatizing ideology-in-action and "staging" a critique of the social norms and prejudices that shape, support, and challenge specific characters' behavior and

development. The design also includes repeated discrepancies and tensions between nineteenth-century feminine ideals and the possibilities the March girls imagine for themselves.

The above epigraph, like the novel, suggests differing motives, philosophies, and prejudices behind Jo and Amy's approaches to developing identity in particular. However, as Little Women dramatizes, there are also significant overlaps between their conceptions of self and identity that indicate Alcott's complex attitude toward nineteenth-century female identity. Generally relating Jo and Amy's motives, philosophies, and prejudices to some of the philosophical movements influential in Alcott's time, including Enlightenment Liberal Feminism, Cultural Feminism, and Transcendentalism, helps characterize several of the feminist themes and social attitudes that Alcott confronts in Little Women. Connections between these philosophies, Alcott's own life, and Alcott's depiction of female identity in key scenes of Little Women also provide opportunities throughout this discussion for discovering why Alcott found "performance" to be such an apt metaphor for understanding female socialization.

Amy's concern with whether or not other people like her and her enterprising attitude toward her social circumstances and relationships suggests the Enlightenment belief in the human ability to perfect one's self and society through willful, rational behavior. She assumes that her interaction with "good society" and the "tastes and manners" she cultivates will benefit her and society (259).[1] "Making the most of every chance that comes" also suggests she believes in and will endeavor to discover and take advantage of a set of universally beneficial principles governing human interaction. Indicative of Amy's attitude throughout the novel, Amy's declaration of independence

connotes a liberal attitude toward sensory and relational experiences; she is often offended by Jo's intolerant attitude toward social customs. Jo's stance, on the other hand, connotes an overt, defiant, self-sufficient version of stubborn independence commensurate with the Transcendental, Romantic belief in isolated, individual experimentation as one of the best means of self-transformation and self-reliance. Seemingly unconcerned with social interaction, Jo throughout the novel seems more interested in her personal revelations and the exercise of her imagination than in her cultivation of socially sanctioned "tastes and manners." While Amy's approach suggests traditional education and mental development, her characterization of Jo's approach is a purely physical one; Jo has her "elbows out" and her "nose in the air." However, Amy also associates Jo with the spoken performance of her own idea—Jo's revisionary "call" on the meaning of independence, thus situating Jo as a reformer, another Transcendental stereotype.

This contrast between Amy's alliance with traditional "tastes and manners" of "good society" and her provocation of Jo's "call" about her own sense of independence stresses a particularly feminist concern on Alcott's part. The contrast emphasizes Amy's faith in a traditional educational system that, as Mary Wollstonecraft points out, offers women a lack of education, condemning women to "meaningless repetition" and an inability to reflect critically upon their own lives (Donovan 10-11): "So they do today what they did yesterday, merely because they did it yesterday," Wollstonecraft argues (104). Women's ability to act with purpose and to have "power . . . over themselves" were aims of Enlightenment feminism that Amy embodies in her statement declaration of independence, but her concern with making people like her connotes a likelihood that she

may do as others have done or what others would like her to do. Nevertheless, like Wollstonecraft, Amy shares the Enlightenment faith in individualism and the power of thinking in an orderly fashion. If one of the "tastes and manners" Amy expects to learn is critical thinking, then she shares an interest in the kind of self-determination affirmed by Enlightenment liberal feminism.

Wollstonecraft's assertion that women should have access to the "great enterprises" of life (294), rather than being confined to the domestic sphere is, in fact, one of the goals and sentiments Amy's character development demonstrates. In contrast to Jo's persistent defiance to feminine norms and traditional educational outlets throughout the novel, however, Amy's confidence in the "goodness" of social structures and nineteenth-century conventions demonstrates Alcott's concern with adolescent girls' vulnerability as they confidently assume that nineteenth-century society has their best interests in mind. As the plot and character development in Little Women progresses, it becomes clear that Jo and Amy actually share an interest in participating in activities that offer opportunities for the free-exercise of their intellects, but Jo remains perpetually more suspicious of the knowledge and treatment she is likely to gain from others.

Aligning herself with Margaret Fuller who initiated the cultural feminist tradition in Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845), Alcott's character Jo March embodies Fuller's argument that "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 [her] powers . . . (244). As Amy's characterization of herself and Jo demonstrates, nineteenth-century culture often left females "overloaded with precepts," as Fuller characterizes them, and "nothing [was] so dreaded for a woman as originality of thought

or character" (245). Because of this dread women's minds are often "impeded by doubts" in their own judgment, and "they lose their chance of fair free proportions," according to Fuller (245-46). "The difficulty is, " Fuller argues, "to get them to the point from which they shall naturally develop self-respect, and learn self-help" (246). For too long, Fuller urges, females have been "taught to learn their rule from without, not to unfold it from within" (245). Romanticism's, or Transcendentalism's, organic world view and privileging of self-exploration and self-determination rather than social training is enacted in Little Women through its narrator's repeated contrasts of the March girls' different personal styles and attitudes, such as the one between Amy and Jo's different approaches to asserting self-identity and establishing female independence found in this discussion's epigraph. Alcott presents several versions of actions and attitudes that comprise adolescent and adult female identity. Such comparisons allow Alcott to present young girls' and women's attitudes toward their own and others' identities as indicative of specific, cultural values and practices without pinpointing any one of the March girls as *the* model for female development.

Instead, Little Women reminds its readers that a combination of socialization processes and individuals' own attitudes and actions comprise female identity inside and outside of relationship. More importantly, the novel focuses on female *behavior*, both individual and collective, as an index of female self-perception, social expectations, and communal responses to female development. The novel's simultaneous attention to collective female activities, such as the March girls' theatrical role-playing and everyday attention to one another's behavior and moods, as well as the *effects* of such activity on individual characters habits of self-conception and social aspirations emphasizes the

difficulty of having simultaneous concern with communal and individual development. Collectively addressing such difficulties makes it possible for the March girls' to gain self-knowledge about the socially performative import of their behavior, thus making them better able to relate to others, or "to love out of strength, not weakness," as Josephine Donovan describes the benefit of cultural feminism's self-centered and women-centered view (33).

Little Women's focus on women-centered culture also embodies Fuller's idea that "women are the best helpers of one another" and that women should reflect of their lives collectively and aspire to act with communal and self-interest in mind (328). As argued in this project earlier discussion of Alcott's adult autobiography, Work, Fuller's motto, "Let [women] think; let them act; till they know what they need," (328) is a prevalent Alcott argument. This attitude demonstrates Alcott's acknowledgment of a central tension between Enlightenment liberalism and cultural feminism: "Fuller's concern about loving relationships and connectedness to community is not something one finds in liberal Enlightenment theory" (Donovan 33). Jo and Amy challenge the philosophies with which they are somewhat easy associated—Transcendentalist and Enlightenment values, respectively—with their reversed attitudes toward female community. Jo is skeptical toward the treatment she is likely to receive from others, even other women, in her attempts at self-development; Amy has an almost naïve faith in a loving, nurturing, tolerant community. This is but one example of Alcott engaging dominant philosophical attitudes of her time and challenging easy assessments of the effects such theorizing may have on women's lives, or, as is the case with Little Women, on the way women imagine their own and other women's lives.

Little Women's attention to collective and individual female activity as identity-shaping forces embodies performance theory's all-encompassing definition of performance as "restored" or "twice-behaved behavior"—the "dramatization of the past in the present," of cultural convention in individual habit, and of the collective in the individual and the individual in the collective—with an often revisionary intent and effect (Phelan 10).[2] One of the novel's primary concerns appears to be senses of identity that result from the combination of the social ideologies and cultural practices that comprise the March girls' individual approaches to establishing self- and social identity. Understood as acts and patterns of behavior repeated back and forth between social and individual contexts, between cultural and personal histories, "twice-behaved behavior" is an apt description of Alcott's use of female performance in Little Women because the March girls' activities are often depicted as rehearsals of particular cultural stereotypes and practices. The March girls' parlor theatrical and other role-playing activities, such as their Literary Pickwick Club and the personas they adopt at social gatherings, include planned behaviors meant to elicit somewhat predictable responses based upon past usage and cultural meaning but also intended to interrupt or revise these responses. Foregrounding the development of female identity *as* performance—as "twice-behaved behavior"—places special emphasis upon the use of social conventions and stereotypical communal interactions and relationships in specific social and private contexts; the March girls become "actors," manipulating conventions at the same time they are learning them. The stereotypes they embody and disrupt operate in the sense Jane Tompkins describes in Sensational Designs: they operate as "instruments of cultural self-definition" for the March girls themselves and for the readers witnessing their

development (xvi). The novel is also "twice-behaved" for readers in that it continually compares the March girls to one another, therefore encouraging comparisons between the March girls' lives and those of her readers' as well. Narrative descriptions in the novel repeatedly "stage" opportunities for readers to reflect on how their own lives intersect with the lives and philosophies of the bratty, awkward, adolescent March girls and their patient, teacherly mother, Marmee.

Jo, Alcott's literary persona and the March sister with whom innumerable readers most readily identify in meaningful and inspiring ways, is often described as appealing because—hating housework, loving to write sensational stories about female rebellion, refusing the marriage proposal of a rich, attractive man, and seeking self-defined independence—she eludes feminine stereotype and rejects traditional nineteenth-century female roles. The development of Jo March's character is particularly relevant because she is consistently identified as Alcott's autobiographical persona. Amy's assessment of Jo as a socially irresponsible character in this discussion's epigraph performs an interesting self-assessment on Alcott's part, indicating Alcott's interest in evaluating the significance of decisions—"calls"—young women make about how to interact with conventional views of female social and familial participation. Because Alcott's literary performance (her own set of decisions about the lives of a certain group of women) in Little Women has caused her to be stereotyped as a proponent of separate-sphere ideology, this particular self-projection may be interpreted as having a purposefully ambiguous performative import.

Amy's statement "[C]all it independence, it you like" reminds Jo and readers of their own opportunities to make decisions, to shape and then embody their own chosen

versions of female independence, but it does so in a manner that questions the quality of life brought about by a sense of female autonomy that rejects conventions and relationships. This skepticism and inquisitive conjecturing about female independence infects much of Little Women and readers' responses to it. Alcott also pinpoints "Call it independence, if you like" as a speech act that does not have clear-cut performative import, thus emphasizing the role of the speech act's interpreters.

Repetitious reevaluations of the March girls' approaches to identity continue in Alcott criticism as well. "[C]all it independence, if you like. That's not my way" paraphrases the response many critics of Little Women have had to one another's assessments of the March girls' development. Debates over the attitude toward feminine roles and versions of female independence performed in Little Women comprise most of its criticism. The phrase "[C]all it independence, if you like. That is not my way," can be switched to embody Jo March's attitude and the attitude of modern feminists who find the novel's celebration of familial and social traditional expectations rather than the March girls' artistic and professional endeavors disappointing. Such a switch also raises questions about whether Amy's emphasis upon social interaction and relationship can be simplified to an alignment with the traditional conceptions of the female role. Amy's announcement does not suggest that she wants to stay home, do the same old thing, and focus on fulfilling the needs of others. Rather, she wants to "go into good society, and cultivate [her] manners and tastes" (259). Amy's assertion may be interpreted as a recitation of Mary Wollstonecraft's suggestions that women should "Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience" (107), or as Amy suggests, to self- and social alienation.

As mentioned before, however, it is impossible to identify one model of development that Alcott privileges, and Amy's attitude toward her education and social development may as easily be interpreted as blind faith. Clearly, evaluations of Amy and Jo's attitudes rely on a multitude of characters' and readers' choices, motives, and prejudices. From this reader's perspective, both Amy and Jo's attitudes embody important complexities that remain central in women's lives. Conflicts between competing feminist approaches are performative in important ways in Little Women and in readers' responses to it: they interrupt any certainty about *the* attitude toward female development expressed in Little Women. After years of stereotyping as a simplistic story of domestic bliss, sentimental sap, and female self-denial, this is a significant accomplishment.

As a performative speech act, Amy's "call it independence, if you like" has significant import within the framework of Little Women and critical reception; the novel, it seems, invites debate over conceptions of the female socialization process and critical responses to it. The novel is about the March girls deciding what they want to do with their lives and what they think about their own and others' life choices. Criticism of the novel is also shaped by these concerns. Jane Tompkins has insightfully pointed out that stereotypes "convey enormous amounts of cultural information in an extremely condensed form" (xvi) and that texts do "cultural work"—they function not only as entertainment but also as didactic and persuasive formulations of cultural identity (xv). As one of the most, if not the most, popular literary renditions of nineteenth-century female identity, Little Women has the "power of [a] copy," or stereotype, as Tompkins describes it. It performs "instantly recognizable representatives of overlapping racial,

sexual, national, ethnic, economic, social, political, and religious categories" (xvi). As Alcott's autobiography, Little Women's handling of stereotypes provides glimpses into Alcott's desires for female self- and social-development.

Investigating Little Women's critical and popular identity and key scenes in the novel where the March girls experiment with and reflect on their own independent senses of female identity reveals a complexity to the novel that has not always been readily perceived: Alcott's strategy of copying feminine stereotypes so as to expose their performative import in the lives of adolescent and adult women and to reveal alternative conceptions of female independence.

Rosalind Krauss argues "there is no original until the copy is operative" (Phelan 9).[3] As performed in Little Women, this philosophical equation is transformed into the idea that feminine stereotypes—"copies"—operate as totalizing forces shaping female identity only to the extent that we ignore the efficacy of individual performances of female identity. The March girls' performances of developing identity in key scenes in the novel offer opportunities for reevaluating methods of understanding and critiquing the female socialization process. In addition, the novel confuses the relationship between copy and original explained by Krauss even further in its existence as Alcott's childhood autobiography. There may not be an "original" female prototype—one would hope not, lest we all be automatons—but there are individual adolescent and adult females and their predecessors, such as Alcott, who build their lives and response to others' lives at least in part through ritualistic and improvised negotiations of feminine and female stereotypes, and these lives are certainly "original" to them. Little Women's in-flux—or "topsy-turvy," to use one of Alcott's favorite expressions—attitude toward female stereotypes

and individual female performances has allowed it to remain somewhat original. After a century and a half of critical interpretation, Little Women's identity is still developing, and this is perhaps its primary appeal.

Alcott's use of the phrase "topsy-turvy" in her personal writings is worth tracing because of its connection with the attitude toward female identity expressed in Little Women. In a letter to her father on their shared birthday, Nov. 28, 1855, Alcott uses the term to describe herself:

> I was a crass crying brown baby . . . I fell with a crash into girlhood & continued . . . tumbling from one year to another till strengthened by such violent exercise the topsey turvey girl shot up into a topsey turvey woman who now twenty three years after sits big brown & brave. (Letters 14)

At the start of the Civil War, she writes: "The town is in a high state of topsey turveyness . . . when quiet Concord does get stirred up it is a sight to behold" (Letters 64-5). And when she is preparing to leave for Washington to work as a nurse, she writes: "Father [is] keeping his topsy turvy family in order . . . I am getting ready to go to Washington as an army nurse . . . if I was only a boy I'd march off tomorrow" (Letters 80). When discussing the favorable reception of her novel Hospital Sketches (1863), she writes: "Hospital Sketches' still continues a great joke to me, & a sort of perpetual surprise party, for to this day I cannot see why people like a few extracts from topsey-turvey letters written on inverted tin kettles" (Letters 95).[4] Repeatedly, throughout these quotations, Alcott uses "topsy-turvy" to describe situations where private and public spheres "constitute worlds turned upside down" (Young 449). Alcott's depiction of the March girls' anxiety about their social identities and their confused personal lives spotlights the "topsy-turvy"—not clearly defined—nature of their adolescent and adult lives.

"Topsy-turvy" also has a less conceptual, concrete reference in nineteenth-century culture. As Elizabeth Young explains, "Topsy-turvy is also the name of a two-headed doll common to this era, whose conjoined black and white torsos . . . suggest the intimate connections between black and white female bodies in nineteenth-century American culture" (Young 449). Young suggests that because of this cultural reference Alcott's use of the phrase particularly emphasizes Alcott's rebellion against constructions of white femininity: "Overturned, the white doll's skirts reveal a black doll in racist 'pickaninny' caricature. Alcott's writings offer a particular psychic appropriation of such duality, whereby the fantasy of unruly blackness serves as the inverted counterpart to the constraints of white femininity" (449). Although relationships between black and white women do not play a significant role in Little Women, connections between black women's and marginalized women's rebellious activity (Hepsey and Christie's conception of themselves in "actor's parts") in Alcott's novel Work do suggest Alcott's use of this subversive image. Alcott's "topsy-turvy" attitude toward female identity in Little Women—such as that depicted in Jo's perpetual desire to be a boy and Amy's desire to exercise a "style not in keeping with [her] circumstances" (259)—at least indicates her interest in challenging stereotypes and constraints of white femininity.

As Alcott's childhood autobiography, the novel presents a theorizing of female identity closely linked with Alcott's own historical, cultural, and familial context, thus making the novel "twice-behaved" within specific literary, philosophical, and ritualistic contexts that provide insight into Alcott's self-identity. Alcott's use of performance in Little Women repeats many of her own family's identity developing practices. Like the family practices depicted in Little Women, many Alcott family traditions were

contradictory—"topsy-turvy"—as well. Both the March and Alcott families lived amidst the clash of transcendental philosophy and sentimental renderings of female sensibility; they employed role-play as a method of allegorical teaching as well as a rebellious, experimental female activity; and they encouraged the production of permanent, publicly accessible, written renditions of self as well as more fleeting, dramatic, confrontational habits of self-display. In addition, both Alcott and the March women struggle to negotiate tensions between self-ambition and relationships with others. These tensions define key scenes in Little Women as well as critical interpretations of the novel.

The following seven sections focus on either dominant responses to the novel—such as its sentimental stereotyping and critics' disappointment with the traditional progression of female identity depicted in Jo March's marriage and truncated literary career—or key themes in the novel—such as the March girls' conflicting uses of role-play, their concern with physical appearance and feminine ideals, and their attitude toward their own and one another's artistic endeavors and public self-presentations. In addition, these sections examine the interconnectedness of these key themes as they develop in the novel. This chapter's simultaneous focus on the development of Alcott's literary identity and on the March girls' developing senses of identity repeatedly reflects on dominant trends in Alcott criticism to inform its discussion of Alcott's and Little Women's relevance in current criticism on female socialization and identity.

Including stereotypical as well as subversive depictions of the female role, Alcott reverses the implications of the nineteenth-century, self-denying, feminine stereotype by turning its characteristics toward concerns with self-care as well as care for others, toward attention to self-development in addition to communal concern, and toward an

interest in a critical attitude toward developments in the nineteenth-century female socialization process itself. Self-awareness rather than denial, and self-directedness rather than social conformity, are activities Alcott emphasizes as adding significant quality to the March girls' lives. Anticipating the concerns and conceptual frameworks of current theorists of the female socialization process, Alcott focuses on performance as a conceptual framework and identity developing activity within March family life.

Alcott's Theorizing and Little Women's Identity: Performative Frameworks

One of the most striking characteristics of Little Women is that people think they *know* the book even if they've never read it (Gannon 103). On one hand, this *knowing* is symptomatic of the novel's sentimental stereotyping. Characterized as a simplistic, even formulaic, novel that promotes female interest in work and relationships as the cures for girlhood anxiety as well as marriage and motherhood as the antidotes for female discontent, Little Women is an icon of nineteenth-century women's culture and a code term for sentimentality (Showalter vii). Assumed familiarity with the text is also symptomatic of the novel's incredibly diverse appeal: the March girls' coming-of-age experiences, often fraught with difficulty, are familiar to most readers in the context of their own lives. At several different points in life, we realize we are aging and "growing up"; reading about the March girls' coming-of-age experiences provides an occasion for reflecting on our own understanding of the development of identity. As Gannon points out, one of the reasons the novel is often described as the "American female myth" is that it has "demonstrated a mysterious power to explain its readers to themselves" (121).

Hindsight versions of adolescent experience often include revisions or summarizations indicative of present attitudes towards one's life and development. As Alcott's childhood autobiography, Little Women offers Alcott's developing version of her own girlhood from an adult perspective—her perspective in the process of becoming and developing for herself and for her readers. Consequently, one shouldn't be surprised to find some theorizing going on in Alcott's (re)tellings of her childhood experiences. Readers' own tendency to relate their life experiences to the text combined with Alcott's own "topsy-turvy" tendency understandably also creates conflicting versions of what even careful readers *know* about the text.

Critical reinterpretations of Alcott's feminist philosophy, following the discovery and publishing of her adult, sensation novels and reconsideration of nineteenth-century women's texts in general, have led to significant questions concerning Little Women's message about the female socialization process and its influence on the way we understand our own and other women's lives. What Little Women is *about* has caused quite a bit of controversy, and "about" in this context has a significant double-meaning. The plot of the novel indicates on a simplistic level what the novel is *about*: under the close surveillance of their parents, primarily their mother, and one another, four adolescent girls grow up and either die (Beth) or happily get married and have kids (Meg, Amy, and Jo). This is hardly a satisfying plot to modern feminists in favor of female independence and autonomy. On a more sophisticated level one can ask what the novel is about in a performative sense: What is the novel *about* in terms of the female socialization process? What does the novel *do* with cultural conventions, activities, and attitudes that shape the female socialization process?

Alcott's "theorizing through autobiography," to use bell hooks' axiom, doesn't provide clear-cut answers to the novel's ideological identity (209). Since its publication nearly a century and a half ago, Little Women has demanded its readers to make their own "call[s]," to go back to Amy's statement in this discussion's epigraph, about the meaning associated with particular female actions and attitudes represented in the novel. Analysis of Alcott's adult, sensational tales about female ingénues—female versions of nineteenth-century "confidence men" who manipulate social conventions and forge identity for their own benefit—has led to the critical habit of assuming subversive intent in all of Alcott's depictions of female experience, including her depiction of the March girls' development.[5] Though more readily associated with her adult fiction, female performance is central in Little Women as well; one doesn't have to turn to Alcott's alternative genre or works published under adopted pseudonyms or anonymously to address the complexity of female identity represented within her works. Performance as an activity for engaging constructions of female identity is central in Alcott's depictions of the March girls' development. The March girls' artistic performances include theatrical role-playing, writing, music, drawing, embroidery, and sculpting, but their participation in social events and, in fact, their participation as particular character-types within the novel itself are also commented on *as* performances throughout the novel. Not as readily associated with the subversion of feminine ideals or the manipulation of social contexts, however, the March girls' performances exist as somewhat frustrating counterparts to those of Alcott's sensational femme fatales. The aims of the March girls' performances are much less obvious than the intentions behind the self-maskings of their sensational sisters.

Jean Muir, the enterprising heroine of Alcott's most famous sensation tale, Behind a Mask, for instance, participates in self-masking performance in order to marry rich and provide herself with financial security and opportunities for individual development. The March girls use performance as a method of experimenting with and expressing identity, but they also use role-playing as a device for social training. Performance has the duplicitous role of providing a means of female rebellion and a means for learning self-discipline and practicing self-denial. Performance's duplicitous role contributes to the novel's ideological ambiguity and is central to the text's characterization of nineteenth-century female experience as well as to Alcott's own identity.

Readers and critics have been unable to monolithically pinpoint the values Little Women promotes, and this critical ambiguity may be one the novel's most significant contributions to considerations of American female identity. Critical interpretations oscillate between emphasizing the novel's subversive and conventional ideologies. On one hand, through the characters of Jo and Amy in particular, the novel strongly encourages the development of female independence and self-actualization *outside* of relationship. On the other hand, the importance and personal benefits of attending to the needs of others *inside* of traditional familial and marital relationships is validated as, if not more, incisively by the novel's plot and character developments in general. In its depiction of the March girls' development of identity inside and outside of relationship, Little Women addresses the question Tompkins suggests preoccupies sentimental and domestic fiction: "what is power, and where is it located?" (Sensational 160). As Tompkins points out, the concerns of sentimental, domestic fiction are primarily social.

Little Women's translation of these questions can be interpreted as: What kinds of activities and attitudes lead to self-fulfilling female identity, and do these activities and attitudes impede or contribute to the development of female independence inside or outside of relationship?

Much domestic and sentimental fiction, Tompkins explains, is about women finding "a way of defining themselves which gave them power and status . . . in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world" (Sensational 160-61). Growing up in the midst of the development of the transcendental world-view with its emphasis upon hard work and self-improvement and associating with thinkers such as Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and Parker, not to mention her father, Bronson Alcott, Louisa Alcott's understanding of the female role was complex if not contradictory. Burgeoning transcendental philosophy did not parcel out gender roles as easily as the providential world-view prevalent in pre-Civil war America. While the providential view supposed that "directly or indirectly, God controlled all things," including the proper course for gender development, the transcendental view placed more of an emphasis upon self-direction, self-discipline, self-conceptualization, and self-development. The transcendental emphasis upon self-reliance was a particular reality for Louisa Alcott who supported her father's contemplative transcendental habit both ideologically and financially, being the primary breadwinner in the family for the majority of her life. As the March girls participate in the development of their own identities they struggle with many of the same questions concerning the female role that Louisa confronted herself.

Alcott's performance in Little Women—her writing of a text that appeals to both the sentimental, domestic mind frame and a more progressive, politically-interested

ideology—reminds readers that different interpretations of the March girls' actions have different points of view and purposes in mind—"*looking* is not an activity that is performed outside of political struggles and institutional structures, but arises *from* them" (Tompkins, Sensational 23). From the various perspectives of the female characters in Little Women, we gain insight into Alcott's understanding of how women defined themselves, what kinds of activities and relationships they found self-fulfilling, and what questions she had about female power and development in nineteenth-century America.

Traditionally, Jo and Amy, the two sisters who prioritize their artistic endeavors and aggressively pursue female independence and self-development, are contrasted with Meg and Beth, the two sisters readily associated with domesticity because of their interests in servitude, family, and home. Side by side, these comparisons of female priorities comply with the stereotypical, though admittedly unfair totalizations, of models of female identity popularized by a modern feminist, subversive view of female possibility versus the model of female identity popularized by nineteenth-century sentimental, domestic ideology. Since, by the end of the novel, even Amy and Jo have abdicated their artistic development in favor of marriage and motherhood, the sentimental, domesticated version of female identity is often interpreted as winning out in the novel.

Alcott has been accused of "selling out," quite literally and successfully, to a press and general readership more interested in buying novels about domestic bliss, female servitude, and feminine virtue than stories about female ambition and independence. An over-simplified chronology of Alcott's life often presents her sensational authorship as ending once she earns enough money from the profits of Little

Women to support herself and more importantly, the rest of her family. Since her domestic fiction was lucrative, the truncated story goes, she became the "Children's friend" and the proponent of traditional notions of nineteenth-century womanhood, putting aside her tales expressing outrage at the stifling effects of nineteenth-century feminine ideals upon ordinary women's lives. In her article, "Impersonating `Little Women': the radicalism of Alcott's *Behind a Mask*," for instance, Judith Fetterley suggests that Alcott couldn't identify herself with what she saw as the potentially disruptive force behind the habit of psychological disguise promoted by nineteenth-century belief in the transparent relationship between a woman's inner sentiment and outward display and still earn a living as a respectable nineteenth-century woman writer, so she turned to children's fiction, trading in her feminist interest in stories of female self-empowerment and rebellion for a successful career as a writer of juvenile fiction—in effect, taking on a actress's part and faking or lying about her convictions (12-14). According to Fetterley, "Alcott, like her character Jean Muir in Behind a Mask, "impersonates the character of a `little woman'"—the nineteenth-century feminine ideal who is passive, subservient, and disinterested in self-development—for financial gain ("Impersonating" 13-14).

However, as Susan Bernstein points out in her criticism of Fetterley's assessment of Little Women, "Such claims seem to assume that language has a transparent quality—that a text is meant never to be read beyond its literal meaning" (30). Little Women may be understood as a performance of what it is like to be a "little woman" or to try to become a "little woman," but that doesn't mean that its performance promotes the nineteenth-century feminine ideal of passivity and subservience at the cost of self-

development. Arguably, Little Women mocks the notion of a monolithic meaning of "little woman," and instead, performs the plurality of experiences and identities that comprise American girlhood and womanhood, destabilizing stereotypical constructions of female identity and easy answers to the questions raised by the book.

Recalling Susan K. Harris' suggestion that readers pay attention to rhetorical strategies, such as metaphor, that produce subversive possibility within nineteenth-century women's writing, Bernstein argues that we can consider Little Women as Jo considers herself and her first novel during her stay in New York as a single women and a struggling writer. Jo described her writing as "getting on in spite of my many failures" and in spite of publishers' contradictory interpretations of it as being either "bad theory" or a failed attempt at some contrived "deep theory" (Bernstein 27, Little Women 271). Jo claims that she "had no theory of any kind" when she wrote her first novel and that she produced it "for the pleasure and the money," but, as Bernstein points out, denying theory implicates theory. "Literary Lessons," the chapter in which Jo discusses these contradictory reviews of her first novel, includes the narrative comment: "Her theatrical experiences and miscellaneous reading were of service now, for they gave her some ideas of dramatic effect, and supplied plot, language, and costumes" (267). More likely than not, Jo's denial of theory indicates Alcott's desire for readers to go beyond literal interpretations of the text and instead consider the narrative, theatrical, and artistic conventions used to tell the story (Bernstein 27). As Harris points out, "Given the nature of the public discourse and the power it had in the market place, writers aiming for a popular audience had to observe, *at least superficially*, essentialist rules for inscribing female protagonists and for their narrator's attitudes towards their heroines' adventures"

(my emphasis, 47). The literary climate of Alcott's time demanded women's attention to the performance-like quality of their writing. Fortunately, for Alcott, she was already interested in the import of theatricality and performance within women's lives; in fact, she was a rather practiced performer herself.

In our own time, attention to Alcott's use of performance can provide insight into the narratives we use to explain the process of female socialization and ideas about how to promote more positive models of female identity. According to Susan Laird, Marmee's teaching philosophy and practices bear an uncanny resemblance to recent feminist psychological studies of adolescent girlhood: "her teaching practices aim to prevent her daughters' loss of self-esteem and their underdevelopment of capacities for adult survival"—their *miseducation* as it is referred to by current educational theorists (296). Marmee's influence is significant and definite, but the teaching philosophy Laird describes is not exclusively Marmee's. It is also apparent in Alcott's use of performance as an activity associated with the development of female identity. Alcott's emphasis upon performance as a female activity repeatedly dramatizes lessons used to teach methods for developing rather than discouraging self-fulfilling and socially aware female identity. The "habits fundamental to the arts of learning love and survival" that Laird credits to Marmee's teaching are also found in key performance scenes in the novel: "sharing experiences with one another, thinking aloud about them in the retelling, risking and taking honest criticism, helping one another along with encouragement and praise, recognizing explicitly what each has learned through daily difficulties, [and] applying a playful and imaginative spirit" to learning (Laird 298-99). Within the March home, performance is an activity that publicly demonstrates individual growth, facilitates

connection with others, and, more importantly, inspires dialogue concerning female development and experience.

Female Socialization and Performance: Self-awareness of Expression

Alcott's handling of conflicts between self ambition and social expectations is complicated by the fact that it is often difficult to tell the difference between the March girls' use of performance as a method of self-development in line with social expectations concerning female self-abnegation *and* as a method of creative experimentation and self-realization. The first chapter's contrast between Jo's play, "The Witch's Curse," as an opportunity for experimenting with identity and Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress as a model for practicing and learning female lessons of self-denial illustrates this conflict. The relation between Jo's theatrical play and Bunyan's allegorical tale is also significant because it establishes a relationship between Alcott's own text and her father, Bronson Alcott's, favorite allegorical text for teaching his daughters self-denial (Showalter xviii). In the opening chapter of her first largely financially successful book—and thus the book that established her female independence, in a stereotypical sense, most assuredly—Alcott pays tribute to her father's teachings, but she does so in a manner that challenges the belief that female self-denial is ideal behavior. Instead, Alcott's use of the Bunyan tale incites self-awareness and knowledge concerning the complexity of self-presentation within public settings—and, in fact, within literary traditions themselves.

The March girls participate in literal staged performances, such as their performance of Jo's play, "The Witch's Curse," on Christmas evening, to explore

identities other than their own. Such motivation behind their play-acting exists in direct opposition to Bronson Alcott's belief in role-play as a method for practicing and therefore learning how to better internalize socially idealized characteristics and sensibilities. Jo's experimentation with male roles within these parlor theatricals, for instance, is often analyzed as an important release for her frustrations with female identity and an important outlet for fashioning a style of female behavior disruptive to nineteenth-century feminine norms. As Karen Halttunen points out, the melodrama of "The Witch's Curse" allows Jo to "abandon the constraints of genteel womanhood" and perform "passionate self-expression" ("Domestic Drama" 244, 233). Showalter echoes this sentiment, pointing out: "In the play, Jo can dress like a man, make love to her sister, express rage and plot murder, and practice witchcraft with impunity" (xviii). Contrasts between the titles of the two role-playing schemas in the opening chapter indicate the simultaneous threatening and instructive possibilities of feminine role-play. As Showalter points out, within post-Salem New England society, female creativity cast in the framework of "the witch's curse," emphasizes its threat to society propriety (xviii). The Pilgrim's game nevertheless highlights Bronson Alcott's belief in theatrical performance as a medium of rehearsing and teaching female self-denial as well. Even the more empowering interpretation of the Pilgrim's game as an opportunity for self-improvement is compromised by the March girls' use of the tale's *male* model of development—a model that inevitably eventually disqualifies them from achieving its male-oriented goals.[6]

The March girls' adaptation of Dickens' Pickwick Club in a later chapter in the novel titled "The P.C. and P.O." is a much more empowering representation of the import

of role-play in the development of the March girls' individual and communal identities because its terms are not allegorical; instead they actually translate into their real life situation. The Pickwick Club initially consists of them imitating the roles of Dickins's characters in "ladies club" fashion and publishing a weekly newspaper that includes articles on familial events (the death of Mrs. Snowball Pat Paw, the family cat), creative works such as poems and plays ("The Masked Marriage" and a poem in honor of the Pickwick Club's fifty-second meeting), announcement of current events (Miss Oranthy Bluggage's lecture on "Woman and Her Position" and the weekend's upcoming dramatic performances), and a report on each sister's demeanor and behavior during that week ("Good," "Bad," "Middling") (100-104). Although Dickins's characters are again male models of identity, Alcott presents the March girls as co-opting these character types much more effectively and deliberately. Club meetings and the newspaper writings themselves blend masculine and feminine characteristics each writer finds appealing, such as habits of male exclusivity and direct expression but also female inclusiveness and improvisation. Laurie, for instance, is admitted into the exclusively female club only under the conditions that he will "keep them from being sentimental" and "not laugh at our paper and make fun of us afterward" (105). Laurie's admission into the club and, more importantly, his immediate contribution of a post office—that has "every convenience for the mails, --also the females, if I may be allowed the expression"—actually ends up facilitating the clubs' writing. The girls benefit from their inclusiveness; with the addition of the P. O., their written communication expands in form, audience, and efficiency. "The P. O. was a capital little institution, and flourished wonderfully, for nearly as many queer things passed through it as through the real office," the narrator

notes (107). Alcott's pun on the conveniencing of "mails" and females also illustrates the revisionist prioritizing of female ambition and self-expression as well as Little Women's own rhetorical play. Insinuated in this passage is the idea that the March girls' writing—perhaps even Little Women—replaces traditional "mail" practices. Here, female writing is presented with the same potential threatening import as Jo's "Witch's Curse." The P.O. is also another instance of a communally-oriented display of the individual March girls' efforts at self-realization and expression.

When playing the Pilgrim game, Marmee instructs the March girls to adopt the personas of the self-improving, burden-carrying pilgrims of Bunyan's epistolary novel, "not in play, but in earnest" (13), but accomplishing this task proves to be much more difficult than co-opting Dickins's roles. The Pilgrim game blurs distinctions between role-play as female experimentation and role-play as a device for practicing or at least displaying self-denial. The first half of the novel includes titles referencing Pilgrim's Progress to indicate significant milestones in the girls' journey toward moral perfection, such as "Amy's Valley of Humiliation," "Jo Meets Apollyon," and 'Meg Goes to Vanity Fair." Significantly, however, each of these chapters repeatedly present the March girls as *struggling* with feminine ideals rather than manifesting them, thus demonstrating the fraught, rather than natural, process of trying to be "little women"—in the self-limiting sense of the phrase. The fact that the Pilgrim's game is a tradition established by Marmee and Father March may be significant. Rather than relying on a strict formats or sets of traditions, the March girls make up the structures and roles of the Pickwick Club.

Amy's attitude toward participating in both Jo's play and the Pilgrim role-play game demonstrates a particularly resistive attitude toward female performance that is not

usually recognized in the novel. As Keyser points out, Amy is the only sister skeptical of how the Pilgrim game relates to their present life and the only one who has difficulty acting or pretending to be anyone other than herself (Family Romance 39, 42). The other sisters project themselves into a wide variety of roles rather easily. Amy's practicality and self-preservation instincts limit her acting ability. When Jo tells Amy that they ought to rehearse her fainting scene because she is "as stiff as a poker in that," Amy retorts: "I can't help it; I never saw any one faint, and I don't choose to make myself black and blue, tumbling flat as you do. If I can go down easily, I'll drop; if I can't, I shall fall into a chair and be graceful" (6). When Marmee suggests reviving the Pilgrim's game the girls used to play when they were "little things," Amy, the youngest of the March sisters, says she would like to play the game again if she "wasn't too old for such things" (9). Amy's protest is criticized by the narrative comment that Amy "began to talk of renouncing childish things at the mature age of twelve" and Marmee's comment that "We never are too old for this, my dear, because it is a play we are playing all the time in one way or another" (10), but Amy's resistance toward pretending to be anyone other than herself introduces a significant, dissenting attitude toward female performance. As Keyser points out, Amy self-awareness is often mistaken as self-centeredness, but we can interpret Amy as being interested in facilitating her own interests and development, rather than trying to embody someone else's ideas about what she should be and do (Family Romance 39).

When Marmee spells out the framework of the Pilgrim's game, she draws attention to Amy's lack of apparent self-awareness only to unintentionally make it seem quite healthy; Amy doesn't recognize her self-care as selfishness. Explaining the game's

structure, Marmee says: "Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is the true Celestial City" (10). Amy "a very literal young lady," the narrator notes, asks, "Really, mother? where are our bundles?" (10). Marmee reminds Amy's that her selfishness is her bundle, and the game proceeds, but Amy's resistance reminds readers that the March girls' "burdens" are in part defined by stereotypical versions of male and female development, rather than their own self-ambitions. Amy's self-interest doesn't have to be equated with selfishness. In an incident earlier in the chapter where the March girls try to decide how to spend their Christmas money, Amy is the only one who is able to compromise and satisfy her desire to buy something for herself as well as her desire to offer a nice present to Marmee. As Keyser explains, Amy's ability "to mediate between her own desires and the needs of others" is a significant display of self-awareness and independence (Family Romance 39).

Parallels between the Pilgrim's game and Alcott's own life demonstrate the novel's own self-awareness—its acknowledgment that it too may be interpreted as a model of development, as a female *bilddungsroman*. Echoing the motive behind Bronson Alcott's use of Pilgrim's Progress, Meg characterizes it as a story that "may help us," but Alcott's portrayal of Amy's difficulty in identifying her situation with the terms of the game subtly insinuates the notion that Little Women "may help us" too by shedding light on the fraught process of female socialization "not in play, but in earnest" (13).

Playing the Pilgrim's game is initiated by Father March's letter imploring his daughters to "do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully, that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder

than ever of my little women" (8). Amy's resistance to perceiving of herself as a "pilgrim"—indeed, a "little woman"—is seen as quite healthy and mature in light of Marmee's explanation of her own habit of psychological disguise later in the novel. When Jo consults Marmee on how to control her anger toward Amy for burning her manuscript—another instance where the novel reflects on its own identity as an artistic performance and where the divulgence of written self-expression is at stake—Marmee admits: "I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it and hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so" (79). Marmee's comment comforts Jo and strengthens her resolution to "cure" her anger, but the narrator also points out that "forty years seemed rather a long time to watch and pray, to a girl of fifteen" (79). As the novel develops, Jo as well as Amy realizes that habits of psychological disguise comprise a large part of the traditional sense of female identity, but one does not have to identify with roles that preclude self-development or self-care. To Jo, Marmee's forty-year struggle makes female self-denial seem like a rather worthless, and even unachievable, endeavor; nevertheless, Marmee and Jo's conversation is instructive. As Michelle Masse explains, at least "Marmee knows she's angry—and that basic fact is a major one, I think" (329).

Masse goes on to point out that Mrs. Shaw in Alcott's Old-Fashioned Girl, published two years after Little Women, "is doubtless also `angry nearly every day of my life' . . . but doesn't know it." Marmee's psychological disguise "may make us uncomfortable as twentieth-century readers, but what is at work here is not the business of repression, but of survival in pragmatic and psychic ways" (329). Masse supports this bent toward survivalistic endeavor by citing Patricia Hill Collins who describes a similar

paradox faced by Black mothers in the late twentieth-century, "who must 'teach their daughters to fit into systems of oppression' and yet assure that they don't become 'willing participants in their own oppression'" (Masse 329, Collins 53). Marmee and Amy's self-awareness and self-interest do not have to be interpreted, respectively, as strictly submissive or selfish. Instead, they may be seen as a growing female self-awareness of how to develop meaningful self-identity within the confines of social conventions.

Developing identity within the confines of nineteenth-century social conventions carries the connotation of participating in what Mary Pipher, in her bestseller Reviving Ophelia (1994), has called girls' habit of "false self-training"—or the habit of being "less than who they really are," of being "what the culture wants of its young women, not what they themselves want to become (44). I am more interested, however, in emphasizing the importance of the fact that Marmee and her daughters realize they are *being socialized* and they are *participating in a process of female socialization*. Attention to the March girls' and the novel's own self-awareness affects interpretations of key scenes in the novel.

Confronting Sentimental Stereotypes: Female Self-Interest and the Appearance Complex

The novel's opening chapter acknowledges its awareness of the fact that the novel is participating as an agent of female socialization by staging conversations between the March girls' self-conceptions and debates central to nineteenth-century conceptions of female identity. The opening chapter begins with the March girls discussing whether to spend their Christmas money on gifts for themselves or for Marmee, thus directly

questioning whether or not girls should be self-interested or self-denying—a question notoriously central but not often seriously debated in the nineteenth-century. According to nineteenth-century feminine ideals, of course girls should be taught to be self-effacing. The fact that the novel questions this choice in its opening scene demonstrates its progressive view of female identity, and its desire to confront such questions in a direct and open manner.

Amy's response to the notion of not buying a gift for herself is particularly rebellious. Meg and Jo quickly acquiesce to Beth's suggestion that they only spend their money on gifts for Marmee. Amy on the other hand, says: "I'll get a little bottle of Cologne: she likes it, and it won't cost much, so I'll have some left to buy something for me" (5). As Keyser has pointed out, Amy's idea might be interpreted as demonstrating her selfishness, but "it is possible to see her ability to compromise—to mediate between her own desires and the needs of others—as sturdy independence" (Family Romance 39). Even when she second-guesses her compromise and returns to exchange the small bottle for a larger one, using all of her money, she still has her self-representation in mind. First she announces her self-correction—"I gave all my money to get it, and I'm truly trying not be selfish any more"—then she compliments herself—"I'm so glad, for mine is the handsomest now" (14).

Alcott continues this upfront acknowledgment of the complexities involved in the development of female identity by disrupting the gift-buying dilemma with a dispute between Amy and Jo concerning their differing approaches to self-expression and responses to social expectations. This confrontation is caused by their different approaches to using language. This redirection, or compounding, of subject matter

indicates the extent to which the novel is more of a dramatization of the complexities involved in the process of growing up and establishing a sense of self- and social identity than it is an enactment or model for feminine behavior. In other words, in the opening pages of the novel, Alcott makes clear that her own interests in exposing the complexities of female identity, embodied by the March girls' concerns and choices, comprise the driving force of the novel, rather than some preconceived plot—or by extension, literary and social conventions. In defense of her desire to spend her Christmas money on herself, Amy explains that her hardships surpass those of any of her other sisters, thus making her more deserving of the indulgence: "I don't believe any of you suffer as I do . . . for you don't have to go to school with impertinent girls, who plague you if you don't know your lessons, and laugh at your dresses, and label your father if he isn't rich, and insult you when your nose isn't nice" (2). Laughing, Jo advises Amy: "If you mean *libel* say so, and not talk about labels, as if pa was a pickle-bottle." "I know what I mean," retorts Amy, who misspeaks again, this time "with dignity," however, according to the narrator, saying: ". . . and you needn't be so 'statirical' about it. It's proper to use good words, and improve your *vocabilary*" (2)." This exchange demonstrates Amy's willingness to try new things, in this case words, though she often fails. Her desire to be "proper" and her method for improving her "vocabilary," as she says it, are indicative of her aggressively open approach to self-development and self-expression.

Jo's approach to self-expression involves a constant rejection of social conventions. Ironically, her attitude toward linguistic conventions is contradictory. Though rebellious in terms of her own language use, she is intolerant when it comes to Amy's linguistic experimentation. In this opening debate she rejects "good words," uses

slang instead, and whistles, along with other "boyish tricks" (3). She explains that she "can't get over her disappointment in not being a boy," saying: "I hate to think I've got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a Chinaster. It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boy's games and work, and manners" (3). Jo's condescending attitude toward Amy, demonstrated in the assumption that she knows Amy means "libel"—when "label" makes just as much sense, especially as slang—illustrates Jo's hostility toward Amy's willingness to try "good words" and excitement, even eagerness, to grow up. In many ways, Amy represents the attitudes and approaches Jo finds most threatening to her sense of self. Amy seems determined to thrive amidst feminine expectations while Jo thinks such stereotypes force her to "stay at home and knit like a poky old woman" when she is "dying to go fight with papa" (3). Amy wants to grow up, while Jo enjoys the freedom of adolescence.

Conflicts between Jo's frustration with having to try to be a "little woman" and Amy's eagerness to experiment with social conventions for the purposes of self-development continue as plot shaping forces throughout the novel. Jo's frustration is dramatized in the textual development of this chapter when Jo, whose own use of slang and interest in disrupting labels of gendered identity is emphasized in the same passage, surprisingly corrects Amy's linguistic experimentation, thus stifling her criticism of social labeling as well. Significantly, Jo corrects Amy to no avail. Amy says she knows what she means and continues to misspeak, using words too big for her but purposeful and communicative nonetheless. There is little Jo can do to impede Amy's interest in cultivating her social development in conventional ways. Ironically, Amy's attempts to be conventional are more disruptive of convention than even Jo's use of slang.

Furthermore, the fact that Amy's use of "label" makes as much sense as the use of "libel" illustrates the double-bind of Jo's frustration: it is seemingly inescapable, and it is sometimes misplaced, causing her to limit her own ability to have communicative, creative, mutually-supportive relationships with others.

With the correlation of "label" and "libel" resulting from Amy's naïve mistake and Jo's frustration and anger, Alcott subtly insinuates the possibility that confident female self-expression, such as that indicated by Amy's willful linguistic experimentation and Jo's lengthy and articulate explanation of her dissatisfaction with being a girl, has a tendency to be libeled, stereotyped in inaccurate and limiting ways, even by other women. Considering the fact that Little Women itself has been labeled or libeled as nothing more than a sentimental tale about forcing young women to be `little women,' such an insinuation demonstrates the novel's own self-awareness.

Highlighting the novel's own status as a performance, Alcott repeatedly employs the narrative method of drawing attention to sentimental stereotypes and then commenting on the novel's deviations from these norms to disrupt stereotypes of feminine identity. We see this particularly in Alcott's depiction of adolescent, female sensibility as imperfect, insensitive, self-centered, and sometimes even funny. Framing feminine behavior as performance—as rehearsed, learned, and strategically presented—is one of the primary ways in which Alcott demonstrates her ideological as well as narrative deviations from nineteenth-century conventional formulations of female identity. Ironically, it is by humorously presenting the performance-oriented nature of the March girls' activities that Alcott is able to emphasize the seriously contrived nature of the nineteenth-century, sentimental, feminine type.

The constructed and unrealistic sentimental version of feminine sensitivity and moral perfection are called into question by Alcott's handling of death scenes in the novel. Deathbed tableaus, one of the most clichéd scenes from contemporary children's and women's literature, are handled in either a very direct or else a comical fashion. When Beth dies she doesn't "utter memorable words, see visions, or depart with beautified countenances" (419). "Seldom, except in books," does this kind of staged perfection occur, explains the narrator. Instead Beth "quietly drew her last [breath,] with no farewell but one loving look and a little sigh" (419). Unobserved and non-dramatic, Beth's death is quite startling to readers expecting the sentimental deathbed tableau prototype. The Hummel baby's death is equally direct: "it gave a little cry and trembled and then lay very still" (177). As Showalter points out, "Alcott's experience in the war [as a nurse] had given her an authority in writing on death which made sentimentality unlikely (xix). In response to Beth's death, Jo "doesn't become quietly saintly" or "renounce[] the world" as she would "if she had been the heroine of a moral storybook" (435). Instead the narrator explains, Jo "acted out her nature, being sad, cross, listless or energetic as the mood suggested," for "you see Jo wasn't a heroine; she was only a struggling human girl, like hundreds of others" (435).

Amy's response to the death of Beth's canary, Pip, earlier in the novel also emphasizes a direct, even humorous, restraint in Alcott's dramatization of feminine sensibility (Showalter xix). As the youngest of the March sisters, Amy's response also embodies the somewhat naïve reality of a young girl's perspective of death. In addition, the cause of Pip's death, Beth's neglect of him during a week where the March girls experiment with what it would be like to avoid all work and responsibility to others,

emphasizes the risks of adolescent experimentation, but it does so in a humorous rather than scolding manner. Amy proposes, in a serious manner, that they revive Pip in the oven, and Beth's retorts—"He's been starved and he shan't be baked" (113). Rather than idealizing the March girls' sensitivity, Alcott makes them seem quite flawed in their understanding and ability to live up to nineteenth-century ideals of feminine behavior.

Alcott's lack of sentimental attention to Beth's death is particularly significant given the cause of her death. Beth's embodiment of the feminine, spiritual ideal is her fatal flaw. Beth contracts scarlet fever from the Hummel baby because of her inability to prioritize her own well being over the baby's care. On one hand, as Foster and Simons suggest, Beth is "seemingly a stereotype of female virtue," but she "is also used by Alcott to address the complex issue of compatibility between image and reality" (93). Beth—"Little Tranquility," as her father called her, who "lived in a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet the few whom she trusted and loved" (4)—cares for the baby in spite of her own peril, and dies for it. Beth demonstrates the ultimate female self-sacrifice, but Alcott doesn't treat Beth's death with any fanfare. Instead, Alcott's direct description of Beth's death emphasizes the reality behind her idealized image. As Foster and Simons point out, Beth's "failure to cope with external community structures results ultimately in her death. The spiritual perfection she embodies . . . is doomed in a world which demands that women must ultimately function outside the family which has nurtured them" (94). Beth's lack of self-awareness and self-care results in her death.

The economic and material conditions in which Alcott grew up also influence her depiction of the March girls' approaches to engaging with social structures. As Foster and Simon suggests, the economic conditions and living environment of the March

family "are far removed from the fantastic scenarios of popular romance fictions" where, as Jo points out, "some rich relative [would] leave you a fortune unexpectedly; then you'd dash out as an heiress, scorn everyone who has slighted you, go abroad and come home my Lady Something; in a blaze of splendour and elegance" (90). Repeatedly, "the March sisters' deviation from standard conduct book behavior is a pronounced feature of episodes which could have been used as exemplary" (Foster and Simons 90). As these deviations often match up with Alcott's lived experiences, the sentimental type-casting of female experience is revealed as quite, if not completely, unrealistic. When Meg and Jo are getting ready for the New Year's party in the second chapter of the novel, the March family's economic conditions become central to the girls' ability, or as it turns out inability, to achieve ideal feminine standards. Meg doesn't have the silk she wants to wear; there is only one good pair of gloves between the two of them; and Jo has to wear a dress that is burnt on the backside.

The March girls' responses to their lack of resources in terms of attire highlight the appearance-oriented nature of social encounter, but they also emphasize envisioning one's self as existing in performance as one the March girls' most familiar strategies for formulating social appearance, and therefore social identity. Once again, Alcott's use of humor is central in her underlying critique of the over emphasis upon female appearance. Meg is "mortified" at the idea that Jo is willing to go the party without proper attire: "You must have gloves, or I won't go . . . Gloves are more important than anything else; you can't dance without them" (24). The notion of the gloves' all-important role in demonstrating one's compliance with social norms and even one's qualification as an acceptable dance participant anticipates Toni Morrison's striking twentieth-century

version of the importance of physical appearance in determining social existence: Dorcas and Felice, in Morrison's novel Jazz, know that "a badly dressed body is nobody at all" (65). Carrying Meg's proclamation, "you can't dance without them," one step further results in the comical notion that the proper dress (gloves) determines even one's ability to physically maneuver one's body in dance-like fashion, but it also acknowledges the significance of appearance and bodily positioning in formulations of social identity. Meg's obsession with gloves my very well index Alcott's awareness of the negative effects such "hands-on," inappropriate touching of one's partner's body might have on a woman's reputation. One really doesn't have control over how one's body is interpreted, but one has even less control of what one's body signifies (how or if it "dances") if it doesn't even gain admittance into the realm of social inscription. Whether or not Meg can "dance" has to do with whether she fits into the crowd (wearing gloves like she is expected to), "nobody," in Morrison's sense of the word (a disqualifying participant), or whether she *becomes somebody* (gains a disparaging social reputation because of her indiscretion). The psychological impact of the social correlation of appearance and identity, as Alcott insightfully points out, can be overwhelming to young girls and women. For Meg, the oldest of the March girls, it is at least figuratively paralyzing; her self-perception of what she is and is not capable of doing is closely linked with her body image.

Later in the novel when Jo takes her writings to the publishers of "The Weekly Volcano," the correlation between appearance and social acceptance is again emphasized, but this time more directly connected with Jo's acceptance into literary participation. On the one hand, Alcott's attention to female obsession with appearance expresses her

concern with young girls' vulnerability to social expectations concerning the way they look because it affects young girls' self-esteem and opportunities. On the other hand, Alcott emphasizes adult women's vulnerability as well. Jo's acceptance into literary participation is a matter of personal and professional development. Here again, female self-esteem and attitudes toward appearance are closely linked. Jo's experience at the publishing house anticipates Joan Jacob Brumberg's twentieth-century analysis of the relationship between female self-esteem and sexual harassment. "Body angst," Brumberg explains, "makes the worst forms of sexual flattery acceptable, which explains why some girls feel ambivalent about sexual harassment and do not know how to respond" (212). Jo ends up laughing along with her male interviewers about her experience at the publishing house, but her laugh is more uncomfortable than funny. Jo's laughter is probably more linked to her ambivalence and indicative of Alcott's own professional confusion.

The appearance of the publishing house, the locale of Jo's attempt to enter the adult, literary work force, is daunting: she "bravely climbed two pairs of dark and dirty stairs to find herself in a disorderly room, a cloud of cigar smoke, and the presence of three gentlemen sitting with their heels rather higher than their hats" (346). In preparation, Jo puts on her best clothes because "she had a womanly instinct that clothes possess an influence more powerful over many than the worth of character or the magic of manner" (346). Upon her arrival, clothes and accessories continue to serve as agents of ritualistic negotiations of identity. Jo notices that "none of [the men] took the trouble to remove [their hats] on her appearance," and that Mr. Dashwood, the head publisher, "seemed to take note of everything she had on, from the bow in her bonnet to the buttons

on her boots," as well as the physical appearance of her manuscript. Mr. Dashwood notices: "the pages were numbered, covered only on one side, and *not* tied up with a ribbon—a sure sign of a novice" (346). Though the publishing men are presented somewhat comically, Jo exists as the subject of scrutiny and intimidation in this scene.

Out of embarrassment, Jo ends up pretending that the manuscript isn't even her own. "Down came the highest pair of heels, up rose the smokiest gentleman, and carefully cherishing his cigar between his fingers, he advanced with a nod, and a countenance expressive of nothing but sleep," the narrator says of Mr. Dashwood. Replacing Dashwood's identity with the movement of his heels and smoke, Alcott highlights his insensitivity to Jo's work and Jo's intimidation (346). Highlighting the connection between Jo's self-esteem and her writing, the narrative rendering of this confrontation equates Jo's physical reaction with her speech: "Feeling that she must get through with the matter somehow, Jo . . . blushing redder and redder with each sentence, blundered out fragments of the little speech carefully prepared for the occasion. 'A friend of mind desired me to offer—a story—just as an experiment—would like your opinion—be glad to write more if this suits" (346). Her "little fiction of 'my friend' was considered a good joke; and a laugh produced by some inaudible remark of the editor, as he closed the door, completed Jo's discomfiture" (347). Jo eventually "laugh[s] over the scene" as well after she get home, but it's clear in this instance that laughter is only a survivalist's response to a very serious discrepancy between self-ambition and social situation (347).

Alcott also demonstrates the risk involved in shaping one's behavior according to social expectations in Mr. Dashwood and Jo's subsequent meeting where they discuss the

changes Dashwood wants to make to the text before publication. "Jo hardly knew her own MS . . . surprised to find that all the moral reflections,--which she had carefully put in as ballast for much romance, --had all been stricken" (347). Forgetting her "friend" story, Jo speaks "as only an author could," saying: "But, sir, I though every story should have some sort of a moral, so I took care to have a few of my sinners repent." Dashwood replies saying, "People want to be amused, not preached at, you know. Morals don't sell nowadays" (347). Explaining literary fashions of the day, Dashwood sounds believable to Jo, but the narrator immediately follows Dashwood's assessment with the words: "which was not quite a correct statement, by the way" (347). The "moral" of this scene might be interpreted as: it is risky to shape one's own self-expression according to social expectations because the value, even existence of, such expectations is tenuous. Instead, one is better off shaping one's self-expression according to one's own ideals. But, as Alcott suggests, there are risks either way. Her depiction of Jo's literary attempts admits that one's self-ambition is informed by social opportunity, and social opportunity relies upon one's ability to inscribe one's self with the conventions at hand.

Anticipating her own publishers' notion that "people like to be amused," humor is present throughout Alcott's presentation of Meg and Jo's preparation for the New Year's party much earlier in the book. Such humor emphasizes the March girls' naïve, adolescent sensibilities, but it also expresses an underlying skepticism about habits of female self-conception in early attempts at formulating social identity. Alcott's narrative commentary seems as directed at the artificiality of social expectations as it is at the March girls' immaturity. The amount of credence she gives to the March girls' concern with their appearance, however, adds to the novel's credibility and appeal. As Brumberg

points out in her analysis of late twentieth-century female identity, "body projects" continue to define women's lives.[7] Though discussions of nineteenth-century female identity often dismiss the relevance of "body projects," instead emphasizing the nurturance of female inner character, Alcott acknowledges the very real significance of gloves, dresses, ribbons, and shoes in the March girls' attempts to fashion their own social identities. Physical as well as psychological disguise is foremost in the March girls' minds as they prepare for the New Year's party.

The New Year's party incident reflects on the nineteenth-century belief in the transparent relationship between inner character and outward appearance. Clearly, at least to Meg, outward appearance comprises social impressions of character to an almost debilitating extent. At the very least, obsession with outward appearance is nearly all-consuming. Preparations for the party involve both scheming about how to behave at the party as well as the manipulation of their physical appearances. On their way to the party the two girls scheme about how they will communicate with one another during the party. It is important to both of them to receive feedback concerning their successes and failures. It is particularly important for Meg to be able to provide Jo with feedback. Jo suggests that Meg give her a wink if she is doing anything wrong, but Meg disagrees, saying "No, winking isn't lady-like; I'll lift my eyebrows if anything is wrong, and nod if you are all right. Now hold your shoulders straight and take short steps, and don't shake hands if you are introduced to anyone. it isn't the thing" (26). The image of Meg constantly either raising her eyebrows or nodding to Jo is hilarious, but the notion that Jo would continually be looking for these particular forms of affirmation from her older sister and that Meg would constantly feel the need to provide such instruction

demonstrates Alcott's sensitivity to what Pipher has called girls' "imaginary audience syndrome"—teenage girls' belief that "they are being watched by others who are preoccupied with the smallest details of their lives" (60). As indicated by the Pilgrim game, the March girls are practiced in perceiving of themselves *in role*, and the educational benefits of openly displaying one's learning process and receiving supportive feedback and honest criticism were familiar to them. Nevertheless, this bodily conversation consisting of lifting eyebrows and nodding illustrates the alternative nature of the March girls' use of performance. Traditionally, performance was a method of conforming to social expectations. Here, Meg and Jo's bodily conversation disrupts such decorum despite the fact that their bodily dialogue is about their social success or failure. Constantly nodding and lifting her eyebrows, Meg will intentionally communicate with Jo, but she is sure to appear improper or least considerably distracted from her own self-presentation in the eyes of those unaware of Jo and Meg's code.

Within the context of Alcott's own life, this awareness of self *in performance* was quite ordinary. As Alcott's use of the Bunyan tale makes clear, writing and reading as performances were familiar identity-shaping and communicative activities within the March home. This was true within the Alcott home as well. The Alcott family kept a family style journal. Bronson started journals for his daughters and expected them to begin writing in them as soon as they were old enough to wield a pen (Douglas, "Introduction" 45). Both Abba and Bronson Alcott "read their children's diaries and wrote comments on their moral progress and struggles, providing a running editorial and censorial commentary that in turn suggested fresh thought for further entries" (Douglas, "Introduction" 46). As Ann Douglas points out, Abba and her daughters created and

maintained an internal postal system similar to the one established by the Pickwick Club in Little Women to facilitate "this incessant process of mutual writing and criticizing" (46). In her often cited introduction to Signet's 1983 printing of the novel, Douglas analyzes Little Women itself as a fictionalized version of the family journal genre—"that now forgotten, [but] once recommended literary phenomena, a family journal, the moral saga of an entire clan" ("Introduction" 44). Charlotte Yonge's The Heir of Redcliffe, the novel Jo is reading at the beginning of the chapter about the New Year's party at the Gardiners, is one of the definitive texts of the family journal genre.

A family style journal "advocates the daily practice of family 'conversation,'" according to Douglas, and "this was the preferred method of self-betterment in the March, and Alcott, families" ("Introduction" 44). In addition, James Abbott, a contemporary Congregational minister and the author of the long-popular Rollo books for children, emphasizes the "various plans adopted for the correcting of faults and promoting improvement" as the most important aspect of the family journal; in addition, it must be "the product of many pens, written under parental supervision" (Douglas, "Introduction" 44). Little Women's use of Pilgrim's Progress, Bronson's favorite allegorical text for the instructing of his daughters, as a structuring device for the first half of the novel certainly performs these aspects of plans for improvement and parental supervision.

With these Alcott and March family practices in mind, Meg and Jo's plan for lifting their eyebrows and nodding at one another becomes a bodily manifestation of the Alcott family's writing and critiquing habits. Louisa's own journal writings also indicate a conception of herself as an actor within a larger family drama in constant need of

feedback and correction as well. In one of her 1850 journal entries, when she would have been eighteen years old, she writes: "In looking over our journals, Father says, 'Anna's is about other people, Louisa's about herself.' That is true for I don't talk about myself, yet must always think of the willful, moody girl I try to manage, and in my journal I write to her to see how she gets on" (Journals 61). Realizing that she is staging her ideas and feelings for her mother and father, she too perceives her writing as a way of practicing self-management and theorizing her own and others' interpretations of her actions. She continues, saying: "Anna is so good she need not take care of herself, and can enjoy other people. If I look in my glass, I try to keep down vanity about my long hair, my well-shaped head, and my good nose. In the street I try not to covet fine things" (Journals 61). In this instance, her journal serves as a device for the public display of self-correction. However, she also includes writing that indicates feelings with which she would like help: "My quick tongue is always getting me in trouble--, and my moodiness makes it hard to be cheerful when I think how poor we are, how much worry it is to live, and how many things I long to do I never can. So every day is a battle . . ." (Journals 61-2). Her confession goes as far as to indicate her severe depression: "I'm so tired I don't' want to live; only it's cowardly to die until you have done something" (Journals 62). Meg and Jo's bodily communication at the New Years party is funny, but, as Alcott's journal makes clear, Alcott also knew that a process of constant feedback and critique could also inspire genuine self-articulation and exploration.

In a letter to her father, on her twenty-third birthday, just after deciding to give up her aspirations to be a professional actress, Alcott speaks of her self-managing in full-blown performance terms:

> After being on the stage & seeing more nearly the tinsel & brass of actor life much as I should love to be a great star *if* I could), I have come to the conclusion that it's not worth trying for at the expense of health & peace & mind, & I shall try to be contented with the small part already given me & acting that well try to mix the tragedy & comedy of life so wisely that when the curtain falls I can jump up as briskly as the stage dead always do, & cheered by the applause of my little audience here, go away to learn & act a new & better part in the Lord's theatre where all *good* actors are *stars*. (Selected Letters 14-15)

As Douglas suggests, Little Women's use of the family journal genre indicates Alcott's interest in revealing the scrutiny of young girls' lives: "The 'little women' on whom the camera's eye is so steadily trained always seem snapped in the moment of—unconsciously—acting for an audience's response; they are destined to elicit approval and disapproval in each other, in their readers" (49). However, Douglas neglects to point out that the March girls' habits also indicate an extreme awareness, rather than unconsciousness, of the "camera's eye" and the import of their own self-conceptions and methods of communication. Consequently, for Alcott, the "imaginary audience syndrome" was not such an irrational response; rather, it was a family practice, a method of establishing self-awareness and communicating with others about one another's development.

Through out the novel, Alcott uses the act of watching others as an opportunity for expressing different characters' perceptions of one another and as a strategy for eluding the limitations of one's own perspective. In the opening chapter, the narrator preempts a visual tableau of each of the March girls with the statement: "As young readers like to know 'how people look,' we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters" (4). The "how people look" portion of this statement can refer to the narrator's (Alcott's own) habits of interpreting as well as to the March girls' physical appearances. In addition, it reminds readers of their own voyeuristic

participation; Little Women itself provides a *look* into March family life. Paying attention to visual cues of ordinary life is one of the ways in which the March girls and Laurie elude parental supervision and restrictions. Jo, for instance, spies Laurie's "brown face at the upper window, looking wistfully down into their garden" and concludes that he "is suffering for society and fun" (47). She watches until she observes Mr. Laurence driving off and discerns that all the curtains are "down at the lower windows; servants out of sight, and nothing human visible but a curly black head leaning on a thin hand, at the upper window," then she throws a snowball at the window, thus initiating her first visit to the Laurence home (47).

When conversing with Jo during this visit, Laurie admits that he too observes the March family through the windows of their home:

> I can't help looking over at your house, you always seem to be having such good times. I beg your pardon for being so rude, but sometimes you forget to put down the curtain . . . and when the lamps are lighted, it's like looking at a picture to see the fire, and you all round the table with your mother; her face is right opposite, and it looks so sweet behind the flowers, I can't help watching it. I haven't got any mother, you know . . . (50)

Directly following Laurie's admission, the narrator explains: "and Laurie poked the fire to hid a little twitching of the lips that he could not control" (50). Realizing that Laurie uses their "picture" to comfort himself and that their discussion of his impressions might lead to meaningful discussions of his life, Jo responds by saying, "We'll never draw the curtain any more, and I give you leave to look as much as you like. I just wish, though, instead of peeping, you'd come over and see us" (50). Providing glimpses into one another's lives, characters' visual observations of one another have instructive and communicative purposes. Jo learns a lot about Laurie through his admission of looking

and feeling guilty about it. Both Jo and readers gain insight into Laurie's sensibility when they see his twitching lips.

The instructive and community building purposes of visual observation are also illustrated when Laurie's spies on the "Busy Bee Society"—where the girls read, sew, knit, draw, and make things out of pine cones—later in the book. With the comment that Laurie "watched them, feeling that he ought to go . . . yet lingering, because home seemed very lonely" (139), the narrator points out how appealing the March girls' sense of community and productivity is to Laurie. A squirrel, not any of the girls, scolds Laurie for standing so close and spying. The girls invite him to participate, and the occasion provides the opportunity for them to discuss the motives behind the Pilgrim game and for all of them, including Laurie, to takes turns describing what they wish for their lives (141-142).

In the New Year's Party incident, we learn about the narrator's other possible interest in "how people look" (4)—in how people look *at* or observe one another. Jo's solution to the glove problem demonstrates that she doesn't think people pay that much attention to the details with which Meg is so obsessed. Nevertheless, Jo's solution to the glove problem also demonstrates her ingenuity and her willingness in this instance to publicly strategize about how to improvise with social and feminine props. She suggests that she carry her soiled gloves crumpled up in her hand so no one will notice the stains, but Meg says that they must each wear at least one good glove, so they'll each carry one so as to appear more proper. Meg assumes people will notice everything.

Meg's solution for how Jo should deal with her burned and torn dress illustrates a survivalist response in line with the habit of psychological disguise and almost irrational

feminine artificiality brought on by the social belief in the inner-outer transparency of female character. Meg's directions require Jo to perform an unachievable effect: "You must sit still all you can, and keep your back out of sight" (24), Meg explains in a serious tone despite the ridiculousness of her instructions. Jo is to erase the reality of her torn dress by presenting herself as if on a proscenium stage: "the front is alright," Meg directs. Jo is frustrated by this strategy of disguising one's feelings and situation in a later scene in the novel as well where Amy convinces Jo to make "calls"—social visits—with her. Jo "diminishes herself to fit the role," of a "little woman," argues Greta Gaard, citing the fact that Jo "sighed," "frowned darkly," "wrestled viciously," "wrinkled up her features," "squeezed" into her gloves, and finally, "with an imbecile expression" says "meekly—I'm perfectly miserable; but if you consider me presentable, I die happy" (Gaard 7, Little Women 288-89). Jo dresses as Amy wishes, despite the fact that a moment earlier she declared: "If people care more for my clothes than they do for me, I don't wish to see them" (288). Conforming to Amy's desires, Jo figuratively "die[s] happy," but the suppression of her feelings is not figurative at all (289).

Meg falls victim to the same kind of irrational plan for disguising one's self that she had proposed to Jo when her own appearance is compromised by Jo burning off her bangs when curling them in preparation for the New Year's dance. Amy consoles Meg by proposing that she hide her burned hair and bare forehead with a ribbon: "just fizzle it, and tie your ribbon so the ends come on your forehead a bit, and it will look like the last fashion. I've seen lots of girls do it so" (25). Again, the notion that Meg could keep her ribbon immobile in the midst of dancing is laughable. Meg's ability to fully participate in the dance is further limited by her shoes that were "dreadfully tight, and hurt her, though

she would not own it" (25). Meg and Jo's obsession with appearance completely distracts them from their own enjoyment of the dance even though they *pass* as acceptable participants.

Though Meg and Jo don't match up to the "fine lady" feminine stereotypes, their experiences while trying to do so result in the initiation of their friendship with Laurie and a less idealistic view of "fine young ladies" (33). This turn of events—the use of an otherwise humiliating scene to bring about positive relationships and social insight—indicates Alcott's subtle strategy of demonstrating female independence without excluding meaningful relationship. Laurie, who has plenty of money, arranges for the carriage to pick the three of them up from the dance, allowing them at least to leave the party in elegant fashion. The incident ends with Jo declaring: "I don't believe fine ladies enjoy themselves a bit more than we do, in spite of our burnt hair, old gowns, one glove apiece, and tight slippers, that sprain our ankles when we are silly enough to wear them," and the narrator stating, "And I think Jo was quite right" (33). Feminine stereotypes do not comprise the March girls' developing senses of identity; instead, their failed attempts at performing such ideals articulate alternative self-conceptions.

Attitudes toward female appearance and social conventions expressed in these episodes disrupt the equation of inner character with outward appearance. The narrative attitude toward the March girls' self-fashioning as absurd is indicated in the comment: "Jo's nineteen hairpins all seemed stuck straight into [Meg's] head, which was not exactly comfortable; but, dear me, let us be elegant or die" (26). Meg ends up spraining her ankle because of her too tight shoes, and Jo literally has to move "backstage"—behind the curtains surrounding the dance floor— because of her inability to choreograph

her movements so as to only expose the front of her body. In a final gesture indicating Jo's particular inability to fulfill feminine expectations, she spills coffee on the front side of her dress as well, thus ruining even the side that "was alright." By the time they leave the dance, both girls are unsuitable for participation, and they are truly unequipped for the next dance as well—Jo's dress is completely ruined, and Meg admits she simply can't function in her shoes. Jo and Meg's inability to live up to feminine ideals is not only understandable but also laudable; one hears the narrator's words "you see Jo wasn't a heroine; she was only a struggling human girl, like hundreds of others" with quite meaningful reverberations in this context (435).

Repetitious and failed attempts to live up to ideal standards continue in the lives of modern women as well. Brumberg discusses one of her confrontations with this fact in her explanation of a late twentieth-century seminar class's discussion of managing the "bikini-line area" (195). Although her students demonstrated an ability to "deconstruct" media messages about women and the cultural pressures surrounding them, "they were admitting, in a backhanded way, that their generation had taken on the burden of perfecting yet another body part" (Brumberg 195). Even though these young women could stand apart from and analyze female socialization as a social and cultural phenomenon, they could not escape the contemporary imperative for the perfect body. Having internalized ideals, even educated, "feminists" admit that they "battle" with "a continuous internal commentary that constitutes a powerful form of self-punishment" (Brumberg 196). Little Women's depiction of the family style journal and the March girls' conversational approaches to negotiating social identity depict a similarity between Brumberg's twentieth-century students and the March girls' sensibilities. The March

girls can "deconstruct" social appearances as well, but they also internalize social messages about themselves and cannot completely escape the tendency to negotiate identity based on appearance. Little Women focuses on the March girls' "body projects," but it also depicts their more meaningful, creative pursuits as well. In the process of "squeezing" into shoes that don't fit, burning one another's hair off, and strategizing about self-presentation, the March girls, Laurie, and their narrator are also talking, sharing information, responding, evaluating, and writing.

Female Socialization as Public Concern: "Girl Advocacy" as Amy March's legacy

Late-twentieth century "girl advocates," such Carol Gilligan and Joan Jacobs Brumberg, suggest elongating preadolescence in girls "in order to give them more time to be nurtured, develop their identity, and solidify the self" (Brumberg 248 n. 3).[8] Postmodern, "harried parents" produce "hurried children," according to Brumberg; "our current postmodern style of family nurturance pays little deference to the old ideal of protecting children from life's vicissitudes or adult knowledge" and children are expected to be "autonomous, competent, and sophisticated by the time they are adolescents" (199). Brumberg's solution to these unreasonable, and seemingly uncaring, expectations is "girl advocacy again," or reinstating aspects of the "protective umbrella" associated with nineteenth-century Victorian culture (197). For many readers, Little Women embodies such a "protective umbrella." Keyser suggests that the novel "offers safety, security, a protected space in which to develop and grow," and it also appeals to "the revolutionary or the rebel within adolescent and preadolescent girls" (14). More importantly, the novel carries the simultaneous desires for independence and affiliation with others into the

March girls' adult lives. As Brumberg explains, self-awareness of these simultaneous needs and concerns will not necessarily eliminate female low self-esteem or the "confidence gap" of young girls, but a society concerned with "girl advocacy"—with collective responsibility for "our girls," as Elizabeth Cady Stanton broached the subject in her 1871 speech of the same title—combined with young women's increased sense of self-awareness will provide significant improvement in all our lives (196, 209-13).

In the chapter "Artistic Attempts," Alcott presents one version of what we might call "girl advocacy" through her depiction of the March family's attitude toward Amy's artistic endeavors. Amy's willingness to aggressively pursue her artistic interests and self-development is treated in a characteristically humorous manner, but Alcott's burlesque style only further emphasizes the importance of Amy's openly self-confident style and the attentive, accepting, supportive environment of the March household. Amy's self indulgences and artistic experiments usually involve the March family, sometimes unintentionally but nevertheless significantly. The open display of her development is presented as having challenging, though often positive, effects on her relationship with her family and her self-identity. When she attempts sculpture, she casts her foot in plaster and has to be excavated by Jo. Poker-sketching leads to burnt fingers, and oil painting, charcoal portraits, and nature sketching end in eye-strain, sunburns, and colds. Amy's artistic indulgences and experiments do not only have noticeable effects on her own physical being, they also affect her, and therefore her family's, environment. Her oil "monstrosities" crowd the March living space, and when she tries charcoal, "the entire family hung in a row, looking as wild and crocky as if just evoked from a coal-bin" (255, 256). While her poker-sketching "attack" lasted, "the family lived in constant fear

of a conflagration," odor "pervaded the house at all hours," "smoke issued . . . with alarming frequency," and "red-hot pokers lay about promiscuously," but instead of curtailing Amy's experimentation, the family just adapts. Hannah took a pail of water with her to bed each night and kept the dinner-bell at her door in case of fire (255). Unafraid of sharing her attempts with the family, Amy executes Raphael's face on the moulding board and a cherub on the sugar bucket. When her "Garrick buying gloves of the grisette" doesn't work out, the family uses it as kindling.

The narrator admits that Amy often "mis[took] enthusiasm for inspiration" and explains that she is learning the difficult "difference between talent and genius," but lengthy descriptions of Amy's artistic experiments, her resulting "monstrosities," and her "utter disregard to all known rules" are filled with details emphasizing Amy's "audacity" and "ardor" (255-56). As Keyser points out, "an impression . . . of boundless energy, ingenuity, and, above all, determination" surrounds Amy (Family Romance 72). She "persevered in spite of all obstacles, failures, and discouragements, firmly believing that in time she would do something worthy to be called 'high art'," the narrator explains. Amy's patience with her self is actually treated as her "art"; the narrator relates her patience, if not her artwork, to a successful artist, Michael Angelo, and his phrase "genius is eternal patience" (257).

Amy's "Artistic Attempts" extend to the fashioning of her social identity as well. Though descriptions of Amy's experiments in various art genres comprise the opening of the chapter, most of the chapter is devoted to the drama surrounding the social, "artistic fête" she orchestrates for the members of her art class (258). As with Amy's other art projects, the "fête" she wants to "make" requires familial involvement; she has to ask

Marmee for permission and her sisters for assistance in the usual domestic tasks--preparing the food, house, and festivities. In fact, Amy even plans to borrow Mr. Laurence's cherry-bounce, so neighbors, in addition to family, are involved. As Keyser points out, Amy doesn't seem to mind if she inconveniences others (Family Romance 76); comfortably herself, she expects their support, enthusiasm, even assistance. While such an attitude is somewhat assuming, Alcott emphasizes the opportunity for negotiation and self-clarification that such an open style of development encourages.

Preparations for Amy's fête produce conflicts between Amy, Marmee, and Jo that dramatize anxiety-ridden aspects of adolescent experience. Alcott's treatment of these confrontations allows her to subtly express her attitude toward the adolescent desire to self-direct the development of one's own style, and thus identity, and the social expectations and stereotypes that complicate, and sometimes even impede, such attempts. Marmee and Jo's interpretations of the motives behind Amy's plans indicate Alcott's interest in addressing the female tendency to unquestioningly accept cultural definitions of self-worth and her interest in proposing alternative responses. Based upon Amy's explanation that she wants to invite her classmates over because she is "grateful" to them for being kind to her despite the fact that "they are all rich, and know I am poor, yet . . . never made any difference," Marmee assumes that Amy is indicating her vulnerability to a group of girls, or a cultural stereotype, that makes her feel inadequate so that she can all too easily be used for its own purposes—in this case to make a particular set of girls feel superior. Marmee becomes indignant at this idea, shouting, "Why should they [make a difference]!" (258). Understandably, more interested in promoting Amy's satisfaction with herself than demonstrating her ability to conform, Marmee says, "Don't you think,

dear, that as these girls are used to such things, and the best we can do will be nothing new, that some simpler plan would be pleasanter to them, as a change, if nothing more, and much better for us than borrowing what we don't need, and attempting a style not in keeping with our circumstances?" (258-59). Jo responds similarly, completely questioning Amy's reasoning and sense of self-worth: "Why in the world would 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 coupe" (259).

Each of these interpretations leads to confrontations that Amy, surprisingly enough, wins. She wins not because cultural stereotypes are defeated, but because her response to such stereotypes is self-empowering. In fact, Amy's attitude toward her circumstances and her "fête" is indeed "artistic," performative to the extent that it allows her the opportunity for self-definition at the same time that it exposes the chains of norms that could disrupt the intended effects of her assertion. Especially given the fact that the party is a complete failure, with only one classmate attending, Amy's behavior before, during, and after the event communicates her sense of self quite clearly to her family. In addition, Amy's attempt at self-actualization provides a learning opportunity for herself and the rest of the March family.

When describing her intentions for the party Amy explains that she wants to serve cold tongue and chicken, French chocolate and ice cream—instead of the cake, sandwiches, fruit, and coffee that Marmee suggests—to demonstrate that she can "be proper and elegant, though I do work for my living" (258). This aim reveals Amy's

"fête" as a performance of identity, as an occasion to prove her taste and demonstrate an individual style. In response to Marmee's indignant reply and defense of a style more "in keeping with their circumstances," Amy demonstrates an alternative understanding of differences between her classmates and herself. "[W]ithout bitterness," Amy says to Marmee, "You know as well as I do that it *does* make a difference with nearly everyone, so don't ruffle up like a dear, motherly hen . . . the ugly duckling turned out a swan you know" (258). In fact, the motivation and benefit she elaborates for her mother and Jo has to do with the positive results of exposing one's self to and even participating in circumstances different than one's own. Amy's practical approach to learning overshadows Jo's concerns that she is "truckling" to her elitist friends and Marmee's concern with genuinely representing the family's economic conditions. Moreover, Amy's "fête" is concerned with developing new skills and knowledge, trying new foods, and participating in somewhat unfamiliar rituals. One has to admit these are more positive ambitions than focusing on what she is going to wear to her or how she is going to act. Instead, Amy is interested in exercising newly gained knowledge and taking advantage of learning opportunities, and her familial environment is facilitating even in its resistance and criticalness. One of the reasons Amy is so willing to try new things is because she has been allowed the freedom to experiment with her own abilities within a facilitating and caring environment.

In Amy's opinion, engagement with the outside world or circumstances not "in keeping with" her own offers positive, transformative possibilities. The ugly-duckling turning into a swan is a cliché, but an image of transformation and unexpected development nevertheless. When Amy first described her desires for the party to

Marmee she explained that her classmates were "wild to see the river, sketch the broken bridge, and copy some of the things they admire in my book" (258). The notion that her circumstances offer new, in fact maybe even transformative, opportunities to her friends and that her friends offer her opportunities for cultivating her own perspective appeals to Amy. Marmee comes closer than Jo to recognizing these transformative possibilities when she suggests that Amy's classmates might enjoy the "change" of a more humble party, but since she assigns the opportunity to Amy's friends rather than to Amy or the March family itself, she misses Amy's point. Nevertheless, the narrator explains, Marmee "knew that experience was an excellent teacher, and, when it was possible, she left her children to learn alone the lessons which she would gladly have made easier" (259). With Marmee's inability to see Amy's fête as a learning opportunity even for herself, however, Alcott hints that maybe Marmee could not have taught Amy the lessons of her fête. In fact, Alcott insinuates, Marmee—adults—could take a few lessons from Amy.

Amy confronts Jo's "truckling" accusation by drawing distinctions between her and Jo's approaches to establishing self-identity. As stated in this discussion's opening section, differences between these two approaches are central to the interpretation of Little Women's overall message concerning female independence, and, in fact, embody the polarization of critical interpretations of Alcott's feminist teachings: "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," Amy tells 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" (259). Amy's "fête" is an example of an

opportunity she makes for herself and for others. She tells Marmee, "If I can't have it as I like I don't care to have it at all," and tells Jo that avoiding relationship is "not my way" (259). With Amy and Jo both demonstrating obstinacy, Alcott hints at the limiting possibilities of Jo's defiant unconventionality as well as the difficulty in telling the difference between Amy's self-direction and her acquiescence to social conventions. With Jo and Amy equally vulnerable to "false self-training," this episode demonstrates the complexity of forging self-identity amidst social groups that are nervous about difference.

The narrator offers the impression that Amy's approach to developing identity is practical and healthy: "When Amy whetted her tongue and freed her mind she usually got the best of it, for she seldom failed to have common sense on her side," the narrator explains, while Jo who "carried her love of liberty and hate of conventionalities to such an unlimited extent" often "found herself worsted in an argument" (260). Later in the novel when Jo interprets an offer to participate in a charitable fair as a patronizing insult, she says, "I'd rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent" (297), and the narrator is again critical of Jo, describing her "revolutionary aspect" as "anything but inviting" (298). Arguably, Amy's attitude toward her "fête" is more freeing that Jo's approach to independence. At the very least, Amy's performance indicates the possibility that while Jo's defiant, indignant approach—her elbows out and nose in the air—might have a more theatrical, momentarily more disruptive, effect, Amy's collaborative approach—the addition of her own style to already established conventions and her involvement of family and friends in her developmental attempts—might disrupt circumstances and perspectives as well, perhaps even more permanently. Most

importantly, Amy's approach allows her to demonstrate the fact that she depends upon her family and friends for support and opportunity, but she also has her own ideas and plans and is determined to exercise them. Amy is confident that if her family will help, she can "carry [her fête] out perfectly well" (259).

As Keyser points out, Amy's "fête" is "one of the rare occasions in which a member of the insulated March family offers to engage the outer world" (Family Romance 75). The fact that Beth's death is the result of one of the only other instances of a March family member engaging the outer world is worth remembering and contrasting with Amy's fête. Amy's description of the significance of self-exposure, whether in the artistic terms of her classmates' desire to engage their own artistry with her surroundings *or* her own desire to try out new manners and tastes, demonstrates an alternative interpretation to Jo's sense of independence as the ability to choose to distance one's self from others whose manners and tastes *might* threaten her own sense of self-worth. Instead, Amy sees relationships as "chance[s]" for self-development or "cultivation" rather than patronizing insult or threat. However, Amy's attitude toward social engagement doesn't always sound so agreeable to readers. In fact, her awareness of her self-on-display in social settings often borders on hypocrisy or a sense of self-in-performance that seems disingenuous. During the charitable fair incident, when Amy is trying to explain to Jo why she agrees to participate, she tells Jo that "Women should learn to be agreeable, particularly poor ones; for they have no other way of repaying the kindnesses they receive. If you'd remember that, you'd be better liked than I am, because there is more of you" (295). As Keyser points out, there is certainly "more of" Jo in Little Women and maybe more *to* her (Family Romance 77), but conflicts between Amy

and Jo do not necessarily end with resolutions about female endeavor going one way or the other. In fact, different attitudes toward female conformity and rebellion resonate simultaneously through out the novel, and Beth's vulnerability and demise remind readers of the importance of this dilemma.

Amy's character is attractive because she repeatedly gets what she wants (even when things don't go just right); things just work out for Amy—she is the one who gets to go abroad with Aunt March to study art; she is the pretty one; she is the one who marries Laurie; she is the one who seems selfish, but maybe isn't; she is the one Marmee repeatedly refers to as her "little one" without any implied disrespect. In some ways, Amy doesn't have to grow up, but she still gets all the benefits of adulthood. Though Amy may seem distant from the family in the opening of the book, she is part of a tight-knit community by the end of the book. To the very end, the March family and the novel itself adapt to Amy's whims and accommodate her development. She expects their love and support and she gets it. Jo, one the other hand, struggles continually throughout the book; she doesn't get to go abroad; she doesn't feel attractive; she refuses Laurie and then is sorry for it; she goes into a "vortex" to develop her artistry; tries to please everyone and "suited nobody" (270); she establishes independence and then questions its appeal; and she marries the Professor and quits writing sensation stories because her family doesn't approve. Amy is the only one who thinks Jo should keep writing sensation tales, and she thinks Jo should do it because she likes it and because it pays well. Seemingly more practical, Amy's approach to self-definition, and especially her expectations about how those who love her should treat her, is more appealing than Jo's adaptive and unsure approach. As the narrator explains, Jo's attitude is sometimes

"anything but inviting" (298). Nevertheless, Amy's approach to self-definition requires a community practiced in "girl advocacy," willing to take on young girls' whims and concerns with serious attention. Jo, also realistic, realizes that some people "don't care a sixpence" (259). Even if it's sometimes "anything but inviting," readers usually identify with Jo's simultaneous stubbornness, indecision, and defensiveness.

Despite their reservations, Jo and the rest of the March family comply with Amy's desires for her fête and Jo even participates giving "an artistic air" to the parlor with "the lovely vases of flowers [she] scattered about" (261). However, when only one of the twelve invited guests bothers to show up, all the March family preparations become "absurd" (263). Nevertheless, they all "played their parts equally well" and the "remodeled lunch" was "gaily partaken of, the studio and garden visited, and the art discussed with enthusiasm" (263). Amy's opportunity for self-development still occurs, just not as she had imagined. When Amy returns from ending the evening with a drive in the cherry bounce—" alas for the elegant cherry-bounce!" the narrator mocks in parentheses—Amy, "looking very tired, but as composed as ever," notices that "every vestige of the unfortunate fête had disappeared, except a suspicious pucker about the corners of Jo's mouth" (263). The narrator doesn't comment on the precise meaning of Jo's smirk, but as the last response to Amy's fête, Jo's smirk is significant. It may be that Jo's smirk signifies her amusement at Amy's attempt to so boldly reinvent social attitudes and relationships, or it may be that Jo's smirk indicates that Amy's fête has taught Jo the importance of having familial support and a safe, forgiving environment in which to grow. "[T]he word 'fête' always produced a general smile," the narrator explains (264).

When Marmee says she is very sorry Amy was "disappointed," but that they all "did their best to satisfy" her, Amy's response indicates her self-pride and appreciation for her family's support. More importantly, it demonstrates her recognition of the entwined existence of her self- and social identity and the performative, public nature of her acts: "I *am* satisfied; I've done what I undertook, and it's not my fault that it failed; I comfort myself with that" (264), Amy says with a quiver in her voice and an emphasis indicating the belief that if she publicly says this is the case it will indeed be so. "I *am* satisfied" is more a strategic, performative speech act—a public situating of self and an expression of her appreciation for her family's efforts and her desire for them to feel successful even though the fête failed—that it is a sincere expression of Amy's satisfaction. "I thank you very much for helping me, and I'll thank you still more, if you won't allude to it for a month, at least" (264), she says indicating a new sensitivity to the effects of the social recognition of her failure and the possible ensuing exploitation of her acts and her weaknesses in particular. In effect, Amy's statement of satisfaction and appreciation demonstrates her awareness of one of the more riskier aspects of the phenomenon of performativity: the potential of her actions and feelings to be "twice-behaved" in ways she did not intend, for others to exploit her weaknesses and use them against her. Brumberg identifies the social creation and exploitation of female insecurities as one of the main obstacles females face in their adolescent and adult lives.[9]

Amy's recognition of the possibility that her self-exposure may work against her in combination with the novel's increased attention to the public reception of Jo's self-expression via her writing and marriage places an increased emphasis upon the novel's simultaneous concerns with female vulnerability and female independence. Alcott's

depictions of the March girls' participation in the public sphere, apart from the immediate and loving support of the March family, highlight a sensitivity to the complexity of women's lives as they exercise their ideas in more public settings.

Female vulnerability is nothing to smirk at, but Jo's "suspicious pucker" is a very important remnant of Amy's fête because it expresses a healthy skepticism and an awareness of the perils of socialization *within* a persistently attentive, caring, and empowering environment. In addition, it is an acknowledgment on Jo's part of the importance of allowing individuals to creatively pursue self-defining experiments in the midst of a community that recognizes the importance of such efforts and responds lovingly to them. Jo's smirk may signify an acknowledgement of the importance of self-knowledge that is gained by direct contact with reality. Both Amy and Jo learn what Frances Wright, a Scotswoman presenting her views in an 1829 public lecture series in Cincinnati, articulated about the importance of the "skeptical and thoughtful evaluation of evidence" on the part of each individual: "Things which we have not ourselves examine, and occurrences which we have not ourselves witnessed, but which we receive on the attested sensations of others, we may *believe*, but we do not *know*" (qtd. in Donovan 12). This lesson also embodies the benefits of the communally supported experimental attitude that Susan Laird identities in Marmee's teaching philosophy (266-269). It is a combination of Enlightenment and Transcendental attitudes towards the importance of individualism and women's opportunity to explore and exercise knowledge in both the domestic and public spheres. Otherwise, what women believe about themselves, their abilities, and their ideas may be what Wright calls "learned error," inaccurate knowledge disguised as "truth." Such an attitude toward female education makes failure less

threatening and social success much less important than self-directed behavior and development.

Jo's Marriage: Alcott's Performance of the Ultimate Female Stereotype

The fact the Jo March marries Professor Bhaer—thus fulfilling the nineteenth-century, sentimental marriage imperative after successfully eschewing many feminine stereotypes for much of the novel—has been one of the most frustrating aspects of the novel for many feminist readers. It is an example of one instance in which many readers would gladly see Jo fail to embody nineteenth-century feminine norms. Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer actually "horrifies a fair number of readers" (Masse 338) because it implies Jo's reduction to a sentimental, character type instead of "a struggling human girl, like hundred of others" who wants more for herself than traditional roles offer her (435). Fetterley goes as far as to suggests that Bhaer is "the heavy authority figure necessary to offset Jo's own considerable talent and vitality . . . In marrying Professor Bhaer, Jo's rebellion is neutralized and she proves once and for all that she is a good little woman who wishes for nothing more than to realize herself in the service of some superior male" ("Little" 39). Fetterley is correct in pointing to Jo's marriage as one of Alcott's most overt confrontations with stereotypical female roles, but Jo's marital choice doesn't have to be interpreted as self-defeating. In fact, responses to Jo's marriage provide a forum that stages current feminist interests quite overtly.

Keyser suggests that the tension between "self-fulfilling achievement and affiliation with others" is "the classic double bind that continues to hamper ambitious women,"(Whispers 105), and negotiations of this tension tend to define social

perceptions of female power. More importantly, such negotiations shape everyday lives as well as critical conceptions of female identity. Little Women continues to appeal to modern day readers because it provides the opportunity for reflecting on this conflict and its influence in the development of relationships and female self-identity. The allure of Jo is usually associated with her tomboyish sensibility and her love of writing, but the underlying conflicts related to these aspects of her identity are what demand attention and make her especially easy to identify with. Jo is obsessed with her work—"when the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, unconscious of want, care, or bad weather, while she sat safe and happy in an imaginary world, full of friends almost as real and dear to her as any in the flesh" (265-66). Completely self-sufficient and self-satisfying, this image of Jo signifies female autonomy and artistic independence. This obsessive activity is also indulgent, and certainly rebellious; its focus upon self-interest and expression is certainly counter to self-denial and service to others. As a writer, Jo makes the world as she pleases; she is safe, happy, and befriended. It is this version of Jo's identity as a single, successful, independent writer that modern women have often found appealing. Women from Simone de Beauvoir to Gertrude Stein, Joyce Carol Oates and Adrienne Rich claim that the novel, and Alcott's literary persona, Jo March, in particular, has had a formative influence on their writing and identity (Foster and Simon 85, Showalter vi, xxviii).

Yet, Jo's writing habits are not necessarily good for her—"Sleep forsook her, meals stood untasted, day and night were all too short to enjoy the happiness which blessed her only at such times, and made these hours worth living, even if they bore no other fruit. The divine afflatus usually lasted a week or two, and then she emerged from

her 'vortex' hungry, sleepy, cross, or despondent" (266). Upon turning twenty-five, Jo isn't quite satisfied with the life her emphasis upon her writing career has left her with: "An old maid—that's what I'm to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty-years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps; when, like poor Johnson, I'm old, and can't enjoy it—solitary, and can't share it, independent, and don't need it" (440). Alcott expresses similar sentiments in her journal when reflecting on her own success. In 1868, the same year she wrote Little Women, she writes: "I sell my children, and though they feed me, they don't love me" (Journals 163). By 1874, literary and familial demands leave her tired and disillusioned: "When I had youth, I had no money; now I have the money I have no time, if I ever do, I shall have no health to enjoy life" (Journals 191). In 1883, independence and success find expression in journal blurbs that express conflicts between her familial commitments and her writing career. In February 1883, for instance, Alcott writes: "Began a book called 'Genius'. Shall never finish it I dare say, but must keep a vent for my fancies to escape at. This double life is trying & my head will work as well as my hands" (Journals 238).[10] After her sister May dies, Alcott adopts her niece, Lulu, taking on the responsibility of caring for her in addition to her failing father. In May of 1883, Alcott writes about her desire but inability to take care of Lulu: "Could do it myself if I had the nerves & strength, but am needed else where & must leave the child to someone. Long to go away with her & do as I like. Shall never lead my own life" (Journals 239).

Reflecting on her own response to Jo's marriage to Bhaer, Masse admits: "There is something a bit strange . . . about my and my students' disappointment at a mid-forties character who has stable and loving relationships, is lauded for her bestsellers, who

founds (and owns) an alternative school, and who is represented as happy" (325). Masse asserts that Jo's development performs the "messy reality of adult life" (325). Though a "sad simulacrum" (Masse 331) of our childhood fantasies, Jo's development indicates that, as Jo herself sets out to demonstrate in her play in Jo's Boys, "there's romance in old [married] women also" (235). As Showalter points out, "Jo and Bhaer have both values and feelings in common; they share an interest in educational reform, in new ideas, and in practical philanthropy. Most important, he understands her need to work" (xxvii). Ann Murphy highlights Jo's ability to create "new possibilities for herself as a member of a community and a professional in her own right" (569) as one of the most important aspects of Jo's relationship with Bhaer. As Jo's assessment of independence and success indicates, these new possibilities were definitely welcome developments in her life.

The fact that Alcott never married shouldn't take away from Jo's healthy and realistic relationship with Professor Bhaer. In fact, their relationship may be an enactment of Alcott's own fantasies about relationship—and not only relationships in a marital sense. As Showalter points out, Jo and Bhaer's relationship is not stereotyped heterosexually. Bhaer is "unconfined by American codes of masculinity"; he is "warmhearted, affectionate, and expressive . . . [i]ntellectual but unpretentious, loving and nurturant, and thoroughly dependeable" (xxvii). Showalter backs up this point by citing Sarah Elbert who argues that Bhaer possesses "all the qualities Bronson Alcott lacked . . . the feminine attributes Louisa admired and hoped men could acquire in a rational, feminist world" (Showalter xxvii, Elbert, Hunger 164). As Elbert points out, "Bhaer does the shopping for both himself and Jo," and is generous with children, both

emotionally and materially despite his poverty (163). He is responsible and self-reliant, "capable of raising his two orphaned nephews" alone, and doesn't "need Jo to mother him, though she is drawn to do so" (Elbert, Hunger 163). Bhaer's proposal to Jo is telling of his perspective on relationships: "Jo, I haf nothing but much love to gif you; I came to see if you could care for it, and I waited to be sure that I was something more than a friend" (475). Care for his love is what he wants, not someone to take care of him.

Alcott's description of Jo and Bhaer's situation at the time of his proposal differentiates their setting from the stereotypically romantic scene. However, according to twentieth-century stereotypes of a modern woman's sensibility, their proposal setting is quite appealing. "It was certainly proposing under difficulties," the narrator explains: "even if he had desired to do so, Mr. Bhaer could not go down upon his knees, for account of the mud, neither could he offer Jo his hand, except figuratively, for both were full; much less could he indulge in tender demonstrations in the open street, though he was near it" (474). Alcott also emphasizes Bhaer's love for Jo by his lack of concern for her appearance: "If he had not loved Jo very much, I don't think he could have done it *then*, for she looked far from lovely, with her skirts in a deplorable state, her rubber boots splashed to the ankle, and her bonnet a ruin. Fortunately, Mr. Bhaer considered her the most beautiful woman living" (474). To counter the notion that Jo's lack of physical or sexual appeal was a concession of Bhaer's part, Alcott also includes the details that Jo "found him more `Jove-like' than ever, though his hat-brim was quite limp with the little rills trickling thence upon his shoulders (for he held the umbrella all over Jo), and every finger on his gloves needed mending" (474).

Alcott creates an egalitarian relationship between Jo and Bhaer. They pledge their commitment to one another by asserting their individual interests and responsibilities as aspects of their identity that will not be sacrificed in their relationship. Neither the location of their work or the subjects of their attention change with their marriage; as Masse points out "They love, but there is no merging of identity: each remains a separate self with separate interests" (339). Bhaer states, "I must go away and do my work alone; I must help my boys first, because even for you I may not break my word . . ." (480). Likewise, Jo claims equal commitment to herself and others outside of her marriage: "I have my duty, and my work. I couldn't enjoy myself if I neglected them even for you,--so there's no need of hurry or impatience. You can do your part out West,--I can do mine here,--and both be happy . . ." (480). Jo's marriage commitments resonate the self-respect and patience with self and others demonstrated in Amy's demands for her family's advocacy of her self- and social-experiments. In addition, Jo's relationship with Bhaer also demonstrates Jo, like Amy before her, learning that compromise does not have to produce self-neglect or abnegation.

Even though Jo spends most of the last chapter professing her happiness and claiming that her decisions to marry and have a family only improve her potential for development, modern readers are often skeptical of the message behind Jo's marriage. Such skepticism is not altogether negative, however. In many ways it has the same effect as Jo's "suspicious pucker" at the end of Amy's fête; it signifies an interest in acknowledging and responding to female attempts at self-definition in critical but also caring and open-minded ways. With Jo's marriage, Little Women demands of its readers the same experimental attitude embodied in the March girls' approaches to self-definition

through performance and communal dialogue. As Laird explains, the March girls undertake experiments "as they pursue their own desires and then evaluate the results afterwards (a flopped dinner, a dead bird pet) in order to set their own goals as learners and sisters" (298). With Little Women Alcott asks her readers to evaluate their own attitudes toward the female role in relationship. Jo's marriage brings these attitudes to the forefront of readers' minds rather poignantly.

As Catherine Stimpson and Masse point out, readers' problems responding to Little Women and Jo's marriage in particular are cultural (Masse 324); there is an "ahistorical resistance to the nineteenth-century 'cult of true womanhood' (Stimpson 967). According to Masse, "We run the risk of decrying Jo's 'failure' because of what Elaine Showalter calls 'the twentieth-century feminist ending of separation and autonomy'" (Masse 324).[11] This preference for establishing female identity apart from relationship is also the result of the resurfacing of stereotypes of female possibility manifest in the cults of domesticity and true womanhood in the 1950s with Betty Frieden's analysis of the *feminine mystique*—or "the problem that has no name" (15-32)—and its emphasis upon women's domestic and consumer roles. The "malaise" of young women at the end of the twentieth-century, according to Pipher, has to do with females being encouraged to "sacrifice the parts of themselves our culture considers masculine on the alter of social acceptability and to shrink their souls down to a petite size," or "little woman" size, as Keyser characterizes it (Pipher 39, Keyser, Family Romance 14). Modern readers also wish Jo would have sacrificed what she considered "the most beautiful things in all the world" (484)—families—for the purposes of modern

notions of female autonomy. Singing the praises of family and relationship is simply *too* feminine for some modern readers.

Attitudes toward relationship and female independence involved in assessments of Jo's marital decision parallel Danielle Crittendon's discussion of conflicts between female independence and relationship in her recent book What Our Mother's Didn't Tell Us: Why Happiness Eludes the Modern Woman (1999). According to Crittendon, young women today inherit a feminist tradition that simply does not encourage women to feel good about being interested in their own development and their contributions to relationships and the development of others' identities. Instead, Crittendon argues, the legacies of modern feminism include the lessons that relationships are threats to one's identity, and that women should view "husbands as potential oppressors" (79). According to Crittendon, one of modern feminism's most damaging legacies is that women have been taught "to think of themselves as a victimized subset of humanity and not as active participants in a free and democratic society" (189). These are precisely the attitudes and lessons embodied in Fetterley's assessment of Jo's marriage. However, the "poor, 'little woman'/ Jo" complex is actually fairly offensive, especially given the fact that Jo takes an active role in defining the terms of her relationships. Granted, she gives up writing at the beginning of her marital relationship, but this is only a temporary phase. She also tells Bhaer in a very open and confident manner that she will "carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that, or I'll never go" (480), and Jo does precisely this with her development of her school, Plumfield.

In A Return to Modesty, Wendy Shalit argues that returning to nineteenth-century attitudes toward women's bodies and gender (sexual) relationships is appealing to women

because if offers them real benefits, such as sexual protection and mutually dependent and committed relationships. Having gender identity "guide and inform" one's life "may be sexist," Shalit argues, but she cleverly points out, "it is certainly not misogynist" (217). In a significant reversal of terms, both Crittendon and Shalit argue that an over-emphasis upon female independence can be harmful to female development as well. According to Crittendon, "lifelong independence can be its own kind of prison too" (75). We certainly see this sentiment echoed in Alcott's statement: "Shall never lead my own life" (Journals 239) and Jo's forecast of her development: "I'm old, and can't enjoy it—solitary, and can't share it, independent, and don't need it" (440). Shalit agrees, commenting: "As it turns out, there is a significant difference between independence and freedom. Today we may all be independent, but are we really free in a society where we can only commit to ourselves . . . [where] even if we wanted to depend on someone else we would be hard-pressed to find someone to really depend *on*" (214).

Crittendon's suggestion for improving both men's and women's lives is to not assume that we have to identify with gender roles in predetermined ways (ways that tend to prescribe oppressor and victim roles). Instead, we can engage with gender roles in ways that are fulfilling within the context of our own lives. "For it's in the act of taking up those roles we've been taught to avoid or postpone . . . that we build our identities, expand our lives, and achieve the fullness of character we desire," Crittendon argues (74). This spirit of "talking up" roles and building identities and lives—of conceiving one's life as a self-directed cultural performance—is Little Women's defining activity and a proactive response to a female socialization process that continues to be hostile. We see this spirit of "talking up" roles and building identities in Jo's marriage and Amy's fête as

well as Alcott's subversive use of the performance framework within an already well-established allegorical tradition.

The Modern Appeal of Little Women: "Twice-Behaved" Rebellion

Little Women has never been out of print since the moment of its initial publication, and still a bestseller in the United States and Britain, it remains one of the most commercially successful novels of all time (Englund 205, Bernstein 26). As Janice Alberghene and Berverly Lyon Clark illustrate, Alcott and the novel have proved successful commodities and enjoyed notoriety in the modern entertainment industry as well: In 1986, *Ladies Home Journal* included Little Women as one of the six works in a recipe series on American classics, including the March gingersnaps along with Captain Ahab's chowder and Tom Sawyer's catfish. In 1993, the U. S. Post Office issued a twenty-nine cent stamp featuring a scene from Little Women. The same year, Giorgio Armani offered a perfume called "Jo." Alcott is the only woman profiled in the card game Authors, and Trivial Pursuit includes the question "What Louisa May Alcott novel is subtitled "Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy?" Following the 1994 film release of Little Women, starring Susan Sarandon as "Marmee" and Winona Ryder as "Jo," Crabtree and Evelyn issued baskets holding copies of the novel, JC Penney offered *Little Women* costume jewelry, and Lanz *Little Women* nightgowns (Alberghene xviii). The novel has been reproduced on the theatrical stage and in film, television, and radio versions numerous times, involving similar commercial responses.[12]

Part of Little Women's popularity is due to the fact that its ideological ambiguity continues to inspire debate about women's goals and the consequences of their career and

familial choices. As a woman with strong interests in the opportunities provided by female performance and theatrical activity in general, Alcott would probably be pleased to know that the performative effects of her most famous work are still a matter of debate. Her performance of the March girls' experiences as they "take up," in Crittendon's sense, life roles they find appealing is clearly complex enough to warrant the incredibly long-lasting interest in debating the novel's *appeal*—both its allure and message about female identity. The novel's "twice-behaved" appeal resonates with performance's own abundant possibilities for development. "Twice-behaved behavior" gets to be called behavior, Phelan reminds us, "because it is performed much more than twice" (10). Little Women gets to be called "*the* American female myth" (Bedell, "Beneath the Surface" 146) because it continues to provide a forum in which readers must confront their own attitudes toward stereotypical events in women's lives as well as rebellious female acts.

The novel continues to ask readers to consider the activities and attitudes that shape the female socialization process as well as responses to it. Ironically, saying that you like Little Women is a somewhat rebellious act today because of the stereotypical attitudes toward female identity people tend to associate with the novel. Saying you like Little Women insinuates that you support the conception of females as "little women"—an inevitably diminutive name. The novel was a progressive text in the nineteenth-century because it asserted female independence in addition to the importance of family and relationship. Today, however, the novel is rebellious because it asserts the importance of relationship in addition to female autonomy. In fact, the novel embraces the importance of relationships in the female socialization process. It emphasizes its own

version(s) of the development of female self-identity as a performative act involving Alcott and March family practices, nineteenth- and twentieth-century attitudes toward the female body, femininity, and female roles, and its readers—*us*, with whatever habits, values, and desires we bring to the text's performance. The self-directed development of female identity as presented in Little Women is an individual and social act—a "call," to go back to this chapter's opening discussion. Though Alcott's publishers might have predicted that "Morals [wouldn't] sell nowadays" either (347), current discussions of female identity and the longevity of Little Women's popularity and relevance indicate otherwise—"call it independence, if you like."

Chapter Four

Alcott's Other Women:

The Threat of Performance in Alcott's Sensational Thrillers

> You gave me a part to play, and I am no actress, as you see.
> ---Louisa May Alcott, "A Marble Woman"

Stephen King has said that "all novelists are inveterate role-players" who find it "fun to be someone else for a while" (viii). The "fun," habit, or necessity of pretending to be "someone else" has a special relevance in the life and writings of Louisa May Alcott. Her personal history reveals the necessity of being the primary breadwinner for her family, and it was by publishing sensational thrillers as "someone else," either anonymously and pseudonymously, that she was able to support her family most efficiently prior to her success as an author of the March Trilogy and other adolescent and adult literature. Writing under the name of someone else, such as A. M. Barnard, or pretending to be no one in particular, Alcott was secretly a very successful writer before the publication of Little Women (1868-69). Literary history has also given Alcott "a part to play" (194), as Cecil Bazil Stein, the heroine of her sensational story "A Marble Women, or The Mysterious Model" says of her own existence.[1] Alcott is well known as the "Children's friend" and as a celebrator of separate-sphere culture. Clearly, however, this was not her only identity.[2]

Claiming authorship of her sensational stories would certainly have hurt, probably even precluded, the identity and reputation she was able to publicly establish with her contemporaries, and Alcott was quite aware of this. Even through Frank Leslie, the publisher of many of her sensational fiction offered to pay her more if she would put her name to her stories, Alcott refused. One of Leslie's letters to Louisa reveals her

rationale: "Of course it would be detrimental to your reputation as a writer for children to have your name used on sensational stories. Mr. Leslie would not desire any such sacrifice" (Stern, "Introduction to Freaks" 17). Cecil Bazil Stein's statement "You gave me a part to play, and I am no actress, as you see" rings true for Alcott in a doubly significant way: Alcott both was and was not what might be called a literary "actress." She pretended to be "no actress, as you see" in that she successfully hid from the public the complexity of her character, the diversity of her writing, and many clues to the insights of her social critiques now apparent in her sentimental and sensational fiction alike. Yet, she was an actress, living at least a double life. But at the same time she wasn't an actress: she really was both the writer of sentimental and sensational fiction, adolescent and adult literature. Relating Louisa Alcott's identity to Cecil Stein's statement demonstrates the complexity of the actress persona and its entanglement with questions of identity. These problems were some of Alcott's primary fascinations, and her sensational stories are riddled with their complexity.

As mentioned earlier, the public remained unaware of Alcott's real diversity as a writer and insight as a cultural critic until the discovery of her sensational authorship in 1943 when Leona Rostenberg discovered a letter from a "J. R. Elliott, Editor" to Louisa Alcott that addressed her as the author of a story by "A. M. Barnard" published in The Flag of Our Union.[3] None of Alcott's sensational fiction was available to the public until the publication of the first collection of her thrillers, Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott, edited by Madeleine Stern, in 1975. Since then, numerous collections of Alcott's sensational thrillers have been published, and Alcott is enjoying significant reevaluation as "someone else" other than previously imagined.[4] As

this project's previous chapters demonstrate, pretending to be "someone else," either imaginatively or physically, is a dominant theme in many of Alcott's personal and fictional writings as well. Many of Alcott's sensational thrillers are set in the theatre and deal directly with the nature of the actor. Stories not set in theatres still consistently include feigned identity and the objectification of the self in what Elizabeth Lennox Keyser has described as "actor's parts," or the imitation of prescribed social identities (Whispers 103). Whether they are located in the theatre or not, Alcott's sensational stories repeatedly connect the nature of the actor to problems of identity similar to the ones she addresses in her other writings. The prevalence of the performance framework in her sensational characters' physical and mental conditions, however, makes Alcott's sensational thrillers an extreme, perhaps even exaggerated, portrayal of the relationship between performance and life.

The theme of pretending to be someone else, of performance, is presented in an especially crude manner in Alcott's sensational tales, and the prevalence of theatricality in nineteenth-century social life and in characters' conceptions of themselves and one another is usually presented in a very negative light. One of Alcott's most important observations in these thrillers is that the human habit of placing one's self in object status—of trying to be or pretending to be the "someone else" others desire—is a prevalent human habit worthy of much more consideration. In the twentieth-century, as Josephine Donovan explains, this psychological maneuver is even interpreted as a cultural practice that results in "other-directed identity" and precludes "the authenticating project of self-realization" (122). As the previous discussions of Behind a Mask, Work, and Little Women demonstrate, the conflict between other-directed and self-directed

identity is one of Alcott's primary concerns, and she repeatedly emphasizes the importance of her female characters learning to embrace their own authentic senses of self rather than complying with the self-denying norm of nineteenth-century womanhood. Mary Daly has also identified women's objectification and women's self-objectifying habit as "the horrifying fact of [woman's] alienation from her authentic self" brought about by "the masks of sexist society" (4). Long before Daly, Alcott connects the habit of self-objectification and feigning of identity with female identity in particular and demonstrates its connection with nineteenth-century gender ideology. The nature of the actor and the female tendency to participate as actresses and imagine one's self as "someone else" constitute plot-shaping devices and events in most of Alcott's sensational thrillers. Her focus on performance as a framework and activity allows her to directly relate the difficulty of rejecting the object role with problems of female identity and nineteenth-century feminine ideals in particular.

Alcott's sensational thrillers were published primarily in the Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner, and Frank Leslie's Lady's Magazine weeklies of the 1860s. Initially, they appear to have little in common with the sentimental stories of "wholesome domesticity" that made Alcott famous (Stern, "Introduction to Unmasked" xi). Rather than telling the tales of frustrated, adolescent girls or hard-working, spiritually-minded young women, they focus on drug addicts, murderers, skillful actors, and vengeful women. However, a common link between Alcott's sentimental and sensational tales is her attention to performance as an activity and framework integral to the development of nineteenth-century conceptions of gender. In both her sentimental and sensational fiction, Alcott focuses on women as actresses and

on public responses to female performance, but it is perhaps her sensational short stories that demonstrate most overtly her extreme interest in exposing disturbing revelations brought about by paying attention to the role of performance in her heroines' lives. Alcott's sensation stories are shocking, especially in the context of their initial publication, but their themes remain quite relevant and even shocking today. A brief review of some of these stories' themes and characters further characterizes Alcott's attitude toward gender identity in nineteenth-century culture as well as her overt and radical use of the performance framework within her sensational texts.

The relation between art and life in Alcott's sentimental fiction often depicts performance as providing a positive, formative import in her female characters' lives—for instance performance is often depicted as an effective means of expressing, exploring, challenging, and molding one's own sense of identity. The March girls, for instance, use performance as a means of experimenting with their growing understandings of themselves and rebelling against nineteenth-century norms. Jo gets to be the boy she desires to be in family theatricals, and Amy is able to communicate her alternative conception of her self and social interaction in general via the party she throws for her art classmates. In Work, Christie Heron is able to draw connections between her experience as an actress and her desire to be self-assertive within the public workforce. For many of Alcott's sensational heroines, however, performance presents a consistently insidious threat to identity.

Alcott's incorporation of performance in her sensational tales provides a means of expressing her anger toward nineteenth-century feminine ideals and her deeply rooted concern with the effects of social, and primarily feminine, artifice. Like Work and Little

Women, "A Marble Women: or, The Mysterious Model" directly connects artistic practices and the development of character. However, unlike Alcott's sentimental fiction, this story depicts the confusion of art and life in a mostly negative manner. "A Marble Woman: or, The Mysterious Model," first published in serial form in The Flag of Our Union in May and June of 1865, is the story of Bazil Yorke attempting to mold the character of Cecil Bazil Stein, the daughter of his estranged and recently deceased wife, Cecilia, who, following the death of her mother is sent to live with him.

Near the end of the story, readers learn that years earlier Cecil's mother had fallen in love and become pregnant by one of Bazil's friends, Germaine, and they ran away to begin a new life together. After several years of unhappiness, however, Cecelia left Germaine, and lived alone with Cecil, out of shame refusing to return to Bazil despite her own poverty and illness. Slowly dying, Cecilia was bereft of any comfort other than her addiction to laudanum and Cecil's companionship, which was also, unfortunately, a constant reminder of the wrongs she had done Bazil. Cecilia arranges for Cecil to be sent to Bazil upon her death, along with a letter explaining Cecil's identity, her own relationship with Germaine, and their life since her departure twelve years earlier, in hopes that this will atone for part of her wrongdoing. In the meantime, Bazil has learned to lead an extremely isolated, solitary life as a sculptor, creating gorgeous works of art that he never shows to anyone. With much generosity and humility, he befriends Germaine, his estranged wife's lover, doing his best "to forgive the wrong which he never could entirely forget" (245), and employing him as a model for his work as a sculptor. Bazil's generosity with Germaine demonstrates his human empathy and alternative spirit. Yet, his broken heart, solitary nature, and jaded attitude toward

relationships allow him to be quite indifferent to Cecil when she first becomes his charge. He disallows her other companionship and teaches her only sculpting skills. Bazil's attempts to mold Cecil into an ideal companion and to control her female desires and development in the manner he would have like to control her mother's, drastically limits Cecil's self-development.

With the molding of clay as his primary obsession, Bazil conducts his influence over Cecil with the same sort of objectifying practices and the odd combination of simultaneous, mental and physical, detachment and intimate control. Bazil's control is emphatic, and it limits Cecil's development severely. He forbids her from calling him by his first name, and instead requires her to call him "Yorke." He makes her choose between his care and home and her relationship with a neighbor boy, Alfred, who loves her and who is the only friend she ever makes. He keeps her isolated from any contact outside of their home and any unsupervised activity. Cecil serves as his model for an exquisite sculptor of Psyche, and Cecil begins to imagine that Bazil desires her to be Psyche to his Cupid: "A marble woman like your Psyche, with no heart to love you, only grace and beauty to please your eye and bring you honor; is that what you would have me?" (188), she asks Bazil when he forbids her friendship with Alfred. When neighbors begin to gossip about the oddity of Bazil's relationship to Cecil, he stops it by marrying her despite the fact that he doesn't really feel affection towards her. Rather, he is drawn to her because of his insecure and jealous need to control her. He marries her because he doesn't want her to marry anyone else. Moreover, the marriage relationship is a familiar one socially; it's an easy social front.

Cecil, too, perceives their wedding and marriage as "a pretty play" (206). Yet, she also cannot help but begin to feel love or at least recognize her need to give and receive love. She also cannot deny her desire to participate in activities outside of their home and other than sculpting. Nevertheless, she "had been trained to repress all natural emotions and preserve an unvarying calmness of face, voice, and manner" (186); control "had been her earliest lesson," and " "[s]he did control herself," habitually placing others' emotions, desires, and ideas ahead of her own (191). Alcott's "marble woman" is much like the "little woman" stereotype so readily associated with her depiction of nineteenth-century girlhood and womanhood. A striking difference, however, is that the notion of a "marble woman" is more directly connected to woman as art, to woman as a male experiment or project. As the "Marble Woman," Cecil's existence appears disturbingly unaffected and non-human. At least Alcott's "little women," as they were initially portrayed in Little Women, were difficult to control, constantly reassessing their behavior and activities, and asking questions. One of Bazil and Cecil's most disconcerting agreements early on in their relationship is that Cecil is never to ask any questions, and, for the most part, she never does.

Cecil grows up to be a consummate sculptor and a beautiful, reserved woman, but as a conversation between two men at a party attended by Bazil and Cecil shortly after their unconsummated marriage reveals, she is hardly an appealing human being. "Where's Yorke's statue as they call her?" one gentleman asks, looking about for Cecil (209). "As a work of art she is exquisite, but as a woman she is a dead failure. Why in heaven's name didn't Yorke marry one of his marble goddesses and be done with it?" "They say he has," laughs the other gentlemen, "He fell in love with her beauty, and is as

proud of it as if he had carved the fine curves of her figure and cut the clear outline of her face. It if were not for color and costume, she might be mounted on a pedestal as a mate for that serenely classical Pallas just behind her" (209). The men continue their conversation, commenting that another woman at the party, Mrs. Vivian, is much more charming and appealing. Overhearing this comment, Bazil asks Cecil what she thinks of Mrs. Vivian, and Cecil answers, "I think she is very pretty, and that her husband loves her very much" (211). "Imitate Mrs. Vivian," Bazil bids (212), and Cecil obeys, waltzing, laughing, and conversing so skillfully that she changes everyone's opinion of her. In fact, "So well did she act her part that [Bazil] soon entered heartily into his own, and taking young Vivian for his model, played the devoted husband" so successfully that at the evening's end, "Mrs. Yorke was the most charming woman in the room, and the sculptor the happiest man" (212).

Cecil's "act" has such an effect on Yorke that he tells her to call him "Bazil" from then on, and he begins to admit to himself his real love for her. Cecil, however, who has never been allowed to talk of, let alone explore, her emotions and human affections, merely asks: "Was my imitation a good one? Is that what you wish me to be in public?" (212). Cecil's sense of identity becomes one that is defined primarily by the difference between private and public masks, between hidden, personal desires and performances of social expectations. Moreover, Cecil's desires are filtered through Bazil's personal expectations and desires as well. Her "personal" and "private" self is an object of presentation within her own home, and any sense of an authentic self appears to be at least partially hidden from even her self. Her sense of self is twice-removed from public demonstration and acknowledgment, staged first for Bazil's discernment and censorship.

At one point the narrator describes her as a prisoner: "her face brightened like a prisoner's when the key turns in the lock and sunshine streams into his cell. Yorke saw the joy, heard the tone of gratitude, and stifled a sigh, for they showed him what a captive he had made of her, and betrayed how much she had suffered silently" (217).

Cecil develops the habit of perceiving of herself as an actress, and she successfully performs the role of Bazil's happy wife on several occasions, but she takes to eating opium to deal with the confusion and tension her disparate roles add to her life. Drug addiction is common in Alcott's sensation tales. Both male and female characters use alcohol or laudanum to help transport themselves and embody otherwise more imaginary roles. Only opium helps Cecil endure the disillusionment brought about by pretending to be both the self-denying, reserved woman her husband desires and the beautiful, charming, talented women that her social circle esteems. When Bazil discovers her addiction to opium after a near fatal dose, she admits to herself, and even to Bazil, that she finds it difficult to deal with her life. Even her description of her condition hints at the idea that she is playing doctor to her own illness, assessing herself in ways she anticipates others might diagnose her: "I find it hard to tame myself to the quiet, lonely life you wish me to lead. I am so young so full of foolish hopes and fancies, that it will take time to change me entirely, and what I have seen of the world lately makes it still more difficult. Have patience with me, and I shall be wiser and more contented soon" (216).

Cecil desires sincere engagement with the world, but her training in self-denial and reserved behavior and her addiction keep her from experiencing genuine affiliation with anyone. She is unable to function genuinely because she is in large part ignorant of

her own ideas and desires. Uncertain how to recognize, let alone enact, her own desires and her wide range of emotions and abilities, Cecil's character is quite confusing to readers as well as to herself. With consummate skills in sculpting and acting, however, Cecil is able to disguise her instability for the most part, and her experiments with self-presentation actually begin to empower her by providing her with opportunities for experimenting with her sense of self apart from Bazil's control. Through out "A Marble Woman" the narrator presents both Cecil's and Bazil's behavior as questionable, possibly deceitful, but also possibly sincere and full of positive possibility. Readers experience some of the same confusion of character as Cecil.

Another character's role-playing in the story also allows readers to experience the revisionary possibilities brought about by experimenting with performance and imagining characters in different roles. Early in the story, Germaine, Cecil's mother's former lover who had been employed for a time as Bazil's model, begins to spend time socializing in the Yorke home. He also begins to sneak around the house uninvited and spy on Cecil. Significantly, neither Cecil nor readers are aware of his real identity as Cecil's father until the very end of the narrative. They know he is a former employee and friend of Bazil's, but are completely ignorant of any other aspect of his identity. In fact, Germaine is named as "the mysterious model" (191). The night Cecil first arrives at Bazil's home, she sees a stranger watching her through a window, and soon after she starts living with Bazil, a stranger accosts her in a dark hallway, kissing her, touching her, and quickly disappearing, after moaning, "my darling" (187). She grows to suspect it was the "mysterious model," though at the time she does not know him at all. This suspicion is confirmed when Bazil has Germaine over to dinner one night and she hears Germaine's

voice. Germaine and Cecil spend more and more time together as the story progresses, and Cecil thinks of Germaine as a prospective lover. Readers assume this as well. Once Bazil recognizes Cecil's infatuation with Germaine, he tries to limit their contact. However, when Bazil learns that Germaine is close to dying, he allows him to spy on Cecil and to stay attuned to the activities of her life because he knows Germaine is Cecil's father. However, as mentioned earlier, readers, like Cecil, do not know of Germaine's identity as her father until the very end of the story. More importantly, readers are not certain that Bazil knows of Germaine's real identity. None of these relations are revealed as certainties until the closing pages of the story. Consequently, Germaine appears to be a stalker whom Bazil finds threatening to his marriage but simply cannot control and whom Cecil finds oddly attractive. Germaine regularly interrupts Cecil's daily life by singing to her from a hidden position beneath her bedroom window or from a ship floating just off shore. To avoid his unanticipated participation in their life, Bazil ends up inviting Germaine to live with them so that he may have at least some control of his behavior.

Germaine and Cecil's relationship becomes increasingly odd and tension-filled as the story progresses and major events in the novel are significantly re-interpreted once readers know of Germaine's real identity as her father. In the closing chapter of the novel, for instance, Cecil runs off with a man in a boat, and no one, including readers, knows whether it is Alfred, her childhood friend who returns late in the story to express his continuing love for her, or Germaine, who has also finally expressed his love to Cecil. Whether it is Alfred or Germaine that Cecil flees with is of interest to readers, but her fleeing is primarily important because it demonstrates her ability to make a decision for

herself and explore her genuine feelings. Readers expect, and Bazil himself believes, that she has left him to spend her life with the man she loves. After discovering a wrecked boat belonging to Alfred, however, Bazil and readers alike believe Cecil has chosen to embrace her love for Alfred only to die with him in the sea. While out searching for their bodies, however, Bazil sees Cecil sitting alone on an island and approaches her. However, once he reaches her he learns that Germaine is there with her, resting in the house behind her. Germaine's presence revises the events of the story once more, insinuating the Cecil has chosen to leave Bazil for Germaine.

This is not the last revision of the tale's relationships and characters' identities, however. After wrecking and barely surviving, Germaine tells Cecil of the relationship between Bazil, Cecil's mother, and himself, and Cecil's response is quite surprising. She explains that she now has proof that Bazil is as generous as she always believed him to be and that she now feels free to express the love she has had for him all along. She explains to Bazil that she, like readers, was unsure of his sincere love for her because of his indifference to her self-development and her clearly affectionate relationship with Germaine. Once readers are aware of Germaine's identity, however, Bazil's love for Cecil and Cecil's love for him are much more clear, and narrative descriptions of events in the book may be reread with completely different significance. Bazil's tolerance of Germaine's stalking, for instance, demonstrates his understanding of fatherly love rather than his sick interest in living vicariously through Germaine and Cecil's secret enjoyment of one another. The story ends with Germaine dying and a complete revision of Bazil and Cecil's relationship. Though filled with manipulation, drug addiction, and odd extra-

marital relationships their relationship is revised into a love story of meaningful growth and transformation, of self-abnegation as well as self-development.

Two of the most significant questions "A Marble Woman" raises is whether people can create meaning for their lives without controlling the lives of others or shaping their character to fit others' desires. How to create meaningful self-identity is a question constantly present in the story but also one what is never directly answered. Feigned and secret identities are emphasized as genuine threats in meaningful relationships in "A Marble Woman," but meaningful relationship also grow out of relationships that are at least initially defined by feigned identities. Nevertheless, Cecil's female tendency to project herself into roles others desire for her is seen as a very real threat to the development of a meaningful sense of self-identity. Bazil's attempts to mold Cecil's character to fit nineteenth-century feminine ideals are also presented in a negative light. His limitation of Cecil's engagement with the world outside their home delays her self-development and her ability to relate with that world in a meaningful manner. One of her main difficulties in establishing meaningful relationship is her ignorance of her own desires and abilities and her privileging of others' best interests. After all, Cecil's identity and sense of self seem secure only after Bazil's and Germaine's real identities are revealed to her and to readers. Her role too often seems modeled after someone else's design. "A Marble Women" confronts the difficulty of telling the difference between art and life, especially if one's art is very successful. In the end, Cecil is, to some extent, still a "marble woman," molded by Alcott's own successfully deceitful narrative design.

Like "A Marble Woman," many of Alcott's sensational narratives involve characters dissatisfied with their identities that attempt to make changes in their lives by

feigning identity and creating either theatrical or everyday performances of the alternative kinds of lives they imagine for themselves. Feeling trapped within their lives, many of Alcott's sensational characters participate in such performance as a means of escape, transformation, and even self-protection. Unfortunately, such performances, even when embodied as a means of self-protection, often end tragically. "A Double Tragedy. An Actor's Story" is one such tale. Narrated by a male narrator, Paul, who is also the male lead in the text, "A Double Tragedy" is the story of two actors who love one another but whose relationship is complicated by the female lover's secret, off-stage identity. Paul explains that their "acting was not art but nature" (251) in the opening lines of the story, but the magnitude of this statement is not apparent to him or to readers until the end of the narrative when a staged theatrical performance ends with real death.[5] Clotilde, the female lover in the story, is described in the opening sentence of the text as "a beautiful embodiment of power and passion," but she is later revealed as achieving this freedom and enjoying self-expression only because she has assumed a fake identity and escaped her life as the wife of a tyrannical husband. Her power and passion is, unfortunately, provisional, and her freedom is threatened when her husband, St. John, after years of detective work, finally locates her and attends one of their theatrical performances as well as the cast party afterwards. At the party, he stages his own performance of sorts telling Clotilde's real-life story in the form of party-going gossip.

Prior to the events of the narrative, Paul asks Clotilde to marry him, and she tells him, "Not yet, Paul; something that concerns me alone must be settled first. I cannot marry till I have received the answer for which I am waiting; have faith in me till then, and be patient for my sake" (251). Paul explains that Clotilde's words and acts often

"seemed to have a double significance to her," and that he "vainly tried to find some cause or explanation to this one blemish in the nature which, to a lover's eyes, seemed almost perfect" (252). He never succeeded, he explains, "till the night of which I write" (252). During this particular evening's performance, Clotilde, usually a very focused actor, is completely distracted by someone in one of the theatre's stage-boxes and is barely able to continue the performance, "forgetting time, place, and character . . . gazing straight in front of her as if turned to stone," murmuring, almost inaudibly: "The answer, Paul, the answer: it has come!" (252). Only because Paul reminds her of her stage lines and covers up for the break in story-line is she able to recover.

The confusion of their on-stage and off-stage identities is emphasized with the narrative description of what happens as the theatrical performance continues, somewhat successfully: "[w]hile Paul Lamar suffered torments of anxiety Don Felix fought a duel, killed his adversary, and was dragged to judgement" (252). All Paul is able to discern in the stage-box that causes the disruption is a ring that shone on the hand of a person whose body and face were otherwise blocked by the box and invisible in the darkened theatre. After the performance ends, Clotilde gives Paul no answer as to the person's identity, and the only explanation she offers is: "have faith in me a little longer, and soon you shall know all" (254). The narrative design of the story leaves readers, like the narrator himself, in suspense of the off-stage drama's progression. In addition, the narrative design also includes Clotilde and Paul in audience member and actor personas, simultaneously. In addition, they have differing levels of inside knowledge about the disruptive stranger and their situations; Clotilde knows more than Paul, but readers learn of the evening's events from Paul. Alcott's design includes a layering of audience

perspectives and participating personas that makes readers acutely aware, to an almost absurd extent, of the performance-saturated nature of the entire encounter.

As the staged production ends, another performance begins. St. John, Clotilde's returned husband, was, of course, the distraction during the play, but readers are left to discover this until, when during the course of the cast party, St. John creates his own performance of sorts by presenting the real life version of his and Clotilde's identities in gossip form for the members of the party. Prior to St. John's storytelling, someone jokes about his ring, "which was too brilliant an ornament to pass unobserved" (255), and St. John gains the attention of the party, relating the ring to "the latest gossip from the gay city, [Paris]" (255). Paul realizes it is the ring he discerned in the darkened theatre's stage-box, and the ring itself is one element of the story that reveals Clotilde's real identity.

To a captivated audience, St. John tells the "little romance" of a certain Monsieur and Madame. Some of the details of his story include the fact that Monsieur "fell in love with a Spanish girl much his inferior in rank, but beautiful enough to excuse his folly, for her married her," but that later he proposed a separation to Madame because he "wearied of domestic tempests" and settled her "in a charming chateau," while "he slipped away," to give his "fiery angel" time to resign herself to her position (256). When asked by one of the party goers, "Well, how did the experiment succeed?" St. John's reply emphasizes his sexist attitude and his tyranny over Clotilde by grouping all women into one category and continuing to emphasize Madame's connection to the home/chateau and his annoyance with her willful, independent behavior: "Like most experiments that have women for their subjects, for the amiable creatures always devise some way of turning

the tables, and defeating the best laid plans" (256). He continues his gossip by explaining that upon rumors of Monsieur's death and apparent confirmation by his long absence and silence, the Madame, "this inexplicable woman," as St. John calls her, rather than "dutifully mourning him . . . shook the dust of the chateau off her feet and disappeared, leaving everything, even to her wedding ring, behind her" (256). At this point in the story St. John is interrupted by a Miss Damareau who, "forgetting the dignity of the Princess in the curiosity of the woman," exclaims: "Bless me, how odd! what became of her?" (256). St. John answer again confirms his shared belief in the oddity of female assertiveness: "The very question her repentant husband asked, when, returning from his long holiday, he found her gone. He searched the continent for her, but in vain; and for two years she left him to suffer the torments of suspense." At this point in St. John's performance, Clotilde cannot help but interrupt him, suggesting that it "was a light punishment for his offense" of leaving the Madame to suffer them "while he went pleasuring."

In a narrative break that emphasizes his own and readers' position as audience members in an unfolding drama of which the other party-going characters are unaware, Paul explains: "Clotilde spoke; and the sarcastic tone, for all its softness, made St. John wince, though no eye but mine observed the faint flush of shame or anger that passed across his face" (256). St. John continues his story, filling out details of the story with the realities of Clotilde's life, including the facts that Madame had "returned to her old profession, and fallen in love with an actor," and that "being as virtuous as fair" had sent letters out trying to gain information that would confirm her husband's death, secure her freedom, and permit her to marry her actor lover. St. John also uses the story to further

inform Clotilde of her position in the present circumstances. He also explains that Monsieur used these letters to track Madame's whereabouts and "followed her indefatigably till he found her" (256). Again, one of the party-goers interrupts him to ask how Madame received Monsieur, and St. John asserts his gossip story into the very locale and reality of their situation by explaining that Monsieur attended her performances in secret for a couple of nights, "fell more in love with her than ever," and "[h]aving tried almost every novelty under the sun he had a fancy to attempt something of the dramatic sort, so presented himself to Madame at a party" (257). Presenting himself as the heartsick, abandoned, forlorn lover and even naming himself as the performer he really is, St. John reveals himself quite clearly, at least to the story's narrator, as Clotilde's husband, returned to claim "his own," as he calls her (257).

"A Double Tragedy" presents performance both as a means of expressing and exploring one's identity as well as a means of negotiating and even destroying one's identity, and both of these possibilities are threatening within the context of this particular narrative. "An actor learns to live a double life," Paul explains early in the text, and Clotilde's husband's arrival at the theatre brings Clotilde's "double life" into focus, or perhaps it's better to say into disillusion. Moreover, St. John's performance at the party adds another dimension to Alcott's depiction of the possibilities brought about by performance in this particular tale: performance is a way of negotiating public and private identity simultaneously. In addition, performance is an especially threatening activity in that one can initiate it and carry it out without the consent of others involved. In the case of "A Double Tragedy," St. John participates in one performance while Clotilde is

involved in yet another, and the power of both performances, like the success of both characters, is compromised by its entanglement with the other.

As Judith Butler has explained, the performative speech act is one example of power acting as discourse. The performative effects of St. John, Clotilde, and the narrator's speech acts during St. John's storytelling and throughout the rest of the story reveal the power struggles inherent in the love triangle. After St. John explains that Monsieur presented himself to Madame at a party, Miss Damareau yells, "Heavens! What a scene there must have been!" (257). In a doubly performative statement—a statement included as part of his story but one that also appears to enact the response he desires from Clotilde in real life—St. John continues:

> On the contrary, there was no scene at all, for the man was not a Frenchman, and Madame was a fine actress. Much as he admired her on the stage he was doubly charmed with her performance in private, for it was superb. They were among strangers, and she received him like one, playing her part with the utmost grace and self-control, for with a woman's quickness of perception, she divined his purpose, and knowing hat her fate was in his hands, endeavored to propitiate him by complying with his caprice. (257)

St. John goes on to explain that the Monsieur is "ready to forgive and forget" if the Madame will "leave the stage to play 'The Honey Moon' for a second time in private with a husband, who adores her." Then he stops to ask Clotilde directly: "What is Mademoiselle's opinion?" Paul interrupts with a narrative aside again, explaining that Clotilde's "every look and gesture [were] guarded," and he "wondered no one observed it" (257). "When St. John addressed her," he explains, "she looked up with a smile as bland as his own, but fixed her eyes on him with an expression of undismayed defiance and supreme contempt that caused him to bite his lips with ill-concealed annoyance," and said, with her own performative import that controlled the progression of the interaction

as much as any of St. John's earlier speech acts: "I think that Madame, being a woman of spirit, would not endeavor to propitiate that man in any way except for her lover's sake, and having been once deserted would not subject herself to a second indignity of that sort while there was a law to protect her" (257). St. John tries once more to dictate Clotilde's response and enact her subjugation by saying: "Unfortunately there is no law for her, having once refused a separation. Even if there were, Monsieur is rich and powerful, she is poor and friendless; he loves her, and is a man who never permits himself to be thwarted by any obstacle." He continues with the performative directive: "therefore, I am convinced it would be best for this adorable woman to submit without defiance of delay—and I do think she will" (257).

St. John's arsenal of performative speech acts does little other than inform Paul and Clotilde of his intentions and provide entertaining party gossip. His continued presence in the theatre, during rehearsals and performances, however, has a profound effect, and, as Paul explains in the story's opening, their acting becomes "not art but nature" (251). St. John physically harms Paul during his participation in a rehearsal of a sword fight by purposefully cutting him, and St. John's petitions to Clotilde are ceaseless. Clotilde becomes so threatened by the idea of having to return to live him that when she has the opportunity to harm him before the beginning of an evening's performance she takes advantageous of it. In fact, she kills him. An extreme action, it signifies Clotilde's desperation in a shocking and especially effective manner.

Prior to St. John's attendance of Paul and Clotilde's performance of Romeo and Juliet, one of the other actors, Keen, suggests St. John watch the performance from one of the loft chambers above the gallery that is sometimes used as a trap door through which

actors could descend by a rope. ""From here you get a fine view of the stage; steady yourself by the rope and look down. I'll be with you in a moment." Keen tells St. John (261). Clotilde, overhearing Keen's suggestion, is aware of St. John's precarious position. She borrows Paul's dagger with which Juliet was to pretend to stab herself later in the play, and cuts the rope, causing St. John to fall to his death. Paul learns of Clotilde's murderous secret by discovering that she was in possession of his stage weapon at the time of the murder and by finding a blossom from the rare flowers he had left in her room that evening next to the loft door. Paul doesn't share his knowledge of Clotilde's act with anyone, and he is accused of the murderous cut. Even though Clotilde's act frees her to marry Paul, he explains that it also, "makes the woman whom I once loved [grow] abhorrent to me" (263). In addition to making her abhorrent to him, Clotilde's act also compromises Paul's reputation and sense of character. Clotilde is so distraught by this turn in events and character that she really does kill herself during that evening's staged performance of Juliet's death. As she is dying, she tells Keen: "Lamar is innocent—I did it. This will prove it. Paul, I have tried to atone—oh, forgive me, and remember me for love's sake." Paul says he did, and explains that he "never played again since the night of that DOUBLE TRAGEDY" (264).

Clotilde's transformation from "almost perfect" to "abhorrent" demonstrates Paul's discomfort with his inability to judge her character or empathize with the severity of her action caused by her extreme fear of returning to live with St. John. In addition to suggesting his lack of ability to relate to the female subject position, or Clotilde's abhorrence of her position of St. John's wife, Clotilde's transformation indicates Paul's fear of female performance and power in general. Building off the nineteenth-century

belief in female transparency and paranoia about social hypocrisy, several other of Alcott's sensation stories, such as "La Jeune; or, Actress and Woman" and "A Freak of Genius," also spotlight the tendency to misjudge female character. Of course, realizing the possibility of misinterpreting female character also insinuates the possibility of reevaluating the judgment and identities of the interpreters, or, in the case of both of these stories, the specifically male vulnerability to misinterpreting the character of women whom they assume to be transparent.

"La Jeune; or, Actress and Woman" was first published in the April 18, 1868 edition of Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner, a weekly magazine intended for a family readership, to which Alcott contributed many stories, including "A Double Tragedy" to the periodical's first number (Stern, "Introduction to Unmasked" xvi). The story directly addresses the persona of the actress both from the actor's and the audience's point of view. As its subtitle, "Actress and Woman," indicates, the narrative utilizes the conflicting identities of woman and actress as the plot defining aspect of the narrative. "La Jeune" is the story of Mademoiselle Natalie Nairne, the actress and woman of the tale, Arthur Brooke, the man who hopes to marry her, and Ulster, the story's narrator, Arthur's friend, and the cynical "detective" who spies on the actress to try to prove her an unsuitable marriage prospect for Arthur. The story begins with Arthur convincing the reluctant Ulster to accompany him to one of La Jeune's performances so that Ulster may see her beauty and talent and hopefully approve of Arthur's decision to propose marriage. Ulster discourages Arthur, and, describing the stereotypical nineteenth-century attitude toward actresses and paranoia toward social hypocrisy, Ulster explains to Arthur: "I know the world, and warn you of this woman . . . I know her class; they are all alike,

mercenary, treacherous, and shallow" (626).[6] Nevertheless, Ulster agrees to go to the theatre with Arthur. During the performance, Ulster is convinced of her extreme talent and beauty: she "entered no as most actresses take the stage, but as a pretty woman really would enter the room . . . She was beautiful" (627), but he doesn't admit his admiration to Arthur, instead dismissing Arthur's inquiries "with a shrug and the cruel words: `Paint, dress, wine or opium'" (627).

Although her beauty is apparent, La Jeune's character, like Jean Muir's in Behind a Mask, is a mystery. However, unlike Muir who keeps her real identity hidden or else deliberately stages voyeuristic moments for an intended audience, Natalie is unknowingly "observed in her transformation" (Stern "Introduction to Freaks," 11): As Stern explains, Natalie "appears to be French, about twenty-five, captivating, filled with fire. But for one brief moment she reveals a darker self" ("Introduction to Freaks," 11). As the performance continues Ulster is transported by La Jeune's skill into the Louis Quatorze era, and explains to readers that "the art is so perfect, one forgets the absence of nature" (626). The illusion is disrupted, however, by Ulster's observance of La Jeune's unintentionally exposed backstage behavior:

> [A]s if forgetting that she could be overlooked, la Jeune leaned back with a change of countenance that absolutely startled me. All the fire, the gayety, all the youth, seemed to die out, leaving a weary, woeful face, the sadder for the contrast between its tragic pathos and the blithe comedy going on before us . . . It was but an instant. Her cue came, and she swept on to the stage with a ringing laugh, looking the embodiment of joy. (628)

La Jeune's transformation is unnoticed by Arthur, and Ulster keeps it to himself. The transformation only increases Ulster's intrigue, and he is even more "bent upon learning the true nature of the actress" (Stern, "Introduction to Freaks" 11).

Following the performance Ulster and Arthur go to an after party at which Mademoiselle Nairne is also in attendance. At the party Ulster questions Mademoiselle directly about her backstage behavior, but she offers a story about one of her buckles wounding her hurt. Cynical Ulster does not believe her. In fact, Ulster is only further convinced that all of Mademoiselle Nairne's behavior is a "bit of clever acting" (630). He believes this especially when she refuses to accept a diamond bracelet given to her by Arthur in a bouquet of flowers following the performance, claiming that she knows "Sir Richard Brooke would disinherit his only son if that son made a *mésalliance*; I know that I regard Arthur too much to mar his future, and—I banish him" (630). Ulster tells Arthur of their conversation, and, dumbstruck and hurt, Arthur appeals to Ulster's sensibility, asking: "You think she means to win me by affecting to sacrifice her own heart to my welfare?" (630). Explaining his extreme confidence, even over-confidence, in his own judgment, Ulster replies: "Exactly; she did it capitally, but I am not duped . . . I never am deceived; I read men and women like books, and no character is too mysterious for me to decipher" (630). Ulster convinces him to let him investigate Mademoiselle, explaining: "I'll study this woman, and report my discoveries to you; thus, step by step, I'll convince you that she is all I say, and save you from the folly you are about to commit . . . I never fail—but it such an unheard of thing occurs, I'll own I'm conquered, and pay any penalty you decree" (631). Agreeing to this arrangement, Arthur fades from the narrative, and Ulster's detective work comprises the rest of the plot.

He follows and spies on Natalie, learning four secrets: First, he discovers she is hiding her involvement with a young lover who is secretly admitted to a specially secured room in her house; next, he overhears her tell her maid, Jocelynd: "Count this for me. I

have been playing for a high stake, but I have won, and Florimond shall profit by my success" and realizes "She gambles—so much the better" (633); then he deduces that La Jeune is an opium-eater when he sees Jocelynd buy laudanum, presumably for La Jeune, in "one of those dark little stores in the Rue Bonaparte" (633); finally, he secretly observes La Jeune when she is acting and looking especially fatigued and stressed and concludes that her secret lifestyle is affecting her health and conscience. Ulster shares this information with Arthur, thinking he has convinced his friend of Mademoiselle's unsuitability. Glad to have proven the correctness of his judgment, Ulster is even more happy not to recommend Natalie as Arthur's wife because he has fallen in love with her himself. With his own amorous feelings in mind, Ulster also interprets Natalie's behavior when they are alone as demonstrating her love for him as well. In a narrative aside, Ulster explains: "[I] longed to drop my mask and tell her that, with all her faults and follies, I found her more dangerous to my peace than any woman I had ever known" (634). Yet, his bias towards her selfishness and shallowness is still present when he follow this statement with the aside that "had I been a richer man she would have smiled upon me in spite of Brooke and the unknown Florimond" (633). Nevertheless, on the last day of Ulster's set amount of time for spying on Natalie, he goes to her house to proclaim his love for her despite his disloyalty to Arthur whom he knows still loves her.

At the beginning of their visit, Natalie pretends not to object to and even to share Ulster affections. However, once he tells her: "I have discovered faults and follies, mysteries and entanglements, but I can forgive all, forget all, for the sake of this crowning discovery. You love me; I guess it; but I long to hear you confess it, and to know in words that I am blest" (634), the direction of the narrative takes a drastic turn

and changes course entirely. Natalie's performative demonstration of her love never comes. Instead, what occurs is a complete unraveling of Ulster's interpretation of Natalie's behavior and judgment of her character. Readers learn that the plot Ulster has provided as narrator of the text is completely incorrect and that Natalie has been aware of his detective work all along. In other words, Natalie as well as Ulster has had designs on the other.

With the unraveling of Ulster's narrative, Alcott mocks the notion one can "read men and women like books" or determine character based upon appearance alone. Demonstrating her complete awareness of her identity as an actress in Ulster's plot, Natalie begins her own revisionary performance with the lines: "I heard you boast, your plot and pledge, made in this room a month ago, and resolved to teach you a lesson. You flatter yourself you know me thoroughly, yet you have not caught even a glimpse of my true nature" (635). "Prove it!" the narrator cries, losing control of his own carefully laid design. And she does: "First let us dispose of the discoveries so honorably made, and used to blast my reputation in a good man's eyes," Natalie begins. "My lover is an Italian physician, who comes to serve a suffering friend whom I shelter; the laudanum is for the same unhappy invalid. The money I won was honestly *played for*—on the stage, and the secret love you fancied I cherished was not for you—but Arthur" (635). In outrage, embarrassment, and pain, the narrator cries, "Hang the boy; it is a plot between you!" and exclaims, "Good! I am right in one thing, the richer prize tempts the mercenary enchantress" (635). Natalie proves his erroneous judgment and inability to interpret character again, saying: "Wrong again; he knew nothing of my purpose, never guessed my love till today" (635). And repeatedly throughout the rest of the story she proves the

story's narrator inability to predict the outcome of the story's plot or know the characters of his own design.

First, she demonstrates Ulster's tendency to misjudge her character by responding to his assumption that she and Arthur will marry with the explanation that she has refused Arthur because she is already married—to the invalid she nurses. On top of that, she is dying herself. "Judge no lest ye be judged," she tells Ulster. "Let me tell you the truth, that you may see how much you have wronged me. You think me a Frenchwoman, and you believe me to be under five-and-twenty. I am English, and thirty-seven tomorrow. Incredulous, the narrator can only repeat the shocking revelation: "English! Thirty-seven!" (636). When Ulster suggests she might leave her husband for Arthur, she proclaims her loyalty to her dying, much older husband who has cared for her for years, "Never! See how little you know my true character . . . I cannot forget the debt I owe him. I am grateful, and in spite of all temptations, I remain his faithful wife till death" (636).

Ulster's humbling is complete. As he becomes the subject under investigation, he, along with readers, makes several discoveries about his own fallibility. His description of his revelation about Mademoiselle Nairne's character confuses art and nature to some extent, but it is only to emphasize his understanding of the significance as well as entanglement of her separate identities as actress and woman. Clearly, questions of the nature of the actor are not easy to answer: "Never in her most brilliant hour, on stage or in *salon*, had she shone so fair or impressed me with her power as she did now. That was art, this nature. I admired the actress, I adored the woman, and feeling all the wrong I had done her, felt my eyes dim with the first tears they had known for years"

(636). Ulster's identity becomes more and more pathetic as the story closes, emphasizing the tragic life one may lead if he lives by performance alone. In the last minutes of his final encounter with Natalie, his attempts at communication become less and less effective, and his inability to interpret his own surroundings is emphasized with one final blow: he is unaware that Arthur is standing behind him, witnessing the entirety of his and Natalie's encounter. "She did not see my honest grief; her gaze went beyond me, as if some invisible presence comforted and strengthened her," he explains, not knowing that Arthur is there. "But for one so beautiful, so beloved, to die alone is terrible," Ulster murmurs through his tears, as Natalie, who at the very same moment stretches out her arms to Arthur, thus revealing his unknown presence to Ulster in one final blow, replies: "Not alone, thank heaven; on friend remains, tender and true, faithful to the end." Completely powerless and insignificant, Ulster closes the narrative curtain with the lines: "It was no place for me," though "love made a heaven for those I left behind" (637). With the exception of a separate, closing paragraph of narrative commentary only, Ulster's self-exile ends the narrative. The closing paragraph explains that four months later Arthur left Paris as well and returned to England to bring Ulster a gift of forgiveness from Mademoiselle Nairne, whom he had left, along with her husband, "quiet under the sod at Pere La Chaise" (637).

"La Jeune" directly addresses the negative possibilities that arise when one interprets a woman's behavior and identity with the assumption that she is a consummate actress both on the stage and off, when one assumes that women or actresses are perpetually disingenuous. Yet, "La Jeune" also proves that performative designs are a reality of everyday life. Ulster suffers for both believing but also underestimating female

performance. The threat of performative designs destroys Ulster's ability to interpret life confidently, let alone trust the identity of his fellow human beings or his own understanding of character. His over-confidence in his ability to "read" others costs him love and friendship. Mademoiselle Nairne's forgiveness of Ulster, however, indicates a possible admission of Alcott's part as to the difficulty in answering questions about the nature of the actor and performance. Perhaps, she infers, performance is most useful because of the questions, as well as humility, it inspires.

Alcott's "My Mysterious Mademoiselle" addresses the possibility of being duped by performative designs in a more humorous, less depressing manner. Nevertheless, the story provides a serious commentary on nineteenth-century feminine ideals and its effects on gender relations. Like "La Jeune," "My Mysterious Mademoiselle" includes a male narrator who is duped by performance, but, fortunately, the story ends with reunion rather than alienation. In addition, the story focuses on a same-sex rather than an opposite-sex relationship. Or, perhaps it is better to say that it ends up focusing on a same-sex relationship, but the majority of the plot focuses on what is presumably a relationship between a young mademoiselle and an older man. In other words, like many of Alcott's sensational thriller, readers are duped alongside characters and narrators. "My Mysterious Mademoiselle" is really about cross-dressing and the successful imitation of a young girl's identity by a skillful male actor, but for the majority of the story readers, along with the narrator, remain completely unaware of the young man's ruse.

First published in the September 1869 edition of Frank Leslie's Lady's Magazine, the same year Part Two of Little Women was first released, "My Mysterious Mademoiselle" adds a significant role-reversal to Alcott's performance repertoire. As

Stern explains, the story "presents, in a way, a Jo March in reverse" ("Introduction to From Jo March's Attic" xxx). Jo March, Alcott's persona, who always longed to be boy is famous for her tomboyish appearance and behavior. The hero of "My Mysterious Mademoiselle" is a boy who pretends to be a girl to evade school authorities as he attempts to run away from his mean aunts and return to see his dying mother. The man he tricks into believing he is a young, forlorn, vulnerable girl, is really his uncle who is also returning to the young boy's home to see his dying sister. The young lad is, of course, aware of all these crossed-identities, but his uncle believes his nephew to have been dead for years, so he is completely unsuspecting. It still remains quite shocking, however, that the narrator fails to see through the young boy's performance.

Admittedly, the narrator's circumstances are fairly complex, but even the details of his situation do not entirely explain his deception, especially because from the very beginning of the narrative he appears attune to minute details that provide insight into character. As mentioned earlier, he is on his way to Nice to see his dying sister who has been estranged for years, ever since she chose to marry a Frenchman and was disinherited from her father's will. Following his father's desires, the narrator has not seen his sister since. Even though his father has been dead for fifteen years, he has never tried to contact her. Only a pleading, pathetic letter saying that she has a "precious gift to bestow" (724) upon him before she dies, convinces him to make the effort to see her.[7] He is very distracted and distraught on the train ride to Nice, afraid of being late, too nervous to read, sleep, or smoke. Just about the time he is wishing for company, the train stops and the guard asks: "Will monsieur permit a lady to enter? The train is very full . . . It will be a great kindness if monsieur will take pity on the charming little mademoiselle."

Immediately following this request, the narrator makes the observation that the guard "dropped his voice in uttering the last words, and gave a nod, which plainly expressed his opinion that monsieur would not regret the courtesy" (724). The narrator's attention to the guard's gestures, appearance, and eye movement make the narrator seem especially observant.

When the "little mademoiselle" enters, his detailed observations continue, depicting his own as well as the mademoiselle's appearance and behavior with theatrical detail. As if providing staging instructions, he records the intended effects of his own and the mademoiselle's actions as well as his observations:

> The first glance satisfied me; but, like a true Englishman, I made no demonstration of interest beyond a bow and a brief reply to the apologies and thanks uttered in a fresh young voice as the new-comer took her seat. A slender girl of sixteen or so, simply dressed in black, with a little hat tied down over golden curls, and a rosy face, lit up by lustrous hazel eyes, at once arch, modest, and wistful. A cloak and a plump traveling bag were all her luggage, and quickly arranging them, she drew out a book, sand back in her corner, and appeared to read, as if anxious to render me forgetful of her presence as soon as possible. (724-25)

His detailed descriptions of the mademoiselle make readers who are also unaware of the true sex of the character completely convinced along with him that he is indeed encountering a young girl: "the long curled lashes, the rosy mouth, and the golden hair of this demure demoiselle"; "a coquettish rose-colored rigolette [tied] over her soft hair"; "now and then she checked some work on her lips, blushed and laughed, and looked so merry and mysterious, that I began to find my school-girl a most captivating companion . . . I forgot my years, and almost fancied myself an ardent lad again" (725). When she falls asleep, or else feigns sleep as the case may be, he observes her especially closely:

> I quite lost myself in the pleasant reverie which came to me while leaning over the young girl, watching the silken lashes lying quietly on the blooming cheeks,

> listening to her soft breath, touching the yellow curls that strayed over the arm of the seat . . . She reminded me of my first sweetheart—a pretty cousin, who had captivated my boyish heart at eighteen, and dealt it a wound it never could forget. (725)

Even when the mademoiselle defies feminine decorum, the narrator only interprets her behavior as all the more feminine because he thinks it demonstrates her vulnerability and need to be protected. When the narrator chooses to feign slumber, he is "amused at the little girl's evident relief" (725):

> She peeped at first, then took a good look, then smiled to herself as if well pleased, yawned, and rubbed her eyes like a sleepy child . . . viewed herself in the glass, and laughed a low laugh, so full of merriment, that I found it difficult to keep my countenance. Then, with a roguish glance at me, she put out her hand toward the flask of wine lying on the leaf, with a half-open case of chocolate croquettes . . . lifted the flask to her lips, put it hastily down again, took one bon-bon, and curling herself up like a kitten, seemed to drop asleep at once. (725)

"Poor little thing," the narrator thinks to himself, "she is hungry, cold, and tired; she longs for a warm sip, a sugar-plum, and a kind word, I dare say. She is far too young and pretty to be traveling alone. I must take care of her" (725).

All of these actions and appearances on the part of the mademoiselle and interpretations on the part of the narrator enact stereotypes of feminine ideals. The young actor, of course, knows this, and when he awakes, his actions and words encourage the older man's interpretation of his, or rather her, identity. "Ah, monsieur, do not hurt me, for I am helpless. Take my little purse; take all I have, but spare my life for my poor mother's sake!" (725). Like Jean Muir in Behind a Mask, the young actor knows that playing the part of the victim will elicit much appreciated manly feelings on the part of his suitor and make him, or rather her, seem all the more feminine and appealing. As Keyser explains in her interpretation of Muir: "men have no sympathy with victims of patriarchy such as the destitute, disreputable, and aging . . . but they do sympathize with

and derive erotic gratification from the sufferings of young, well-born, and attractive victims" (Whispers 30). The young actor in "My Mysterious Mademoiselle" exploits this stereotypical tendency on narrator's part to enjoy the role of protector.

It is the role of husband, however, that the narrator assumes when a third party enters their carriage unexpectedly, and the mademoiselle notices a man peering in the window and hears him inquire about anyone seeing a runaway. Alarmed, she bids the narrator to pretend to be her father, but the narrator assumes the part of her lover and casts her into the role of an invalid, explaining that "passing as her father disgusted me, and I preferred a more youthful title" (727). Following the disruption and their return to their "real" identities, the narrator requests a kiss, but the mademoiselle declines, promising to fulfill his wish upon their good-bye. Such a good-bye never occurs, however, because having safely made the trip to Nice without being apprehended by the school authorities he is evading, the young hero reveals his real identity and his uncle's actual role as well.

Near the end of their ride, after both have been asleep for a while, the narrator requires of their location, and hears someone answer: "In a long tunnel near Nice." Realizing this is the cue for his long-awaited and sought after kiss, the narrator says: "Ah, mademoiselle is awake! Is she not afraid that I may demand payment now?" At the same time, however, he is annoyed to smell the odor of his choice cigarettes and hear the crackle of bon-bons fill the darkened carriage. When they suddenly exit the tunnel and light enters the carriage, he is "petrified with amazement, for there, opposite me," he explains, "lounged, not my pretty blonde school-girl, but a handsome black-haired, mischievous lad, in the costume of a pupil of a French military academy" (729). "`Have

a light, uncle?' was the cool remark that broke the long silence," the narrator explains (730), and the boy explains the necessity of his disguise. In the process of telling his story, the young boy explains that "mamma has often told me of your pranks when a boy, and I made you my hero," and, amazingly, the narrator is hardly embarrassed by mistaking the young boy's sex and identity and, instead, returns the boys hugs and affections, though he had "often ridiculed the fashion" (731). The final line of the story reiterates both the narrator's and the young boy's masculine identities and their renewed camaraderie: "we shook hands, manfully, and walked away together, laughing over the adventure with my mysterious mademoiselle" (732).

Readers may laugh as well at the narrator's gullibility in "My Mysterious Mademoiselle." After all, feminine identity isn't necessarily so easy to embody, especially to careful observers, and members of appearance-obsessed culture are especially adept at identifying what is not "feminine." On the other hand, the narrator carefully catalogues the feminine characteristics he found so appealing, so convincing, and lists such as ones he provides regularly appeared in nineteenth-century advice literature, such as often appeared in Frank Leslie's Lady's Magazine, the periodical in which "My Mysterious Mademoiselle" was first published. If the young actor fulfilled all the feminine requirements, then it seems the narrator isn't foolish, but well-informed about feminine detail. Nevertheless, the narrator's foolishness and the young actor's effectiveness remain biting, though obvious, critiques of nineteenth-century compliance with the equation of female appearance and identity. The totalizing effects of feminine appearance on female and male identity seem quite absurd in "My Mysterious Mademoiselle," but the humorous and even happy end of the tale does not escape the

import of such feminine and female equation. One unhappy reality of the tale is that the young boy first receives care and attention by playing the role of a young, attractive, female victim. Granted, honesty occurs at the end of the narrative, but the possibility remains that the young lad's wishes might not have been accepted or accommodated if he had said he needed protection and assistance as a young man. One of his remarks to his uncle following the removal of his feminine mask is that "you so kindly protected me that he could not suspect your delicate wife" (731). As mentioned earlier, the idea that a young woman automatically needs and desires protection is also an offensive stereotype used strategically in the young actor's plot. With the inclusion of this stereotype and its implications in the end of the narrative, Alcott demonstrates that one of the privileges of performance-oriented endeavor and analysis is that stereotypes get exploited in unexpected ways and lose some of their efficacy in the process.

Two other Alcott thrillers also address the importance of appearance and the sometimes extreme consequences of its equation with inner sensibility. "A Freak of a Genius" (1866) includes a male character Kent who is supposedly very ugly. He and his remarkably beautiful, adopted son, St. George, are often referred to as "Beauty and the Beast" (433).[8] Having been rejected earlier in his life by a woman who explained that she could not love him because his looks repulsed her, Kent vows prior to the events of the story never to love again and never to put himself in a position where the discrepancy between his talent, character, and looks would inflict such pain again. Kent is also a very talented writer, and when he adopts St. George, who is also an aspiring writer, he offers to let St. George, who is very impressed with Kent's writing, to pretend to be the author of his works. Being vain, insecure, and lazy, St. George takes him up on the offer, but his

extreme success and popularity as the fake author of Kent's works, leaves him extremely dissatisfied with his own ability, and he becomes a depressed alcoholic who eventually takes his own life. After Kent's identity as the real author of the famous works is revealed, Kent explains that one of the reasons he did not want to claim authorship is that he did not want to be exposed to the public eye and vulnerable again to public remarks about his appearance. Fortunately, the female leads in the novel, Margaret and May, are very attracted to Kent's character and, much to Kent's surprise, are not repulsed by his appearance. Instead, they truly love and value him. In fact, both express their affection for him very openly, and Margaret even marries him. Margaret, in fact, defies the female stereotype of concern with appearance and attraction to male accomplishment, fortune, and fame, explaining to Kent that it is neither his appearance nor his success as an author that she cherishes: "To me you are not ugly, old, faulty nor odd, but all that I respect, admire and value in a man. . . it [is] your patience, generosity and excellence; of these and many other virtues I am far prouder than a dozen books" (486).

Male insecurity with appearance is not a prevalent topic in other Alcott thrillers, nor is the female ability to look past concerns with appearance. In fact, the depiction of the female obsession with attaining male fortune and physical admiration in Alcott's thriller "Which Wins?" is horrifying and disturbing. "Which Wins?" plots female wit and female beauty against one another, demonstrating in its horrifying conclusion that women taught to equate appearance with value may acquire grossly distorted senses of self-worth. First published in the March 1869 edition of Frank Leslie's Lady's Magazine, "Which Wins?" is the story of two women, Thyra and Nadine, who compete for male attention and marriage partners based upon their appearance. Dress and physical

beauty are the characteristics by which Nadine and Thyra are evaluated by the men who place wagers concerning which of the two women will make a the more wealthy and socially privileged match. Nadine is stereotyped as more witty and Thyra more beautiful. The story includes the observation that "beauty carries the day nine times out of ten" (695), but this idea is challenged by Alcott's portrayal of the disturbing, disillusioning import of Thyra's jealousy and disillusionment when Nadine through the strategic and intelligent manipulation of the men's wager and Thyra's plot against her actually wins the hand of the more appealing and wealthy bachelor.[9]

Narrated in third person, the story's plot and its horrifying conclusion have an odd inevitability and ease about them. The idea that "beauty carries the day nine times out of ten" is challenged, but it wins out. After exiting the party at which Nadine had shunned her by out-smarting her, Thyra sits out on the balcony listening to the party mock her and congratulate Nadine. Noticing a half-smoked cigarette and a way to reach Nadine through an open window, "Thyra saw a way to avenge her wrongs, and prove herself the victor in spite of all that had passed." " It was the work of an instant to lift the smoldering spark [of a half-smoked cigarette] and lay it on the filmy fabric" surrounding Nadine's head. She "watch[ed] the breeze fan it to a little flame, and the flame steal on unobserved till the mantilla suddenly blazed up like an awful glory about the fair head of its wearer" (703). In a fit of uncontrollable rage and indignation, Thyra sets fire to Nadine's hair, permanently disfiguring her. In her triumph, Thyra shouts, "Yes! now love, rank, success, and youth are all poisoned for you . . . *I* preserve my beauty and my freedom still, and it is *I* who win at last!" (703).

"Without a rationally, sexually egalitarian society," Stern explains, "Alcott felt these abuses would invade daylight reality as well as midnight fantasies" ("Introduction to Unmasked" xxvi). Thyra's "win" is revolting, but familiar. Appearance-obsessed culture makes it very easy for performance-oriented behavior to prosper, for characters to place more emphasis upon and have more power through who they appear to be than through the identities they actually embody or leave behind in their ruses. In "Which Wins?" the sentimental belief in the transparent relationship of outward appearance and inner character and the effects of this belief on social identity and mobility preclude a rationally, sexually egalitarian society. And, women as well as men are to blame. Obsession with appearances and material gain preempt moral judgment, concern for others, and responsibility for one's behavior—Thyra leaves, "never to be . . . again," unaccountable for her actions.

Valuing beauty over intelligence, social reward over meaningful relationship, and social acceptance over an authentic sense of self, many of Alcott's sensational characters discover, as Ulster does in "La Jeune," that there "was no place for me" (637). Skillful acting asserted into, in fact *as*, the reality of everyday life often causes Alcott's characters to commit horrifying acts of misjudgment that destroy relationships and lives. Appearance-oriented culture, as Alcott demonstrates, is not just concerned with physical, bodily appearance alone. It has as much to do with cultural practices in general, with codes of conduct, standards of expression, and ways of interacting with one's environment and other human beings. One is reminded of Jo March's experience with her publishers who "seemed to take note of everything she had on" to the appearance of her manuscript "not tied up with a ribbon—a sure sign of a novice" (Little Women 346)

as well as Thyra's permanent disfiguration of Nadine. One thinks of Christie Heron, in Work, who "wears out" her apron as if it is a fancy dress as well as Kent, in "A Freak of a Genius" who avoids the public eye because he is too embarrassed of his physical appearance. Appearance as a central concern in American culture has to do with a concern for when things are recognizable and when they are not, for what is socially inscribed and what is not. But, as Alcott's narrative designs demonstrate, anticipating the occasions and effects of social recognition and inscription is not always easy.

Alcott's performance-saturated sensation stories depict characters confident in their ability to affect unaffectedness and to interpret the affected and unaffected behavior of others. But as Alcott's plots reveal, their judgments are often wrong. Her sensation characters are confident of their capacity to affect the world but often surprised by the results of their affectations. Affectation is repeatedly dangerous and alienating to her characters, and they are repeatedly surprised by the drastic and irrevocable results of their performances.

In Alcott's sensational fiction, complications with the actor persona are commensurate with problems of identity. Perhaps one of her most significant contributions to discussions of identity is the realization that the internalization of otherness results in other-directed, audience-oriented, identity that leaves people vulnerable to the problems of the actor. The "others" they pretend to be as well as the selves that they reject or leave behind in their "performance" all end up absent of any authentic sense of character. Whether interpreting their own behavior or the actions of these so-conceived "others," their interpretations are untrustworthy because they are mis-recognitions, made-up parts, not genuine representations or identities.

Somewhat disturbingly, people who internalize this ideology of otherness *do* genuinely experience and relate to their internalized identities despite their inauthentic nature. Alcott's characters genuinely talk about and sincerely reflect on their feigned identities; feigned identities do produce real not just imaginary experiences in Alcott's characters' lives. Nevertheless, her thrillers repeatedly include characters for whom it becomes increasingly more difficult to actually identify and distinguish between their lives inside and outside of representation. They experience the difficulty of taking responsibility for their "authentic" and "performed" actions *at the same time*.

Alcott's fiction demonstrates that distinctions between performed life and lived life become too slippery to neatly identify. This is advantageous in some ways because it indicates to her readers the possibility of people making changes in their lives according to the possibilities and roles they *imagine* and *create* for themselves. The roles Alcott's characters "make" for themselves do, indeed, provide them with opportunities they might otherwise not have had. Identity, Alcott emphasizes, isn't limited by the experiences one actually lives or embodies. Imagined experiences and the experiences of others fortunately, and sometimes unfortunately, do make a difference in our lives. Knowledge, ideas, and private and sensory experiences, not just verbalized words and physical, public actions, are performative.

The slipperiness of distinctions between performance and life threaten the stability of identity in Alcott's texts. This is in part because she portrays identity as collective, personal, and social. As many of Alcott's characters realize, and possibly her readers too, the potential threat of performance is that it brings the dynamics of life, human action, language, and the imagination to attention—sometimes into focus, other

times into disillusion. In other words, the threat of performance, at least as Alcott depicts it, to this reader's sensibility, is that it foregrounds performativity.

The significance of "performance" is that it reveals the performative import of ideas, words, and actions to us *at the very same moment* that it is the *occasion* of these effects. It dramatizes the past in the present and the imaginary in the real while at the same time providing us with glimpses into the potential, future import of current endeavor. This complexity offers insight into the relevance of the subject matter with which Alcott's readers struggle because of her attention to performance as an activity and framework *in* narrative form, itself a "performance." The import of conceiving of literature *as* performance is that it reveals literature as a performative occasion and a set of effects. Literary texts employ chains of historical, cultural, literary, theoretical, and personal norms with *effect* while *at the same time* existing as *occasions* that embody the performativity of readers' own habits and the cultural norms that support such impulses. Literature as performance offers readers opportunities for reevaluating and questioning the "historicity of norms," as Butler calls it, that comprises the performativity of particular encounters with texts (Bodies 187). Conceiving of literature in this way makes literature, indeed, an "archive of restored behaviors," as Joseph Roach calls it (153)—a performance "in-between," to use one of performance studies' favorite axioms, a performance *for*, and a performance *of* writers and readers. And, literature is a "performance" of all of encounters *simultaneously*.

Notes

Introduction
Louisa May Alcott's Performative Identity: Performance Theory, Motives, and Frameworks

[1] See Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)," Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127-88 and Foucault's Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 29-30 and chapter 3, "Panopticism," pp. 195-228.

[2] Peggy Phelan's "Introduction" to The Ends of Performance (New York: New York UP, 1998), pp. 1-19, and Della Pollock's "Performing Writing" included in the same publication, pp. 73-103, provide excellent discussions of performance methodology. Organized as performances—in sections that indicate each author moving inside of and outside of her own theoretical frameworks and reflecting on the performative implications of her own discussions at the same time she is presenting them—these essays are particularly helpful because they perform the methodology at the same time they discuss it.

[3] See Chapter 1 of Geertz' The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973) for further discussion of anthropological practice as "actor-oriented."

[4] In How To Do Things With Words Austin defines two kinds of performative speech acts: illocutionary and perlocutionary (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975), 94-108. Illocutionary performatives do what they say at the moment of utterance, for instance, "I pronounce you" and "I convict you." Perlocutionary performatives eventually lead to a set of actions and effects. Perlocutionary speech acts sometimes have unintentional results, such as an unintended insult, but they are characterized primarily by the fact that their saying and the consequences they produce are temporally distinct.

[5] See McKenzie's "Genre Trouble: (The) Butler Did It" in The Ends of Performance (New York: New York UP, 1998), pp. 217-235, and Gates' The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), pp. 44-51.

[6] This is a critique that is developed throughout Butler's work in Gender Trouble, Bodies That Matter, Excitable Speech, and The Psychic Life of Power, but she first presents this argument in an early article titled "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" in Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre, edited by Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1990).

[7] See Turner's From Ritual to Theatre (New York: Performing Arts Journals Publications, 1982).

[8] See Schechner's Between Theatre and Anthropology (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1985), 35-116.

[9] This Rorty essay is included in his book Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989).

[10] See A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

Chapter One
Stretching the Bounds of Maiden Modesty:
Performances of the Feminine Ideal in Louisa May Alcott's Behind a Mask

[1] For a feminist view and definition of the influence aimed at by nineteenth-century sentimental fiction see Jane Tompkins' "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History" in The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory. Ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 81-104.

[2] Karen Halttunen's Confidence Men and Painted Ladies: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) analyzes the growing theatricality of American culture as it moved from the sentimental sincerity and home- and family-based life of early Victorian culture to the proud social display and market-based culture of high Victorian culture. See particularly chapter 6.

[3] Mary Elliott's "Outperforming Femininity: Public Conduct and Private Enterprise in Louisa May Alcott's Behind a Mask" discusses this interior-exterior split specifically in relation to construction of the nineteenth-century feminine "self." She argues that nineteenth-century ideology precluded any genuine notion of the feminine "self" because it identified selfhood as an exclusively masculine trait. See Elliott, American Transcendental Quarterly 8.4 (December 1994): 299-310.

[4]For further discussion of Bronson Alcott's use of allegory, see Odell Shepard's Pedlar's Progress: The Life of Bronson Alcott (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1937) and Charles Strickland's "A Transcendentalist Father: The Child-Rearing Practices of Bronson Alcott," Perspectives in American History 3 (1969): 56-61.

[5]This autobiographical information is cited in a large number of discussions of Alcott's life and writings. It is a well-known fact that Louisa supported her impoverished family with her writing and that Bronson Alcott was a economic failure. Much of the biographical information I use throughout this discussion is derived from the following texts: Madeleine Stern's Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1984) and "Introduction" to Behind a Mask (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1975); Sarah Elbert's A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott's Place in American Culture (New York: Rutgers UP, 1987) and "Introduction" to Work: A Story of Experience (New York: Schocken Books, 1977); Halttunen's "The Domestic Drama of Louisa May Alcott" 10.2 (Summer 1984): 233-254.

[6]Alcott's pseudonym was discovered by Leona Rostenberg in 1943, but none of Alcott's anonymous and pseudonymous sensational tales were available to the public until 1975 when Stern published Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1975). For a thorough discussion of the discovery and history of Alcott's writings under the pseudonym of A. M. Barnard see Madeleine Stern's "Introduction" to Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers (Boston: Northeaster UP, 1995.) and Stern and Rostenberg's "Five Letters That Changed an Image" in Louisa May Alcott: From Blood & Thunder to Hearth & Home (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1998), 83-92.

[7] See Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood," American Quarterly 18 (1966): 151-174, and Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century

(Athens: Ohio UP, 1976), chapters 1 and 2, for classic analyses of the nineteenth-century feminine ideal.

[8] All further textual citations are from "Behind a Mask: Or, A Woman's Power" in Stern's Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thriller (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1998), 361-429.

[9] See Frances Cogan's All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America (Athens: Georgia UP, 1989).

[10] See Lerner's The Female Experience: An American Documentary (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977) and The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979) and Anne Douglas's The Feminization of American Culture (New York: Knopf, 1977).

[11] I owe my synopsis and summary of these ideologies to Mary Elliott's article "Outperforming Femininity: Public Conduct and Private Enterprise in Louisa May Alcott's Behind a Mask," American Transcendental Quarterly 8.4 (December 1994): 299-310.

[12] Judith Fetterley draws a parallel between the role of a "little woman" and that of a "true woman" (the female role defined by the Cult of True Womanhood) in her article "Impersonating `Little Women": the radicalism of Alcott's Behind a Mask," Women's Studies (1983), 10:1-14.

[13] Textual citations for Little Women are from Little Women (New York: Penguin, 1989).

[14] This citation is also discussed in Halttunen's Confidence Men and Painted Ladies, p. 166.

[15] All citations are from Work: A Story of Experience (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

[16] See Lora Romero's "Domesticity and Fiction" in The Columbia History of the American Novel, edited by Emery Elliott et al. (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), pp. 110-129, for a discussion of More's Strictures.

[17] I owe this comparison to Mary Elliott in "Outperforming Femininity: Public Conduct and Private Enterprise in Louisa May Alcott's Behind a Mask," American Transcendental Quarterly 8.4 (December 1994): 299-310.

[18] For a discussion of this particular evening's performance, see Ellen Donkin's "Mrs. Siddons Looks Back in Anger: Feminist Historiography for Eighteenth-Century British Theatre" in Critical Theory and Performance, Eds. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1992), pp. 276-290. My knowledge of the various accounts of Siddons' performance on October 5th, 1784 is derived from Donkin's article.

[19] The association between actresses and prostitutes can be traced back to the career of Nell Gwyn and her relationship with Charles II. Nell Gwyn was in fact a prostitute and an actress who was also the mistress to Charles II. As Ellen Donkin explains, her contemporaries seized upon her work as an actress and her activities as a prostitute as somehow intrinsically related, as the following verse indicates:

> Next in the Playhouse she took her degree
> As men commence at University.
> No doctors, till they've masters been before;
> So she no player was till first a whore.

This verse, written by Rochester, is quoted in Roy MacGregor-Hastie's Nell Gwyn (London: Robert Hale, 1987), 35.

[20] Judith Butler has provided some of the most important commentary on the importance of repetition and performativity as constituting factors of gendered identity, and her ideas inform much of my interpretation of Muir's performance of femininity. See Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex' (New York: Routledge, 1993), Excitable Speech: The Politics of the Performative (New York: Routledge, 1997), and The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997).

Chapter 2
'A New Declaration of Independence':
Performativity at Work in Louisa May Alcott's Work: A Story of Experience

[1] A popular song at the end of the twentieth century, Jewel's "Hands," also uses Carlyle's famous call to work and encourages people to take care of themselves and do what they can for the betterment of others: "I won't be made useless. / I won't be idle with despair. / I will gather myself around my faith. . . . / My hands are small I know. / But they're not yours, they are my own. . . . / We'll fight, not out of spite. / For someone must stand up for what's right. / 'Cause where there's a man who has no voice. / There ours shall go singing . . . / In the end only kindness matters" (Jewel Kilcher. Spirit. Hollywood, 1998).
[2] All future textual references are from Work: A Story of Experience (New York: Penguin, 1994), edited and with an introduction by Joy Kasson.
[3] Horatio Alger's Ragged Dick stories, published between 1863 and 1870, offered an enticing success formula for young readers. "I hope, my lad, you will prosper and rise in the world," a respectable gentleman tells the hero of Ragged Dick. "You know in this free country poverty in early life is no bar to a man's advancement. . . . Save your money, my lad, buy books and determine to be somebody, and you may yet fill an honorable position" (qtd. in Kasson xxv). In Eight Cousins, Alcott attacked these tales, lamenting that their heroes always find out, "Be smart, and you will be rich" rather than "Be honest, and you will be happy" (197). As Joy Kasson asserts, Alcott "might have pointed out, Alger's tales of successful young orphans who make their way in the world with nothing but pluck and luck center on boys, not girls, and the values they pursue are individualistic, not communal" (xxv).
[4] For further discussion of Fuller's influence upon Alcott and Work see Rigsby's "Louisa May Alcott's Work and the Ideology of Relations" in Redefining the Political Novel: American Women Writers, 1797-1901, Ed. Sharon M. Harris (Knoxville: Tennessee UP, 1995), 109-127.
[5] See "A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts" in The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory, edited by Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 46-61.
[6] I use the phrase "actor's part" throughout the chapter in Keyser's sense of the phrase: referring to Christie's developing sense of herself *in role* and the subversive possibilities it entails.
[7] In How To Do Things With Words, J. L. Austin defines two kinds of performative speech acts: illocutionary and perlocutionary. Illocutionary speech acts do what they say at the moment of the utterance, for instance, "I pronounce you" or "I convict you." Perlocutionary speech acts lead to a set of actions and effects that are not the same as

what they say. An unintentional insult would be an example of the consequences of a perlocutionary speech act. Butler's Excitable Speech, especially her "Introduction: On Linguistic Vulnerability," provides an excellent introduction to these ideas.

[8] Althusser's notion of interpellation identifies a linguistic performative that constitutes a subject by hailing, naming, and addressing him or her in a particular social position. He gives the example of a policeman on the street yelling "Hey you there!," and concludes that this call constitutes the one it addresses. Since this is a disciplinary situation, Althusser also believed that the persons who turned around also actually felt guilty and identified with one who needed to be reprimanded. Otherwise, he might ask, why would she or he turn around? See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 170-77. Also, see chapter 4, "'Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All': Althusser's Subjection," of Butler's The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection for a developed discussion of this "turn."

[9] See chapter 6 in Theories of Subjection: The Psychic Life of Power (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997).

[10] Christie says to herself, "So let me seem until I be," when she realizes that she has made an impression upon David Sterling (her future husband) that she wishes were true (248).

[11] In a letter to the Alcott Family, in October 1858, Louisa wrote:

> Dear People,
>
> You will laugh when you hear what I have been doing. Laugh, but hear, unless you prefer to cry, & hear. Last week was a busy, anxious time, & my courage most gave out, for every one was so busy, & cared little whether I got work or jumped in the river that I thought seriously about doing the latter. In fact, I did go over the Mill Dam & look at the water. But it seemed so mean to turn & 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 . . . I begin tomorrow & am in fine spirits again. 'Here we go up up up—And here we go down down downy' is a good song for me.
>
> With love you tragic comic
>
> LU.

See The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott. Eds. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine Stern. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987).

Chapter Three

The Appeal of Little Women: Competing Version of Female Independence

[1] All textual references are to Little Women (New York: Penguin, 1989).

[2] See Schechner's Between Theatre and Anthropology (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1985), 35-116.

[3] See Rosalind Krauss's The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge; Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1985).

[4] I am indebted to Elizabeth Young for her attention to these letters in "A Wound of One's Own: Louisa May Alcott's Civil War Fiction," American Quarterly 48.3 (September 1996): 439-473.
[5] For further discussion of the tradition of the "confidence man" in relation to Alcott's sensational writings see Gail Smith's "Who Was That Masked Woman: Gender and Form in Louisa May Alcott's Confidence Stories" in Reconceptualizing American Literary/Cultrual Studies. Ed. William Cain. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 45-59.
[6] For an developed comparison of Bunyan's bildungsroman and Alcott's novels Work and Little Women see Elizabeth Langland's "Female Stories of Experience: Alcott's *Little Women* in Light of *Work*" in The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development. Eds. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland. (Dartmouth: New England UP, 1983), 112-127.
[7] See Brumberg's The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls. (New York: Random House, 1997).
[8] Brumberg suggests Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown's Meeting at the Crossroads (Cambridge, Mass., 1992) and David Elkind's Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance (Cambridge, Mass., 1994) for further discussion of the proposal to raise "some kind of protective structure" for girls (248 n. 3).
[9] This is an idea analyzed throughout The Body Project, but the book's final chapter, "Girl Advocacy Again," provides a discussion of this issue that compares nineteenth- and twentieth-century responses to female insecurities.
[10] Genuis never was completed.
[11] See Showalter's "Little Women: The American Female Myth" in Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing (New York: Clarendon/Oxford UP, 1997), 57.
[12] See Alberghene and Clark's "Introduction" to Little Women and the Feminist Imagination and Gannon's "Getting Cozy with a Classic: Visualizing *Little Women* (1868-1995)," both cited within this text, for further discussion of commercial responses to the novel.

Chapter Four
Alcott's Other Women:
The Threat of Performance in Alcott's Sensational Fiction

[1] Further textual references are to "A Marble Woman: or, The Mysterious Model" in Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers, ed. Madeleine Stern (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995), 175-250.
[2] For a recent collection of essays on Alcott's multiple literary identities see Madeleine Stern's Louisa May Alcott: From Blood & Thunder to Hearth & Home (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1998).
[3] For an in depth account of the discovery of Alcott's sensation thrillers see Leona Rostenberg and Madeleine Stern's "Five Letters That Changed an Image" in Stern's Louisa May Alcott: From Blood & Thunder to Hearth & Home, pp. 83-92, and Stern's "Introduction" to Louisa May Alcott Unmasked (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995), xi-xxix.

[4] See Plots and Counterplots: More Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott, ed. Madeleine Stern (New York; William Morrow, 1976); Alternative Alcott, ed. Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1988); A Double Life: Newly Discovered Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott, ed. Madeleine Stern, Joel Myerson, and Daniel Shealy (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988); Freaks of Genius: Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott, ed. Madeleine Stern and Joel Myerson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); From Jo March's Attic: Stories of Intrigue and Suspense, ed. Madeleine Stern and Daniel Shealy (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1993); Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers, ed. Madeleine Stern (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995); and The Feminist Alcott: Stories of a Woman's Power, ed. Madeleine Stern (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1996).

[5] Further textual references are to "A Double Tragedy. An Actor's Story" in Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers, ed. Madeleine Stern (Boston: Northeaster UP, 1995), 251-264.

[6] Further textual references are to "La Jeune; or, Actress and Woman" in Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers, ed. Madeleine Stern (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995), 625-637.

[7] Further textual references are to "My Mysterious Mademoiselle" in Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers, ed. Madeleine Stern (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995), 724-732.

[8] Further textual references are to "The Freak of a Genius" in Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers, ed. Madeleine Stern (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995), 430-488.

[9] Further textual references are to "Which Wins?" in Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers, ed. Madeleine Stern (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995), 695-703.

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