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Alcott's "Rigmarole":

The Composition and Publication History of *Little Women*

In one episode of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, the characters play a game called "Rigmarole," whose rules are these:

"One person begins a story, any nonsense you like, and tells as long as they please, only taking care to stop short at some exciting point, when the next takes it up, and does the same. It's very funny, when well done, and makes a perfect jumble of tragical comical stuff to laugh over." (127)

Little Women itself can be said to belong to this "genre": like a rigmarole, it is a work composed piecemeal and narrated in more than one generic mode. Alcott's complete financial dependence on what she could earn from her writing, her ambivalence toward conventional narratives for women, and, most importantly, her alternating submission to and rebellion against the demands (real and imagined) of her readers and her editor/publisher, Thomas Niles--all these factors made *Little Women* a veritable piece of patchwork. Picking apart its seams suggests that it is these very contradictions, both formal and thematic, that have helped the story achieve the mythic escape velocity it still enjoys.

Little Women was originally published in two parts: twenty-three chapters in October of 1868 as *Little Women, or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy First Series*; and another twenty-four chapters, in April of 1869, as *Little Women, or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy Part*

Second.¹ What we mean when we refer to *Little Women* is usually a forty-seven-chapter volume including both Part One and Part Two. All three American movie versions of *Little Women* (the most recent in 1995, with Winona Ryder as Jo) are all based on both Part One and Part Two. But it was Part One alone that made the first hit with the American public, selling out its first small edition in a month and creating a strong demand for an as-yet-unwritten Part Two.

Part One in itself is a patched-together affair, as its composition history shows. Alcott sent the first twelve chapters to her publisher in June of 1868. When she sent the next ten chapters a mere month or so later, in July, she mentioned that "Not having the first half by me was rather a disadvantage, as I don't remember it very well, so may have missed some of the threads. Please 'make note on if so be' " (Letters 117). Alcott, desperately busy writing sensation stories and journalistic pieces for the money, had no time to make copies of what she wrote, nor time to revise much, if at all.

Hans Robert Jauss, in his work *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, defines ephemerally popular *Unterhaltungskunst*, or "culinary" art, as that which "reproduces the familiarly beautiful"--not only thematically, but also formally (25). That Alcott meant *Little Women* to do just that is indicated by the fact that she prefaced her work with an epigraph invoking the popular didactic work *Pilgrim's Progress*. She wrote to Niles that this beginning would "give some clue to the plan of the story" (Letters 117). Alcott adheres to this generic model faithfully in the first twenty-two chapters of *Little Women*, and establishes an almost mathematical didactic dramatic situation: four girls,

¹ For the composition and publication history of *Little Women* that follows I rely on two unpublished sources in addition to the published sources cited: Daniel Lester Shealy, "The Author-Publisher Relationships of Louisa May Alcott," diss., U of South Carolina, 1986; Thomas Niles, letters to Louisa May Alcott 1868-1882, Houghton Library, Harvard, Cambridge, MA.

each with a fault that she must overcome. The first lines of the book apportion the plot mathematically, suggesting the particular character flaw of each girl with economy:

"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

"It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

"I don't think it's fair for some girls to have lots of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

"We've got father and mother, and each other, anyhow," said Beth, contentedly, from her corner. (1)

Jo, who grumbles, is troubled with the flaw of a bad temper; Meg thinks too much about her clothes; Amy of the "injured sniff" must learn to be less self-important; and even Beth must learn not to be quite so content in her domestic steadfastness, must learn to overcome her shyness so that her goodness can have a wider sphere of influence.

Many feminist readings, among them Judith Fetterley's, have pointed out the paradoxically self-negating caliber of these narratives of self-cultivation, and it is certain that the trajectory of these first twelve chapters coincides with mainstream nineteenth-century narratives for women. All the girls at least have the modern virtue of witty discontent, unlike many of their literary predecessors--for instance, cheerless Ellen in the nineteenth-century blockbuster *The Wide, Wide World*--but in this first narrative piece, all four girls take it as given that they must work to realize the ideal of the modest, helpful, uncomplaining maiden. The very traits that distinguish them as characters must be eradicated: self-erasure in the name of self-improvement.

In the twelfth chapter, "Camp Laurence," the last chapter of the first portion Alcott sent to Niles, this plot of self-improvement reaches its first plateau; we see that

three of the girls, at least, have nearly cured themselves of their faults. At the beginning of the chapter, Marmee has noted and approved of Jo's improvement, writing her a letter "to tell you with how much satisfaction I watch your efforts to control your temper" (120). Jo proves that she is worthy of Marmee's commendation when, at the picnic, she is able to control her temper even when put to a hard test. Provoked by Fred's cheating at croquet, she retires into the shrubbery to calm down instead of clouting him over the head with a handy mallet. Beth, too, is praised for her efforts at the commencement of the chapter, hearing Jo tell her, "That's my good girl; you do try to fight off your shyness, and I love you for it; fighting faults isn't easy, as I know; and a cheery word kind of gives a lift" (121-22). Beth, too, demonstrates the extent of her improvement at the picnic, overcoming her shyness enough to hold a conversation with a stranger--a strange boy, at that.

Marmee is satisfied, as well, with a certain change in Meg. Meg's fault--figured in her preoccupation with her clothes--might seem to be simply vanity or materialism, but it would no doubt have been tacitly understood by the nineteenth-century reader that Meg's fault is desire in all its forms, including the sexual. She is in danger of acquiring an active consciousness of her own status as desired object, and therefore is in danger of being tempted to manipulate her own image to indicate her sexual availability--which would amount to a kind of active sexuality. In the chapter "Meg Goes to Vanity Fair," Meg confesses to her mother that she was guilty of flirting and wearing a low-cut gown, and prescient Marmee prompts an addition to the confession:

"There is something more, I think," and Mrs. March smoothed the soft cheek, which suddenly grew rosy, as Meg answered, slowly,--

"Yes; it's very silly, but I want to tell it, because I hate to have people say

and think such things about us and Laurie."

Then she told the various bits of gossip she had heard at the Moffatts; and, as she spoke, Jo saw her mother fold her lips tightly, as if ill pleased that such ideas should be put into Meg's innocent mind. (96)

Meg must "fess" to her mother that the idea of marrying Laurie has entered her mind. Marmee thereafter kindly admonishes Meg not "to do foolish or unmaidenly things" and to be "modest as well as pretty" (97). Meg's very prettiness seems to betoken immodesty.

But in the chapter "Camp Laurence" Meg has somehow managed to forget her awareness of the sexual. This progress is evidenced by her laudable inability to read the signs of John Brooke's increasing infatuation. Brooke has snatched one of Meg's gloves as a romantic keepsake, but Meg has no idea of such a thing:

"I hate to have odd gloves! Never mind, the other may be found. My letter is only a translation of the German song I wanted; I guess Mr. Brooke did it, for this isn't Laurie's writing."

Mrs. March glanced at Meg, who was looking very pretty in her gingham morning-gown, with the little curls blowing about her forehead, and very womanly, as she sat sewing at her little work-table, full of tidy white rolls; so, unconscious of the thought in her mother's mind, she sewed and sung while her fingers flew, and her mind was busied with girlish fancies as innocent and fresh as the pansies in her belt, that Mrs. March smiled, and was satisfied. (119)

Here Meg, both womanly and girlish, is neither fully a woman, allowed to have a certain active (married) sexuality, nor fully a girl, lacking all sexuality; rather, she has found the proper mental attitude of an eligible young woman ready to figure as the attractive but unconscious object of a voyeuristic gaze. Later in the chapter Meg gets an opportunity at

the picnic to show that her new virtue, like Jo's and Beth's, can stand a hard test:

There was a queer smile about Mr. Brooke's mouth, as he opened at poor Mary's lament.

Meg, obediently following the long grass-blade which her new tutor used to point with, read, slowly and timidly, unconsciously making poetry of the hard words, by the intonation of her musical voice. Down the page went the green guide, and presently, forgetting her listener in the beauty of the sad scene, Meg read as if alone, giving a little touch of tragedy to the words of the unhappy queen. If she had seen the brown eyes then, she would have stopped short, but she never looked up, and the lesson was not spoiled for her. (133-34)

That Meg forgets her listener, that she does not look at him, that her ability to "make poetry" is entirely unconscious, figures her as the ideal nineteenth-century modest maiden: the object, never the subject, of a desiring gaze. As Ann B. Murphy puts it, "The sisters are learning not simply to be selfless, but to be objects, viewed by patriarchal subjects" (570). This, says the logic of the book, will make a young woman more attractive than any number of filagree sets or tight-laced corsets.

Anger, introversion, desire: Alcott's heroines strive to conquer all of these in the first twelve chapters, and are rewarded for their success at the close of them with maternal approval.

The ten chapters which follow repeat this narrative, with the difference that the girls must win the approval of their father. This is evidently more difficult, for the trials become harder. Whereas the troubles of the first twelve chapters are primarily trivial and domestic--a spoiled supper, sisterly rivalry--the troubles which test them in the next ten chapters include Mr. March's wounding, Beth's illness, and Laurie's threat to run

away: potentially more serious incidents in which, perhaps, their mother's authority is insufficient to validate and certify the girls' feminine heroism.

Alcott faithfully follows her model, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, throughout. Both "Longmeadow," the "pleasant green field, with three wide-spreading oaks in the middle," where the scenes of reward and trial are staged in chapter twelve; and the "Pleasant Meadows" of the title of chapter twenty-two refer to the description of Beulah, taken from Isaiah, in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. In the penultimate paragraph of chapter twenty-two, Beth remarks that " 'I read in "Pilgrim's Progress" today how, after many troubles, Christian and Hopeful came to a pleasant green meadow, where lilies bloomed all the year round, and there they rested happily, as we do now, before they went on their journey's end' " (224). This explicit reinvocation of her primary literary model indicates that Alcott's own narrative--which began with the chapter, "Playing Pilgrims"--is coming to an end; the reader is to picture the characters at rest, partway along their life's journey, with the rest unnarrated.

Had it ended with this twenty-second chapter, *Little Women* would, I think, be easily dismissable as *Unterhaltungskunst*. It would be a very tidy children's novel tracing the means by which Jo, grumbling "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," is entirely superseded by sweet Beth, caroling that "Fulness to them a burden is, / That go on Pilgrimage" one enlightening year later on Christmas day (224).² Formally, thematically, and morally, the work would be largely unremarkable, allowing both the model of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and its own original plan to bind it.

² In another instance of narrative resolution, and despite this moral, the girls do receive precisely the Christmas gifts they wished for in the first chapter: Jo gets her *Undine and Sintram*, Meg a silk dress, and so forth.

But another piece was yet to be added. Niles had asked Alcott for a manuscript of four hundred pages, and these twenty-two chapters made (by Alcott's reckoning) a manuscript of four hundred and two pages. Yet after reading chapters thirteen through twenty-two, Niles wrote to Alcott expressing the opinion that "A chapter could well be added, in which allusions might be made to something in the future" (qtd. in Showalter xviii). Niles seems to have been concerned about two very pragmatic publishing issues when he made this suggestion: first, he wanted to ensure that the book would have enough pages to warrant a retail price of \$1.50; and second, he wanted to end Part One with what would amount to an advertisement, or "teaser," for Part Two--even though Part Two was not yet written. Alcott, in fact, wasn't at all sure she wanted to write a sequel; after all, she hadn't particularly wanted to write the first part: "I plod away, although I don't enjoy this sort of thing," she had written in her journal upon commencing *Little Women* (Journals 165). Nevertheless, as she would often do in the years to come, Alcott took Niles's advice. She wrote another chapter, and *Little Women* as first published had a total of twenty-three chapters.

There is an additional interpretation possible for Niles's phrase "allusions . . . to something in the future." The contents of that added chapter suggest that Niles was offering a more delicately-phrased version of that abiding piece of publishers' serpent wisdom: sex sells. The first twenty-two chapters, taken as a unit, are purely didactic; the added chapter switches into a new mode as abruptly as though a new teller had begun her turn in the game of "Rigmarole." That mode is romantic.

For instance, Alcott had--as we've seen--spent a great deal of narrative energy getting Meg to be unaware of John Brooke, and Alcott's original ending thus decorously implied that their courtship would be properly lengthy. Mr. March tells Meg in chapter

twenty-two, " 'I'm proud to shake this good, industrious little hand, and hope I shall not soon be asked to give it away' " (222-3). But in chapter twenty-three, Alcott suddenly shifts Meg's heretofore slow courtship into high gear. Alcott must force a crisis, and is therefore obliged to bring in a *dea ex machina* in the form of Aunt March, a move she highlights in the chapter's title: "Aunt March Settles the Question." Aunt March abuses John to Meg, Meg defends him, and John overhears her praise of him--their engagement ensues.

All reference to *Pilgrim's Progress* disappears; suddenly, it is no longer an appropriate model. The chapter ends, too, with a final tableau very different from the moral scene that ended the first draft:

Father and mother sat together quietly re-living the first chapter of the romance which for them began some twenty years ago. Amy was drawing the lovers, who sat apart in a beautiful world of their own, the light of which touched their faces with a grace the little artist could not copy. Beth lay on her sofa talking cheerily with her old friend, who held her little hand as if he felt that it possessed the power to lead him along the peaceful ways she walked. Jo lounged in her favorite low seat, with the grave, quiet look that best became her; and Laurie, leaning on the back of the chair, his chin on a level with her curly head, smiled with his friendliest aspect, and nodded at her in the long glass which reflected them both.

So grouped the curtain falls on Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. (235)

No longer grouped as a family around Beth, the story's conscience and angel, but rather as an assortment of male-female couples, as many characters as possible are here firmly thrust into a romance narrative. Mr. and Mrs. March are suddenly and incongruously

figured as the hero and heroine of an earlier romance, while Beth appears as Mr. Laurence's own particular moral Muse rather than as a solo voice. And, perhaps most importantly, "allusions to something in the future" are made not only to the now-certain marriage of Meg and John Brooke, but also to the implied eventual pairing-off of Jo and Laurie. The mirror that reflects them visually enshrines them as a couple in precisely the same way that Amy's drawing does for Meg and John Brooke. Laurie smiles and nods in satisfied knowledge at the mirror, while Jo seems to have acquired an insistent unawareness of being watched resembling that of her sister Meg. That Jo is here looked-at, rather than looking, reiterates the finality of her absorption into the soft glow of coupledness lighting this final scene.

Alcott's authorial position was not such that she could revise the whole of *Little Women* into an integrated unit, even had she wished to do so. But Alcott makes very interesting, very clever decisions when faced with this problem of adding a new chapter. For she chooses to have chapter twenty-three address its own superfluity explicitly: "As [Mr. March] sat propped up in a chair by Beth's sofa, with the other three close by . . . nothing seemed needed to complete their happiness. But something was needed, and the elder ones felt it, though none confessed the fact" (225). Though the older girls don't (or can't) confess their restlessness, the youngest can do it for them; out of the mouths of babes, Amy's remark sums up the situation: "'Every one seemed waiting for something, and couldn't settle down, which was queer, since father was safe at home'" (225). What is most interesting about this is that Alcott here reflects in her readers as she creates in her characters the remainder of restless romantic desire that exceeds the boundaries of the moral narrative. Had Part One been thoroughly revised to present a unified generic aspect, this tension, this remainder, would not be visible. The addition of

the twenty-third chapter thus virtually ironizes the preceding chapters; the moral, didactic tale is literally not enough.

Alcott ended Part One of *Little Women* with a sentence indicating her ambivalence about the project: "Whether [the curtain] ever rises again, depends upon the reception given to the first act of the domestic drama, called *LITTLE WOMEN*" (235). The success of Part One of *Little Women* was small enough; it sold out its first edition of a thousand in its first month, and ran to four thousand by the end of 1868, generating a Christmas check for Alcott of \$300. This sum, however, was a great deal to Alcott, who was accustomed to be paid \$10, or \$25, or at most \$50 for the tales she wrote.³ It was enough to ensure that there would indeed be a Part Two. And Part Two, of course, goes on to make an even more dramatic reversal of mode: Jo refuses Laurie, and the story (to some extent) refuses both the didactic and the romantic modes, to morph into something resembling a vocational narrative, a *Bildungsroman*. Both Part One, then, with its unplanned but no less effective self-reversal, and Part Two, with its stubborn veering from the course of Part One, adopt the form of the rigmarole.

Few critics seem to have recognized the full significance of that gap between the time *Little Women* Part One made a hit with the public and the time Alcott began to write *Little Women* Part Two. Elaine Showalter, for instance, gives a clear account of the composition history and the correspondence between Alcott and Niles in her introduction to the Penguin edition of *Little Women*. Yet even she, who gives such a clear account of the composition history and the correspondence between Alcott and Niles, claims in that same introduction that "despite the haste with which it was written,

³ See Alcott's *Journals* p. 168 for Alcott's memorandum of the sums she had earned in 1868.

Little Women is more tightly constructed and more stylistically controlled than any of Alcott's other books" (xxiii). We are still, as critics, haunted by that aesthetic ideal of the polished piece of work; it is central to the argument that Alcott is a good author that she means to do everything she does, that she have sole control over her own writing. But I believe that in Alcott's case unplanned inconsistency, resulting from her uneasy intercourse with her readers, became a positive triumph of peripeteia.

To point out that *Little Women* is not the fullest possible realization of a single authorial vision is not to decrease the book's status. Rather, it is to suggest that the textual incongruity in Part One of *Little Women* is also an ideological incongruity, an incongruity so visible that it may help to account for the book's popularity. We can further postulate that the continuing popularity of a *Little Women* that includes both Part One and Part Two may be due to the even more striking structural and moral reversals of Part Two, reversals enabled by Alcott's strong but sudden assertion of independence from the very readers, professional and amateur, whose approval of the disjointed Part One enabled another episode of rigmarole in Part Two. The readers of *Little Women*, then, turn out to prefer the inventive, the plural, the uneasy, to the familiar, the univocal, the seamless.

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