

“Meg Goes to Vanity Fair”

by

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A thesis submitted to the

Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

Graduate Program in

English

written under the direction of

Dr. Holly Virginia Blackford

and approved by

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Camden, New Jersey [May 2013]

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Louisa May Alcott's domestic fiction and romances portray a complicated relationship between objects and nineteenth-century American womanhood. In both genres, virtuous or "real" women produce homemade objects that are invested with sacred meaning; because they represent woman's ability to produce from nothing, they serve as a metaphor for maternity and motherhood. In contrast, those of Alcott's characters who don artificial accouterments or fashion objects are always "fallen"; she denies these characters, as artificial women, the redemptive and reproductive powers afforded her "real" ones. I argue that Alcott's distrust of materialism originates in the fact that these objects inhabit the male sphere: money and property are only relevant because men make them so. Indeed, Alcott's subtext is that mercenary women are no more than prostitutes. Further, because fashionable artifices are simply constraints of woman's "real" nature created by the Pygmalionesque fantasies of the patriarchy, women who associate with them are "dolls," or uncanny automatons. This thesis examines Alcott's distrust of

materialism in three genres: short romances—"Pauline's Passion and Punishment", "Behind a Mask", and "Fate in a Fan"—published under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard in 1863, 1866, and 1869, respectively; a 1877 romance that reinterprets Goethe's Faust titled *A Modern Mephistopheles*; and her enduring 1868-69 domestic novel, *Little Women*. The short romances compare mercenary women to prostitutes and impotent automatons. *A Modern Mephistopheles* reimagines the fallen Margaret from Goethe's *Faust* as a Real Woman who resists the temptations of luxuriant wealth and is, unlike the original, able to redeem Alcott's Faustus before she dies. Finally, in *Little Women*, Alcott offers a feminine utopia in which women are self-sufficient. I read in this progression Alcott's displeasure with the fashionable objects and artifices emerging from the rapidly industrializing social landscape of nineteenth-century America, her alignment with the Ideal of Real Womanhood, and her offering of a matriarchal feminine utopia as a solution to the fallen status materialism holds in store for girls and women.

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## Introduction: “In Woman Dressed and Adorned”

Louisa May Alcott’s domestic fiction and romances portray a complicated relationship between objects and nineteenth-century American womanhood. In both genres, virtuous or “real” women produce homemade objects that are invested with sacred meaning; because they represent woman’s ability to produce from nothing, they serve as a metaphor for maternity and motherhood. In contrast, those of Alcott’s characters who don artificial accouterments or fashion objects are always “fallen”; she denies these characters, as artificial women, the redemptive and reproductive powers afforded her “real” ones. I argue that Alcott’s distrust of materialism originates in the fact that these objects inhabit the male sphere: money and property are only relevant because men make them so. Indeed, Alcott’s subtext is that mercenary women are no more than prostitutes. Further, because fashionable artifices are simply constraints of woman’s “real” nature created by the Pygmalionesque fantasies of the patriarchy, women who associate with them are no more than? “dolls,” or uncanny automatons.

This thesis examines Alcott’s distrust of materialism in three genres: short romances—“Pauline’s Passion and Punishment”, “Behind a Mask”, and “Fate in a Fan”—published under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard in 1863, 1866, and 1869, respectively; an 1877 romance that reinterprets Goethe’s *Faust* titled *A Modern Mephistopheles*; and her enduring 1868-69 domestic novel, *Little Women*. The short romances compare mercenary women to prostitutes and impotent automatons. *A Modern Mephistopheles* reimagines the fallen Margaret from Goethe’s *Faust* as a Real

Woman who resists the temptations of luxuriant wealth and is, unlike the original, able to redeem Alcott's Faustus before she dies. Finally, in *Little Women*, Alcott offers a feminine utopia in which women are self-sufficient. I read in this progression Alcott's displeasure with the fashionable objects and artifices emerging from the rapidly industrializing social landscape of nineteenth-century America, her alignment with the Ideal of Real Womanhood, and her offering of a matriarchal feminine utopia as a solution to the fallen status materialism holds in store for girls and women.

As an antidote to the harmful patriarchal institutions that turn the heroines of her thrillers into fallen women and prostitutes, Alcott offers "real" womanhood. Not to be confused with The Cult of True Womanhood, which idealizes fragility and passivity in women, The Ideal of Real Womanhood offers a middle-class nineteenth-century American woman with robust health and work ethic. Louisa May Alcott's heroine is not the passive "angel in the house" that is onehalf of the harmful virgin/whore dichotomy that constricts women in patriarchal discourses, nor is she a figure of "sentimental true womanhood." Rather, she subscribes to mid-nineteenth-century *real* womanhood. A phrase to define it?

Alcott's short romances illustrate her uneasiness with the object discourses that both fashionable and fallen women employ in nineteenth-century America, as well as the conclusion that such women are automatons and prostitutes. The heroines of her romances are "fallen" women—abandoned and divorced; gambling and social climbing—set on profit and revenge. Their agendas necessitate that they

communicate and deceive through the clothes they wear and the accessories they wield. However, Alcott argues through these texts that battles that necessitate such rabid participation in the patriarchal constructs are not worth winning, as they *cost* the woman her realness and virtue.

*A Modern Mephistopheles* is an 1877 reworking of Alcott's 1866 romance, *A Long Fatal Love Chase*. It evidences an Alcott who integrates her conflicting selves—the author of sensationalist thrillers and the author of domestic fictions—to apply a feminist reinterpretation of the Mephistophelian wealth and Faustian decline that fascinated her since she first read Goethe. *A Modern Mephistopheles* illustrates the impotence of luxury and materialism against the power of Real Womanhood. Though the Mephistophelian Jasper Helwyze offers Alcott's Faustus, Felix Canaris, fame and wealth, it is no match for the creative powers, industrious hard work, and motherhood that comprise Gladys's Real Womanhood. Though Gladys dies, it is not before she redeems others captive to the spell of Mephistopheles.

Finally, in *Little Women*, Alcott presents a feminine utopia happily independent of the patriarchal constructs of commerce and materialism. Like the heroines of Alcott's romances, Meg March encounters the temptations of wealth in high society. When she does, she, too, becomes a fallen woman and an automaton. However, *Little Women* ultimately serves as a didactic novel that teaches readers to be self-sufficient rather than to be consumers or materialists. Domestic self-sufficiency serves as a metaphor for motherhood in a matrilineal family in which motherhood is the ultimate power.

This thesis explores the portrayal of women's relationships to objects in Louisa May Alcott's works with the Marxist feminist theory that materialism is a patriarchal construct that is the result of womb envy, and, further, that fashionable artifices are the results of both materialism and Pygmalionesque fantasies of the patriarchy. As a result, Alcott portrays women felled by these constructs as prostitutes and automatons. Alternatively, Real Womanhood offers redemption and, as she shows in *Little Women*, the opportunity for a feminine utopia.

#### Theoretical Framework: Automatons vs. Real Women

*Hang town gals is plump and rosy*

*Hair in ringlets mighty cozy*

*Painted cheeks and classy bonnets*

*Touch them and they'll sting like hornets*

-- Verse from a Boomtown Drinking Song (Rutter 2)

Alcott's texts and subtexts argue that the fallen woman literally "sells out" to the patriarchy. Because the notions of materialism and private property are patriarchal constructs, the mercenary woman "exchanges" her virtue for futile financial gains and loses the much more valuable redemptive powers that Alcott associates with Real Womanhood. Further, because fashionable artifices appeal to the Pygmalionesque fantasies of the patriarchy, the artificial woman is nothing more than an impotent doll or automaton. Such fallen women appear in Alcott's romances, which caution readers against the dangers of becoming mercenary and artificial. As an alternative to the fallen status and ruin she portrays in her romances, Alcott's longer fictions—including her reimagination of Goethe's *Faust*, *A Modern*



*Mephistopheles*, and her domestic fiction, *Little Women*—offer “Real Womanhood.”

Not to be confused with the Ideal of True Womanhood, which considers women morally superior to men but innately fragile and weak, the Ideal of Real Womanhood encourages women to be neither angel nor monster but strong, capable, and independent.

Commerce, material, money, and private property are patriarchal constructs in Alcott’s fiction. Contemporary feminist theory takes a Marxist approach to the importance of capitalism to oppressing women. In *The Second Sex*, for instance, Simone de Beauvoir proclaims that the notion of private property creates the patriarchal system in which inheritance is passed down from father to son and that ultimately subjugates women:

Private property appears: master of slaves and of the earth, man becomes the proprietor also of woman. This was ‘the great historical defeat of the feminine sex’. ...Then maternal authority gave place to paternal authority, property being inherited from father to son and no longer from woman to her clan. Here we see the emergence of the patriarchal family founded upon private property. In this type of family woman is subjugated. (de Beauvoir 56-57)

Further, feminist theorists such as de Beauvoir and Dorothy Dinnerstein argue that these constructs originate in man’s inability to control his own birth and death. Capitalism, commodities, and the notion of private property evolve from his alienation from the cycle of life. Therefore, because man cannot give birth, he creates a system of materialism that enables him to manufacture his own artificial relevance in the life cycle: a contrived legacy of private property.

As a result, artificial women are the victims of the patriarchy's Pygmalionesque fantasies. Accouterments and fashion adornments—bustles, corsets, and crinolines; false hair, false teeth, and makeup—are the result of urges to suppress the reproductive power of women that men fear and deem monstrous. As de Beauvoir finds, “in woman dressed and adorned, nature is present but under restraint, by human will remolded nearer to man's desire” (de Beauvoir 167). When women assume artifices, they are not appealing to men's primitive desires but their Pygmalionesque ones. The discourses of commodity and materialism as they relate to women—in artifice and adornment—originate in the Pygmalionesque fantasies man develops to cope with his inability to ever truly control a woman's power. The legend of Pygmalion, about an artist who falls in love with his own creation, mythologizes a man whose woman lives because of and exclusively for him. This enduring archetype is a subversion of the reality in which, as de Beauvoir says, “in many species the male appears to be fundamentally unnecessary” (5). Evidence of man's Pygmalionesque fantasies and womb envy occurs throughout history. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Genesis subverts biological fact by insisting that woman, Eve, comes from man, Adam. Baptism, too, undermines childbirth: it is only after the newborn undergoes the patriarchal ritual that it is considered a soul. Thus, because man cannot ever fully control or possess a woman's body—or any of its reproductive capabilities—he develops Pygmalionesque fantasies.

The accounts of the lives of nineteenth-century prostitutes fixate on these women's consumer habits, portraying the proverbial prostitute as the ultimate woman in capitalism. Letters and memoirs of miners, settlers, and soldiers that

describe the opulent accouterments of the actresses, soiled doves, ladies of the lamplight, *filles de joie*, harlots, and prairie nymphs—in other words, prostitutes—that they encounter. These accounts contribute to the growing association of materialism with the notion of the fallen woman or prostitute that Mariana Valverde examines in “The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse” and that is evident in Alcott’s works. These accounts tell of prostitutes’ wardrobes consisting of “evening wear, afternoon ‘costumes,’ and lingerie,” as well as “powder, other cosmetics, and perfume” (MacKell 8). One newspaper reporter, when covering a fight between a madam and her employees and a client, goes to great lengths to describe the ladies’ false accouterments, saying “the floor was covered with false teeth, false curls, false palpitations [probably false breasts], patent calves, chignons, and other articles of feminine gear too numerous to mention”, while another such incident is characterized by “wigs, teeth, obscenity, and bad breaths” (MacKell 28). An account of the life of a woman named Josie “Silver Heels” Dillon says her nickname originates in the silver-heeled dancing shoes she wears, which were given to her by a client (MacKell 47). I argue that sociological writings focus on these women’s objects because prostitutes epitomize the effects of the patriarchy’s system of private property on women: they invest in, market, and sell themselves. To Alcott, not just whores but all women with mercenary ambitions are guilty of prostitution; this reference includes those of all classes who invest in and market themselves, even if not to johns but, rather, wealthy potential husbands. To Alcott, it is foolish for a woman to sacrifice her morals and virtue—indeed, her

self—for the futile goods whose only worth is within the context of an oppressive patriarchal system.

Because artifice, commerce, and materialism are male constructs that repress woman's reproductive powers, the women who dabble in them do so in "exchange" for their virtue and, indeed, their very "realness." By becoming artificial women, the fallen lose their womanhood and all of its powers. Alcott's argument is that the financial and material wealth women gain are not worth the exchange for their virtue and "real" womanhood.

To emphasize the "unnaturalness" of the artificial woman, in many cases, Alcott revokes her reproductive powers or takes away her child (Singley 140). Her texts develop the connection between the fashionable lady and the prostitute not only by emphasizing the artificiality of both but also by plaguing the "marble woman" with another commonly recorded repercussion of prostitution: childlessness. Indeed, nineteenth century fiction and non-fiction emphasizes the childlessness of these mercenary and morally fallen women. Sexually transmitted diseases and abortions render the prostitute sterile in most accounts. One of Leadville, Colorado's back alleys is nicknamed "Stillborn Alley" (MacKell 2). Literature likely stresses this fact to caution women against promiscuity.

Alternatively, Frances B. Cogan's *All American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* finds evidence of Real Womanhood in the nineteenth century in didactic literature for women, domestic novels, and the pioneers and schoolteachers who read them.

It seems clear, for example, that the middle class women traveling by wagon train to California and Oregon, the female missionaries, the women working all over the nation as schoolteachers, the women attending both female and coeducational schools of higher education, and the women supporting families did not follow the dictates of the passive, sheltered, and fragile True Womanhood very convincingly. (Cogan 9)

To defend her arguments, Cogan cites nineteenth-century didactic literature for women as well as domestic novels. I believe that *Little Women* is a didactic domestic novel that aims to teach young girls how to be real women. Indeed, the Ideal of Real Womanhood may serve as the battle cry of the middle class. While women of the upper and lowermost classes dress and behave scandalously, the middle classes—with their emphases on hard work and practical morality—lay the foundations of women's suffrage and political influence. Similarly, Steele finds that women from the uppermost and lowermost classes dress similarly, with working and middle classes maintaining a more conservative uniform:

Contemporary reports and visual evidence indicate that the women of the social elite (still largely aristocratic) and the famous courtesans of the day dressed much in the same style...Women of the upper-middle and middle classes led a more restricted social life, centering around their children, visits to friends, shopping, and so on. Although they, too, were supposed to look beautiful and well dressed, the situations themselves implicitly limited the degree of erotic display that would have been acceptable. Middle-class women were also not in as strong a position to risk public criticism by appearing too avant-garde. (Steele 76)

In other words, the social extremes—aristocratic lady and fallen woman—wear the most fashionable and titillating clothing, while the middle classes—such as the March girls—were expected to dress conservatively. Indeed, in Alcott, the lady of fashion relies just as much on affectation and props as does the actress or the fallen woman.

Considering this option for nineteenth-century women alternative to “fallen” or “True” woman, it becomes clear that it applies to characters such as those in *A Modern Mephistopheles* and *Little Women*. In *A Modern Mephistopheles*, Gladys boycotts the impotent luxury with which she is surrounded, instead exhibiting the ideals of Real Womanhood with her strong work ethic. Likewise, *Little Women* serves as a didactic manual for Real Womanhood and a domestic, nineteenth-century versions of *Pilgrim’s Progress* for girls. Meg, the eldest sister, overcomes the temptation to become a fallen woman and an automaton many times and grows to be a strong example of Real Womanhood. These texts portray the Real Woman’s ability to redeem others from the temptations of materialism, and locate in motherhood “a woman’s power.”

#### Dolls and Whores: The Fallen Women of Alcott’s Romances

Alcott applies to the “fallen” heroines of her romances many of the social theories that the opponents of the presence of the coquette in nineteenth-century America invent. For instance, “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” shows that object discourses only serve to objectify women, whereas “Fate in a Fan” shows the corrupting effects of coquetry and, finally “Behind a Mask,” the impotence of the fallen woman. The morals—in both senses of the word—Alcott presents in these cautionary tales and didactic novels develop her argument that women who engage in materialism become “fallen.”

“Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” illustrates the patriarchal nature of women’s object discourse, and its effect of turning the women who participate in it

into objects themselves. First published in 1863, this story deals with a fallen woman, Pauline, who enters into a sham marriage with a wealthy man in order to get revenge on the man who abandoned her. In order to communicate in high society, Pauline must do so through the accouterments she dons and the ways she handles them. However, these restrictive objects conceal her true self. Further, the text illustrates how a woman's identity is so bound to her things that she herself becomes an object. As a result, "Pauline's Passion and Punishment" illustrates how women become objects by being forced to communicate through them.

The society in which Pauline travels consists of dandies and spectators who are artificial and "promenade" (119); as a result, all characters are absorbed in the discourse of objects. This illustrates that object discourses are a social construct. Objects serve as discourses for all characters: To dismiss Gilbert's petition to her former affection, Pauline "with feminine skill mutely conveyed the rebuke she would not trust herself to utter, by stripping the glove from the hand he had touched and dropping it disdainfully as if unworthy of his place" (Alcott 126). Here, Pauline removes Gilbert's touch from her hand by separating the artificial from the real and indicating to Gilbert his place strictly limited to the former. Gilbert adopts the new meaning Pauline attaches to this artifact, communicating his determination to her by carrying the torn glove around for the remainder of the evening until it is a threatening spectacle to her. Within this discourse, the meaning of the glove is changed from a feminine item infused with culture and propriety to a gauntlet catalyzing the unspoken challenge between Pauline and Gilbert. When Gilbert admits defeat at the end of the story, he once again raises the tattered white glove,

like a flag of surrender, before congratulating her on her victory. To indicate to Pauline that he has not forgotten their previous intimacy, Gilbert “[takes] her bouquet with the air of one assuming former rights” (Alcott 130), thus utilizing the culturally infused meaning in this feminine object to send a nonverbal message to Pauline. After Gilbert drops the flowers (perhaps indicating his inability to love and care for Pauline in the long term) he rearranges them in their jeweled holder with the same gallantry. Pauline, too, notices Gilbert’s new use for the cultural artifact, “now changed from a love token to a battle gage” (Alcott 131). To deliver her final insult to Gilbert, Pauline tears a nosegay from her breast, drops it onto the rocky path they walk, and crushes it with her foot. Alcott emphasizes the meaning with which the object is infused and suggests that its destruction exorcises Gilbert’s power over Pauline: “Pauline tore away the last gift he had given, and dropping it to the rocky path, set her foot upon it, as if it were the scarlet badge of her subjection to the evil spirit which had haunted her so long, now cast out and crushed forever” (Alcott 150). Further, feminist criticisms, such as Luce Irigaray’s “When Our Lips Speak Together,” note the paralyzing effects that male language and its constructs have on women:

If you/I are reluctant to speak, isn’t it because we are afraid of not speaking well? But what is ‘well’ or ‘badly’? What model could we use to speak ‘well’? What system of mastery and subordination could persecute us there and break our spirits? (Irigaray 75)



Indeed, in order to communicate, Pauline (as well as the other women in her social circle) must rely on not only on the arbitrary signs of patriarchal language, but also on socially constructed codes based on how they present themselves.

However, the artificial accouterments and fashion items that women must use to communicate objectify them and suppress their real selves. Pauline receives the news of her abandonment and the text describes the “ornaments” Pauline has “flung away” in her rage:

As if in anger at the beauty now proved powerless, all ornaments had been flung away, yet it shone still undimmed, and filled her with a passionate regret. A jewel glittered at her feet, leaving the lace rent to shreds on the indignant bosom that had worn it; the wreaths of hair that had crowned her with a woman’s most womanly adornment fell disordered upon shoulders that gleamed the fairer for the scarlet of the pomegranate flowers clinging to the bright meshes that had imprisoned them an hour ago. (107)

This image of Pauline, stripped of her artifices, shows the heroine at her most honest and vulnerable. This is the only scene that reveals her sincerely: an abandoned woman, alone and distraught. Indeed, this is the only scene in which Pauline has not manipulated her image to disguise her true emotions. Later, she is adorned with ornaments that serve as props to her performance, and her behavior is similarly affected and unnatural. In the same beginning passage, Alcott emphasizes the patriarchal nature of artifice by situating it in opposition to “Nature, the great mother of us all” (107).

Pauline is so absorbed by the objects she employs to suppress her natural self that her identity merges with those of the objects, and she *becomes* her clothes. When Gilbert gazes at the objectified Pauline, his heart beats as if “responsive to the

rhythmic rise and fall of that booted foot and satin slipper” (128). Because Manuel’s part in the performance is sincere, boot and foot combine—however, because Pauline’s part is artificial, she is represented solely by a satin slipper. Charlotte Perkins Gilman finds that this is a common effect of the slipper, which is so unlike the part it covers that it alienates woman from her actual body:

Why do we think it beautiful to make the shell of a foot so different in shape from the poor thing inside? If we take out that crushed maltreated object we find its real beauty, as a foot, is utterly sacrificed to the adventitious acquirements of the shell. ...But the proud possessor does not pity her own injured feet, nor blush for them. She has never studied the beauty of feet; she does not know or care about it. What she does know about is the general standard of beauty in shoes. (Gilman 45)

Thus, though the slipper necessitates certain damage to the foot (as it does for Meg in *Little Women*) it effectively replaces the foot in the mind of the woman—she thinks not of her natural, powerful feet but of her weak, man-made shoes. In this passage, the objects Pauline uses to conceal her identity devour her individuality altogether—something that sociological writings say is symptomatic of women in fashion.

Because the woman who suppresses her natural self with objects becomes an object herself, destruction of the object-woman’s props can also mean symbolic exorcism of her presence. Gilbert crushes Babie’s ivory fan—the image of his wife—in his regret of choosing Babie over Pauline: “He unclosed his hand, but the delicately carved fan fell at his feet in a shower of ivory shreds—he had crushed it as he watched his first love with the bitter thought ‘It might have been!’” (Alcott 123).

The destruction of the woman's fan also foreshadows her ultimate bodily annihilation.

Alcott's notion of the fallen woman communicating through and, then, becoming an object as a part of a vicious capitalistic patriarchal cycle relates to the experiences of non-fictional fallen women—prostitutes—as recorded in nineteenth century America. Women wore expensive evening dresses and other conspicuous artifices and luxuries in the street to “advertise” their “availability,” but wouldn't “and” be better? as a result, male-authored accounts of nineteenth-century prostitutes focus more on their wardrobes than the lives of the women themselves. Alcott further explores the detrimental effects of the language of objects on those who “speak” it in “Fate in a Fan.”

In Alcott's 1869 story, “Fate in a Fan,” illustrates how women who use objects to flirt end up gambling with their happiness and poisoning their own morality. Rolande's conviction that Leontine's secret is in her fan mirrors the mystery surrounding that accessory within the context of nineteenth century socialization and courtship. Leontine's use of the fan to stupefy her father's opponents is a metaphor for women using fans to captivate and trick suitors. However, the secret of Leontine's fan is that it is a poison that dulls the senses of its target but, unfortunately, those of its wielder as well. The text's ultimate conclusion is that no financial victory is worth the moral dangers of the fan.

The text is full of unresolved sexual tension between Rolande and Leontine, and his fixation with understanding her fan parallels the experiences of many real

men's pursuits of a lady's true feelings behind the coquetry of her fan. Rolande is sure that in Leontine's fan is the weapon he has been recruited to detect; however, he also obsesses over the alluring young woman's secrets. Indeed, the fan is the hallmark of the nineteenth-century coquette and flirt. The "language of the fan"—a set of codes with a prescriptive meaning assigned to every gesture of a lady's fan—allows women to engage in the language of courtship in a(n allegedly) "safe" way. However, some are wary of "the language" and women's abilities to appropriate it for deceitful purposes. According to Ariel Beaujot, "If a woman were aware that her fan was an accessory that might express her emotional state, she could also use it to conceal unwanted thoughts or as a device to be manipulated into demonstrating feelings that they woman wished she possessed" (76). At first glance, Leontine appears a virtuous—if suffering—young woman due to her lack of ornaments. However, Rolande suspects her, mirroring the attitudes of Victorian-era men confused by fashionable ladies' fans. With the deceptive language of their fans, Victorian coquettes can pass as virtuous women, and virtuous women can pass as coquettes. Rolande is sure that if he can discern the secrets of the fan, he can discern the secrets of the woman. His fascination perfectly embodies the importance of a Victorian lady's objects to concealing or revealing her intentions.

Leontine's use of her fan to assist her father in profiting from gambling implies that women trolling fashionable society for husbands are merely *playing* into a *patriarchal* system and are gamblers and spectators seeking unearned wealth. Many Victorian manuals and novels warn young women against the dangerous "game" of the fan. An etiquette manual tells "the story of a lady who practice[s]

coquetry, breaking off many engagements with young handsome men. One day, after ‘sinking into middle life,’ she promise[s] to marry a man with whom she had once been betrothed, only to suffer the same fate as she had put countless men through when her lover refused to marry her” (Beaujot 83). Women who act as coquettes in order to advance socially and financially gamble not only with their futures but also with the hearts of their suitors as well as their own.

That the poison of the fan—which is a metaphor for the nineteenth-century fan’s ability to stupefy and trick suitors—ultimately harms Leontine more than anyone else suggests a metaphor for the coquetry in real life. Women who act as coquettes, according to Alcott and the Ideal of Real Womanhood, only harm themselves, such as the married protagonist of the 1904 novel, *The Woman with the Fan*, who uses the “language of the fan” to attract more men (Beaujot 83). To Alcott, every flutter of the fan poisons the morality of its owner.

Ultimately, “Fate in a Fan” is a cautionary tale advising young women not to give in to the popular convention of using the accessory for flirtation; indeed, to do so is to become “fallen.” The text first establishes Leontine’s fan as a metaphor for the social convention, then illustrates how those who engage in it “gamble” with their futures and, ultimately, corrupt their own morals. Alcott’s message is that women who rely on the “language of the fan” are, like Leontine, participants in a mercenary scam and, by harming those around them with their coquetry, ultimately do the most harm to themselves.

“Behind a Mask” (1866) shows that an artificial woman gets an artificial marriage. Like Pauline and Leontine, Jean Muir—a divorced ex-actress posing as a virtuous young governess—also uses objects to deceive, appealing to one of the nineteenth century’s greatest anxieties about artificial women by infiltrating the upper class. The effect of Jean concealing her true self is that she becomes an uncanny doll, or unreal woman. Though Jean Muir’s financial triumph may appear to empower the female and lower-class demographics to which she, as the text’s sole and, thus, representative member, belongs, Jean Muir is ultimately a tragic figure whose ending sounds out her loneliness. Because she is not a “real” woman, she cannot have a “real” marriage. Here, Alcott (quite literally) pairs moral ruin with impotence.

Jean Muir’s use of artifice to ensnare an upper-class patriarch speaks to a very acute nineteenth-century anxiety about the power of artifice and fashion to enable fallen or lower-class women to “pass” as ladies. The late nineteenth century suffered from an acute anxiety of an alleged dwindling distinction between the prostitute and the respectable woman. As Valerie Steele finds, “some people feared that the ‘lines of respectability were becoming blurred’” (128). Further, the very position or “breed” of the governess occupies a precarious space in between decency and indecency: governesses are expected to teach young *ladies* all of the womanly arts, yet the governesses themselves are often considered “morally suspect” (Butterworth-McDermott 31). More so, most high-class nineteenth-century prostitutes have the skills “to pass for a governess or companion to a rich man’s child or elderly parent” (MacKell 6) in order to entertain undetected.

Like Pauline Vallary, Jean Muir uses fashion items to suppress her natural or “real” self. Jean reveals herself only while kneeling before her trunk—an altar to feminine artifice. It is only after Jean removes the objects that conceal her status as a fallen woman—false hair wrapped in demure braids, makeup that gives her cheeks a youthful, rosy glow, and the false teeth that conceal her true poverty—can she “settle in to her natural self”:

Still sitting on the floor she un[binds] and remove[s] the long abundant braids from her head, wipe[s] the pink from her face, [takes] out several pearly teeth, and slipping off her dress appear[s] herself indeed, a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least. (12)

Indeed, Jean is unable to be a natural or “real” woman when constrained by these artifices. Unlike the trunks in *Little Women*, though, which contain items produced through domestic labor, Muir’s reveals the artificiality of her performance.

Positioned before her trunk in a reverent kneel, she produces from her trunk a glass and a cordial, addressing the alcohol as “old friend” and apostrophizes her plans to it while removing the artifices—costume and props—that reveal her performance as a virtuous woman to be a sham.

Further, Alcott stresses the unnaturalness of Jean’s use of makeup to mask her true self by mentioning its “uncanny” effect on her appearance. Indeed, the Ideal of Real Womanhood disapproves of makeup, which fallen women use to mask natural emotions and flaws. As Steele writes:

[Godey’s Lady’s Book’s magazine editors worr[y] that real cosmetics [conceal] the evidence of true inner emotions that would normally be expressed by blushing or growing pale. Indeed, the emphasis on ‘sincerity’ and ‘honesty’ [is] so strong that some Americans [profess] daguerreotypes

over painted portraits, on the grounds that their rather harsh 'realism' [does] not 'flatter' the sitter. To look too good [is] suspect. (125)

Indeed, the emotionless perfection Jean achieves by masking her true self is uncanny. Gerald Coventry's first impression of the governess is that she is "far from" pretty and "an uncanny little specimen" (9). Within the context of the nineteenth century Ideal of Real Womanhood, Jean's "uncanny" appearance is likely due to its inauthenticity.

An artificial woman, though, can only hope for an artificial marriage: Jean Muir's marriage to Lord Coventry is doomed to be an unhappy one because her love for the lord is an act. Further, it bears little threat of reproduction. Interestingly, the nineteenth-century anxiety of fallen women deceiving their way into marriages with members of the upper classes is founded in anxiety of these women bringing disease into respectable households. Jean does not, for one reason or another, marry the young and virile Lord Sydney, Gerald Coventry, or Edward Coventry; instead, the text pairs her with the geriatric patriarch. Perhaps because she is not a natural or "real" woman, Jean cannot have a "real" man. Interestingly, the ravages of poverty Jean Muir uses artifice to conceal—missing teeth and hair and a haggard complexion—are not unlike the ravages of age that certainly mar her elderly new husband. The text thus concludes that fallen status is as impotent as age.

Louisa May Alcott's romances apply popular beliefs about fallen women to literature. "Pauline's Passion and Punishment" illustrates how the discourses that turn women into objects are a social construct. "Fate in a Fan" warns of the harm women do to themselves when acting as coquettes and flirts. Finally, "Behind a



Mask” shows the impotence of luxury. Ultimately, the fallen women of Alcott’s thrillers identify with objects that accentuate their artificial feminine performances because they haven’t any access to a Marmee or her sacred objects. As Holly Blackford finds in “Vital Signs at Play: Objects as Vessels of Mother-Daughter Discourse in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*”, they lack the “life objects” that are extensions “of the maternal body” (4). As a result, they are forced to identify solely with transitional objects or those invested with meaning by cultural, not domestic, discourses. Indeed, such examples found in Alcott’s romances foreshadow and reinforce the stance against coquetry and in favor of Real Womanhood that she takes in her domestic fiction. *A Modern Mephistopheles*, too, argues that materialism is impotent. However, it offers a solution in the form of virtuous and redemptive motherhood.

#### A Mother’s Jewel: Impotent Luxury and Redemptive Motherhood in *A Modern Mephistopheles*

*A Modern Mephistopheles*, Alcott’s interpretation of Goethe’s *Faust*, most plainly situates luxury in opposition to virtue, but it also illustrates the impotence of the allures of material wealth against the virtues that real womanhood and maternity represent. Alcott’s Mephistopheles, Jasper Helwyze, offers Felix Canaris and his young wife Gladys leisure and luxury, but Jasper’s literal impotence suggests the impotence of wealth. Unlike Goethe’s Margaret, Gladys is a Real Woman who is deaf to the siren call of the costly items Jasper offers her. Instead, she embodies the argument Alcott echoes in *Little Women*: that women should produce, not consume.

Gladys's ultimate power, though, is in her maternity. When she conceives, she redeems Felix as well as the fallen older woman, Olivia. Though Jasper uses tricks similar to those used by nineteenth-century madams and pimps to try to lure Gladys and Felix back into a life of being "kept," and though Gladys dies as a result, she triumphs in the battle for Felix's soul, showing the redemptive powers of motherhood and Real Womanhood and the impotence of materialism.

The offer of Alcott's Mephistophelian aesthete, Jasper Helwyze, epitomizes the futility of the patriarchal constructs of materialism and wealth and, even, fame, with its impotence. First, Felix desires fame so that he may "die content" (6). This reference can be interpreted as Felix's impotent desire to leave a legacy. Further, Helwyze has only his wealth and the prospect of fame with which to tempt the aspiring writer. Helwyze must live vicariously through Canaris. Like Faustus does Mephistopheles, Canaris provides Helwyze with the metaphorical body he lacks: the text describes Canaris's virility and youth as "an utter contrast to [that of] his patron" (5). In addition to a vicarious youth, Felix also provides Helwyze with a Pygmalionesque fantasy, almost akin to a pseudo-maternity. Helwyze first transforms Felix from "a haggard youth" into "a wonderfully attractive young man" (5). By providing everything for Felix—food, clothing, shelter, fame, fortune, and education—Helwyze situates himself as a kind of mother. However, the nurturing he provides is not real maternity but a false and impotent one based on material things. Though Helwyze aspires to be everything to Canaris, it is Canaris who is truly everything to Helwyze—including, as he says, "protégé" and "son" (13). He uses Canaris to conquer Gladys, as he cannot do it himself; however, when insisting on

Canaris's match, he also argues that he asks "no more than many parents do" (25). In this sense, Helwyze's obsession with Felix is a manifestation of his own desire to leave a legacy and his impotent, male inability to do so. Helwyze attempts to lure Felix and Gladys not just with luxury, but also with culture. However, these, too, prove impotent and ineffective when Gladys begins "reading a far more engrossing volume than any of these...the heart of the man she loved" (88). For, as Gladys says, "Love is the one master who can rule and bind without danger or disgrace" (19) and Helwyze cannot buy Canaris's love. Helwyze's grand house, containing "every luxury which taste, caprice, or necessity demand[s]" (54) is not unlike the old Mr. Laurence's luxurious but barren house in *Little Women*. Though the ingénues swoon at both mansions, Alcott is quick to point out that the cluttered collections of objects and things are futile without the liveliness that women and children provide.

As a Real Woman, Gladys rejects the trinkets Helwyze offers. In one scene, she cannot help but be enticed by the curios that Helwyze has collected from around the world; however, though she allows him to place a bracelet around her wrist, she breaks it and declares that he will never imprison her within such objects (67). These trinkets are like the ones Mephistopheles produces for Margaret. Faustus and Mephistopheles entice Margaret with corrupting jewels, as Mephistopheles proclaims:

"Just leave it in the chest up there  
 She'll go out of her mind I swear  
 For I put things in it, good sir  
 To win a better one than her." (2734-37)

These objects epitomize worldliness as they are both “of the world” (being from every foreign land) as well as secular (non-religious or sacred). Gladys rejects the ivory carvings of Hindu gods because she will “have no idol” (68). In contrast to Margaret—and, perhaps, in reference to the “string/or something like it, made of pearl” (3672-73) Faustus and Mephistopheles bring her—Gladys rejects Helwyze’s gift of pearls. Like Margaret in Goethe’s *Faust*, Gladys—whom Helwyze compares to a “young eve” (36), obviously placing himself in the role of the serpent—Gladys is at first enthralled by the rich jewels bestowed upon her by whom she believes to be her young suitor. Unlike Margaret, however, Gladys is simply too good to receive the gift with a mercenary perspective. As Canaris notes, “anyone but Gladys would [see] how costly [is] the gift” (46). Instead, Gladys, in her purity, interprets the pearls as a symbol of Canaris’s love.

Gladys’s chain, made of her own golden hair, may best illustrate the idea that woman should produce and not consume. Necessitated by her poverty, the precious bijou is made entirely from Gladys. The hair becomes an “amulet” against Helwyze’s gilded corruption for Felix, who attaches to it his own “poor but precious” treasure—a cameo of his mother. The value of the latter object, too, is constructed entirely by a woman. Its value comes not from its material but sentimental properties; it is invested with her motherhood. The objects invested with domestic meaning eclipse Helwyze’s expensive but empty gift.

When Gladys appears barefoot and hatless, adorned only by flowers and hair (45), she enralls Helwyze with her maidenly artlessness, and inspires him to

declare that “A beautiful, fresh soul is most attractive when one is weary of more material charm” (20). Here he echoes Marmee March’s philosophy about the tendency of artifice and ornaments to corrupt a young girl’s virginal beauty.

Ironically, Mephistopheles, when telling Faust of Lilith, warns him against “...her captivating tresses: She likes to use her never-equalled hair/ to lure a youth into her luscious lair” (4120-23). Alcott’s Gladys subverts the myth of Lilith: Goethe’s Lilith uses her hair to lead men astray, whereas Gladys’s hair is an extension of her goodness.

Like flowers, hair is another respectable ornament for a virtuous young girl. In her opposition to artificial accouterments, Marmee proclaims that “real flowers [are] the prettiest ornament for a young girl” (71) and, indeed, the text places flowers—a natural ornament—above jewels, lace, silks, etc. Flowers represent the fecundity and fertility that elevate a young woman to her rightful place in the cycle of life. Man-made artifices, on the other hand, constrain nature and turn their wearer into an automaton. When Beth falls ill, she gives locks of hair to her family, inspiring Amy to plan on doing the same in the event of her own demise (157). Indeed, in Alcott, hair is the most respectable and, many times, only expression of a young girl’s beauty. Jo’s hair is her “one beauty”; as Amy grows, she is “not beautiful” but her curls grow “more golden and abundant than ever” (199). The virtuous woman’s beautiful hair is the safest way to adorn her in an economy in which good features (such as the Grecian nose Amy covets) would be equated with having a wealthy family that offers little opportunity to earn her virtue—like the notion that “by birth she [is] a gentlewoman” that causes Amy’s follies (205). Further, Jean

Muir's use of false hair is alarming within the nineteenth century discourse that a woman's hair was her crowning glory and somehow connected to her virtue. Steele finds that "a 'virtuous woman' would never wear 'borrowed plaits,' but others believed that false hair might be 'excusable,' if not fully justifiable, if it concealed a serious deficiency of hair. In fact, the trade in hair was considerable, with the hair often bought from peasant women in Europe who wore traditional head-dresses. Conservatives often maintained that the hair was bought from diseased women and was contaminated—an obvious example of a punitive moralistic threat" (Steele 126). In Alcott's context, natural beauty is as suspect as wealth while grace and virtue are the more attractive and desirable attributes. The virtuous woman grows her hair herself.

Indeed, Jean Muir's use of false hair is alarming within the nineteenth-century discourse that a woman's hair was her crowning glory and somehow connected to her virtue. Steele finds that "a 'virtuous woman' would never wear 'borrowed plaits,' but others believed that false hair might be 'excusable,' if not fully justifiable, if it concealed a serious deficiency of hair. In fact, the trade in hair was considerable, with the hair often bought from peasant women in Europe who wore traditional head-dresses. Conservatives often maintained that the hair was bought from diseased women and was contaminated—an obvious example of a punitive moralistic threat" (Steele 126).

When Felix calls Gladys's golden head the only thing of value he has (84), she vows to make it so—in the literal sense—by using her industrious work ethic to

teach Felix how to earn an honest living. Gladys shows Felix that the respectable and right way for a man to earn money is not through art and fame but industrious hard work. She discourages Felix from gambling (81) and saves money by performing domestic production with embroidery and needlework. She makes flowers with her needle and thread. The “domestic league” that Gladys’s secret mission creates protects the newlyweds from Helwyze and brings them closer to one another (87).

Gladys also adds her little cross to the pearls, juxtaposing the older domestic and sentimental object with the newer ornament and transforming the necklace into a sacred rosary. Gladys declares her cross the “more precious” of the items because it is the “only jewel” her mother left her. Considering this statement, Alcott’s readers could argue that the cross is a metaphor for Gladys’s virtue. Later, when Helwyze claims that the pearls once belonged to the fallen Olivia—the former fiancé of Helwyze to whom Gladys is now a ward—it suggests that she, as Helwyze’s former lover and wife, exchanged her virtue for the pearls. Indeed, Olivia is now constructed almost entirely of objects.

Like the fallen heroines in “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” and “Fate in a Fan,” Olivia, as a fallen woman, is “silenced” and communicates mainly through objects. She is “humiliated in spirit” (14) having abandoned Helwyze in his infirmity only to suffer an abusive marriage. Like other fashionable ladies of the nineteenth century, Olivia communicates through her fan—in some cases, her fan speaks for her even when she is not present: “Olivia’s fan, flung down upon a couch, made [Helwyze] smile, as if he saw her toss it there when yielding half-impatiently to the

entreaties of Canaris” (31). The fan, as a nineteenth-century accessory, developed its own language within the silenced demographic of fashionable ladies. According to Steele, it is an “image of graceful, coquettish beauty” and “A ‘language’ of fan gestures existed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Steele 65). Olivia is so absorbed in object discourse that her animated fan can replace her self, entirely, in social interaction.

Gladys’s ultimate power, though, is in her maternity. Before the text announces her pregnancy, Gladys seems endowed with divine powers, and “It seem[s] as if some angel ha[s] Gladys in especial charge.” She cannot be harmed, and takes on the “spiritually beautiful” face of “some young Madonna” (111). Indeed, the pregnancy endows her with “originality, fire, and energy” in addition to her gentleness and grace (112). Gladys marries the concepts of artistic creation and motherhood: though Canaris and Helwyze struggle to write well, Gladys invents songs out of thin air (10). Gladys believes that singing—and, metaphorically, sharing her feminine gifts—“for praise or money” (11) would spoil them; indeed, doing so would make her a prostitute. Further, Gladys teaches Canaris to garden. Cultivating the earth serves as a metaphor for reproduction: here as elsewhere, production stands for (re) production. By helping her husband to cultivate new life, she allows him to participate in the cycle of life and leave a legitimate “legacy,” unlike the one of artistic fame and fortune for which he once aspired.

The image of Gladys as a Madonna ultimately redeems Olivia. When Olivia sees Gladys sitting alone, working, and singing a lullaby to herself beneath a painting



of an angel with the Lily of Annunciation in its hand, she feels “the hope which lift[s] her above all sorrow” and “[a]ll her worser self slip[s] from her” (113). Gladys’s pregnancy reminds Olivia of her own lost maternity: her deceased daughter and, at the same time, the fact that she could have been a mother to Gladys. She relates to Gladys as a fellow mother, but also as a mother to a child. However, Gladys comforts Olivia as well, placing her in the position of the maternal. In her maternity, “little Gladys. . . had subjugated haughty Olivia, wayward Felix, [and] ruthless Helwyze” ruling all with “the irresistible influence of a lovely womanhood” (116).

The fallen Olivia is punished for her material transgressions with the loss of her child. Evidence of the doubt that a woman could lead a life of fashion and be an effective mother can be found even in the late eighteenth-century accounts of the life of Mary Darby Robinson, actress, mistress, and fallen woman. One account describes Robinson’s taking her infant daughter, Maria Elizabeth, with her to a local ball. When Maria Elizabeth becomes ill after Robinson breastfeeds her in between dances, Robinson is convinced that “her vigorous dancing and the excessive heat of the ballroom had affected her milk and brought on the fit” (54). Later, John King, a man to whom Robinson’s husband owed money, published *Letters from Perdita to a Certain Israelite*. In it, King claimed that Robinson, while in debtor’s prison, gave birth to a baby disfigured from the actress’s fashionable tight corsets: “...her *constrained Constancy* gave birth to a Female Babe, distorted and crippled from the tight contracted fantastic Dress of her conceited Mother” (61). Such accounts—of which these, from the eighteenth-century, are just examples—illustrate the complicated and problematic relationship of women to adornments. The same

society that requires these enhancements of women condemns women for embracing them and accuses them of sacrificing maternity for the sake of fashion and finery.

Indeed, sociological writings emphasize that nineteenth-century prostitutes often pay for their transgressions with the childlessness and sterility associated not only with opiates, but also with venereal disease. Famously childless nineteenth-century historical figures such as General Custer are now said to have contracted such diseases by frequenting houses of ill repute: "Some have speculated that General Custer might have picked up a venereal disease on one of his exploits, likely gonorrhea, which he is believed to have passed on to his wife Elizabeth, making her sterile" (Rutter 36). The most obvious connection between a woman's virtue and her fertility, however, is in the misconception that truly virtuous women are immune to such effects:

Sadly, at this time, popular folklore suggested that a 'good,' 'decent' woman who had a pure heart was immune to the effects of venereal disease. ...People believed that prostitutes could contract venereal disease because their hearts were not pure—they were fallen women. (Rutter 77)

When Helwyze fails to ensnare Gladys with his wealth, he tricks her into using hasheesh, signifying the relationship between the impotent luxury he represents and both addiction and moral ruin. Nineteenth-century Americans feared that luxuries, like drugs, are addictive to women. One madam writes, "'There is nothing more pitiful in life than a prostitute who has...tasted the luxuries and liked them, then finds herself...in the gutter'" (Rutter 12). Further, opiates themselves are linked to prostitution in that they are used by madams and pimps as recruiting

tools: “One Nevada madam, Rose Benjamin, [is] accused of leading a young girl astray by having her smoke opium for several days in her house of business. Apparently she was preparing the young girl for the profession” (Rutter 54).

When Helwyze drugs Gladys, Canaris wonders what she has done to make herself so beautiful (94), bringing up the destructive and unhealthy artifices toward which women turn to improve their personal beauty. Though her simple homemade dress is “becoming to her flower-like face and girlish figure” (95) it is the uncanny glow Gladys contracts from taking hasheesh that truly attracts her husband. Canaris’s preference for Gladys under the influence is suggestive of other drugs Victorian-era women and, especially, prostitutes, ingested for cosmetic purposes:

There was an added benefit that many women who used such potions enjoyed. This was the highly stylish glassy-eyed look and ashen skin that was the latest fashion. Opiate use (ingested by spoonfuls or by drinking from a medicine bottle) allowed a woman to have this look without makeup. For a prostitute, especially one in a better house, appearance was everything. The stylish harlot could kill two birds with one stone—she looked good and it sent her into the zone. (Rutter 69)

Here, Canaris’s desire for his wife grows because the effects of the opiate on her appearance appeal to his patriarchal and Pygmalionesque desires. Nineteenth-century prostitutes also used opiates as a form of birth control, believing that the drug halted ovulation. As Anne Seagraves finds, “It was also discovered that ‘regular use of opiates caused disruption or total cessation of menstruation and it was possible that prostitutes used opiates as forms of birth control’” (63). The hasheesh combats the pregnancy that threatens to tear Canaris, Gladys, and even Olivia, from Helwyze. It is also the instrument of Helwyze’s futile attempt to turn Gladys into an

impotent luxury addict like himself. Because Gladys begins to triumph over Helwyze in redeeming Canaris and Olivia, he desperately attempts to position her as an addict, prostitute, and barren woman with hasheesh.

Though Gladys dies, it is important to note that death cannot quell her triumph. Helwyze notes that she has the makings of an excellent martyr, and Gladys begs Canaris to let the protagonist of his story live, even if the heroine must die, foreshadowing her own purpose when she proclaims, “if you must end tragically, let the woman go; she would not care, if he were safe” (77). Few of Alcott’s heroines possess the redemptive power that Gladys does. She redeems both Felix and Olivia before dying, and even Helwyze laments that she may have been able to help him, as well, had she more time. After Gladys’s death, Felix resolves to be good so that he may be worthy of following her where she waits for him. Indeed, the virtuous woman emerges victorious over the impotent devil in the battle for Canaris’s soul.

The Little Women Make the Clothes: Domestic Creation as a Metaphor for Motherhood in *Little Women*

*Little Women* presents a compelling alternative to the relationship between artificial objects and the fallen woman. Closely examining the development of the character Meg—rather than Jo, as most criticism does—proves that when she encounters luxury objects, they threaten to ruin her as they do the heroines of Alcott’s thrillers. Homemade objects, however—such as handwritten notes and hand-embroidered handkerchiefs—represent messages and people in some of *Little Women*’s most pivotal moments. Indeed, the virtuous nineteenth-century woman, as

outlined by *Little Women*, should be frugal and self-sufficient, producing domestic niceties independently and without much interaction with public markets. While a ruined woman allows the strange objects applied to her person to alter her, a virtuous woman must make her own.

Images of self-mutilation the girls undergo when trying to be fine suggest quite literally that fashionable artifices destroy the real woman beneath them. When preparing for Mrs. Gardiner's dance, Meg burns her hair and turns her ankle emulating the latest fashions. At "Vanity Fair," Meg's tight dress gives her a side-ache and the champagne she drinks threatens to leave her with a "splitting headache" (81). Alternatively, when Meg's hands are made imperfect by good, industrious work, Mr. March declares them "much prettier." When the girls mutilate themselves trying to be fashionable, they destroy their personhood; however, when they earn blisters and callouses cooking and sewing, their father can "read a little history" of how their characters develop (176). Here Alcott subverts the notion of self-mutilation through labor. When the girls attempt to be fashionable and fine, they inflict painful injuries upon themselves. However, the text does not include descriptions of the physical pain they feel from the burns and callouses they get doing domestic chores. These badges of industry, like love, are instead a "great beautifier" (191).

Further, when the girls mutilate themselves attempting to be fashionable and fine, they become, obviously, less capable and more dependent on patriarchal institutions. For instance, when Meg turns her ankle dancing in high heels, she is

dependent on a symbol of patriarchy and wealth: Laurie's hansom. Gilman points out that fashionable devices inhibit and weaken women, and that many "chivalrous" customs are necessitated by the restrictions fashion puts upon women (Gilman 33). Once Meg dons the clothing of a society woman, she is at the mercy of chivalry and the masculine sphere. The implications of this passage are that the fashions the patriarchy demands subjugate women to the patriarchy.

When Meg interacts with luxury, the vapid society threatens to tear her from her home and mother that protect her from Mephistophelian worldliness. At "Vanity Fair," the wealthy and worldly Moffat family is in stark contrast to the "pastoral state of innocence" (74) in which Marmee raises Meg. Meg knows it is superficial and ungrateful to feel dissatisfied with the heirloom objects her family provides in comparison to Sallie Gardner's new luxuries and slips a note into her pocket "as a sort of talisman" (73). However, Sallie's worldliness has a corrupting influence on Meg and separates her from her family by making home seem "bare and dismal" (73) and raising unflattering suspicions about Mrs. March (75). Keeping company with high society tears Meg from the values of her home and leaves her vulnerable to temptation, and she returns from Vanity Fair having found that she is too young to wear fine things or leave her mother.

By participating in the competitive sport of attempting to marry for money, as do the women Meg encounters at Vanity Fair, they present themselves as merchandise. Indeed, the allegorical town in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, for which Alcott names this chapter, emphasizes the buying and selling of "vanities" therein.

Wai Chee Dimock calls Edith Wharton's Lily Bart, who debuts into Old New York some decades after Meg March goes to Vanity Fair, "a self-acknowledged 'human merchandise'" who is "busy marketing herself throughout most of the book, worried only about the price she would fetch" (Dimock 64). It is of such things that Marmee, creator of her own matrilineal feminist utopia, disapproves: women disregard their moral values for monetary ones, and sacrifice their virtues to step through the metaphorical "looking glass" into a patriarchal world in which it is the women, not the men, who strive to impress potential mates and the ultimate prize—material wealth—is something that it is the patriarchy that decides they need in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

Meg is a morally fallen woman at Vanity Fair as she flits and flirts and her low-cut neckline offends her and Laurie's (81) sense of modesty. When she blushes at herself in the mirror, Meg indicates a certain sexual knowledge of which, in the safety of her home, she seems "innocent" and "unconscious" (100). Though Meg blushes out of modesty, Gilman finds that the very notion of modesty is in and of itself an indication of sexual knowledge:

We mean by modesty a form of sex-consciousness, especially peculiar to woman. For a maiden to blush and cast down her eyes when a man approaches her is an instance of this 'modesty.' It shows that she knows he is a male and she is a female, and her manner calls attention to the fact. (10)

When Meg's neckline abashes Laurie—who suggests she "pin [her train] around [her] neck" and focuses, embarrassed, on her boots instead—this abashment

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<sup>1</sup> Lily Bart, tragically, follows the paradigmatic trajectory of the predecessors she finds in Alcott's less fortunate characters: fallen status, childlessness, and death. I maintain that these characters fall as a result of their lack of the matriarch or strong matriarchal base that Meg March enjoys.

indicates that Meg's clothing awakens a certain sexual maturity in Laurie, as well. Indeed, the exposed décolleté and shoulders popular with fashionable nineteenth-century eveningwear were regarded as semi-nudity:

Although the day dress was concealing, ball gowns were almost always décolleté, exposing the upper part of the bosom and the arms and shoulders. Since, traditionally only the upper classes had had occasion to wear low-cut evening gowns, this type of physical display was widely regarded as aristocratic. It was also widely regarded as 'naked.' (Steele 110)

This style of dress once again emphasizes the fine line between "aristocratic" and "fallen" that Alcott addresses in "Behind a Mask." Further, when Meg declares that Marmee promises her a silk dress when she turns eighteen, the text equates luxury objects with burgeoning sexuality and carnal knowledge. Though Meg is not oppressed by sumptuary laws, which once dictated which classes could wear which fabrics and ornaments (Crane 3), an observer could identify a woman's class from the material, more than the cut, of her dress. Silks are a favorite among upper-class nineteenth-century women because they are too expensive for working-class girls to emulate. Thus, Marmee forbids Meg from showing her aristocratic breeding—or from presenting herself in luxury objects—before she reaches a certain sexual maturity. Meg returns from Vanity Fair having found that she is too young to wear fine things, or even to leave her mother.

Just as Alcott's thrillers suggest that, when women adorn themselves with artifices, they become uncanny automatons, *Little Women* makes several comparisons of fashionable Meg to a doll. The girls adorn Meg with crimps and curls, perfume, makeup, tight, low-cut clothing, jewelry, and accessories until Miss Belle



regards her “with the satisfaction of a little girl with a newly dressed doll” (76). This and subsequent references to the doll-like effect of Meg’s makeover in this chapter imply that, beneath these adornments, Meg is somehow less real.

By engaging the trope of the woman as a doll, Alcott also addresses the nineteenth-century influences of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Alcott argues that when women overindulge in artifice, they become uncanny dolls. By comparing the over-enhanced woman to an automaton, Alcott places them in opposition to her idea of a “real” woman. Unlike “real” women, “dolls” are constructed entirely by the Pygmalionesque fantasies of the patriarchy.

Alcott suggests that the perfect woman is a patriarchal construct and by no means real. The women in Hoffman and Hawthorne are so heavily adorned, artificial, and made-up that they become uncanny automatons. In Hoffmann’s “The Sand-man,” Olympia is at first the perfectly adorned woman. She makes her debut “richly and tastefully dressed” with a “beautifully modelled face and figure” and fashionable “hollow back and wasp waist” that seems “the result of excessively tight clothing” (23). Olympia has all of the features fashionable for ladies at the time. However, hers are uncomfortable in their extremes and strike her acquaintances as mechanical and restrained. Hoffmann’s protagonist, Nathanael, finds that Olympia is an automaton. She is not only constrained to the extreme by patriarchal ideals, but she herself is in fact man-made. Nathanael’s discovery prompts gentlemen to insist on their lovers’ imperfections as evidence of their humanity.

Similarly, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," a chemist ultimately kills his wife by attempting to remove a birthmark on her face. The chemist, Aylmer, uses the futile patriarchal construct of science to control his wife, Georgiana. The birthmark represents Georgiana's romantic past, her biological secrets—indeed, all of the mysteries of her womanhood that Aylmer resents. Georgiana's former lovers have all admired the small birthmark, declaring it a "fairy hand." According to the text, "Many a desperate swain would have risked life for the privilege of pressing his lips to the mysterious hand" (266). That said, Aylmer's fixation could be more about eliminating Georgiana's romantic past than helping her to achieve physical perfection. Aylmer's obsession with controlling his wife's appearance is also an obsession with controlling and understanding nature: "It [is] the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain" (266). However, in his attempts to control nature in his wife, Aylmer loses her to death—the force of nature, alongside birth—from which man is most alienated.

The makeover that precedes Meg's debut at Vanity Fair acknowledges the Pygmalionesque desires of patriarchal high society: like Cinderella, Meg goes unnoticed by financially eligible bachelors until she reappears clad in expensive clothing (77). The notion that it is the patriarchy that ultimately necessitates women's adornments, artifices, and objects is a key aspect of this enduring archetype: it is only after attaining clothes, shoes, and property that she can present herself as a viable mate. The patriarchy idealizes artificial women because the true

nature of the woman that the patriarchy deems “monstrous” and fears. Like the heroines of Alcott’s romances, who must communicate through their accessories or not at all, Meg is not audible or visible as a marriage prospect until she conforms to Pygmalionesque fashions that contort her natural person.

Luxury objects once again fell Meg when Alcott uses her extravagant purchase to draw upon the nineteenth-century connection between a morally ruined woman and an economically ruined one. When Meg purchases a fifty-dollar violet silk on a shopping trip with Sallie Moffat, the luxurious fabric sends her into debt and disrupts the domestic harmony of newlyweds Meg and John Brooke. The fabric Meg purchases forces her to keep a secret from her husband and quarrel with him, while the narrator compares her to Eve (223). Meg’s failure to create a usable garment for herself out of the luxurious fabric indicates that the fabric does not “become” (224) her status as a “poor man’s wife” (223). When Meg purchases cloth outside of her means, she emulates one of the worst suspicions of fallen women who acquire fashion objects: she attains them by spending all of her husband’s money—disturbing not only his happiness, “but what some men seem to value more, his money” (223). Valverde finds a connection between a morally ruined woman and an economically ruined woman in nineteenth-century object suspicion: “Finery in the pejorative sense mean[s] the type of female dress that signified or brought about moral ruin; in turn, moral ruin was usually linked to economic ruin—of the woman herself, or of her hapless husband” (Valverde 170). The nineteenth century suffers from an acute anxiety of this addictive and seemingly inescapable cycle of spending and debt acquisition that women either overspend or go to illegal or immoral

extremes to finance. Further, Steele finds a link to frivolous spending and sexual promiscuity in the Victorian psyche: "Victorian sexual mores were essentially bourgeois, associated with the capitalist economy, and centered on the ideal of sexual continence (saving) except for the purposes of procreation (spending)" (Steele 87). By spending freely, Meg is being promiscuous. Finally, debt is a considerable factor in the seemingly inescapable cycle of prostitution for nineteenth-century "soiled doves" "Many madams encouraged their girls to spend more than they could afford on clothes and other finery. If the debt got a little bit too high, the madam could demand the prostitute to do extra work to pay off her obligation" (Rutter 56).

The failure to create something of her purchase (224) also indicates that, while Meg is a fallen woman, she cannot become a mother. Meg comes to understand that she cannot participate in Sally's opulent activities and also be a good wife. When Meg finally gives up on her habit of buying artificial adornments, she achieves domestic bliss and becomes pregnant (226).

Meg's shopping trips with Sallie are also sexually promiscuous. They are counterproductive to her maternity in that they offer a scenario in which Meg replaces her husband, John, with a woman. Sallie assumes John's role as the primary provider of Meg's financial and sensual stimulation. Concern over the erotic female shopper was not uncommon in the nineteenth century, as Parkins and Sheehan find that

Perhaps most disturbing was a new breed of female shopper, who discovered that 'shopping for pleasure' could rival, and even surpass, the rewards of heterosexuality. . . . This is the most suspect pleasure of fashion, that it is not a heterosexual encounter but the most autoerotic delight of bodily self-cultivation. (Parkins and Sheehan 95)

In Meg's case, shopping is not so much autoerotic as it is homosocial. Worse, because Sallie's income is actually that of her husband, Ned Moffat, Sallie's support of Meg somewhat suggests that both women are polygamous or harem wives of Ned's.

The text's comparisons of Amy to an art object are appropriate given her passion for making an automaton of herself. To avoid making herself black and blue with bruises, young Amy moves "as if she [goes] by machinery" when acting in her sisters' play (15). Though adult Amy continues to make herself into a "well-placed statue," her arsenal of adornments is the homemade product of her own ingenuity. In Europe, she decorates herself with tarlatan, tulle, English simplicity, and the knowledge that she can't *afford* to make a fright of herself (300). She responds to Laurie's admiration of the charming effect of these ornaments by explaining how she is used to "making the most" of her "poor little things" (304). Amy is embarrassed when Jo reveals that he that is homemade, not purchased, chastising her for "tell[ing] about [their] little shifts, and [exposing their] poverty" (233) but learns to be proud of her domestic labor.

Later, when Amy ends up a happy bride of the Laurence fortune, this lucrative arrangement is one that she arguably helps to produce by using a woman's redemptive power to transform "Lazy Laurence" into a working man. As a young

boy, Laurie hates the luxury goods and “old rubbish his [grandfather’s] ships bring in” (119) and prefers to dedicate himself to art. Amy aims to “mend” him, and Laurie praises her ability to “[wind] one round her finger as softly and prettily as a skein of silk” (347) evoking images of Amy weaving the luxury that surrounds her. Though wealthy, she remains a domestic worker and a producer. Anne Dalke argues that, in persuading Laurie to abandon his artistic aspirations and “work like a man”, Amy “teaches him the emptiness of ambition...the limits of male autonomy and striving” (561). Indeed, as Elizabeth Keyser notes, “Laurie’s grandfather equates business with masculinity and Laurie’s interest in art and music with effeminacy” (608).

The text punishes the girls for dabbling in commercial pursuits, identifying such tasks as part of the “male” sphere. Whereas men participate in commercial pursuits within moderation, the March women’s key powers are redeeming the men from overindulging in capitalism.

The dynamic between the March girls and “the Laurence boy” very accurately portrays nineteenth-century gender relations: Laurie is wealthy but lonely and the girls are poor but add warmth and hospitality to his life:

The other lion was the fact that they were poor and Laurie rich, for this made them shy of accepting favors which they could not return. But, after a while, they found that he considered them the benefactors, and could not do enough to show how grateful he was for Mrs. March’s motherly welcome, their cheerful society, and the comfort he took in that humble home of theirs. (52)

In this way, the transactions that occur early on in the relationship between the neighbors very much mimic a traditional marriage. Laurie proclaims Jo “medicine” (50) when reciprocating with goods for her hospitable company. Mr. Laurence even

furnishes Beth with a cabinet piano in exchange for the homemade slippers she produces for him. Keyser finds the two houses—one containing only Marmee, Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, and Hannah and another containing only Mr. Laurence, Laurie, and John Brooke—“representing feminine and masculine spheres” (608). One is poor but full of feminine love for which the latter inhabitants rely on the former.

Though men are encouraged to participate in capitalism and commerce, they must do so with respectable moderation. In “Chasing Amy: Mephistopheles, the Laurence Boy, and Louisa May Alcott’s Punishment of Female Ambition”, Blackford argues that Theodore “Laurie” Laurence, the next-door neighbor who loves the March girls and ultimately marries Amy, is a Byronic figure. Admittedly, Laurie is Byronic—or even Mephistophelian—in that his tremendous wealth, in contrast with the March girls’ poverty, presents a threat to their virtue. As it is in *A Modern Mephistopheles*, Woman’s redemptive power is a solution to unwholesome male financial practices such as dandyism and gambling. The March sisters redeem Laurie from a life of unearned wealth such as when they forbid him to be idle in their company (116). Later, Jo tells Laurie that Marmee will not let him in their house if he becomes too much like Ned Moffat and “wish[es he] were poor” so she “shouldn’t worry” (124), full aware of the sins with which money tempts her Mephistophelian friend. When Jo criticizes Laurie’s collegiate dandyism and even tramples his felt-basin hat (197), the destruction of this item symbolically exorcises the demonic habits from her friend. Meg demands a temperance pledge of Laurie on her wedding day, “for which he thank[s her] all his life” (202). Dalke, too, interprets Laurie as in dire need of an education by the March girls because he is a wealthy male, claiming

that “Poverty provides for the Marches an impetus to occupation; for Laurie, prosperity has the opposite effect” (Dalke 559) as she discusses his worst failing: indolence. Poverty, in this text so wary of luxury and wealth, is somewhat of a guardian of the March girls’ virtues. It prevents them, in many cases, from socializing with the wealth who, in the world of *Little Women*, are Mephistophelian and dangerous. The girls’ poverty also necessitates that they create sacred objects from nothing, reinforcing the idea that women must produce things naturally and without artificial aid or intervention.

The text idealizes poverty by redefining the terminology of commerce, exchange, and money, negating poverty and wealth. It emphasizes the “earned” quality of Mr. March’s poverty as much as it would his wealth: when Mr. March “earns” his poverty through the noble endeavor of attempting to help an unfortunate friend, Meg and Jo must “beg” their parents to allow them to participate in their newly impoverished lifestyle and send them out to work. When Frederick stops visiting the Marches, Daisy loses her best “customer” and goes “bankrupt” because she is unable to give out her kisses. Here, even as a young girl, Daisy peddles something that she alone produces. The text asserts that the child’s kisses and all they represent are a product of the domestic sphere. Similarly, by accepting his, Jo is able to transform Frederick’s “too poor” proposal of marriage into something of precious value.

Their poverty, as well as the standards of virtue for their age, prevent the March girls from enjoying commercial theater; as a result, the girls “play” at acting



but also practice feminine self-sufficiency. They work to make everything they need because, as the text explains, “necessity [is] the mother of invention” (22). This loaded phrase suggests that the feminine tradition of self-denial figuratively births the feminine ingenuity the text encourages. For their work in the “theater,” the March girls make their own props (clothing) scenery (homes) and even serve as male characters, foreshadowing the instances in their adult lives in which they will have to get on without men. Because playing at home represents commitment to the domestic sphere, when Meg and Jo abandon that sphere for the commercial, public theater, the results are disastrous. When Amy spies Meg slipping the lady-object of a fan into her pocket, she no doubt feels abandoned by the older girls’ transition into the public sphere (that Mephistophelian Laurie enables) and throws a tantrum, setting forth a series of events that comprises Jo’s “Apollyon.”

#### Extra space

There is also a nationalistic duty the girls fulfill in abstaining from materialism and being self-sufficient. As the narrative—set during the American Civil War—begins, the girls prepare for a gift-less Christmas out of respect for the men “suffering so in the army” (11). Further, Marmee reminds her daughters that it would be selfish to ask for their father to return “a minute sooner than he can be spared” (16); though, by going without their patriarch, the girls suffer financially as well as emotionally. Like the old man Marmee meets, who has lost four sons in the war, the March girls are expected to “give...and give free” (42). Indeed, within the military context, a healthy young woman’s abilities are as devalued as those of an

infirm old man. A woman's contribution to the war effort is to go without goods, but also to produce. Jo resents her support of the army being reduced to "stay[ing] at home and knit[ting] like a pokey old woman" (13), and Beth, after reading her father's letter, "begin[s] to knit with all her might, losing no time in doing the duty that lay nearest her" (17). The work poverty necessitates once again becomes a point of nationalistic pride when Meg must defend her position as a governess to the Englishwoman, Miss Kate. John Brooke comes to her aid by declaring that "Young ladies in America love independence as much as their ancestors did, and are admired and respected for supporting themselves" (110). By going without material goods—for both practical and symbolic reasons—and producing goods within the home, the March girls are good citizens as well as good women.

Jo participates in commerce solely to fulfill her aspirations of serving as the masculine provider of the family in father's absence, declaring: "'I'm the man of the family now Papa is away, and I shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone'" (14). At Mrs. Gardiner's dance, she doesn't care for the ladylike gloves she's ruined until she espies Laurie's nice men's pair. In "Burdens," Jo promises to make her fortune writing so that she can support Meg in the luxurious lifestyle for which she covets and later expresses the wish that she could marry Meg herself (161). Indeed, though Jo wishes she could "fix things" (129) for her impoverished sisters as she does for her fictional heroines—by writing—she does, in a way, by earning the money to buy things for them. She earns, as the patriarch of a household might, and her writing buys her family meats, carpets, groceries, and gowns (215). Indeed, taking up the phallic pen enables Jo,

somewhat, to “marry” her sisters, as she once wished. Jo’s commercial success enables her to serve as a masculine provider.

Jo’s relationship to objects is also more masculine in that she destroys more than she creates. At Mrs. Gardiner’s dance, she arrives with a burnt poplin and a stained glove, and quickly ruins the unspotted remainder of her dress—as well as Meg’s nice glove—by spilling coffee on herself (27-33). Further, her possessions are “usually too dilapidated to be of much use” (71). Later, John’s tendency to lose buttons with his “impatient tugs and clumsy fingers” (218)—which Meg must, as a wife, repair—is reminiscent of Jo’s masculine carelessness. These endearing tendencies of masculine characters such as Jo and John illustrate their need for feminine characters—in both Jo’s and John’s cases, Meg—to create and mend.

Jo and Laurie are more rivals for the position as a provider for the remaining March girls than an appropriate couple. Jo is never punished for selling the hair that is “rightfully” hers, but Laurie can never reconcile himself with the loss (144). Of course, Jo’s shorn hair is more masculine (Steele 119), especially in comparison to the glorious extensions of virtuous womanhood Alcott’s other heroines wear. Further, in choosing to sell her crowning glory for money with which to support her family, Jo further establishes herself as a masculine woman, rather than a woman eligible for Laurie to court. Jo goes on to reject “patronage” (236) while Amy welcomes it.

Laurie’s “mania for patronizing Yankee ingenuity” (193), which manifests in several ridiculous purchases that he makes for the new Brooke household, also

indicates his wish to serve as the masculine provider to any and all of the March sisters. These ludicrous devices destroy the household items they are meant to improve; however, humor renders the domestic destruction innocuous. These purchased appliances sharply contrast with the lovingly homemade items that furnish the “Dovecote.” Here, Laurie attempts to usurp his tutor’s role as Meg’s masculine provider, as evidenced by the watchman’s rattle for “Any time when John is away” (195).

But can one be mercenary and still be a “real” woman? Jo, much like the legendary prostitute, Julia Bulette, remains untarnished by her participations in masculine capitalism. Like Jo, Julia Bulette participates in the high-stakes sphere of crude commerce but avoids becoming, like her peers, a “fallen” or “marble” woman. This is because, as masculine figures, both are accepted into the rough fraternities with which they associate. Jo becomes a patroness and a peer—not an object—of boys, from being accepted into Laurie’s circle of college friends to becoming the patroness of Plumfield.

[Julia Bulette comes] as close to being respected as any working girl in the West...[is] noted for nursing the sick and [is] a great help during a smallpox outbreak, reportedly caring for some of the men in her home. Her good works also [include] helping during influenza and cholera epidemics. She [is] generous with her funds and gave money to a number of charities. Julia also ha[s] a particular interest in caring for firefighters: She help[s] support and [is] an honorary member of the Virginia City Engine Company Number One. (Rutter 112)

Bulette, too, runs a Plumfield-esque retreat out of her cottage, caring for her “boys” and is even an honorary member of the fire department.

Frederich begins as a domestic and, thus, feminine character who darns his own socks and plays with the children. However, when he comes to claim Jo, he assumes his masculine rights to consumerism and property. He is “dressed in a new suit of black, which [makes] him look more like a gentleman than ever” and wears “gold sleeve-buttons in his immaculate wristbands” (354). It is only when he assumes the masculine role of actively seeking material gain—quite literally, as well, as he cannot propose to Jo before he “could haf a prospect of one to gif”—that Frederich can claim Jo as his wife.

Shopping altogether opposes Alcott’s sentimental real womanhood, and Jo confirms the unfeminine nature of shopping when she takes pride in her “shopping capabilities” (366). She is proud of her boldness in penetrating the dry-goods store “with unfeminine interest,” leaving male patrons to wonder “‘how the deuce she got there’” (364). Later, she hopes to impress Frederich with “the neatness and dispatch with which she would accomplish the business” (366). However, when Jo is flustered by her excitement over Frederich’s company and blunders the transactions, it is Frederich who, once again, assumes his newfound paternal role of procuring goods for his loved ones and, in doing so, places Jo under the umbrella of his care.

Instead of shopping, the March matriarchy produces homemade goods that are invested with the values of home and motherhood. Like the note Meg slips into her pocket at Vanity Fair, other homemade objects carry messages and meanings. In contrast to the purchased objects, whose meanings are constructed by the

patriarchal system of commerce that exists outside the March home, these homemade objects' meanings are constructed by the feminine utopia that exists within the March home. Blackford finds that homemade objects infused with meaning represent maternal spaces—in which the girls relate to Marmee—and transitional spaces—in which the girls relate to themselves—for Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy: “Feminine items such as ribbons, bridal gowns, baby curls, slippers, flowers, and fans unfold stories of girlhood lives and are readable because they are invested with personal, familial, and cultural meanings” (2). Domestic production serves as a metaphor for maternity.

The material self-sufficiency of the March girls mirrors the biological self-sufficiency of women. *Little Women* presents a universe in which the male is fundamentally unnecessary. Marmee, Hannah, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy exist as a complete family unit for the first half of the novel with “Father” present only via letters. He is banished by the patriarchal constructs of war and religion and present only via the patriarchal construct of authorship and letters. The concept of “Father” is just a formality. Marmee is essentially a single mother. Even when he comes home, it is unclear what his contributions are, as Marmee continues to provide the girls with sermons and much more of the text is dedicated to Jo's financial support of the family than Father's. The text is clear that Mr. Laurence and Laurie benefit more from the company of the March women than the March women do from their gifts. Further, because Meg does not marry for money, nothing John has to offer her is anything she couldn't have gotten at home. Indeed, by refusing to marry for money, Meg boycotts a culture in which the women must chase after and impress

the men. Even the donation of Plumfield, which completes the March family's transcendental compound, is from Aunt March. In its independence from patriarchal institutions, the universe of *Little Women* returns to the biological reality in which the female of the species does the selecting and enjoys control over its legacy.

Further, *Little Women* portrays maternity as woman's ultimate power. The landscape of the text is heavily matriarchal and matrilineal: Marmee does not give her daughters away to their husbands when they marry, but gains men for her brood. This is ironic considering Jo's lament, early in the text, that because she and her sisters are women, marriage threatens to separate them. The final scene, "Harvest Time," parallels the opening scene of the text: Marmee receives presents from her daughters—and, now, grandchildren—while the husbands are absent and silenced from this moment. Anne Dalke's "'The House-Band': The Education of Men in *Little Women*" argues that the novel presents a matrilineal society into which men are drawn. If, as Keyser insists, "Marmee keeps her daughters dependent, undeveloped, diminutive" (Keyser 611), it is Marmee and the March sorority on which they are dependent—not their husbands.

The ill-fated Beth compensates for the impossibility of her motherhood with domestic creation. Beth dies before she is able to continue producing, and her many failed attempts at maternity foreshadow her failure to grow to maturity and reproduce on her own. The invalid dolls for which she cares are all disfigured or malformed in some way. During the girls' "Experiments," Beth forgets her pet canary, Pip, and he dies of starvation, inspiring Beth to proclaim that she'll "never

have another bird...for [she is] too bad to own one" (96). Later, Mrs. Hummel's baby dies in her arms (142). Beth holds the dead baby until its mother returns—signifying the impossibility of her maternity—and, in doing so, contracts the scarlet fever that weakens and ultimately kills her. However, Beth makes mittens, doll clothes, penwipers, scrapbooks, "and all manner of pleasant devices" (324) for the neighborhood children until she dies. Her deep regret that she "ha[s] done so little" (327) suggests a regret that she will never marry as her sisters will and also suggests the connection between producing domestic items and giving birth to produce children.

Similarly, the women's ability to create domestic *tableaux* is afforded the same delicate privacy as their reproductive processes. For male eyes to see the raw materials of these projects is shameful and vulgar indeed. Amy is humiliated when her live lobster tumbles out before one of Laurie's college friends (209). Later, Meg is humiliated when John finds her vulgar ruined jelly. As a newlywed, Meg is determined to shield John from the labors that go in to creating a domestic "paradise" (217). Indeed, these scenes are so intimate that they find Meg with coquettish bare arms (218-19) and her apron over her head (220). Meg is aghast when John brings a friend home to share in the experience.

Motherhood enables Amy to become a greater artist than any man could hope to be. Adult Amy assures Jo she doesn't "relinquish all [her] artistic hopes" and considers the marble she's sculpted in the hopes of immortalizing of her sickly daughter "the best thing [she's] ever done." Angela M. Estes and Margaret Lant



agree: “For Amy creates not out of a fresh encounter of her own self within the world; rather, she repeats, imitates, what is now for her the primary act of creation, biological creation, as she models ‘a figure of baby’” (Estes and Lant 575). This art is invested with Amy’s motherhood and thus made all the more precious. Children, not paintings, are Amy’s true artistic contribution. In many ways, Alcott’s sentimental real women are like the artists that wealthy newlywed Laurie vows to help: “Splendid fellows, some of them, working like heroes, poor and friendless, but so full of courage, patience, and ambition that I was ashamed of myself, and longed to give them a right good lift” (357). The girls are expected to be hardworking, humble, and modest rather than ambitious and mercenary. They earn their rewards by passively abstaining from seeking them. Alcott’s perspective of sentimental real women as artists or producers and men as consumers or patrons continues when Laurie abandons his creative urges to go into business and “work like a man” (355). Like artists, women create new life while, like patrons, the men are left to fund—but not participate in—the creative process.

Indeed, *Little Women* establishes a mother-oriented and self-sufficient culture that the March girls—as women themselves—are able to carry on. The male characters, in contrast, are unable to achieve the values the text prioritizes—domesticity, maternity, and self-sufficiency—without women. Dorothy Dinnerstein’s exploration of the female monopoly of childcare supports this. She says, “a woman is the first human center of bodily comfort and pleasure, and the first being to provide the vital delight of social intercourse” (28). In other words, women can provide the comforts of the mother for themselves and others whereas men must seek it out:

“The mother-raised woman is likely to feel, more deeply than the mother-raised man, that she carries within herself a source of magic early parental richness. In this sense—even if not in others—she is more self-sufficient than the mother-raised man” (42).

Ultimately, the March clan achieves many of the transcendental ideals of Alcott’s contemporaries. The family—that never shopped much to begin with—develops a self-sufficient commune in Plumfield.

### Conclusion

Many scholars argue that fashion liberated the nineteenth-century woman. The flirtatious new language of fans and parasols allowed her (somewhat more) sexual liberation while “art” allowed her (somewhat more) agency over how she presented herself to the world: gloves covered her class-revealing hands, makeup covered her age-revealing complexion, and bustles and corsets allowed her to shape her own figure. Surely, the profuse male anxiety of being duped by an artful dresser is evidence enough of the liberation that domestic and feminine consumer culture brought to the nineteenth century.

However, women’s purchases ultimately put money into male pockets. The accessories and artifices covered female bodies to please male gazes. Alcott ultimately rejects the nineteenth-century idea that a woman could construct an identity for herself by buying things.

Ultimately, the more one of Alcott's heroines depends on the patriarchal construct of fashion, the more subservient she is to the patriarchy: she puts on the clothes to appease a set of patriarchal values. Further, in trying to impress the patriarchy and subscribing to its values, she abandons the natural order in which it is the men who must impress the women for their power. As Gilman finds, "If sex distinction were working normally, women would demand in men a rich variety, a conspicuous impressive beauty...Then further, the same normal distinction would strike the true note of womanhood, and give us another beauty, restful and satisfying. It is woman, the eternal mother, who should express peace and power in her attire, not glitter like a peddler's tray, to catch the eye" (Gilman 58). This woman is fallen in Alcott's texts. However, Alcott offers alternatives such as "real" women who can illustrate the impotence of such patriarchal constructs beside a woman's reproductive power, as well as those who can exist in matriarchal utopias.

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