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“Give Me This and I am Yours”: Masks & Identity in Louisa May Alcott’s *A Modern Mephistopheles*

SUZUKI, Miki

1. Introduction

Louisa May Alcott, a 19th century American female author, has been called an “ambidextrous” (Showalter, *Choice 44*) author due to the two very different genres in which she wrote: one for children, the other for adults. These two genres are so different as to be schismatic—reflective of the dual life that Louisa herself led. As such, an understanding of the dual nature of Louisa’s life is crucial in understanding her works, for in her life one finds many parallels with her novels—in particular, the concept of the “mask.” Perhaps none of her novels better develops the concept of the mask than her final thriller, *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877), which stands as a personal triumph for Louisa as an individual as well as providing great insight into her character.

2. Louisa and her contemporary world

Though undoubtedly fond of writing, Louisa had little choice but to publish due to the poor financial situation of her family. Yet being a female breadwinner in antebellum America was unusual. She was thus forced from an early age to assume two masks: that of daughter and that of breadwinner. Her father, Bronson Alcott, was at the center of the transcendentalist movement, a new school of philosophy then thriving in New England, and knowledge of these concepts undoubtedly imparted

a less-than-conventional sense of Christianity on young Louisa, a characteristic that required further masking. Both her financial obligations and the gender equality inherent to transcendentalism led Louisa to become aware of the concept of women's rights. Her developing proto-feminism required even more reserve in its display.

Absorbed in the philosophy of the transcendentalist school, Bronson Alcott was more inclined towards Quixotic ventures than practical matters, leaving to Louisa the burden of familial financial responsibility. Her subsequent decision to pursue money by any means—"I will make a battering-ram of my head and make my way through this rough and tumble world" (Silverthorne 37)—was noted by Showalter to be a type of "Faustian vow" (*Choice* 47) as it required her to write with a financial focus. Louisa's father proved a loyal reader as she concentrated on juvenile-oriented novels and often offered feedback. Despite her central role in the financial affairs of her family, "Alcott [Louisa] always regarded herself as a dutiful daughter" to her father (Showalter, *Choice* 43). Her alter-ego, *Little Women* (1868, 69)'s Jo, is invariably obedient to her father: "She gave him entire confidence,—he gave her the help she needed" (459). As such, Louisa's early works on novels for youth were to a great extent for economic purpose and contrary to her fondness for thrillers.

After the success of *Little Women*, Louisa struggled with the social constraints that her new-found fame had brought, for they required her to be a "Children's Friend" (Stern, *Blood & Thunder* 85), which led to expectations from her readership regarding topics, content and style. Books suitable for this audience were those which could be read in a family circle, in a library, at school, as Showalter mentions: "Essentially moralistic, it was designed to bridge the gap between the schoolroom and

the drawing room, to recommend docility, marriage, and obedience rather than autonomy or adventure” (*Choice* 50). These very attributes, though, were quite contrary to Louisa’s character; like Jo, she was hot tempered. She wrote in her journal when she was at fourteen: “I am old for my age and don’t care much for girl’s things. People think I’m wild and queer” (*Journal* 59). Though she welcomed success and fame, it would be no wonder if Louisa herself did not often feel that she were wearing a mask.

Louisa’s “double literary life” (Douglas 43) can be traced to 1861, when she wrote in her journal of her earnings from gothic thrillers such as “A Pair Of Eyes” and “Whisper In The Dark”(106). Her second published thriller, “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” (1863), which was published anonymously in *The Frank Leslie Illustrated Newspaper*, won a prize, encouraging Louisa to start a second, if mostly anonymous, career as an author of thrillers. She chose the sexually ambiguous pseudonym A. M. Barnard—the surname likely a cleverly-chosen mask, literally meaning “bear-brave.” Coupled with the initials A. M., it may well have been a private joke. Her pseudonymous thrillers include murder, mesmerism, disguise, double marriage—these very adult topics she was forced to mask both due to her Concord environment¹ and to preserve her reputation (ne: financial position). This particular genre not only augmented the funds she required to support her family, it was also a clear enjoyment for her. As she wrote in a letter to her friend:

I intend to illuminate the Ledger with a blood & thunder tale as they are easy to “compoze” [sic] & are better paid than moral & elaborate works of Shakespeare, so dont [sic] be shocked if I send you a paper containing a picture of Indians, pirates wolves, bears & distressed damsels in a grand tableau over a title like this “The

Maniac Bride” or “The Bath of Blood. A thrilling tale of passion,” &c. (79)

Goethe had become a cherished author of Louisa since her perusal of *Goethe's Correspondence with a Child* (1835) as an adolescent. Following the 1868 publication of the novel which established her fame, *Little Women*, Louisa continued to concentrate on novels targeting younger readers such as *An Old Fashioned Girl* (1870), *Little Men* (1871), *Eight Cousins; or, The Aunt-Hill* (1875), *Rose in Bloom* (1876), and *Under the Lilacs* (1878). From 1877, Louisa began mentioning frequently in her correspondence and diary of her mental satiation with producing novels in the style that had made her famous and of her continued fascination with Goethe's drama: “It has been simmering ever since I read Faust last year. Enjoyed doing it, being tired of providing moral pap for the young” (*Journal* 204). By now 45, she was free of the burdens that had dictated to her as a younger woman and eager to explore her own character.

The resulting *A Modern Mephistopheles* said to be Louisa May Alcott's final thriller, is a Gothic novel which was published anonymously as part of a popular series of anonymous authors (Kane, 109). The publication of the novel achieved for the author two long-held desires: The rewriting of the famous *Faust* (1808/1832), and a freedom from the style aimed at juveniles for which she had gained fame and financial independence.

In this way, the creation of *A Modern Mephistopheles*—Louisa's final thriller—is of irreplaceable importance in interpreting the dualism that marked Louisa's life.

3. Louisa's use of masks in previous works

Throughout her works, Louisa used the motif of masks both literally

and metaphorically. This is exemplified in her “most skillful of the tales” (Showalter, *Alternative* xxix), *Behind a Mask: or A Woman’s Power* (1866), whose title clarifies the interest the author held in the interactions of people and masks for example. *Behind a Mask* depicts a protagonist, 30-year-old former actress Jean Muir, whose “metamorphosis” (12) from a 19-year-old governess to a polyglot and accomplished chanteuse aids her in her struggle for upward social mobility. She dons the mask of excessively femininity—required of contemporary women—so as to marry into aristocracy.

Louisa’s use of the mask motif was not limited to her thrillers but extends to her works for youth. In *Little Women*, for example, Louisa utilizes the mask to display the concept of an idealized figure: the sisters Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy are repeatedly urged to conform to an idealized “little women”(17); Fetterley calls it “the job of ‘little woman’” (6, underline mine). The sisters struggle with the gap between the mask of idealism (who they are expected to become) and their real selves (who they want to become).

These examples demonstrate Louisa’s deep interest in who wears a mask, why they do so, and what happens through and after the masquerading.

4. Masks in *A Modern Mephistopheles*

4. 1 Masks and Feminism

A Modern Mephistopheles has been cited by critics as an early feminist work particularly due to the strong will displayed by Gladys. Louisa had declared her allegiance to early feminism in her *Hospital Sketches*, “I’m a woman’s rights woman” (9), and some critics have noted in the character Gladys elements of this feminism, which is akin to Jean Muir of *Behind a Mask* and Jo of *Little Women*. Each of these characters reveals the

proto-feminism borne by Louisa. As S. Elbert sees that *Mephistopheles* is “[treatment] of romantic sexual conflict” (232), critics such as Chapman and Sanderson recognize the confrontation between Helwyze and Gladys as the confrontation between patriarchy and women, with the former endeavoring to strip naked and the latter trying to maintain a clothed dignity. Paradoxically, Louisa’s Mephistopheles, Helwyze, is physically a very feminine creature: His face is “pale” and hands are “thin” (9)—he is rather helpless (“frail-looking”¹³). Louisa entitling her work “Mephistopheles” serves to emphasize the mask rather than the gender of the character behind it. Helwyze as such is less a representation of his gender than that of humankind. Each character in the novel faces a conflict of common theme beyond gender. Fundamentally, *A Modern Mephistopheles* deals with a universal aspect of human nature: that of the mask. *Mephistopheles* intends to illustrate the masks which humans wear, why they wear them, and the confrontations which ensue.

4. 2 The motif of mask

The motif of the mask in *A Modern Mephistopheles* is quite clear: Canaris, ostensibly the erudite and published sage, is in fact impotent and empty, a kept anima. As Sanderson describes famous poet Canaris as a “mask of male genius” (50), the overriding theme of the novel is identity and presentation, essentially what we know we are and how we present ourselves. While Goethe’s drama provided inspiration, Louisa took wide liberties in plot in her recreation, with the protagonist selling his soul to Satan as the sole similarity. Goethe’s Mephistopheles invariably satisfies Faust’s desires, while Louisa’s Helwyze keeps Canaris on a very tight leash. In exchange for literary fame, Helwyze requires from the young

poet “[e]ntire obedience” (51). Canaris agonizes over his loss of freedom and, though still in the flower of his youth, being chained to the decrepit Helwyze as his “body and soul” (17). Louisa took great pains to fully develop the characters of not only Canaris but of Helwyze; while Faust’s Mephistopheles as Satan is necessarily a one-dimensional figure, Louisa’s Helwyze, though a master manipulator, is still in the end simply human.

Perhaps in no other of her works was Louisa’s development of the mask theme more deeply developed than in *Mephistopheles*. Indeed, as Stern mentions (*Mephistopheles* xxiii), Louisa wastes no time in unmasking her characters through their names: Felix Canaris, whose simple pursuit of happiness is most dog-like, must obey his master Helwyze like a dog to realize his dreams. Jasper Helwyze—the Persian “Gaspar” means “treasure bringer” and the name of the one of the biblical Three Kings who presented Christ with frankincense, itself symbolic of soothing—is clearly wise, though his wisdom composes his personal hell. Olivia—“olive,” symbolic of peace—mediates between Gladys and Canaris. Gladys—in Old Welsh “royalty”—expresses a strong and determined will towards her relationships with men; some critics appraise her as “the best-drawn character” (Burlingame 205). Each character is important for the investigation of relationships between masks and humans, and the name of each protagonist symbolizes a particular human archetype, making the novel very much a parable.

Aside from a short introductory scene in the misery of Canaris’ hovel, the entire story is set in the soothing world that is the Helwyze estate, a world whose environs are entirely under the power of its creator save for the thoughts and actions of those who allows abide there. Helwyze, as creator and master of this world, has chosen each of his guests for a specific social attribute. Helwyze invites Canaris to the house to manipulate “first

as secretary, then *protégé*, now friend, almost son” (28). Gladys, an orphan, pure and with “innocent face” (22)—often called “child” by both men—is manipulated by Helwyze to be bride to Canaris despite the latter’s reluctance. Olivia herself is still in thrall to the embers of her love for Helwyze, and he uses this power over her to make her midwife to his desire. In this, all except Helwyze are unaware of their roles and are thus essentially masked; at the same time, though, Helwyze is blocked from truly penetrating what is in their hearts, so he is, too, masked, but with a mask that lacks eye holes.

The masks that Helwyze, through Louisa, makes his would-be puppets wear—the ambitious youth, the innocent maiden, the indebted matron—are those people wear to satisfy social requirements. The demi world composed by the Helwyze house reflects society at large and its denizens, particularly those who must assume some character, for society oft requires people to bear some definable attribute. Kane takes the example of Gladys: “like most young women in Victorian society, she [Gladys] has been kept totally ignorant of the potential power of her own sensuality” (111). The mask Helwyze forces upon Gladys thus equates the mask forced upon young women by societal norms of that time.

Louisa’s frustration with the complexity of society’s requirements is reflected here. She would occasionally complain about her multiple roles: in a letter to her friend, Mrs. Graham, referring to herself as her alter-ego, *Little Women’s* Jo, Louisa vented: “Jo is nurse, housekeeper, scribbler & Papa to the boys” (220). Louisa was well aware of the need to juggle multiple social and familial roles so as to maintain social position and the family, and that each came with its own mask. Yet while these masks may have had their uses, they came with a cost in both the struggle to differentiate them and the loss of true sense of being.

In *Mephistopheles*, Louisa displays this conflict in her way of revealing multiple attributes of her characters. Her treatment of Gladys’ position in Helwyze’ house emphasizes this dualism:

This was the double life Gladys now began to lead. Heart and mind were divided between the two, who soon absorbed every feeling, every thought. To the younger man she was a teacher, to the elder a pupil; in the one world she ruled, in the other served.... (122-23)

This double life as both “a teacher” and “a pupil” that Gladys is made to play torments her psychologically. She complains to her husband, “I too am tired of this life; not because it is so quiet, but so divided” (162). As such, the novel clearly writes of women’s struggles with male-dominated society; as Keyser mentions, Gladys’s “double life” “represents the life of every woman” (127).

Such a dual life is inherent to all characters in this novel, symbolic of the need everyone has to wear a mask so as to live their lives—to pretend to be what is required of them by authority, society, and themselves.

4.3 “Mephistopheles” as a mask

Just as Helwyze gives his fabricated family masks to mark their roles, Louisa also gave Helwyze a mask: She has him call himself “Mephistopheles.” Olivia, spying Canaris talking to Gladys, remarks, “Faust and Margaret, playing the old, old game,” to which Helwyze responds, “And Mephistopheles and Martha looking on” (36). The awareness of Helwyze of his role² — his mask that he has assumed of his own volition—is in marked contrast to Goethe’s drama. The “old, old game” is the display of love in its many-masked splendor, and looking on is the agent who brought it about.

Unbeknownst to Helwyze, though, his observance of what he thought was the consummation of his plans was in fact his own unmasking, for Gladys hears from Canaris of the emotional paralysis Helwyze has suffered since parting from Olivia. Gladys quickly assumes a mask of innocence when Olivia, who cut loose Helwyze, comes nearer: “It is she; hide me till I learn to look as if I did not know!” (34) This parallels with a novel within a novel, which Louisa focuses on the motif of the mask.

This identity of “Mephistopheles” is to Helwyze his sole source of strength, particularly his ability to see through the masks of others. Like *Faust’s* Mephistopheles, Helwyze is interested in the human condition, as in particular the term “read” to indicate his observance shows; we need to focus on his eye. Helwyze’s first encounter with Canaris, for example, notes how he saw the young man’s “desperate eye,” and “The stranger [Helwyze] read the little tragedy at a glance” (11). Canaris can do no mask in front of Helwyze, in front of whom he is naked to analysis: “[H]e [Helwyze] leaned forward to read the face which could wear no mask for him” (17). Then the young man reveals his face to the older: “I do hunger and thirst for fame” (17). Reading others’ faces is an amusement for Helwyze akin to reading books, though with a significant difference: His keenness of perception, of unmasking the objects of his observance, gives him power over others so much so that he has authority to make the young man a “famous poet.”

Louisa turns the story to the competition between Helwyze and Gladys so as to elucidate the effects of wearing masks on people. Helwyze repeatedly encourages Gladys to see the parts of her real self that she masks by showing her items of a luxurious sort and books not read among children. He desires of Gladys that she recognize her capacity for such emotions as vanity, envy, desire, and fury—base emotions commonly

masked in public—and he wants to see her display them, unmasked and naked. Louisa has Gladys indicate that she considers those kinds of feelings to be “evil”:

“I feel as if under a microscope when with him [Helwyze]; yet he is very kind to me, and very patient with my ignorance. Felix, is he trying to discover the evil in me, when he gives me strange things to read, and sits watching me while I do it?”
(160, underline mine)

Louisa implies here that the donning of a mask is not necessarily negative; it may allow a certain control, whereas, when stripped naked of the mask, control shifts to the observer. Gladys realizes that she is “an object of the gaze” (Chapman 29)—that Helwyze is trying to unmask her—but she resists.

Louisa, however, makes clear through their competition that Helwyze is able to see only what he wants to see (in this case, Gladys’ real self). In other words, he is blind to all but what he supposes is beneath the mask. It is a paradoxical relationship; the unmasker cannot see but what he desires to see, and the masked cannot act but as her masquerade dictates. The questions, thus, are what Helwyze wants to see, and what imperatives drive Gladys—it is this gap that blinds him.

4. 4 Revelation of the real self, or anima, via the mask

Untangling the above paradox requires a focus on the relationships between the characters. Louisa’s purpose for Helwyze, rather than Canaris, as protagonist is clear: it is his bilateral relationships with Gladys and with Canaris which not only serve to cause confrontation but—indeed, necessarily—through confrontation, are required for each character to acquire

self-realization. The manipulator, though, is also himself manipulated: as Helwyze endeavors to envision Gladys' real self, he exposes his own anima to the eyes of the reader. That is to say, what mechanisms one utilizes to see allows one to be seen, and what mechanisms one utilizes to uncover allows one to be uncovered. To see is to be seen; to reveal is to be revealed.

The process through which Helwyze unmasks Gladys is instructive here, for his desire to view the world as he desires it to be incidentally reveals his real-self. The power of unmasking actually shows his infirmity. First he gives Gladys “hasheesh” (181)³ which causes her to disbosom her inner emotion to Olivia, who attracts Canaris “in a low, intense voice never heard from her lips before,” saying, “I have won him [Canaris]; he is mine, and cannot be taken from me any more” (184). This uncharacteristic action reveals her strong emotion and passion. Louisa then adds a third layer of obfuscation which is paradoxically clarifying as Helwyze later has his guests engage in the performance of a *tableau vivants*⁴, or “masquerading” (202)—literally, “living picture”—Gladys, in donning her *tableau vivants* mask, reveals her real self. She, acting as King Arthur's Vivien⁵, shows two aspects of her mask and real-self: “[...] for him [Helwyze], a double drama was passing on that little stage, and he found it marvelously fascinating” (192). “A double drama” shows her mask (staging) and real-self (her love for Canaris). Helwyze notices this and enjoys seeing her inner emotions—her anima—and particularly her jealousy: “You [Canaris] have made her jealous, and your angel will prove herself a woman, after all” (192-93).

Gladys is thus only recognized as a woman when she reveals her anima, that being her capacity for jealousy and passion. Of importance is that these emotions were never non-existent and that they were simply hidden within her. She at last realizes her real-self because of Helwyze,

who was blind to the consequences of unmasking:

“I did not know my own power till you [Helwyze] showed it to me; unintentionally, I believe, and unconsciously, I used it to such purpose that Felix felt pride in the wife whom he had thought a child before.” (225)

The forces requiring Gladys to assume the persona of a child are shown here to be not only external society but also internal—the mask she wore was worn both consciously and unconsciously. Helwyze thus provides both the stimulation and the process for Gladys to rid herself of her mask and, for the first time, truly recognize herself.

Louisa displays her understanding of masks here by showing how the revealer is revealed as Helwyze shows his real-self simply by valuing Gladys’ unmasked emotion: “[T]he girl [Gladys] possessed the originality, fire, and energy which were more attractive to him [Helwyze] than her youth, gentleness, or grace” (212). The roots of his obsession for unmasking Gladys’ emotions are thus laid bare: it is life that he desires, and this betrays his fundamental weakness. What he adores of Gladys is “the originality, fire, and energy”—though he was not aware of this until not only had he stripped her of her mask, but until his own mask had also been stripped.

Gladys turns a revealer; Helwyze’ inner emotion is recognized by Gladys as something she does not want to admit “[Helwyze’] love.”: “I [Gladys] do not see, I vaguely feel; I pray God I may never know” (208). For Gladys, these statements of uncertainty towards motivation indicate that she is, after all, conscious of Helwyze’ love. Helwyze’ attitude shows that he wore a mask, and as such, when he hears those words, he loses his sense of composure: “Helwyze dropped the nerveless hands, turned

from the mutely accusing face, let the troubled spirit rest, and asked no more” (208), indicating the impotent admission of the veracity of Gladys’ suspicions of his unconscious love for her. Thus, even as he enables her awareness of her power, she awakens in him both awareness of his emotion and his inability to realize its imperatives.

Mephistopheles is, in fact, a mask that Helwyze must wear, if semi-consciously, for him to execute his desires: those of manipulating human behavior and perverting love. The fact, though, that he must wear the mask admits a grave weakness: his inadequacy as a human. That Helwyze cannot see himself is, as his utterance “I shall never understand myself” (218) directly states, clear. By unmasking Gladys’ feelings, Helwyze necessarily but unwittingly unmasks himself. Although called “Devil” by those such as Showalter (*Choice* 47), the relationship between Helwyze and Gladys proves that he is all too human—one who need mask himself to cloak the dangers of intimacy, whether it be his desire to befriend, to love, or to stay near Gladys, and it is this inability to relinquish control that is his fatal weakness.

Mephistopheles ultimately illustrates the difficulty all have existing independent of their masks. After Gladys’ death⁶, Canaris departs, leaving Helwyze alone, which differs from *Faust*, who remained shadowed by Mephistopheles as the latter awaited the death of the former to claim his prize. Helwyze, recognizing his love for Gladys, instead can but lament his fate, and in doing so, reveals the difficulty of both masking and unmasking: “Life before was Purgatory, now it is Hell; because I loved her, and *I* have no hope to follow and find her again” (290). Here he finally recognizes his love for Gladys. For Helwyze, life was “Purgatory” because his love for Gladys was unrequited, try as he would to manipulate

her. Yet there remained at least hope, no matter how faint; her death removed even that faint hope, plunging him into “Hell.” Until the last, he has no choice but to wear the mask of Mephistopheles—a pretense which agonizes him—to hide his true self whose reality equally agonizes him.

4. 5 Exchanging Identity

Louisa also focuses on the mutual relationship between Helwyze and Canaris. After “selling his soul,” Canaris chafes at his owner’s control. Helwyze, though, is well aware of the depth of Canaris’ ambition for fame as a poet: “Yours is ambition, —an insatiable fellow, who gives you no rest” (87). The leash binding Canaris is his own ambition, and Helwyze, by satisfying this ambition a bite at a time, holds the leash. Canaris struggles such under the leash of Helwyze that, after achieving literary fame, he is driven to threatening his owner with disclosure of their pact. Helwyze, though, sees the futility as Canaris has grown too attached to the success Helwyze has allowed. Critics have recognized parallels between Canaris becoming a renowned poet by selling his soul with Louisa’s writing endeavors. Showalter suggests that Louisa reflects a “guilty sense” in this novel for “having bartered her womanhood and art in the name of financial expedience, to achieve literary and commercial success” (*Choice* 47-48). Canaris too is dogged by a sense of guilt. Perhaps, like Louisa, he feels deeply the conflict between his ambition for fortune and fame and his desire for freedom.

Louisa, at the end of this novel, frees Canaris from the mask, which begins with his disclosure of truth to Gladys. He tells her the truth of his masquerade as a famous poet, writing “Jasper Helwyze” under his name of his representative work and calling himself a “living lie” (257). After all, he lives with his false identity, or “Other[’s]” identity (Keyser 122)⁷, which he

borrowed from Helwyze. Seeing how the truth deflates Gladys, Canaris at last realizes the emptiness of a false identity which shows nothing of his true-self, such that he considers himself to be but an “empty name” (258). It is as such that he chooses to unmask himself and to enter the world anew.

As Louisa has Canaris unmask, his relationship with Helwyze is clarified: it is not simply a master-subordinate relationship as between owner and dog but a relationship of mutual soul-selling. Canaris repeatedly calls himself Helwyze’ “body and soul,” which would necessitate that Helwyze also be Canaris’ “body and soul.” Canaris eventually realizes: “[...] in me he [Helwyze] would live his youth over again, and, in return for such help as he could give, I should be a son to him” (261). Helwyze regains youth by making Canaris his alter-ego, his “son,” thus betraying that it is not only Canaris but also Helwyze who assumes a false identity. In other words, as Canaris writes Helwyze’ name on his book, Canaris was Helwyze, while at the same time, Helwyze was Canaris. If Hewyze is the lifeblood of Canaris, Canaris is also the lifeblood of Helwyze. Their masking enables that they may mutually gain attributes they lack, such as youth, energy, intelligence, style, skill. Consequently, their identities are exchangeable: it is Helwyze who personifies Faust—who sells his soul to renew his youth—Helwyze, not Canaris, is Faust.

5. Conclusion

The overview of Louisa’s literary dual life at the beginning of this paper notes the parallels which her life shares with her works, and, as such, the motif of the mask is a key for a fuller interpretation of *A Modern Mephistopheles*.

Interpreting this novel from a feminist point of view is tempting; however,

the theme of *A Modern Mephistopheles* goes beyond gender: that all people regardless of sex tend to first don a mask and only realize their real-selves through their relationships. The bilateral relationships between Helwyze and both Gladys and Canaris comprise not only the confrontation which many critics have argued but are essentially a common struggle. Canaris pleading with Helwyze, “Give me this and I am yours”(17) is a metaphor of the novel’s deep connection with the issue of identity. Just as Helwyze is an adolescent trapped in an old man’s body, as are so many men, so is Gladys a human female trapped in the constraints society have compelled.

Though Louisa’s re-creation traces the plots of the original *Faust*, she places more emphasis on the characters’ inner aspects—that is, the interplay between mask and real-self, a theme Louisa had frequently depicted in other works ranging from thrillers to children’s books. A common thread running through the wearing of a mask is the social factor, and this novel depicts the strengths, infirmities, and conflicts of those who wear a mask, whether consciously or not. The novel thus illustrates that, while masks may in some cases allow the wearer’s desires to bear fruit in reality, their usage brings at the same time agony. Revealing one’s real-self is also shown to be difficult. Louisa’s clear depiction of such conflicts in this novel shows both literary skill and also understanding of a dilemma faced by humans so fundamental that the issue of the mask and real-self remains as pertinent today as it did when Louisa herself was confronted with the dilemma. *A Modern Mephistopheles* thus proves itself as appealing today as it was upon publication and deserving of continued critique.

Notes:

Special thanks to William Baerg for help in preparation of this manuscript.

- 1 The anonymity of *Mephistopheles*'s publication was likely related to the rarefied intellectual climate of her Concord environment, where "Titan[s] of intellect" (Pickett 42) such as Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau congregated. Among these, Louisa's thrillers were considered nothing more than "rubbishy tales" (*Journal* 139). It was also likely due to contemporary social prejudices discouraging females from writing such genre.
- 2 Helwyze further acknowledges his conscious assumption of the role of Mephistopheles through remarks such as "The danger is the charm"(36); he purposely acts as a devil-like figure, though, interestingly, not in the way most 19th century people invoked the devil. Like Louisa's favorite author Hawthorne's confident scientist Ailmer of "The Birthmark" (1846) and Rappaccini of "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844), Helwyze's hubris affects others against their will.
- 3 This parallels with "Rappaccini's Daughter," as M. Elbert interprets: "It is no coincidence that men try to subdue the imposing woman of their imaginations—through poison, in Beatrice's case, and through hashish, in Gladys's case" (20). However, the consequence of drug use in *Mephistopheles* shows not Gladys' obedience; she does in some cases rule over Helwyze.
- 4 Some critics have viewed this masquerading as reflecting the hidden power of women: Dawson, for example, interprets that Gladys' performance "can be read as one of confident self-assertion" (42).
- 5 As Chapman analyzes the character, Vivien's story is underneath of *Mephistopheles*: "Vivien's infidelity and her manipulation of Merlin have obvious parallels in *A Modern Mephistopheles*. Like Vivien, Gladys seizes male power and turns it against itself, symbolically imprisoning Helwyze in the house in which he has held Canaris and her as his dependents" (27-28).
- 6 S. Elbert reads this as Gladys' escape from males (232).
- 7 When Keyser wrote her book, she named the chapter "An Identity 'Other' Than Their Own" (122), using an excerpt from Heilbrun: "[W]omen have long searched,

and continue to search, for an identity ‘other’ than their own” (111-12, underline mine). This indicates it is especially women who search for other identity, but in *Mephistopheles*, this mechanism is shared by both sexes.

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