

Spring 1996

# "There is no school like the family school": Literacy, mother-teaching, and the Alcott family

Lisa Margaret Stepanski  
*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation>

---

## Recommended Citation

Stepanski, Lisa Margaret, ""There is no school like the family school": Literacy, mother-teaching, and the Alcott family" (1996).  
*Doctoral Dissertations*. 1899.  
<https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation/1899>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact [nicole.hentz@unh.edu](mailto:nicole.hentz@unh.edu).

## INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

**The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.** Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

# UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA  
313/761-4700 800/521-0600



**“THERE IS NO SCHOOL LIKE THE FAMILY SCHOOL”:  
LITERACY, MOTHERTEACHING, AND THE ALCOTT FAMILY**

**BY**

**LISA M. STEPANSKI  
B.A. Boston College, 1982  
M.A. Boston College, 1985**

**DISSERTATION**

**Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**in**

**English**

**May, 1996**

**UMI Number: 9627166**

---

**UMI Microform 9627166  
Copyright 1996, by UMI Company. All rights reserved.**

**This microform edition is protected against unauthorized  
copying under Title 17, United States Code.**

---

**UMI**  
300 North Zeeb Road  
Ann Arbor, MI 48103

This dissertation has been examined and approved.

*Cynthia Gannett*

---

Dissertation Director, Cynthia Gannett  
Associate Professor of English and  
Women's Studies

*Brigitte Bailey*

---

Brigitte Bailey,  
Associate Professor of English

*Robert Connors*

---

Robert Connors,  
Professor of English

*Sarah Sherman*

---

Sarah Sherman,  
Associate Professor of English

*Barbara White*

---

Barbara White,  
Professor of Women's Studies

*4/12/96*

---

Date

For My Parents  
Theodore Joseph Stepanski  
and  
Patricia Glasson Stepanski

“So great a happiness do I esteem it to be loved, that I really fancy every blessing both from gods and men ready to descend spontaneously upon him who is loved.”—Xenophon

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The paradox of scholarship is such that even though most research and writing tasks must, by their very nature, be performed in solitude, it is also true that no student or professional academic can do her work without the support and encouragement of family, friends, colleagues, and mentors who sustain and revitalize her all along what is often a long and lonely journey. This is certainly the case with me. In many ways, this dissertation is a collaborative effort that came to be only because of the many people in my life who gave so generously of their time, wisdom, and patience, and who understood, when I could not, the reasons why I was involved in this project in the first place. To all who inquired after my work throughout my graduate career, I give hearty thanks. There are also those who helped me in very specific ways to arrive at this point today where I can offer public thanks, and I list them here.

My first debt of gratitude is to my dissertation advisor, colleague, and very good friend, Cinthia Gannett. Not only was Cindi willing to assume, in addition to her many other professional duties, the responsibility of directing my dissertation, she gave generously of her time and energy throughout these past two years to ensure its completion. She was the one who told me to focus on the Alcotts in the first place—probably the most important decision I had to make during my graduate career. Cindi always knew what kind of guidance was most appropriate, and my dissertation is much better because of her support and advice. Our



conversations were always inspiring and productive, and I am particularly grateful for her flow of words on those occasions when mine had all dried up. I also would like to thank Cindi's husband, Timothy Finnegan, and their daughter Molly, for sharing Cindi with me during my many visits to their home and for providing hospitality and good humor.

Briggs Bailey was a valued member of my committee. Her course on gender and writing provided me with my first chance to think and write about Louisa May Alcott on a graduate level. Briggs' cheerfulness and enthusiasm sustained me throughout the dissertation process, and her insightful comments pointed the way out of the mists of many fuzzy arguments.

Sarah Sherman provided much-needed feedback on my chapters on Abby and Louisa Alcott, at a time when I was struggling with critical issues in my project. I am grateful, too, for her insistence that I incorporate Abby Alcott into my study and for her belief that I would indeed locate material that would allow me to do just that.

Barbara White provided generous and thoughtful comments on all my drafts. I am particularly grateful for her assistance on chapters four and five.

In addition to serving on my committee, Robert Connors has also been my graduate advisor throughout my eight years in the doctoral program at UNH. As such, he has offered counsel and encouragement at every stage of my journey, and more importantly, he has laughed at all my jokes.

I am grateful to the staff at the Houghton Library at Harvard University for their assistance during the many visits I made there to examine the Alcott family papers housed at the library. Publication of this material in my dissertation is by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

I would also like to thank the staff at the Interlibrary Loan Office at Boston College's O'Neill Library for their assistance in locating many of the more obscure nineteenth-century texts I used for this project.

This dissertation could not have been written without the University's financial assistance which came in the form of several part-time scholarships and a one year dissertation fellowship. I thank Dean Harry Richards of the Graduate School, who read my many letters and applications about such matters, and who acted on my behalf on several occasions.

The members of English 999, the dissertation reading group, were always generous in their comments on drafts of this project. Sue Schibanoff offered common sense direction and enthusiasm. Anne Malone read several additional drafts of my manuscript and gave thoughtful commentary. I am particularly grateful to her for pointing me to the Perry material that became an important part of my discussions on Abby Alcott.

My good friend and companion on the road to the Ph.D., Lisa Sisco, provided inspiration, comfort, encouragement, and many hours of camaraderie during our years in the program. I am especially grateful to her and her husband,

Bob Soucy, for the many times they opened their home to me when I needed a place to stay after classes.

In addition to the community at UNH, I would like to thank my friends and colleagues at Emmanuel College in Boston where I have been teaching for the past eight and a half years. The college granted me two leaves of absence in the past three years in order that I might finish the work for my degree. My colleagues in the English department, Jerry Bernhard, Steve Bloom, and Mary Mason willingly helped me out with administrative duties this semester when I was pressed for time. In addition, Mary Mason has been both a mentor and inspiration to me as I tried, like her many years before, to juggle the often conflicting demands of scholarship, teaching, and motherhood. The friendly inquiries of Lenore Martin and Michael St. Clair have heartened me. My dear friend, Kathy Soles, who by now knows far more than she probably ever wanted to about the Alcotts, offered comfort, food, and companionship. Our Tuesday evening walks this semester provided me with the opportunity to decompress and connect with a sympathetic listener and fellow mother teacher.

My Thursday night knitting class provided welcome relief from the stress of graduate work. I am especially grateful to Fay Lyons, Kathy Sullivan, Mary Nyren, and Joan Miesen for reading drafts of my dissertation and to all my fellow knitters for their firm belief that I would, indeed, finish it *and* my father's vest.

I am grateful for the excellent mother-teaching given to my children by their daycare providers, Julie Fortis and Sue Osborne. It was a great comfort knowing that my sons were in capable hands while I was far away, attending classes and workshops at UNH.

My good friend and neighbour, Sandy Dobday, has helped out in countless ways this past year. She has watched my children, given me dissertation-related material, and been a sympathetic listener throughout these harried final weeks as I completed my project.

My family has shared the biggest burdens during the time I was preparing this manuscript, and I am thankful for their patience and forbearance. My sisters, Susan and Faith, cheered me on and often watched my children so that I might write or read. My husband, Sean Borstel, has lived, uncomplainingly, with the Alcotts for these many years, and I am grateful for his constant good humor. My children, Theodore and Nathan, young as they are, always seemed to understand that even though I could not play with them *that* day, someday soon they would get their mother back.

Finally, I thank my parents, Theodore and Patricia Stepanski, my first and finest teachers. It is because of their unfailing affection and belief in me that I have gotten this far. To them I dedicate this volume.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	xi
CHAPTER .....	PAGE
INTRODUCTION.....	1
I.“...THE HAPPY MOTHER OF A HAPPY CHILD”: EDUCATION AND CHILDREARING IN NEW ENGLAND, 1830-1860 .....	11
II.“A PLACE WHERE THEY MIGHT DELIGHT TO ASSEMBLE”: THE EDUCATION AND EARLY TEACHING CAREER OF BRONSON ALCOTT .....	43
III.“...TO LEAD THEM TO USEFULNESS AND HAPPINESS”: DISCIPLINARY INTIMACY AND WRITING IN THE CLASSROOMS OF BRONSON ALCOTT .....	67
IV.“INFLUENCE IS BETTER THAN PRECEPT”: ABBY MAY ALCOTT AS MOTHEREACHER.....	114
V.“DUTY’S FAITHFUL CHILD”: MOTHEREACHING AND THE WRITING LIFE OF LOUISA MAY ALCOTT .....	159
CONCLUSION.....	209
WORKS CITED .....	213
APPENDICES.....	221

“The time will probably come in the history of this world—it might even now come, if we were willing to receive it—when there will be not only the disposition, but the ability, to render all our houses places of instruction and education. The parents, grandparents, and eldest brothers and sisters, will be teachers of the younger members of the family, and will have time and means for discharging their duty. But before this blessed hour can arrive, man must learn that he *is not only his ‘brother’s keeper,’ but his brother’s educator....* There is no school like the *well-regulated family school* with respect to discipline; for though there may be much in the best families which is far from being commendable, still it is certain that, in general, parental government and discipline are incomparably superior to the government and discipline of the school-room. There is neither the tyranny of the common school teacher, nor the distance or reserve of the professor or tutor of the university. Love is the golden chain, which not only binds pupil to pupil, but also pupil to teacher, in the *family school*; while force is quite too often the order of the day elsewhere...”

—William Alcott  
“There Is No School Like The Family School”  
*The Mother’s Assistant*, January 1843

“The academic and the extracurricular can never be fully quarantined from each other. Each extends its influence to the other, although in differing degrees and through different mechanisms of power and transmission.”

—Jean Ferguson Carr  
“Rereading The Academy as Worldly Text”  
*College Composition and Communication*,  
February 1994

## ABSTRACT

### “THERE IS NO SCHOOL LIKE THE FAMILY SCHOOL”: LITERACY, MOTHEREACHING, AND THE ALCOTT FAMILY

by

Lisa M. Stepanski  
University of New Hampshire, May 1996

By the mid nineteenth century, Americans were increasingly recognizing the need for public education and literacy for all citizens if the United States was to survive, if not thrive. In addition, new industries and technologies were developed that would slowly transform the agrarian New England landscape into a terrain of mill towns and manufacturing sites. The industrialization of New England altered family life, as well, and led to the rise of the “motherteacher” ideology, a cultural paradigm that profoundly influenced discussions of childrearing and public education in the United States.

This dissertation examines the motherteaching of three famous nineteenth-century figures, Bronson, Abby, and Louisa May Alcott, in their public and private lives. In particular, I examine their attitudes toward literacy and moral education. The Alcotts promoted what literary historian Richard Brodhead terms “disciplinary intimacy” as a means of instructing children in proper behavior and parentally sanctioned values. My

dissertation focuses on the potent relationship between literacy, maternal authority and discipline as it was envisioned and acted upon by Bronson, Abby and Louisa May Alcott.

Chapter one of the dissertation traces the origins of the motherteacher paradigm and examines in detail the best-selling childrearing manual *The Mother At Home* written by John S.C. Abbott in 1833. Chapter two examines the early teaching career of Bronson Alcott in Cheshire, Connecticut and the motherteaching methods he used in his classroom. Chapter three focuses on the reactions of several of Bronson's young students to his attempts to establish disciplinary intimacy through personal correspondence and journal keeping. Chapter four shifts the discussion to Abby Alcott as motherteacher and examines her contributions to education reform, as well as the ways in which she shaped her daughter Louisa's writing voice. The final chapter traces the teaching career and writing life of Louisa and explores how she used *Little Women* as a vehicle to promote and revise the motherteacher paradigm she inherited from her parents.



## INTRODUCTION

This project really began many years ago when, at the age of twelve or so, I received my first copy of *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. It was an unprepossessing volume—gray, beginning to fray slightly at the corners, and inscribed “Evelyn Cole Christmas 1923” in flowing script. Such was my introduction to a book that would become a passion, both personal and professional, in my life. Little did I realize then, however, that someday I would be writing an introduction to a dissertation whose subject was the author of that very same book. Indeed, only two years ago, when I first began focusing on possible dissertation topics, I initially ignored my interest in the Alcotts, deeming it a personal (albeit increasingly academic) fancy that would be suitable only if I was earning my degree in American history, not composition and literature.

But then I read Anne Ruggles Gere’s 1994 *College Composition and Communication* article, “Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurricular of Composition.” In it, Gere argues persuasively for our need to view composition training as a lifelong continuum of literacy events and endeavors that take place, more often than not, *outside* traditional school settings—in the home, the literary club, the informal reading or writing group. My own experience seemed to confirm the truth of Gere’s observations. My

initial interest in the Alcotts was prompted not by any school assignment or activity or teacher, but rather by reading that for many years I did on my own, in private. In fact, when I first became interested in Louisa May in the early 1970s, academia had relegated her to the list of “minor” American writers; she was a quaint artifact who happened to still appeal to certain readers such as myself—female adolescents. I remember the frustration I felt as a young girl when I realized that most of Alcott’s work was out of print and that nothing new had been written *about* her for many years.<sup>1</sup>

In light of Gere’s article, I reexamined my interest in the Alcotts. If indeed important literacy instruction does take place in what Gere and Frederick Rudolph term “extracurricular” sites, as well as in schools, under the aegis of people who are not necessarily trained, professional teachers, then we have an obligation to broaden our scholarly gaze and examine not only the many diverse places where such training occurs, but also the influence non-professional instructors have had in shaping our cultural attitudes toward literacy and education. Composition scholars have been doing just that in recent years, and for me such research is precisely what makes the discipline so interesting and dynamic. The “extracurricular evidence” of the history of reading and writing in the United States is both rich and rewarding. Letters, diaries, memoirs both published and unpublished, minutes of literary clubs and writing societies, etiquette and child-rearing manuals, domestic and spiritual tracts, popular culture

magazines and newspapers, children's literature and fiction—all these have the potential to offer new ways of thinking about the history of literacy and composition in the United States. What our "foraging," (as Cinthia Gannett likens searches for composition-related archival material) reveals to us is that "to compose" is an act that historically, many people have performed under a variety of circumstances—all of which deserve our scholarly attention.

The broadening of the parameters of composition history to include the extracurricular coincides with the shift toward "cultural studies" in the literature field. Richard Brodhead's book *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* is a fine example of recent scholarship that masterfully blends both composition and literature concerns. Brodhead examines the contexts in which certain nineteenth-century writers did the work of creating texts. His book became a model of sorts for my own project, and his theory of "disciplinary intimacy" eventually became an important paradigm that helped me to better understand the Alcott family's approach to reading, writing, and education.

The "extracurricular evidence" of reading and writing instruction that the Alcotts left behind reveals much about what it meant to write—and what was even more interesting to me, to *learn* to write and use one's literacy—in the nineteenth century. The way in which I have drawn on this primary material, much of it still unpublished and all of which is housed at the Houghton Library at Harvard University, is what differentiates this

dissertation from other current Alcott scholarship. For one, I was interested in an angle of Alcott family life—that is, their home schooling philosophy and practices— that other biographers have either ignored or discussed in only a cursory fashion. My curiosity about how Abby and Bronson transmitted their beliefs about literacy to their daughters and to Bronson’s students—and the reactions of those same children to such instruction—led me to examine both the Alcott sisters’ youthful diaries, as well as a series of letters written by two of Bronson’s students at the Germantown Academy in Pennsylvania. Before now, none of this unpublished material, which is highlighted in chapter three, has ever been discussed in detail by other Alcott scholars.

In addition, my dissertation incorporates an extensive amount of unpublished material by Abby Alcott that is related to literacy education. Much of this material is in the form of her letters that she exchanged over the course of her life with her brother, Samuel May and her personal journals. Although two of the most recent Alcott biographies, Martha Saxton’s *Louisa May* (1977) and Madelon Bedell’s *The Alcotts: Biography of a Family* (1980) also draw heavily on this material, neither of these texts treats Abby’s intellectual life and pedagogic practices as fully as feminist scholars in particular today might desire. In chapter four, I address this gap by examining Abby’s significant extracurricular contributions to her children’s literacy education and recognizing her in her own right as a talented writer

who also played a vital role in both Bronson's and Louisa's professional careers.<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation explores the contributions of Abby, Bronson, and Louisa May Alcott to the history of mid-nineteenth-century curricular and extracurricular literacy instruction by locating them within the cultural and historical framework of education and family reforms, particularly in respect to the dominant ideological paradigm of the motherteacher. By the mid-nineteenth century, Americans increasingly were beginning to recognize the need for public education and literacy for all citizens if the country was to survive, if not thrive. In addition, new industries and technologies were developed that would slowly transform the agrarian New England landscape into a terrain known more for its mill towns and manufacturing sites. The industrialization of New England would transform public education and family life, and in particular, the role of the mother.

The motherteacher ideology profoundly shaped Bronson and Abby Alcott's attitudes toward language and child-rearing practices and significantly influenced the course and content of their daughter Louisa's writing life. The motherteacher ideology conflated the roles of educator and mother into one person, usually the female head of the household. By mid-nineteenth century, women, and in particular, mothers, were seen as the preeminent transmitters of values and education in the United States. This motherteacher ideology promoted "disciplinary intimacy" and language play

(reading, writing, and speaking activities) as the primary means of instructing children in proper behaviour. The Alcotts, too, relied on the intimate and emotional bond between themselves and their charges (their daughters and Bronson's pupils) as a means to discipline, guide, and teach. My dissertation focuses on the potent relationship between literacy, maternal authority and discipline as it was envisioned and acted upon by Bronson, Abby and Louisa May Alcott.

Chapter one sets out the theoretical framework for my analysis of the Alcotts' literacy practices. I begin with a detailed look at an early child-rearing text, John S.C. Abbott's *The Mother At Home*, which explicates in all kinds of provocative ways the motherteacher ideology as it related to home literacy practices. The engraving in Abbott's book of a mother supervising her children's journal writing activities provides a visual metaphor for my later discussion of the relationship Abby and Bronson developed with their daughters and pupils. Because the notion of disciplinary intimacy is central to my analysis of the Alcotts, I also provide a summary of Brodhead's theory in this opening chapter in order to establish a framework for the discussion that follows. In addition, this chapter provides an overview of the debate on common school teaching that took place during the mid nineteenth century. What this history reveals is that the Alcotts' child-rearing practices and pedagogical methods were in fact, based on specific ideas and educational agendas and methods in circulation at that time. While certainly progressive

in their approach to child-rearing, Abby and Bronson Alcott were also very much a part of a growing (and increasingly mainstream) movement of educators and parents who advocated less stringent attitudes toward children and pedagogy. In other words, Abby and Bronson were not alone in promulgating what were seen then as novel (threatening to some) pedagogical practices.

Chapter two focuses on the early teaching career of Bronson Alcott in Cheshire, Connecticut. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the influence of the motherteacher ideology on the formation of Bronson's early educational philosophy and pedagogical methods. As he conceived of it, motherteaching was a revolutionary act that would radically transform the classroom and give students a measure of authority unheard of in most mid-nineteenth-century classrooms.

Chapter three then examines the effects of Bronson's motherteaching pedagogy on several of his young pupils, namely, Elizabeth Lewis, Charles Morgan, George and Martha Kuhn, and Anna Alcott. Bronson used both personal correspondence and journals as a means of establishing a sense of disciplinary intimacy with his students and instilling literacy and values in his young charges. I argue that Bronson's approach to literacy instruction was both directive and liberating, and that his students, far from being passive recipients of knowledge, were, in fact, actively engaged in upholding and subverting their teacher's innovative pedagogical agenda.

The fourth chapter shifts the focus to Abby Alcott, whom I argue was as skilled and active an educator as her husband. As a mother, Abby did much of her teaching in the domestic classroom, the home. In this chapter I attempt to recover Abby as both an intellectual figure and an important motherteacher by examining her commentary (drawn from her personal correspondence and journals) on education reform and pedagogy. By doing this, I make the case that the type of literacy instruction provided in the home by nineteenth-century mothers such as Abby was as influential as the instruction provided by professional teachers such as Bronson. The second half of this chapter examines the relationship between Abby and Louisa. Abby's motherteaching was a significant factor in her daughter Louisa's writing life. By "mothering the mind" and talents of her daughter, Abby provided the important psychic space in which Louisa then developed her writing talent. The profound influence of Abby's motherteaching on her daughter is revealed in Louisa's adult prose which echoes the strains of her mother's voice.

The final chapter of the dissertation concentrates on the influence of the motherteacher ideology on Louisa. In this chapter I show how she responded to her parents' teaching and in particular, their belief that literacy was inseparable from issues of conduct, morality, and character development. I argue that Louisa's decision to forego writing "sensational" literature for didactic fiction aimed primarily at juveniles was a conscious decision based,



in great part, on her upbringing and the literacy training she received as a young girl. As an adult, Louisa herself chose to become a motherteacher, only her pedagogical setting became the didactic novel rather than the schoolroom. The second half of this chapter focuses on Louisa's attitudes toward language, conduct, morality, and motherhood as they are manifested in the March family trilogy, and in particular, *Little Women*. I argue that *Little Women* is a textbook that promotes the Alcottian model of motherteaching that emphasized literate activity as a means of creating moral character.

My project to recover the Alcott family's "extracurricular" and write their literacy narrative, will, I hope, add to the current discussions in the composition field about nineteenth-century writing instruction and text production. In addition, I believe my dissertation adds a new dimension to our understanding of the Alcotts, in particular, Louisa May, who, I am happy to see, is increasingly a major figure in discussions of nineteenth-century literature and culture. It is my hope, too, that my project will serve in some small way to illustrate the ties that exist between the disciplines of composition history and American literature and the importance of drawing on both traditions in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of what it meant to learn to write, both in the school and the home, during the mid nineteenth century.

## NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. All that frustration would fade when I read Martha Saxton's *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott*, published in 1977. I can honestly say that her book had a profound influence on me; it was my introduction to the world of feminist scholarship, and it transformed what I had up till then thought of as merely a personal curiosity in Alcott into a worthy intellectual pursuit.

2. I have chosen to follow the lead of Alcott biographer Madelon Bedell in referring to Abigail May Alcott (the mother) as "Abby" rather than "Abba." In the reference notes to her book *The Alcotts: Biography of a Family*, Bedell writes that she uses Abby "since a study of the Alcott papers indicates that the latter [Abba] was a nickname; the former the name by which she was known and usually signed herself" (338). My examination of the Alcott collection at the Houghton library confirms this.

## CHAPTER I

### “...THE HAPPY MOTHER OF A HAPPY CHILD”: EDUCATION AND CHILDREARING IN NEW ENGLAND, 1830-1860

#### I

In his 1993 book, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*, literary historian Richard Brodhead examines the change in attitude towards corporal punishment and child-rearing that took place in Europe and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century which led to what he calls “the articulation of a softer, more internalized disciplinary system” (27) in prisons, in schools, and in the family. According to Brodhead, this new approach, what he terms “disciplinary intimacy,” is a useful framework which explains certain social and literary phenomena that occurred at this time, including debates over school reform, changes in family structure and authority, and the rise of the sentimental novel. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, disciplinary measures took on a new mien as European and American societies increasingly voiced objections to the use of overt acts of violent physical punishment as a means of enforcing authority over the passive bodies of criminal malefactors. Instead, those in positions of power (legislators and prison wardens, for example) began to rely more on covert, internalized methods with which to discipline and punish.<sup>1</sup>

This shift to “gentler” disciplinary methods also manifested itself in the heated debate that arose in mid-nineteenth-century America over the use of corporal punishment in schools. This issue, one of many that came to define a broad agenda for education reform advocated by such figures as Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, Emma Willard, Catherine Beecher, and William and Bronson Alcott, among others, reflected middle-class America’s growing preoccupation with childhood in general and the “feminine influence” of mothers in particular. So-called “fireside literature,” which included advice manuals aimed specifically at helping mothers improve their parenting skills, began to flood the market by mid century. In his lucid and provocative analysis of these texts, Brodhead argues that they are examples of ways in which the newer forms of internalized discipline played out in the micro-setting of the home. In particular, writers of such literature popularized the image of the “motherteacher,” a woman who was both parent and pedagogue, and who relied on the bond of emotional intimacy, not spankings, to discipline her child.<sup>2</sup>

However, the influence of the potent motherteacher paradigm was not confined to the home, even though real-life motherteachers usually were. Indeed, from mid century on, this powerful model of maternal nurture and discipline would shape, in both conscious and unconscious fashion, public discussions of educational practices, literacy, and the moral and spiritual training of the young. This chapter traces the origins of the motherteacher

paradigm and its effect on family life and education reform in mid-nineteenth-century New England in order to provide a broader context for my later discussion of the pedagogical practices of the Alcotts. The motherteacher ideology was, indeed, at the heart of Alcott family life and explains both the childrearing attitudes and methods of Bronson and Abby, and the moral and pedagogical emphasis that would underlie their daughter Louisa's most famous work of fiction, *Little Women*.

## II

### Motherhood, Motherteachers

The motherteacher paradigm was only one of a whole host of important cultural and economic changes that transformed middle-class American society in the fifty years following the Revolution. The most significant of these changes, as far as the discourse on women and education was concerned, was the emergence of the "separate spheres" ideology, an outgrowth of the Republican motherhood credo that has been traced in great detail by contemporary feminist scholars such as Nancy Cott and Barbara Welter. In her book *The Mother's Role in Childhood Education: New England Concepts 1830-1860*, historian Anne Kuhn dates the beginnings of the separate spheres philosophy to the 1830s. One of the hallmarks of the separate spheres ideology particularly relevant to discussions of education reform at this time was the belief, voiced by many writer-reformers, that women were "natural"

teachers of small children. This recognition has its roots in both the ideological and the practical. In the years immediately following the Revolution, growing national disquiet over the future of democracy translated into public recognition of the important role that women, mothers in particular, played in transmitting patriotic values to children. After the War, they were seen as an important defense against crumbling civic virtue and as such, were given the task of overseeing their children's education in the hope that maternal tutelage would create a nation of "good citizens" who shared similar democratic and Christian beliefs. No less a figure than Noah Webster celebrated Republican motherhood:

The women in America—to their honor it is mentioned—are not generally above the care of educating their own children. Their own education should therefore enable them to implant in the tender mind such sentiments of virtue, propriety, and dignity as are suited to the freedom of our government. But the influence of women in forming the dispositions of youth is not the sole reason why their education should be particularly guarded; their influence in controlling the manners of a nation is another powerful reason... (qtd in Monroe 452).<sup>3</sup>

As historian Nancy Cott notes in her book *The Bonds of Womanhood*, this valorization of motherhood and the mother-as-teacher became more prevalent as the industrial revolution took hold in New England, dramatically changing home life for many. For not only did industrialization shift economic earning power and the worksite from the domestic sphere (in New England

usually a farm) to the factory, it also removed many fathers from the home for a good part of each day, thus diminishing, to some extent, their parental authority and influence.<sup>4</sup>

Radical changes in mainstream religious doctrine also contributed to the elevation of mothering and the emergence of the “motherteacher” ideology. No longer did hard-core Calvinist views hold sway in New England. One scholar comments on the particularly harsh view that Calvinism took of childhood: “[T]oo often the child, even of Christian parentage, was viewed as an alien from the divine promises—a “child of wrath” until in years of approaching or actual maturity the Divine Spirit should work the transformation which should transmute him into a child of God” (Weigle xxix). In effect, Calvinist theology held that parents could not hope to influence a child’s character in any meaningful way; they could only pray for her eventual conversion. However, with the rise of Unitarianism and Transcendentalism during the mid nineteenth century, there was a softening of opinions, if not an outright condemnation of tenets such as infant damnation, predestination, and original sin and a growing recognition of the innocence and impressionability of youth. Anne Kuhn notes that

[T]he connection between transcendentalism and the domestic concerns of mothers and young children in mid-century New England is, while indirect, of considerable significance. The new faith embraced a doctrine of ‘plain living and high thinking’ which highlighted many of the intimate details of domestic life...Daily occupations were influenced by idealistic emphasis upon

the world of nature and communion with God in nature. And finally, those 'apostles of newness' who sought to influence their generation were, many of them, active in educational improvements of the period, contributing directly or indirectly to a philosophy of domestic education. (16)

But if women were to succeed in their newly appointed role as advocates of a domestic model of education, it was imperative that they themselves be educated, which often was not the case in early nineteenth-century America.<sup>5</sup> A new genre of texts called fireside literature was developed specifically to educate readers, male and female, about their social roles and responsibilities. These texts satisfied to some extent the demand for additional training for mothers. One such mother's manual, *The Mother At Home; or, The Principles of Maternal Duty Familiarly Illustrated*, originally published in 1833, provides a thorough explication of the mother-teacher's influence and is particularly useful in illuminating her duties as they related to her children's education. The author of the manual, John S.C. Abbott, was a noted Congregational minister who was born in Maine in 1805. In addition to his ministerial duties, he taught at a female seminary in New York City for several years. Abbott's childrearing manual, the first of its kind published in America, had its origin in a series of lectures he delivered to his parish's maternal organization. Its purpose was purely pedagogical, in that it offered mothers "plain and simple instruction in respect to the right discharge of their maternal duties, and, at the same time, some practical aid in leading



the minds of their children to proper views of their obligations to God, to their parents, and to one another” (Abbott v).

Abbott counseled mothers in the proper moral and spiritual approach to childrearing. In the first chapter he notes that although “the world has been slow to perceive how powerful and extensive is this secret and silent influence [of mothers]” (12), she, in fact, “emanates the most powerful influence which is exerted in the formation of the character of man” (13). He cautioned mothers to maintain control over their children in order that they might not be lead morally astray. Parental authority was embodied in the natural parent-child bond which Abbott claimed “God has fastened... “(34). He exhorted mothers to take seriously the sacred duty of moral instruction of the young because the mother who successfully fulfilled her duty of “training up [her] child for heaven” (35) would be rewarded in her old age with an adult child of whom she could be proud. But Abbott had harsh words for the mother who neglected her offspring’s education in virtue:

On the other hand, remember, that if you set it [the child] an example of sin, or act in your management under the influence of indolence or irritation, consulting the present convenience, without attempting to follow any fixed principles,—Oh, remember, that though an act of unfaithfulness may be over in an hour, its memory will last, and it will bite like a serpent, and sting like an adder.  
(36-7)

Abbott concluded the opening chapter, which is replete with various examples of children who grew up to be either moral and immoral adults, with the line “[I]f then you would be the happy mother of a happy child, give your attention, and your efforts, and your prayers, to the great duty of training him [the child] up for God and heaven” (39).

*The Mother At Home* resonates with the language of disciplinary intimacy which Brodhead notes was “articulated with massive repetition all across the literature of the child, one of the most distinctive textual productions of the American 1830s and 1840s” (18). Abbott’s publication was enormously popular, as was a similar manual, *The Mother’s Book* (1831) by Lydia Maria Child.<sup>6</sup> Brodhead interprets this new approach to child-rearing and discipline, as it was envisioned by Abbott, Child, and others, in the following way:

Within this account, enmeshing the child in strong bonds of love is the way authority introduces its charge to its imperatives and norms. From the child’s perspective, what the parent-figure believes in comes across indistinguishably from his love, so that the child imbibes what the parent stands for in a moral sense along with the parents’ physical intimacy and affection. The child’s first love *for* the parent becomes, accordingly, an inchoate form of allegiance to what the parent represents--a fact this scheme of rearing then exploits. In later development the child’s continuing desire for its parents’ warmth and favor--the disposition that this whole plan of nurture aims to intensify and to transform from a primal instinct into the ground of the child’s emerging selfhood--establishes an agency, within the child’s nature, that enforces the feeling of obligation to parentally embodied values. (20)

Disciplinary intimacy conferred on the mother a unique influence over her children that was the direct consequence of her maternal status. She was responsible for supervising her children's education into parentally sanctioned values. However, Abbott apparently did not wholly trust the efficacy of emotion as the sole tool with which to influence young children in 1833, perhaps in part because of his own Calvinist background. In the chapter entitled "Maternal Authority," he makes a case for the use of corporal punishment in certain cases when a child refuses to obey her mother. He comments, "[T]he principle of government is simple and plain. It is to begin with enforcing obedience to every command. It is to establish the principle that a mother's word is never to be disregarded" (57).<sup>7</sup> He acknowledges that "[T]he exercise of discipline must often be painful," but the mother who shrank from this duty left herself open "to all that sad train of woes which disobedient children leave behind them" (59-60).

This approach to childrearing that so emphasized the potent influence of a parent's childrearing approach on the child's conduct also placed an emotional burden on both parties. Abbott made it quite clear in his book that a child's moral successes—and failures—were directly attributable to her mother's parenting abilities. As for the child, her behaviour was interpreted as a reflection of her feelings for her mother. Such a view could also lead to the

unfair conclusion that the well-mannered child must love her mother more than the ill-mannered child did.

And yet, in spite of this possibility and Abbott's endorsement of corporal punishment as an appropriate measure in some instances, his motherteacher was more than capable of controlling and nurturing her charges by milder means. In the chapter entitled "Methods and Plans," Abbott laid out a remarkably progressive and modern agenda that promoted both "the moral and intellectual training of children" and obedience to parental authority that was the primary goal of his childrearing scheme. The various practical plans he proposed all relied on literacy, specifically writing, as a means of inculcating virtue into young children. For instance, there is the example of the "Black Book," which Abbott claimed one father used quite successfully to discipline his children. The directions for the "Black Book" are as follows:

When either of the children is guilty of any act of disobedience, neglect of duty, insubordination, or contention, or of any other offense, they are to make an entry of the case in this book, at Aunt Maria's direction. If they are ill-humored and sullen about it, then Aunt Maria is to make the entry herself, stating the reason why the guilty one did not do it. If, when I come home, I find this book empty, I shall fear that Aunt Maria has not been faithful.  
(145)

It's clear from this description that the "Black Book" functioned in much the same way as Foucault's famous panopticon. Parental power was displaced from the actual figure of the father to the book itself; nonetheless,

control was maintained. By moving the site of authority from the father to the printed page (which the child was expected to compose), the child was encouraged to reflect upon and *instruct herself* in proper behaviour. This, in turn, would lead (it was hoped) to an internalization of the authoritative voice of the parent. No doubt, too, the vision of the father returning home to read the "Black Book" was a powerful impetus for the child to exert herself to be well-behaved.

After quoting several lengthy entries from Aunt Maria's "Black Book" in order to illustrate this approach, Abbott then turns to journals as another instructive tool in child-rearing. He notes,

There can be, in fact, no better plan, in family government, than to induce the children to keep a journal in which they shall record such things which they may do that are wrong, as the parent may think that this mode of discipline is adapted to remedy. For those children of a family who have sufficient age and maturity of mind, the plan of writing a full and regular journal of whatever interests and concerns them, and especially of all that relates to their intellectual and moral progress, may well be recommended. Such a journal may assume a great variety of forms. It may be a religious diary. It may be a narrative of personal incidents. It may be a record of resolutions made, with an account subsequently of the manner in which they have been kept. Or it may consist of all these combined.

Even very young children can keep such journals, with a little help and encouragement from the mother. The work must however be managed in such a way as not to be a burden to them. They must not be expected to write too much, or too frequently, or at unseasonable times, when their minds are interested in other things. (149-151)

Inserted in the middle of this discussion of journal writing is an illustration of a domestic scene that encapsulates the didacticism of Abbott's plan. (see appendix 1) Four children of varying ages are seated around a table, all of them busy with journals and pens. One boy is so young that he must perch on a book in order to reach the table. Directly next to the table stands an older female, presumably a sister, with a volume tucked under her arm. At a distance, next to the fireside, sits an older woman who appears preoccupied with her sewing. This picture, which later I will refer to as an important visual metaphor in my discussion of the Alcott family, is a succinct rendering of the triangularity of literacy, morality, and maternal authority inherent in the motherteacher ideology. A quick glance makes plain the mother's role vis-à-vis her children's writing; she was to give them great latitude in their attempts at self-expression. The journal itself was left vaguely defined; it "may assume a great variety of forms" (150).

Yet the very placement of the mother in the picture points out the tension between the directive and non-directive aspects of this ideological approach to raising children. That the mother is in the room at all as her children write their journals suggests that she is still a part of the proceedings and continues to exercise control—however indirectly—over the direction of their ruminations. Her very presence is the signal of disciplinary intimacy. However, maternal influence is more obviously being exercised by the young girl who appears ready to offer advice and guidance as she looks

over the shoulder of one boy as he writes. The mother herself seems content with her children's behaviour; she is not interfering and in fact, she isn't even looking at them as they write. Taken in conjunction with Abbott's advice, the engraving's point is clear—literacy and moral instruction are natural partners. The children are learning to form their letters and discipline their character and each other as they write about themselves. In addition to keeping a journal, Abbott also recommended that older children read the “celebrated essay” on the value of autobiography written by one John Foster. According to Abbott, “[T]here can hardly be a more excellent, intellectual, and moral exercise, for one who has attained maturity of mind, than thus to review the past” (151).

Abbott's suggestions were in keeping with a long New England tradition of pairing literacy and moral training that began with the appearance of the *New England Primer* in the seventeenth century. The purpose of this famous and enduring text was explicitly pedagogical and religious. By copying such virtuous maxims as “I Will fear GOD, and honour the KING./I will honour my Father & Mother./I will obey my Superiors,” children received instruction in the religious tenets of Puritan society (309).<sup>8</sup> But Abbott's insistence that the child needed to play an active role in determining the content of her journal reflected the change in attitude that had taken place by the mid nineteenth century regarding the nature of childhood. Children were no longer seen as inherently evil (and passive)

creatures whose conversion could only be effected by a higher moral authority such as the minister. This new emphasis on the innate divinity and goodness of children would, in turn, help create an image of schools as natural extensions of the home and teachers as surrogate mothers whose most important task was to inspire moral sentiments in students. The next section of this chapter examines these very practical consequences of the motherteacher ideology.

### III

#### Nineteenth-Century Education Reform

“The object of education is not the mere acquisition of a certain amount of facts; it should have a higher aim viz. to discipline and strengthen the mind. It consists in no small degree in laying a foundation upon which to build a durable superstructure; in supplying the pupil with an instrument, as it were, with which he may work without foreign aid; or rather, in teaching him to use and improve that wonderful instrument, his own mind.” An observer, “Effects of Family Example on Schools,” *Annals of Education*, Jan 1834.

By the time the anonymous “observer” penned the above comment in 1834, the seeds of education reform and teacher professionalization were being sown industriously throughout the New England states. One highly debated subject was, as the observer points out, the proper object of education. In seventeenth and eighteenth-century New England, education



goals were relatively simple, reflecting the primarily agrarian nature of early American society. A child learned to read in order to have access to the Bible and hence, salvation. Boys were also usually taught basic ciphering and writing skills, enough to ensure that they could make transactions in the marketplace and sign legal documents. These skills were not necessarily considered essential for girls, and often they were educated only to read the Bible.

The connection between religion and education in the United States was particularly strong during the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries and had much to do with shaping public opinion of teaching, a profession whose early roots are in the Calvinist ministry. For example, it was not uncommon for seventeenth and eighteenth-century ministers to supplement their income by tutoring local boys. By the 1820s, however, religious authority, especially Calvinism, had dissipated considerably in New England in the face of increasing rejection of its harsher tenets such as infant damnation and the innate depravity of humans and with the rise of more liberal sects such as Unitarianism and Methodism. By 1833, the separation of church and state doctrine was in effect in all the states, illuminating the widening divide between theology and the secular world (Douglas 23). Teaching itself was no longer the exclusive province of the church and its ministers; it had begun to establish itself as a profession in its own right. Nonetheless, the church retained its influence over school-related issues. It was not uncommon for

ministers to take up the cause of education reform, if not actually teach. Such was the case with T.H. Gallaudet, the founder of the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb in Hartford, CT, and Samuel J. May, who helped organize the first education conference in the United States. Ministers often served on school committees and as official school visitors, charged with the responsibility of monitoring the teaching in local classrooms (Mattingly 22).

The religious influence on the education debate is evident in “the observer’s” comment that begins this section. His observation echoed a common refrain of pedagogical discourse of the time. It was not enough to simply cram a pupil’s mind with endless facts; by mid century increasing emphasis was being placed on the need to provide children with what would become known as a sentimental education, one that encouraged proper moral thinking, conduct, and sentiments. Horace Bushnell’s *Christian Nurture* (1861), which originally appeared in 1847 as “Discourses on Christian Nurture,” provided one of the more famous articulations of this more emotional approach to childhood education. He argued that an instruction in Christian principles “begins with nurture or cultivation” (21) and that parents

...should rather seek to teach a feeling than a doctrine; to bathe the child in their own feeling of love to God and dependence on him, and contrition for wrong before him, bearing up their child’s heart in their own, not fearing to encourage every good motion they can call into exercise; to make what is good, happy and attractive; what is wrong, odious and hateful; then as the understanding

advances, to give it food suited to its capacity, opening upon it gradually the more difficult views of Christian doctrine and experience. (39)

The preoccupation with the sentimental aspects of schooling affected both pupils and instructors. The professionalization of teaching that began in the 1820s was another sign of the shift in the discussion of morality from the pulpit to the classroom. For example, Mattingly notes,

From the 1820s to the end of the century the fundamental goal of educational improvement was...the inculcation of character...Not only did the creation of characters become the primary undertaking of the public classroom, but also schoolmen esteemed this end as the indispensable prerequisite in the formation of a professional teacher. (44)

It is no coincidence that school authority waxed as religious authority waned in New England. In his article “The Shifting Roles of Family and School as Educator: A Historical Perspective,” Joseph Kirschner argues that public schooling took the place of the established church as the notion of a universal Protestant theology began to disintegrate after the American Revolution. “Schooling came to be regarded by increasing numbers of people as the messianic hope of an American millennialist mission,” he writes. (137-8) Furthermore, “[E]ducation, it was hoped, would offset a trend toward a radical individualism with little regard for the larger welfare. The faith in public schooling as an ‘engine of democracy’ grew so strong that schools became a veritable secular ‘established church’” (139). Ministers no longer held a monopoly on moral issues, but instead were forced to share their

authority with parents and the growing ranks of public school teachers, as well as writers of sentimental fiction and fireside literature. For increasingly, all these people had something to say about virtue and the cultivation of character in American society. If anything, there was a sense of urgency behind reformers' calls to teach values to a society that was becoming ever more secular. However, there was also a growing societal perception that it was as much the duty of the family and the state, as well as the church, to promote such values.

Mounting anxiety over the societal changes resulting from secularization, industrialization, and increasing immigration also fueled the debate over schooling. It became imperative to educate all children, not necessarily so they would be saved from sin, but rather so that the state would be saved from them. The "mission of teaching," so to speak, became the formation of good citizens and the instillation of a common code of moral and civic virtues into an increasingly diverse population. But the rhetoric of education was still permeated by religious concerns. For example, Fitch Reed, a Methodist minister commented in 1831 that, "Constant and familiar precepts and examples in the domestic circle; interchange of correct feelings and sentiments--these alone will give that consistency of moral character to the rising generation, necessary to the happiness of domestic life and the well being of civil government" (qtd in Kirschner 145). In 1838 Henry Ware, a

Unitarian minister, voiced a similar view when he noted that “universal education is a religious idea” (qtd in Kirschner 144).

By mid century the teacher’s task had assumed a decidedly spiritual cast, in spite of the fact that the profession itself was becoming more and more secularized. In his discussion of the origins of teacher institutes, one of the earliest forms of professional teacher training, Mattingly notes

...how determined schoolmen were to equate professionalization with ‘awakening’ of moral character rather than with the training in communicable skills and the standard techniques of teaching. ‘Awakening’ arranged the inspiration of the inner man; training assured at least minimal competencies in actual classroom performance. Professional employing numerous individualized strategies to inculcate character in these early years always discussed their techniques in nonmechanical terms, as emanations of moral character. Competence and effectiveness were measured intuitively and impressionistically, never precisely by common rules or authorized standards. (63)

Equating pedagogy with spiritual and moral inspiration accounts, too, for the emphasis on abstract ideas rather than practical knowledge that characterized much of the recurring debate on education. For example, William Alcott noted that “...every thing which has an influence in developing mind or body, and in training up, either for good or for evil, is entitled, justly, to the name of education” (*Young Woman’s* 25)<sup>9</sup>

One obvious result of these more progressive attitudes toward education was the establishment of numerous infant schools in the United States, many of them founded on the principles of Swiss educator Pestalozzi

(1746-1827) whose innovative theories and pedagogy had by this time made their way to the United States. Pestalozzi championed a nurturing pedagogy in direct contrast to the more authoritarian methods that had characterized New England schools in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Pestalozzian approach reflected the new Christian dogma that emphasized human beings' capacity for good rather than evil. The curriculum and teaching methods employed in such a classroom were determined not by the teacher but rather by the child. Pestalozzi stressed the mother's role in education and promoted inductive rather than deductive strategies of learning. Furthermore, he rejected the notion that knowledge should be drilled, even beaten into a child. Instead, his methods promoted the idea of learning through sensory experiences in a setting that was nurturing and home-like.

Traditional pedagogical approaches came under intense scrutiny during the 1830s and 1840s, in part because of the increasing popularity of Pestalozzian methods. Several educational journals and societies were founded during this time—the American Lyceum in 1826, the Western Academic Institute and Board of Education and the Institute of Instruction in 1830, and in Boston, the American Institute of Education.<sup>10</sup> All of these societies provided a forum for spirited discussion of the deplorable state of public education in the United States which Pestalozzian philosophy only served to highlight. According to Robert B. Downs, conditions in most public

grammar schools were, at best, wretched and at worst, reprehensible. New Englanders have always been noted for their parsimony, particularly where public funding of education is concerned, and during the mid nineteenth century that stinginess was manifested in the reluctance of most New England states to levy taxes that would benefit common schools. There was a very real fear that mandatory schooling would take children away from home duties, or the factory which more and more was becoming an important source of income for many households. As a result, many towns lacked a grammar school altogether or else funded only the most rudimentary kind, and overall pupil attendance was sporadic at best. Students supplied their own books—often ones their parents had toted to school years before—or else had none, and standardized texts were nonexistent. As a result of these very real obstacles, curriculum was decidedly limited and haphazard and often focused more on religious rather than secular concerns.

Compounding these obvious problems was the fact that teachers were woefully paid in most mid-nineteenth century schools. Downs notes that the average monthly salary of a Massachusetts teacher in 1837 was \$25.44 for men and \$11.38 for women (38). Instructors were often inadequately prepared and as a result, teaching at most common schools was particularly egregious. Horace Mann, who would become one of the most vocal and famous critics of public education in America, had this to say about the schooling he

received in the town of Franklin, Massachusetts during the early nineteenth-century:

My teachers were very good people, but they were very poor teachers...with all our senses and our faculties glowing and receptive how little were we taught...Our eyes were never trained to distinguish forms and colors. Our ears were strangers to music...Of all our faculties, the memory for words was the only one specially appealed to...All ideas outside of the book were contraband articles, which the teacher confiscated or threw overboard. (qtd. in Downs 13)<sup>11</sup>

In addition to calls for better pay and teacher training, corporal punishment, a staple in many ill-managed schoolhouses in New England came under attack. Rote learning, too, of the kind alluded to by “the observer” in the epigraph above, was discredited by many reformers. In his “Errors in Common Education. An Address delivered at the Lyceum in Brooklyn, Con, Oct. 22, 1828,” published in the *American Journal of Education* in 1829, Unitarian minister and education advocate Samuel J. May sounds surprisingly modern in his assessment of the flaws of public education as it existed in Connecticut at that time. May lent his support to what we call today “critical thinking skills,” arguing that

...in teaching the young any thing, we ought to begin with the consideration of what they already know, or may easily ascertain; and so on step by step, from that which is most easy to those things, which are more difficult to be understood, continually requiring them to exert their own powers to discover what we wish them to know; and this we may enable them to do, if we approach the truth in a simple natural manner; being careful that they understand, as they advance, every preliminary. (222)



May denounced rote learning, noting that

[M]ost persons think it enough to put the elementary book into the hand of the pupil, and exact from him a memoriter recitation of successive portions until the whole be gone over. But in most cases, this will be only an exercise (sic) of the memory, and may be well accomplished, while the pupil remains wholly ignorant of the subject, on which the book treats. The mind may be filled with words, and at the same time empty of ideas. (222)

Improvements in grammar school education were the result of criticism by May and others, including Horace Mann, who identified many of the problems including the sorry condition of schoolhouses, many of which lacked adequate heat and ventilation, not to mention comfortable seating, and the lack of standardized texts.<sup>12</sup>

However, the most notable change in the education landscape at this time, brought on by the motherteacher ideology, as well as changing social conditions, was the increasing feminization of the teaching profession. Even Horace Mann recognized women's teaching capabilities, arguing that "[A]ll those differences of organization and temperament which individualize the sexes point to the female as the guide and guardian of young children" (qtd. in Downs 44). By the late 1840s women had, without a doubt, established their preeminence as instructors of the young which, in turn, helped propel them further into the public rhetorical arena as teachers and writers of sentimental fiction and fireside literature. Anne Kuhn notes that famous writer-reformers

such as Sarah Josepha Hale, the longtime editor of *Godey's* magazine, and Lydia Maria Child were

...because of their own home-loving qualities, exerting a definite effect upon the womanly ideal of the period, removing some of the stigma which had formerly been attached by conservatives to the intellectual woman or 'bluestocking.' Gradually, the concept of the 'domestic woman' was expanding to make room for new activities and new aspirations. When it was seen that intellectual and literary as well as moral eminence were not incompatible with simple domestic interests, the way was made clear for a type of female emergence which was in line with the most acceptable social goals of the mid-century years. (37)

However, it did not necessarily follow that women were readily accepted as the intellectual equals of men. In fact, there was still much skepticism, if not outright hostility regarding female intellectual abilities, as evidenced by the words of the anonymous author of *The Young Lady's Book :A Manual of Intellectual Improvement and Moral Deportment*, published in Philadelphia in 1838:

...for it must be allowed that literary ladies have not been always very prepossessing. The disciple of Woolstoncraft [sic] threw off her hat, and called for a boot-jack; and imagined that by affecting the manners of the other sex, she should best assert her equality with them. The female pedant appears in a disordered dress, and with inky fingers; and fancies that the further she is removed from feminine grace, the nearer she approaches manly vigor. And we cannot wonder that, with such examples, men should prefer proficient in housewifery to smatterers in science....(50)

The image of the "female pedant" in her "disordered dress" highlights the assumptions, anxiety, and ambivalence that surrounded the issue of female education in particular during this time. In fact, the advice offered by

many etiquette manual writers such as William Alcott and Child, among others, was often embedded in a broader discussion of proper feminine conduct and the importance of the roles of wife and mother.<sup>13</sup> Other manuals of the era echo anonymous's sentiments, cautioning female readers to hold fast to their womanhood even as they pursued an education in letters.

Furthermore, despite the pronounced movement of women into teaching, most avenues to higher education (high school and college) remained closed to them until after the Civil War. In his book *Motherteacher: The Feminization of American Education*, Redding Sugg argues that "[T]he democratic predilections that predisposed Americans to accept the feminization of education would have been insufficient for the purpose if feminization had implied feminism" (18). Both Sugg and Monroe maintain that a main reason for women's acceptance as professional teachers was they would work for less than their male counterparts. In addition, beginning in the 1830s, men began to move away from teaching and the ministry as more lucrative business opportunities opened up in the increasingly industrialized republic. Only because men willingly exited the ranks of grammar school teaching for better economic opportunities elsewhere were women were allowed to join.

Nonetheless, once admitted, women were quick to seize whatever advantages teaching might offer them. Monroe notes that by 1855 female teachers outnumbered men two to one in all New England states with the

exception of Vermont (483). The domestication of education and the feminization of the teaching profession would have an effect far beyond the walls of the one room schoolhouse. Interestingly enough, many famous nineteenth-century women reformers, suffrage leaders, and writers such as Catherine Beecher, Mary Livermore, Margaret Fuller, Louisa May Alcott, and Susan B. Anthony began their public careers as teachers. Without a doubt, the rise of the motherteacher paradigm profoundly altered what historian Nancy Theriot calls the “lifescrypt” of nineteenth-century women. In part because of the unique moral authority conferred on them as a result of their maternal role, women were able to pursue careers in teaching and writing—avenues closed to women of an earlier generation—as well as participate in public debates over abolition, temperance, and universal suffrage.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to influencing the wider sphere of mid-nineteenth-century society and discourse, the motherteacher paradigm would profoundly shape the destinies of many individuals—famous and not-so-famous—of this time. This is no more apparent than with Abby and Bronson Alcott and their daughter, Louisa. Taken together, their lives provide a wealth of information on the ways in which this maternal ideology played itself out in the lives of nineteenth-century students, teachers, writers, parents, and children. From a young age, Bronson shared with his cousin, William, an interest in pedagogy and education reform. As young boys growing up together in rural Connecticut, they attended school together, and later traveled to the Southern

states in the hopes of establishing themselves as teachers. Not only did both men enthusiastically promote the new maternal ideology in their articles on education, but Bronson himself assumed the motherteacher role in his home and classrooms. The following chapter chronicles his early efforts to promote a domestic model of education, based on motherteacher principles, and advance the cause of practical classroom reform in his schools in Connecticut.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER I

1. Brodhead acknowledges his debt to Michel Foucault in his study, although he cautions that “a Foucauldian reading cannot tell the whole history of nineteenth-century American anticorporalism without considerable adjustment for historical specificity. If certain nineteenth-century American institutions resembled the ancien regime in making the body the site of correction, their institutional differences from the ancien regime (as from one another) are still evident enough; and of course they resisted reformation not only with their corporal disciplinary strategy but with their whole particularity as cultural forms” (17).

2. Although I am indebted to Redding Sugg’s 1978 book *Motherteacher: The Feminization of American Education* for introducing me to the term “motherteacher,” I will use it throughout my dissertation in a very different sense than he does. Sugg’s preface to his volume provides a succinct summation of his particular perspective on the influx of women into the teaching profession: “The first profession opened to women consisted of the sale of sexual love and was called prostitution; the second, an initiative of nineteenth-century Americans, was a traffic in maternal love and was called pedagogy” (vii). My definition of the term is much broader than that offered by Sugg. I will argue throughout my dissertation that although the term “motherteacher” has obvious strong gender overtones, motherteaching itself is not strictly a gender-based activity. In fact, the whole notion of motherteaching, particularly as it was envisioned and practiced by the Alcotts, incorporated a host of issues including maternity, feminine identity, pedagogy, literacy training, discipline, and child-rearing methods.

3. The notion of Republican motherhood was much on the mind of Lydia Maria Child when she wrote her manual *The Mother’s Book*, which was published in 1833. The dedication page reads, “To American Mothers, On Whose Intelligence and Discretion The Safety and Prosperity of our Republic So Much Depend, This Volume Is Respectfully Inscribed.”

4. In an article entitled “Early Nineteenth-Century American Literature on Child Rearing,” Robert Sunley argues that “[T]he child-rearing literature suggests some of the reasons for this increased concern over the upbringing of children: an increasing emphasis on the child as the extension of parental ambitions and as the representative of the parents’ status in society; a growing belief in man’s power to control the environment and direct the future,

including the molding of the child; a new need for personal direction, as established patterns of living and child rearing were being disrupted in the rapid shift to industrialization and urbanization" (151).

5. Public schooling as we know it today was practically non-existent in the early nineteenth century. Historically, for most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New England children, boys as well as girls, literacy training and education was anything but an elite experience that took place away from home; rather, it was a quotidian task woven into the fabric of home life, like milking the cows or knitting a sweater. In eighteenth-century New England, dame schools were often the site of the only formal schooling children received. Run by women out of their homes, often as a means of supplementing their income, dame schools taught the rudiments of reading and sometimes writing. This private, domestic literacy education was particularly the norm for girls. Education historian Paul Monroe notes that it was not until the nineteenth-century that "...girls were admitted on equal terms, or even on any terms, to the town schools. Previous to this time they obtained their instruction in reading and writing, much more rarely in ciphering, in dame schools, in private schools, or in the home, rarely in the town school but during special hours" (463-4).

And although by the early nineteenth-century girls were being admitted in greater numbers to town grammar schools, there were restrictions. They usually attended only during the summer months, when the boys were absent working on the farm, or at certain times of the day. Their increasing admission to these schools was part of a larger national movement to expand educational opportunities for girls and women. The early nineteenth-century witnessed an explosion of writing and commentary on the subject of education in general, and female education in particular. In 1819 Emma Willard made her famous appeal to the New York legislature for improvements in female education. And in 1825 the *Journal of Education*, founded by William Russell, dramatically announced that "above all, the subject of female education will be considered of unspeakable importance" (Monroe 446). According to Monroe, the years 1825-1865 "saw their [girls'] admission to educational privileges substantially equivalent to those of men" (445). For young girls, especially, literacy and education were fraught with domestic, moral, extracurricular concerns. Ironically enough, however, as central a role as the home played in discussions of education by important reformers such as Alcott, Child, Hale, et al, our curricular histories of nineteenth-century education usually ignore the domestic and focus instead on changes that took place in "real school" settings. In the introduction to the book *Nineteenth-Century Women Learn To Write*, Catherine Hobbs notes that histories of education "...most often generalize from elite male experience, using records of

the century's prestigious all-male institutions such as Harvard, Princeton, or Yale" (4).

6. According to Frank Luther Mott, author of *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States*, Abbott's *The Mother At Home* sold 125,000 copies between 1830 and 1839 (306).

7. The softer approach is seen in Child's advice to mothers. She noted in *The Mother's Book*, "[T]he great difficulty in education is that we give rules instead of inspiring sentiments. The simple fact that your child never saw you angry, that your voice is always gentle, and the expression of your face always kind, is worth a thousand times more than all the rules you can give him about not beating his dog, pinching his brother, &c. It is in vain to load the understanding with rules, if the affections are not pure...But if you inspire him with right feelings, they will govern his actions...Children are not so much influenced by what we say and do in particular reference to them, as by the general effect of our characters and conversation" (22).

8. Jean Ferguson Carr notes that the *New England Primer* "was the practical outgrowth of the colony's insistence on the importance of widespread literacy as a means for salvation and civic order...The young readers of the Primer...were expected to inherit and preserve the cultural and religious values of the community, to be responsible for 'that part,/which never shall decay' as long as each generation learned the words and creeds, the promises and definitions upon which Puritan culture was based" (Introduction 327).

9. In his 1847 etiquette manual *The Young Woman's Guide*, William Alcott (1798-1859), physician, teacher, reformer, writer, and cousin of A. Bronson Alcott, noted that "[I]t was said by Dr. Rush, long ago, that mothers and school-masters plant the seeds of nearly all the good and evil in our world. Presuming that by school-masters he meant teachers of both sexes, will any one doubt the truth of his assertion? Will any one doubt the justness of a remark in the late "Western Review," that if this world is ever to become a better and a happier world, woman must be foremost, if not the principal agent in rendering it so?" (23-4). From this remark it is clear that Alcott believed that both men and women could fulfill the duties of the motherteacher, although clearly, he believed women more suited to the role.

10. In order to avoid confusion over the many names of educational institutions and journals that came into being during this time, it is helpful to know that the *American Journal of Education* was published between 1826 and 1830; it then changed its name to the *Annals of Education* and continued until 1837.



11. In 1837, when Horace Mann assumed the position of Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, he began issuing annual reports on the state of education in the Commonwealth which identified many of the problems of public schooling. Along with Henry Barnard, Child, William and Bronson Alcott and many other writer-reformers, Mann helped inaugurate the “education revival” during the mid-nineteenth-century that helped focus attention on public education and spur reform.

12. A brief and lucid overview of Mann’s contributions to education reform is provided by Button and Provenzo who note that “[T]he development of Mann’s educational philosophy is most thoroughly chronicled in the twelve annual reports (1837-1848) that he submitted while he was the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. Remarkable for their insight and comprehensiveness, the *Reports* were widely circulated in both the United States and abroad. Taken as a collective whole, they represent perhaps the best source for understanding Mann’s ideals and purpose as an educator” (107).

13. In *The Young Woman’s Guide to Excellence* William Alcott wrote, “[A] world whose females were all educated in the family schools—and especially in the school of affliction and poverty, and hardship—would be incomparably a better world than one whose young women should ‘wear soft clothing,’ and live in ‘kings’ courts’—who should be educated by merely fashionable mothers, amid ease and abundance, and ‘finished’ at the institute or the boarding school” (331-332). His belief in the home as an appropriate site of schooling for young women is one that he would voice, in various guises, in the many books and articles he wrote during his life on the subject of education. William Alcott was certainly not alone in emphasizing the domestic aspect of education for females. Fourteen years earlier, Lydia Maria Child cited the lack of “domestic education” as one reason for “the vanity, extravagance, and idleness that are so fast growing upon our young ladies...” and argued that “two or three years spent with a mother, assisting her in her duties, instructing brothers and sisters, and taking care of their own clothes” would “make them [young ladies] happy as well as good wives...” (92).

14. In a talk entitled “Images of Teachers and Education in Mid-Nineteenth - Century Women’s Novels” delivered at the NWSA Conference in June 1988, Barbara White discussed at length this very connection. She noted that for many women writers “being a novelist must really have seemed an extension

of being an educator.” The rise of didactic fiction and fireside literature during this time can be seen as further evidence of a growing interest in the notion of public schooling and literacy training in general and so-called “sentimental education” in particular.

## CHAPTER II

### “A PLACE WHERE THEY MIGHT DELIGHT TO ASSEMBLE”: THE EDUCATION AND EARLY TEACHING CAREER OF BRONSON ALCOTT

#### I

“We believe there are many of those very useful members of the community, the teachers of primary schools, who daily feel the responsibility of their profession, are deeply interested in the rising welfare of their pupils, and sincerely disposed to adopt any judicious means which shall issue in their improvement. Possessing sufficient independence of mind to think for themselves, and to estimate things by their intrinsic utility, they are prepared to receive any suggestions which aim at the intellectual and moral advancement of the rising generation; and they are aware that it is the fate of every thing valuable and interesting in the progress of mind, and the improvement of society, to be ushered into the world under the name of innovation, and regarded as unnecessary and chimerical.”—Bronson Alcott, “Common Education. Elementary Instruction,” *American Journal of Education*, June 1828

The advent of Bronson Alcott’s teaching career in Connecticut during the 1820s and 1830s coincided with the metamorphosis of teaching into a profession charged with the all-important civic duty of instilling values into the young. In many ways Bronson Alcott (1799-1888) is the apotheosis of the mid-nineteenth century idealistic and evangelical education reformer described in the previous chapter. As the epigraph above indicates, he was committed to the image of teachers as “very useful members of the community” who could bring about “the intellectual and moral advancement

of the rising generation” and effect social change. To this end, he enacted new and innovative pedagogical methods in his classrooms and advanced similarly progressive theories in his writings on education. But given the prevailing cultural attitudes toward public schooling during the mid nineteenth century, especially in rural areas of Connecticut, these two goals—a successful teaching career and a progressive pedagogical agenda—were more often than not at odds with one another.

For Bronson was an unusual mid-nineteenth-century schoolmaster in that his career both paralleled and anticipated the general cultural movement away from authoritarian pedagogies. As a young student in Connecticut common schools, Bronson experienced firsthand the problems that plagued public education at mid century. As a young teacher, he pioneered classroom reforms that quickly made him a leading name in the ever-widening circle of mid-nineteenth-century education reformers. This chapter chronicles Bronson’s early education and his efforts to introduce practical classroom reforms during his tenure as schoolmaster at Cheshire, Connecticut Primary School No. 1. In particular, I will focus on those aspects of his classroom practices that highlight Bronson’s role as a motherteacher. In the form that Bronson imagined it, a domestic model of education based on motherteacher principles was a vehicle for radical change in the individual and the greater society. Given the context in which he practiced it in his own classrooms, motherteaching was far more liberating an ideology than coercive.

By implementing reforms based on the newer, gentler approach to childrearing, Bronson hoped to advance his own vision of creating a classroom Utopia of sorts in which students were encouraged to think critically and arrive at moral decisions on their own. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Bronson's Cheshire experiences suggest that at least as he imagined it, motherteaching was indeed a revolutionary act.

## II

### “make things interesting”: The Cheshire School Experiment

From an early age, Bronson evinced an interest in reading and writing, beginning at age twelve his lifelong habit of journal keeping, in imitation of his mother. He was largely self-taught, as there was little access to anything beyond the crudest kind of public education on Spindle Hill, in Wolcott, Connecticut, the site of the Alcott homestead. His educational experience was typical of many children in New England during the early nineteenth century. Regarding the state of teaching in Connecticut during the early 1800s, Odell Shepard, Bronson's most famous biographer, had this to say:

Every town wished, of course, to have its children taught by persons of the most exemplary morals, with precisely the correct opinions upon matters of church and state; but such was the unwillingness to pay for what was sought, or to treat with ordinary human consideration the teachers who were secured, that in some

towns--at least so it was whispered--only jailbirds would apply.  
(*Pedlar's* 8)<sup>1</sup>

Bronson attended the dismal, one-room schoolhouses of Wolcott sporadically during his youth and studied for a brief two months at the Cheshire Academy, where his mother's brother, Dr. Tillotson Bronson, a member of the Episcopal clergy, also served as the school's principal. Bronson also studied under the Rev. John Keyes of Wolcott in 1814.

Despite Bronson's lack of formal education, which ended when he was thirteen, literacy was at the heart of his childhood experience. Shepard notes that Bronson learned to write by tracing the letters of the alphabet in chalk on the wooden floor of his home (*Pedar's* 5). Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* which Bronson studied intently during his childhood, was highly influential on his later educational philosophy (11). The book, a descendent of the Puritan *New England Primer*, contained various didactic precepts and maxims and was as much about morality as about correct spelling. From Webster, Shepard notes, Bronson learned "...that moral instruction is a main ingredient in all right education of the young" (*Pedlar's* 11)--an idea that would shape his pedagogical theories and practices for the rest of his life.

He struck up a youthful correspondence with his cousin William Alcott who lived nearby and who would later make a name for himself as a teacher and physician, as well as author of over one hundred articles and books on education, health, and conduct.<sup>2</sup> As young boys, the cousins were brought

together by their love of reading and writing. In an attempt to supplement the scant resources of Wolcott schools which they attended together, they established their own lending library, assembling a collection of texts from the paltry offerings of neighbors. In part because both men received their most significant lessons outside the walls of the schoolhouse, they would later champion, in varying forms, the notion of the school-as-home. Shepard notes that both men believed "...that a formal schooling, even when good, is not the only means of securing an education...To Bronson in particular there may have come knowledge that the school, at its best is only a substitute for the family and home" (*Pedlar's* 13-14).<sup>3</sup>

Bronson's religious beliefs also played a vital role in shaping his educational philosophy. Raised a Congregationalist, he eventually rejected that sterner creed and was confirmed in the Episcopal church at age 17. As he read more widely in theology and philosophy, Bronson's adherence to any one particular creed loosened, and by the time he began teaching at Cheshire, he was well on his journey away from mainstream Protestant thought. Like the many other New England thinkers who eventually would be dubbed Transcendentalists, he had begun to question established church doctrines that assigned divine status only to Christ and offered no room to question the authority of the Bible. Instead, he believed that moral goodness resided in all individuals and that the Bible, while undoubtedly an inspired work of literature, was not necessarily the word of God. Nevertheless, he admired

Christ as an exemplary instructor and looked to him as a role model for his own teaching. Bronson turned to the teaching profession in part because of his interest in literature and writing. However, it also seemed the ideal profession for a person such as he who was increasingly attracted to the newer, softer Protestant theologies that placed moral decision-making authority in the consciences of individuals rather than the pulpit seat and that valued intuition over reason. Bronson eventually turned away from established religion, convinced that the schoolhouse, not the church, offered the most hope to bring about reform in individuals and hence, society.

In 1816 Bronson passed the Wolcott school committee's examination for a teaching certificate. After several peddling trips to the Southern colonies between 1817 and 1823, (he taught penmanship for a short time in Virginia and No. Carolina in 1822) he began his formal teaching career at the Fall Mountain District School in Bristol, Connecticut during the winter of 1823-24.<sup>4</sup> He then spent the term of 1824 teaching at the West Street School in Bristol after William Alcott vacated that position. However, his longest stint in any Connecticut school was at the Central District School in Cheshire where he taught four consecutive terms beginning in November of 1825 and ending in 1827. His efforts there drew the attention of leading education reformers including Samuel May, his future wife's brother, and marked the beginning of his fame as an innovative pedagogue. Bronson's experiences at Cheshire also serve to highlight those aspects of his version of motherteaching



that conservative thinkers would deem a threat to the educational and societal status quo. In January of 1828, one year after Bronson closed the school, the *American Journal of Education* published his article “Primary Education. Account of the Method of Instruction in the Primary School No. 1, Cheshire CT,” which offers modern scholars a detailed portrait of the classroom practices that simultaneously won him the admiration of his peers and the condemnation of the local community. The article is a fascinating account of the forces arrayed against education reformers in the 1820s and of Bronson’s subtle attempts to negotiate those forces to his own benefit.

Prompted, no doubt, by the bitterness he felt one year later as a result of the school’s eventual demise, he began the article by taking aim at his detractors, noting the lukewarm reception accorded many of his innovations and the intransigence of the local population when it came to educational change:

Hence, measures tending to elevate and improve the character of that system [primary education] are unpopular: the fear of innovations upon a system identified with the name of our forefathers, hangs like an *incubus*, upon every attempt at elevation or improvement. (26)

By his own account, Bronson introduced improvements gradually, aware that any sudden changes might well be greeted by strong public opposition. These changes, which to modern eyes may appear slight, nonetheless represented a dramatic departure from traditional pedagogical

practices of the time and reflected the influence of Pestalozzian methods which were being brought to the attention of many American educators, including William and Bronson, through the *American Journal of Education*.<sup>5</sup> During his first term in Cheshire, Bronson was content to address curricular issues, introducing “a few additional branches of study” (he does not mention what they are) and “improving the aspect and character of school instruction; by modes of communication better adapted to the genius of the young mind...” (27). He was careful to note that “[N]o radical change was attempted” during his first term (27).

In the concluding paragraph of his article, Bronson refers to an eight page “Outline of Instruction” that was printed in the subsequent issue of the *American Journal of Education*. This detailed outline provides a succinct overview of Bronson’s student-centered pedagogic theories that were the rationale for his classroom practices in Cheshire. After listing under separate headings the moral, physical, and intellectual “General Principles” of the school, Bronson then offered brief explanations of each. Under the general principles of moral education, Bronson listed as subheadings “Affections,” “Obedience,” “Truth,” “Temper,” “Approbation,” “Amusements,” “Rewards and Punishments,” “Police,” and “Laws.” The latter outlines eighteen school rules relating to, among other issues, punctuality, neatness, talking, cheating, and respect for others with an emphasis on self-examination and critical

moral thinking. Under the heading “Intellectual Education. General Principles” Bronson listed the following precepts:

Follow Nature.

Employ the known to induce the unknown.

Teach by visible and tangible objects; by oral, and illustrative, and familiar methods.

Bring all the powers of the mind into harmonious development and exercise.

Prepare the mind to investigate for itself; forming good mental habits; strengthening its powers by exercise, and preserving it from implicit belief.

Develope [sic] reason as rapidly as possible.

Cause and Effect; their relation never lost sight of.

Experiment made the test of theory, and the basis of fact.

Genius of pupils' minds, habits, &c. consulted.

Constant employment furnished. (“Primary” 91)

Under the heading “Observation” are statements that reveal Bronson’s adherence to inductive methods of teaching: “Notice, and describe familiar objects, and incidents,” “Lessons on material things daily,” “Questioning, to

ascertain the accuracy of observation,” and “Sensitive knowledge, precede relative and abstract” (91).

Emboldened by the success of his initial efforts, Bronson pushed his reforms further the next term. These changes included modifying his own classroom demeanour and substituting “habits of familiarity, affection, and entreaty” for “the distant and imperative manner of address and communication, so often conceived essential to the school room...”(27). Minimizing overt displays of authority was a fundamental aspect of his pedagogical approach—and a radical departure from traditional teaching since it attempted to close, not widen, the gap between instructor and pupil.<sup>6</sup> Throughout his career, Bronson advocated a nurturing teacher role, one that was sympathetic to student concerns and in direct contrast to the time-honored method of “spare the rod, spoil the child,” the more popular disciplinary approach in Cheshire during this time. Bronson himself had this to say about his instructional method:

[I]t is adapted professedly to the wants and genius of the young mind; it refers to children. And it is insisted that children are the best judges of what meets their views and feelings...The writer would not choose to forget that little things please little minds; that he once was a child; that then *he ‘spoke as a child, he understood as a child, he thought as a child,’* and that while employed in directing the youthful thoughts, and understandings, and feelings, it becomes him not, were he able, *‘to put away childish things.’* (“Primary ” 30-1)

Alcott biographer Dorothy McCuskey observes that Bronson “had the simple genius to look at children and see them as themselves, quite divorced from current or historical theories of education, religion, politics, or social standing. It was most upsetting to everyone except Bronson and the children. They had a very good time together” (47). Other innovations included decorating the classroom and “devising various plans of amusement and instruction...”(Alcott “Primary” 28). One can well imagine the dismay, even horror expressed by some parents at an instructor who not only went out of his way to create new games for his pupils, but who also “endeavored to conciliate the good will and affections of his pupils by taking their amusements under his superintendence; indicating an interest in them; occasionally uniting in their pastimes; and attempting to make the school room and its exercises pleasing to their young associations—a place where they might delight to assemble” (28).

In addition to aesthetic touches such as pictures and flowers and the introduction of more comfortable benches with backs, all of which no doubt did make his school a more delightful place for his students, Bronson also established a school library. Books were a rare commodity in many rural New England homes and communities during the early and mid-nineteenth century and in short supply in most common schools. Using his own funds, Bronson created a library of about one hundred volumes which he noted “was read with much avidity; and was found to subserve important moral and

intellectual purposes. Its influence on the daily studies of the school room, in furnishing excitement, by way of reward, was very salutary" (28). At a time when most books other than the Bible and the ubiquitous almanac were deemed by many adults to be frivolous, if not downright dangerous, establishing a school library for children was a particularly bold act. The students' eager response suggests just how limited literacy opportunities were in Cheshire at this time. And yet, by introducing a variety of books to his students, Bronson was also introducing them to the world of ideas and the notion of reading for pleasure, something that many parents would eventually decide they could not tolerate. However, the most revolutionary pedagogical changes were curricular in nature. Bronson chronicled these in a two-part article entitled "Common Education. Elementary Instruction" that appeared in the June and July 1828 issues of the *American Journal of Education*. In the second half of the article, Bronson detailed his views regarding literacy instruction for young children. He noted,

As means of formal instruction, we come to the mention of exercises particularly conducive to lead the young mind to perceive the connexion (sic) of ideas with words—a point to which the attention of teachers should be distinctly directed in the communication of knowledge to their pupils. The mere impression of names upon the memory, is but a part of the true purpose of tuition. Words are but the visible forms of thought, the signs of ideas, and, to become significant, must be connected with the ideas which they are designed to represent. (440)

For Bronson, the significance of words and their definitions could not be underestimated. He opposed rote memorization as a learning technique precisely because “[A] child may commit to memory and recite with perfect accuracy, and afterward, page after page, from written expressions, and yet obtain but few ideas from the exercise—for the simple reason, that the words repeated, are not associated in the mind, with their corresponding ideas” (440). Arriving at those “corresponding ideas” behind the words was what mattered most in his pedagogy. Thus, teaching a child to read, write, and spell was much more than a lesson in mechanics; it was a lesson in morality. “A prominent purpose of all education is, or should be, the acquisition of accurate and distinct ideas, and the names by which they are expressed” he commented (440). “All systems which fail of these results, are consequently imperfect” (440).

With this theory in mind, Bronson designed assignments whose purpose was to reinforce those “correct ideas” (440). Recitations were taken a step further and supplemented by exercises that encouraged students to apply the terms they had memorized. Bronson noted, “[B]ut let the terms which he [the student] has thus recited, be connected with the ideas which they represent, by means of words which suggest correct ideas to his mind, and he will then derive instruction from his labour” (440). As a result, composition instruction became a moral exercise in Bronson’s classroom. His belief in the potentiality and divinity of human beings, children in particular,

made him a strong advocate of what we would call today the expressivist philosophy in composition instruction. He believed that “[L]eft to the enjoyment of that innocent freedom of mind, which is the rightful gift of nature, spontaneous thought will find expression: the young heart will feel the influence of those forms by which it is surrounded: imagination will preserve their native interest and beauty” (441). Students in his class began by writing “simple descriptions, epistles, stories, anecdotes, &c” of familiar objects, advancing, “in a gradual and natural manner, to the expression of his thoughts, upon subjects of a more abstract character” (441-2).

Students in Bronson’s classroom learned to learn in many ways, using various medium. His approach to teaching drawing and geography was similarly student-centered and self-directed. Instead of copying a picture from a book, students drew what was in their immediate environment, that is, “[T]he apparatus of the school room, books, slates, cubes, &c...” (442). To learn geography, Bronson had his students begin by studying “...the topography of his own town, proceeding gradually but intelligently forward, to those adjacent—to the state—country, &c, in the natural and simple order, by which the mind ever travels abroad in the pursuit of information” (442). There were few rote exercises in the class; instead, a student was encouraged to paraphrase the texts “...and give the ideas which they are designed to convey, in his own words” (442).



At mid century, the most common method of reading instruction was memorization and recitation. Understanding and applying the content of a text was not emphasized, nor in general was it considered appropriate or even desirable that school and learning should be anything but drudgery. Shepard notes “[T]he processes of education were not supposed to be pleasant, but definitely painful, as befitted the training of ‘young vipers’ and ‘limbs of Satan’...because all children were thought to be naturally bad and all learning was considered in itself distasteful” (*Pedlar’s* 88). But in his school, Bronson varied classroom routine in order to stimulate his students’ intellects and imaginations. Students did not merely read and recite from texts; rather, they discussed what they read. In addition, Bronson designed vocabulary exercises based on the readings the students were actually doing, rather than simply assigning long lists of words taken out of context. He advocated that “[P]upils use their own language in Recitation,” (“Primary” 92), which, of course, transformed what was a rote exercise into a lesson in critical thinking. In addition, he introduced journal-keeping, encouraging his students to produce writing that was spontaneous and original, not merely a transcription of passages taken from various books. McCuskey notes that “[W]riting was never a separate subject in this school. As the child learned to write words, their qualities were pointed out, sentences were analyzed, and, without knowing it, the child was learning the rudiments of functional grammar” (30).

This is an approach that many twentieth-century composition teachers take to grammar instruction.

Bronson's writing assignments served another purpose, as well. According to Dahlstrand, Bronson also devised "a system of classroom democracy" that relied on school journals rather than the ubiquitous birch rod as a way to instill order and discipline in the children (38). Students were instructed to record in their journals the names of anyone they observed misbehaving in class. At the end of the week, they would share these names with the entire class which would, in turn, attempt to determine the guilt of the parties. Those who had committed infractions would then apologize to the class (Dahlstrand 39). Bronson believed that a disciplinary approach that relied on writing rather than corporal punishment would lead to the creation of a "common conscience" among his students that would be more effective than the individual conscience of any one child. His method is akin to the journals and "Black Books" advocated several years later by Abbott in *The Mother At Home*. Certainly the disciplinary intent of Bronson's method is apparent, although today many might look askance at a practice that seems to encourage "tattling" among children. However, Bronson believed such that such writing encouraged a sense of responsibility and what Dahlstrand calls "a community spirit" in his school (39). His belief in the sanctity of the family and the innate goodness of children prompted him to create a familial atmosphere in his classroom and to present himself not as a stern

authoritarian figure but rather as a mother teacher with the responsibility to nurture and guide his charges. This focus on students as sites of authority and leadership is no more apparent than in Bronson's outline of instruction in which he noted under the heading "Police:" "Power emanating from the pupils; Instructor moralizing the public sentiment" ("Primary" 89).

According to his account of the Cheshire school, Bronson was very careful in the beginning not to demand remuneration for the various improvements he introduced in his school, and as a result, he met with little organized resistance. This suggests that even though an iconoclast, Bronson was not completely devoid of common sense when it came to dealing with the community upon whose goodwill he relied if he was to retain his teaching post. However, at the beginning of his third term, not only did he request a raise, but also "alterations in the school room—new class books—together with additions to the school library" ("Primary" 28). It was at this point that he began to encounter opposition; as he notes, "the popular sentiment was not sufficiently liberalized to meet these demands; they were too large a tax upon its bounty" (28). Apparently the community tolerated his reforms as long as they cost nothing to implement. And although he was given a pay raise, he noted that not all of his other requests were met.

By the time the fourth and final term of the school commenced, Bronson was firmly committed to his reform agenda, despite waning public support. His experience with the Cheshire community, most notably its

resistance to his requests for increased funding, is indicative of the obstacles that faced most education reformers in the 1820s. His liberal reforms were too extreme in fiscally and socially conservative Cheshire, and although he acknowledged that townspeople “begin to appreciate the influence of these schools on society, and to perceive some of the prevalent defects in the principles upon which they have heretofore been conducted,” the school’s fate was sealed, “depending,” as it did, “in a considerable degree upon the unsettled humour of the district” (“Primary” 29).

If nothing else, Bronson’s Cheshire experience illustrates why the pace of education reform was so slow in New England during this time. Bronson’s pedagogy, which aimed at creating a classroom of engaged, thoughtful pupils, was too radical; it threatened the authority not only of the classroom teacher but also of the parents. In a community still wedded to the notion that literacy primarily served the purpose of salvation, Bronson’s belief in his students’ ability to think for themselves and make rational moral decisions was uncomfortable for many. He, too, believed in the notion of moral salvation, but his conversion process was a departure from the norm. No doubt the timing of his reforms had something to do with the townspeople’s less-than-enthusiastic reception. The pace of industrialization was quickening all around Cheshire during the 1820s, bringing with it social and familial changes that undoubtedly were unsettling to many.<sup>7</sup> Bronson’s pedagogy, which encouraged independent thinking in the young, promised to

accelerate that pace of change. As Odell Shepard points out, instead of cramming his pupils with knowledge appropriate to their future stations in life as farmers or factory workers, Bronson "...began, instead of telling his pupils much of anything, to ask them questions about their souls" (*Pedlar's* 83). Bronson himself seems to have sensed the challenge his pedagogy posed to a community in transition when he commented in his journal on September 22, 1826:

Those who in modern times attempt in education anything different from the old established modes are by many regarded as publick innovators on the peace and order of society, as persons desirous of destroying the structure which secures present happiness, and of substituting in its place anarchy and confusion. They are regarded by some as dangerous and by others as ignorant and imbecile members of society—as visionary projectors against intelligence and wisdom, as persons beside themselves. (Shepard *Journals* 4)

But perhaps the biggest threat of all was the reaction of students, who actually seemed to enjoy attending a school founded on the principle "Take nothing on trust; examine; compare, decide independently" and whose teacher espoused the belief "make things interesting" (Alcott "Primary" 92).

Regarding the failure of a school in which he had so much invested, Bronson noted in his journal on 7 June 1827:

'The number of those who advocate any particular theory is thought by many to be a fine test of its truth.'

This sentiment is thought to be erroneous. Men, as they have been trained, are averse to thought; the labour attending mental action is opposed to inquiry; and opinions are implicitly embraced

without reflection, to save the labour of thought. Hence a few original thinkers have given laws to the world. Others have blindly followed. We come then to this true principle: The number and age of those who advocate any particular doctrine is not test of its truth, but, to the contrary, it is an indication of its incorrectness. (Shepard *Journals* 7)

Bronson's self-righteousness is indicative of his life-long attitude toward his pedagogical ideals. Dorothy McCusky interprets his arrogance as the result of his belief in the vital role education played, not only in instilling knowledge, but even more importantly, in developing the morals and character of children. She comments,

It can be plainly seen that the man who was the chief agent in the forming of character held a great responsibility which he could not afford to shirk at the whim of unenlightened critics. It was not the minister, but the school master, who was responsible for the development of character. This attitude explains in part Bronson's arrogance, his refusal to make any compromise to please the community which was supporting him. He was not just the village school master; he was the apostle of enlightenment, engaged in a noble plan for the regeneration of man. (23)

Despite the failure of the greater Cheshire community to embrace his reforms, Bronson's school attracted the attention of leading education reformers. William Alcott visited the school in February 1827 and praised it highly. In the spring of 1827, several Connecticut reformers, lead by Samuel May, called for an education conference to be held in Hartford that year. Although Bronson did not attend the conference, William informed the organizers of the Cheshire school, and in August, Bronson was invited by May to visit his Brooklyn, Connecticut home and discuss education reform.

Although bitter over the failure of the Cheshire school, Bronson was determined to persevere in his efforts to advance pedagogical reform. If anything, the rejection only served to convince him of the righteousness of his cause and to deepen his commitment to the teaching profession. At the conclusion of his “Common Education” article, Bronson argued that

[O]ur systems of instruction...should receive that degree of attention and interest, which their importance demands. The character of the rising generation is, in a great measure involved in these. They are exerting an influence, which, silent and imperceptible almost, is inevitably forming the minds of the young to become useful and active members of society, or by indolence and ignorance to prove injurious to its best interests. And this is true in relation their moral, no less than to their intellectual influence.  
(443)

In 1829, the *American Journal of Education* published Bronson’s article “Maternal Instruction,” a detailed account of Pestalozzian methods and his own motherteacher principles. In it, he asserted the importance of the mother’s role in the education of children in language that anticipates Abbott’s *Mother At Home*. The language of the article highlights the importance that Bronson assigned to the motherteacher role. He noted that “[A]s an agent of the divine instructor [sic], the mother will feel herself entrusted with a spirit, destined for immortality, on which she is urged, by every consideration, to shed that redeeming influence, which alone can preserve it from earthly pollution, and conduct it to the skies” (“Maternal” 55). Interestingly enough, although he directs his comments to women here,

Bronson used just such a maternal approach in his own classrooms. In an 1833 article, “Maternal Influence,” he argued for improvements in female education and training in order that mothers might successfully exercise their influence and “sustain the child in the path of rectitude, and keep the ‘still small voice of conscience,’ from being stilled and overpowered” (23).

In April 1828, after a brief tenure at the West District School in Bristol, Connecticut, Bronson left his home state for Boston. Firmly convinced he had a mission to fulfill, Bronson hoped his progressive pedagogy would be cordially received by more sophisticated urban thinkers and parents. And indeed, his teaching experiences there and at the Germantown Academy in Pennsylvania reveal the existence of a sympathetic audience of listeners—his own students, whose individual responses to Bronson’s motherteaching methods are the subject of the following chapter.



## NOTES TO CHAPTER II

1. Shepard's biography, published in 1937, is the most widely cited source for information on Bronson's life. Dorothy McCuskey's *Bronson Alcott, Teacher* (1940) focuses on the genesis of Alcott's pedagogical theories and practices. However, Frederick Dahlstrand's more recent *Amos Bronson Alcott: An Intellectual Biography* (1982) provides the best analysis of the many phases of Alcott's life and the influence of the various philosophies and events that shaped his thinking.
2. See chapter one, notes 9 and 13.
3. Several of William Alcott's publications that are particularly relevant to my discussion are *The Young Wife, or Duties of Woman in the Marriage Relation* (1837); *Confessions of a Schoolmaster* (1839); "There Is No School Like The Family School" (1843); *The Young Woman's Guide to Excellence* (1847).
4. Bronson made several peddling trips through the Southern states, once in the company of his cousin William. Unfortunately for Bronson and his family, he incurred heavy debts during one of these journeys. According to Shepard, Bronson's father, Joseph Alcox, was forced to relinquish part of the family farm in Wolcott as partial payment for those debts (68).
5. William Alcott's influence on the shape of Bronson's teaching career cannot be underestimated. William was himself a prolific writer on education and a tireless advocate for school reforms. In 1831 he moved to Boston and became the assistant to Rev. William C. Woodbridge, the editor of the *Annals of Education*. Alcott would also edit the *Juvenile Rambler*, an early children's magazine, and *Parley's Magazine*.
6. Dahlstrand notes that "...the Cheshire District School was no 'free school' in the modern sense. Despite his belief in the necessity of a positive joyful and attractive classroom atmosphere and his striving to allow self-expression on the part of students, Alcott was a firm disciplinarian. Indeed, he believed a positive learning situation was impossible without discipline. Students were to be prompt, neat, attentive, silent in class unless called upon, and seated unless given permission to move about. They were to avoid interrupting the work of others, 'idly lounging or gazing,' or laughing at the instructor's remarks" (39).

7. Seth Thomas, the famous clockmaker, was also born in Wolcott in 1785. In 1807 he formed a clockmaking company with Eli Terry and Silas Hoadley, producing in the first two years some 4,000 clocks. In 1812, Thomas left the firm and created his own factory in nearby Plymouth Hollow. According to Dahlstrand, Bronson worked for Hoadley for a few months when he was fourteen (27).

## CHAPTER III

### “...TO LEAD THEM TO USEFULNESS AND HAPPINESS”: DISCIPLINARY INTIMACY AND WRITING IN THE CLASSROOMS OF BRONSON ALCOTT

#### I

Nineteenth-century discourse on child-rearing and education reform reveals the ways in which parents, mothers in particular, were seen more and more as teachers and teachers were increasingly seen as influential arbiters of middle-class morals and norms. In their book, *History of Education and Culture in America*, H. Warren Button and Eugene Provenso, Jr. note that [C]hanges in attitudes toward childrearing were closely related to changes in schooling that took place during the early phases of the Common School Movement. The feminization of the teaching profession and the primacy of moral over intellectual instruction suggest models based upon principles of childrearing as much as upon traditional pedagogy” (101).

Literary historian Richard Brodhead’s theory of disciplinary intimacy not only helps illuminate these new attitudes toward childrearing practices as exemplified by texts such as Abbott’s *The Mother at Home* and Child’s *The Mother’s Book*, but also the corollary in educational practices such as those introduced by Bronson Alcott in his various classrooms. As firm believers in the newer, gentler approach to childhood education, both Bronson and his wife

Abby relied on their ability to create an emotional connection with their daughters and students, respectively, in order to teach and discipline them. They utilized literacy instruction in the service of values education, engaging their pupils and daughters in acts of reading and writing designed primarily to cultivate moral consciousness and instill a sense of internal self-discipline and adherence to virtue. What is unique about Bronson's efforts, in particular, is the way in which he was able to cross the gender line and in effect "motherteach" his pupils using progressive pedagogical principles that were increasingly being defined by feminine rather than masculine norms and attitudes. Furthermore, these efforts and practices are demonstrated in a significant body of textual evidence, namely extant letters and journals written by his pupils and the Alcott daughters, that reveals the children's responses to Abby and Bronson's efforts to promote disciplinary intimacy in the school and the domestic classroom.

This chapter focuses on the effects of Bronson's motherteaching on specific students. By examining correspondence between Bronson and two of his pupils at the Germantown Academy, Elizabeth Lewis and Charles Morgan, the Temple School journals of brother and sister George and Martha Kuhn, the diary of eight-year-old Anna Alcott, and classroom conversations between Bronson and his Temple School pupils as recorded by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody in her *Record of A School*, I argue that Bronson's program of learning virtue through reading and writing was, paradoxically, both a

furthering of the agenda of disciplinary intimacy as well as a release from it.<sup>1</sup> The dialogic nature of journaling and letter-writing, central pedagogical tools used by the Alcotts in both the home and school, gave the children under their care a voice with which to talk back, even if that same voice was, indeed, shaped by the motherteacher. By allowing students to use writing as a means of exploration and analysis, Bronson hoped they would, in turn, inscribe upon themselves a commitment to duty, self-sacrifice, and community, an adherence to conscience and truth, and a desire for moral perfection. In some ways, literacy training as Bronson envisioned it was highly directive; however, I will argue that his ultimate goal, encouraging self-reflexive thinking in his pupils, rescued his pedagogy from the realm of the wholly coercive.

## II

### Disciplinary Intimacy and Bronson Alcott's Vision of the Teacher

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, Bronson Alcott's teaching career is indicative of cultural shifts in attitudes towards education that would cause schools to become a preeminent site of character training by the mid and late nineteenth century. In a letter to his cousin William Alcott, dated 3 January 1826, Bronson Alcott described his own teaching career in language that suggests he saw it very much as a spiritual mission:

God, in his goodness, has placed me, though unworthy, in a sphere in which I can with his assistance be useful—can benefit a few of my fellow-travellers, young and inexperienced in the world, by example and instruction, and endeavor to lead them to usefulness and happiness. (qtd in Rose 62)

Bronson took seriously the spiritual duties of his job, and his practical pedagogical methods sprang directly out of his idealistic views of both the teaching profession and the nature of childhood. In his article “A Transcendentalist Father: The Child-Rearing Practices of Bronson Alcott,” Charles Strickland notes that the child was a potent image for all Transcendental thinkers. Bronson himself rhapsodized that childhood “is above Nature—yea above man—for yet unfallen, unbeguiled, it is an angel and enjoyeth the beatific countenance of the Celestial Father in Heaven—even the selfsame face that Nature doth but dimly shadow forth to the external sense!” (qtd. in Paul 91). According to Bronson, not only did children represent innocence and moral purity, even perfection, but they most closely resembled the Divine, in that they had had the least exposure to debilitating social influences.<sup>2</sup> Strickland notes that “[I]t was to be expected that this vision of childhood would readily join with Alcott’s programmatic emphasis on educational reform, for if the child were uncorrupted, then it was incumbent upon adults to protect the child from the world in order to help him realize the future possibilities for human perfection” (11).

Bronson’s articles about education are a reflection of his belief that teaching promoted such “human perfection.” They are shot through with

millennialist zeal regarding the importance, the sacredness, of the profession. For example, in his 1836 article, “The Doctrine and Discipline of Human Culture,” a philosophical treatise that explicates his educational theory, Bronson begins on a high note with the line “Man is the noblest of the Creator’s works.” “And yet,” he notes a few lines later, “he enters upon the scene of his labors, a feeble and wailing Babe, at first unconscious of the place assigned him, and needs years of tutelage and discipline to fit him for the high and austere duties that await him” (31). In Bronson’s opinion, it was precisely such important tutelage that educators provided the young. The work of school was not merely to instill knowledge of facts, but more importantly, to use that knowledge to “wake” a child’s soul, and “...discipline it into the perfection which is its end, and for which it ever thirsts” (42). Not surprisingly, Bronson’s model teacher was Jesus Christ, whose style of conversing in parables became the model for his own classroom pedagogy. The teacher was on par with the minister, both of whom were “co-working with God” to lead young children to a full realization of their goodness. Bronson offered this commentary, highly spiritual in its tone, regarding the teacher’s responsibility:

To fulfill its end, Instruction must be an Inspiration. The true Teacher, like Jesus, must inspire in order to unfold. He must know that instruction is something more than mere impression on the understanding. He must feel it to be a kindling influence; that, in himself alone, is the quickening, informing energy; that the life and growth of his charge preexist in him. He is to hallow and refine

as he tempts forth the soul. He is to inform the understanding, by chastening the appetites, allaying the passions, softening the affections, vivifying the imagination, illuminating the reason, giving pliancy and force to the will; for a true understanding is the issue of these powers...And to do this, he must be the personation and exemplar of what he would unfold in his charge. Wisdom, Truth, Holiness, must have preexistence in him, or they will not appear in his pupils...Under the melting force of his Genius, thus employed, Mind shall become fluid, and he shall mould it into Types of Heavenly Beauty." ("Doctrine" 46-7)

Like the Puritan minister who leads his congregation to a conversion experience through the medium of the sermon, the instructor, as Bronson imagined him, was a person who, by virtue of an exemplary life and progressive classroom methods, pointed the way for students to the path to moral perfection. However, the sad reality of mid-nineteenth century classrooms was far removed from the lofty and evangelical vision sketched by Bronson in his essay. He himself noted, "There is little genius in our schoolrooms. Those who enter yearly upon the stage of life, bearing the impress of our choicest culture, and most watchful discipline, are often unworthy specimens of our nature" (43).

Bronson's vision of the teacher is a curious blend of both the nurturing and the authoritative/authoritarian. In a fashion suggestive of Abbott's *Mother at Home*, Bronson, too, saw the instructor's role as an exalted and highly influential one. The teacher, like the mother, was a mirror of his young charges, reflecting what was good or bad in them. And like the minister, the teacher could also be a catalyst for change in those children. There is



something both benevolent and slightly insidious in Bronson's theory—benevolent in that the teacher's role was not to quash the child but rather to draw out the goodness and natural curiosity that was assumed already existed within—insidious in that he envisioned the child as a pliant figure, whose "Mind shall become fluid" and who was easily molded by the right kind of instructor into "Types of Heavenly Beauty," a more precise definition of which Bronson never offered in the essay.

He outlined the instructor's role in words that are equally applicable to Abbott's motherteacher, a potent image in Bronson's educational philosophy as well:

The province of the instructor should be simple, awakening, invigorating, directing, rather than the forcing of the child's faculties upon prescribed and exclusive courses of thought. He should look to the child to see what is to be done, rather than to his book or his system. The child is the book. The operations of his mind are the true system. Let him study these carefully and his success is sure. Let him follow out the impulses, the thoughts, the volitions, of the child's mind and heart, in their own principles and rational order of expression, and his training will be what God designed it to be—an aid to prepare the child to aid himself. (qtd. in Hochfield 92-93)

As this journal entry makes plain, Bronson's child-centered pedagogy was a radical departure from traditional methods that placed authority and classroom direction solely in the hands of the instructor. In a reversal of roles, Bronson studied his pupils and looked to them in order to determine the direction of instruction and perhaps to gain insight into how he might live a

moral life. Although Bronson indicated that the child should “lead” the teacher, nevertheless, he did use the word “directing” when describing the “province of the instructor.” Although the Alcottian teacher gave up outward signs of authority over his pupils (most notably in the form of corporal punishment which Bronson opposed), he retained influence over them in the form of powerful personal and emotional ties.

In writing about his own children, Anna and Louisa, in a 21 January 1835 journal entry, Bronson indicated that he was well aware of the existence and efficacy of this emotional bond between parent and child:

My children are objects of great delight. They are both in health. Nature has given them good constitutions of body, fine endowments of mind, and the influences to which they have been subjected and the discipline pursued with them in their moral and spiritual culture has brought out their characters in interesting forms[.]...So long as they move before me in the majestic dignity of human nature, unspoiled by dalliance with things, shall I have a strong bond to unite me to them, and in this union to find the tie that binds man to his race as well as to his Author. (qtd. in Hochfield 96)

An important—and progressive—aspect of Bronson’s attitude toward children was this belief that the parent-child bond functioned in a mutually beneficial fashion. This intimate relation reinforced parental principles and authority, but it was also the means by which both were able “to find the tie that binds man to his race as well as to his Author.” As Bronson imagined it, nurture and regulation flowed together in the paradigm of disciplinary intimacy which in turn created a tie that established the child’s connection to

the larger society and served as a reminder of his or her communal responsibilities.<sup>3</sup>

For all its kinder and gentler aspects, Bronson's model of instruction did pose a challenge to the teaching profession, such that it was, which at this time was most notable for its dearth of charismatic, well-trained instructors. His approach also created enormously high expectations for students of such a visionary. Indeed, in his discussion of Bronson's relationship with his own daughters, Strickland notes that Bronson "expected a great deal from the children in the way of conscientious self-control at a very early age," an observation borne out by Bronson's pedagogy (13). Even though he relied on emotion and "Inspiration," not physical punishment as the means of instruction, he never wavered in his attempts to instill self-discipline in his students.

To that end, Bronson's classroom approach was marked by a heavy reliance on language as an appropriate tool for gaining insight into and control over the self. This is not surprising, coming as it did from a man with a lifelong penchant for journal-keeping and a fascination with the nature of the self. The existence of thousands of pages of his most intimate ruminations indicate that, if nothing else, Bronson valued writing as a form of knowledge making, and personal writing as a principal means to learn about himself. Bronson noted the instructive nature of this kind of writing in his comment:

I look back upon these pages whereon I have imagined some dim and imperfect signs of my spiritual and intellectual life—some emblematic hints of what I have been doing and designing—some notes that indicate, where in the realm of space and time, I lived and felt and thought and acted. As I read the written words the past comes up before me and I commune with my past-self—my former states of thought—I trace the history of ideas from their embryon forms to their maturer shapings. (qtd in Kagle 129)

Bronson's own journal was his central text, a lifelong guide and permanent record of his journey to moral perfection and transcendence. If such intimate writing was useful for him, no doubt it would be so for his pupils, he reasoned. As I have indicated in the previous chapter, accounts of the Cheshire school indicate that he introduced journaling in that setting; records of both the Germantown Academy and the Temple School reveal that journaling and letter writing were used as important modes of instruction there as well. The surviving journals and letters are valuable for the picture they paint of his school from the perspective of its students, a view not often available to historians of classroom practices who have tended to study only textbooks and curricula. In his instructor role, Bronson very much resembled the motherteacher in Abbott's text. Personalized writing assignments involving the journal and letters were the means by which he established disciplinary intimacy and reinforced moral values and expectations among his charges. His student-writers appear to have quickly discerned their teacher's more idealistic expectations of them and their language activities, and as a result, they attempted to make their oral and written responses to him as

much a fulfillment of those expectations as an attempt at honest self-expression. Nonetheless, in an interesting and perhaps not wholly unexpected twist, the extant journals of Bronson's students reveal not necessarily "fluid minds" who were easily molded into Alcottian types of "Heavenly Beauty," but rather, active and curious minds that both resisted and welcomed their teacher's well-meaning attempts to discipline them through the medium of their own language.

Finally, the prospectus of the female school at the Germantown Academy, circulated in March 1831, indicates the importance Bronson and his fellow teacher William Russell placed on establishing a home-like setting in order to do the work of character training which both men believed was the most important task of the school. The prospectus notes that

[R]egarding *the cultivation of the filial and social affections*, as claiming our first attention, we shall endeavour to conduct the successive stages of education, by methods of a parental character. The principals will receive a few pupils into their families, as boarders under the immediate superintendence and care of Mrs. Russell and Mrs. Alcott. These, with a limited number admitted as day scholars, are intended to compose a domestic circle, associating for purposes of instruction, and mutual influence. (*italics Alcott*)<sup>4</sup>

Bronson's language ("methods of a parental character," "to compose a domestic circle") suggests that he saw his school as an extension of the home, with the teacher functioning in much the same fashion as a nurturing parent (read mother). His was a vision of a school with fluid boundaries that

naturally overlapped and absorbed some of the tasks, including moral training, heretofore associated with the home. Establishing a teacher-pupil relationship modeled on the parent-child bond was critical if the school was to succeed in its mission of creating a harmonious “domestic circle.” Such an intimate relationship would also make it easier to implement his progressive personal writing curriculum.

In her book *Gender and the Journal*, Cinthia Gannett traces the origins of the journal in the United States back to the spiritual diaries of seventeenth-century Puritans in New England. According to Gannett, by the mid-nineteenth century, journal-keeping was a pervasive activity in literate New England, spurred on, in part, by technological advances that made paper and books cheaper and hence more readily available. Gannett notes that “[J]ournals will come of age in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as various strands of journal tradition combine and recombine, and as the social and literary value of journal keeping is exploited” (105). Their popularity, coupled with the surge of interest by Transcendental thinkers in self-expression and reflection, made intimate writing a natural medium for teachers such as Bronson and Abby who were intensely interested in promoting “spiritual culture” in their home and schools and promoting what Judith Strong Albert terms “the unfolding of the spirit in language” (“Transition” 210).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as I will discuss in the following section, both the journal and the letter were logical places for the nineteenth-century child to

nurture her emerging analytical skills as well as discipline herself in the virtues her parents and teachers deemed most important.

### III

#### “and as every thing gose in to the journal.” Letter Writing and Journal Keeping in the Alcott Classrooms

One form of intimate writing that Bronson and Abby Alcott relied on in order to discipline their charges was letter writing. Like many literate New Englanders, they kept up a voluminous correspondence with various family members and friends during the course of their long lives. The letters they wrote to children, their own and others, reveal that the Alcotts were cognizant of the efficacy of letter writing as a means to establish an intimate connection with children and hence discipline their minds and sentiments. In 1832, Bronson Alcott began corresponding with one of his pupils at the Germantown Academy, eight-year-old Elizabeth Lewis, the daughter of Mordacai Lewis of Philadelphia.<sup>6</sup> The twenty-six surviving letters between the two are proof of the respect Alcott paid his young pupils, and he believed, served as evidence of his success at what he termed “the cultivation of the powers of expression.”<sup>7</sup>

In his introduction to the bound volume that contains the letters, Alcott wrote the following regarding the purpose of the correspondence:

Education, rightly regarded, embraces not only those influences which enable the mind to realize in external things, the

ideas which dwell within it, but those also which vivify and brighten these ideas, through the imagination and the heart. It is a process by which the mind is rendered conscious of its relations to itself, and to surrounding things. It is the expression of the ideal by the real.

Language is the sensible sign of this expression. It is a picture of the ideal. Its imagery is typical of thought: and an important department of education lies in the cultivation of expression by written signs. The power of depicting the flitting thoughts on paper, in their true forms, preserving their intellectual freshness and ideal beauty, is one of transcendent importance, since language is the tongue of the soul, speaking, in expressive tones and significant signs, its inmost [wants?].

The second paragraph of this introduction illustrates Bronson's belief in the close correspondence between language, truth, and reality. If language was indeed the "tongue of the soul, speaking...its inmost wants," then it was a medium that must be handled with care and reverence, given its highly charged moral nature. As Lawrence Buell points out, this view of language was shared by other Transcendentalists, as well, whose discussions of literary merit often conflated morality, personality, and aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> Bronson's philosophy of composition was a natural extension of this belief that language was, in fact, a sign of the welling-up of the soul. He encouraged his pupils to turn not to books or external authorities, but within themselves for insight and appropriate subject matter for examination and analysis. He said as much in letter V to Elizabeth:

[T]hought and feeling expressed and embodied in the correspondence and diary, seem multiplications of ourselves; becoming portraiture of our characters. In this respect, they are valuable and interesting materials.—They open the Book of the



Heart—they become leaves on which the experiences of self, are inscribed—they aid us in attaining that self-knowledge, without which, all the attainments, cannot give us the power of reading the page of self aright.

In his first letter to Elizabeth, Bronson inquired after appropriate topics, and in doing so, posited what we today call a romantic, expressivist approach to composition:

On what subjects shall we write?--on those with which we are most familiar, I suppose, and in which we feel most interest. Our thoughts will then flow easily and our correspondence be simple and natural. We will not limit our efforts, in the beginning, by specifying subjects minutely, but be guided by circumstances and the spontaneous feelings of the moment. Let us be free and unbound.

In his comment encouraging Elizabeth to “be free and unbound,” Bronson exhibited the non-directive aspect of his pedagogical approach. Yet in the very next paragraph, he offered some possible suggestions for topics, with the intent, no doubt, of influencing the general direction of their subsequent correspondence. He noted,

But we may, nevertheless, anticipate the general course of our thoughts. You are deeply interested in the subject of self, and our letters will doubtless embody much on this, and whatever may serve to illustrate and amplify our ideas regarding it. This implies a reference to Nature and Revelation, which will naturally claim a share of our attention and remark. By allowing ourselves to expatiate in this wide field, we shall find all the variety, freedom and simplicity, which we desire.

Without a doubt, Bronson had in mind a course of letters more self-conscious than not. Buell’s analysis of the public conversational techniques

employed by various Transcendental thinkers is particularly helpful here in understanding Bronson's approach to his correspondence with young Elizabeth. Buell notes that while conducting their public conversations, Margaret Fuller and Bronson Alcott often relied on members of the audience to suggest topics spontaneously before they expressed their own views. Buell comments that "each really wanted to draw the company out...and felt that they had failed if they didn't" (89). Bronson is seen employing a similar approach in his letters to Elizabeth when he offers her the opportunity to suggest topics. But in keeping with his highly idealistic view of the goals of education, he also attempted to discourage her from lapsing into the trivial.<sup>9</sup>

Elizabeth's response to this first epistle indicates she was conscious of the didactic nature of their correspondence. "I have no doubt but what it [BA's next letter] will be interesting as well as instructive to me; and I think that I shall improve as I go on, both in the thoughts and expressions," she wrote in reply. She willingly ceded to him the responsibility of deciding on subject matter, stating, "Your next letter I hope will decide upon what [subject] it [the correspondence] shall run." In his subsequent response, Bronson reiterated the moral and disciplinary nature of their exchanges, praising Elizabeth for her letter which "...bespeaks a heart full of good purposes, and a mind interested in worthy subjects. Our correspondence, will, in its progress, I trust, disclose thee traits of mind and character on your part." He also offered some comments on the subject of intellect, reminding her that "[T]he more we

cultivate our minds, therefore, the more do we advance ourselves towards wisdom and happiness: the broader becomes the foundation on which we stand, and the wider our moral view.” In a later letter, Bronson gave credit to both letter writing and journal keeping as “...my most effectual instructors” in aiding him to learn to think and write.

The contrast between Bronson’s serious, at times pontifical, tone and Elizabeth’s child-like directness and earnestness is both amusing and indicative of his natural habit of treating all children with as little condescension as possible, which, as Strickland notes, was “an unusual quality for the time...” and often lead to “some remarkably candid statements” from Bronson’s own daughters (64). He was the catalyst for a similar honest response from Elizabeth. Her frank assessment of the Bible, prompted by Bronson’s own comments in a previous letter, reveals what made his educational agenda so iconoclastic—and threatening—to many of his contemporaries. “I get knowledge; but I do not think that I or you, from what I have seen of you, get much knowledge from the Bible, for I do not understand it,” she stated with all the fearlessness of an eight-year-old thinker. For the more tradition-minded of the nineteenth century, such comments could easily be construed as highly offensive, if not heretical. But Bronson’s philosophy of composition, by its very nature, encouraged students to engage in critical thinking which might naturally lead them to topics or views deemed inappropriate for young children by many parents.<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth herself pointed

to the liberatory nature of Bronson's pedagogy when she wrote, "I am sure there is a great deal that is of use in letter writing; it makes us think; and as we do not like to send bad letters to any body, we take pains to have them good. Though some people would say I was too young to give any body thoughts, I do not see why I may not, though I am young; does that make any difference?"

Elizabeth's precociousness and intellectual advancement no doubt make the correspondence between her and her teacher somewhat out of the ordinary, if not downright extraordinary at times. Yet certain of her comments do serve as reminders of her youthfulness. Over the course of their correspondence, she and Bronson discussed the Bible, Wordsworth's poetry, and the nature of truth, to name but a few astonishing topics. In response to a particularly long and convoluted letter by her teacher regarding the uses of a diary (among other things), Elizabeth offered this pointed chastisement: "Your last letter was more difficult to understand, than the other...I did not read it with interest. I think that our letters will be better if we write them when it is pleasant to us, and not with just for the sake of saying 'I have done it.' I think we had better write when we have good thoughts to write." When she inquired of him "...how do we get truth?" she made sure to let Bronson know that she wanted his reply "in as few and simple words as you can," perhaps not the easiest request for him to satisfy, given his tendency to favor

a formal philosophical style that at times obviously vexed his young correspondent. Alcott responded to her criticism mildly, stating,

You wish me to write in simpler words. It is a reasonable request; and yet a communication which does not tax our understanding, and interest us enough to induce a second and third reading, is hardly worth receiving. I do not wish to write above your apprehension, but to elicit and exercise all your perceptive and creative powers. Perhaps I have expected too much of you. But this remains to be proved—and 'tis yet too soon to decide. Heretofore I have written, not only to interest, but to prove your powers of understanding; and, in my last particularly, imagined myself writing to one of mature mind. We shall see whether you appreciate my thoughts as our correspondence advances. You are willing to use all your faculties, & I will endeavour to direct them to such subjects only, and such views of subjects, as you shall be able to discuss.

Bronson's comment seems to suggest that he hoped their correspondence would serve as an example of the pedagogical value of writing that challenged the "perceptive and creative powers" of students and provide evidence of his belief in the innate intellectual and moral capabilities of children. He assumed Elizabeth was his equal, "one of mature mind," and accordingly, introduced subjects that would "prove [her] powers of understanding." One senses some dismay and a hint of defensiveness in his response, the result, perhaps, of Elizabeth's hint of resistance to Bronson's philosophic tone and agenda. Charles Strickland makes the point that "it is difficult for a child to respond to an adult in terms of equality, much as an adult might wish it," and observes that Anna Alcott's replies to her father's philosophic inquiries were often ambiguous, a "mixture of candor and

conformity" (64) that was the result of her uncertainty over what constituted a proper response to his questions. Elizabeth, however, exhibits no such ambiguity in her letters. Instead, she felt free to criticize her teacher's agenda and writing style, and in doing so, demonstrated the more exhilarating results of such a pedagogical approach.

In response to another of Elizabeth's requests in the same letter, Bronson also offered his opinion regarding the use of a diary:

I will state what seems to me the most important. What is a Diary?—a daily record of one's experience—in which are collected the changeful hues shed upon our minds by circumstances. It is a concentration of our thoughts, feelings, and purposes; and exhibits the views which most attract our mental self. If true to ourselves, it becomes a history of our being.

Bronson's statement reveals the importance he placed on journaling as a way of arriving at self-knowledge. He continued in a similar vein, noting:

Now the advantages of keeping such a psychological record are obvious at once:—

(1.)—It imparts self-knowledge—by requiring an enumeration of circumstances, and leading us to perceive and record their influence upon our mind, feelings, or character.

(2.)—It, therefore, calls forth observation and reflection--requires the exercise of discrimination and reflection--cultivates expression, and thus puts our whole mind in action.

(3.) By daily bringing in review the events of our being, it offers an occasion, which we cannot well fail to improve, for sitting in judgement on the course of our life—setting before us the causes of our successes and failures, and holding up the mirror of self for the inspection of ourselves. ....Formal instruction may impress; but it is the experience of circumstances that alone educate us.—So much for the Diary and its connexions.

The more demanding—even intimidating—aspects of Bronson’s pedagogy are apparent in his definition of the purpose of a journal. To write such a text was, no doubt, a challenging task, requiring of the writer a singleminded focus on “the events of our being.” The journal as Bronson envisioned it was the site of intense character scrutiny, the appropriate place “for sitting in judgement on the course of our life—setting before us the causes of our successes and failures, and holding up the mirror of self for the inspection of ourselves.” This definition of purpose, however, was in keeping with his belief in the Messianic nature of teaching. What better way to advance the agenda of moulding his charges into “Types of Heavenly Beauty” than to have them reveal their “successes and failures” in the journal, the ultimate “mirror of self?”

Elizabeth’s response to Bronson’s lofty description of the journal reveals both her maturity and confidence. Undeterred by what to some children must have been the daunting prospect of recording virtues and flaws for the teacher’s inspection, Elizabeth noted in her next letter that she would begin keeping a journal. In a wonderfully insightful distillation of Bronson’s own theory of the journal, she offered her own opinion of the disciplinary nature of such a document:

But there is one thing that I forgot to tell you--that is, one of my reasons for keeping a Diary. You have often said that we get conscience by experience; observing it, I mean. Writing a Diary is writing our experience; and after we have written it, read it, and

observed the causes of what happened, this teaches us how to act again.

In her response, Elizabeth revealed that she has absorbed Bronson's belief that not only did such writing provide instruction in "writing our experience," (i.e. composition) but more importantly, it "teaches us how to act again." She echoed Bronson's own belief that the very act of writing a journal is a moral one because it allowed the writer the opportunity to reflect upon the actions being recorded.

Elizabeth's letters show her to be a child well-suited to Bronson's more intense pedagogical methods. There is no doubt that she was intellectually gifted, as well as emotionally mature for her age. Her prose style reveals that she had internalized the adult voices, including Bronson's, around her to the degree that she was also able to offer commentary on those voices (her critique of the Bible is a good example of this). Her criticism of Bronson also indicates she was not easily intimidated by her teacher's requests or high expectations. The ease with which she corresponded with Bronson also proves that he was, indeed, able to communicate openly with his students without resorting to condescension or threats of any kind, a point reiterated by many Alcott scholars.

However, not all of Bronson's students responded in such a sophisticated fashion to their teacher's insistence on infusing morality into all



reading and writing assignments. Another Germantown pupil, Charles Morgan, had this to say to Bronson about journal writing:

My Journal I am very much interested in. I have tried very hard, in my last week, to please your desires—though the chapters are short, and badly spelt: this last fault, and many others, I have & will try to overcome. One great desire of mine is, to learn to express my language better than I do; and your school, Mr. A., is the best for this purpose.<sup>11</sup>

Charles' transparency (particularly his final line) is both amusing and revealing. Here was a child who, unlike Elizabeth Lewis who responded with interest and obvious curiosity to Bronson's moral agenda, seems to be straining to fulfill his duty—and meet his teacher's expectations of his writing, that is, to “please” his “desires.” In letter 12, Charles made apparent what he only hinted at in his earlier comment regarding his writing:

I now begin to feel great interest in our correspondence. In No. 10 I think, you say it was not well to write on Moral subjects long; but it seems to me when ever I set down to write to you, my thoughts allways [sic] lean toward Moral subjects, and I cannot turn them otherwise. I do not think were I to tell you about my plays, and what I go to see—if I was to write on these subjects, I do not think, it would afford you much pleasure; but, I dare say it would, if I wrote concerning the various interesting book's [sic] I read.

It seems safe to conclude from these comments that Charles was very aware of the parameters governing his correspondence with Bronson—some topics, such as “Moral subjects” were clearly more fitting than discussions of childish “plays.” He exhibited, too, a keen sense of audience awareness when he noted artlessly “it seems to me whenever I set down to write to you, my

thoughts allways [sic] lean toward Moral subjects, and I cannot turn them otherwise." Such language might, at first glance, seem to indicate he was a passive student, intent only on pleasing his teacher, an important—and natural—concern for any young child that in itself should not be discounted. However, in a dramatic display of breathless self-reflective rhetoric in his April 19th letter, Charles convincingly demonstrated that he was anything but passive when he mimicked, in hilarious fashion, his teacher's lofty thoughts and prose:

But I will here drop this subject [his journal], and enter into an examination of myself, and view the faults, and, I hope, a few virtues, which preside there. I think I have at times escaped from the claws of Passion, and if I once arrive at the splendid city of Goodness and everlasting Happiness, I will strive to make it my abode, and not let mighty Sin, which you know is standing ready at the gates of this brilliant city to seize upon the first one that ventures near him, entice me away by his treacherous charms and devices. If he once detains me a prisoner, bound fast by his iron grasp in his dark and gloomy dungeon of Despair and Grief, there I must stay never, never more to enjoy the free air, never more to gambol on the green carpet of the earth. No, never! those pleasures are denied [sic] me, and justly so.

But I have almost forgotten what I am doing, in my imaginary flight of wickedness. So I will return to earth, and close my letter.

If nothing else, Charles' exaggerated didacticism, his references to *Pilgrim's Progress* (which undoubtedly he knew was a favorite with his teacher), and his framing of the response as an allegory all reveal that he was not insensible of the persuasive powers of Bronson's own literary imagery and rhetoric. If it is true that in order to satirize effectively, one must first

thoroughly understand the subject being parodied, then we can conclude from this excerpt that Charles certainly understood the best way to win this teacher's approval when setting out on an "imaginary flight of wickedness." Because of his young age, however, I suspect that Charles was probably unaware of the full humorous import of his ingenuous –and highly earnest– words.

Many of Charles' letters to Bronson (unfortunately the latter's responses are not preserved in this volume) do reveal his childish eagerness to use literacy in the "right" way in order to satisfy his instructor. At one point Charles commented that he was "very glad to find you approved of my Saturday letter, for I used my utmost endeavours to render it agreeable to your wishes." In another he asked, "And if you think the veiw [sic] I have taken of the subject [a book he has been reading] is not correct, I wish you would correct it in your next." But as time went on, he became taxed by the peculiar demands of their correspondence. In one of his final letters to Bronson, Charles requested that they exchange letters only once a week "and let that be on Saturdays, and the letters that you write to me, shall be in answer to mine of that date. Writing two letters a week has now become a burthen which used to be a pleasure, as I do not feel myself capable of doing justice to more than one."

Another eight-year-old who responded in a similar fashion to Bronson's exercises in journal-keeping and literacy was his eldest daughter, Anna.<sup>12</sup> She

and her sisters were an endless source of fascination for him (and frustration, too, in the form of Louisa) and an inspiration for many of his pedagogical theories and methods. Anna herself was the subject of a detailed study of infancy and childhood which he undertook shortly after her birth.<sup>13</sup> Bronson's job was to effect a childrearing program that would promote perfection and moral regeneration.<sup>14</sup> When she learned to read and write, Anna, too, was expected, like all of Bronson's students, to undertake the task of self-study via the medium of the journal. Her 1839-1840 homemade journal, approximately four and a half inches by six inches and written on lined paper, folded and hand-stitched at the seam, contains not only her entries, but pencil notations as well, inscribed by her father, or some other adult reader. It, too, is another fascinating account of a child's journey to goodness taken under the watchful eye of Bronson.

Like the dutiful Charles, Anna, too, seemed to view her journal writing as more of an assignment than a self-sponsored act of reflection. On Sat. 20 Sept. 1839 she noted, "I have not written in my Journal for some days. father has been in Boston." On Wed. Nov. 11th she was more explicit when she commented, "I have not written anything in my journal for some days. Father went to Plymouth, and when he is gone I do not write in my journal." Anna explained several of her journal's lapses in this way. It is clear that Bronson played an important role in getting her to write; when he was absent, there was little or no incentive to continue. Her entries indicate that she was

immune, or at least indifferent to her father's preoccupation with the moral aspect of journal-keeping. Rather, Anna viewed such writing as simply one in a series of academic tasks she was expected to accomplish under his guidance. "...I go to school every day in the house. I read, write, and spell, do sums, paraphrase, and tell definitions, and keep a journal," she noted in a May 19th (1839) letter to her grandmother Alcott that she then copied into her journal.

Not surprisingly, Bronson was the focus of many of Anna's entries. One reason for this may have been the fact that he, along with other family members including Abby, was also the audience for her journal. It was common practice in many nineteenth-century households, including the Alcotts', for family members to share their personal writing. On Oct. 30, 1839 Anna noted this in her entry:

Yesterday I dined with grandfather, and he called to see us. I showed him my diary.

We spend an hour or more every morning at our lessons with father writing, reading, spelling, drawing, defining, cyphering, and talking. I have never been to any school but fathers; he has taught me most that I know about myself and other things. I do not know that I shall have any other teacher.

As her teacher, Bronson was, naturally, an active contributor to Anna's journal. In addition to prose accounts of the daily events of her eight-year-old life, the journal contains a record of her homework—addition and subtraction exercises, parsing, spelling and penmanship lessons. She took up drawing in the course of the 1839 journal, and as a result, small pictures begin to appear

alongside entries, many of them drawn by Bronson rather than Anna. In another instance (Mon. 25th Nov. 1839), Anna wrote, "Here is my name which I copy after father." This is followed, on separate lines, by "Anna Bronson Alcott" written twice, the first in Bronson's hand, the second in Anna's. These entries illustrate the more prosaic—and necessary—aspects of education in the Alcott household. On one level, the journal was simply a workbook in which Anna practiced the more mundane tasks associated with learning the "3R's." But the most important and revealing lessons that Anna recorded in her journal were the periodic assessments of her moral character and conduct. For example, on Friday, Aug. 9th, 1839 she wrote:

I had a good time this morning with Father about my lessons. We talked about the meaning of the words in the reading lesson about 'Minding Your Mother.' We talked about Indulgence too. I like to talk in this way about words and about my own faults because it helps me to correct them. I wish to correct my impatience. Father says all naughtiness begins by impatience.

A preoccupation with correctness in speech, thought, and behaviour characterizes the intimate writings of Elizabeth, Charles, and Anna. For Anna, this takes the form of several references to impatience, apparently her "greatest" character flaw. Her January 1840 comment, "Father says that he wants me to write in my journal everyday. I wish I liked to write better and had more patience," was, no doubt, an unconscious response to her father's insistence on writing a journal. These subjects—writing better and curbing one's impatience—surface in her sister Louisa's journal, as well.

Bronson also utilized journal-keeping in his most famous educational experiment, the Temple School in Boston. (1834-1838) As the “Quarter Card of Discipline and Studies in Mr. Alcott’s School For The Spring Term Current 1836” indicates, some form of journal writing was scheduled each day, with the exception of Tuesdays when the pupils spent that time sketching maps in journals. (see appendix 2) Alcott’s main goal in this school, made clear in both the schedule and detailed account provided by his assistant, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, in *Record of Mr. Alcott’s School, Exemplifying the Principles and Methods of Moral Culture*, was to address the spiritual, imaginative and rational faculties of his pupils. According to Madelon Bedell, Alcott was most interested in helping his pupils “listen to their inner voices” when they confronted moral decisions (82). Dorothy McCuskey notes that “[A]t the same time that he [the student] was encouraged to obey the law of his own nature, the child was made to realize also that he was a social being, that he formed a part of the ‘common conscience’ of the group” (48). The journal is certainly one way to record, reflect upon, and discipline the “inner voice,” the “common conscience” of the child. Journal-keeping was also the easiest way in which Bronson as teacher could keep watch over his pupils’ inner voices. Literacy, morality, and communal responsibility were inextricably linked in his classroom, a point that Dorothy McCuskey notes as well:

[T]here never was any separation here between mental and moral training, between character education and any other kind of

education...Self-analyses, biography, and journal writing, all bearing on the skillful use of language, were also vital parts of the character training as well. The work of this school was thus integrated, in the best sense of the word. (82)

Through his Temple School pedagogy, Alcott also asserted the importance of a child's imagination. To this end, he engaged in what today we might consider a whole language immersion curriculum which placed storytelling, reading, writing, and speaking activities at the heart of the school experience.

Fortunately for scholars, we know much more about the Temple School than about many other mid-nineteenth century academic institutions for young children. Not only did Elizabeth Palmer Peabody transcribe in great detail many of the conversations between Bronson and his pupils in *Record of A School*, but the Temple School journals of brother and sister George and Martha Kuhn have survived and offer yet another provocative glimpse of Bronson's pedagogy in action.<sup>15</sup> George began attending in September 1834 (the school's opening), Martha in June 1835. Both left the school in November 1837. The Kuhns' journals are particularly useful as they illustrate the effect of Bronson's pedagogy on pupils who were bright but whose writing skills were more typical of their actual ages. (George was eight when he began his journal, Martha ten)

Both George and Martha's school journals are similar to Anna Alcott's in that they include the children's' comments about moral and theological issues and records of homework assignments in subjects such as spelling,



grammar, paraphrasing, arithmetic, drawing, and geography. When reading them, one is struck by their contemporary interdisciplinary nature. This can be attributed in part to the more mundane fact that scratch paper, ubiquitous in schools today, was rare in the classrooms of the 1830's, even the better-equipped Temple School.<sup>16</sup> So the classroom journal was the obvious place to record quotidian school tasks and assignments, as well as weightier ruminations on character and virtue. Yet this very characteristic is what makes these journals early models of a writing-across-the-curriculum approach to primary education. This approach is made apparent in George's comment, "I went to my seat and wrote my Journal. I have drawed [sic] the middle states seperately [sic] and will draw them here all together as it is geography day and as every thing gose in to [sic] the Journal" (59).

And everything, indeed, "gose in to" George's journal which also included lists of words and definitions that constituted the day's spelling lesson. In this sense, the journal functioned in a disciplinary manner, as the place for George to inscribe his lessons and commit them to memory. He also recorded Bible verses and paraphrases, as well as virtuous maxims which Bronson wrote on the blackboard and asked the pupils to copy into their books. "I have wrote them." George announced in one entry. "they are these"

Reward the viretous [sic]  
Scorn a mean action

Wisdom is charming  
X represent ten

Avoid evil speaking  
Beauty seen [sic] decays

Reward the virtuous  
Scorn a mean action. (66)

In addition to assignments such as the one above, George's journal also recorded his random observations on the events that took place both in and out of the Temple School. Apparently, he usually wrote simply in response to Bronson's requests—descriptions of recess activities, paraphrases of Biblical stories and verses, a record of the hour he arose in the morning ("Mr. Alcott told the scholars [sic] it would be a good plan to put in our Journals what time we got up I will tell it was 10 minutes of 6 o'clock." (77)), and he drew "what Mr. Greater [the drawing teacher] wished me to" (78). Several times he mentioned that he enjoyed attending the Temple School, perhaps due in no small measure to the many "interesting talk" (sic) that the pupils engaged in with their teacher (91). In one amusing entry, George recorded an "Imaginary letter to the man in the moon," addressed "Mr Moon Man/Moon street 74/In the moon" which he composed in response to an assignment. But such an entry is atypical, for in general, George's journal is a rather stark contrast to the philosophical flights taken by Elizabeth Lewis in her letters to Bronson. However, it is more in line with what we might expect from an eight-year old child—a dutiful, if laconic, attempt to write what he thought would please his teacher.

In one of the more curious—and cryptic—moments of George’s journal, the disciplinary nature of Bronson’s pedagogical method is vividly displayed in a drawing the young boy made of his teacher brandishing a whip which he brought to school one day to make a point regarding the pupils’ lack of attentiveness. In the garbled entry that accompanies the drawing, George noted “as we were not very attentive Mr. Alcott said he should punish us as he never did if we did any more he after the analysing punish us on going on the wheels of Dudy it was the first time he ever brought a whip in the school room I represent it in this picture that you see” (100). Such an overt display of authority by Bronson no doubt shocked and fascinated his students because it was so out of character. One can only wonder what prompted Bronson to introduce, however briefly, the symbol of a pedagogical approach he himself so abhorred. And yet, this drawing is also symbolic of George’s attitude toward a literacy pedagogy that was so insistently didactic and disciplinary. It was “Dudy,” not pleasure, discipline, not desire, that prompted him to fill up the pages of his spiritual record.

Martha Kuhn’s school journal is similar to her brother’s in that most entries are a combination of assignments and a chronology of the day’s events. The purpose behind having the children record in their journals many lengthy lists of words and definitions, as well as shorter lists of maxims was to encourage what Peabody called “the study of spirit” (249) “He [Alcott] begins with asking questions upon the meanings of the words which the children use

in speaking, and which they find in their spelling-lessons, requiring illustrations of them in sentences composed and remembered," she noted (249). She then provided an example of Bronson's approach to the "study of spirit":

He one day began with the youngest of thirty scholars to ask illustrations of the word *brute*; and there were but three literal answers. A brute was a man who killed another; a drunken man; a man who beat his wife; a man without any love; but it was always a man. In one instance it was a boy beating a dog. Which is the brute, said Mr. Alcott, the boy or the dog? The boy, said the little girl, with the gravest face. This case indicates a general tendency of childhood, and is an opening therefore for speaking of the outward as the sign of the inward, and for making all the reading and spelling lessons exercises for defining and illustrating words....Most persons seem to be struck with the advantages necessarily to be derived from the habit of inquiring into the history of words from their material origin, and throughout the spiritual applications of them which the imagination makes. (249)

Like George's, Martha's school journal contains many lists of words and definitions that she recorded. So-called "correct" definitions were of great importance in a pedagogical system that encouraged pupils to make "spiritual applications" of words. But Bronson must have been more than a little disappointed in the lack of such applications in the journals of George, Martha and Anna; although the children dutifully recorded their language lessons, they offered no discussion about the actual words except to note that they had transcribed the lists in their journals.

Nonetheless, despite their overall lack of moral commentary, according to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody the pupils were in agreement that the reason

they came to the Temple School was “to feel rightly, to think rightly, and to act rightly” (15). Because Bronson believed that “[T]he contemplation of spirit in God is necessarily wrapt up in a study of language...” (254), he urged his students to choose their words carefully as they could have a morally generative effect on listeners. “It makes a great deal of difference in your characters, whether there are beautiful shapes in your minds or not,” he cautioned his pupils, “ and, in using words you should take care to use such as may put shapes into the minds of others, which will mold them right” (79-80). If nothing else, such a comment served as a reminder to his students of the power inherent in literacy. Not only could their teacher mold them through his language—they could mold him (and others) by using words that would put the correct “shapes into the minds of others.” Elizabeth Palmer Peabody reiterated this in her observation that “[T]o learn to use words teaches us to appreciate their force” (274). She noted that Bronson viewed journal writing as

...a means of self-inspection and self-knowledge,—enabling the writers to give unity to their own being by bringing all outward facts into some relation with their individuality, and gathering up fragments which would otherwise be lost,—he knows he is also assisting them in the art of composition, in a way that the rules of rhetoric would never do. Every one knows that a technical memory of words and of rules of composition gives very little command of language; while a rich consciousness, a quick imagination, and force of feeling seem to unlock the treasury: and even so vulgar a passion as anger produces eloquence, and quickens perception to the slightest inuendo [sic]. (274-5)

All these comments point to the fact that writing instruction in the Temple School was more than just a grounding in the basic rules of grammar and rhetoric; it was heady training in moral principles, in “consciousness,” “imagination,” and “feeling,” all of which were seen to contribute more to the literary aesthetic than mere “technical memory of words and of rules of composition” (Peabody 274-5).

However, the unevenness of moral reflection in George and Martha Kuhn’s journals does not mean that Bronson was disappointed by the more spiritual abilities of his Temple School students. Peabody mentioned one pupil’s journal that “was full of her [the pupil’s] thoughts and feelings” and as a result, was praised by Bronson. Conversely, Bronson “told one journalist that he wished he would put more of himself into the journal; the boy of that journal, was a mere automaton; he came in, and went out, and did things, but he never felt or thought” (126).

In her article entitled “Transcendental School Journals in Nineteenth Century America,” Judith Strong Albert notes that even at a progressive school like the Temple School, “...the practice of having one’s thoughts proclaimed and discussed in class following individual readings was often an embarrassing and awkward experience,” and helps explain the children’s reticence in disclosing intimate details in their journals (106). In a particularly harsh interpretation, Albert likens this reading aloud technique to psychological abuse which is “less easy to analyze than traditional overt

dislike, which had been identifiable through canings, duncecaps, and Dickensian Gradgrinding forms of educational torture characterizing most nineteenth-century institutions of learning” (106). Certainly the practice of reading aloud from student journals opens up a whole host of ethical issues for twentieth-century scholars and teachers. This is one of the more problematic aspects of the “gentler” approach to childrearing advocated by Bronson and many other well-meaning nineteenth-century education reformers. Public exposure of a student’s more intimate ruminations can easily be interpreted as simply a replacement for physical punishment as a method of discipline. In the hands of a careless or mean-spirited instructor, the result might very well be humiliating and traumatic rather than educational or spiritual. We can only speculate on the effect such readings of student journals might have on the writers themselves; for some, certainly there must have been some discomfort. The prospect of public embarrassment might indeed explain why George’s journal reads more like a writing assignment, dutifully completed, rather than the musings of a budding Transcendental philosopher. Perhaps he simply didn’t want to reveal too much of his “soul,” especially if he was unsure of the reactions it might prompt. Student resistance to the spiritual agenda may be one reason, too, why Bronson was disappointed in the earlier quarter’s journals which, according to George were not “fit to carry home” (58). However, in her analysis Albert focuses only on the more negative aspects of such an exercise,

overlooking the possibility that, in the context of more commonplace—and rigid—mid-nineteenth-century classroom methods, many students might have welcomed Bronson’s interest in their thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, George’s age could also explain the lack of spiritual references in his journal; perhaps he was simply too young to fully understand the more abstract demands of Bronson’s pedagogy.

Because journal writing as Bronson defined it established such a close emotional connection between motherteacher and charges, it was indeed a more effective instrument of discipline than the rod in the classroom. In fact, despite his gentler methods, Bronson was firmly in control in his school and exercised great authority through the use of language. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody herself noted in the *Record* that he was “very autocratic” (31) and cautioned readers, especially teachers with little experience, against imitating his methods in their own classrooms. His autocracy, she claimed, was “not derivative, but original. It is drawn from experience and observation; and I should add, it continually takes counsel from its sources” (32). She herself was a disciplinarian of sorts, who often read aloud from her own record of the school, which the children apparently found intriguing. Peabody noted that such a communal reading reinforced a sense of communal discipline and “seems to create a happy influence on the school. No one defends his faults when he sees himself in the Journal. It is evidently a great aid to self-knowledge” (114).



At other times, the pupils themselves acted as “superintendent” whose job it was to record the names of those who misbehaved. Bronson told one superintendent “[Y]ou know you cannot put down a name because you wish to, nor refrain from putting it down because you do not wish to. Conscience must write down the names, not inclination” (Peabody 109). Self-control was an important virtue in the school; at one point Bronson asked his students if they had “put a sentinel over [themselves]today...” (140) In a sense, the superintendent functioned much like the panopticon of Jeremy Bentham’s prison architecture, which Foucault has argued “automatizes and disindividualizes power” (202). Students kept watch at various times over others, and more importantly, over themselves. With this approach, although discipline was divested from the authority of the teacher, order in the classroom was still maintained with little display of outward force. On one occasion, Bronson resorted to physical punishment, but with a twist—he made the guilty party strike him with the ferule. This, like all other actions in the school, was explained in spiritual terms by Peabody:

...the point of view in which this punishment is presented to the minds of children is not to satisfy the claims of any inexorable law, but to give a pain which may awaken a solemn attention, and touch the heart to love and generosity. The children do not feel that they escape punishment; for it is taken for granted that they feel a greater pain in seeing others suffer than they would in suffering themselves. But its great object is to display to them that Mr. Alcott’s infliction of punishment is not want of feeling for their bodies, but a deeper and intense interest in their souls. ( 36)

The children's' reactions to this newer form of discipline are also noted in the *Record*. In one conversation, they "all spontaneously said that they had never been in a school where there was so much order, and so little punishment, as in this. Mr. Alcott asked them how they felt when he punished them; and they said that they always felt he punished them for their own good, and not from anger" (141).

In this post-Freudian age, it is easy to criticize Bronson's disciplinary methods as retrogressive, as merely substituting psychological discipline for physical punishment. Certainly, he and his assistant were guilty of asking leading questions of their charges during the many conversations on moral issues that played an important role in the school's curriculum. Reading the transcripts of these conversations, one is struck by the teachers' naiveté, their inability to see that their pupils may in fact have been giving them the "right" answers not necessarily as a result of the flowering of their spiritual intuitions, but rather because they had discerned what "right" answers would satisfy their instructors and win their approval. Peabody records one such artless dialogue between Bronson and his pupils: "Who was the best man in the world? Lafayette. Was he the very best? Oh no! it was Jesus Christ; I am surprised I could forget that" (186). In another instance, he asked pupils "...which was most interesting, such conversation as this, [on angels and spiritual issues] or conversation about steam-engines or such things" (89). Peabody records that many replied the former, while a few remained silent.

Prompted by the teacher, a young boy was lead to conclude that he “liked to think about his thoughts” more than thinking about anything else. Then Bronson again asked that “ all those who like to think about their thoughts better than about how things were made and done to hold up their hands; and almost every scholar held up his hand for thoughts” (89).

Although today we may find some of Bronson’s pedagogical methods inappropriate, if not problematic, it is important to remember that in seeking his pupils’ opinions on such “adult” subjects as religion, the Bible, or simply by requesting that they record their daily thoughts and activities, Bronson was granting the children a measure of autonomy and self-expression seldom seen in any classroom of the 1830s. And although there certainly was punishment and discipline in his schools, it is also clear from the evidence of student responses that it was not meted out in a capricious or whimsical fashion. The records indicate, too, that his pupils were eager and curious participants in his educational experiments. They demonstrated an acute, and at times, artless awareness of Bronson’s spiritual agenda, which, while undermining it to some extent, nevertheless enabled them to grapple in a critical fashion with complicated—and interesting material, no small achievement in a nineteenth-century classroom. Dahlstrand offers the following assessment of Bronson’s pedagogy that sums up the tension between its more coercive aspects and its benefits to the pupils:

Thus Alcott's paradigm [of the spirit] gave the children a means of exercising their minds. It served as a structure on which they could build ideas. In one sense the paradigm limited them, but in another important way it freed them—it freed them from the tyranny of disorganization. In time they could cast away the paradigm, but the thought processes it helped them develop could stay with them forever. Alcott may not have made his students more spiritual, nor awakened in them the truth of spiritual things, but he did make them think. Almost despite himself, his methods succeeded. (127)

If nothing else, Bronson evinced an obvious interest in his students' "inward life" not common in most teachers of his day (Peabody 42). He also believed that "...every book read should be an event to a child, and all his plans of teaching [kept] steadily in view the object of making books live, breathe, and speak..."—certainly a laudable goal given the almost universal reliance on rote teaching methods during this period. (Peabody 26-7).

Furthermore, Bronson was deeply committed to establishing a close connection between the workings of school and the home. He firmly believed that education needed to be useful, it should function as a support to, not stand apart from, the daily duties of everyday existence. Dorothy McCuskey notes that he viewed schools as second homes, and "...he always deemed them successful insofar as they approximated the loving affections of the ideal family" (130). Viewed in the light of Brodhead's theory of disciplinary intimacy, Bronson's pedagogy is very much an attempt to replicate the motherteacher figure in the classroom along the lines advocated by other proto-child development specialists such as Child and Abbott. Begin by

reforming the individual child—better yet, let the individual child learn to reform herself, along accepted Judeo-Christian principles—thus would the reformation of all society and institutions begin, Alcott believed. The testimony of the students themselves, both enthusiastic and qualified, indicates that, if nothing else, an Alcott school was a lot more interesting than the average mid-nineteenth century academic institution. One former pupil, Charles Godfrey Leland, noted in his memoirs that Bronson “...was the most eccentric man who ever took it on himself to train and form the youthful mind (46). But despite Leland’s dismissal of his former teacher’s pedagogical prowess (“His forte was ‘moral influence’ and ‘sympathetic intellectual communion’ by talking; and oh, heaven! what a talker he was!” (46)), he inadvertently offered evidence that, if not inducing him to become an “ideal” boy, Bronson at least whetted his literary appetite and was the catalyst for his reading, at age nine, the entire “Faerie Queen”—a fact which Bronson made sure to remind him of at an 1881 meeting at Harvard University where Leland delivered the Phi Beta Kappa poem (Leland 46).<sup>17</sup>

As a minister of moral and spiritual culture and Transcendental ideals, Alcott’s true legacy can be best assessed by the pupils under his care, most of whom have faded into oblivion. We can only guess that, like most teachers, he was popular with some, like the mature Elizabeth Lewis, more of a failure, if not a figure of ridicule to others like Leland. What is clear from the record, however, is that mothering and teaching were inseparable in

Bronson's worldview. Then, as now, both activities required an authority figure acting in a nurturing and a disciplinary capacity. Although it may be difficult at times for us today to distinguish between these two aspects in Bronson's pedagogy, his supremely optimistic belief in the goodness of the children under his care suggests that he was genuinely interested in the welfare of their minds and souls and fervently hoped he could assist in a positive way his young "fellow-travellers" who were on their journey to "usefulness and happiness."

Bronson was not alone in his mission to reform the world by influencing the characters of his young charges, particularly his own daughters. His wife, Abby May, had her own ideas about education reform and a mother's role in shaping the character and values of her children. Her equally important, and often overlooked, contributions to the motherteaching that took place in the Alcott "domestic circle" are the subject of the next chapter.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER III

1. The correspondence between Bronson and Elizabeth Lewis is part of the Alcott Family Papers Collection at the Houghton Library, Harvard University. The accession number for that material is 59M-305 (33); it is listed in my bibliography under the title "Correspondence between a Teacher and One of His Pupils" in the entries for Bronson. The correspondence between Bronson and Charles Morgan is also part of the Houghton collection. Its Houghton accession number is 59M-305 (33); it is listed in my bibliography under the descriptive title I assigned it, "Correspondence with Charles Morgan," in the listing of entries under Bronson. The Kuhn children material is listed under their name in my bibliography. Anna Bronson Alcott Pratt's childhood journal is cross-referenced in my bibliography under her name. It, too, is part of the Houghton's Alcott collection, accession number 59M-305 (24).

2. Sherman Paul notes that "[M]ore than any other American transcendentalist, Bronson Alcott took Wordsworth seriously: he enacted the philosophy of the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*. In his search for the object most closely corresponding to the divine, Alcott came by way of infant and elementary school teaching, his philosophical immersion at Germantown, and the study of the psychological behavior of his daughters, a lifelong dedication to the child. Perhaps the popular conception of his innocence and naiveté expresses this devotion, for he was always able to enter easily the world of the child. Children were his fit audience...they mirrored for him the spiritual state that the adult had forfeited by contact with debasing material affairs. In them, he sought a purity similar to that Thoreau saw reflected in Walden Pond" (89-90).

3. Paul notes "[T]hus, Alcott came to believe that the process of inspiration was social, that lacking the schoolroom the family was the perfect sphere for its practice" (92).

4. I am quoting here from a copy of the Germantown Academy prospectus found in the Alcott Family Papers at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, accession 59M-305 (33).

5. Lawrence Buell notes that "...it was in Transcendentalist writing that the three traditions...spiritual self-examination, romantic self-consciousness, and democratic individualism—converged for the first time in American history,

with the result that the self became a more important entity for the Transcendentalists than for any of their forbears” (267).

6. All quotations in this and subsequent chapters from correspondence between Bronson and Elizabeth Lewis refer to material housed in the Houghton Library Alcott Family Papers collection, accession 59M-305 (33). See the citation “Correspondence between a Teacher and One of his Pupils 1832” under A[mos] B[ronson] Alcott listings in my bibliography. According to Charles Strickland, Elizabeth Lewis boarded with the Alcotts at Germantown for a period of time in 1832.

7. See note 6; see also bibliography, A[mos] B[ronson] Alcott, “Correspondence between a Teacher...”.

8. Buell notes that “[T]he idea of art as an expression of character was a standard romantic assumption; it was also a classical assumption, and a Christian assumption, too...What is provocatively unique about the Transcendentalists is the seriousness with which they took it...Here, as at several other points, what differentiates them from the great English romantics as well as such compatriots as Hawthorne and Poe is not so much their critical principles as the strictness with which they applied them...the Transcendentalists took the messianic implications of the poet-priest more seriously than all English romantics except Blake and Shelley” (67).

9. In her discussion of the transcendental pedagogies of Bronson Alcott and his disciple Hiram Fuller, Judith Strong Albert comments that “...Alcott’s purpose was to reveal the soul...If he were unable to reveal the child’s soul, the loss was a sense of personal failure. There was no space between Alcott the man and Alcott the teacher” (“Transition” 211).

10. Inappropriate subject matter, which included birth and circumcision, was indeed what created the great public outcry over Alcott’s 1836 volume *Conversations With Children on the Gospels*, which one critic labeled “one third absurd, one third blasphemous, and one third obscene” (qtd. in Dahlstrand 141).

11. Charles Morgan’s letters to Bronson which I quote in this chapter are found in the Houghton Library collection of Alcott Family Papers, accession number 59M-305 (33). See listing under Bronson’s name in bibliography (“Correspondence with Charles Morgan, 1834”).



12. Anna's 1839 journal is housed in the Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 58M-305 (24). See Pratt listing in bibliography. All quotations refer to this material.

13. This massive study, which Alcott titled "Observations on the Phenomena of Life, as Developed in the Progressive History of an Infant, during the First Year of its Existence" was, according to Strickland, one of the first of its kind in the United States (6).

14. According to Dahlstrand, Bronson believed "[P]roper child rearing, proper education, would make pure individuals; in turn these pure individuals would transform society and institutions" (84).

15. The Kuhn journals have been reproduced; see Kuhn listing in bibliography.

16. The Temple School was indeed well-equipped for the time. As was typical with all his schools, Bronson paid attention to its aesthetic qualities. There were books, busts, a globe, pictures, good lighting, and comfortable seats.

17. In her 1837 book *Society in America*, Harriet Martineau had some rather unkind words to say about Bronson's Temple School. She noted, "[T]here is a school in Boston, (large one, when I left the city,) conducted on this principle. The master presupposes his little pupils possessed of all truth, in philosophy and morals; and that his business is to bring it out into expression; to help the outward life to conform to the inner light; and, especially, to learn of these enlightened babes, with all humility. Large exposures might be made of the mischief this gentleman is doing to his pupils by relaxing their bodies, pampering their imaginations, over-stimulating the consciences of some, and hardening those of others; and by his extraordinary management, offering them every inducement to falsehood and hypocrisy. His system can be beneficial to none, and must be ruinous to many. If he should retain any pupils long enough to make a full trial of his methods with them, those who survive the neglect of bodily exercises and over-excitement of brain, will be found the first to throw off moral restraints, on perceiving at length that their moral guide has been employing their early years in the pursuit of shadows and the contempt of realities. There is, however, little fear of such a full trial being made. A few weeks are enough to convince sensible parents of the destructiveness of such a system; and it will probably issue in being one of the fancies of the day at Boston; and little heard of anywhere else" (175-6).

## CHAPTER IV

### “INFLUENCE IS BETTER THAN PRECEPT”: ABBY MAY ALCOTT AS MOTHERTEACHER

#### I

“...but books were always attractive”: The Education of Abby Alcott

If Bronson Alcott was the “motherteacher” of his young charges in Cheshire, Germantown and Boston, it was his wife, Abby May Alcott (1800-1877) who filled a similar role in the family circle, participating in a critical way through her financial and emotional support in her husband’s endeavours at educational reform, as well as in the formation of her daughters’ literacy. Until now, literary scholars and historians of the Alcotts have focused primarily on Abby’s role as wife and mother in the Alcott family, overlooking the fact that as the daughter of the prominent Bostonian Colonel Joseph May, a man notable for his many charitable acts, she was, both before and after her marriage, well-connected to the many social reform movements beginning to percolate in that city during the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, Abby May was a member of one of the most respected and venerable Boston families. Alcott biographer Madelon Bedell notes that Abby was part of a circle of influential women in that city who had taken up various social causes, most notably education reform, during the early and mid-nineteenth century (39).

The reality is, however, that we know much about Bronson's contributions to education reform, but Abby's own commentary on the subject is often overlooked. And while there have been several biographies of Bronson over the years, the only full-length treatment of Abby was written in 1949.<sup>1</sup> This may be because she never practiced teaching in the professional realm, nor did she ever write anything for public consumption. Biographers of the Alcotts have overlooked the fact that as a mother at home, Abby was the primary caregiver of her children and therefore was continually engaged in a teaching dialogue with her daughters. Furthermore, her pedagogical observations were recorded only in the private sphere, in her personal journal and correspondence with family and friends, which also may account for the lack of scrutiny given to her comments on education. Most accounts of Bronson's teaching experiments minimize, if not wholly ignore, Abby as both an intellect and active participant in her husband's career, focusing instead on the trials she endured as a result of Bronson's financial ineptitude. This exclusion is perhaps to some degree understandable, given the relative paucity of primary materials that exist to document Abby's life compared to her husband's.<sup>2</sup> There are more narrative and dramatic possibilities, too, in highlighting Abby's role as the wife of a man that history insists on labeling, not without good reason, an "eccentric."<sup>3</sup>

But it is important to remember that Abby was thirty years old when she finally married Bronson. Her initial attraction to the man who would

become her husband was the result of shared interests; by the time she met him, Abby had formed quite definite opinions of her own about pedagogy and educational reform. The collection of her letters, diaries, and autobiographical fragments at the Houghton Library, while not nearly so extensive as her husband's, nonetheless provides ample and eloquent testimony of an independent minded, intellectual woman who took a keen interest in many social movements, particularly education reform. Her commitment to the notion of moral education for the young is most clearly apparent in her letters, especially those she wrote to her brother Samuel Joseph May, who himself taught school at various times between 1817 and 1819 before becoming a Unitarian minister. Although Abby never became a public reformer like her husband, nevertheless she was a highly influential figure in her daughters' education. The most persuasive testimony of her importance in her daughters' literary and imaginative lives lies in her daughter Louisa's writing style which echoes the strains of her mother's, not her father's voice. This chapter attempts to lift the veil from Abby's intellectual life and mother-teaching and examine her more private discourse and actions vis-à-vis education reform in order to reveal the important role she, too, played in shaping not only her daughter Louisa's prose style, but also Louisa's notions of literacy, moral education, and feminine identity.

Interestingly enough, Abby and Bronson's courtship was partly the result of her brother Samuel's role as a promoter of education innovation.

Intrigued by what he had read about Bronson's Cheshire school, May corresponded with Alcott and extended an invitation to him to visit May's Brooklyn, Connecticut home in 1827. In Samuel May and his sister, Abby, Alcott found listeners keenly interested in his ideas and innovative pedagogies. Abby, in particular, was deeply impressed by this "Professional Educator."<sup>4</sup> "His views on Education were very attractive to my brother as well as myself," she noted in an autobiographical fragment written many years later. "I was charmed by his modesty, his earnest desire to promote better advantages for the young."<sup>5</sup> In April 1828, as a result of the Mays' encouragement and his own conviction that his educational experiments could not succeed in rural Connecticut, Bronson turned his back on his home state and, intent on meeting with more enlightened minds, headed to Boston. In 1828 Abby also applied for the position of assistant teacher at the Salem Street Infant School to which Bronson had been appointed Superintendent. The committee appointed to oversee the school, however, hired another woman. He and Abby continued to correspond and in 1830 were married in Abby's hometown.

Not surprisingly, Abby's early education was similar to Bronson's—and to so many other children's in New England during this time. It was more informal than not and often interrupted. Furthermore, it took place primarily in the home setting. Her brother Samuel mentions that at the age of four, Abby did become a "regular attendant" with her siblings at a Boston "Ma'am

school” (*Memoir* 23) However, according to Abby’s own memoir, her formal schooling was punctuated by frequent bouts of illness.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, she was encouraged to read and often read aloud to her siblings and mother. At the age of 19, she attended a school run by a Miss Allyn of Duxbury, a friend of her brother Samuel. In her memoir Abby notes that she studied French, Latin, botany, and history, and lists “Hume–Gibbons–Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire–Hallam’s Middle Ages–Robertson’s Charles 5th” as some of the school texts. She commented, “I did not love study, but books were always attractive.”<sup>7</sup>

According to accounts of the May family life, the household was a lively one, full of talk of all kinds between its members, and for Abby and her father especially, talk about books. In his memoir Samuel May noted that his father “was of a continually cheerful spirit, and of unusual social gifts; an easy and witty talker, with a fine sense of humor and a fund of personal anecdotes and illustrative stories, which he told with spirit, and always to the delight of listeners” (2). May also commented that his father was also “...a great reader, but not a miscellaneous one...,” his favorite authors being Pope and Addison, as well as “...the theologians of most advanced thought,–Priestley especially” (*Memoir* 2).

In a fictionalized account of her mother’s childhood entitled “Little Things,” Louisa makes much of the love of reading that Colonel May and Abby shared. The story opens with the young protagonist, Abigail, reading

*Rasselas* aloud to her father. Like the Mays, the fictional father and daughter in Louisa's story also share a love of Johnson's prose. In real life, as in the story, reading Johnson was an activity that created an immutable father-daughter bond that lasted well beyond Colonel May's death in February 1841. This is reflected in a comment that Abby made a week before her own death in November 1877 as she closed a book by her favorite author, Johnson: "I shall read no more, but I thank my good father for the blessing this love of literature has been to me for 70 years"<sup>8</sup> An important legacy that Abby passed on to her daughters was this paradigm of literacy as an activity that creates both intimacy and strong familial bonds. It is a model that would be reflected in many of the prose productions of her daughter Louisa, particularly in *Little Women*.

Louisa's sketch of her mother in "Little Things" seems a reliable guide to understanding the source of Abby's interest in reading, writing, and education. Like Jo March in *Little Women* whom she closely resembles, the fictionalized Abby of "Little Things" clearly has a strong, inquiring mind of her own. She ".hated to darn, infinitely preferring to read, or study Latin with her brother, instead of repairing old damask, muslin gowns, and the family hose" (96). Although she is skilled at the requisite domestic tasks such as needlework and keeping household accounts, "[T]hese accomplishments did not satisfy her, however, and she longed to know much more,—to do and be something great and good,—with the sincere longing of an earnest, thoughtful

girl” (93). Both the real-life and the fictionalized Abby had educations typical of many middle-class girls of the early nineteenth-century—some formal schooling in a dame school where, “...after learning to read, spell, sew, and cipher a little...girls were left to pick up knowledge as they could; while the brothers went to college, or were apprenticed to some trade” (Alcott “Little” 93).

Family letters reveal that Abby, too, was quite conversant in the ideas of the leading thinkers and writers of her day. For example, in a letter to her dated 14 August 1815, her brother Samuel mentions his previous letter in which he had commented upon Locke’s theory of the origin of ideas. It is clear from his comments that May was engaged in a thoughtful discussion of educational issues with his sister: “What you say relative to education is certainly true. Nothing is of unimportance in the formation of the mind,” he noted.<sup>9</sup> Abby was particularly close to Samuel, who for many years provided much-needed financial and emotional aid to his sister and her young family. His letters to her are full of remarks on such social causes as abolition and education reform and references to famous writers, all of which indicate that he was well-aware of his sister’s ability to comment meaningfully on a range of subjects. In a letter dated 13 June 1819, Samuel mentioned that he had sent her several books: “Do not be alarmed by the number of Books which it is desirable you should read; nor be induced to read with too great rapidity that you may learn to accomplish much,” he wrote. “Depend upon what I say, haste



in reading is a great waste of mind as well as time: of mind because it weakens the power of observation; of time because nothing is in fact accomplished.”<sup>10</sup> He then recommended Abby make a daily habit of reading a paper from the *Rambler Journal*, a literary production associated with Dr. Johnson, taking care to “remember the train of thought and the leading ideas.”<sup>11</sup>

In a letter to her parents dated 10 Oct. 1819, Abby indicated her own strong desire to abstain from social duties (that is, formal calls) for a period of time in order to concentrate on her studies:

For visiting is altogether incompatible with study and improvement...I cannot let this winter pass without much improvement in mind and habits. I feel as if I had just begun life, for I never enjoyed life rationally before. And I am every day more convinced that there are no real enjoyments but those which philosophy dictates and religion sanctions.<sup>12</sup>

Abby’s commitment to furthering her own education also lead her to comment on what she perceived were the “defects and deficiencies” of “Female education” in general. In a letter to Bronson dated 16 Sept. 1827, she noted that just such defects and deficiencies are what “have from time immemorial kept us [women] in a latitude unrecognized and [oppressive?] to our moral health and intellectual growth.”<sup>13</sup> She mentioned “the good Russell,” presumably the education reformer/writer and friend of Bronson who “has come forth as a pioneer to our emancipation.”<sup>14</sup> She continued her animated defense of feminine influence and intellect, noting,

He [Russell] has said that “Woman was the mother of man.” Let us thank him for this, for it is a fact that has well nigh been forgotten. That we are instruments in the hand of the Great [Artificer?] cannot be denied. Let us then be used as such. Let our women be treated as divine agents, not merely as objects of pleasure or [sense?] created only for convenience and admiration. Let us be taught to think, to act, to teach; let us adopt and exercise the laws of our nature, which nature is Love.<sup>15</sup>

In another undated letter to Bronson, Abby argued that women should be allowed to study physiology:

Why should we not understand what we see, feel, suffer, enjoy?... We study mind, metaphysics, that we may the better regulate our own, and influence that of others. None but the most depraved could derive any thing [sic] from it but what is beautiful—every thing [sic] to wonder and adore... Many of my sisters blush at that which if investigated would make them love God more [profusely?]. ... I may almost say the object for which woman was created is forgotten or shunned as being unfit [for?] their delicate sensibility to investigate.<sup>16</sup>

Extant private correspondence also reveals how the medium of letter-writing functioned as a home school of sorts for family members, particularly the May sisters like Abby for whom access to formal education was limited. Letter writing provided all members with the opportunity to practice and refine rhetorical skills and engage in dialogue on various subjects of interest, both personal and intellectual. Abby’s own letters, and those written to her by siblings, are, in many instances, transcripts of mini-lectures on various literary and rhetorical topics. Sisters, brothers, and parents all functioned in the May household as teachers of one sort or another, dispensing advice on grammar, writing, and the latest books. For example, Abby’s older sister

Louisa May, in a letter dated 5 July 1816, commented extensively on Abby's writing ability, observing that " [W]ith a little practice and correction...you may write elegantly."<sup>17</sup> Like her brother Samuel, Louisa too, offered advice on the course of study she thought her sister should follow, urging her to develop reading habits that were at once catholic, cultured, and high-minded:

I hope you both remember all I have said to you and endeavor to accomplish a little reading every day, and at night write me what you have read. Give me your opinion of the *Style*, etc, of the book you are engaged in. You must forgive me for urging this so constantly upon you, but I feel anxious to have your minds well studied with every thing useful, and as highly cultivated as any [word] in the country.—I do not wish to confine you to one sort of reading, nor to the studies of chemistry, botany, and astronomy; though a slight knowledge of [word] would be very well. Devote most of your time to history, and biography; blend with it poetry, the drama; and sometimes a well chosen novel will not be amiss. In fact, I think it is indispensable to have a little knowledge of the new publications, to read those that are recommended by persons in whose judgments you can confide; that is, if you wish to appear at all to advantage in conversation...but a great deal may be gained from the *Tales of Miss Edgeworth*; which should be read with attention; her morals are pure, her style to me is delightful; and, I believe, correct.<sup>18</sup>

Louisa May's advice is another example of a strong family literacy model similar to the one that existed between Colonel May and his daughter. Louisa's extended and earnest comment reflects both an affectionate concern for her sister's emerging intellectual life and a belief that reading was a prized activity. This model of literacy training, relying as it did on intimate relationships as a means to discipline and teach, would inform the way in which Abby mothered her own daughters, as well, and, as I will discuss later,

was not only at the heart of her relationship with her writer-daughter Louisa, but *Little Women*, as well.

Abby's letters and diaries also support her sister's contention that Abby was more than a competent writer. Her enthusiasm for her writing is expressed in a 4 May 1818 letter to her father: "I love to write letters (when I may be allowed to talk my own language) to my dear friends, and I love still more to receive them."<sup>19</sup> Abby's distinct prose style ("my own language") offers a direct contrast to that of her husband who himself, upon perusing his wife's personal letters and diaries after her death commented: "Here is greatness displayed in humble privacy and devotedness to duty day by day" (qtd. in Dahlstrand 327). Bronson was accused by Emerson as well as at least one modern critic of being a stylistic failure when it came to writing.<sup>20</sup> A brief excerpt from his infamous "Orphic Sayings" convincingly illustrates some of his rhetorical weaknesses, not the least of which was too-great a reliance on abstract subject matter, combined with a deadly earnest philosophical tone:

It is the perpetual effort of conscience to divorce the soul from the dominion of sense; to nullify the dualities of the apparent, and restore the intuition of the real. The soul makes a double statement of all her facts; to conscience and sense; reason mediates between the two. Yet though double to sense she remains single and one in herself; one in conscience, many in understanding; one in life, diverse in function and number. (qtd. in Hochfield 311)

But whereas Bronson was often wordy, obscure, pedantic, in contrast, Abby's voice is refreshingly direct and often humorous. Some of her rhetorical ability can be traced to her Latin studies, a subject not pursued by Bronson and which she undertook upon the advice of her teacher Miss Allyn. Abby hoped that it "would give me a more [word] knowledge of my language, and enable me to detect errors which otherwise would [pass?] unnoticed. And Miss Allyn thought it an exercise for the mind, memory and attention."<sup>21</sup>

But undoubtedly the more influential figure in her own literary development was Dr. Johnson, the famous eighteenth-century stylist who was well-known for his biting wit and verbal artistry. In her own writing, Abby demonstrates a similar deftness and understated humor. A typical example of her ability to turn a phrase to particular effect appears in an October 1833 letter to her brother Samuel. In it, Abby offers a dry and clear-eyed assessment of both her husband and the society that refused to appreciate him and other idealists. She, too, could write about philosophers and their intellectual ken; however, her use of a lively vernacular renders her prose much more memorable and enjoyable than her husband's. "Passed two hours here in philosophical discussion with Mr. A who I guess gave him some new thoughts or at least confirmed some old ones," she wrote of a Doctor Follen who had visited Bronson and Abby in Philadelphia. "They are both bold thinkers—they soar high and dig deep—but such minds are some what solitary in this world of folly and fashion when a mans [sic] hat is the most essential

part of his head—and his coat his [word] passport to society.”<sup>22</sup> Regarding the women she solicited in 1854 to sign a petition to include sewing in the public schools : “I wish they displayed more brains and less jewelry.”<sup>23</sup> In another instance she dismissed criticism of her husband with the tart rejoinder, “I wish people thought half as much of a man’s life and bearing to his neighbors as they do about some wrinkle in his creed.”<sup>24</sup> Abby’s prose style, always quick, often humorous if not pointedly satirical, drawing on both the homely and the ethereal for inspiration and subject matter, is very similar to that employed by Louisa in her most famous didactic fiction.

In addition to being proficient in reading and writing, Abby May was, even before she met Bronson, deeply engaged in the educational debates that began to rage in the mid-nineteenth century. In particular, she recognized the need for reform in female education. She herself regretted the brevity of her own formal schooling. A revealing comment in her journal, dated Brooklyn, Connecticut 20 April 1829 indicates it was other duties, both social and familial, that contributed to the sporadic nature of her education:

I lament and ever shall the want of early culture. My mind, naturally active and vigorous, was left too much to its own pursuits and inclinations. Fond of reading, I devoured every thing which came in my way in the form of a book:—thought little of what I read, but loved the act of reading. It seemed to take me out of myself and away from those about me. As circumstances and situation changed I had less time to myself and was obliged to mix in society. Here I made an excentric [sic] figure. I cared for nobody, and generally left a party with disgust. ...I withdrew myself in a great measure, for which I was stigmatized as odd. Odd I shall probably

be through life, for I shall ever contemn [sic] those forms of society which displace the [substance?] of life.<sup>25</sup>

The circumstances that conspired to take her away from her studies were similar to those many women like her encountered in the nineteenth-century. In Abby's case, unavoidable family responsibilities inserted themselves between her and her education. In November 1828, Abby's sister, Louisa May Greele, died, leaving behind two young children. The following April, Abby moved to Brooklyn with her brother Samuel to help care for her niece and nephew, all the while attempting to continue her education on her own. "I will try and read something every day, be it never to [sic] little," she commented in the same journal entry. "I will learn to think with more method and accuracy...If it [the mind] is not laid out and cultivated into a regular and beautiful garden, it will of itself shoot up weeds or flowers of a rank growth."<sup>26</sup> However, family duties would become more, not less, consuming in Abby's life, particularly after her own marriage to Bronson, their subsequent move to Germantown in December 1830, and the birth of their first child Anna in 1831.

Becoming a mother marked the transition in Abby's life from student to teacher. Her early interest in education continued, however, although now she turned her energies and attention to the task of instilling literacy and values in her own children, a task which at times appeared to her to require

superhuman powers. In a letter to Samuel and Lucretia May dated 22 June 1833, Abby commented,

It is a good while since I wrote to you. I write but seldom to any one now. My time is abundantly occupied with my children. It seems at times as if the weight of responsibility connected with these little immortal beings would prove too much for me. Am I doing what is right? Am I doing enough? Am I doing too much?... I am in constant fear that I may mistake the motive which prompts many of their actions. Mr. Alcott aids me in general principles, but nobody can aid me in the details....<sup>27</sup>

With the birth of her children, Abby would focus her attention primarily on their upbringing; she would teach, only now her children were her texts and the nursery was her classroom. It seems safe to assume it was her knowledge of the discourse of educational reform that prompted William Russell and Bronson to mention her by name in the prospectus for the “Female Department” they had been invited to create in 1830 at the already established Germantown (PA) Academy. In the prospectus for the school, the founders emphasized the new department’s familial nature, noting that “...we shall endeavour to conduct the successive stages of education, by methods of parental character.”<sup>28</sup> The prospectus also indicated that, “[T]he principals will receive a few pupils into their families, as boarders under the immediate superintendence and care of Mrs. Russell, and Mrs. Alcott. These, with a limited number admitted as day scholars, are intended to compose a domestic circle, associating for the purposes of instruction, and mutual influence.” This explicit mention by name suggests that Russell and Alcott



believed their wives had a prominent role to play in their academy, since the school itself would, according to its prospectus, stress character formation and “methods of a parental character.” A comment by pupil Elizabeth Lewis suggests that she felt equally at ease turning to Abby for intellectual guidance when her official teachers were unavailable to her. In a letter to Bronson in which she asks him to tell her “which part [of the Bible] is easiest to understand,” Elizabeth notes that if he is unable to furnish her with answers to her questions, she “will ask Mrs. Alcott, who I think, likes to explain such things, when she is doing nothing else.”<sup>29</sup>

And yet, it appears that Abby seldom was “doing nothing else.” Her intense preoccupation with her maternal role and domestic duties is a continuous thread that runs throughout her diaries and letters. Nonetheless, she was not without doubts regarding her suitability for the role, nor did she harbor illusions about the demands that childrearing made of women. In a letter to Samuel’s wife, Lucretia May, written shortly after daughter Anna’s birth in 1831, Abby rhapsodized that “she [Anna] has lived long enough to open all the fountains of my higher and better nature—she has given love to life—and life to love.”<sup>30</sup> Yet several months later, her understated comments to the same correspondent reveal Abby’s recognition of the strain that childrearing and domestic duties put upon the intellectual life of a woman : “...my Anna has been sadly sick with teething and bowel complaints and I have had 6 children in my family besides a goodly company to [dine?] and be

looked after 7 hours a day. My days have been busy and my nights [restless?]-this you know unfits one for much mental effort.”<sup>31</sup> And another of Abby’s comments regarding her role of housemother of sorts to the boarding students at the Germantown Academy indicates that she was keenly aware that little value was assigned to traditional female work. “[I]t is a thankless employment,” she noted, “to take care of other people’s children.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Abby’s changeable attitude toward her motherly role is evidence of what critic Sara Ruddick sees as a built-in tension within that very role. In her essay entitled “Maternal Thinking,” Ruddick comments that [I]solation, restricted options, and social devaluation can make mothering grim even for economically privileged women. It is difficult when writing about motherhood—or experiencing it—to be balanced about both its grim and its satisfying aspects” (344-45). Abby’s journals reveal that maintaining such a delicate balance was not often easy, particularly in the light of growing financial exigencies in the Alcott household.

The tension between intellectual pursuits, motherteaching, and domestic duties grew stronger after Abby gave birth to Louisa in 1832, Elizabeth in 1835, and Abby in 1840. The repeated failure of Bronson to establish himself as a reliable breadwinner increased her anxiety, prompting her in January 1841 to express her disillusionment to brother Samuel in a torrent of words that would be humorous if they did not expose so poignantly

the painful reality of the harried living conditions with which she had to contend for much of her married life:

It is a good while since we have interchanged letters—I am so weary with details, with private grievances, public wrongs, personal insults, new propositions, communities, expediencies, hopes, fears, heavens, hells, improved methods of living, old and evangelical ways of dying, young men and maidens, old men and children, church, state, Holy wars (but not holy soldiers) all sorts of things—I say I am so weary that I take my baby turn my head to the window and annihilate for the time every thing but my husband, children, cooking stove, work basket and the Dial indeed I have got into such a mill trot that if anybody should ask me the way to Boston I should say it was in the oven, or if I had read the last Liberator I should reply it wanted darning, or if I had seen the account of the [word] works, I should be very likely to reply the children drank them, or if I had read the Baptism of Pochahontas I should say it was not brown enough—I really have no vocabulary for a letter—Mr Alcott is writing a series of Delphic letters which if people will deign to read will do more for their souls than Paul or Pliny, Junius or Jack—Downing—Mr Emerson seems fuller in the faith than ever that he is the man which is to do us a great work in these days of sore tribulation—I suppose Anna word or Miss Robie have told you of his noble offer to us—half his house and store-room free—Mr A to work with him on his land and I am to share the household labor with word...But I cannot gee and haw in another persons yoke—and I know that every body burns their finger if they touch my pie—not because the fire is too hot, but because it is mine, and you know by sad experience that I had a ‘kink’ “always”...But to be serious for my time and paper are [word]—we are as poor as rats or as church mice (and as good too).<sup>33</sup>

This letter to Samuel also illustrates yet another feature of Abby’s prose style, a dramatic—and highly effective—hurriedness and intensity that becomes more apparent as family pressures increased. The words seem to tumble out in energetic bursts, and formal punctuation rules are abandoned in favor of the dash to separate trains of thought. It is as though Abby has

fallen into a writing “vortex” not unlike those experienced by the fictional Jo March. These stylistic features can be attributed, perhaps in some measure, to the demands placed upon her time, as well as the difficult conditions under which she attempted to write in the first place. In a letter to Samuel and Lucretia May dated 22 June 1833, she mentions that she has not written in a long while to anyone except her father in part because “...a full connected letter seems to me now a formidable undertaking—my eyes are very uncertain—and my time abundantly occupied with my babies....”<sup>34</sup> Yet in another letter to Samuel, dated 9 September 1834, she touches upon, at astonishing speed, the subjects of Bronson’s pupils, her friend Eliza Robbins’ school textbooks, the moral education of children, and teacher training before finally concluding, “My children are importunate—or I should fill this sheet for my mind is brim full and stirring with some great thoughts—which I have not time to define or express—.”<sup>35</sup> There is a poignancy about her final comment for it is obvious from the evidence of her correspondence and journals that Abby did indeed have more than a fair share of “some great thoughts,” but more often than not lacked the time and energy to give them permanent public form.

And yet, despite financial and familial circumstances that worsened over the years, forced her into an unending and at times humiliating search for ways to scratch out a subsistence living, and threatened at times to overshadow all other concerns in her life, Abby was always a significant and

central figure in the lives of her daughters, encouraging them in their talents and shielding them as much as she was able from the many misfortunes that tugged relentlessly at the family. Abby was the embodiment of Abbott's mother at home, overseeing her daughters' development while attempting, like the mother in Abbott's picture, to maintain some distance from them, however slight, in order to give her children an opportunity to pursue their own talents and interests. She described her approach to mothering to her brother Samuel in a September 1860 letter:

I stand as much out of the way, and try to keep myself from being a hindrance to these girls, who are full of life–aspiration tact and talent–I will never impose my experience upon them as the better guide or wisest way–tho' 30-40 years of a most varied life gives me an accumulated knowledge of the world and its requirements...encouragement and the example of our own best life is our greatest responsibility–Influence is better than precept–and when we insinuate by the sweetness of our own life, that goodness into our children which we most desire them to profess, we have done more than schools, and all that Heaven can require of us as parents—<sup>36</sup>

Abby's comments on her parental role resonate with the language of disciplinary intimacy. Her approach to child-rearing, emphasizing as it did influence over precept, yielded long-lasting consequences, and the bond between Abby and her daughter Louisa, in particular, had implications far beyond the private family circle. In Louisa's journals there is much evidence illustrating the way in which Abby's approach to child-rearing shaped her daughter's personality and subsequently, her art. The diaries of both mother

and daughter also provide evidence of the powerful maternal influence Abby Alcott exercised on her daughter's imaginative life.

## II

### “Love is a powerful agent to discipline children with”: Maternal Influence and the Journals of Abby and Louisa May Alcott

The centrality of the maternal role for Abby Alcott mirrored the reality of nineteenth century life for many middle-class white women of her generation and experience. Historian Nancy Theriot has noted that for such women of the early nineteenth century, “[M]otherhood became the most important symbol of true womanhood, the major cultural metaphor for femininity; the moral mother seemed to encompass all the characteristics newly assigned to the female sex” (18).<sup>37</sup> And yet, since it was more and more assuming a distinctly educational agenda, motherhood also provided Abby with an outlet for her interest in things pedagogical. Her own diaries indicate that she took very seriously her maternal duties. On 18 June 1842, during the time of the Fruitlands experiment, she noted in her journal “Anna, Louisa, Elizabeth, Abba, are so many epitomes of my life.—I live, move, and have my being in them—I have not much mind for knowledge drawn from other sources.”<sup>38</sup> And yet in August, despite the press of family affairs, she mentions that she has indeed been consulting “other sources,” that is,

reading Biber's *Life of Pestalozzi*, which detailed the work of a philosopher whose ideas made as much an impression on her as they did on her husband.

The book, she noted,

is full of deep interest—it is essentially a Mother's book, and no less essential to children. His principles, despite his failures, have since continued to spread and to reform education even where his name is unknown. Love was the fundamental principle, the active agent, the ruling motive of his system of education[.] But all our institutions are based on selfishness; how then can we develop [sic] love in our pupils? I know of no more effective remedy, no more powerful lever than by beginning with our own family, with our own selves. We can do little toward reforming individuals, or society,—or remodelling institutions, while there is any lack of this divine principle in our own lives and conversation.<sup>39</sup>

Pestalozzi's letters, she believed, "should be a study for every Mother."<sup>40</sup> His philosophy of using love as a disciplinary agent for young children was one that she and Bronson took to heart in their own family. "Love," Abby noted in a January 1854 journal entry in which she commented upon Louisa's own teaching career, "is the powerful agent to discipline children with—."<sup>41</sup>

In their book *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and Their Silent Partners*, Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley draw on the work of psychologist D.W. Winnicott in order to examine "the enormous influence that certain central figures—lovers, sisters, patrons, mothers, aunts, friends, husbands—have had on the lives and work of 14 writers" (4). They call this relationship between the artist and the silent partners "mothering the mind."

In her introduction, Perry defines this term, taking care to point out that such relationships are not founded on “a smothering, self-sacrificing, one-way devotion on the part of one person for another—the enslavement of one person to another’s purposes” (4-5). Instead, Perry offers the image of “good-enough” mothers who “have other things on their minds and do not focus their attention exclusively on their children. Present but not necessarily attentive, a mother can also function as a background for her children’s foreground activity, a sheltering canopy upon which they can project fantasies, desires, and thoughts” (4-5) Abby Alcott was just such a “good enough” mother, who provided her daughter Louisa with the safe space in which to explore her literary fantasies. Both Abby and Louisa’s journals contain evidence of Abby’s mothering of her daughter’s mind and talent, as well as Louisa’s responses to her mother’s nurture.

Perry notes that those who mother the minds of others (they can be male or female) “have never been credited properly for the role they played except in the way of informal gossip, and yet to a greater or lesser extent the artistic achievements were shaped by their presences” (5). This is certainly true in the case of Abby’s connection to the imaginative life of Louisa. The personal diaries of these two women reveal the ways in which Abby mothered Louisa’s mind, particularly during her adolescence. Such a reading flatly contradicts the interpretation of Louisa’s journals offered by Judy Simons, who offers a particularly negative assessment of Abby’s and Bronson’s



influence over Louisa, as it manifested itself in the latter's diaries. Simons argues that Louisa's journals reveal a young girl who desperately struggled to conform to standards of feminine behaviour imposed by her unwavering and unsympathetic parents.<sup>42</sup> That Abby and Bronson read their daughters' journals is interpreted by Simons as an invasive and insidious act, one that prompted what Simons refers to as "the growth of Alcott's split self" (108) and Louisa's lifelong reluctance to reveal intimate details of her personal life in her diary.<sup>43</sup>

Such an interpretation not only conflates the influence of both parents, but also fails to take into account Abby's philosophy vis-à-vis personal writing and the compelling evidence in her diary of her recognition and encouragement of Louisa's talent. That Abby and Bronson should have regularly read their children's journals may seem to some today as an intrusive or overbearing act. And yet, as Cinthia Gannett has noted, nineteenth-century diaries often had a public as well as a private aspect to them. Since Bronson and Abby viewed journal-keeping as a mode of self-examination, a pedagogical tool for directing the self toward virtue and establishing disciplinary intimacy with their children, it should come as no surprise that Abby not only read her daughters' journals (in fact, Abby and Bronson read each other's journals, as well), but wrote comments in them—and occasionally allowed her daughters to write in her diary as well.<sup>44</sup> Bronson himself shared his journals with Ralph Waldo Emerson, a practice common among the Transcendentalist thinkers.

In a letter to Louisa dated 29 September 1847, Abby offered her own reflection on journal-keeping, a task which obviously had great value for her, although she was often hard-pressed to find the time in which to write:

My Diary! Your Diary! only to think that we neither of us snatch a moment to notch our days! Can they be profitably spent if not a moment can be spared to record the fact that we lived? What is time doing to us? Oh, my daughter, if we can make no note of it, shall we only lament its loss? No. No. Occupy, live, learn, love more and more each moment, and record what we know of our self, if we know nothing of another. We are not today what we were yesterday, or can we be tomorrow what we are to-day. The floodtide of our existence takes us a little farther each day, and the ebb erases the footprints of our yesterday's steps.<sup>45</sup>

Abby's opening exclamation "My Diary! Your diary!" suggests an overlap between the personal writings of mother and daughter. Her subsequent description of the journal as a means of self-examination is very much in keeping with traditional views of such personal writing. For Abby as well as Bronson, the journal served a higher spiritual and educational purpose.<sup>46</sup> On 1 January 1854, Abby noted that she was resuming her journal again after a two year lapse. "I have missed the pleasure at times exceedingly, but my occupations were so constant often offensive that I thought it best to discontinue that which I could not do well," she wrote. "But I resume it from a conviction that it is important to [progress?] to note down not perhaps so much what happens to us—as what good I may be realizing from my readings, or doings...."<sup>47</sup> Many years later, on 3 March 1861 she reiterated her philosophy of journal-keeping:

Many interruptions through the day prevented my writing—I love to record something at least once a week—A life seems but half lived if no record of thought or motive be made visible it helps memory—Even the best of us are forgotten soon enough; let us perpetuate in the remembrances of our children at least, what of love and good-will we have lived for them; what at such a period of our life we were reading, thinking or proposing to do—what we were hoping, desiring, believing As I sometimes take up an old Diary of mine, I am encouraged to believe these records are not without their value—at times I have written but little—and I miss the data very much.—<sup>48</sup>

Abby's view of literacy was at once communal, dialogic, uplifting, and disciplinary. As the above comment makes clear, Abby realized that her journal would outlive her, and, if nothing else, serve to keep her memory alive after her death. Abby's view of literacy, like her husband's, could not be separated from morality. The journal and personal letters were textbooks for the soul, writing that by its very nature and purpose was meant to be shared with others in order to be of the most value. The boundary between public and private writings was a fluid one in the Alcott family, precisely because Abby and Bronson saw literacy, and writing in particular, as an important child-rearing tool.

There are other examples, as well, that reveal how Abby used the acts of reading and writing both as a way to discipline her daughters in the Judeo-Christian ethic as well as to nurture their literary talents. Alcott family life was laced with literate activity designed to inculcate moral perspectives and reinforce virtue. For example, in January 1843, Abby noted in her journal the formation of "a household Post-Office," which she believed "would afford a

daily opportunity for the children, indeed all of us to interchange thought and sentiment—had any unhappiness occurred it would be a pleasant way of healing all difference, and discontents.”<sup>49</sup> Later that month, when Bronson accompanied Charles Lane on a trip to Boston, Abby used that domestic post office as a means of monitoring her children’s’ behaviour during their father’s absence. Every evening, she would place “in the Post Basket a ticket with ‘Bon’ or ‘Mauvais’ upon it, as an expression of my approbation or dissatisfaction of their conduct through the day.”<sup>50</sup> She noted the effectiveness of this gentler disciplinary method that relied on language, not physical action, to persuade a child of the moral significance of her actions. “The domestic Post Office has worked well—,” she wrote in her journal on 22 January 1843. “it has been the means of inducing the children to interchange kind notes of reconciliation and reestablishing friendships—or slight disaffections among them”.<sup>51</sup> Abby was providing her daughters with a model of language as action and teaching them, however indirectly, of the vital role their literary talents played in developing moral consciousness and a sense of connection to the greater community, in this case, their immediate family.

In addition to establishing a family post office, Abby relied on other literate activities to foster the growth of her daughters’ moral sensibilities. In a December 1847 letter to Anna, Abby reminded her “[Y]ou will be sustained by the perusal of books on morals, always reading these in direct reference to your own improvement, rather than amusement.”<sup>52</sup> Family fetes were often

marked by the writing of verses honoring the occasion. On the occasion of daughter Abby's second birthday in 1842, Abby described the family celebration in her journal and commented, "I seldom omit these occasions for showing my children the joy I feel in their birth and continuance with me on earth—I wish them to feel that we must live for each other—My life thus far has been devoted to them and I know that they will find happiness hereafter in living for their Mother."<sup>53</sup> Abby's comments also reveal her undisguised desire that her devotion to her children would one day be reciprocated. Like most parents, she had hopes for her daughters, in her case that they would one day be able to contribute their talents to the support of the family. However, it seems unfair to suggest that economic motives alone prompted Abby's encouragement of her daughter's talents. Abby valued these examples of her daughters' expressive abilities for their own sake, recording many of them in her own journal.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, she presented her daughters with gifts that reflected the importance she placed on literate activity. On Louisa's fifteenth birthday, Abby penned the following note to her daughter which accompanied her gift:

Dearest accept from your Mother this pen and for her sake as well as your own use it freely and worthily. Let each day of this your 15th year testify to some good word or work; and let your Diary receive [sic] a record of the same...I wish you a happy birth-day—may eternal love sustain you—Infinite Wisdom guide you—may the sweetest Peace reward you—<sup>55</sup>

Such a note is a good example of the way in which Abby used writing as a means of establishing disciplinary intimacy with her daughters, in particular, Louisa. That her mother wrote to her frequently, commenting upon her behaviour is evident from entries in Louisa's diaries which often record her responses to such private epistles. In July 1850, Louisa noted the discovery of one such note in her journal "so like those she [Abby] used to write me when she had more time. It always encourages me; and I wish some one would write as helpfully to her, for she needs cheering up with all the care she has" (*Journals* 63). Louisa's childhood and adolescent journals contain many examples of the effects of her parents' positive use of disciplinary intimacy on her consciousness. Take, for instance, the entry she penned on the occasion of her eleventh birthday:

It was Father's and my birthday. We had some nice presents. We played in the snow before school. Mother read "Rosamond" while we sewed. Father asked us in the eve what fault troubled us most. I said my bad temper.

I told mother I liked to have her write in my book. She said she would put in more, and she wrote this to help me:—

DEAR LOUY,—Your handwriting improves very fast. Take pains and do not be in a hurry. I like to have you make observations about our conversations and your own thoughts. It helps you to express them and to understand your little self. Remember, dear girl, that a diary should be an epitome of your life. May it be a record of pure thought and good actions, then you will indeed be the precious child of your loving mother" (*Journals* 47).

Both Bronson's inquiry about his daughters' most troubling fault and Abby's private note to Louisa encouraging her to view her writing as the embodiment of her moral self reveal the Alcotts' mother-teaching approach to raising their children. This is one example of the way in which both Bronson and Abby passed on what Theriot calls "a domestic lifescipt" to their daughter, inscribing that script on both her conscience and diary. Louisa's journal was a site of dialogic, script-writing activity, with her parents' voices playing an influential and directing role. Again, Abbott's picture of the mother at home monitoring her children's private writing is an apt one in this context. As her mother's note to her makes clear, Louisa was encouraged to write, although Abby felt it her maternal duty to direct her daughter's imaginative impulses toward a higher, more spiritual realm. Abby is a pervasive and powerful presence in her daughter's journals even when she (Abby) was not writing in them directly.<sup>56</sup> For Abby, all language activity—reading, writing, and speaking—was invested in codes of proper behaviour. In an undated letter to Louisa, Abby mentions that she has received her note: "I have placed a kiss on your lips. May they never open but in kind words, and sweet sounds for us all."<sup>57</sup>

Louisa's journals reveal many instances of Abby and Bronson's attempts (at times not too subtle) to discipline their daughter with love and literacy into accepting a lifescipt based on Christian principles. On Sunday 28 August 1843, Louisa noted in her journal, "After breakfast I read till 9

o'clock and Father read a Parable called Nathan. and I liked it very well he then asked us all what faults we watted [wanted] to get rid of I said "Impatience" (*Journals* 44). On 1 September of that same year, she recorded her response to a didactic story "The Judicious Father," that Charles Lane had read to the children. In the story, a rich girl whose father overhears her mocking a poor girl is forced to exchange clothes with her for a week. "But the rich one was very sad, for she had to wear the old ones a week, and after that she was good to shabby girls. I liked it very much, and I shall be kind to poor people" (*Journals* 45). Not only did her parents use such fiction as a means of stressing moral precepts, but Louisa, too, disciplined herself using literary texts. In that same journal entry, she comments "I felt sad today because I have been cross today, and did not mind Mother. I cried, and then I felt better, and said that piece from Mrs. Sigourney, 'I must not tease my mother.' I get to sleep saying poetry, -I know a great deal" (*Journals* 45).

Louisa's childhood journals record, often in wistful fashion, one young girl's attempt to "be good," as such behaviour was defined by her parents and the society at large. There is ample evidence of the internal struggles she underwent to fit herself into a role that often clashed with her temperament and her natural tendency to be outspoken. In January, 1845, when she was thirteen years old, she wrote, "I got angry and called Anna [her sister] mean. Father told me to look out [sic] the word in the Dic., and it meant "base," "contemptible." I was so ashamed to have called my dear sister that, and I



cried over my bad tongue and temper" (*Journals* 54). Both Louisa and her father were sensitive to the lapse of virtue that occurred as a result of Louisa's insult of Anna. The Alcott sisters were all taught that words were much more than mere hieroglyphics on a page; rather, they were symbols of larger Christian ideals, hence, Louisa's acute discomfort over what might seem to some a minor childhood infraction. Later that year she recorded a sample of her lessons at Fruitlands; it is a Socratic dialogue complete with questions and her responses:

What are the most valuable kinds of self-denial?  
Appetite and temper.

How is self-denial of temper known? If I control my temper, I am respectful and gentle, and every one sees it.  
What is the result of this self-denial? Every one loves me, and I am happy. (*Journals* 55)

As this journal excerpt painfully illustrates, Alcott was aware at an early age of the heavy burden that words, especially those used in anger or haste, could pose to the quick-tempered child. As her responses to the questions show, the "wrong words" threatened the very foundation upon which a child based her identity—the love of her family. The lesson records Alcott's conscious attempt to internalize central Christian precepts of submissiveness and self-denial. She often described herself in her journal as "moody," and chronicled her attempts to control her temper which often manifested itself in verbal outbursts.

But despite the tension she often experienced as a result of her use of strong words, Alcott was drawn to them early, writing poetry as a child. Writing was both liberatory and disciplinary, and her journals reveal that she continually moved back and forth between these two extremes on the literacy continuum. Read in the context of a society that privileged a code of feminine behaviour stressing Christian virtues of submissiveness and self-effacement, Louisa's comments on the Socratic dialogue on self-denial are not particularly notable. As the daughter of highly idealistic parents who viewed self-sacrifice and service to others as central precepts by which to live, Louisa was simply responding in her journal to her parents' stringent, but not at all unusual, code of values. What makes Louisa's journal so interesting is the fact that both daughter and parents *consistently* drew on their literacy as the shaping, disciplinary tool. She learned from a very early age that Christian principles and moral precepts were at the heart of her parents' definition of literacy. This connection between virtue and language, impressed upon her from the time she began writing, was something she struggled with and sometimes rejected (as her sensational fiction demonstrates), but ultimately decided not only to accept, but to promulgate for much of her adult career.

To argue, then, as Judy Simons does, that Abby's "rebukes...only confirmed her [Louisa's] suspicions about her own imperfections" (112) is to ignore the cultural childrearing context in which Abby offered them, as well as the evidence from Abby's journals that show how she nurtured and lauded her

daughter's creative efforts. As early as March 1845, Abby voiced both her recognition and approval of her daughter's writing. For example, she copied in her journal a poem Louisa wrote to Anna on her birthday and noted, "[T]his poetical effort was quite impromptu—and I think with some success.—Louisa continues to write—has copied all her little verses into a book—She is making great effort to obtain self possession and repose—less excitable and anxious—.”<sup>58</sup> In a letter to her brother Samuel in April 1845, Abby mentions that “Louisa is very free in her expression and happy in her conceptions. I read a few of her little poems to Elizabeth Hoar and she thought them quite good—two she thought very superior. I encourage her writing it is a safety valve to her smothered sorrow which might otherwise consume her young and tender heart.”<sup>59</sup> Coming as it did only one year after the disastrous Fruitlands experience which took an emotional toll on all the Alcotts, Abby's comment about the “safety valve” indicates just how sensitive and understanding she was of her daughter's state of mind.<sup>60</sup> Clearly she recognized the therapeutic value of writing, especially for a troubled adolescent. In July 1853, Abby wrote to Louisa in Boston, noting

I am pleased to hear you say that your mind is quite at ease, and you get happiness out of writing and reading letters...Keep up dearest! get all the enjoyment you can from intercourse with others, but your best and most enduring, will be that of your own character, motives, &c,...Elizabeth says you send all the beams [gossip] to Anna. I am willing if you will send such nice notes to us. You write remarkably well, and the hand part of it, we can forgive because the head part is so good.<sup>61</sup>

Abby's comments to Samuel May in a February 1848 letter further reveal both her sensitivity and understanding of her daughter's unconventional temperament

She [Louisa] will never endure anything like publicity—She must have retirement—agreeable occupation—and protective, provident care about her—She has most decided views of life and duty—and nothing can exceed the strength of her attachments—particularly for her Mother—She reads a great deal—Her memory is quite peculiar and remarkably tenacious.<sup>62</sup>

Viewed in the light of the Alcotts' pedagogy of literacy and Brodhead's theory of disciplinary intimacy, Abby becomes a much more sympathetic figure whose actions are examples of a progressive approach to childrearing that relied on literate activity rather than corporal punishment as a means of influencing behaviour. Abby's understanding of her daughter's temperament is again revealed in an observation she made when Louisa began teaching in 1854. Abby voiced her suspicion that her daughter's talents and prospects for success lay elsewhere. Commenting on the impending arrival of Anna from Syracuse in December of that year, Abby wrote, "Louisa will be greatly relieved in the School as she has sewing and writing enough to occupy her time And I am not sure that anything should compel her to do that which is so distasteful to her mind and genius She is industrious and intelligent but cannot get interested in children."<sup>63</sup> Nine years later, commenting on the favorable reception of Louisa's *Hospital Sketches*, Abby wrote,

This success will embolden her I hope to greater effort—Sure am I success awaits some special achievement—her thoughts and purposes have been maturing for some deeper surprise than we have yet had—and I predict that she does not fail to establish a...position among authorships—It may take years, but she will have no mean ranks assigned her now—She is in the vestibule of the Temple But the high Altar is not far off—. <sup>64</sup>

Perry notes that a significant function of persons who mother the mind of an artist is to act as “an appreciative audience for the writer whose work he or she enabled...Each provided not only admiration—although that too—but also a hearing, external verification, that nod that confirms a writer’s hold on his or her subject as well as on sanity itself” (6). Despite the difficult circumstances under which Abby labored to raise her children, she managed to be a “good enough” mother to Louisa and her sisters. Not only did she hold the family together through perilous times, she also provided the safe psychic space that her daughters needed to pursue their individual talents. Indeed, Abby was so “good enough” that as an adult, Louisa felt compelled to use her artistic talents not for her own intellectual gratification, but rather to support the family, her mother especially. In December 1870, Louisa noted that she had a furnace installed in Orchard House, the family home in Concord. “Mother is to be cosey if money can do it. She seems to be now, and my long-cherished dream has come true; for she sits in a pleasant room, with no work, no care, no poverty to worry, but peace and comfort all about her...I have no ambition now but to keep the family comfortable and not ache any more. Pain has taught me patience, I hope, if nothing more” (*Journals* 179-80). Louisa’s

sense of obligation and duty to her mother was a powerful motivator, and it helps explain to some extent her decision to focus her energies on writing what she herself referred to condescendingly as “moral pap for the young.” Her mother’s lifescrypt, with its heavy emphasis on teaching and values, was deeply ingrained on both her moral and artistic consciousness. Although Louisa was well-aware that language need not always serve a moral or spiritual purpose, she had been mothered by parents who believed that literacy was a dutiful and ultimately, disciplining act. Louisa absorbed that teaching as a child, and then spent much of her adult life grappling with its powerful influence over her art. What is most remarkable about Abby’s motherteaching is that more often than not it took place in the context of great emotional, financial, and physical duress. Despite this, Abby and Louisa’s journals reveal the existence of a profoundly loving and life-long mother-daughter bond. More than anything else, it was that very bond that enabled Louisa to take up her pen in the first place. And it is that intimate and disciplining bond that is at the heart of Louisa’s most famous novel, *Little Women*, the subject of the next chapter.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

1. See chapter two, note 1 for references to biographies of Bronson. The biography of Abby that I refer to here is Sanford Sayler's *Marmee: The Mother of Little Women*. As this title has only come to my attention as this dissertation goes to press, I am unable to offer any commentary on Sayler's work. However, the fact that it was published so long ago and is the only biography of Abby that I have ever seen mentioned in my many years of reading about the Alcott family, is, I believe, an indication of the relative lack of interest scholars have had in Abby as an historical figure in her own right. Interestingly enough, for all the attention that has been paid to Bronson over the years, critic Walter Harding, in his introduction to a collection of Bronson's educational writings observes, "Why has he [Bronson] been forgotten? Part of the fault lies with Alcott himself. He was always more ready to talk than to write, so that comparatively little of his philosophy of education got written. When he did write his ideas down, they were usually published in pamphlet form so ephemeral that now a century later it requires long search to find copies. And, unfortunately, chiefly because of his "Orphic Sayings," in the pages of the Transcendentalist periodical *The Dial*, he acquired a reputation for windy vapidness that does not at all apply to his writings on education" (vii-viii). The Bronson Alcott that most know today is not the educational reformer, but rather the eccentric founder of Fruitlands who was incapable of supporting his family.

2. In April 1882, Louisa noted in her journal " [R]ead over & destroyed Mother's Diaries as she wished me to do. A wonderfully interesting record of her life from her delicate, cherished girlhood through her long, hard, romantic married years, old age & death Some time I will write a story of it" (*Journals* 233). Although Louisa destroyed much private family material, a portion remains of her mother's private correspondence, including thirty-six years of letters between her and Samuel May, as well as fragments of her journals, including material from the years of the Fruitlands experiment. All of this material vividly illustrates Abby's prowess as a writer and thinker.

Louisa's actions were prompted, in part, by Abby's own stated wishes. In the Alcott collection at the Houghton Library, (accession 59M-311(1)) the bound volume of Abigail May Alcott's diaries from 1841, 1842, 1843, 1844 contains a note in Abby's hand, dated 1 Jan 1874, that reads

To my Louisa!  
Beloved daughter—

I place at the disposal of your judgment this, and all other of my Diaries; to keep for reference—or to destroy for safety—my hopes, fears, aspirations, have been uttered fearlessly—believing this utterance, or prayer of complaint should be known only to that power which can bestow, protect, or relieve—

May you survive me, to consummate to perfection, the work of Life, you have so nobly begun—so successfully pursued so generously shared with those whose exertions have been thus far, pursued with less success or reward—

May you have good health as you have the good heart to live and love,  
Long! Long!—

Marmee—

Furthermore, in a journal entry dated 19 Dec. 1841, Abby noted that she had been reading Dr. Ripley's funeral sermon.. She commented, "In an extract from a memorandum he used to keep of great events in life—he says—"I have serious objections to a Diary to be inspected after death, even if it could [be] kept with exactness and truth.—What is had in me, why should the world know farther than it observes—? and if there be anything good, by the grace of God, will not the daily exhibition of it be the best evidence to the world—...

I entirely agree in this thought of Dr. R's if a diary is true it must record much that can be of little use to the writer after it has occurred—and of no service to the reader at any time if the diary is only partial it gives a very imperfect notion of the life lived; I have for many years been in the habit of keeping a book like this, in which I occasionally write [word] to keep up a train of interesting facts or any thought which may be exercising my mind—But I could not compel myself to write every day—It would be formal and insincere—and my life has been one of no great episodes or adventures—We have been sufficiently varied by joys and sorrows to discipline my soul for moderation in success and resignation in defeat—" (Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (1)).

3. The 1995 book *Eccentrics: A Study of Sanity and Strangeness*, by Dr. David Weeks and Jamie James, helped me better understand Bronson's personality and behaviour. Out of a study of more than one hundred "potential eccentrics" (25), the authors developed a profile of bona fide eccentrics. They list the most common characteristics of eccentrics as "nonconforming; creative; strongly motivated by curiosity; idealistic: he wants to make the world a better place and the people in it happier; happily obsessed with one or more hobbyhorses (usually five or six); aware from early childhood that he is different; intelligent; opinionated and outspoken, convinced that he is right and that the rest of the world is out of step; noncompetitive, not in need of reassurance or reinforcement from society; unusual in his eating habits and living arrangements; not particularly interested in the opinions or company of other people, except in order to persuade them of his—the correct—point of view; possessed of a mischievous



sense of humor; single; usually that eldest or an only child; and a bad speller” 27-8). Bronson fits this clinical profile in most respects, with the exception that he was married and, from what I can tell, probably didn’t have much of a sense of humor.

4 Abigail Alcott, Ms. of memoir fragment, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (3).

5. See note 4.

6. See note 4.

7. See note 4.

8. Ms. in Louisa’s hand, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-314, box 1.

9. Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-306 (28).

10. See note 9.

11. See note 9.

12. See note 9.

13. See note 9.

14. See note 9.

15. See note 9.

16. See note 9.

17. See note 9.

18. See note 9.

19. See note 9.

20. No less a person than Ralph Waldo Emerson had this to say about Bronson’s *Orphic Sayings*: “Not very good. I fear he will never write as well as he talks” (qtd. in Bedell 154). See also note 1.

21. Letter from Abigail May Alcott to her parents, dated 25 March 1819, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-306 (28).
22. Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).
23. Journal entry dated 4 Jan. 1854, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (2).
24. Letter from Abigail May Alcott to Hannah Robie, 13 Sept. 1840, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-306 (28).
25. Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-306 (28).
26. Journal entry dated 20 April 1829, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-306 (28).
27. Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-306 (28).
28. For this and all other references to the Germantown Academy prospectus, see chapter three, note 4.
29. See chapter three, note 1.
30. Letter from Abigail May Alcott dated 27 March 1831, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).
31. Letter from Abigail May Alcott dated 24 August 1831, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).
32. Letter from Abigail May Alcott to Lucretia May, dated 20 February 1833, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).
33. Letter from Abigail May Alcott to Samuel May, dated 24 January 1841, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).
34. Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).
35. Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).
36. Letter dated 8 September 1860, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).

37. Theriot writes, “[T]he mother role that women encountered in the pages of advice literature and domestic fiction involved a many-faceted script. It is helpful to speak of the script as having three major dimensions. First of all, the new mother role required strict adherence to a child-centeredness that was newly valued. Second, the script defined a new realm of feminine power. Lastly, the mother-role contained a promise of fulfillment by associating womanhood with maternity, thus claiming that physical mothering was essential to feminine happiness. The combination of these three characteristics produced a compelling new role for early-nineteenth-century American women” (18).

38. Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (1).

39. Journal entry dated 22 August 1842, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (1).

40. Letter from Abigail May Alcott to Samuel May, dated Fruitlands, Sat. morn (no year), Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).

41. Journal entry dated 3 January 1854, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (2).

42. Simons notes that “[T]he diary was seen as a spiritual record and the Alcott children had to ensue that their diaries were always available for their parents to read, hardly the most propitious circumstances for encouraging intimate revelations” (107). Simons interprets the communal quality of journal-keeping in the Alcott family negatively because she is reading them with a twentieth century eye for privacy. However, as Gannett points out, journal writing was much more of a public, dialogic activity during the nineteenth century than it is today. Critics who fault Abby and Bronson for reading their children’s journals fail to take into account the historical context in which such documents were created.

43. Again, Simons reveals her twentieth-century bias when she comments, “[D]espite its [Louisa’s journal] alleged status as a private document, it seems to shun privacy by deliberately avoiding all suggestions of intimate revelation. It assumes throughout an implied and rather strict reader. There is little mention of personal feeling. It overtly suppresses anger, pain, and suffering, although by describing the attempts to suppress these dark and dangerous emotions Alcott creates her own channel of expression” (117). Simons faults Louisa’s journal for its lack of personal revelation and places the blame for such a lack on the presence of stern parent-readers Abby and

Bronson. Again, she reveals a lack of historical understanding of the role of journals in the nineteenth century.

44. On 8 Oct. 1843, Abby's 43rd birthday, she recorded in her journal the following: "Recieved [sic] from my children as usual their little tokens of affection—I gave them a book of prints which my husband brought from Europe—They will copy for me below a piece of poetry of their own selection—" What follows are several different poems, including one signed by Louisa (Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (1)). On 26 June 1842, Abby noted in a letter to Samuel May that she had been "reading over with prodigal delight" Bronson's journals, and that "they shall be carefully preserved for their use when we are gathered to the Great Congregation—" (Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25)). In 1861, Anna Alcott reminded her mother of a letter she (Anna) had written in Abby's journal six months earlier, on the occasion of Anna's marriage (Letter from Anna Alcott, dated New Year's 1861, in Houghton 59M-311 (2)). These comments reveal that in the Alcott household, everyone, parents and children, shared their journals. What I find so interesting is that Abby's was open to her children. This is proof that Louisa was exposed to her mother's prose style at a young age, when her (Louisa's) own voice was only beginning to emerge. This becomes a significant factor in my later discussion of Louisa's prose voice.

45. Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-306 (28).

46. Gannett writes that "[I]n America, settled primarily by dissenters, the spiritual diary is one of the oldest literary traditions, acting as the central strand of American diary traditions, along with travel diaries, up until the nineteenth century...The later Transcendentalists will borrow and adapt this heritage of spiritual diary keeping...The diary of conscience paves the way for secular journals that will also focus on the inner reality of the diarist rather than on the recording or interpreting of external reality" (110-11).

47. Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (2).

48. Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (2).

49. Journal entry dated 15 January 1843, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, 59M-311 (1).

50. Journal entry dated 22 January 1843, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, 59M-311 (1).

51. See note 50.

52. Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-306 (28).

53. Journal entry dated 24 July 1842, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (1).

54. On 25 June 1843, Abby noted in her journal that the family celebrated the birthday of Elizabeth Alcott. To mark the occasion, the family wrote little notes, "some of which were in poetry which I will insert as it is well to make a record of these things" (Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (1)). What follows are the various verses composed by family members.

55. Dated 29 Nov. 1846, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (2).

56. After Abby's death in November 1877, Louisa wrote in her journal, "I never wish her back, but a great warmth seems gone out of life, and there is no motive to go on now.

My only comfort is that I *could* make her last years comfortable, and lift off the burden she had carried so bravely all these years. She was so loyal, tender, and true; life was hard for her, and no one understood all she had to bear but we, her children. I think I shall soon follow her, and am quite ready to go now she no longer needs me" (*Journals* 206).

57. Dated "At the Cottage," Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-306 (28).

58. Journal entry dated 16 March 1845, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (2).

59. Letter dated 18 April 1845, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).

60. In the same year as her mother's comment about the "safety valve," Louisa recorded this entry in her journal: "[M]ore people coming to live with us; I wish we could be together, and no one else. I don't see who is to clothe and feed us all, when we are so poor now. I was very dismal, and then went to walk and made a poem." What follows is a poem entitled "Despondency" (*Journals* 56).

61. Letter dated 4 July 1853, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-306 (28).
62. Letter dated 29 February 1848, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).
63. Journal entry dated 25 December 1854, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (2).
64. Journal entry dated 14 June 1863, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-311 (2).

## CHAPTER V

### “DUTY’S FAITHFUL CHILD”: MOTHERTEACHING AND THE WRITING LIFE OF LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

In January of 1868, Louisa May Alcott was living in Hayward Place in Boston, anticipating a busy winter of writing and editing for the children’s magazine *Merry’s Museum*. She noted in her journal for that month, “[T]he year begins well and cheerfully for us all,” (*Journals* 162) prophetic words, certainly, for in the month of May she would begin, at the behest of Thomas Niles, her editor at Roberts Brothers publishers, the “girls’ book,” *Little Women*, that would bring her the literary fame she had always desired. By 1868, Alcott, 35 years old at that time, was a seasoned author who had honed her talents by writing several serialized sensational stories, including “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” which had won the one hundred dollar prize awarded by the highly popular *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, as well as a novel, *Moods*, and two collections of stories, *Flower Fables* and *Hospital Sketches*. The latter had met with a fair amount of success when it was initially printed in the *Boston Commonwealth* in 1863 and later, when it was issued as a book in August of that same year.

Alcott’s journal entry for January 1868 is indicative of the pattern that her life would take following the phenomenal success of *Little Women*:

I am in my little room, spending busy, happy days, because I have quiet, freedom, work enough, and strength to do it...My way seems clear for the year if I can only keep well. I want to realize my dream of supporting the family and being perfectly independent. Heavenly Hope!

I have written twenty-five stories the past year, besides the fairy book containing twelve. Have earned \$1,000, paid my own way, sent home some, paid up debts, and helped May. For many years we have not been so comfortable. May and I both earning, Annie with her good John to lean on, and the old people in a cosey home of our own.

After last winter's hard experience, we cannot be too grateful. Today my first hyacinth bloomed, white and sweet,—a good omen,—a little flag of truce, perhaps, from the enemies whom we have been fighting all these years. Perhaps we are to win after all, and conquer poverty, neglect, pain, and debt, and march on with flags flying into the new world with the new year (*Journals* 162).

Alcott's prolific literary output, her concern for earning money and paying her own way, her deep desire, in her own words, to "make a battering ram of my head" and prove to the world that "though an Alcott," she was capable of becoming financially independent and providing for herself and her family, all these issues are reflected in this journal entry and are central to understanding Alcott's complicated sense of her literacy, literary achievements, and feminine identity.<sup>1</sup>

From the time of her birth in November 1832 at Germantown, PA, this strong-willed second daughter of Abby and Bronson was immersed in the discourse of education reform and innovation that preoccupied her parents. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, the lifscript she inherited from her parents was grounded in the motherteacher ideology. The Alcottian



version of the script, which reinforced the sacredness of motherhood, virtue, and discipline and promoted a pedagogy that united literacy and family issues, not only made a deep and lasting impression on Louisa's character, but on her literary choices as well. However, like her father's inquisitive pupils from the Germantown Academy, Louisa was not merely a passive recipient of an inherited definition of female—or literary—identity. Rather, she took her parents' script, so heavily invested in the issues of domesticity and literacy, and inscribed on it her own experiences as a daughter, creating in the process a writing career characterized by dramatic contrasts in subject matter and style. But more significantly, her attempts to tailor her own life to her parents' motherteacher ideology resulted in *Little Women*, arguably one of the most influential and powerful feminine lifescritps in the canon of American literature.

Nancy Theriot notes the “challenge” that many nineteenth-century daughters like Louisa May Alcott experienced as they attempted to reconcile their own lives with their mothers' notions of feminine identity. She writes that “...the material conditions of one generation usually do not fit exactly with the ideology produced by the previous generation,” and as a result, “[W]omen create a new, altered version of the feminine script out of the contradictions and similarities between their worlds and their mothers” (2). In this chapter I will argue that *Little Women* is Alcott's attempt to pass on her parents' motherteacher script, while at the same time offer her own set of

revisions to that text, made in response to her upbringing as well as the new “material conditions” she experienced as a young working woman. In particular, *Little Women* is concerned with the issues of literacy, education, and mother-teaching as a locus of female identity. As was true of Louisa herself, Jo March is educated by a woman who is well aware of her responsibility to teach her daughters the value of living a virtuous, Christian life. By examining Louisa’s writing life, as well as the characters of Marmee and Jo from *Little Women*, I will show how Louisa drew on her parents’ model of literacy training in order to stretch and reshape the privatized maternal role of the previous generation and demonstrate the new intellectual and economic possibilities open to their daughters.

## II

“I won’t teach; and I can write...”: Family Ties and the Career of Louisa May Alcott

“Busy life teaching, writing, sewing, getting all I can from lectures, books, and good people. Life is my college. May I graduate well, and earn some honors.” Louisa May Alcott, journal entry dated March 1859.

For a woman who was reared by parents who made little distinction between their teaching and parenting duties, Louisa showed a remarkable lack of interest in formal pedagogy, and in particular, her own career as a teacher. As young women, both she and her sister Anna ran home schools out of various family residences. In addition, Louisa also served as a tutor and governess on several occasions.<sup>2</sup> Abby Alcott apparently harbored hopes that when old enough, one of her daughters would find steady employment in the teaching field as a means of supporting herself and contributing to the meagre family income. No doubt she recognized that teaching was one of the few respectable economic avenues open to women her daughter's age. She was pragmatic, too, about her children's need to support themselves as soon as they were able; in the 1850's the Alcott family was enduring particularly bad financial straits.

Given her and her husband's lifelong zeal for pedagogy, it's not surprising that Abby hoped her daughters might succeed in a profession which had promised much to their father, but ultimately brought him little public or monetary recognition. The epigraph that begins this section illustrates the limited range of work options open to a young woman such as Louisa—and her willingness to try her hand at all of them, including teaching. It shows, too, the remarkable similarity between her own education ("Life," rather than any formal institution, is her college) and her mother's.<sup>3</sup> However, in an undated journal entry, Abby noted that it was Abby May, the youngest sister, a

student at Boston's Bowdoin Street Grammar School in January 1853, who "bears the drill of formal education better than the other girls would have done" (*Journals* 70). Abby's comment notwithstanding, in 1850 it was Louisa who first recorded \$50.00 in earnings from teaching in her journal. This was the first of many such notations of payments received from teaching, sewing, serving as a governess, and writing. During the 1850's, earnings from teaching were gradually overshadowed and eventually replaced by revenue from the sale of her fiction.

Indeed, the evidence from Louisa's journals indicates she never enjoyed her time in the classroom. In July 1850, she recorded her mixed feelings regarding her first teaching stint, a reaction that would not change much with subsequent experience:

I had to take A's [Anna's] school of twenty in Canton Street. I like it better than I thought, though it's very hard to be patient with the children sometimes. They seem happy...I guess this is the teaching I need; for as a *school-marm* I must behave myself and guard my tongue and temper carefully, and set an example of sweet manners. (*Journals* 63)

Unlike her father's extensive record in both his journal and letters of his schools and students, Louisa's diary reveals very little about her actual time in the classroom, a sign, no doubt, of her apparent lack of interest in the role of the stereotypical sweet-mannered school-marm which we can assume went against the grain of her own strong personality. Louisa's lack of intellectual engagement with the profession can also be interpreted as her

way of distancing herself from that aspect of her parents' motherteacher lifescrypt which placed such a high premium on the sacredness of the act of teaching (both in the home and the school). Unlike her parents, especially Bronson, who considered teaching his life mission, Louisa saw it as primarily a way to earn the money needed to keep the Alcott household afloat. Literary historian Richard Brodhead notes that as a young woman, "...Alcott inherited the dependence of her family," and as a result, "...was thus bound to work, in the sense that she was obliged to earn an income for the intimates who came increasingly to depend on her" (75). Her allegiance to her parents' motherteaching, which stressed the ideal of duty to one's family, was a major impetus to her throughout her working career. But her dislike of teaching also seems to suggest that she saw little possibility that she could rewrite the sweet-mannered school-marm script in order to make it fit comfortably on the shoulders of an independent-minded woman such as herself. After all, she had grown up with a father, his mild manners notwithstanding, whose own efforts at educational reform had met with resistance, even public scorn. Perhaps wary of a similar fate, Louisa approached her teaching career with her mother's pragmatism. Teaching was one way she could satisfy her strong sense of economic and moral obligation to her family, but she refused to let it engage her in any other way.

Further evidence of her lack of enthusiasm for the profession is apparent in a January 1862 journal entry in which she mentions Elizabeth

Palmer Peabody's request that she open a kindergarten in Boston. It was the lure of potential income, nothing else, that caused her to accept Peabody's offer. "Don't like to teach, but take what comes," she wrote, "so when Mr. F. [Fields] offered \$40 to fit up with, twelve pupils, and his patronage, I began" (*Journals* 108). Louisa boarded with Fields and his wife Annie, her cousin, for the six months her school operated, and during this time was encouraged not to write but instead "stick to my teaching," advice that, thankfully, failed to dampen her interest in a literary career (111). With the closing of the school in May of that same year, she abandoned teaching forever, reasoning "as I could do much better at something else" (109). That "something else" was her fiction which was finally beginning to bring her financial rewards. In the same entry, she notes that she "wrote a story which made more than all my months of teaching" (109). And her tart response to Fields' blunt assessment of her literary prospects: "Being wilful [sic], I said, 'I won't teach; and I can write, and I'll prove it'" (109). These words were becoming reality by the summer of 1863 when, encouraged by the flattering reception of *Hospital Sketches* which was based on her experience as a nurse in a Georgetown hospital during the Civil War, she began writing her novel *Moods* (109).

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, Louisa evinced an interest in writing at an early age, and her mother was quick to encourage her daughter's obvious talent. Abby's recognition was both pragmatic and disinterested. Engaged as she was for so much of her married life in a series

of frustrating attempts to render her family economically self-sufficient, Abby undoubtedly realized that, like teaching, writing, too, might provide financial opportunities for the Alcotts.<sup>4</sup> The conditions imposed upon her own life by the motherteacher script had sharply limited Abby's own economic options and made it nearly impossible for her to single-handedly support her family. However, the economic aspects of that script had altered enough by the 1850's that women her daughters' age could now contemplate some measure of financial independence, albeit only if they worked at a limited range of low-paying jobs such as teaching or sewing. However, there was one job that seemed to offer women more promise than the others, and that was professional writing. Brodhead sketches the history of publishing in America during the 1850's and 60's, and notes that "Alcott emerged as a writer at a moment when writing itself was being reestablished as a social activity...made the subject of a new scheme of institutional arrangements that stabilized the relation of authors to readers and solidified the writer's public support" (80). In other words, unlike their mothers before them, who labored under conditions particularly hostile to intellectual or literary women, a daughter like Louisa not only could aspire to a literary career, she could also hope for success in that field.<sup>5</sup>

Providing material comforts and cash for her family became increasingly important to Louisa's sense of self, and more and more it was with her writing that she was able to do just that during the 1850's and

1860's. Any examination of her career must not underestimate the significance of this economic stimulus. Louisa's literary talents gave her a sense of control over her own fate—a pleasant surprise and a powerful impetus for a woman accustomed to abject poverty for much of her childhood and adolescence. By 1868 she was able to record in her journal “[H]ad the pleasure of providing Marmee with many comforts, and keeping the hounds of care and debt from worrying her. She sits at rest in her sunny room, and that is better than any amount of fame to me” (*Journals* 165). Five years earlier, in October 1863, she had commented, in typical self-deprecating fashion, on the circumstances that seemed to signal success in her chosen field:

If ever there was an astonished young woman it is myself, for things have gone on so swimmingly of late I dont [sic] know who I am. A year ago I had no publisher & went begging with my wares; now *three* have asked me for something, several papers are ready to print my contributions & F.B. S[anborn] says “any publisher this side Baltimore would be glad to get a book.” There is a sudden hoist for a meek & lowly scribbler who was told to “stick to her teaching,” & never had a literary friend to lend a helping hand! Fifteen years of hard grubbing may be coming to something after all, & I may yet “pay all the debts, fix the house, send May to Italy & keep the old folks cosy,” as I’ve said I would so long yet so hopelessly. (121)

In his own analysis of Alcott's literary career, Brodhead makes a point of tracing the shifts in the publishing scene that occurred simultaneously with Alcott's own emergence as a serious writer in the 1850's and 1860's. He notes that she is an example of how professional writers of this time “faced an array of literary possibilities and had several publics and several models of



authorship equally available to them” (80). The field of professional authorship had become “stratified” and changes in the publishing world “laid the basis for separate modes of literary production to produce separate bodies of writing to separate social publics” (80). In other words, Louisa became a writer at a time when changing social and economic conditions were affecting the scripts of both middle-class white women and authors. One result was “an array of literary possibilities” that now confronted writers, encompassing “several publics and several models of authorship” (80), including one as the role of “the children’s friend,” (as Louisa would eventually become known as) that is, the author of juvenile fiction.<sup>6</sup>

Much of Louisa’s childhood and adolescence had been spent watching her parents constantly being thwarted in their own efforts to make a decent living. However, as a young woman, Louisa faced the quite different prospect of reaping considerable gain, both financial and emotional, from her “grubbing,” specifically, her literary work. It’s not surprising that she voiced some degree of astonishment and disbelief at the prospect of achieving the success that had so stubbornly eluded her parents. Despite her surprise, she demonstrated a willingness to exercise the influence that accompanied that success in her negotiations with publishers. In an extended autobiographical fragment in which she commented on her career as the pseudonymous author of sensational fiction, Louisa noted that she deliberately concealed her gender

from her publishers in order to command the higher prices that male writers received for similar material:

Sensation stories were in demand at this period, & I turned off [sic] eight or ten a month after some practice in [sounding?] much wrath, ruin & revenge into twenty five pages. Frank Leslie took these exciting productions & paid well while 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' [sic] stopped untill [sic] the matter was settled as before, for I insisted that if the rubbish was ever worth a dollar a page it was so still, & had my way, steadily increasing the sum as the demand grew.

A few tales in the Atlantic & Hospital Sketches made it easy to ask & get \$100 for every story, especially after one recieved [sic] the prize offer by Frank Leslie. But blood & thunder stories lost thier [sic] 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.<sup>7</sup>

Louisa's professional career, particularly her stint as the author of numerous sensational stories, has been well-chronicled by literary critics and historians over the last twenty years. Various interpretations, variously sympathetic and vilifying, have been offered regarding Louisa's conflicted attitude toward her writing, and in particular, the didactic fiction that gave her lasting fame. In drawing on her own experiences as sister and daughter when she created the fictional Marches of *Little Women*, Louisa was, by her own admission, writing about subjects with which she was more than a little familiar. Nonetheless, she had her reservations about translating her own lifescrypt into a novel. "Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters, but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting though I doubt it," she

commented in her journal in May 1868 after she began writing the novel (*Journals* 165-6). (“Good joke” she later wrote next to this entry.) Some critics cite her apparent lack of interest in the project as proof of her alienation from her “sentimental” project. Judith Fetterley sees Louisa’s lack of intellectual engagement as proof of her “instinct for self-preservation,” a deliberate distancing that was a portent of the limitations its success would place on her future career (140). Eugenia Kaledin faults Louisa for her “acceptance of the creed of womanly self-denial as much as her willingness to buy success by catering to middle class ideals” which, she argues “aborted the promise of her art and led her to betray her most deeply felt values” (251). Angela Estes and Kathleen Lant conclude that “[T]he tragedy of *Little Women* is, of course, that Jo is no longer Jo when she reaches maturity, for the real Jo never could reach maturity” (120). Sarah Elbert notes how [H]istorians of juvenile fiction...join with many historians of women’s literature in placing *Little Women* at the top of a downward spiral” (198).

Yet I would argue that these various critics misinterpret Louisa’s discomfort, which I view as yet another sign of the life-long dissonance that was a natural consequence of her attempts to fit her own often turbulent adolescent experience into the neat ideological script offered by sentimental fiction. The genre itself was too conventional, too narrowly idealistic for her, and its privileging of the romantic/maternal role for females just didn’t fit with the reality of her own lifscript which increasingly was defined by her

literary and economic, not romantic or maternal ambitions. Pertinent, too, to my argument is Elaine Showalter's comment that the "girls' story" genre (which *Little Women* was envisioned to be) "was designed to bridge the gap between the schoolroom and the drawing room, to recommend docility, marriage, and obedience rather than autonomy or adventure" (50). Perhaps Louisa was initially hesitant about doing in her writing that which she had chafed against in real-life-teach. But ultimately, that very dissonance worked its way into her book, making it a sentimental novel that undercuts sentimentality at all turns. For in her attempts to write some of the more unconventional of Alcott experiences into a conventional script, Louisa was forced into acts of creative revision that, in turn, give the novel poignancy and sly humor, the combination of which is the source of its tremendous appeal. Indeed, *Little Women* has none of what critic Elaine Showalter terms "the self-pity, the lachrymose sentiment, and the lugubrious piety that characterized so much female scribbling of the period" (51). Indeed, it is through *Little Women* that Louisa performed the kind of motherteaching that best suited her personality. For Louisa, as for her parents, motherteaching was bound up in literacy issues. However, fiction writing allowed her to promote a particular set of values without ever setting foot in a classroom. In *Little Women*, a new model of motherteaching is offered, one that suggests that books and texts, as well as actual mothers, can offer powerful and effective guidance for the young.

Artistic and intellectual growth seldom occurs in the absence of tension; with that in mind, I agree with critic Lisa Sisco's comment that Louisa's decision to write *Little Women* is anything but an artistic failure of nerve. Sisco writes, "Alcott's development as a writer is more likely understandable as a normal experience of literacy maturation....Alcott moves from the pseudonymous hiding and deception of sensation writing to a more public authorship which brought with it many painful moral and financial responsibilities—hallmarks of literary adulthood and a sophisticated literacy" (197). Louisa's lifescipt had as its hallmark a domestic pedagogy centered around high ideals, maternal nurture, and self-sponsored literate activity. In her attempts to match her life with this motherteacher script, Louisa, like many other women her age, experienced at various times conflict, tension, anxiety. Certainly Louisa herself is a good example of the ways in which, in the words of Catherine Belsey, women "are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses" (598). Yet the negative interpretations of what was Louisa's *conscious* decision to write *Little Women* seem to suggest she was a passive victim of the social and economic forces of her world, an image of her that belies many of her actions. For not only did she continue writing *Little Women* in spite of her reservations, she also wrote two sequels to it, indicating that on some level the project *did* engage her, even if initially such engagement was grudging. Louisa noted in her journal when she began the second half of the novel that "I can do a chapter a day, and in a month I mean

to be done. A little success is so inspiring that I now find my 'Marches' sober, nice people, and as I can launch into the future, my fancy has more play" (*Journals* 167). Her response suggests two things: that the financial rewards of the novel were a powerful motivator, and more importantly, that she became aware (perhaps only after the novel began meeting with unexpected success) that she could use the sentimental genre in ways she had not originally anticipated ("my fancy has more play").

As in Alcott's own life, language in the March household is a highly charged medium imbued with moral responsibility and virtue. *Little Women* also functions as a gloss on child-rearing, character formation, and literacy education. The March sisters' education at the hands of their motherteacher Marmee is much like that of the Alcott sisters, devoid of the more wrenching moments of what Alcott biographer Martha Saxton terms the "continual and frightening strife" that often characterized the home life of the real family. (220). The novel reiterates the values of Abby and Bronson's version of the motherteacher script, yet it also refigures that script in order to, in the words of critic Donna M. Campbell, "offer[s] a map for the imaginative journey toward the possibility of control—not over life, a manifestly impossible task, but over the self and its responses to life's vicissitudes" (119).

## III

“...to impress the lesson more deeply”: Literacy and Maternal Influence in  
*Little Women*

In Louisa's novel *Little Women*, motherhood and motherteaching are presented as dynamic and powerful roles, simultaneously frustrating and rewarding, and requiring of women great wisdom and presence of mind. There are the mothers—some good (Aunt Carroll), some not-so-good (Mrs. Moffat), and then there are the motherteachers (Mrs. March) who exert a palpable moral influence that extends well beyond the walls of the home. Influential motherteachers, modeled to a great extent on *both* Abby and Bronson, dominate much of Louisa's didactic fiction, most memorably in the form of Marmee and Jo March.<sup>8</sup> Like Abby and Bronson Alcott, Marmee is the symbol of disciplinary intimacy and moral life in the March household. Her heroic stature comes as a result of her ability to teach her daughters, with wisdom and tact, how to negotiate a world that is often at great odds with the selfless Christian ideals she embodies.

The novel opens with a scene that immediately makes evident to readers the notion that Marmee is the central figure in the household even when she is absent physically. The sisters await their mother's return home in the evening with preparations often associated with the arrival of a father. Amy abandons the easy chair, obviously the most valued seat in the house,

while Beth warms a pair of slippers on the hearth (6). The only item missing is the requisite pipe. But even though Marmee is away, engaged as she is through much of the novel by work that takes place outside the home (she is a precursor of the working mother), her disciplining presence is made plain when, prompted by the sight of their mother's worn slippers, the sisters' complaints over the impending frugal Christmas turn into a lesson in self-sacrifice as they discuss spending their money on gifts for their mother, not themselves.

The physical absence of a vital father-figure in the March household serves to throw into relief not only Marmee's strength and independence, but also her nurturing qualities. Nonetheless, remote though he is physically, Mr. March too is a moral and disciplining force in the house. However, instead of gathering his daughters close around his chair as Marmee does that evening, Mr. March is a textual presence who, like Bronson Alcott, exerts much of his influence and authority through an intimate language medium, in this instance, the personal letter. After the bustle of Marmee's entrance in that opening scene, it is the arrival of Mr. March's letter that generates the most excitement that evening. The close of that letter, when he begins "I know they will remember all I said to them," strikes a particular chord with the sisters who "sniffed when they came to that part..."(10). The intimacy and emotion generated by Mr. March's letter provide Marmee with the opportunity to suggest a highly persuasive pedagogical plan of her own for her daughters,



which is that they model their lives on Bunyan's text *Pilgrim's Progress*. The parable (itself a teaching lesson) becomes the sisters' touchstone for the remainder of the novel. Louisa used the structure of *Pilgrim's Progress*, an important story in her own childhood and an essential literary model in her parents' worldview, as a loose framework for her novel. However, *Little Women* is anything but a simple playing out of Bunyan's journey to goodness. Louisa draws on the parable form, which offers obvious pedagogical opportunities, in order to demonstrate how difficult it is, even for the Marches, and especially for Jo, to "be good," to "do our best," to fit one's life into Bunyan's ideal script.

Yet the Bunyan model has obvious attraction for the sisters. "What fun it was, especially going by the lions, fighting Apollyon, and passing through the Valley where the hobgoblins were!" notes Jo as she reminisces fondly over childhood plays centered around the story (11). Marmee is well-aware of the usefulness of the parable as both teaching tool and moral script; she advises her daughters to "begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far on you can get before Father comes home" (11). Meg notes that "the story may help us; for though we do want to be good, it's hard work and we forget, and don't do our best" (11). Her comment points to the subsequent unfolding of the novel's plot which is a series of self-contained narratives charting the sisters' journey to moral goodness.

In the following chapter, Marmee reiterates her lesson in the one Christmas gift she gives her daughters—copies of “that beautiful old story of the best life ever lived...” (13). Like Mr. March’s letter, these texts have an immediate and powerful effect on their readers. Meg comments that “...I shall keep my book on the table here and read a little every morning as soon as I wake, for I know it will do me good and help me through the day,” while Jo begins to read “with the quiet expression so seldom seen on her restless face” (13). Again, the scene is an intimate one as the sisters spend the next half hour reading and imbibing a character lesson from texts made more precious precisely because they are the only gifts from their mother. The message here is that literacy is a communal, familial act, designed to promote harmony and individual virtue. In this early scene, the sisters’ self-sponsored literate activity marks the beginning of their journey into moral maturity. In giving them the books, Marmee has also conferred on them the responsibility to learn to govern their consciences. The novel reiterates the idea that words, potent symbols that can help the sisters in this task, resonate virtue or vice, depending on the text and the circumstances surrounding its creation.

In chapter four, entitled “Burdens,” Marmee’s disciplining influence over her daughters is again emphasized. As Meg and Jo leave for their jobs at the Kings and Aunt March’s, respectively, they take a final glance backward “...for their mother was always at the window to nod and smile, and wave her hand at them. Somehow it seemed as if they couldn’t have got through the

day without that, for whatever their mood might be, the last glimpse of that motherly face was sure to affect them like sunshine” (34). Like the mother in Abbott’s picture, Marmee’s presence is apparent, yet it is not coercive. Later, as the sisters recount their day, we learn that the older sisters “each took one of the younger into her keeping and watched over her in her own way—’playing mother’—they called it—and put their sisters in the places of discarded dolls with the maternal instinct of little women” (39). The suggestion is that one of the more important lessons the sisters must learn as they mature is to mother not only their own selves, but also those around them, as Marmee has mothered them. Again, the way to effective mothering is through discursive activity; in this chapter each of the sisters tells the “story” of her day. After offering their respective tales, “they asked their mother for one...,” and Mrs. March obliges (42). However, unlike her young daughters, she is able to read the deeper significance of their seemingly mundane narratives. Upon Jo’s request, she tells another story, “one with a moral in it,” for “she had told stories to this little audience for many years, and knew how to please them” (42). Her second story is based on the narratives her daughters have just given of their less-than-satisfying day at work. The scene ends with the sisters’ exclamations over the lesson Marmee has just delivered in parable form: “Now, Marmee, that is very cunning of you to turn our own stories against us, and give us a sermon instead of a romance!” (43). Meg’s response is echoed by her sisters. By this time Marmee’s role as teacher, as well as her

chief pedagogical strategy—using stories to impart lessons—have both been well-established. All three chapters I have just discussed include important scenes involving literate activity performed in a communal setting. Not only does Marmee encourage, even initiate such activity, she is also revealed in this final scene as the one who is best able to extract the meaning from her daughters' words and actions; like Louisa herself, Marmee performs the important work of transforming the sisters' lives into dramatic moral narratives that then become highly effective pedagogical tools.

Despite the obvious emphasis on Marmee's disciplinary functions, Alcott clearly does not want to render her as an overbearing, sanctimonious mother. In fact, Marmee's approach to raising her adolescent daughters is highly reminiscent of Abby's own childrearing philosophy of standing "as much out of the way" and trying "to keep [myself] from being a hindrance to these girls, who are full of life—aspiration tact and talent—."<sup>9</sup> In the chapter entitled "Experiments," Marmee's central role in the smooth functioning of the household is made quite apparent, yet Louisa also emphasizes Marmee's sense of humor and her desire to let her daughters learn on their own the value of the ideals she embodies. In this chapter it is the lesson "all play and no work is as bad as all work and no play" (103) that she wants to impart. With this in mind, Marmee agrees that after a long winter of work the sisters may try a week-long experiment of rest and recreation, although she warns them that the novelty may soon wear off. In order to make her point more

effectively, she decides at the end of the week to “let the girls enjoy the full effect of the play system” by giving the servant Hannah the day off and ensconcing herself in her bedroom. Her conscious withdrawal from the center of the household discomfits the sisters; the narrator notes, “[T]he unusual spectacle of her busy mother rocking comfortably and reading early in the morning made Jo feel as if some natural phenomenon had occurred, for an eclipse, an earthquake, or a volcanic eruption would hardly have seemed stranger” (106).

Marmee’s absence from the family is keenly felt that day by all the daughters; it highlights the usually invisible bonds of disciplinary intimacy that exist in the March household. The effects of her sudden withdrawal range from the comic to the pathetic. The breakfast they prepare for her is unpalatable, Beth’s favorite canary dies of starvation in culmination of a week of neglect, and Jo hosts a disastrous dinner party. Marmee, whom the narrator notes in this chapter “had a good deal of humor” (104) receives their breakfast “with thanks and laughed heartily over it after Jo was gone,” (105), evidence that she, too, enjoys a joke. In this scene she becomes a figure much like Mr. March; her disciplinary influence is rendered even more powerful by the fact that she is physically absent for most of that day. She herself is aware that influence is often best wielded at a distance; it is her desire “to impress the lesson more deeply” that prompts Mrs. March to take the day off in the first place, and then to leave the house before Jo’s dinner party. Upon

her departure, “[A] strange sense of helplessness fell upon the girls as the gray bonnet vanished round the corner...”(108). By the end of what Jo describes as a “dreadful day,” the sisters are more than willing to agree with their mother when she returns home and advises them “to take up your little burdens again, for though they seem heavy at sometimes, they are good for us, and lighten as we learn to carry them” (111).

Like the real-life Abby Alcott, Marmee “mothers” her daughters’ minds through her stable presence. She is the linchpin of the family and keeps the domestic space ordered and functioning despite repeated attempts by the outside world to destroy its harmony and the sisters’ equanimity through various worldly means—fashionable clothing, gossip, a desire for fame and fortune. This is not to say that Marmee is non-directive; it is, in fact, precisely *because* of her intimate relationship with her daughters that she is able to guide and discipline them using Christian and transcendental precepts such as self-sacrifice, allegiance to duty, family, and the promptings of one’s conscience that the novel affirms are the most important in an increasingly commercialized and market-driven world. But with all four daughters she stands back and lets them learn their lessons on their own, as difficult as that may be. Meg visits the fashionable Moffats and comes home wiser about the difference in ideals held by her mother and people Marmee describes as “kind...but worldly, ill-bred, and full of ...vulgar ideas about young people” (91). Amy is publicly humiliated at school by her teacher who “knew a

quantity of Greek, Latin, algebra, and ologies of all sorts so he was called a fine teacher, and manners, morals, feelings, and examples were not considered of any particular importance” (64).<sup>10</sup> When she arrives home, indignant at the fact that she has been the victim of corporal punishment, she is disappointed when her mother says “I should not have chosen that way of mending a fault...but I am not sure that it won’t do you more good than a milder method” (67). Ultimately, Marmee does remove Amy from the school, citing disapproval of the school’s teaching methods, as well as its students as the reasons for her decision. In both these instances, the sisters return home to the “safe space” where their mother puts into words the lesson that follows upon their actions. Home is the school ( in Amy’s case, a much better school) in which the sisters can forge a strong individual identity and a common conscience that will safeguard them from those forces of the outside world that threaten their sense of duty to others, their morality, and, paradoxically, their self-autonomy. At home the sisters learn the lesson that self-fulfillment comes through a recognition of others in their community.

Of all the sisters, it is Jo, the writer, whose identity and fate is shaped most rigorously and profoundly by her parents’ teaching. When the novel opens, Jo is the only sister who rebels against the feminine lifescipt that is being offered her. Meg, the sister who is well on her way to living out the motherteacher script with little or no variations on it, lectures Jo “to leave off boyish tricks, and [to] behave better,” to turn up her hair and act like “a young

lady” (5). Jo responds by pulling off her hairnet and exclaiming, “I hate to think I’ve got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China aster! It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys’ games and work and manners!” (5). For most modern readers, the novel’s appeal is the result of Louisa’s skillful rendering of Jo’s struggle to negotiate the tension between the lifscript that calls her center her identity solely in motherhood and family, and her own desire to pursue a career—an option not open to her mother’s generation and one that Meg and Beth, the most conventional (old-fashioned) of the sisters, could never entertain.

The first sign of the clash between the motherteacher lifscript and the material reality that is Jo’s ambition occurs in chapter five, “Jo Meets Apollyon.” She has written her first work, “half a dozen little fairy tales...putting her whole heart into her work, hoping to make something good enough to print” (72); however, the only copy of this first literary attempt is burned by Amy, in retaliation for being left home when her older sisters accompany Laurie to the theatre. As punishment, Jo, in turn, leaves Amy behind when she goes skating with Laurie; Amy follows and accidentally falls through the ice. The chapter concludes with Marmee delivering a lesson to Jo on the value of holding one’s tongue. Interestingly enough, it is Jo, the target of the vengeful act, not Amy, who is subjected to the most intense sorrow and remorse as a result of this episode; Amy, the instigator of the episode, is asleep during Marmee’s talk. Presumably she does not need to learn to watch



her language in the same way her sister does, although she, too, the only other sister who is a serious artist, suffers from a problem with words—she commits egregious malapropisms. But in this instance, she, like Beth and Meg, has already absorbed the conventions governing appropriate behaviour as it relates to the virtuous use of words, so there is no need for her to hear Marmee's talk.

The lesson of the chapter is clear; ultimately, it is not the irreplaceable loss of an artistic creation that causes the most trauma and creates the drama of episode, but rather the loss of virtue—in Jo's case manifested by the way in which she uses words against her sister: “You wicked, wicked girl! I never can write it again, and I'll never forgive you as long as I live” (72). Jo's silence is condemned as well, as it is her calculated decision *not* to warn her sister about the rotten ice that leads to Amy's accident. Jo must learn, just as Louisa did when she called her sister Anna “mean” that words—and sometimes the absence of words—can be an explosive mix if not used with prudence and restraint. Marmee's job is to mediate between the warring sisters and point out the value in using language to promote, not destroy, domestic harmony. To do so, she admits to her daughter that she, too, harbors a similar fault, anger.

Jo and her mother are bound closer as a result of this admission. When Jo asks her mother “are you angry when you fold your lips tight together and go out of the room sometimes, when Aunt March scolds or people worry you?”

(76), her mother replies, "Yes, I've learned to check the hasty words that rise to my lips, and when I feel that they mean to break out against my will, I just go away a minute, and give myself a little shake for being so weak and wicked"(76). Marmee's admission of such a potentially damaging fault (in Jo's case, her sister could have drowned) is an example of Louisa's creative revision of the typical sentimental story. Nancy Theriot notes that real-life mothers were often advised by mid-nineteenth century writers of prescriptive literature to control their anger in order to set a good example for their children. According to Theriot, such cautions "highlighted the central theme of the motherhood script's behavioral imperative. Besides seeing their lives as examples and conquering harsh emotions, mothers were expected to embrace self-renunciation as a total lifestyle" (22). But with Marmee's revelation, Louisa twists this aspect of the script, and in doing so, reveals that both she and Marmee are unwilling to wholly embrace self-renunciation and the dictums of the society of which they are a part. Contrary to reader expectations, anger and vice do indeed exist in the March household, and Marmee reveals she is no saint. It is because of Jo's transgression involving words that the intimate mother-daughter bond is strengthened, as is, ultimately, the connection between Jo and Amy. At the close of the chapter, with her mother as her inspiration, Jo vows to discipline her tongue and temper and is able to forgive her sister, thus restoring family unity.

The chapter's conclusion emphasizes the close communion between mother and daughter and the fruits of Marmee's disciplinary intimacy and mother-teaching philosophy. Jo embraces her mother and prays for guidance "for in that sad yet happy hour, she had learned not only the bitterness of remorse and despair, but the sweetness of self-denial and self-control; and, led by her mother's hand, she had drawn nearer to the Friend who welcomes every child with a love stronger than that of any father, tenderer than that of any mother" (78).

Interestingly enough, the only other mention of Marmee's tight-lipped response comes later in the novel and is the result of humiliation she experiences at the hands of an unsympathetic relative. When Marmee must travel to Washington to attend her critically ill husband, she is forced to borrow money from wealthy Aunt March who responds with a loan as well as a disparaging note. Her caustic comments cause Marmee to fold her lips "in a way which Jo would have understood if she had been there" (152). Marmee's request emphasizes her own economic dependency, a position over which she has little, if any, control, and is highly reminiscent of many scenes in Abby Alcott's own life. Like her real-life counterpart, even Marmee has yet "to learn not to feel it," that is, her anger (75). But experience has taught her that although she cannot control certain outside forces (such as money and relatives) that disrupt her equanimity, she can control her responses to them, small consolation, perhaps at times, but certainly preferable in the Alcott

worldview to utter capitulation and a sense of victimization. Marmee is tacitly acknowledging that a woman can express some measure of control and autonomy in a world dominated by materialistic, patriarchal values, even if it is only by tightly folding her lips and, paradoxically, not saying a word. It is this most important practical lesson in discipline, founded on the primary Christian precept of self-denial, that she seeks to impart to Jo in chapter five.

Marmee also functions as a silent muse of sorts to her daughters, encouraging them to pursue their various interests in music, art, drama, and writing. In Jo's case, she writes, produces, and acts in her own highly imaginative, "sensational" theatricals, all with her mother's tacit approval. But like Louisa, Jo must learn that literacy as it is defined by the motherteacher script is more than simply the ability to read, write, and entertain; rather, it is informed by the twin notions of virtue and discipline. At some point she must learn to use her literacy not only to mother her own mind, but to mother others, as well, to serve the greater good as well as personal pleasure. In chapter 14, "Secrets," Jo retreats from the harmonious (at times also constraining) domesticity of the lower house to the garret. In this unfinished space with an "old tin kitchen"—normally a repository for foodstuffs—serving both as desk and the safe hiding place for her literary creations and a few cherished books, she writes. Just as food preparation is vital to the well-being of the family, so too Jo's literary concoctions provide her with much-needed intellectual and emotional nourishment and are a creative

release, as well. Later, when her talents mature, her ambition will enable her to provide mundane but much-needed "blessings" to her family in the form of "groceries and gowns" (251).

The garret functions as her own kitchen of sorts where she can conduct her literary experiments, untroubled by household tasks. She has completed another story which she ties up with "a smart red ribbon," (139) which we learn in a later chapter signifies a novice writer. Jo escapes, unseen, from her house and delivers her manuscript to a newspaper office. Laurie witnesses her trip, but what begins as a chapter on Jo's writing career temporarily turns into a lecture on the feminine influence exerted by the March women over Laurie. This is yet another example of the recurring pattern in *Little Women*, that is, the juxtaposing of literacy events and moral commentary. In the novel's worldview, these issues are inseparable. In this scene, Jo tries on the voice of the motherteacher when she exhorts Laurie to "just be a simple, honest, respectable boy, and we'll never desert you" (141). Yet she drops that voice moments later when the two meet Meg, who scolds Jo for running a race with Laurie. Once again, Jo resists the lifescipt that she senses is exerting an strong and inevitable pull over the sisters (Laurie has just informed her that Meg's lost glove resides in John Brooke's pocket); instead she responds, "Don't try to make me grow up before my time...Let me be a little girl as long as I can" (144).

After this moral digression, the chapter returns to the subject of Jo's writing. She reveals to her family that her manuscript, "The Rival Painters" (the title, biographer Madeline Stern notes, of Alcott's own first story) has been published. In contrast to Meg, who will become a wife and mother, at the close of this chapter Jo appears headed toward a public life as author. Unlike her mother and older sister, Jo harbors ambitions that extend beyond the domestic sphere; nevertheless, those ambitions are literally wrapped up in her obligations to her family. The narrator notes that after she reads her story aloud to her family, "Jo's breath gave out here, and wrapping her head in the paper, she bedewed her little story with a few natural tears; for to be independent and earn the praise of those she loved were the dearest wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step toward that happy end" (147).

Jo's writing career is marked by this constant tension created by the pull between her own personal artistic development and her emotions and sense of duty to her family. She is serious enough about her writing that she regularly falls into a "vortex...writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace (250). These uncontrollable artistic "fits" render her oblivious to her family; during them she is utterly absorbed by her art and is "safe and happy in an imaginary world, full of friends almost as real and dear to her as any in the flesh" (250). This is a portrait of a serious artist, and it is apparent from this description that Jo, like her creator, derives a great deal of pleasure from her literacy. On

the one hand, the very nature of serious writing makes it incompatible with family life; it is an activity that is best pursued alone, away from family and friends, and thus does not promote domestic harmony in any obvious way, Abbott's motherteacher notwithstanding. But Jo is never wholly isolated during these creative interludes. She never leaves home during her vortexes—indeed, home provides the safe environment in which she can pursue her art. Her family, too, help her mediate a balance between the public and private aspects of her art by providing her with a wide berth when the writing fit is on and taking their cues from the attitude of the cap she wears while writing.

In chapter twenty-seven Jo reads a sensational story by the popular Mrs. SLANG Northbury (a reference to real-life best-selling author Mrs. E.D.E.N Southworth), and returns home, inspired to try for the hundred dollar prize offered by the paper for a similar piece. She begins writing, "much to the disquiet of her mother, who always looked a little anxious when 'genius took to burning'" (252). The passion and self-absorption that Jo exhibits for writing are not entirely in keeping with Marmee's motherteacher script which emphasizes selfless behaviour, hence her anxiety for her daughter. In her quest to establish herself as a serious writer (winning such a large prize will, in a sense, mark her transition from amateur to professional), Jo must stretch her talents and imagination. She "hadn't ever tried this style before, contenting herself with very mild romances for *The Spread Eagle*," but her story, which "was as full of desperation and despair as her limited

acquaintance with those uncomfortable emotions enabled her to make it," (252) wins the prize.

After reading it, Mr. March comments, "You can do better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest, and never mind the money" (253). His rather naive rebuke is another example of dissonance between the anti-materialism of the March lifescrypt, which casts literacy in a highly moral light, and the reality of the publishing world, which demands that, first and foremost, language must entertain, not preach. This tension is made explicit later in chapter thirty-four when Jo is in New York writing for the *Weekly Volcano*. Her first story for that paper is heavily edited, and she is nonplused to find that the "moral reflections—which she had carefully put in as ballast for much romance—had been stricken out" (326). Mr. Dashwood, the *Volcano*'s editor, responds to her protest, "[P]eople want to be amused, not preached at, you know. Morals don't sell nowadays" (326). The contrast between the values of the March household and those of the publishing world is quite obvious—the latter is a disruptive place (the paper's name hints broadly at that) where those in charge refuse to pay heed to the emotional and moral connection a writer might have with her creation. Taken to an extreme, this world demands capitulation to material values, which means that in this instance, Jo must alienate herself from her artistic vision and ideals instead, turn her story (and by extension herself) into something it was not originally intended to be.



Nevertheless, throughout Jo's career, she and her parents are able to assuage their moral misgivings over her art because she is always motivated by altruism. The one hundred dollar prize money sends Marmee and Beth to the seaside; the earnings she accumulates during her stay in New York fund a similar trip. What is so interesting about Jo's (and Louisa's) career is that she is willing to experiment with various literary genres, even those (sensational literature) that seem to contradict the teaching she has received at home. The prospect of her parents' disapproval does not inhibit her from taking certain risks which, in fact, she must take if she is to grow artistically and eventually find her true voice. The fate of her first novel, the subject of chapter twenty-seven, is an example of how the dissonance she experiences serves as a catalyst for further fame and fortune. She writes a novel which is accepted for publication on the condition that "she would cut it down one third, and omit all the parts which she particularly admired" (254). Her father advises her to ignore the advice and instead, "[L]et it wait and ripen.." (254). But here is an instance when his wife disagrees. Marmee counsels her daughter to publish, noting "that Jo will profit more by making the trial than by waiting...Criticism is the best test of such work, for it will show her both unsuspected merits and faults, and help her to do better next time" (254). With her pragmatic advice, Marmee is urging Jo to deviate from the motherteacher script—she is, in fact, acknowledging the possibility that Jo may, in fact, take a different path, one that will lead her to a public life that

will, in turn, give her some measure of control over the financial aspects of her life. Indeed, as a result of her talent, Jo begins "to feel herself a power in the house, for by the magic of her pen, her 'rubbish' turned into comforts for them all" (253).

The language used to describe Jo's attempts to write a novel that will satisfy both her publishers and her family is provocative. The manuscript is "her firstborn" yet she "chopped it up as ruthlessly as any ogre" (255). This image shows the powerful pull exerted on Jo by the motherteacher script and the conditions of her career. Her text is her child, which initially goes out into the world bearing the moral impress and the "metaphysical streak" (255) of the March lifescipt. Yet she must eradicate much of the vestiges of her parents' teaching in order to create a novel that sells. In the end, as a result of her ruthless amputations, no one, least of all Jo, is happy with "the poor little romance" which is true neither to the ideals of her parents, nor those of the publishing world. Despite her discomfort over the critical response to the novel, however, the narrator informs us that the entire experience is a catalyst for Jo's artistic growth; the public exposure "did her good, for those whose opinion had real value gave her the criticism which is an author's best education; and when the first soreness was over, she could...feel herself the wiser and stronger for the buffeting she had received" (256).

The emotional and artistic "buffeting" that Jo experiences as a result of her writing comes to a climax in chapter thirty-four. Her stories for the

*Weekly Volcano* are becoming more and more "thrilling"— and very profitable. However, she refrains from telling her family about her latest literary efforts because she suspects "that Father and Mother would not approve" (327). But again, such disapproval does not hinder her efforts; in fact, she "preferred to have her own way first, and beg pardon afterward" (327). But these latest stories require Jo to move further away from her family; the ideals her parents have given her are in danger of being obliterated by the "folly, sin, and misery" to which she is being exposed (328). By writing them, Jo is also discovering the limitations of the education she has received from Marmee. She is away from home, she is absorbed in her writing, and not only is she learning about other lifescrpts, she is living a life of a single, economically independent woman, a script far different from her mother's.

It is at this point, too, in the novel, that Louisa must confer on Jo a permanent lifescrpt as either a professional, unmarried writer, or a wife and mother. It is clear from Louisa's depiction of Meg's married life in the chapters "Domestic Experiences" and "On the Shelf" that a similar fate is not particularly attractive nor possible for Jo unless she completely renounces her identity and chief ideal, which is self-sufficiency. Meg lives a life defined completely by the parameters of her house and her role as a wife; yet "her paradise was not a tranquil one, for the little woman fussed, was overanxious to please, and bustled about like a true Martha, cumbered with too many cares" (257). Like Louisa with her teaching, Jo never takes easily to domestic

duties (she learns to cook only as a result of the public humiliation she feels after her first dinner party). In fact, even after Beth's death when she begins to mute her criticism of the domestic script, Jo still despairs over "spending all her life in that quiet house, devoted to humdrum cares, a few small pleasures, and the duty that never seemed to grow any easier..."(404). Yet the savvy writer Louisa was fully aware that the conventions of the sentimental novel required marriage for the heroine, as did readers of *Little Women* who clamored for her to marry Jo and Laurie in the sequel. By 1868, Louisa had been writing and publishing for over ten years, long enough to have assessed her potential audience's and critics' expectations of her and was well-accustomed to editors' demands. At this point in her career, she was well-accustomed to performing literary "amputations" on her material in order to meet the expectations of a variety of readers. For example, in revising *Hospital Sketches* for publication in book form, she noted dryly that "[B]y taking out all Biblical allusions, and softening all allusions to rebs., the book may be made 'quite perfect,' I am told. Anything to suit customers" (*Journals* 164). But in the case of *Little Women*, she refused to capitulate entirely to her audience's demand for conventionality; in her journal she wrote emphatically "Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I *won't* marry Jo to Laurie to please any one" (*Journals* 167).

The introduction of yet another teacher, the older and decidedly unromantic, asexual Professor Bhaer, is yet another example of Louisa's creative revisioning of the motherteacher script. Although Professor Bhaer, who functions as a surrogate parent for Jo when she is away from her parents' home, is the reason she decides to abandon the highly lucrative sensational genre, Jo never completely forsakes her talent. In fact, after returning home and nursing Beth through her final illness, Marmee encourages her to write again, and the result is a "story that went straight to the hearts of those who read it..." (407). Jo resumes writing, but profound life changes have altered her attitude, and as a result, her motives are no longer strictly materialistic. At the same time, her attitude toward her art has matured—her stories are no longer her "firstborn" but rather "dutiful children" who "...sent home comfortable tokens to their mother..." which suggests that one function of this phase of her literary career is to prepare her for her future role as wife and mother (408).

Yet the tension between the two competing scripts is still evident in Jo's depression, which is prompted by her inability to live out unreservedly the Bunyan script which seems to lead her inevitably toward marriage and a life rooted in domestic, not artistic or public, concerns. On the one hand, "[S]he had often said she wanted to do something splendid, no matter how hard; and now she had her wish, for what could be more beautiful than to devote her life to Father and Mother, trying to make home as happy to them

as they had to her?" (407) And yet, the narrator also notes, "if difficulties were necessary to increase the splendor of the effort, what could be harder for a restless, ambitious girl than to give up her own hopes, plans, and desires, and cheerfully live for others?" (407) It is at this point that she begins to cast the final shape of her future. She picks up her career, yet is dissatisfied with the role of "[A] literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps; when, like poor Johnson, I'm old, and can't enjoy it, solitary, and can't share it, independent, and don't need it" (411). The fact that Dr. Johnson is for Jo a decidedly unappealing model of the wholly self-reliant artist indicates that she has now realized that her vision of future happiness must speak to both her individual and communal needs. I agree with Elaine Showalter who argues that Jo 's "trajectory" toward marriage and motherhood at the novel's close indicates not that she has been utterly absorbed by the conventions of mother-teaching, but rather that she "has learned to exchange the model of male 'genius' for a more realistic feminine model that is based on training, experimentation, professionalism, and self-fulfillment" (59).<sup>11</sup>

The fact that "the prospect" of Jo's marriage continues to generate the most heat in discussions of Louisa's career indicates that, if nothing else, the pairing was anything but a pat response to conventional readers' demands. Donna Campbell draws attention to "Alcott's glee at outfoxing her readers, her eagerness at the prospect of a good fight" that she argues "suggests a

rumpled and unrepentant Jo at her most contrary” (124). The ending is “Alcott’s triumph,” (125) a deliberate twisting of the motherteacher/sentimental script from which “the rebellious Jo/Alcott emerges victorious” (126). In her vision of Jo’s future, Louisa makes an unequivocal statement about the kinds of romantic relationships that had come to define a woman’s life and purpose. She herself had seen firsthand how the conventional motherteacher script, while privileging certain important Christian values, had also served to limit her mother’s own economic options, resulting in continual frustration and pain. If a woman *had* to get married, as Jo does in order to satisfy readers’ expectations, then Alcott makes it plain that it is a marriage of companionship, intellectual compatibility and equality, not necessarily romance, that offers the most hope for a woman to retain financial independence and personal autonomy. By uniting Jo and Professor Bhaer, Louisa proposes a new script for her adolescent readers, one that meshes idealism and pragmatism and allows Jo to become a true working mother who is paid for the services she renders in her home, which, in another twist, is transformed into an economic workplace. For it is vital that Jo continue working for a living after she marries since Professor Bhaer’s financial prospects are modest at best. At the conclusion of *Little Women*, Jo and her husband both live and work at Plumfield, which Jo has inherited from her stern and childless aunt, a legacy no doubt intended by her more worldly relative to shield her niece from the financial buffets of a

world not particularly hospitable to respectable young women who marry intelligent but poor men.

As Lisa Sisco points out, Jo's decision to open a school for boys at the end of the novel does not signify defeat of her literary ambitions "because the novel itself does not privilege writing over other forms of expression" (225). Furthermore, the ending is in harmony with the rest of the novel which has continually conflated the responsibilities of writing and teaching. In fact, Jo renews her career, quite successfully, in the later *Jo's Boys*. A particular kind of domestic idealistic literacy is the means by which the March sisters are educated about their potential lifescritps in society, and it is their responses to that education that is the central theme of the novel and its sequels. It is Jo, the sister who demonstrates the most resistance to the conventional script, who ultimately becomes most identified with her parents' role as a disciplinarian and teacher of young children. Like them, Jo, too, uses literacy as a tool for fostering a sense of virtue and intimacy in her charges, maintaining at Plumfield what she calls her "Sunday closet" which contains "picture-books, paint-boxes, architectural blocks, little diaries, and materials for letter-writing" (*Little Men* 31), as well as a "conscience book" (reminiscent of Abbott's "black book") in which she charts on a weekly basis the moral progress of her students. "This is one of the ways in which I try to help my boys" she tells Nat, one of her students. "I keep a little account of how he (her pupil) gets on through the week, and Sunday night I show him the record. If it



is bad I am sorry and disappointed, if it is good I am glad and proud; but, whichever it is, the boys know I want to help them, and they try to do their best for love of me and Father Bhaer” (31).

By the beginning of *Jo's Boys*, Jo's—and her parents'—vindication is secure. For we learn that the rest of the family has “emigrated to Plumfield” en masse “when the rapid growth of the city shut in the old house, spoilt Meg's nest, and dared to put a soap-factory under Mr. Laurence's indignant nose” (2), confirming the vindication of domestic space and family harmony and intimacy over material advances that threaten to overwhelm even the most harmonious of domestic spaces. The March household is transplanted to Plumfield and reconstituted into a larger Utopian community whose primary job is to teach values to the students who attend what is now a college on its grounds.

For many readers today, *Little Women* and its sequels do not offer a vision of women's roles that can be considered particularly liberatory, and for this, Louisa is often severely condemned. Not only is such criticism unfair, but it is also, in the words of Elaine Showalter, “overstated and extreme, demanding from Alcott's nineteenth-century female Bildungsroman a twentieth-century feminist ending of separation and autonomy” (57). According to Showalter, “Alcott's novel...dramatizes the Transcendentalist dream of sexually egalitarian lives of love and work. Seen in this context, Jo's literary and emotional career is a happy one, even if it does not conform to our

contemporary feminist model of a woman artist's need" (57). The ending also reminds us that there is more than one model for female self-fulfillment and independence. In Louisa's domestic Utopia, virtue and maternal values reign supreme, and literacy occupies a privileged position as the most important tool for shaping character and achieving personal happiness.

There is yet another reason why the novel continues to captivate readers after so many years. More than anything else, Louisa realized is that life was often, nearly always, a struggle between ideals and reality that often require difficult choices and sacrifice. *Little Women* does not advocate an overthrow of middle-class Christian values and principles precisely because Louisa herself had to fight so strenuously much of her life to achieve the kind of financial success in just such a middle-class world. As a result, she was loath to explode it in her fiction and replace it with something completely new. After all, as a child she had participated in "something new," the disastrous Fruitlands experiment, and undoubtedly that experience colored her opinion of radical social experiments and alternative living arrangements. Jane Tompkins, in her book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction*, comments, "When one sets aside modernist demands...and attends to the way a text offers a blueprint for survival under a specific set of political, economic, social, or religious conditions, an entirely new story begins to unfold, and one's sense of the formal exigencies of narrative alters accordingly..." (xvii-xviii). *Little Women* is just such a "blueprint for survival," one which charts

the journey of Jo March, Louisa's alter-ego, as she navigates the specific set of new opportunities and old responsibilities confronting a new generation of nineteenth-century women and attempts to create her own life and set of values out of that experience.

Louisa's brand of feminism attempted to embrace aspects of both the motherteacher script and the new economic and social realities of America at mid century. In a letter to Maggie Lukens dated 21 Feb. 1886, Louisa describes a Mrs. Ripley, a woman who embodies Louisa's feminist ideals:

I am glad you have discovered how much that is lovely as well as useful that word house keeper means. The mere providing of beds, meals &c is a very small part of the work. The home-making, the comfort, the sympathy, the grace, & atmosphere that a true woman can provide is the noble part, & embraces all that's helpful for soul as well as body.

I wish our girls would see this, & set about being the true house-keepers. Mrs. Ripley used to rock her baby's cradle, shell peas, or sew, & fit a class of young men for college at the same time. One can discuss Greek poetry & chop meat as I saw her doing once with Mr Emerson & Margaret Fuller & the one task ennobled the other because it was duty. (*Letters* 297).

The intellectual woman Louisa paints in this letter is a far cry from the solitary Johnsonian model that so depressed Jo March. Mrs. Ripley is admirable for her ability to simultaneously "discuss Greek poetry & chop meat," although it's also apparent which of these activities Louisa herself would consider "duty." In her study of Alcott *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott's Place in American Culture*, Sarah Elbert offers a comment on Louisa's

feminism that also helps explain more fully her feminism and her admiration for women like Mrs. Ripley:

[L]ike most of her readers, Alcott accepted woman's traditional commitment to family and home life; yet she also demanded individuality as her 'natural right.' She brilliantly communicated the tension between woman's traditional household cares and her new right to individual achievement. To resolve the conflict she presented an inviting range of domestic arrangements and income-producing work in alternative communities. Her ability to communicate the tension between old responsibilities and new rights while simultaneously offering viable alternatives to patriarchy partially explains her enduring popularity (1-2).

*Little Women* accurately reflects the struggle that many women still face as they wrestle with the many different scripts that are now open to them—homemaker, career woman, working mom, supermom. Yet it is patently untrue to say that, unlike Jo March or Louisa Alcott, women today no longer have to worry about reconciling their individual interests with their duties to others. We may have more life options than Jo March had, but we still must make what are at times difficult choices among those options. As a result of her life decisions, influenced to a great degree by her own and her family's view of literacy, Louisa was able to create a career that also allowed her to realize her dream of making her family, particularly her beloved Abby, comfortable.

And yet, her writing, economic life-saver though it was, was also a burden. By the end of her life, the toll exacted on her as a result of her unwavering devotion to writing done in the service of her family and morality

was a painful one. Her upbringing had instilled in her an almost dogged devotion to duty and virtue that was difficult, if not impossible, for her to shake. It was not only poetic sentimentality which prompted her father to conclude his poem "To Louisa May Alcott" with the line "I press thee to my heart as Duty's faithful child" (Cheney 11). As the years went on, her journal entries degenerated into terse one or two line comments about her declining health. One year before her death, in an 1887 letter to journalist Frank Carpenter who inquired about her work methods she wrote:

My methods of work are very simple & soon told. My head is my study, & there I keep the various plans of stories for years some times, letting them grow as they will till I am ready to put them on paper. Then it is quick work, as chapters go down word for word as they stand in my mind & need no alteration. I never copy, since I find by experience that the work I spend the least time upon is best liked by critics & readers.

Any paper, any pen, any place that is quiet suit me, & I used to write from morning till night without fatigue when 'the steam was up.' Now, however, I am paying the penalty of twenty years of over work, & can write but two hours a day, doing about twenty pages, sometimes more, though my right thumb is useless from writer's cramp. (*Letters* 307)

But what matters most is that Louisa *did* write, and that she *did* achieve an astounding degree of success. Given the heavy odds against her, both as an Alcott and an intellectual female living in the nineteenth century, hers is a remarkable story, which, like so many others is not without its share of personal tragedy. The life of Louisa May Alcott and her novel *Little Women* illustrate, in a compelling way, the ways in which all women are, at different

times, both “culture-formed and culture-forming” (Theriot 16). There are always choices to be made, but *Little Women* reminds us that there is some hope for happiness and balance in one’s life. *Little Women* affirms that it is indeed possible to be, in Abbott’s words, “the happy mother of a happy child.” Louisa took what she learned in private about writing, virtue, and influence and applied it in a public way—with remarkable results. Her writing life shows just what a sophisticated literacy can mean for us and those around us. Yet just literacy opens new horizons, it can also shut us off from other dreams and aspirations. Ultimately, however, Louisa, Marmee, and Jo serve as powerful reminders of the many ways in which we can use our literacy to mother others—family members, children, students—and ourselves.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER V

1. The entire quote, taken from a letter Louisa wrote to her father in 1856, reads “though an *Alcott* I *can* support myself. I like the independent feeling; and though not an easy life, it is a free one, and I enjoy it. I can’t do much with my hands; so I will make a battering-ram of my head and make a way through this rough-and-tumble world” (qtd. in Saxton 210).

2. Louisa begins recording in her journal earnings for sewing, teaching, and writing in 1850.

3. Louisa’s 1872 novel *Work*, as well as her short story “How I Went Out to Service” are based on her many and varied work experiences. These narratives reveal that for Louisa, as for her mother before her, life, was, indeed often the hardest teacher.

4. In a letter to Samuel May dated 4 April 1841, Abby noted “By the fall my babe will be more out of my arms, I shall have more word of action and tho I may adopt some scheme of life giving me more labor if it makes me independant of the charity of my relations and friends it will give me life indeed—and my children will not have to reproach their parents with idle word word—my girls shall have trades—and their Mother with the sweat of her brow shall earn an hones subsistence for herself and them—I have no accomplishments for I never was educated for a fine lady—but I have handicraft wit and, enough to feed the body and save the souls of myself and children—” (Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25)). This letter indicates that Abby was making a conscious decision to alter her own lifescrypt which had not given her any economic options aside from marriage to a financially stable man, which Bronson clearly was not. (Note her comment “I was never educated for a fine lady.”) At this point, the lifescrypt she had been given had rendered her financially dependent on her relatives.

5. Brodhead’s chapter on Louisa provides an excellent analysis of the trends in the publishing field at the time when she was coming of age as a professional writer. He argues that Louisa “became the kind of writer she did by choosing among contemporaneously generated modes of literary work that were first equally available” (86).

6. According to Mary Kelley, Sara Parton (“Fanny Fern”) was paid \$1,000 for the story “Fanny Ford: A Story of Everyday Life” that was published in the

New York Ledger in 1855 (6). Publishing was becoming a lucrative field for some women writers, and certainly paid better than teaching and sewing, something both Louisa and her mother realized. In a letter to Samuel May, dated 3 October 1852, Abby commented, "I am sure if 'Fanny Fern' is popular Louisa would receive premiums as thick as Blackberries" (Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25)).

7. Ms. in Louisa's hand, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-314, box 1.

8. Other motherteachers in Louisa's juvenile fiction include Uncle Alex in *Eight Cousins*, Mrs. Minot in *Jack and Jill*, and Mrs. Milton in *An Old-Fashioned Girl*.

9. Letter from Abigail May Alcott to Samuel Joseph May, dated 8 Sept. 1860, Houghton Library, Alcott Family Papers, accession 59M-305 (25).

10. In this episode, Louisa is obviously having her revenge on critics of her father's pedagogical theories and methods.

11. As I noted in chapter four, Johnson was an important model for Abby Alcott. However, he does not speak to women of Jo's generation who are looking for a newer model of artistic and intellectual life, one that will allow them to incorporate both their public (professional) and private (maternal) duties.



## CONCLUSION

I began my dissertation by stating my belief that a study of the Alcott family's literacy practices could provide both composition and literature scholars with new material on the history of writing and text production in mid-nineteenth century America. At this point, I hope that my project has helped to advance Anne Ruggles Gere's claim that important composition history has always been made—and will continue to be made—outside the walls of the traditional classroom and that we owe it to our field and our students to examine the tradition of extracurricular as well as curricular education. I hope, too, my discussion illustrates the truth of Jean Ferguson Carr's comment that prefaces the dissertation: "The academic and the extracurricular can never be fully quarantined from each other. Each extends its influence to the other, although in differing degrees and through different mechanisms of power and transmission." This was certainly true for the Alcotts who, more often than not, viewed home and school as overlapping institutions with complementary agendas, and who believed that mothering and teaching were inextricably linked.

But I also believe that this study does more than simply make the case for adding the Alcotts to our list of famous figures in composition history. Indeed, the more involved I became in my project, the more convinced I was of the relevance of their literacy experiences to us today. In true expressivist

fashion, Abby, Bronson, and Louisa May Alcott all believed in the value of literacy as a means of arriving at a deeper understanding of the private self. In Bronson's classroom, writing instruction was much more than an academic exercise; rather, it was a way to lead his students to critical thinking and, he hoped, a better understanding of themselves both as individuals and as members of a greater community. This, of course, is nothing new to composition scholars today who continually debate the merits of expressivist and social constructionist approaches to writing instruction. On one level, Bronson's teaching experiences serve as a very basic but nonetheless critical reminder of how useful it is to know the history of our own scholarly discussions, if for no other reason than we might avoid repeating past pedagogical mistakes.

But on a more personal note, as I read about Bronson and Abby's attempts to instill literacy and virtue into their daughters and pupils, I couldn't help but reflect on my own teaching practices both in and out of the classroom. I suppose this couldn't be avoided since I myself am both a mother and a professional teacher. As a friend of mine noted, I was living what I was writing about in my dissertation. So I began to think about the relationship between literacy and mothering in my own life. Instead of viewing my roles as wholly separate, something I often must do if only to get some work done, I began to think of the times when they overlapped—and the result when that occurred.

And I conclude that the best mothering and the best teaching must partake of both the directive and the nurturing. Just as a good enough mother cannot always remain neutral or uncritical if she is to truly help her child develop a critical consciousness, so too a teacher cannot only play the role of the authoritarian in interactions with students. As composition teachers today, we continually grapple with the question of our own authority and influence in the classroom. When should we exercise it? In what manner? When do we step in and offer direction and guidance to the shape of classroom discussion or writing, both public and private? How can we be, like Abbott's motherteacher, both in the room with our students and available to them and yet at enough distance to allow for the flowering of their intellects and imaginations? In essence, how can we, like Bronson and Abby Alcott, point the way for our charges, children or students, to usefulness *and* happiness?

The challenge for mothers, fathers, and teachers alike lies, of course, in arriving at a harmonious balance between what are often seen as—and indeed often are—conflicting elements. As Abby Alcott pointed out, mothering and teaching are infinitely complex and demanding tasks that often require almost superhuman abilities. If nothing else, this dissertation reveals that the challenges we face as parents and teachers today are not all that different from those the Alcotts grappled with in their personal and professional lives over one hundred and sixty years ago.

In the other epigraph that prefaces this dissertation, William Alcott, Bronson's cousin, comments that "[L]ove is the golden chain, which not only binds pupil to pupil, but also pupil to teacher in the family school; while force is quite too often the order of the day elsewhere." At their best the Alcotts were just such "golden chains," figures committed to helping their charges link the private world of their individual conscience and imagination to the larger world of which they were always a part. From the Alcotts' experience, we are made aware that the motherteacher paradigm has been with us in the classroom for a very long time. Knowing this, we can perhaps better understand our influence as teachers and parents and learn what it takes to create through our own literacy pedagogies the kinds of golden chains that join our students to us and to each other in mutually agreeable and empowering ways. The Alcotts had a vision of literacy and mothering that would transform students and by extension, the world. For many of us involved in teaching today, that's still a compelling reason to walk into the classroom.

## WORKS CITED

- Abbott, John S.C. *The Mother At Home; or, The Principles of Maternal Duty Familiarly Illustrated*. 1833. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1855.
- Albert, Judith Strong. "Transcendental School Journals in Nineteenth Century America." *The Journal of Psychohistory* 9 (1981): 105-26.
- . "Transition in Transcendental Education: The Schools of Bronson Alcott and Hiram Fuller." *Educational Studies* 11 (1980): 209-19.
- Alcott, Abigail May. "Family Letters 1828-1861" Vol. III. 59M-305 (25). Alcott Family Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- . Journals 1841-44. 59M-311 (1). Alcott Family Papers. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- . Journal fragments, 1845-77. 59M-311 (2). Alcott Family Papers. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- . Ms. of memoir fragment. 59M-311 (3). Alcott Family Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- . Memoir and letters. 59M-306 (28). Alcott Family Papers. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Alcott, A[mos]. B[ronson]. "Primary Education. Account of the Method of Instruction in the Primary School No. 1, of Cheshire, Connecticut." *American Journal of Education* 3. 1 (Jan-Feb 1828): 26-31, 86-94.
- . "Common Education. Elementary Instruction." *American Journal of Education* 3. 6 (June-July 1828): 369-75; 440-3.
- . "Correspondence between a Teacher and One of his Pupils 1832." 59M-305 (33). Alcott Family Papers. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- . Correspondence with Charles Morgan, 1834. 59M-305 (33). Alcott Family Papers. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

- . "The Doctrine and Discipline of Human Culture." *Essays on Education (1830-1862)* by Amos Bronson Alcott. Ed. Walter Harding, Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1960. 29-55.
- . "Family Letters 1837-50 Vol I Domestic." 59M-305 (24). Alcott Family Papers. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- . "Maternal Influence." *American Annals of Education* 3.1 (Jan 1833): 16-24.
- . "Maternal Instruction.—Hints to Parents." *American Journal of Education* 4. 1 (Jan 1829): 53-58.
- Alcott, Louisa May. *Eight Cousins*. 1874. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1906.
- . "How I Went Out to Service." in *Alternative Alcott*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
- . *Jack and Jill*. 1880. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1916.
- . *Jo's Boys*. 1886. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1903.
- . *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*. Ed. Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy and Madeleine B. Stern. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989.
- . *Little Men*. 1871. Boston: Roberts Bros., 1873.
- . "Little Things." In *Spinning Wheel Stories*. 1884. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889.
- . *Little Women*. 1868. New York: Bantam, 1983.
- . Ms. 59M-314, Box 1. Alcott Family Papers. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- . *Old-Fashioned Girl*. 1870. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1906.
- . *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*. Ed. Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy and Madeleine B. Stern. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987.
- . *Work*. 1873. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

- Alcott, William. *Confessions of a School Master*. Andover, MA: Gould, Newman and Saxton, 1839.
- . "There Is No School Like The Family School." *The Mother's Assistant* 3.1 (Jan 1843): 1-3.
- . *The Young Wife, or Duties of Woman in the Marriage Relation*. 1837. New York: Arno Press, 1972.
- . *The Young Woman's Guide*. 13th ed. Boston: Charles H. Peirce, 1847.
- Bedell, Madelon. *The Alcotts: Biography of a Family*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1980.
- Belsey, Catherine. "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text." *Feminisms*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991. 593-609.
- Brodhead, Richard. *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Buell, Lawrence. *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973.
- Bushnell, Horace. *Christian Nurture*. 1861. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947.
- Button, H. Warren and Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr. *History of Education & Culture in America*. 2nd ed. Needham: Allyn and Bacon, 1989.
- Campbell, Donna M. "Sentimental Conventions and Self-Protection: Little Women and The Wide, Wide World." *Legacy* 11 (1994): 118-29.
- Carr, Jean Ferguson. "Rereading the Academy as Worldly Text." *College Composition and Communication* 45 (Feb 1994): 93-7.
- . Introduction to the Bay Psalm Book (1640), The New England Primer (1683?). *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Paul Lauter. 2nd ed. 2 vols. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1994. Vol. 1. 326-8.

- Cheney, Ednah Dow. *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters and Journals*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1928.
- Child, Lydia Maria. *The Mother's Book*. 1831. Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1992.
- Cott, Nancy F. *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.
- Dahlstrand, Frederick C. *Amos Bronson Alcott: An Intellectual Biography*. East Brunswick: Associated University Press, Inc., 1982.
- Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. New York: Random House, 1977.
- Downs, Robert. *Horace Mann: Champion of Public Schools*. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974.
- "Effects of Family Example on Schools." *Annals of Education* 4.1. (Jan 1834): 29-31.
- Elbert, Sarah. *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott's Place in American Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987.
- Estes, Angela M. and Kathleen Margaret Lant. "Dismembering the Text: The Horror of Louisa May Alcott's Little Women." *Children's Literature* 17 (1989): 98-123.
- Fetterley, Judith. "Little Women: Alcott's Civil War." *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979): 369-83.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Gannett, Cinthia. *Gender and the Journal: Diaries and Academic Discourse*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.
- Gere, Anne Ruggles. "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurricular of Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 45 (1994): 75-92.



- Harding, Walter. Introduction. *Essays on Education (1830-1862) by Amos Bronson Alcott*. By Amos Bronson Alcott. Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimile & Reprints, 1960. vii-xvi.
- Hobbs, Catherine, ed. Introduction. *Nineteenth-Century Women Learn to Write*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995.
- Hochfield, George, ed. *Selected Writings of The American Transcendentalists*. New York: Signet, 1966.
- Kagle, Steven E. *Early Nineteenth-Century American Diary Literature*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986.
- Kaledin, Eugenia. "Louisa May Alcott: Success and the Sorrow of Self-Denial." *Women's Studies* 5 (1978): 251-63.
- Kelley, Mary. *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Kirschner, Joseph. "The Shifting Roles of Family and School as Educator: A Historical Perspective." *Home Schooling: Political, Historical, and Pedagogical Perspectives*. Ed. Jane Van Galen and Mary Anne Pitman. Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1991. 137-158.
- Kuhn, Anne L. *The Mother's Role in Childhood Education: New England Concepts 1830-1860*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947.
- Kuhn, George and Martha Kuhn. "The Temple School Journals of George and Martha Kuhn." *Studies in the American Renaissance*. Eds. Alfred G. Little and Joel Myerson. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993. 55-145.
- Leland, Charles Godfrey. *Memoirs*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1893.
- Martineau, Harriet. 1837. *Society in America*. 3 vols New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1966. Vol. 3.
- Mattingly, Paul H. *The Classless Profession: American Schoolmen in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: New York University Press, 1975.

May, S.J. "Errors in Common Education. An Address delivered at the Lyceum in Brooklyn, Con, Oct. 22, 1828." *American Journal of Education* 4. 3. (May and June 1829): 213-25.

---. *Memoir of Samuel Joseph May*. Boston: Roberts Bros., 1873.

McCuskey, Dorothy. *Bronson Alcott, Teacher*. 1940. New York: Arno Press, 1969.

Monroe, Paul. *Founding of the American Public School System: A History of Education in the United States*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1940.

Mott, Frank Luther. *Golden Multitudes; The Story of Best Sellers in the United States*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1947.

The New England Primer. in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Paul Lauter, et al. 1st ed. 2 vols Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1990. Vol. 1. 308-10.

Paul, Sherman. "Alcott's Search for the Child." *Boston Public Library Quarterly* 4 (Apr 1952): 88-96.

Peabody, Elizabeth Palmer. *Record of Mr. Alcott's School, Exemplifying the Principles & Methods of Moral Culture*. 3rd ed. Boston: Roberts Bros., 1874.

Perry, Ruth and Martine Watson Brownley, eds. *Mothering The Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and Their Silent Partners*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1984.

Pratt, Anna Bronson Alcott. Journal for 1839. Alcott, A[mos] B[ronson] "Family Letters 1837-50 Vol I Domestic." 59M-305 (24).

Rose, Anne C. *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement 1830-1850*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

Ruddick, Sara. "Maternal Thinking." *Feminist Studies* 6 (1980): 342-67.

Saxton, Martha. *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977.

- Sayler, Sanford. *Marmee: The Mother of Little Women*. Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949.
- Shepard, Odell, ed. *The Journals of Bronson Alcott*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1938.
- . *Pedlar's Progress: The Life of Bronson Alcott*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1937.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Simons, Judy. *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990.
- Sisco, Lisa A. "Emerging From The Chrysalis: Isolation and Publication in Nineteenth-Century Literacy Narratives." Diss. University of New Hampshire, 1995.
- Stern, Madeleine B. *Louisa May Alcott*. 1950. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971.
- Strickland, Charles. "A Transcendentalist Father: The Child-Rearing Practices of Bronson Alcott." *Perspectives in American History* 3 (1969): 5-73.
- Sugg, Redding. *Motherteacher: The Feminization of American Education*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978.
- Sunley, Robert. "Early Nineteenth-Century American Literature on Child Rearing." *Childhood in Contemporary Cultures*. Ed. Margaret Mead and Martha Wolfenstein. Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1955.
- Theriot, Nancy M. *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity*. 1988. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996.
- Tompkins, June. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Weeks, Dr. David and Jamie James. *Eccentrics: A Study of Sanity and Strangeness*. New York: Villard, 1995.

Weigle, Luther A. Introduction. *Christian Nurture*. By Horace Bushnell. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947. xxiii-xl.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-174.

White, Barbara. "Women Writing About Teaching in the Nineteenth-Century United States." Annual Meeting of the National Women's Studies Association. Minneapolis. June 1988.

*The Young Lady's Own Book: A Manual of Intellectual Improvement and Moral Deportment*. Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwaite & Co., 1838.

## Appendix 1

From: Abbott, John S.C. *The Mother At Home; or, The Principles of Maternal Duty Familiarly Illustrated*. 1833. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1855.



WRITING JOURNALS.

Appendix 2

From: Peabody, Elizabeth Palmer. *Record of Mr. Alcott's School, Exemplifying the Principles & Methods of Moral Culture.* 3rd ed. Boston: Roberts Bros., 1874.

QUARTER CARD OF DISCIPLINE AND STUDIES IN MR. ALCOTT'S SCHOOL FOR THE SPRING TERM CURRENT 1836.							
THE TUITION AND DISCIPLINE ARE ADDRESSED IN DUE PROPORTION TO THE THREEFOLD NATURE OF CHILDHOOD.							
THE SPIRITUAL FACULTY. MEANS OF ITS DIRECT CULTURE.		THE IMAGINATIVE FACULTY. MEANS OF ITS DIRECT CULTURE.			THE RATIONAL FACULTY. MEANS OF ITS DIRECT CULTURE.		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Listening to Sacred Readings.</li> <li>2. Conversations on the GOSPELS.</li> <li>3. Writing Journals.</li> <li>4. Self-Analysis and Self-Discipline.</li> <li>5. Listening to Readings from Works of Genius.</li> <li>6. Motives to Study and Action.</li> <li>7. Government of the School.</li> </ol>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Spelling and Reading.</li> <li>2. Writing and Sketching from Nature.</li> <li>3. Picturesque Geography.</li> <li>4. Writing Journals and Epistles.</li> <li>5. Illustrating Words.</li> <li>6. Listening to Readings.</li> <li>7. Conversation.</li> </ol>			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Defining Words.</li> <li>2. Analyzing Speech.</li> <li>3. Self-Analysis.</li> <li>4. Arithmetic.</li> <li>5. Study of the HUMAN BODY.</li> <li>6. Reasonings on Conduct.</li> <li>7. Discipline.</li> </ol>		
<i>The Subjects of Study and Means of Discipline are disposed through the Week in the following general Order.</i>							
TIME.	SUNDAY.	MONDAY.	TUESDAY.	WEDNESDAY.	THURSDAY.	FRIDAY.	SATURDAY.
IX	Sacred READINGS with Conversations.	STUDYING Spelling & Defining and Writing in Journals.	STUDYING Geography and Sketching Maps in Journals.	STUDYING THE GOSPEL, and Writing in Journals.	STUDYING Parsing Lesson and Writing in Journals.	PARAPHRASING Text of Readings and Writing in Journals.	COMPLETING Account of Week's Studies in Journals.
X	Listening to Services at CHURCH and Reading BOOKS from School Library or others at Home.	SPELLING with Illustrative Conversations on the Meaning & Use of Words.	RECITATIONS in Geography with Picturesque Readings and Conversations.	READINGS and Conversations on SPIRIT as displayed in the Life of CHRIST.	ANALYSING Speech Written and Vocal on Tablets with Illustrative Conversations.	READINGS with Illustrative Conversations on the Sense of the Text.	READINGS from Works of Genius with Applications and Conversations.
XI		RECREATION ON THE COMMON OR IN THE ANTE-ROOM.					
XII		STUDYING Arithmetic with Demonstrations in Journals.	DRAWING FROM NATURE in Journals with Mr. Graeter.	CONVERSATIONS on the HUMAN BODY and its Culture.	COMPOSING and Writing Epistles in Journals.	STUDYING Arithmetic with Demonstrations in Journals.	REVIEW of Journals Week's Conduct and Studies.
I		INTERMISSION FOR REFRESHMENT AND RECREATION.					
III		STUDYING Latin and Writing in Journals.	STUDYING Latin with Recitations.	RECREATIONS and Duties At Home.	STUDYING Latin with Recitations.	STUDYING Latin and Writing in Journals.	RECREATIONS and Duties At Home.
IV							

TEMPLATE No. 7, MARCH 1st 1836.