

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

“BLOOD AND THUNDER” IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: DECEPTION, FEMINIST  
SENTIMENT, AND SEXOLOGICAL ETIOLOGIES IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT’S  
SENSATION FICTION

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

EMMA HORIO

ADVISOR: CHRISTOPHER LOOBY

LOS ANGELES, CA

22 MARCH 2024

## ABSTRACT

“BLOOD AND THUNDER” IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: DECEPTION, FEMINIST  
SENTIMENT, AND SEXOLOGICAL ETIOLOGIES IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT’S

SENSATION FICTION

BY EMMA HORIO

This thesis is an exploration of how the literary public sphere generates sexual discourse and an effort to understand the link between sexology—the sexual science of the nineteenth century—and imaginative literatures of the same period. I reexamine the geographical origins of sexology and consider the broader question of what constitutes a sexological intervention, arguing that imaginative literature should be given more importance in the study of sexology. I understand Louisa May Alcott’s double literary life as necessary for inhabiting the literary public sphere the way she did and consider how authorial deception contaminates the search for truth in that sphere. In doing so, I place the culture of authorial deception that emerged in the periodicals of the 1860s in conversation with the “truthful confession” that Michel Foucault argues is an important component of the procedure for accessing sexual truth. The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the role of deception in Alcott’s life and work, and how she uses deception to examine the nature of desire and criticize the aristocratic order in her sensation fiction. The second builds upon that basis to examine how Alcott develops sexological vocabularies in support of the same ideologies that her themes of deception reveal. I conclude with a discussion of transgressive conceptions of gender in literature of the period, arguing that decentralizing the medical gaze and studying literature as a creative force in the realm of sexuality allows a more balanced view of sexual discourse and invites into consideration non-pathologized queer possibilities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
CHAPTER ONE.....	13
CHAPTER TWO.....	37
CONCLUSION.....	55

LIST OF FIGURES

*Fig. 1* — scan from *The Flag of Our Union*, microfilm

*Fig. 2* — image of *The Greek Slave* by Hiram Powers

## INTRODUCTION

“There is a big secret about sex,” wrote Leo Bersani in 1987. “Most people don’t like it” (197). Bersani’s now-infamous declaration was sensational by way of the statement’s unexpected ending; but the idea that sex had a “big secret” about it was no secret at all. Unearthing the secret of sex via discourse is a pursuit to which post-Enlightenment Western societies have dedicated elaborate systems and institutions.

In *The Will to Knowledge*, the first book of Foucault’s four-volume *History of Sexuality*, which has been instrumental in shaping scholarly approaches to sexuality, Foucault argues that discourses around sex proliferated in the West as a result of *scientia sexualis*, which existed to find the truth of sex to enforce a moral norm around it that would reinforce the status quo. Foucault cites the invention of sexology as the crystallizing component of *scientia sexualis*, the moment when the “archives of the pleasures of sex” (63) ceased to be ephemeral, and were instead meticulously documented and preserved. Foucault pins this historical moment within the general nineteenth century by virtue of the sexologists he names as the assemblers of the science.

Each iteration of this procedure comprises a method for procuring sexual truth that revolves around “truthful confession” (Foucault 58) and the subsequent interpretation of the confession by a higher power. This confession is both “obligatory and exhaustive” (Foucault 68) and encompasses everything from “ordinary affairs” to “the most solemn rites” (Foucault 59). Foucault emphasizes the sheer pervasiveness of the confession in contemporary Western society, writing: “One confesses in public and in private, to one’s parents, one’s educators, one’s doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about” (59).

Foucault couples the confession, and by extension, the production of sexual truth, with literary practice. He does this both in the above quote and in the chapter that precedes it, “The Incitement to Discourse,” developing a through-line from desire to discourse in “‘scandalous’ literature.” (21) For Foucault, prurient literature is a mode of confession, a trove of narrative discourse that can be mined for the elusive truth of sex. He cites works by the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) and the anonymously authored memoir *My Secret Life*, a sexually explicit English work, which appeared in eleven volumes beginning in 1888. The confessions in the salacious literature Foucault invokes were explicitly placed within the economy of pleasure—the authors wrote for their “pleasure alone” (23), in what Foucault claims was “the strongest sense of the expression” (23). In a society that employs *scientia sexualis*, pleasure is still at play, and the triangulation of pleasure, power, and desire in literature seeks to discover the truth around sex.

Parallel to the movement toward *scientia sexualis* and a proliferation of sexual discourse, the American literary marketplace was being transformed by the rise of periodical literature, which began in the 1830s thanks to technological innovations and rising literacy rates, according to Susan Belasco Smith and Kenneth M. Price, who tentatively date the end of this transformation to the 1890s in their volume, *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*. These innovations created a socially dynamic literary public sphere that also contributed to the proliferation of sexual discourse in the nineteenth century. In fact, Christopher Looby argues that the construction and promulgation of sexuality itself is “a literary phenomenon” (2013 842) attributable to this very public sphere, which provides an explanation for how categories created within the sexological silo became widespread and known to

laypeople, but also contends that these sexual categories are at least partially created by writers themselves.

Authors who straddle both the worlds of sex and periodical literature gain a unique importance in the study of how these two dynamics develop alongside one another. Louisa May Alcott was one such writer. During the 1860s, she churned out sensation stories at a frenetic pace; these “blood & thunder” (*Journals* 132) stories appeared in various periodicals, garnering Alcott a great deal of money while providing her with an opportunity to “relieve [her] feelings” (*Journals* 132).

This thesis understands Alcott’s sensation fiction as a part of the rapidly proliferating sexual discourse of the 1860s, and attempts to advance Alcott’s work as a case study in support of the contention that literature itself is a major player in the creation of sexual discourse and development of sexual mores; *i.e.* the construction of sexuality. Alcott’s sensation fiction interrogates sex to a significant degree through its variegated explorations of deceit, the marriage plot, and forms of desire. It is not a stretch to say that Alcott was attempting to investigate, define, and communicate a truth of sexuality. Alcott was responding to the injunction to speak of sex, however obliquely—within the Foucauldian paradigm, it’s hard to go wrong with this. If “the heart of the economic and political problem of population [is] sex,” (Foucault 25) and discourse around sex is tied to the population’s marriage rules, rates, and family organization, the inverse should also be true; all roads lead back to whence they came.

Alcott uses both sex itself and the emergent vocabularies provided by sexology, the *scientia sexualis* of the age, to create a discourse around sex that often eschews truth, rather than seeking to locate it. General deception is a hallmark throughout Alcott’s sensation fiction and a

theme throughout the genre, and Alcott uses it to pervert social norms around sex and its accoutrements—that is, marriage and family organizations, all that precedes and proceeds from sex—in many cases. It does so in service of the women of the narrative, who use their sex to their own advantage; a plotline that Alcott seems fond of is that of the marriage under deception, a hallmark of the sensation genre. Yet Alcott’s marriage deceptions, in contrast to much of the sensation genre, are orchestrated by women, who reap the benefits in the end, as her tales “Behind a Mask: Or, a Woman’s Power” (1866) and “V. V., or Plots and Counterplots” (1865) (to a lesser extent) demonstrate.<sup>1</sup> Through these tales, Alcott advances a narrative argument that sex can and should be harnessed by the individual to undermine the aristocracy, and the upper class more broadly. The formulae of her fictions constitute a systematization of this behavior, a production of sexual discourse that hints at a more radical contention—that sex and deception are inseparable, and there is no “truth of sex.”

Alcott herself also embraced deception in pursuit of her sensational literary escapades. In deceiving the world with a pen name, she gained the liberty to write in the “lurid style” that came so naturally to her, and which brought with it both creative fulfillment and monetary gain. This deception was highly successful, although not without aid from her first biographer and journal editor, Ednah Dow Cheney. It was so successful that her tales were lost until 1943, when Leona Rostenberg discovered Alcott’s frequent pseudonym, A. M. Barnard. In this thesis, I examine the

---

<sup>1</sup> Marriage under false pretenses, while a common theme in the sensation genre, more often took the form of an exploitative marriage for the woman. (This gimmick is possibly inspired by *The Woman in White* (1861), which is widely hailed today as the first ‘true’ sensation novel, and the entire plot hinges around a woman trapped in a marriage with a con man who plans to steal her inheritance and abandon her in an asylum.)

critical recovery of Alcott's sensation fiction and contextualize any future discoveries within the inconsistencies within Alcott's own letters and her documented publication history, as well as the wider culture of authorial deception at the time.

Unfortunately for scholars, Alcott was a private soul and burnt most of her diaries, "fearing biographies" (Alcott to Moulton) after her death. In their volume, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott (Journals)*, editors Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy (with Madeleine Stern acting as assistant editor) compile and synthesize surviving journal fragments, along with text from Ednah Dow Cheney's earlier volume, *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals* (1889) to provide a more complete picture of Alcott's life from her own perspective. I am greatly indebted to this volume, as well as *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott (Letters)*, edited by the same. The most significant portion of my analysis of Alcott's letters is devoted to her autobiographical notes sent to Louise Chandler Moulton in preparation for Moulton's 1883 sketch of the author printed in *Our Famous Women* (1883). These letters now reside in the Houghton Library at Harvard University, and they are the most thorough extant account from Alcott's own pen of how she produced and published her sensation fiction.<sup>2</sup> These letters remain unpublished and have consequently not yet been the subject of much scholarly attention, but they are a valuable collation of Alcott's career, especially the sensational aspect, from her own perspective, and provide firsthand insight into how truth can be muddled over time and "truthful confession" can become an impossible task.

---

<sup>2</sup> Alcott kept lists of her published work, including her sensation stories, but the surviving lists appear to be incomplete, and were almost certainly meant for her eyes only. These, too, reside in the Houghton Library.

For Alcott, sex is almost inextricably linked with deception. Combined, the pair form a system by which women of the lower classes undermine the aristocratic order. In her representations of sexuality, one sees much support for Foucault's contention that "sexuality... appears as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power" (103). Using the beginnings of sexual taxonomies and pathologies forming under the auspices of sexology, Alcott demonstrates how men, especially those of the upper class, employ sexuality as a way to subjugate women. At the same time, she shows the inevitable pitfalls of such an approach and systematizes a path of resistance for women, which manifests itself through deception. In this way, Alcott shows how easy it is for one to subvert the mechanisms that seek to produce the truth of sex and impose a certain social order: just lie. If one does not yield to the injunction to confess, and confess truly, the apparatus for maintaining the social order begins to crack.

Existing scholarship lacks in analysis of the way Alcott employs her authorial deception to explore themes of sexual deception in her sensation fiction, but the two seem inextricably linked. Just as deception, when paired with sex, allows women of the lower classes to raise their economic statuses within her stories, deception played an important role in Alcott's own life as the bestower of many privileges, economic and otherwise. To shed light on why Alcott often paints deception as a mode of resistance, I examine Alcott's own life and revisit her motivations for writing her sensation fiction. In discussing Alcott's literary double life in conversation with the double lives of her sensation protagonists, I illuminate the link between this somewhat anonymized literary public sphere and a diversification of sexual discourses.

Next, I consider the geographical origins of sexology and the role of literature in sexological thought, culminating in a reading of Alcott's sensation stories as sexological texts.

Benjamin Kahan's article, "The Unexpected American Origins of Sexology and Sexual Science: Elizabeth Osgood Goodrich Willard, Orson Squire Fowler, and the Scientification of Sex," builds the argument for an American origin of sexology, both by examining the work of Willard and Fowler, and by broadening his approach to include writing by laypeople. In doing so, he claims to reveal in American sexology an attitude of "relentless heteronormativity that promotes marital, reproductive, loving sex and vilifies prostitution, polygamy, masturbation, contraception, sex for pleasure, and ... sodomy," as opposed to the "homophilic sympathies" of German sexology (73). Kahan turns away from a medical and scientific origin of sexology to suggest that Transcendentalism and phrenology were instrumental in creating American sexology, which sought to advance a "conservative understanding of proper sex" (81) but with the objective of expanding women's rights. In my analysis of Alcott's sensation stories as sexological literature, I outline the ways in which Alcott elaborates upon emerging sexological vocabularies through her sensation fiction and uses them as a tool to examine how the feminine ideal promoted by society has negatively influenced the way some men view women. The sexological construction of "the satisfaction of lust with statues" (Kaan 78) is one of the six main sexual pathologies Heinrich Kaan articulates in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1844), one of the earliest sexological treatises. It is also a theme Alcott found intriguing, and she was not the only American to have considered the erotic potential of marble statuary during the nineteenth century.

This topic came to the forefront of the American public consciousness when Hiram Powers' *The Greek Slave* became an overnight sensation as the first life-size nude female sculpture to be publicly displayed in the history of American sculpture. Alcott's exploration of marble eroticism bears similarities with *The Greek Slave*, insofar as she couples enslavement and

subjugation with a feminine marble form. Alcott's interest in the marmorean could have also stemmed from Theodore Winthrop's *Cecil Dreeme* (1861), a novel which she read multiple times and which greatly influenced her own tale, "A Marble Woman: or, The Mysterious Model." *Cecil Dreeme* loosely couples marble flesh with sexuality, but Alcott's reimagining of marble statues makes the connection even more sexologically explicit. I examine the representation of marble flesh as a an object of masculine desire in three of Alcott's sensation stories, "A Marble Woman" (1865) "The Fate of the Forrests," (1865) and "Countess Varazoff" (1868). Alcott's figure of the marble woman is clearly an exploration of statue eroticization—the various expressions of this sexological paraphilia were collated in the twentieth century under the term "agalmatophilia," which I will borrow for the sake of convenience. Alcott develops this idea further than Kaan does, essentially creating multiple case studies and a fairly consistent profile for the kind of man prone to agalmatophilia. Alcott's engagement with the contours of marble women and the men who love them thus seems to be a rather feminist investigation of the same phenomenon described by sexologists.

I contextualize Alcott's fiction in the literary discourse of the time by bringing in surrounding texts of the time, both novels and periodicals. I examine the intertextuality of Alcott's tale "A Marble Woman: Or, The Mysterious Model" and *Cecil Dreeme*. I also examine the theater as a site of genderqueer possibility and crossdressing as a vehicle for queer sexual expression in periodical fiction of the time. Through investigating how Alcott's sensation fiction, rooted in deception, produced discourse around sexuality, I illuminate one of the less-examined mechanisms from which the "multiplicity of discourses" (Foucault 33) around sex in

nineteenth-century America sprung and argue for the importance of considering imaginative literature in studying the history of sexuality.

## CHAPTER ONE

## DECEPTION AND DISCOVERY: LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S DOUBLE LIVES

The induction of sensation stories into the Alcott canon began in 1943 with Leona Rostenberg's discovery of Alcott's secret pseudonym, A. M. Barnard, under which many of these stories were published. This discovery has spawned countless volumes, excavated from the archives and republished to be enjoyed by a new generation (or many generations, one hopes) of readers. Rostenberg's confirmation of the A.M. Barnard stories' existence—and subsequent sleuthing with Madeleine Stern to find them—vindicated years of scholarly speculation as to the existence of a secret stash of Alcott thrillers.

To blame for scholars' simultaneous knowledge of the thrillers and inability to find them was Ednah Dow Cheney, Alcott's first biographer. Cheney had close ties to the Alcott family after meeting them in Boston in the 1840s; she was particularly close with Alcott's father, Amos Bronson Alcott, a major Transcendentalist figure. After Alcott's death, Cheney wrote *Louisa May Alcott: The Children's Friend* (1888), and edited a volume entitled *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals* (1889). In the pages of the latter, she revised and redacted Alcott's writing, according to accepted scholarly conventions of the day, and with the family's presumed blessing. Cheney tantalized scholars with a short explanatory introduction to the journals of 1860:

Much interest attaches to this period of Louisa's work, when she dashed off sensational stories as fast as they were wanted, from the account which she has given of it in "Little Women." ... They were as sensational as the penny papers desired. She had a passion for

wild, adventurous life, and even for lurid passion and melodramatic action, which she could indulge to the utmost in these stories. (Cheney 105)

Knowing what assumptions her readership would have made upon hearing about “sensational stories,” Cheney hastened to add that Alcott’s sensation stories were “never coarse or immoral. . . . There is often a severe moral enforced” (Cheney 106). This is a stretch on her part; beyond an omnipresent theme of deception, Alcott’s stories often featured drug use, seduction, and violence. Any “moral” precept present was dubiously gestured at, rather than enforced with the singularity Cheney implies. It’s very likely that she was not familiar with all of Alcott’s anonymous and pseudonymous publications; although Alcott left incomplete lists of the stories she wrote, it is unlikely that Cheney would have felt the need (or even had the means) to track down periodicals from twenty or more years earlier. Her interest was in creating a wholesome and flattering picture of Alcott’s life and work, one that the Alcott family had to approve of before the book went to publication (Eiselein & Phillips 48-49).

In Cheney’s volume, oblique and explicit references to Alcott’s tales survived, mostly as short records of an “F. L.,” who would later be identified as Frank Leslie, a publisher who bought her stories for his various periodicals. Other journal entries are more explicit, such as this one from May, 1864: “My tale ‘Enigmas’ came out, and was much liked by readers of sensation rubbish” (Cheney 158). (“Enigmas” was one of the few sensation—or sensation-adjacent—stories Alcott published under her own name.) Cheney tentatively agrees with Alcott’s “rubbish” characterization, citing her youth and inexperience, but also unequivocally asserts that Alcott’s sensation stories were not “the best work of which she was capable,” (Cheney 106) likely because of the popular perception of sensation fiction as lowbrow

literature with less literary merit than books. In her first article announcing the rediscovery of Alcott's sensation fiction, "Some Anonymous and Pseudonymous Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott," Rostenberg contends that Alcott's use of a pseudonym betrays her "attitude toward the penny dreadfuls and her own thrillers," (134) but observes that she published poetry in the same penny dreadfuls under her own name, concluding that "it would seem that she did not altogether condemn the periodical but was loathe [sic] to link her name with the sensational stories" (134). Many scholars of Alcott's sensation stories have pointed this out as the obvious rationale for Alcott's employment of a pseudonym, which is supported by Alcott herself. At the same time, however, there was a broader culture of authorial anonymity (or "ambiguous attribution," as Max Chapnick calls it) among those writing in the periodical sphere. The decision to remain anonymous does not necessarily reflect as garishly upon Alcott under this light—but more on this in a moment.

During her career, Alcott wrote prolifically for many periodicals across a diverse array of styles and genres. From 1851 until 1870, when her sensation stories seem to have petered out, Alcott's thrillers appeared in Frank Leslie's various periodicals, as well as *The Saturday Evening Gazette*, *The Flag of Our Union*, and other places. Her poetry and less scandalous stories graced the pages of *The Olive Branch*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Commonwealth*, *The Independent*, *The Youth's Companion*, and other outlets.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>For a more thorough catalog of Alcott's publications, see Madeleine Stern's article, "Louisa May Alcott in Periodicals" or her complete (although lacking Chapnick's finds) bibliography of Alcott's publications contained within *Louisa's Wonder Book: An Unknown Alcott Juvenile* (1975).

Any publication that paid the bills was a worthy candidate, and any identity publishers desired, Alcott assumed. Her authorial deceptions began even before she assumed pseudonyms on the page. When she was first beginning to write sensation stories for Leslie's periodicals, Alcott recounted to Moulton that Leslie paid well "under the delusion that the dashing signature L. M. Alcott was a man's. When the truth came out the price went down, but the stories stopped until [sic] the matter was settled as before." Here, Alcott uses the muddling of truth to her advantage, and this is a theme she explores in other arenas, not just the monetary one. As Alcott put it in a letter to her friend Alfred Whitman, tentatively dated May 11, 1862, "money is the end & aim of my mercenary existence," (*Selected Letters* 76). In letters from the early years of her career, Alcott characterized money as "the principle [sic] object of my life" (*Selected Letters* 16), "my end & aim just now" (*Selected Letters* 67), and "the staff [sic] of life" (*Selected Letters* 72) in reference to efforts to publish sensation fiction, "flat" (*Selected Letters* 67) tales—a telling characterization of the less lurid stories requested by *The Atlantic Monthly*—and the other snippets of prose and poetry that made a couple of dollars here and there.

Despite this enduring fixation on money, Alcott's sensation fiction was not purely a product of her desire for pecuniary gain. She clearly enjoyed writing these tales. For her, writing any kind of sensation story provided a break from writing "moral pap for the young" (*Journals* 204), as she called it in 1877. Unsurprisingly, given her wry characterization of her children's fiction, Alcott wrote in a letter tentatively dated to 1878, "I do not enjoy writing 'moral tales' for the young, I do it because it pays well" (*Selected Letters*, 232). In addition to the money her sensation fiction brought in, the ability to publish the stories themselves was a privilege of Alcott's anonymity. Under a pen name, she could write in as "lurid" of a style as she pleased

without impugning her reputation as Louisa May Alcott, the “children’s friend.” This allowed Alcott to be truthful about who she was; and she had been this person since the beginning of her life. In one of her letters to Moulton, recounting her very first literary attempts, which began with a simple poem at the age of eight, she wrote, “after frightening my sisters out of their wits by awful tales whispered in bed, I began to write down these histories of giants, ogres dauntless girls & magic transformations.” Alcott’s very first stories bore the seeds of sensation, as evinced by their effects on her sisters.

In an oft-quoted yet rarely-cited interview with an acquaintance, LaSalle Corbell Pickett, Alcott reinforces the same literary preferences she articulates in her letter to Moulton. Alcott’s presumptuous friend asserts that *Little Women* showcased Alcott’s “true style of writing,—the pure and gentle type, . . . with the thoughts and feelings befitting a quiet home circle” (Pickett 107). Alcott rebuts this, saying, “I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies and wish that I dared inscribe them upon my pages and set them before the public” (Pickett 107). Alcott cites Ralph Waldo Emerson’s influence, her father’s opinion, and “the respectable traditions of Concord” (Pickett 108) as reasons she does not dare to do this. Emerson was a noted Transcendentalist thinker and Bronson Alcott’s friend, and Alcott had a lifelong infatuation with him after he taught her foundational philosophy and poetry at a young age. Emerson supported Alcott’s authorial endeavors to the extent that he was aware of them. He called her “the children’s poet” (Eiselein and Phillips 97), and it’s clear that his understanding of Alcott’s authorship did not extend beyond those works she put her name to. There they are—concrete reasons for all of the secrecy and deception. Emerson is chief here; Alcott’s father

and the people of Concord are more of an afterthought. But even Emerson's lordly influence does not stop Alcott from following her true nature, although she feels she must deceive to do it.

In addition to Alcott's personal motivations for remaining anonymous, Chapnick points out that "ambiguities of authorship" (172) in the nineteenth century were by no means uncommon, and publishers often encouraged them. During Alcott's career, the Roberts Brothers—the same publishers who coaxed *Little Women* from her reluctant pen—published another novel of Alcott's, *A Modern Mephistopheles*, as a part of their No Name Series. When the anonymous series appeared in print, Alcott wrote "M. M. appears and causes much guessing. It is praised and criticized and I enjoy the fun" (qtd in Chapnick 173) and Pickett later mentions how "Miss Alcott's friends were not only surprised but incredulous when it was discovered that she was the author" (106). The stir generated by these guessing games was beneficial for the publishers, but also for the authors involved. As Thomas Niles, the partner at Roberts Brothers who came up with the idea for the No Name Series, put it: "The idea of being able to write fearlessly, intrenched [sic] behind an anonymous, and all the critics at bay, is pleasing" (qtd in Stern and Shealy 1991, 176). This had previously been the only rationale put forth in support of Alcott's anonymity, but the existence of an anonymized literary public sphere makes Chapnick's contention that Alcott's work was "less defined by the 'author's subjectivity' than awash in a printed world of authorial uncertainty" (172) a strong one.

These case studies pertain to the novel or novelette, but the periodical form also contributed heavily to the culture of authorial ambiguity, often by suggesting to readers that eminent authors were writing for their pages. For example, "V. V.," one of Alcott's trickier mysteries, was published anonymously in *The Flag of Our Union* before being reprinted later

under the name of A. M. Barnard. The paper, in typical story paper convention, ran a short column entitled "Next Week's Paper" with a preview of the stories to come. The week before its debut, "V. V." was advertised; the paper claimed it was written "by a well-known author," a tantalizing phrase that seems explicitly engineered to draw speculation as to said author's identity. Many other story papers, including the *True Flag* and the *New York Ledger*, were in the habit of doing the same thing. The game allowed periodicals access to a certain level of literary cachet while sparing the authors any recognition in their pages.

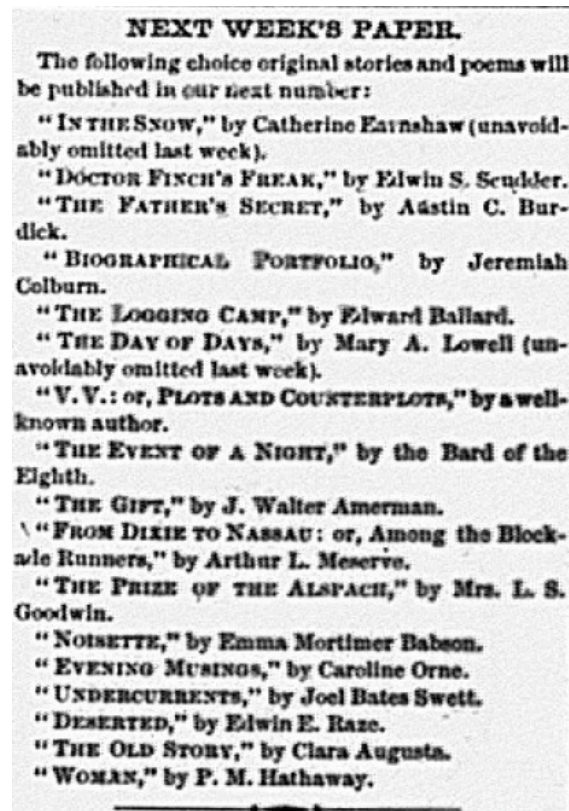


Figure 1. Each issue of *The Flag of Our Union* included a preview of next week's paper, advertising the stories and poems that would run in the next issue. The above figure shows the issue advertising the first installment of "V. V." (Reproduction of *The Flag of Our Union*. Vol XX, no. 4. 28 Jan 1865. Microfilm. AC ser. 2, Reel 1162. Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.)

In the periodical form, author-guessing games were made both explicit and commonplace. Fanny Fern, the highest-paid newspaper columnist in 1855, wrote under a pseudonym—her real name was Sara Payson Willis. A contributor to *The Olive Branch*, *The True Flag*, and later to *The New York Ledger* under an exclusive contract, she ran in many of the same literary circles Alcott did. By the time she reached high acclaim, “her private identity and family background were common knowledge,” (Gunn 23) according to Robert Gunn, and still “Fern shunned the public eye,” (Gunn 23) and members of the public had no idea what she truly looked like. Fern occupied a strange liminal space between the known and unknown, in some ways representative of the pseudonymous limbo many authors slipped into as they inhabited the sensation genre.

A part of Alcott’s oeuvre will likely always be shrouded in uncertainty; she was a member of a class of authors that embraced it. Deception played an important role in Alcott’s life as a way for her to author her sensation fiction, get paid handsomely for it, and protect her personal privacy, but those boons for Alcott and other writers in the periodical sphere are disadvantages to scholars trying to trace authorial attribution. Without a roadmap of clear attribution, one way scholars have tracked down Alcott’s sensation fiction is through a few surviving lists of her work. Most of the tales named in these lists have been located and republished, most recently with Chapnick’s find of “The Painter’s Dream,” recorded in the earnings section of Alcott’s ledger under the year 1856.<sup>4</sup> In addition to “The Painter’s Dream,” Chapnick purports to have identified “at least seven stories, five poems, and one piece of nonfiction” (171) written under a different pseudonym, E. H. Gould, between 1856 and 1860.

---

<sup>4</sup> Alcott received \$10 for this literary effort, as recorded in her journal and account book, which is located in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. (Or see Myerson and Shealy’s *Journals*, “Notes and Memoranda,” 1856.)

Despite this progress, the hunt for titles referenced in the pages of the ledger continues. “My Malady,” a story recorded in the 1868 entry, remains lost to time, as do several tales in the 1859 entry. A lack of extant issues of certain periodicals, such as the *American Union*, where Stern contends that Alcott published many of her early tales, contributes to the mystery (Stern 1995, xvii).

Two additional culprits are Alcott’s own faulty memory and her intentional obfuscation of her contributions to the sensation genre, dynamics which are often indistinguishably intertwined in her letters, journals, and records. Alcott’s published novels and other tales (including her sensation fiction), are reported by name in the earnings section of the ledger she kept, alongside a record of the money they fetched. She mentions this very ledger to Moulton, saying, “I have an old ledger with a brief record of events, but burnt up a bushel of diaries long ago fearing biographies when I was gone.”<sup>5</sup> Though authorship was one of her callings, arithmetic was clearly not. Her calculations are erroneous on many occasions. It is reasonable to infer that this volume was created to replace the burnt “bushel of diaries,” and its author may not have taken much care with it, feeling that the calculation of money earned and spent years ago was not of the utmost importance. The book itself is a grand affair, measuring around 7” by 11.5,” with marbled boards and endpapers. In addition to the tenuous observation that the entries seem to have been assembled simultaneously, with a few later additions, the grandeur of the

---

<sup>5</sup>This ledger now resides in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. (Louisa May Alcott Additional Papers. MS Am 1130.13, Volume 8.) In Myerson and Shealy’s *Journals*, the numbers recorded in the ledger are reproduced in the “Notes and Memoranda” section at the end of each year. Myerson and Shealy have noted discrepancies in earnings and made sense of them to the furthest possible extent.

book provides support for the argument that this ledger was the product of a successful author who made the purchase in the interests of distilling her affairs to hide personal details from prying eyes. A young Alcott would likely have had more pressing financial concerns to attend to than buying a majestic account book. The ledger's grandeur and its many inaccuracies confirm that it was almost certainly not written contemporaneously with the publications it records.

Another example of Alcott's potential memory mix-ups is her repeated mentions of a Boston periodical, the *True Flag*. She mentions having written sensation stories for the *True Flag* on multiple occasions within her letters, but does not appear to have actually done so. Alcott did write several sensation stories and novelettes for the publication *The Flag of Our Union*, however, and was most likely conflating the two. This mix-up is complicated by the fact that James R. Elliott, whose letters to Alcott were the catalyst for Rostenberg's discovery of Alcott's "A. M. Barnard" pseudonym, served as a publisher for both of those papers at different times. No tales graced the pages of the *True Flag* under the byline of A. M. Barnard from 1852-1868, so rather than being another illumination of the Alcott canon, it appears to be a rather disappointing slip of the pen. Interestingly enough, there do not appear to be any instances in her letters wherein she references *The Flag of Our Union* by its correct name, and neither the *True Flag* nor *The Flag of Our Union* appear in any surviving journal entries.

In an 1878 letter to a Miss Churchill, a young aspiring author, Alcott wrote, "The *True Flag* used to pay me \$25 or \$30 for a long story, Frank Leslie at first \$25 for short ones, then \$100 for anything I would send." (*Selected Letters* 233) This letter has been tentatively dated to 1878 by Myerson, Shealy, and Stern's calculations, which would have been more than ten years

after Alcott's work with the *Flag* concluded. Alcott made the same mistake again in the notes sent to Moulton. Here, Alcott wrote:

“I find a mem[orandum] of 14 books & 300 short-tales. The books I own, the tales I don't. Leslie offered me \$25 more on each one if I would put my name to them, but I would not. Never had a *nomme [sic] de plume* except for a few novelettes in the *True Flag*. “A. M. Barnard.”

There are several oddities in this statement. The contention that A. M. Barnard was Alcott's only pseudonym is laughably false. Alcott's use of pseudonyms began with her very first publication in 1851, a poem entitled “Sunlight” in *Peterson's Magazine* under the name Flora Fairfield.<sup>6</sup> She would publish at least five more pieces under the name of Flora or F. Fairfield. Her first known tale that fell more on the lurid side, “The Rival Prima Donnas,” (1854) bore the name Flora Fairfield, as did four poems published in the *Ladies Christian Annual* (1, 1853) and the *Boston Olive Branch* (3, 1857-8).<sup>7</sup>

But beyond the more concrete issues of the *True Flag* and the pseudonym: None of Alcott's extant memorandums list anywhere near the 300 short tales she claims to have written here, even if we include all of her published work in the count. If we take Alcott's statement to be true, and infer that her “tales” comprise only stories she didn't “own,” but published anonymously or pseudonymously, there are more than 200 Alcott tales left unaccounted for. This

---

<sup>6</sup> Stern bibliography: “Sunlight.” (Poem by “Flora Fairfield”), *Peterson's Magazine*, Vol. XX, No. 3 (September, 1851).

<sup>7</sup> These four poems were only recently unearthed by Chapnick, demonstrating that Alcott's use of the Fairfield synonym was more extensive than previously thought.

number seems spuriously large, but Alcott also tells Moulton, “Sensation stories were in demand at this period, & I turned off eight or ten a month after some practice,” which seems blatantly incompatible with the Alcott ledger and list, but we also don’t know how long this prolific sensational stint lasted.<sup>8</sup> It is possible that Alcott is referring to 1866, during which her “Notes and Memoranda” section documents that she “wrote 12 tales in less than three months” (*Journals*, 154). These spates of hyperproductivity were not uncommon for Alcott; she wrote *Moods* in four weeks during August of 1860 (*Journals* 99). It’s also possible to explain away this claim and the other discrepancies with the contention that Alcott was simply exaggerating or misremembering.

It is also possible that she was deliberately misleading her readers. While admittedly a very unlikely scenario, redirecting curious readers to the *True Flag* as the avenue through which she published her pseudonymous stories would have created a convenient red herring for any nosy readers that had the tenacity to search out the renowned author’s salacious side. The letter to young Miss Churchill offers a fairly straightforward motive for doing such a thing. After all, she seemed to be responding to some kind of fan letter, and would have acted with that in mind, but in the letter to Moulton, any potential motive is less apparent. Near the end of the letter, Alcott entreats Moulton to “Pray be discreet,” and cites the measures she has already taken to ensure her privacy, having burnt her diaries and replaced them with the ledger. Yet she trusts

---

<sup>8</sup> A few sentences down, Alcott tells Moulton that “blood & thunder lost its charm when novelettes were ordered. Twenty four chapters long, with a catastrophe at the end of every other chapter, & thirty pages a day was found rather too lively work.” Alcott began writing novelettes for Elliot of *The Flag of Our Union* around 1865, which would place her prolific stint in the ballpark range of late 1862 (Alcott’s first known story for Leslie was published in January of 1863) to 1865.

Moulton enough to reveal her pen name, something she did not do for Churchill, and it would seem incongruous to extend her confidence in that area but stop at a publication. Alcott was aware that Moulton intended to write a sketch of her for the book *Our Famous Women: An Authorized Record of the Lives and Deeds of Distinguished American Women of Our Times* (1883), which featured sketches of other Boston notables, including Julia Ward Howe. Moulton's sketch repeated many of Alcott's passages nearly verbatim, but steered clear of any mention of Alcott's sensation stories, exercising the requested discretion; this anthology would not have been the proper venue to emphasize such exploits. Alcott's letters to Moulton, of which there are three, are undated, but Moulton's book's publication in 1883 provides a roundabout estimation of their timing.

Another place Alcott's publication history may deserve a bit of scrutiny is *The New York Ledger*. In her letter to Moulton, Alcott writes "Frank Leslie & the Ledger took these exciting productions & paid well" during the height of her sensation fiction production. Frank Leslie's periodicals did publish the majority of her sensation fiction at the time. The struck-through mention of the *Ledger* doubtless refers to *The New York Ledger*, another popular story paper at the time. References to the *Ledger* or its publisher, Robert Bonner, made sporadic appearances in Alcott's letters at the beginning of her career in sensation fiction, but there is no concrete indication within her letters that she contributed anything other than a single column to its pages.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Alcott dashed it off and just as quickly struck it out because she remembered that

---

<sup>9</sup> Within the digitized extant issues from the American Antiquarian Society, hosted by the NewsBank database, there are no titles attributed to Alcott or any of her known pseudonyms between the years of 1862 and 1868. It's

she never actually ended up writing stories for the *Ledger*, despite many earlier intimations on her part. In 1856, Alcott wrote to her father and proudly declared her ability to make a living “though an Alcott,” (*Selected Letters* 26) saying, “C[lapp] takes me one a month, and I am to see Mr B[onner], who may take some of my wares” (*Selected Letters* 26).<sup>10</sup> William Warland Clapp, Jr. was the editor of the *Boston Saturday Evening Gazette*, which was Alcott’s “first major magazine” (Stern 1992 65). Perhaps it did not work out with Mr. B. this time around, but Alcott was not daunted; in June of 1862, Alcott wrote to Alf Whitman, describing her intent “to illuminate the Ledger with a blood & thunder tale as they are easy to ‘compoze’ & are better paid than moral & elaborate works of Shakespeare” (Alcott to Whitman). Perhaps she *had* published some stories in the *Ledger* during that years-long gap between mentions, just not ones that she necessarily deemed to be “blood & thunder” tales, and was hoping to fall back on that relationship to publish her sensation fiction. Perhaps she didn’t end up doing so because Leslie paid better, or overwhelmed her with enough requests to quash any desire to write for the *Ledger*. When publishers began demanding longer works with greater frequency, “blood & thunder lost its charm. . . . Twenty four chapters long, with a catastrophe at the end of every other chapter, & thirty pages a day was found rather too lively work,” wrote the author to Moulton. It’s understandable, then, that Alcott would content herself with her strong existing relationships rather than branch out, which makes this exploration seem rather tenuous. Later, in 1868, Alcott contributed an advice column to *The New York Ledger* at Bonner’s special request, and under her

---

technically possible that she contributed earlier, but I’ll need to make another trip into the archive to investigate this possibility.

<sup>10</sup> The names in brackets have been extrapolated by Myerson and Shealy.

own name, for which he paid her the handsome sum of \$100.<sup>11</sup> Alcott records how this transpired in dramatic fashion in her journal; it was a dreary evening, and she was “trudg[ing]” (*Journals*, 164) homeward when she encountered a mysterious guest on her doorstep:

He handed me a letter out of which fell a \$100 bill. With this bait Mr. B[onner]. lured me to write "one column of Advice to Young Women." ... So I gave a receipt, and the very elegant agent bowed himself away, leaving my "umble" bower full of perfume, and my soul of peace. (*Journals*, 164)

This is a typical Alcott entry, filled with mystique and drama at every turn. No evidence exists for any other Alcott contribution to the *Ledger's* pages. But this is a strange way to make a reacquaintance after approximately twelve years, if we are to assume that Alcott spoke to Bonner only once, back in 1856, and had not cultivated any kind of professional relationship during the time that elapsed. But, like everything else, it is not a smoking gun by any stretch of the imagination.

With this corpus of random observations and dead ends, one could conclude that there is no possibility that Alcott contributed tales to *The True Flag* nor *The New York Ledger*. There is certainly no promising trail of evidence to suggest otherwise, yet Alcott's tantalizing calculation of 300 tales and Chapnick's most recent discovery of a completely new pseudonym suggest that literary sleuths would be remiss to rule out publications she referenced with such gusto over the period of many years. Alcott's inability or refusal to keep her publications straight still lends another crumb of credence to the claim that there are many more tales waiting in the wings. But

---

<sup>11</sup> The column in question is here: Alcott, Louisa May. "Happy Women," *The New York Ledger*, Vol. XXIV, No. 7 (April 11, 1868).

beyond that: Alcott and other anonymous authors, alongside their publishers, were often the only ones to know that they indeed wrote a work of literature. If they themselves become confused as to what they published, as well as when and where, the only tie to the work's provenance is essentially severed for good. The archives may well be brimming with authorial secrets, but sometimes there is simply no way around the mystery, at least for time being.

This muddling of truth until it disappears into deception occurs in Alcott's sensation fiction as well—it is a nigh-ubiquitous dynamic, but for analytical purposes, I will mostly rely on tales Alcott published in *The Flag of Our Union*. She published four lengthy tales in the pages of *The Flag of Our Union* in fairly rapid succession from February 1865 to January 1867, and these tales are on the more sensational end of the bunch. “A Marble Woman” deals with opium usage and toes incestuous lines. “Behind A Mask” is perhaps Alcott's most-cited “feminist” thriller. Its protagonist, a poor woman of humble status, deceives a wealthy aristocratic family and successfully marries into riches and a title, playing upon similar themes elucidated in the earliest *Flag* story, “V. V.” Alcott wrote “Behind a Mask” and another *Flag* story, “The Abbott's Ghost, Or Maurice Treherne's Temptation” after a brief stint in England, and both stories deal with great degrees of deception and underhanded schemes (or the consequences thereof).

In Alcott's tales, women of low birth employ deception in order to advance their status in the world, usually by using a combination of disguise and feminine charms to trick a member of the bourgeoisie into marriage. Alcott uses the marriage-under-pretense plot quite often; her plots often culminate with her female protagonists married, dead, or both. Perhaps it is odd that an author who claimed to have been tormented by an army of “enthusiastic young ladies” into marrying off *Little Women's* protagonist, Jo March, whom Alcott thought “should have remained

a literary spinster,” (*Selected Letters*, 125) should rely so heavily on the marriage plot in her sensation fiction. Yet the concept of marriage Alcott embraces in *Little Women* and in her sensation tales could not be more different. In *Little Women* and her other “moral pap,” Alcott’s primary view of marriage, it seems, is the love marriage. Yet in her sensation fiction, Alcott recognizes that marriage is often an economic arrangement for women, she treats it primarily as such. The deception necessary to secure a marriage in Alcott’s sensation stories is not antithetical to Alcott’s economic conception of marriage by any means. Love, if it is even a dynamic at play, comes after the fact, or exists outside of the marriage. Marriage under false pretenses, while a common theme in the sensation genre, would generally take the form of a marriage that exploited the woman in some way. Alcott departs from the norm when she makes these marriages advantageous for women, and even more so when she makes it clear that the women have engineered the entire thing through their own ingenuity.

“Behind a Mask,” published in 1866, is where Alcott’s understanding of sex and class shines as a form of class-conscious feminism where sex and deception function as tools to undermine both the patriarchy and the aristocracy. Judith Fetterly calls it “Alcott’s most radical text” (Fetterly 2). The story centers around Jean Muir, a woman from a questionable background who deceives an entire family to engineer a better future for herself. She gets what she wants. The Coventry family, for whom she works as a governess, is devastated in her wake. The Coventry brothers are made jilted lovers when she passes them over to marry Sir John, the titled and moneyed older man in the family, while the mother and sister are blindsided by the deception. Fetterly identifies this story as a social critique of the feminine ideal imposed on middle-class white women, and even discusses the Alcott family’s own dire financial straits that

the publication of “Behind a Mask” was an attempt to ameliorate, but oddly does not follow up this identification of class with any discussion of Alcott’s own critique of the aristocracy, preferring to couch this debate in the clash of the sexes and Alcott’s personal circumstances.

Elizabeth Schewe’s fine article, “Domestic Conspiracy: Class Conflict and Performance in Louisa May Alcott’s ‘Behind a Mask,’” interrogates the class dynamics of this text more closely, including how Jean’s role in the home fit into class structures. Schewe also makes the compelling contention that the governess is uniquely threatening to the aristocracy, as “it is the governess who teaches the young lady . . . the markings of the upper class that are supposed to be innate,” which demonstrates “the performative nature of upper-class identity” (Schewe 581). Foucault, too, alludes to the concern around domestics, constructing the development of *scientia sexualis* as a response to threats to the ruling class from the proximity of lower-class domestic help. He writes that the “onanistic child” (121) that the medical establishment creates *scientia sexualis* to address is none other than the aristocratic child, who is “surrounded by domestic servants, tutors, and governesses,” (121) and therefore risking compromising “his intellectual capacity, his moral fiber, and the obligation to preserve a healthy line of descent for his family and his social class” (121). As a governess, Jean is domestic help, but she is also very close to the family, and therefore has the potential to corrupt them sexually, which she ultimately does realize.

In this respect, “Behind a Mask” is a part of a broader literary inquiry into the role of the governess. Novels such as *Jane Eyre* (1847), in which Jane, a governess, wins the love of Mr. Rochester, the moneyed man of the house, are emblematic of the nineteenth-century anxiety about the potential of governesses to use their proximity to the family to upend the social order.

Alcott uses this trope to construct her own plot in “Behind a Mask,” except Jean actually goes through with the marriage and becomes Lady Coventry. Gerald Coventry, the eldest brother and heir, is suspicious of Jean from the beginning, and fears that his younger brother, who “‘is just at an age to make a fool of himself for any girl who comes in his way,’” will be compromised, and bids his lover, Lucia to “‘have a care of the governess . . . or she will bewitch him’” (362).<sup>12</sup> This statement is a warning to not forget that, although the governess is hired help, she is still a “girl,” and she possesses the power of seduction, of sex. She has the potential to “bewitch” men and contaminate the family with her lower-class self.

Jean is conscious of this limbo she occupies and resents it. When she first meets Sir John, her future husband, he is charmed, and believes her to be one of his niece’s friends, but she quickly corrects him, saying: “‘I am not a friend. I am only Miss Coventry's governess.’” (369) At this knowledge, “a slight change passed over Sir John's manner,” which Jean feels “at once, and bit[es] her lips with an angry feeling at her heart.” (369) She realizes that her class is a barrier to seduction, and so craftily lets slip that she is also descended from an aristocratic bloodline. This, of course, is a lie; but deception is the price of entrance to the world of aristocratic seduction and marriage.

“Behind a Mask” begins with Jean Muir’s physical disguise before introducing more complex forms of deception to the plot. She enters the Coventry family home, disguising herself as a girl of nineteen, despite being thirty. She tells the family, “‘I wish I was thirty, but, as I am not, I do my best to look and seem old,’” (364) which garners her much pity, as she intends it to,

---

<sup>12</sup>All of the page numbers for Alcott’s stories correspond to the text in Madeleine Stern’s volume, *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: The Collected Thrillers*.

knowing that a divorced actress does not receive the same sympathetic treatment as a young, mysterious girl with an air of sorrow beyond her years.

Her deception—even the suspicion thereof—is couched in theatrical terms from beginning to end. Gerald makes his cynicism known with a snarky comment after Jean faints in the middle of performing on the piano, whispering to his younger brother, ““Scene first, very well done”” (364). This angers Jean, but she accepts the framing of her behavior when she replies, ““The last scene shall be still better”” (364). When she is alone, Jean speaks to herself in the same theatrical language, saying, rather melodramatically, ““The curtain is down, so I may be myself for a few hours, if actresses ever are themselves”” (367). This is a telling declaration; here, to play a part is to potentially forsake the person one was before adopting that role, and to absorb, at least somewhat, the character one intends to imitate. In Jean’s performance, truth is mixed with deception, and the line between the two is certainly blurred, if not completely erased. This dynamic is present elsewhere in Alcott’s fiction, where the theater crops up often, and there are some interesting intersections pertaining to gender performance in Alcott’s other tales, which I discuss later.

Alcott’s penchant for the theater is evident in Jean’s physical disguise, and so the theatricality of deception becomes a metanarrative element, in addition to a narrative one. Jean’s disguise smacks of the stage, and some suspension of disbelief is necessary in order to accept that it allowed her to pass for a teenager. Everything about her appearance is a contrivance, and so when she “unbound and removed the long abundant braids from her head, wiped the pink from her face, took out several pearly teeth, and slipp[ed] off her dress” at the end of the day, she appears “herself indeed, a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least.” (367) This is

stage makeup, more than anything; the dramatic transformation would have been believable from afar, perhaps, but in the close proximity of the drawing-room, and in natural daylight, something would almost certainly give Jean's age away. Jean's "disguise was more in the expression she assumed than in any art of costume or false adornment," (367) Alcott continues, dismissing this exploration before it can really begin.

The theater is also where Alcott takes her most embodied approach to sexuality in "Behind a Mask." Gerald, the man who has been suspicious and standoffish to Jean during her stay, is fully seduced when the pair are onstage together, playing lovers. By drawing Gerald into her theatrical realm, Jean is able to seduce him with her body in a way that would be completely off limits in other venues. As he kneels with his arm around her waist and head against her chest, Gerald feels "the indescribable spell of womanhood" (395) "for the first time in his life" (395). He then assumes the air of "the ardent lover to perfection" (395) and loses himself so deeply in his character that he stays in this position after the curtain falls and is only roused from the reverie as Jean squirms away from him. Jean, used to inhabiting this realm, is not affected in this way; she is still acting. When Gerald undergoes this transformation from the proximity to her body and the dazzling affectations of the stage, "she felt his hands tremble, saw the color flash into his cheek, knew that she had touched him at last, and when she rose it was with a sense of triumph." (395) This vignette is the most concentrated dose of theatrical seduction in the story, despite its enduring presence, and from the immediate change evident in Gerald, it is clear that the effects of this drug are proportional to the dose.

At the end of the story, Jean is married to Sir John, who has been "unconscious of deceit" (414) this entire time, and triumphantly confronts the betrayed family. She harkens back to the

previously discussed exchange, saying to Gerald, ““Is not the last scene better than the first?”” (429). The story closes on this quote, which bookends Jean’s deception, at least this particular episode. She has money and a title, the objects of her desire, and so the deception no longer has utility. Before her jibe at Gerald, Jean promises her pupil, Bella, and Mrs. Coventry, Bella’s mother, that she is a changed woman, saying, ““To you I will acknowledge that I am not worthy to be this good man's wife, and to you I will solemnly promise to devote my life to his happiness.”” (429) Given how the story ends, this quote is certainly up for interpretation. Whether Jean is simply continuing her deceptive ways or if she has truly turned over a new leaf is impossible to determine, because in achieving her goal, her deception has essentially become her reality.

If “Behind a Mask” is the story of how a woman successfully tricks her way into a marriage, “V.V.” is a story of how such trickery fails when met in kind. Perhaps the ending is why the tale has not been scrutinized by feminist scholars like Fetterly and Schewe, or received much attention at all. Yet the two tales revolve around many similar plot and character constructions. The protagonist, Virginie Varens, is also a performer—in this case a dancer, or *danseuse*—who assumes a false identity to live among a wealthy aristocratic family. After Virginie marries Allan Douglas, her jealous lover, Victor, kills him and the two escape. Virginie tires of Victor again and escapes with the kindly Colonel Vane; after he fortuitously dies, she poses as his widow and enjoys a life in the hospitality of high society. They assume she is one of them: Lady Lennox, her host, tells Earl Douglas, the love interest she attempts to ensnare, “one can see at a glance that she is of high birth,” (90) and Virginie herself maintains that she is a member of the aristocracy, although the text itself casts suspicion on her “questionable nobility”

(139). When Earl Douglas (ill-fated Allan's cousin) returns from abroad, Virginie, or Mrs. Vane, as he knows her, captivates him. Virginie sows discord between Douglas and his would-be lover, Diana, by making Diana believe that Earl Douglas and Allan Douglas are one and the same, and that Douglas had spurned her before turning to Diana. Diana dies in a mysterious fall, and Virginie is implicated at the scene through a muddy footprint. Douglas begins to suspect that Mrs. Vane and Virginie are one and the same. He ensnares her through an elaborate plot that involves drugging her, entering her bedchamber while she sleeps, and killing Victor, her lover-in-disguise. When she realizes that the jig is up, so to speak, Virginie kills herself with poison rather than face the punishment Douglas has engineered for her.

The elements of physical disguise present in "Behind a Mask" are equally pronounced in "V.V." Whereas Jean uses her disguise to appear a younger version of herself, Virginie dons her clothing to shed an old identity. While the revelation of Jean's plot in "Behind a Mask" is greeted with an aghast exclamation that "a woman could not do it," (425) the characters in "V.V." acknowledge disguise as an established feminine tool. When trying to identify Virginie, Douglas' friend Dupres says, "She baffles me somewhat, I confess, with her woman's art in dress" (128); he concurs and relays this to Virginie, saying, "You, too, disguised yourself, with an art that staggered my own senses, and perplexed Dupres, for our masculine eye could not fathom the artifices of costume, cosmetics, and consummate acting" (140). Here, the physicality of disguise is portrayed as a feminine art (which is at odds with the text itself, wherein Victor disguises himself on multiple occasions with great success), but it's acknowledged and discussed in a way that never occurs in "Behind a Mask." The characters' differing understandings of female disguise are indicative of their familiarity with deception; In "V.V.," where men scheme

alongside their female counterparts, they understand how feminine theatrics are used against them because they too speak the language of deception. This doesn't altogether hamper the effects of Virginie's deception, however; her beauty and charm—the methods of seduction—buy her a seemingly unrealistic amount of leeway. Even when Douglas is nearly certain that demure Mrs. Vane and conniving Virginie are one and the same, he can't resist “the wish that she might be proved innocent and somewhere find the safe home her youth and beauty needed” (125). Here, his goodwill toward her is linked to the qualities in Virginie to which he is attracted, and which she uses to seduce him: her youth and beauty. As these thoughts churn in Douglas' mind, the pair are sitting close together on a couch, which contextualizes the intoxication of the following lines: “So potent was the fascination of her presence that when with her his doubts seemed unfounded, and so great was the confusion into which his mind was thrown by these conflicting impressions that his native composure quite deserted him at times” (125-26). His attraction to her actually enacts some of the deception on its own.

There is a clear link between deception in Alcott's personal life and her tales: once deception is introduced, it taints the narrative, and any quest for “truth,” which, by then, has become an equally compromised concept, must paradoxically include its opposite. Jean Muir succeeds because she is the only one plotting; Virginie Varens fails because she is up against many crafty opponents. It seems that two wrongs make something of a right: plots can only be combated with counterplots.

## CHAPTER TWO

## SEXOLOGY AND SENSATION: THE MARBLE QUANDARY

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the role of deception in Alcott's life and work, and how she uses deception to examine the nature of desire and criticize the aristocratic order. This chapter builds upon that basis to examine how Alcott develops sexological vocabularies in support of the same ideologies that her themes of deception in "Behind a Mask" reveal. In it, I reexamine the geographical origins of sexology and consider the broader question of what constitutes a sexological intervention, arguing that imaginative literature should be given more consideration when studying the development of sexology. In service of this end, I examine how Alcott develops sexological elements within three of her sensation stories to advance an argument that agalmatophilia is fundamentally a manifestation of the desire to subjugate and control women. I also briefly look at the treatment of gender transgressions in fiction of the time, including Alcott's "My Mysterious Mademoiselle," *Cecil Dreeme*, and another anonymous short story, "The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman," in order to understand the potential of literature in imagining queer possibilities.

When reading Alcott's sensation stories as sexological texts, I take stock of extant sexological elements with roots in Europe, but I also consider Kahan's argument for an alternative, American origin of sexology. Scholars have historically thought of sexology as a German invention and accordingly emphasized the contributions of influential German sexologists; Foucault is no exception. When discussing how sexology began to "solidify" the

“archives of the pleasures of sex” (63), Foucault names “Campe, Salzmänn, and especially Kaan, Krafft-Ebing, Tardieu, Molle, and Havelock Ellis” (63), who individually originated from Germany, Austria, France, or Britain.<sup>13</sup> When examining the geographical provenance of the evidence Foucault considers, it becomes apparent that his theory of *scientia sexualis* does not consider the development of sexology in America. Yet the development of sexology was not geographically monolithic, nor were the other components that made up sexual discourse, a category that includes imaginative literature. Kahan’s article builds the argument for an American origin of sexology, both by examining the work of Elizabeth Willard and Orson Fowler, and by broadening its approach to include writing by laypeople. In doing so, Kahan claims to reveal in American sexology an attitude of “relentless heteronormativity that promotes marital, reproductive, loving sex and vilifies prostitution, polygamy, masturbation, contraception, sex for pleasure, and . . . sodomy,” (73) as opposed to the “homophilic sympathies” of German sexology (73). This characterization of American sexology sounds a lot like a version of Foucault’s *scientia sexualis*, with the category of the Anglo-American white race as a clearer demographic stand-in for Foucault’s ruling class.

Kahan argues for the importance of considering origins of sexology outside of scientific and medical realms, a contention I adopt. Kahan briefly discusses a passage from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* in order to explore “how sexology and sexual science are routed through literature and literary styles” (72); in particular, he cites an essay by Michael Lynch, ““Here is Adhesiveness”: From Friendship to Homosexuality,” which investigates how

---

<sup>13</sup> In his Edinburgh Philosophical Guide to *The History of Sexuality*, Mark G. E. Kelly concludes that “Molle” was a misspelled reference to Albert Moll, a German sexologist. I have adopted this contention.

Whitman's writing shaped the phrenological phenomenon of adhesiveness. He describes his approach as "attend[ing] to what Christopher Looby calls 'the literariness of sexuality'" (72). Kahan's actual discussion of imaginative literature is fairly sparse, however, and consequently does not in actuality attend fully to the "literariness of sexuality" (Looby 2013, 843) characterized by Looby. Augmenting Kahan's discussion of sexology with something more responsive to Looby's actual conception of "the literariness of sexuality" requires a more thorough investigation of literature in its own right. Looby argues that a literary public sphere is necessary for the adoption of the sexual identities that sexologists are so invested in categorizing, and that the contemporaneous emergence of both in the nineteenth century was no coincidence. Periodical literature made up a large part of this public sphere in the later nineteenth century, and in the 1860s, sensation fiction made up a large part of periodical literature. Although literary analysis will not necessarily directly develop Kahan's study of the origins of sexology, it further develops his approach of expanding the understanding of sexology into non-medical arenas.

According to Kahan, American sexologists used Transcendentalist metaphysics and the pseudoscience of phrenology to advance a "conservative understanding of proper sex" (81) but with the objective of expanding women's rights. Alcott's literary proximity to Transcendentalism, which Kahan identifies as an origin of American sexology, makes her an ideal subject of study when considering how sexological thought evolved in literature of the United States. Emerson's influence is apparent in Elizabeth Willard's book, *Sexology as the Philosophy of Life: Implying Social Organization and Government* (1867), in her fixations upon normality and the laws of nature, which Kahan argues is emblematic of the heteronormative American sexological tradition. Kahan argues that Willard's text was a response to "Emerson's

famous call at the beginning of ‘Nature’, where he says that a ‘true theory . . . will be its own evidence’ and will ‘explain all phenomena’” (Kahan 76) Emerson himself, however, was skeptical of explaining sex, writing, “Now many [phenomena] are thought not only unexplained but inexplicable as language, sleep, madness, dreams, beasts, sex” (qtd in Kahan 76).

Alcott was no stranger to Transcendentalism; as the daughter of Bronson Alcott, she experienced the application of Transcendentalist theories firsthand in the disastrous Fruitlands commune experiment, which she later satirized in *Transcendental Wild Oats* (1873). She worshiped Emerson, a close friend of her father’s whose influence was also a component of Alcott’s decision to remain pseudonymous when writing sensation fiction; she said to Mrs. Pickett that “to have had Mr. Emerson for an intellectual god all one’s life is to be invested with a chain armor of propriety” (Pickett 108).

This is where an analysis of Alcott’s sensation fiction may prove useful: Just as Whitman shapes the concept of adhesion, she challenges the ideological underpinnings of sexology that Kahan and Foucault put forth. Before Willard published *Sexology as the Philosophy of Life*, Alcott had published “V.V.,” “A Marble Woman,” “Behind a Mask,” and countless other works of sensation fiction. All of these stories, like Willard’s text, are written in support of the rights of women, but they also use deception and sex to chip away at the legitimacy of the aristocratic ruling class. Unlike Willard’s text, Alcott’s sensation fiction does not put forth a complete explanation of sex by any means, indeed, her writing suggests that truth has the potential to be a permanently elusive thing. She is caught by Emerson’s black-and-white view of the “true theory,” yet cannot resist putting forth her theories despite understanding their limitations; in this tug-of-war, Alcott emerges as an American sexological figure in her own right.

This analysis will center primarily around “A Marble Woman,” one of Alcott’s most widely-discussed sensation stories, perhaps because it is also one of the most sensational, harboring opium use, hints of father-daughter incest, and what appears to be an odd fetish for marble statues. Here is perhaps where Alcott’s intersection with the European sexological gaze manifests most explicitly, as “the satisfaction of lust with statues” (Kaan 78) is one of the six main sexual pathologies Kaan articulates in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1844). Incest and other such sexually aberrant behaviors feature heavily in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which is an obvious commonality with “A Marble Woman,” but the eroticization of statues is a paraphilia much newer to the discourse, only articulated in 1844, and Kaan does not elaborate on this particular pathology within *Psychopathia Sexualis*. However, the idea eventually develops into “a mainstay of sexological thought,” asserts Kahan in the introduction to the 2016 translation of the text, citing Ellis’ “Pygmalionism” and Krafft-Ebing’s inclusion of a similar paraphilia in his own, much later *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886).

Beyond the realm of European sexology, America was publicly contending with the erotic potential of marble statuary during the mid-nineteenth century. In 1846, Hiram Powers finished carving *The Greek Slave*, which was “the first publicly exhibited, life-size, American sculpture depicting a fully nude female figure” (National Gallery of Art), and an instant, polarizing success. Powers gained lasting international fame for this sculpture; in his 1903 book *The History of American Sculpture*, Lorado Taft writes, “[*The Greek Slave*’s] success was overwhelming. It was the centre of interest at the first World’s Fair in New York in 1853, and was reproduced over and over again. Its fame in the United States was largely due to the fact that it was one of the first nude figures created by an American” (Tate 64). In 1847, *The New York*

*Daily Tribune* reported that “One critic ... objects to the nudity of the figure,” and this person’s view was certainly shared by some. *The Tribune* and others, however, thought the nudity fitting for what the statue depicted: a young Christian woman being sold in a Turkish slave market. Regardless of the patrons’ views, *The Tribune* reported, “the same surprise and delight, and the same elevation of sentiment seem in various degrees to be felt by all comers; whatever may be the critical *judgement* of individuals as to the merits of the work, there is no mistake about the *feeling* which it awakens.” This “elevation of sentiment” that is universally “awakened” in audiences seems euphemistic of some acknowledgement of the statue’s erotic potential, especially since much of that article is spent discussing its nudity.



Figure 2. *The Greek Slave* captivated American and international audiences for her striking nude figure, paired with her poignant facial expression and submissive posture. (Powers, Hiram. *The Greek Slave*. Modeled 1841-43, carved 1846. Marble. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.)

Alcott finds the idea of attraction to a marble woman salient enough to explore in multiple tales over a period of years. It's unlikely that Alcott's understanding of statues as loci of erotic attraction came directly from Kaan's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, but there are several probable American inspirations for this exploration. Alcott's idea of the marble woman has similarities with *The Greek Slave*; for her, statuesque women are obedient, docile women who perform their duties silently and beautifully, yet ask nothing in return. In characterizing her marble women, she

uses the language of slavery, and even puts one of her marble women in chains at some point, both tellingly evocative of Powers' sculpture. As the marble women in her tales are flesh-and-blood women, she gives herself enough leeway to confront the issue without literally having to deal with men attempting to copulate with a statue. Alcott also defines the type of man who is attracted to marble women and attempts to elucidate why they find this archetype so compelling. Alcott actually develops this idea further than Kaan does, essentially creating multiple case studies and a consistent profile of the kind of man that is drawn to the marble woman. Alcott's engagement with the contours of marble women and the men who desire them constitutes a feminist investigation of the same phenomenon described by European sexologists.

One potential point at which "A Marble Woman" may have picked up its sexological influences is during Alcott's exploration of other literature in the American sphere. "A Marble Woman" clearly draws inspiration from a queer American novel of the nineteenth century, Theodore Winthrop's *Cecil Dreeme* (1861). Alcott read this novel multiple times before writing "A Marble Woman," which was published in four installments during May and June of 1865. A journal entry from April of 1864 records her enjoyment of the novel, saying, "Read Oliver Twist, Cecil Dreeme & Scarlet Letter again & like them all better than ever" (*Journals* 129) But even without this concrete admission, the similarities between the works are undeniable. *Cecil Dreeme's* titular character shares an adopted first name with "A Marble Woman's" protagonist, Cecilia Bazil Stein, who is christened "Cecil" by her strange benefactor and sculptor, Bazil Yorke. She goes by this name for the remainder of the story. The mechanism by which the Cecils came by their names is also similar. Cecil Dreeme was born Clara Denman, but is forced into hiding by the evil Densdeth, who seeks to marry her. She adopts the name Cecil Dreeme and the

disguise of a male artist to avoid detection. Both Cecils have their names foisted upon them by their dark romantic pursuers; in this comparison, it becomes apparent that Basil Yorke is the Alcottian reimagining of Winthrop's Densdeth, and "The Marble Woman" emerges as a darker, more gothic retelling of the novel's romance plot. In *Cecil Dreeme*, Cecil avoids Densdeth and triumphs over him, even though the cost to her is great. Cecil's marble-esque physical state, brought on by her travails hiding from Densdeth, is something that Densdeth precipitates by rendering it necessary, but that she uses to her advantage. Beyond her description, multiple characters in the story identify Cecil with the marble statue in her family's foyer; Robert Byng tells her, "that statue has seemed to me your presence there" (345). The tentative characterization of Cecil, a woman who is hunted by a man who seeks to subjugate and marry her against her will, illuminates another possible inspiration for Alcott's literary exploration of marble women in the years after she read the novel.

Cecilia Basil Stein is not Alcott's sole marble woman, only her most prominent. The story Alcott published directly prior to "A Marble Woman," "The Fate of the Forrests," (1865) explores a similar dynamic, as does the later "Countess Varazoff" (1868). Basil's approach in "A Marble Woman" is the most heavy-handed of the three; he adopts Cecil as a child and attempts to mold her into an emotionless being as she grows up, believing that he will save her from heartbreak. A defiant Cecil later confronts her sculptor, Basil Yorke: "You bade me be a marble woman, with no heart to love you, only grace and beauty, to please your eye and do you honor" (247). This is the crux of the matter: the marble women are expected to be emotionless beings with no agency—"no heart"—but to pour their efforts into serving their men with their graceful mannerisms and pleasing them with their beauty.

“A Marble Woman” is the outlier of the three stories, being the only one in which the heroine’s death does not serve as a convenient bookend for the narrative. Yet that tale too ends with a death—it is the rather non sequitur-ish passing of Cecil’s father that fulfills that trope, leaving behind a happy couple, even if their joy is somewhat dampened in the moment. The coercive elements evident within Cecil and Bazil’s dynamic differ greatly from what the two heroines of the aforementioned tales, Ursula Forrest and Countess Irma Varazoff, suffer at the hands of their love interests. (The term “love interest” conveys a sense of mutuality that is decidedly absent here.) Beyond any common denominator of plot, Ursula, Irma, and Cecil are all described in terms that liken them to marble statues. This is a characteristic that their controlling lovers gravitate to, if only to eventually attempt to transform the cold statue into an affectionate wife.

Even where an explicit injunction to become more statuesque is absent, the marble women are adored and coerced for this reason: their pursuers enjoy the chase, the molding, the breaking of the will. As Ursula’s tormentor, Felix Stähl, admits: “Those who tamely submit to me I despise, but those who oppose me I first conquer and then faithfully love” (154). Seemingly paradoxically, it is once the women are appropriately statuesque that their pursuers fall in love with them, and it is this deeper feeling of love that causes them to desire a relationship with a flesh-and-blood woman who loves them back, not just a marble one.

Through Alcott’s pen, the desire for a marble woman reveals an underlying obsession with perfect subjugation and then a corresponding disappointment that the subjugated creature will never love one back. The marble woman is, in many ways, the picture of the perfect Victorian woman. She controls her emotions and performs her duties perfectly. She is the

embodiment of the “angel in the house,” a portrait of the self-sacrificing Victorian wife (and mother) popularized by Coventry Patmore, but without the authorial rose-colored spectacles. Alcott herself was no stranger to self-sacrifice: Her children’s fiction is rife with the theme, as was her own life. Here and elsewhere in her sensation fiction, Alcott pushes back on the idea of self-sacrifice as unilaterally positive that she often embraced in her life and work. The marble woman is a sexy picture, but a woman expending all of her energy outward with the goal of serving others and suppressing herself will not have much left over to give, hence her marble-like frigidity. Felix Stähl embodies the male frustration in this peculiar equation, after blackmailing Ursula into marrying him and consequently dealing with the fact that she does not love him, he complains, “I find a cold, still creature in my arms” (153) and asking her if he might never hope for the warmth of her love. Ursula responds, as “pale and passive as if she were in truth a marble woman,” and shuts him down without hesitation, retorting, ““I vowed obedience at the altar, nothing more. I did not love you; I could not honor you, but I felt that I might learn to obey. I have done so, be content”” (153). The marble women that these men fetishize are essentially the picture of docile, obedient Victorian woman, and Alcott dissects the paradox here—men want this sort of woman to love them without realizing that forcing a woman into a role that privileges obedience over all reduces them to that single dimension.

Parallel to the woman-as-statues language, Alcott hammers in the language of dominance and submission, making clear that the two are inexorably connected in her eyes. In “The Fate of the Forrests,” upon being blackmailed, Ursula “[sits] as if changed suddenly to stone” and her eyes do not leave her future husband’s face “while light, color, life itself seemed to ebb slowly from her own, leaving it as beautiful yet woful to look upon as some marble Medusa’s

countenance” (147). Ursula’s transformation takes place immediately upon realizing that she is completely beholden to this man and will have to comply with whatever he demands. Later, when the pair are married, and Stähl is dealing with the frustration of dealing with his submissive but icy wife, he resorts to allowing her cousin—and lover—to visit. Upon this development, “Ursula's hard won submission deserted her... in reanimating the statue Stähl soon felt that he had lost his slave and found a master” (157). Alcott uses the slave/master characterization everywhere that she uses the statue characterization; it is apparent that the fixation upon statues is an expression of this dynamic.

In “Countess Varazoff,” the picture of domination is even more striking, as the countess is a Polish woman still smarting from her country’s recent annexation, while her lover is a Russian prince. The night she agrees to marry him, they are at a masquerade ball where Irma appears as the “Genius of Poland, in mourning robes with fettered hands,” (640) a gesture that does not curry favor with her Russian hosts. Alcott uses the unfortunate historical circumstances to emphasize the subjugation that women endure (distasteful move on her part, perhaps). Once the countess agrees to be his wife, the prince leads her back to the party, “listening well pleased to the soft clank of the silver chain she wore” (644), and the chapter closes on this rather dramatic image of a woman in chains held by her husband and master, somewhat evocative of *The Greek Slave*. On her wedding day, Irma appears “calm and fair as the marble image of a bride” (645), the picture of self-control and manufactured composure. Then, her fairness is revealed as the pallor produced by fear, when after the ceremony the narration ominously recounts how “no one saw the pale bride shrink as the ring went on, no one heard the stern

bridegroom whisper "Mine!" as he led her away" (646)—the marble facade is submission, often a freeze response induced by fear.

Alcott often uses free indirect discourse when characterizing her marble women, laying bare the fact that their marble status is not something inherent, but conferred upon them by the gaze of another. The individual imposing this marble characterization therefore becomes an object of speculation, and their obsession with marble women even more so. After marrying Countess Irma, Prince Czertski begins to believe he has "married a snow-image, not a mortal woman," but upon receiving good news in the form of a letter, "the pale statue suddenly woke and warmed" (646). Highly suspicious of this development, Czertski asks, "'Who is this who wrings tears from the eyes of my marble princess?'" (646), pointing to the fact that he sees her as a marble woman, but also as his own marble princess, signifying a sense of marital belonging that Irma herself certainly does not feel. Later, readers learn of Irma's death through Czertski's discovery and consequent colorization of "the beautiful pale statue lying dead in her chamber" (647). She is in death what she was in life; there is no difference because the ideal of the marble woman Czertski creates for his wife to live up to does not allow for dynamic movement in characterization.

The comparison to the marble woman in death seen in "Countess Varazoff" is absent in "The Fate of the Forrests." In something of a parallel, Ursula dies at the end of the story. This is where the similarities end. She's not alone, but in the company of her cousin-turned-lover, Evan. The love between Ursula and Evan is not coercive—it is for him that Ursula longs during her bleak days with Stähl. It is his presence at her deathbed that makes all the difference in how she is portrayed. Evan loves Ursula; he has never tried to force her to be anything other than what

she was, and with him, she is not a marble woman. As Ursula dies in Evan's arms, the only physical description of her is as a "wan and wasted creature who had given herself for [Evan]" (174); here, the absence of her coercive lover is marked by the absence of any statuesque vocabulary.

Out of "The Fate of the Forrests," "Countess Varazoff," and "A Marble Woman," the only successful marriage is that of Cecil Stein and Bazil Yorke. This is also the only story in which the man shows any kind of true repentance for his actions and a desire to change his ways, providing support for Alcott's narrative argument that the agalmatophile's fantasy is fundamentally misguided and unsustainable in a loving and fulfilling romantic partnership. After Cecil confronts him about how he has essentially molded her into a marble woman (and now has the nerve to complain about the thing he created), Bazil responds "God forgive me for the wrong I did you. I tried to atone for it, but I have failed, and this is my punishment" (247). He continues in this vein for a while, pleading with Cecil to change and love him, climaxing with the ardent declaration, "I will work and wait for years, will be your servant, not your master, will bear and suffer anything if I may hope to touch your heart at last" (248). This is telling, because it makes explicit what is already implicit in their dynamic and inverts it in a single moment. Bazil verbally recognizes that his attempt to render Cecil a marble woman has been with the intent to subjugate her and regrets it all. In the absence of any of this mistreatment, the pair can become a happy couple.

In addition to Alcott's critique of the masculine desire for complete uxorial subservience, she begins to deconstruct rigid binaristic conceptions of gender in her stories. She is not the first nor the only author to figure the theater as a site of transgender possibility: Winthrop's Cecil

Dreeme resorts to the theater wardrobe to furnish her own male disguise, confessing, “I dressed myself in a suit of clothes I had worn as the lover in a little domestic drama we played at home in happier days” (344). Realizing the transgression of gender boundaries she has committed by taking the costume into the real world, she quickly follows this by imploring her audience to “not think me unwomanly for this disguise,” (344) affirming her own gender identity but also acknowledging that this “disguise” has the potential to shift it. As Looby notes in his introduction to *Cecil Dreeme*, the revelation of Cecil’s womanhood manages to dissipate the specter of the homosexual relationship between Robert Byng and Cecil Dreeme, to some extent; as one commentator puts it, Byng’s “heterosexuality is reaffirmed—more or less—when it turns out that the delectable roommate is a woman in disguise” (qtd in Looby 2016 viii). Alcott’s gender transgressions take place in the realm of theater as well, where they are understood to be impermanent, costumes that one dons when necessary and discards when they have exhausted their utility.

But this simplistic resolution the commentator identifies in *Cecil Dreeme* is problematized if the opposite is true, and a previously assumed heterosexual attraction turns out to be queer. One is reminded of Alcott’s attitude toward deception in her other stories, such as “V.V.,” where deception, once enacted, is in some ways undoable. It is precisely this uncomfortable situation that plays out in a later work of Alcott’s, “My Mysterious Mademoiselle.” This story was one of Alcott’s several anonymous contributions to *Frank Leslie’s Lady’s Magazine* between 1868 and 1870. In similar style to the others, it is a short, pithy vignette, in which a man travels by train to visit his dying sister. He is joined in his car by a young, attractive woman, to whom he feels an instantaneous attraction. It quickly becomes

apparent that the young mademoiselle is hiding something—she implores the older George Vane to pose as her father to evade detection by a man who comes searching for her. Vane seizes on this request to pose as her husband, and as repayment for this favor, asks her for an “English good-by” (Stern 1995, 729), that is, a kiss on the lips. She agrees to this, and the journey continues. They both fall asleep until the “long tunnel near Nice” (729), when Vane awakes in the dark and hears the girl meddling with his cigarettes and bon-bons. Before he can decide “how to punish” (729) her for her impudence, the train emerges from the tunnel, revealing a handsome lad in the girl’s place. This “mysterious mademoiselle” (732) has been Vane’s nephew all along. He had been traveling to the same destination to visit his dying mother, in disguise because his aunts forbade him to leave his school. The uncle and nephew laugh over the boy’s prank and part on good terms.

This queer little story is a new play on a typical Alcott dynamic, in which a woman disguises herself in some way and seduces a man in order to fulfill a deeper objective. In this story, a young man, George Vane Vandeleur, is the one doing the deceiving. The chemistry between nephew and uncle is not solely the uncle’s misguided construction. It materializes between the two when the uncle poses as the nephew’s husband; before, it had simply been the uncle’s fantasy, and not a mutual construction. Once this new dynamic develops, the nephew allows it to continue, with what appears to be some amusement, assenting to his uncle’s demand of a kiss on the lips (but revealing himself before he must follow through). Being “small, and hav[ing] as yet no beard” (730), young George is accustomed to playing “girl-parts” at school. In fact, one of the components of his disguise is “the blonde wig [he] wore on the stage” (730). When the boundaries are blurred between the theater and the real world through disguise and

deception, the theater is able to realize its queer possibilities. George may still be acting, but the people who perceive him certainly believe he is a young woman.

The fact that Alcott does not pathologize the gender transgressions in her fiction is significant, but none of this treatment is unprecedented in contemporaneous fiction. Another story from 1857, “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman,” published anonymously in *The Knickerbocker*, a literary magazine in New York, more concretely depicts what we would call today a transgender woman.<sup>14</sup> The protagonist, Japhet Colbones, wears women's clothes in secret and eventually commits suicide, asking to be buried in the women's clothing. Japhet's suicide note is a poignant and explicit embrace of another gender identity: “I think I am a woman. ... As I have passed so long, falsely, for a man, I am ashamed to show myself in my true colors; therefore, I hang myself” (Looby 2017, 108). This portrayal, where Japhet's “true colors” can be those of womanhood, rather than the manhood he was endowed with at birth, exists, at least in its initial form, without the scrutiny and ultimate pathologization it would be subjected to under the medical gaze.<sup>15</sup>

In the pages of American periodical literature, complex treatments and radical conceptions of gender identity and sexual behavior emerge that parallel those in sexological,

---

<sup>14</sup> This is an anachronistic transposition of a modern conception of gender identity, but convenient here for the sake of clarity and concision.

<sup>15</sup> In using he/him pronouns to refer to Japhet, I follow an established critical tradition and the style of the story itself. Needless to say, misgendering a transgender person today is anathema to modern conceptions of gender identity and should not be done under any circumstance, but in 1857 these conceptions of gender were in a greater degree of flux, and Japhet Colbones could identify with womanhood and be accepted for this quirk without necessarily ever implying a change of pronouns.

medical, and other scientific texts. The pair are often linked; in queering the gender of an object of attraction, one queers the trajectory of said attraction. Imaginative literature allows for greater flexibility to mask or bend the truth and explore diversified sexual discourses through the resultant deception. As exemplified with Alcott's treatment of agalmatophilia, the periodical sphere becomes a more democratized place where laypeople, too, can consider different potential symptoms, outcomes, and situations, and introduce their readers to the same.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have drawn from Alcott's life experiences and the literary context of the mid-nineteenth century to elucidate how deception, the periodical form and sensation genre gave voice to Alcott's radical conceptions of sex, gender, and class. Alcott was only one of many female authors who lived, in some ways, on the margins of American print culture. Women's contributions to any kind of public sphere, not solely the literary, were often devalued or censored; with this world as a teacher, Alcott learned that employing deception was an effective way to free herself from her reputation and identity in order to access the financial privileges and freedom of expression writing her sensation stories afforded her. One easy venue to access this freedom was through the periodical form, where anonymity and ambiguity were more commonplace.

Given Alcott's well-documented autobiographical tendencies, the reliance upon deception in her tales seems indicative of her lived experiences. Her sensation stories allowed her to express herself in the "lurid style" she adored and speak the truth about who she was, not a tepid moral crusader but a salacious powerhouse. Yet Alcott's letters and journals begin to muddle information about her sensation career, complicating the narrative and replicating the contamination of truth present in her fiction. My close reading of Alcott's sensation tale "Behind a Mask" explores the potential of deception to break down class barriers and undermine the aristocratic order through marriage plots. My examination of "V.V." in conjunction with "Behind a Mask" underscores Alcott's idea of truth as a fragile and irrecoverable thing.

In reading Alcott's sensation fiction as sexological literature, Alcott's characterizations of the figure of the marble woman in her tales "A Marble Woman," "The Fate of the Forrests," and

“Countess Varazoff” emerge as case studies for the same paraphilia sexologists identify and examine, prompting questions about the potential American origins of this discourse. Finally, by discussing transgressive conceptions of gender in literature of the period, I conclude that decentralizing the medical gaze and studying literature as a creative force in the realm of sexuality allows scholars to hold a more balanced view of sexual discourse and consider histories of non-pathologized queer possibilities.

Alcott’s double literary life and corresponding deception was a necessary price for inhabiting the literary public sphere the way she did. Authorial deception positively affects the literary public sphere and contributes to a diversification of discourse around sexuality, the same proliferation that Foucault identifies and attributes to *scientia sexualis*. This thesis is a response to previous studies of the history of sexuality that have neglected to sufficiently account for the presence and influence of imaginative literature. It is an attempt to first illuminate the link between authorial deception and proliferating discourse and outline a potential American origin of sexology through literature. In decentralizing the medical gaze and making a case for the study of literature—despite its arguable untruths—as a creative force in the realm of sexuality, we open ourselves to a more complete study of “a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (Foucault 100). This approach is essential when deconstructing the binary of dominant and dominated discourses, an oversimplification of discursive reality that Foucault too was against. But by privileging truthful confession in the creation of sexual discourse, we privilege perspectives that can be revealed without fear of retribution. Deception is essential to the diversification of sexual discourses; periodicals and the

sensation genre provide valuable insight into the development of sexual sentiment during the nineteenth century and should not be overlooked in the study of the history of sexuality.

## Bibliography

- Alcott, Louisa May, 1832-1888. *Alcott Family Letters to Alfred Whitman*. MS Am 1130. Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- . *Journal and account book*. Louisa May Alcott Additional Papers. MS Am 1130.13, Volume 8. Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- . Letters to Mrs. Moulton: autograph manuscripts; [no place, undated]. Alcott family additional papers. bMS Am 2745 (98). Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- . *Little Women*. Penguin Books, 1989.
- . *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: The Collected Thrillers*. Edited by Madeleine B. Stern, 2nd ed., Northeastern University Press, 1995.
- . *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*. Edited by Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, University of Georgia Press, 1997.
- . *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*. Edited by Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, University of Georgia Press, 1995.
- . "Transcendental Wild Oats". *Writing New England: An Anthology from the Puritans to the Present*, edited by Andrew Delbanco. Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 308-320. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674335486.c67>
- "Article on *The Greek Slave*." *The New York Daily Tribune*, 15 September 1847. <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sentimnt/snar04at.html>
- Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October*, vol. 43, 1987, pp. 197–222. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>.

Brantlinger, Patrick. "What Is 'Sensational' About the 'Sensation Novel'?" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1, 1982, pp. 1–28. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3044667>.

Chapnick, Max L. "New Louisa May Alcott Pieces: Radical Sensation in a Culture of Ambiguous Attribution." *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1, Mar. 2023, pp. 171–85. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnc.2023.a909300>.

Cheney, Ednah Dow. *Louisa May Alcott: Life, Letters, and Journals*. University Press, John Wilson and Son, Cambridge, 1889.

Eiselein, Gregory, and Anne K. Phillips, editors. *The Louisa May Alcott Encyclopedia*. Greenwood Press, 2001.

Fetterley, Judith. "Impersonating 'Little Women': The Radicalism of Alcott's *Behind a Mask*." *Women's Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1, Jan. 1983, pp. 1–14. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1983.9978576>.

*The Flag of Our Union, Vol. XX No. 4*. 28 Jan. 1865. Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. 1978. Vintage-Random House, 1990.

Franklin, Rosemary F. "Louisa May Alcott's Father(s) and 'The Marble Woman.'" *American Transcendental Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 4, 4, Dec. 1999, p. 253.

"The Greek Slave." *National Gallery of Art*, n.d., <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.166484.html#overview>. Accessed 22 March 2024.

- Gunn, Robert. "'How I Look': Fanny Fern and the Strategy of Pseudonymity." *Legacy*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1, 2010, pp. 23–42. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.5250/legacy.27.1.23>.
- Kaan, Heinrich. *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Edited by Benjamin Kahan, translated by Melissa Hayes. 1844. Cornell University Press, 2016.
- Kahan, Benjamin. "The Unexpected American Origins of Sexology and Sexual Science: Elizabeth Osgood Goodrich Willard, Orson Squire Fowler, and the Scientification of Sex." *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1, Feb. 2021, pp. 71–88. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695120910051>.
- Looby, Christopher. "The Literariness of Sexuality: Or, How to Do the (Literary) History of (American) Sexuality." *American Literary History*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2013, pp. 841–54. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43817604>.
- , editor. *The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman' and Other Queer Nineteenth-Century Short Stories*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
- . "Cecil Dreeme and the Misfortune of Sexuality." *Cecil Dreeme*, edited by Christopher Looby, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Moulton, Louise Chandler. "Louisa May Alcott." *Our Famous Women: An Authorized and Complete Record of the Lives and Deeds of Eminent Women of Our Times*, The Hartford Publishing Company, 1888, pp. 29–52.
- Patmore, Coventry. *The Angel in the House*. Edited by Henry Morley, Cassell and Company, 1891, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4099/4099-h/4099-h.htm>.
- Pickett, LaSalle Corbell. *Across My Path*. Brentano's, 1916, <https://www.loc.gov/item/16010485/>. Library of Congress.

Powers, Hiram. *The Greek Slave*. Modeled 1841-43, carved 1846. Marble. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Price, Kenneth M., and Susan Belasco Smith, editors. *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*. University Press of Virginia, 1996.

REIS, ELIZABETH. "Transgender Identity at a Crossroads: A Close Reading of a 'Queer' Story from 1857." *Early American Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2014, pp. 652–65. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24474874>

Reisen, Harriet. *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind Little Women*. Henry Holt and Co., 2009.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing. *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Translated by Charles Gilbert Chaddock, Philadelphia: The F.A. Davis Company; London: F.J. Rebman, 1894. *Internet Archive*, <http://archive.org/details/PsychopathiaSexualis1000006945>.

Rocha, Leon Antonio. "Scientia Sexualis versus Ars Erotica: Foucault, van Gulik, Needham." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, vol. 42, no. 3, 3 Sept. 2011, pp. 328–43. *ScienceDirect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2011.01.003>.

Rostenberg, Leona. "Some Anonymous and Pseudonymous Thrillers of Louisa M. Alcott." *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2, 1943, pp. 131–40.

--- and Madeleine Stern. "Five Letters that Changed an Image." *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood & Thunder to Hearth & Home*, Northeastern University Press, 1950, pp. 83-92.

Schewe, Elizabeth. "Domestic Conspiracy: Class Conflict and Performance in Louisa May Alcott's 'Behind a Mask.'" *American Transcendental Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 4, 4, Dec. 2008, pp. 577–92, 609.

Stern, Madeleine B. "Louisa May Alcott and the Boston 'Saturday Evening Gazette.'" *American Periodicals*, vol. 2, 1992, pp. 64–78.

---, editor. *Louisa's Wonder Book: An Unknown Alcott Juvenile*. Central Michigan University, 1975.

---. "Introduction." *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: The Collected Thrillers*. Edited by Madeleine B. Stern, 2nd ed., Northeastern University Press, 1995.

---, and Daniel Shealy. "The No Name Series." *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1991, pp. 375–402.

Taft, Lorado. "Hiram Powers and *The Greek Slave*." *The History of American Sculpture*. Harvard University: Macmillan, 1903.

Winthrop, Theodore. *Cecil Dreeme*. Ticknor and Fields, 1868.