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## Rejecting Shadow for Substance: Marriageable Love within the Novels of Louisa May Alcott

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*Rejecting Shadow for Substance:  
Marriageable Love within the Novels of Louisa May Alcott*

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University of Tennessee

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The headlines could have read “Marriage Gone Wrong.” The scrolling credits would announce the story of intellectual and reformer Mary Sargeant Gove Nichols<sup>1</sup>, who spent many years trying to extricate herself from the prison that one bad decision imposed upon her. Nichols’ semi-fictive autobiography, *Mary Lyndon: Or, Revelations of a Life* (1855), makes a compelling plea for sympathy as she details her account of how she agreed under pressure to marry the strictly pious Quaker Albert Hervey, realized she did not love him, and then was coerced into keeping that vow by fellow Quakers who believed that marriage is eternally binding, and that an engagement is as binding as marriage. Following through with the marriage with the solemnity of a gravedigger, Mary entered a world in which a wife experienced a total loss of rights and has absolutely no say in any decisions. Hervey denied her the ability to choose her profession or social group of companions, burned evidence of her personal letters he discovered, took control of the receipts of all her earned money and refused to let her purchase books with that money, and determined for her what was and was not ‘sinful,’ demanding that she adhere to strict legalisms and morality. His domination was so oppressive that Mary fell into a perpetual state of illness and contemplated suicide, and was only pulled out of these thoughts by the comfort of her only child, Eva. Mary chose to exercise the undeniably human right to think, coming to the conclusion that “marriage without love was legalized adultery,” “unsanctified and unholy,” and thus not even a union but a “discord” (131, 152). Acting on these beliefs, Mary sought divorce; however, Hervey locked her into their marriage by threatening to ruin her reputation and take their child, Eva—which he was completely authorized to do by law.

As Nichols laid out the situation in *Mary Lyndon*, Mary was able to disentangle herself from caring about the opinion of others enough to divorce Hervey, marry another man she loved,

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<sup>1</sup> Born Mary Sargeant Gove, the author creates the semi-fictive aspect of her autobiography by naming her protagonist Mary Lyndon. Within this thesis, I will refer to the character as Mary and author as Nichols, referring to her later married last name.

and retrieve her daughter, but the point is not lost that Mary's life when tied to Hervey was not much above the status of a slave. Though she was not herself property, all of her rights to property, will, and children were vested solely in her husband. Nichols herself explains her situation with the chilling statement, "According to the law of the land, this man owned me, *body and soul*, and my child" (310, emphasis added). It is worth noting that Harriet Beecher Stowe, in her famous novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), uses this phrase to powerful effect when describing the relationship of ownership—legally, sexually, and emotionally—between slave masters and female slaves, most hauntingly that of Simon Legree and Cassy. After Legree purchases fifteen year old Emmeline and brings her back to his plantation, Cassy laments to Tom the years she has spent living with Legree: "I've been on this place five years, *body and soul*, under this man's foot; and I hate him as I do the devil!...and it's no use resisting" (426, emphasis added). While Mary Lyndon was not in a slave-master relationship, her marriage shared many similarities with those relationships, for she was bound to her husband legally (with no rights to property), sexually (as conjugal rights), and emotionally (with no hope of divorce without losing her child). As Cindy Weinstein asks, "Are there degrees of slavery?" (134). Mary's experience echoes Cassy's, as neither woman could resist the bondage of male dominance in their lives. As a modern reader, one must certainly take seriously the plight of a group—or sex—of people when it produces a gripping likening to slavery, the lurking shadow of the sins of the people in nineteenth-century America.

Mary Sargeant Gove Nichols' story represents the dilemma of one individual woman in nineteenth-century America, but Louisa May Alcott opens up the question—how a woman is to discern whom and if she should marry, and then how to conduct herself once she enters that sphere—to different types of women in various situations. In this thesis, I will first contextualize

the era surrounding Louisa May Alcott (1832-88) by exploring the historical, social, and philosophical context of the mid-nineteenth century, including women's rights, Transcendentalism, and new ideals of companionate marriages. Next, I will show that Alcott works on the problem of marriageable love within three of her major novels, *Moods* (1864), *Little Women* (1868-69), and *Work* (1873), while fluctuating between endorsing and critiquing traditional nineteenth-century courtship and marriage. Alcott adheres to ideals of traditional marriage in *Moods* (1864), questions the place of traditional marriage as the only option for women in *Little Women* (1868-69), wholeheartedly offers an alternative to traditional marriage in *Work* (1873), and then returns to endorsing traditional marriage and all its binding characteristics for women in her revision of *Moods* (1882). Analyzing the kinds of marriageable love represented within the novels will show that—though the process is ridden with conservative counter-examples and moments of tension—Alcott challenges the present and strives towards the future, as she stands upon a progressive platform of critiquing traditional nineteenth-century methods of courtship and marriage and offering alternatives, including singleness, widowhood, and companionate marriage.

#### Women's Rights and Nineteenth Century Marriage

The fact of the matter was that every woman become wife was affected by the laws and attitudes surrounding marriage in nineteenth-century America. Women's historian Tiffany Wayne explains that America had adopted British common law of coverture, which meant that a woman was legally "covered" by her husband within marriage (17). Though Nichols may have been an extreme example, her story displays one possible result of the abuse of concentrated power vested in men by the system of coverture. As for divorce, it was legal in most states by 1800 but was extremely rare—1.2 divorces out of every 1000 marriages—and did not

significantly increase throughout the century. By 1900, there were still only 4 divorces out of every 1000 marriages, and these were surely a last option for women, for there were no legal guarantees of alimony, child support, or even a woman's right to any of her previous property (Wayne 5-6). Ironically, it was the issue of property—that is, slaves as property—that propelled Southern states to be the first to change their laws in favor of women. In 1839, Mississippi passed a law allowing women some right to their own property in circumstances of their husband's death or divorce (Wayne 17). New York followed in 1848, and by the end of the century in 1890, Wyoming was admitted as the first state granting women the right to vote.

The women's rights movement, brought on by changing laws and attitudes, allowed women to explore thinking for themselves, and provided an outlet for them to question if marriage was as immutable as society decreed. The most significant event to catalyze such questioning was the Seneca Falls Convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Led by women's rights advocate Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a group of New York Quaker women, and featuring influential speakers such as Lucretia Mott and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, this convention was the first large-scale gathering for the sole purpose of addressing women's rights. It holds prominence in nineteenth-century history for producing "The Declaration of Sentiments," which opened with the recognizably rewritten phrase: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal...." (1). Author Elizabeth Cady Stanton went on to lay out complaints against mankind, such as the fact that a woman in America was disenfranchised, unrepresented in the formation and continuation of laws, disallowed to own property, expected to promise submission in marriage, bound to reap the consequences of having all property and children stripped from her in case of divorce, barred from many employment and higher education, and denied the freedom to choose what "sphere of action," or realm of

socially appropriate roles and opportunities, in which she would partake. Stanton concludes with a list of resolutions for the women of the convention which strike the main chord of the “Declaration”—that women are “invested by the Creator with the same capabilities and same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise” as men (3). The women’s rights movement had been initiated.

Out of the women’s rights movement and a growing sense of equality, an ideal of companionate marriage grew. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the movement of Romanticism had pushed love to the forefront of the minds of men and women, and even more than this, it seemed as if love was becoming an intricate part of a developing American identity. Historians James and Dorothy Volo discuss the features of this identifiably American love, namely, that nineteenth-century Americans held it to be ever-present, the object of every girl’s hope, and successful when preceding marriage. Returning to America after a long absence, author James Fenimore Cooper commented on the increased presence of love, that “attractions lead to love; and love in this country, nineteen times in twenty, leads to matrimony” (Volo & Volo 208). Love had become a prerequisite for marriage. This developing attitude can be seen in an article reprinted in several newspapers across New England in 1846<sup>2</sup>, warning young people against “prudent marriage contracts,” claiming that it is preferable to marry for love, even if foolishly, for “true affection consecrates even weakness” (“Prudent Marriages” 7). Furthermore, Wayne points out that this increased presence of love and courtship was paralleled by progressive features such as “individual choice becom[ing] favored over parental choice [in matters of matrimony],” as well as “the ideal of companionate marriage or a partnership based on love and mutual respect” rather than “an earlier economic model of marriage” (1). As it became

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<sup>2</sup> i.e. *The Portland Transcript*; *Western Citizen*; *Factory Girl’s Advocate & Operatives’ Advocate*; and *Yankee* (Boston, MA)

more important for Americans to find love before marriage, and as love was increasingly linked to mutual respect, marriages began to look more and more companionate in nature.

Along with the principle of companionate love progressively becoming necessary for matrimony, spiritual values dictated what marriage would mean for a woman. With the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century, more and more people were looking to Biblical scripture to define love and marriage. It was completely acceptable for general newspapers to use the interpretation of Scripture as evidence in arguments. For example, in 1838 *The New York Mirror* argued against a bill placed before the state for the preservation of the rights and property of married women by upholding the long-held view of marriage as a “perfect identity of interest between the union” as ordained by God, finding evidence in the “wedded union which our Savior blessed in Galilee” (“Rights of Women” 239). Even if the Bible was not explicitly cited, marital attitudes and the contemporaneous language of coverture reflected that of Genesis 2:24:

“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh”; Romans 7:2: “For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth”; and Ephesians 5:22-23: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church” (*King James Version Bible*). Along with other closely studied and practiced Scriptural references, these verses constitute a core basis for the moral and social beliefs of marriage.

Specifically, the moral expectations were that marriage was to last as long as husband and wife lived, and that women had a separate role, or “sphere of action,” given her by God, and in which they were to remain. Pamphlets, instruction books for women, and articles in periodicals and newspapers carefully laid out this sphere of action to young women; for example,



the 1840 article “Rules for Wives” in *The Universalist Palladium & Ladies’ Amulet* informed a wife to “Always receive your husband with smiles...Never attempt to rule...Never attempt to interfere in his business” (Garrick 20). Similarly, the *Lady’s Amaranth* in 1839 related that “sweet is the society” where “husband and wife govern and are governed reciprocally” in their respective roles of “bear[ing] rule over his wife’s person and conduct” and “bear[ing] role by persuasion...by softness, complacency, and tears” (“Matrimony” 271). Clearly, it was recognized that women were an influential and vital complement in matrimonial union, but they were to conform to their sharply defined roles. Rev. A. A. Lipscomb wrote in 1846 in the *Literary Emporium* that “the respective spheres of husband and wife ought to be kept sacred by each other” and that to separate those roles would be to break the laws of nature (219). Lipscomb went on to advocate an elevated view of conjugal love, proclaiming that “Impulse is short-lived; romance soon decays—but such love [in marriage] expires only in the grave” (220). Dubbing marriage holy or hallowed allowed men and women to understand their marriages—though not as perfect as the engaged couple blindly assumed—as a sacred union ordained by God to be conducted with mutual respect, love, and service to the other person. A quotation featured in *Godey’s Lady Book* (1852), the most popular women’s magazine of the era, reminded readers that in marriage, husband and wife “bound themselves to be good humored, affable, forgiving, patient, and joyful, with respect to each other’s frailties and imperfections, to the end of their lives” (“The Marriage Relation” 294). Not only was a wife to contain her actions to a certain “sphere” appropriate to her role within the sacred union of matrimony, but she was to also restrict her *feelings* to those of a content, cheerful and submissive nature.

More than simply turning one’s name from “Miss” to “Mrs.,” marriage essentially subsumed a woman’s identity into her husband’s. As Volo and Volo point out, a woman lost her

last name and replaced any previous identity with that of 'wife,' a role defined as possessing certain responsibilities as ordained by society and God himself (208). Because a wife's identity was *legally* considered part and parcel with her husband's, married women were not able to control any previous property, acquire any property solely in their name, make contracts, transfer property, or bring about a lawsuit. Ultimately, it seemed that coverture "created an equation in which one plus one equaled one by erasing the female one," as historian Norma Basch aptly remarked (qtd. in Clymer 89-90). While reformers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Louisa May Alcott worked to change the system, the common American woman had to learn to deal with her lack of rights and her newfound awareness of them. Instead of merely relying on one's head to dictate when a prudent match turned up, women considered their own heart in deciding whether or not to marry a man. A companionate love must be present in order to deem it marriageable, and that love must be strong enough to compel a woman to erase her legal identity (according to the concurrent standards and laws) by becoming one flesh with her husband.

#### Transcendentalism and Marriage

Understanding Louisa May Alcott's attitude towards marriage requires not only a contextualizing of women's rights and laws regarding marriage and property, but also an appreciation of a major school of philosophical thought centered in Boston and the small town of Concord, Massachusetts from the 1830s through 1850s: Transcendentalism. In 1840, the Alcotts moved to Concord, where a small cluster of Transcendentalist thinkers were occupied with writing and giving speeches on self-reliance, the soul, human capabilities, travel, nature, and education. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "father figure" of this group, was a hero to Louisa and lifelong friend and supporter of her father Bronson, himself a Transcendentalist thinker and education reformer; Henry David Thoreau, Emerson's mentee, was Louisa's beloved childhood

teacher; and Nathaniel Hawthorne was the Alcotts' reclusive neighbor. Further, other members of this literary and intellectual circle frequented Concord, including education reformer Elizabeth Peabody, women's rights advocate Margaret Fuller, abolitionist Theodore Parker, and Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing. As a young girl (eight years old in 1840), Louisa was ripe to catch their idealistic fervor.

During this time of changing ideals and standards, one of the more radical ideas that grew to popularity and presented alternatives to traditional marriage was that of utopian communities, or groups of people who retreated from the rest of society with the hopes of forming their own, perfect society. One utopian community in the area was the Shakers, a religious group dedicated to celibacy that had already been thriving in the United States since the 1780s. This was also the period of the rise of Mormonism, which was founded by Joseph Smith in the 1820s and grew famous and experienced criticism and harassment for its core belief of polygyny, or plural marriage. Further, the Nashoba commune in Tennessee, founded in 1825 by Fanny Wright to educate and emancipate slaves, allowed their community members to engage in open sexual relationships and birth control (Wayne 19). Though the commune only lasted three years, its new concepts shocked many Americans, especially Southern slave-holders, so that future liberals or radical women became known as "Fanny Wrights" (Wayne 19). Another controversial figure was Charles Fourier, a French social scientist who believed in creating communities of cooperation in which labor was distributed to people based on their skill sets and interests, and wages would be set according to the respective unpleasantness of the job. In the same way, Fourier believed commune members should be allowed free sexual expression in accord with their needs and desires, regardless of marital ties or the gender of sexual partners. Fourier's ideas were especially significant for their influence on Transcendentalists, infusing them with utopian

visions. Through all these examples, though, Americans had been faced with the question of what is sexually acceptable or moral, what form sexual relations should take, and what role marriage plays in those sexual relations.

Less bold in its resistance to traditional sex and marriage than other utopian communities, yet nevertheless raising questions regarding these issues, was the first Transcendental commune, Brook Farm, founded by a Unitarian preacher George Ripley and his wife Sophia in April of 1841 in West Roxbury, MA. The farm, first established on Transcendental principles, possessed an environment of intellectual freedom; however, two years in, Ripley adopted Fourier's utopian ideas of labor distribution in hopes of attracting more people and receiving much-needed financial support from Fourier's followers, Associationists. However, the participants of Brook Farm still did not adopt the radical ideal of free sex, as suggested by the disgusted response to the "nauseous villain" Fourier's "consummated Paradise" by a character in Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* (1852), a fictionalized account of his time at Brook Farm (53-54). Though sexual relations are never explicitly referenced, and the narrator is not even sure if the female character Zenobia is or ever was married, Hawthorne portrays a society that flirts with romance and sex while living in a *Midsummer Night Dream*-type world. The farm is "the forest of Arden" (91), and women are characterized by "wildness" (59) and imagined "in Eve's earliest garment" (17). Hawthorne's most shocking intimation of Brook Farm as a site of free love was in his reminiscence of "the Golden Age" of Blithedale, which "seemed to authorize any individual, of either sex, to fall in love with any other, regardless of what would elsewhere be judged suitable or prudent" (72). Without taking Hawthorne's fictive representations of Brook Farm too literally, one can still see that establishing any sort of utopian community would necessarily raise questions of about appropriate interactions and relations between the participants.

Whereas Ripley believed that institutions had to be radically reformed to bring about meaningful social change and enacted this belief through Brook Farm, Louisa's father Bronson Alcott ascribed to the more Transcendental thought that it was the individual, or the "consociate family," which would put into effect social change (Delano 251). Thus Alcott declined to join Brook Farm but created a utopia of his own, Fruitlands, along with British supporter Charles Lane and his son, and in June of 1843 hauled his wife Abba and daughters to the farm in Harvard, Massachusetts. Fruitlands asked self-denial of its dwellers; anything that put an animal to work or death was banned, including meat or dairy, whale oil to light lamps, and oxen to till the ground. Further hardship was felt in the clash of Lane and Alcott's philosophies, as Lane stood for the idea that love should not be expressed, even in touching, for it was the epitome of selfishness (Matteson 140). On a visit to the Shaker commune across the river, Lane admired their ideas of celibacy and indifference to children, and returned to Fruitlands wanting to enact celibate lifestyles for their members. Of course, adherence to this belief would shatter the Alcott family, even though Lane softened the blow by calling the resulting group a "consociate family." Approached with the proposal to join the Shakers, Alcott had to make an extremely difficult decision that would affect all those he loved. He and Abba were at odds, and finally gathered their girls for a conference. Eleven-year-old Louisa wrote of the event in her journal of December 10, 1843 with childlike poignancy that "Anna and I cried in bed, and I prayed God to keep us together" (Stern 86). Though the next exchange was not recorded, Lane and his son quit Fruitlands to join the Shaker commune across the river. Fruitlands had only lasted six months. There were harsh lessons to be learned all around, especially for the impressionable young Alcott girls—who learned that Transcendental idealism was not always practical or preferable, and that

the questioning of traditional marriage certainly had a limit one could not cross without disrupting the family.

Throughout Louisa's childhood and youth in Concord, the most significant Transcendentalist writing on love and marriage was undoubtedly Margaret Fuller. Fuller founded Conversations—or open discussions for Bostonian women held during the winter months of 1839 to 1844—and more significantly wrote *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), an expansion of her essay “The Great Lawsuit: Man *versus* Men, Woman *versus* Woman” (1843) in the Transcendentalist magazine she edited, the *Dial*. This book famously argues for egalitarianism between men and women, as seen in her vivid language:

Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman. (Fuller 68-69).

Fuller's call for an almost genderless understanding of men and women adds a radically new progression to the Transcendental thought of individualism, that both sexes are equally equipped and in fact not easily distinguishable from each other; thus any resistance against women possessing equal opportunities for perfection of the soul should be quelled. Fuller urges women to strive instead for “self-reliance and self-impulse...[for] being more a soul, she will not be less woman, for nature is perfected through spirit” (103). Fuller additionally directs womankind toward the soul or spirit, writing of her autobiographical alter-ego, Miranda, that she grew up “a child of the spirit” addressed by her father “not as a plaything, but as a living mind” (21). Fuller surely recognized the legal and practical implications of acknowledging that a woman possesses not only her own “body” and “soul,” but a *mind*, and so emphasizes a Transcendentalist principle

of relying upon one's own mind when forming convictions. Prioritizing a woman's need to think and make decisions for herself, Fuller famously insists on individual development: "We must have units before we can have union" (60). While this statement is interesting in its legitimation of marriage—or at least some kind of union between the intermixing "fluid" and "solid" male and female—the importance of the call for women to first be units cannot be understated. Fuller desires women to see themselves and be seen as individuals, rely on their own soul or spirit for inner perfection, and possess a mind of their own when making decisions.

While Transcendentalism calls for individualism, self-reliance, and the potential for spiritual and intellectual perfection, these ideals take on a new and somewhat contradictory life of their own when Fuller employs them in the context of marriage. Specifically, the contradiction lies in love; love is an emotion that threatens pure self-reliance, and consummation of that love in marital union would seem to eliminate individuality. Indeed, Fuller defines "perfect freedom" as "the heaven where there is no marrying or giving in marriage," for then each soul is truly individual and "enfranchised" (37). Acknowledging the existence of love, though, Fuller attempts to reconcile the incongruity between love and her Transcendental ideals by esteeming and placing a very high standard upon marriageable love. She derives her standard of love from the example of Christ, who expressed in an act of selfless sacrifice "a love to which it was alike to descend into the depths of hell" (10). Love is similarly linked to selflessness in Fuller's narration of a Rhine legend in which a pair of lovers chooses faith over passion in acts of self-denial, as a maiden commits herself to a nunnery when she discovers that her lover made a promise to his patron saint that he will enter the monastic order (34). Fuller goes on to uphold their mutual love as noble and worthy, adding to the legend an ending of figurative language by likening their celibacy vows to marriage: "Then, passing over to the nunnery opposite, [the

maiden] takes the veil, and meets her betrothed at the altar; and for a lifelong union, if not the one they had hoped in earlier years” (34). Importantly, Fuller’s subsequent comments on the legend reveal that she believes the story to be “of lofty beauty,” showing “a sufficiently high view of woman, of marriage” (34). By calling the lovers’ metaphorical union a marriage, Fuller is determining that genuine love is marriage enough, at least in her eyes if not in the eyes of the law.

Defining genuine love is trickier than remarking upon its necessity. Fuller attempts to do so by defining it in terms of purity and genuineness. Continuing to look to others for ideals of pure love, Fuller cites Donne’s belief that the union of love makes for “an abler soul,” and remarks that Shakespeare must have realized that “the utmost ardor” is inextricably linked to “the utmost purity” (39). Although nineteenth-century love is not typically represented within novels or historical documents in terms of “ardor” or passion, it is significant to realize that Fuller recognized the importance of feeling and their passionate expression as a determinant of love. Taking Fuller’s remarks about Shakespeare a step further, one can deduce that, since passion is purity, a marriage without love is impurity—exactly Mary Nichols’ conviction after she experienced the trauma of a loveless marriage. It is evident that Fuller despises the marriages of convenience common to European society, instead insisting upon a “marriage of souls” so hallowed that no mere “cold bathing and exercise” will suffice in purifying a marriage without “an inward baptism” of passionate love (82). Using baptism—the Christian outward representation of the inner washing and regeneration of the soul—to signify the concept that true love has the ability to purify all things, Fuller invokes the symbolic nature of water as a cleansing element to convince the reader that nothing but pure love will do in marriage. This tactic is also used following Fuller’s shift of attention from single men to single women, addressing them to



seek pure love, not that of “allurement,” “gratification of your love of excitement,” the untested “flush of passion,” or “coquettish attraction” (83). Fuller is not satisfied with any kind of feeling, but demands *genuine*, tested and confirmed passion rather than flattery, vanity, or deceit when determining pure love. Fuller appeals, “Steep the soul / In one pure love, and it will last thee long” (83). As if the soul is a tea bag, Fuller petitions women—if they choose to seek love in this life—to submerge their souls in the infusing water of *pure* love. Louisa May Alcott would make this same plea in strikingly similar language in an essay she wrote for young, single women in the *New York Ledger*, “Happy Women” (1868):

If love comes as it should come, accept it in God’s name and be worthy of His best blessing. If it never comes, then in God’s name reject the shadow of it, for that can never satisfy a hungry heart. Do not be ashamed to own the truth—do not be daunted by the fear of ridicule and loneliness, nor saddened by the loss of a woman’s tenderest ties. Be true to yourselves; cherish whatever talent you possess, and in using it faithfully for the good of others you will most assuredly find happiness for yourself and make of life no failure, but a beautiful success.

(Stern 149)

Alcott, too, absolutely rejects a marriage of convenience, calling it along with any other endeavor to love without the true feelings a mere “shadow”. Both Alcott and Fuller urge women, when seeking love strong enough to justify and purify marriage, to be bold enough to pursue “the love of truth, the love of excellence” (Fuller 83).

Margaret Fuller’s ideas of love and marriage reached much further than the Transcendentalist circle of her friends and fellow intellectuals in Concord. Phyllis Cole shows that Fuller greatly shaped public opinion by providing a new language for understanding “gender

equality, vocation and community” in terms of the individual consciousness and its authority (“Woman’s Rights and Feminism” 223). This language in turn provided other women a tool to advocate for more equality within and outside marriage. Initially, some of these Transcendentalist female voices inspired by Fuller remained within the domestic sphere, though other voices hailed the public in published essays or books. As an example of this distinction, Elizabeth Peabody, best known as an education reformer and co-teacher at Bronson Alcott’s Temple School, published in the *Christian Examiner* a series of articles, “The Spirit of the Hebrew Scriptures” (1834), including a gender-equalizing essay on Genesis which lifted blame for the fall from Eve’s shoulders (Cole, “Woman’s Rights and Feminism” 225). However, Elizabeth’s meeker sister Sophia, who married Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1842, refused to publish her “Cuba Journal,” which similarly reimagined Eden. Fuller’s works greatly influenced both the everyday man or woman as well as the highest intellectual or reformer, and they responded in different volumes to her ideas.

Fuller’s most far-reaching influence can be seen in the fact that her writings motivated reformers Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in many more ways than they would admit (Cole, “Stanton, Fuller and the Grammar of Romanticism” 559). They did give Fuller some credit for how she catalyzed the women’s rights movement, as Stanton quoted Fuller’s final poem from *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in Stanton’s first address after the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, and Stanton and Anthony honored Fuller on the dedication page of their history of the movement (Cole, “Stanton, Fuller and the Grammar of Romanticism” 533, 554). However, if one turns to reflect upon Fuller’s text itself, it can be seen that Fuller influenced the women’s rights movement in more ways than these, as she advocated in strong and convincing language for many of the same principles that the movement attempted to make

heard years later. Fuller condemns fixed spheres, is worried about the limitations that women's property laws gave, argues that if indeed "woman is the weaker party, she ought to have legal protection," considers marriage without love impure, praises the work and fulfillment a single woman could find, thinks highly of women as intellectuals and speakers, and demands men to "remove arbitrary barriers" from women's opportunities, allowing them to "be sea-captains, if [they] will" (Fuller 15, 17, 18, 39, 57, 65, 101, 102). If Cole's argument that Fuller was the muse of the women's rights movement is true, then every time that Louisa May Alcott formed a character or shaped an idea influenced by the women's right movement, one can recognize Alcott's debt to Margaret Fuller—whose life and works were an integral part of the Transcendental circle that Louisa May Alcott grew up in and knew well.

Alcott was certainly impressed with Transcendentalist values as a child, especially the radical implications of utopian communities and the new conceptions of Transcendentalist ideals of love and marriage as represented in the writings of Margaret Fuller. However, though many values and ideas of Louisa's later writings can be traced to her Concord background, it is indisputable that Louisa would develop a mind of her own and spend much of her time pushing back against some of the ideologies she grew up with. Louisa's breakaway from Transcendentalism can be seen in the fact that by 1873, Louisa had gained enough distance from her childhood Fruitlands experience to write of it satirically in a short story, "Transcendental Wild Oats," penning her father as "Abel Lamb" and Charles Lane as "Timon Lion" (Alcott, "Transcendental Wild Oats" 89). Louisa seemed to be mocking or at least questioning the validity of Transcendentalist principles, then-waning in influence. As an author in her own rights, Louisa absorbed some values of her childhood, pushed back against or rejected others, and learned to formulate her own opinions about marriage, spending her literary career exploring

exactly what constitutes an equal “union,” or a marriageable love. Many of Alcott’s representations of marriageable love follow Fuller’s call for egalitarianism, and yet she is still confined within the limits of her historical context.

*Moods* (1864)

Louisa May Alcott generates a bold polemic against loveless marriage in her first novel, *Moods* (1864)<sup>3</sup>. *Moods* stands out for exploring the life of a woman who actually commits the offense Alcott often warns single women against in her other works: to not enter a loveless marriage. Sylvia Yule, a girl driven by whims, impulsive moods, and passion, falls in love with Adam Warwick, a man of similar nature except that he is older than she and of a stronger and more intense constitution. Awakening one day to discover that Adam has mysteriously left their group of companions, the reason being, as the reader learns, that he is secretly betrothed to a woman he does not love, Sylvia believes she must have mistaken their so-thought mutual love. After a phase of loneliness, she ends up accepting an offer of marriage from Adam’s friend, the weaker and effeminate Geoffery Moor, even though she knows she does not love him beyond friendship. Needless to say, the marriage affords nothing to Sylvia beyond an arena of duty, a situation exasperated by the fact that Adam, freed from his betrothal, returns and confesses his love for her. Adam’s return validates Sylvia’s true feelings of passionate love for him, but she still decides to selflessly prioritize her husband’s happiness over hers. However, Sylvia

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<sup>3</sup> Alcott’s journals imply that she began writing *Moods* in 1860, and then was interrupted by her enlistment as an Army nurse and then her subsequent contraction of typhoid fever. After the good reception of her “Hospital Sketches” (1863), Alcott decided to send her *Moods* manuscript in to publishers, and finally made a contract with A.K. Loring to publish a heavily edited and shortened version of the novel. The book was released in December of 1864, to mixed reviews, including a harsh critique by peer Henry James. Nevertheless, it was still a recognized work, especially after Alcott rose to fame with *Little Women* (1868-69). Loring still had ownership rights of *Moods*, and so re-published the novel in 1870 with illustrations and a gilded cover boasting Alcott’s name, to the vehement anger of Alcott. It was not until Loring’s firm went bankrupt in 1881 that she finally gained the copyright; almost immediately, Alcott attempted to correct the mess of her novel by publishing a new edition more along the thematic lines of her conservative *Little Women*, complete with an explanatory preface, under the Roberts Brothers in 1882 (Blackwell 79-93). In this section of my thesis, I will refer to the original, 1864 edition of *Moods* and will not discuss Alcott’s revised edition until later.

eventually collapses and tells her husband the truth, resulting in both of the men deciding they cannot be with her—the husband because his wife does not return love, and the lover because their passionate natures are so similar that he believes to join in union would be for him to overpower and snuff the life out of her. By reproving Sylvia for entering a loveless marriage—though not judging her for that decision, as it can be blamed upon her passionate and moody nature—Alcott represents in *Moods* what a marriageable love should and should not look like.

From the time Louisa was two years old, her father recorded in his journal of her strong-willed temper and moodiness: “There is a self-corroding nature—a spirit not yet conformed to the conditions of enjoyment. She follows her impulses...Passion rages within; and *Strife* enacteth itself without” (Matteson 64). Sylvia, too is a woman driven by her moods, or as the term is given in several instances, her *passions*. This is not surprising, for *Moods* is surely a book about moods—to the point where it would not be too much to claim that the entirety of the novel considers and critiques a woman’s inner tensions and vacillating emotions.<sup>4</sup> The novel becomes interesting when passionate Sylvia, driven by impulses and possessed with a changeable heart, finds a man so compelling that romantic love makes the idea of *permanence*—matrimony’s legal restrictions on divorce and social demands for lifelong sacrifice—appealing rather than terrifying. There is something clearly captivating in Adam Warwick’s dominance and power, both as an older man and a physically stronger man, that makes Sylvia want to become more

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<sup>4</sup> The meaning of “moods” needs clarification. Taking Alcott’s temperamental character, along with the evidence that she often wrote in obsessive whirlwinds, or a “vortex” of continuous writing in which, she journaled, “my mind was too rampant for my body...my head was dizzy, legs shaky” (Matteson 262), some biographers and psychologists believe that Alcott may have suffered from a form of manic-depressive disorder, in the terminology of modern medical science (305). If this were so, Alcott may have intended to write her own “peculiar nature” into Sylvia’s moody nature (Stern 148). However, Alcott biographer Madeleine Stern denies the vortexes were anything more than Alcott’s writing style, and most critics do not read *Moods* as a commentary on mental illness (Matteson 305). While I keep open the possibility that Alcott addresses atypical natures, especially in suicide scenes and her family of insane characters in her later novel *Work*, I follow the trends of critics in choosing to read Sylvia not as a commentary on mental illness but as a representative *woman*; as such, her moods refer to the complex emotions and warring dispositions women everywhere experience.

woman-like for him. Adam is described as being “of the heroic type” and “the manliest man that Sylvia had ever seen” for his “power, intellect, and courage”<sup>5</sup> (Alcott 33-34). She seems to exemplify Alfred Habegger’s assertion that for Alcott, “love is by definition a function of power and powerlessness” (244).

I will now explore what compels Sylvia to submit to man dominance, both in instances of passionate love and in those of prudent duty, and more particularly how Alcott represents the process of acknowledging, understanding and expressing marriageable love. This is best seen through the prism of scholar Karen Lystra’s attempt at an all-encompassing definition of marriageable love, in which she writes of the norms of nineteenth-century romantic love: “lovers were involved in a process—initiated for a multitude of reasons—which led them to an identification of selves through an intensive sharing of their interior lives” (29). Sylvia and Adam seem to fulfill three aspects of this norm: (1) love comes by a multitude of reasons, (2) shared looks enact a mutual transaction of interior lives, and (3) this leads to an identification of selves, or mutual recognition of persons—though, unfortunately, the subtlety and unreliability of these non-verbal elements leave too much room for doubt and uncertainty within their relationship, thus offering a critique of mute courtship.

First, the process of suspicion, testing, and confirmation of romantic love comes to the characters in a multitude of ways, especially physiological phenomena and changes in demeanor. After returning from the adventures with Geoffery, Adam, and her brother Mark, Sylvia’s happiness in the chapter, “Why Sylvia Was Happy,” cannot be interpreted but as falling in love. Prudence notices that Sylvia “grows quiet, loveable, and cheerful,” begins to care about what she wears, and experiences physiological symptoms: “her forehead rushed an impetuous color, her

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<sup>5</sup> It is commonly understood Alcott modeled Warwick after her fifteen-year-her-senior Transcendentalist neighbor, Henry David Thoreau, whom she adored as a child. Warwick mimics Thoreau’s single lifestyle and is described as “a solitary, self-reliant man...a masterful soul, bent on living out his beliefs at any cost” (Alcott 33-34).

eyes shone, and her lips trembled...then a panic appeared to seize her” (Alcott 69, 74). While Prudence (appropriately named so for her practical and head-driven look at life so contrary to Sylvia’s moodiness) believes she knows exactly what is going on, part of the magic for Sylvia lies in the fact that these physiological symptoms seem to overcome her without warning; Sylvia does not yet *know* “Why She Is Happy.” Alcott argues that it is not enough for a woman’s family to discern or interpret her feelings, but rather one should reach a state of self-awareness in order to interpret her one’s own symptoms. It seems that the place for this self-awareness to happen is in the thoughts of the mind, for whereas the heart is untrustworthy and mood-inducing, Sylvia seems to have autonomy over her own mind. Sylvia’s confirmation of her love for Adam falls in line with the nineteenth-century expectation that proof of love is in constantly *thinking* about the other person (Lystra 30). After Adam leaves without warning and Sylvia does not know why, Alcott explains Sylvia’s thoughts: “As books most freely open at pages oftenest read, the romance of her summer life seldom failed to uncloset at passages where Warwick’s name appeared” (80). Alcott posits the mind as a book, and the fondest thoughts Sylvia chooses to replay over and over as favorite passages of that book. While there is certainly a “process initiated for a multitude of reasons,” the clearest hints and indicators of romantic love fleshed out within *Moods* are physiological and demeanor changes, as well as the internal mind (Lystra 29).

Secondly, an “intensive sharing of interior lives” (Lystra 29) is accomplished above all through eye contact, or the “assurance given by looks,” as Sylvia names the pervasive phenomenon (Alcott 26). Remembering the earlier book imagery, in which the eyes are the means by which a reader takes in and interprets the word on a page, so do the eyes hold import in deciphering marriageable love and the mind in making meaning of that code. Early in their friendship, Adam gazes at Sylvia as if to unveil her character with his “gray eyes, that seemed to

pierce through all disguises,” making Sylvia feel as if he “search[ed] one through and through with its rapid discernment” (Alcott 34, 43). In this case, Adam is given almost god-like access—or rather, *commands* access—to Sylvia’s interior soul by directing his penetrating gaze upon her. Adam’s first exertion of authority over Sylvia introduces a power dynamic between the two, as the foundation for the tension between reciprocity and domination is laid out. Sylvia does get her own turn at communicating with her eyes, though, after Adam burns his hand while saving her from the forest fire. Alcott writes of the incident: “Sylvia glanced up with a look that mutely asked pardon for past waywardness, and expressed gratitude for past help” (52). Here, the sharing of interior lives is not forced by Adam’s penetrating gaze but is initiated and freely given by Sylvia’s upturned glance into Adam’s eyes. Even so, it is worth noting that Sylvia’s communication is in all actuality a form of submission, as she must look *up* to Adam, and ask for *forgiveness* for her moods, instead of requesting an understanding of her moodiness.

The most significant instance of sharing of interior lives comes when Adam finally expresses his love for Sylvia in a look—or, at least, Sylvia interprets so. Sylvia goes out to the garden to call Adam for dinner, and finds him musing with his head upon his hand. Then, “He came out of the shadow showing her an expression which she had never seen before. His face was flushed, his eye unquiet, his manner eager yet restrained” (Alcott 71). Drawn and attracted to this side of him she had never before seen, Sylvia “met the glance,” and Adam “seemed to interpret it aright” (Alcott 71). Of course, Adam’s interpretation is merely understood through the perspective of Sylvia, as highlighted by the vocabulary of vagueness, “seemed”; this is where the difficulty of love—particularly the verification of love through non-verbal cues—comes in to play. Looks, simply put, are unreliable, and the interpretation of them is even more unstable. While Sylvia claims that Adam’s eye is “unquiet,” the frustrating truth is that speaking literally,



the eye *is* quiet (Alcott 71). As certain as Sylvia may be about their love, the muteness of their interaction—while it is essential in order to suspend the magic, necessitates uncertainty. Still, the two lovers (or at least Sylvia) *feel* as if they have inferred something extremely important from this glance, and repeat the look after dinner as if to attempt to confirm their suspicions:

Warwick's eyes were fixed full upon her own. What spell lay in them she could not tell, for human eye had never shed such sudden summer over her... It lasted but a moment; yet in that moment, each saw the other's heart, and each turned a new page in the romance of their lives. (Alcott 74)

Once again, a look is the means by which lovers share their inner selves with each other, this time in an apparently reciprocal unspoken dialogue as “*each* saw the other's heart.” In this instance, the power dynamic is leveled and both Sylvia and Adam gain equal knowledge of the other's interior life—and at that, the most intimate part, “the other's *heart*.” Recalling the earlier book imagery which was presented earlier, Alcott seems to be suggesting that romantic love occurs when two peoples' minds (books) turn the same page (thoughts), resulting in a sharing of interior lives (hearts), a seemingly mystical phenomenon in which the veracity of love can be understood and tested by a look.

A *negative* example to the second aspect of Lystra's definition of marriageable love, “intensive sharing of interior lives,” is the marriage of Sylvia and Geoffery Moor. Ultimately, there is no shared exchange of feelings or thoughts between the two, though initially it may seem as if the first aspect of Lystra's definition holds true, as by outward appearances Sylvia exhibits physiological reactions and begins to act differently around him. Geoffery misinterprets Sylvia's physiological evidences of love for Adam—coloring when Geoffery catches her daydreaming (of Adam) and lowering her eyes from his gaze (in embarrassment, not shyness)—as evidences of

love for him (Alcott 80). Ironically, though unknowingly deceived by Sylvia's looks, Geoffery uses a look to first demonstrate his love for Sylvia. Alcott describes Geoffery's nearly wordless revelation to Sylvia:

No demonstration seemed beautiful enough to grace the betrayal of his passion, no language eloquent enough to tell it, no power strong enough to hold in check the impulse that mastered him. He went to her...and lifting to her a face flushed and fervent with the ardor of a man's first love, said impetuously—"Sylvia, read it here!" (Alcott 81)

Alcott employs the vocabulary of romanticism—passion, impulse, and ardor—to depict the fullness, intensity, and uncontrollable nature of the emotion of love; even the prudent Geoffery falls into its clutches. Tragically, his look is the most transparent or reliable of all, and yet Sylvia is unable to return it in full faith. While Geoffery's love may be true and his heart is certainly full, Sylvia feels she must reject his proposal because there are no *mutual* feelings or sharing of interior lives. Though Alcott almost seems to mock his one-sided sincerity, she certainly does not discount or blame Geoffery for his misinterpretation of Sylvia's looks; instead, she posits Geoffery as a victim of the means by which love was understood at the time: unreliable looks. Indeed, even Sylvia's eyes, which are described as expressing shifting emotions—"by turns eager, absent, or sad"—suggest that eyes can be driven by moods, and looks are (tragically, for Geoffery) interpretable and thus prone to improper perception (43). If looks are supposed to be the window to the heart, and yet they, too, are driven by temporary or vacillating moods, a lover must entertain the chance that outward appearance or mannerisms can deceive either the looker, as Geoffery discovers, or the looked upon, as Sylvia later believes when Adam suddenly disappears and shakes up everything she thought she knew about his love for her. For Alcott,

marriageable love needs to be demonstrated by more than outward looks, but also mutual, shared feelings, preferably verbalized.

Finally, the characters within *Moods* exhibit the third and most complex aspect of Karen Lystra's definition of marriageable love: that it leads to an "identification of selves" (29). While one might enthusiastically predict from this that love leads Sylvia to an Emersonian self-reliance or an individualism Fuller would be proud of, this aspect is not as Transcendentalist as it first sounds. When Lystra drew attention to identification of selves as a notable evidence of romantic love within the nineteenth-century, she was not referring to the achievement of an extraordinary sense of individualism or independence, but rather to a process in which "Romantically attached individuals repeatedly evoked the inner sense of sharing the identity of another...[reaching] mutual identification" (42). The process is initiated through self-criticism, introspection, and praise of the other since only by understanding themselves could they then seek to find part of their identity in the other. Lystra explains of the romantically involved couple: "They became obsessive observers of their own inner states, and reflected upon the process of ever deepening identification between themselves and their lovers" (44). Within *Moods*, this process is initiated between Adam and Sylvia, but Alcott cuts it off short of fulfillment. More disconcerting is the negation of this process within the marriage of Geoffery and Sylvia. It is not mutual identification which occurs but the eradication of identity, as Sylvia's identity is radically subsumed under her husband's by the contract of loveless marriage.

Sylvia and Adam are able to achieve mutual identification throughout their interactions with each other. At the beginning of the novel, during the adventures of Sylvia, Adam, Moor, and Mark, Adam allows Sylvia to play her whimsical games, and even seems to appreciate her for them. More significantly, mutual identification is laced within the games, accomplished

through introspective self-criticism and praise. After they race to weave the best basket and Sylvia's falls apart, Sylvia admits that "I deserve [this] for my boasting. Next time I'll try to combine strength and beauty in my work" (44). In this comment, Sylvia both humbles herself and exalts Adam for his union of strength and beauty—surely referring to more than his basket-weaving skills. Adam also takes his turn at exalting Sylvia for characteristics contrary to his, praising her as "a true woman" for her determination and perseverance in gathering lilies (46). Adam and Sylvia's self-criticism and praise allows the two of them to understand their individual characters more, especially when it leads to the earlier discussed introspection that Sylvia undergoes in attempting to discern "Why She is Happy." Sylvia and Adam, though they clearly have her own identities—as seen in their difference of literary opinions, amusement versus poetry—find a part of their identity within the other. Sylvia wants to be more like Adam in basket-weaving and its deeper meaning, and Adam wishes to impart knowledge to her in instructing her how to better her subsequent basket. Next, Sylvia trusts herself to Adam in allowing him to row her where he wishes, and Adam picks up on and is pleased with "her frank tone, her confiding look" (45). The fact that Sylvia trusts and wants to confide in Adam, and that he responds with desire to be confided in, is a hopeful evidence for romantic love, according to Lystra. Interestingly, this mutual identification and trust can be contrasted with a later scene, in which Geoffery also tries to humor Sylvia's whimsical side by initiating a game of pretending they are children again; however, this is a tragic rather than pleasing scene within the novel, for Sylvia finds that, for some reason, in his presence she is not free and "cannot be a child again" (129). The difference between Adam and Geoffery is that Adam's character is such that he and Sylvia reach *mutual* identification, as achieved through introspection and self-identification.

Sylvia fatally rejects the conviction for mutual identification that she experienced with Adam—and more simply, personal *happiness*—when she finally decides to marry Geoffery Moor. The catalyst of this change within her is that her hope disappears when Adam disappears. Since *looks* are intricately linked to emotions (Alcott even seems to argue that looks are the primary means of expressing emotions), a woman cannot help but begin to doubt the veracity of her emotions of love when no *look* remains to remind her. Lonely and forlorn from what Sylvia believes is Adam's lack of love for her, Sylvia begins to find Moor's devotion to her appealing and safe. The deadening of emotions within Sylvia can be seen in the passivity of her agreement to marry Moor: "with a curious expression of relief, regret, and resolve...Sylvia decided 'I will'" (101). Sylvia resolves to attempt to remove her passionate and moody nature—*essentially eliminating her own identity*—and replace it with prudence and adherence to duty. Following advice of her sister Prudence and the corresponding virtue, Sylvia submits herself to marry Geoffery in hopes of learning to love him—and then further submits herself when she realizes she does not love him yet still decides to perform rituals as wife in order to keep her vow to "make Geoffery's happiness the first duty of my life" (Alcott 145). Unbeknownst to Sylvia at this point in the novel, her obedient submission—an act which could be effectively symbolized by a lowering of the eyes, rather than the aforesaid full frontal gaze and expression of the heart—comes at the cost of any mutual identification which would lead to romantic love and personal happiness.

Alcott seems to fully endorse traditional marriage, with all its legal and dsocial ramifications, by posing Sylvia's sacrificial decision to remain with Moor and quell her true feelings as a sign of noble and selfless maturity, which in turn implies that true love is sacrifice. This definition of love is in direct conflict with Lystra's idea that love is a mutual, tender

affection which leads to the “identification of selves” (29). Instead, love as sacrifice indicates that one party will be subsumed under the other. This unequal relationship is seen later on in the novel, as the newlywed couple settles in their home and Moor revels in his prize. Alcott draws attention to the ring upon Sylvia’s finger, which reminds Moor of their wedding and prompts him to “claim her again, with an emphatic ‘Mine’” (124). It is evident that Sylvia belongs to Moor, and not the other way around. Additionally, by the end of the novel Sylvia is finally subsumed by Moor in the chief act of sacrifice, as her death feels so unnecessary and unjustified that it as if she is giving up her own life. Tension exists in this act, for while death would certainly be the end of Sylvia and the reification of Moor’s domination, Sylvia’s identity has already been so eradicated by this point that death would almost be a freedom to her. Alcott even describes the looming arrival of death as her “helper” (190). Sylvia’s death scene is so glorified that it is almost a mockery of the individual she once was: Sylvia “proved that she *did* know how to die” by speaking cheerfully and tranquilly of death, banning grief or fear, and continuing her “daily duties” (Alcott 194). Duty brings to mind an image completely contradictory to the whimsical and playful woman Adam appreciated. Sylvia’s last words of being “Quite happy, quite content,” though certainly noble in their sacrifice of personal happiness for Moor’s own peace of mind, are less than convincing (197). Though somewhat inimical to Alcott’s portrayal of love as sacrifice, yet in line with Lystra’s definition, the conviction the modern reader will surely come away with after finishing *Moods* is that marriageable love should not result in the loss of personal happiness, but should be equal and symbiotic, leading to the mutual identification, not eradication, of selves.

After such promise for marriageable love between Sylvia and Adam—as suspected through physiological changes, evidenced through looks and understood through the mind, and

resulting in mutual identification—the reader is left wondering by the end of *Moods* why Sylvia is left identity-less, loveless, and lifeless. To begin with, one must remember the complexities of discerning Alcott's true intentions when she was bound to a restrictive contract herself, a publishing contract with editor A.K. Loring. Bannett sheds light on the dilemma by pointing out that letters Alcott wrote to her friend Caroline Dall in 1864 indicate that, if it were not for Loring's insistence that Sylvia be punished for her moods, Alcott "intended to have [Sylvia] spend the rest of her life alone, busy & happy" (345). Nevertheless, Sylvia still dies, weakly explained by her being too passionate and "living too fast" (192). Geoffery's sister Faith, the 'wise woman' within the story, delivers advice against Sylvia and Adam's union for the reason that Adam's "ardent nature" (163) might clash against hers and "stronger intellect exhaust the weaker" (159), crushing the life and energy out of Sylvia. In the same way, it seems that Alcott is giving women the same hopeless message as Faith: that the only options for women are marrying the man they love but ending up crushed and overpowered, or conformity to a dutiful, prudent marriage which will end in death.

Ultimately, Alcott offers no clear, promising example to women as to how to find that third aspect of Lystra's definition, identification of selves, without being wholly subsumed into the identity of another or subordinated by death. By the ending of *Moods*, within Sylvia's death dream, Alcott's vocabulary mirrors the dismal circumstances of Sylvia choosing sacrificial duty and eventually death: "the shadowy house-top in a shadowy city," the "dark earth and darker sky," and "universal gloom and stillness." This dark and morbid vocabulary leaves the reader with a wish to return to the earlier vocabulary of life, vitality and nostalgia for the playful whims of Sylvia and the brightly colored hues of the moods at the beginning of the novel. Indeed, the beginning of the novel is a good place to look for clarity. Alcott chose a quote from Emerson's

essay, “Experience,” as an epigraph to her novel, surely with much purposeful meaning: “Life is a train of moods like a string of beads; and as we pass through them they prove to be many colored lenses, which paint the world their own hue, and each shows us only what lies in its own focus” (1). Reading into this thematically encompassing quote, one can infer that Alcott believes *all* situations, whether they come about by choice or circumstance, beautify, color, and invigorate one’s life—even those foolish decisions or painful circumstances which paint a darker hue. If this is true, then the experience between Sylvia and Adam, *because* it produced moods, feelings, and mutual identification—those genuine expressions of a love steeped equally in “utmost ardor” and “utmost purity” that Margaret Fuller was advocating (39)—needs to be acknowledged and validated for what it is, authentically romantic and potentially marriageable love. The fact that the reader longs for an alternate ending is significant, for it suggests that Adam and Sylvia shared something like love, as it was certainly suspected, tested, and confirmed through physiological evidences, looks of assurance, shared interior lives, and mutual identification; however, Alcott positioned their love painfully and complexly sandwiched between the war of passion and prudence, in which their mute courtship condemned duty to win over marriageable love.

*Little Women* (1868-69)

Louisa May Alcott’s second novel *Little Women*, at first glance standing as a conservative, domestic treatise on successful marriageable love, found favor in the eyes of children, adults, and critics alike. This was likely a relieving, gratefully received success following the harsh criticism of first novel, *Moods*, which caused sales to be low and Alcott to object:



Some fear it isn't moral because it speaks freely of marriage. My next book shall have no *ideas* in it, only facts, and the people shall be as ordinary as possible; then critics will say it's all right. It was meant to show a life affected by *moods*, not to be a discussion of marriage, which I knew little about, except observing that very few were happy ones. (Kaledin 254)

Alcott was correct in her prediction that critics would like her next novel; in fact, 6,000,000 copies of *Little Women* would be sold in the United States a mere hundred years after its publication (Stimpson 966). The novel was written in two parts, the first (published October 1868) as a request for a girl's book from Thomas Niles, of Roberts Brothers publishers, and the second (published April 1869) after the first was an instant hit—selling out two thousand copies within a few days of its publication and another forty-five hundred by the end of the year. However, Alcott was surely wrong in her reasoning for why the masses loved her novel; *Little Women* is anything but ordinary, and it certainly *does* put forth ideas—about marriage, no less. Indeed, the largest and most significant transformation within the novel is that of Jo and her sisters morphing from playful girls into *Good Wives*, as Part Two (1869) of *Little Women* was entitled. In some way, each of the March girls—even non-conformist Jo—fulfills Marmee's maternal wish: "I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected, to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send" (Alcott 149-50). By the end of the novel, the March girls find themselves happily married to their respective husbands, with Beth as the one exception, finding peaceful death to be her husband. Although *Little Women* seems to endorse traditional courtship in its approval of some instances of submission and self-denial, Meg's initial rejection of John, Beth's metaphorical marriage to

death, and Jo and Fritz's egalitarian courtship provide a subtle critique to these norms of marriage and offer a more feminist commentary on marriageable love.

As in *Moods*, initial attraction between Meg and John Brooke, Laurie's German tutor, are first suspected through mute looks; however, romantic feelings are expressed through verbal communication. John "never talked to [Meg] much, but he looked at her a great deal, and she felt sure that he did not regard her with aversion" (181). Alcott's employment of two negatives in expressing Meg's thoughts about John shows Meg's reluctance to pinpoint John's feelings through unreliable looks, just yet. It seems that Alcott accepts or at least utilizes the myth of sexual innocence in adolescent girls, as Meg's naivety echoes Sylvia's innocence in not knowing "Why She Was Happy." As Meg rightly cautioned herself against, it turns out that Alcott does not give as much importance to looks either, but upholds *conversation* within courtship—certainly a situation which offers more potential happiness than the characters achieve in *Moods*, where nearly mute courtship leads to tragedy. At Camp Laurence, Laurie notices that once John is emboldened to move past the stage of looking at Meg, "he keeps talking to Meg" (185). The content of their conversation matters not; it is the compulsive quantity of it which signifies Laurie to take note. As looks are replaced by conversation, it is almost as if eye contact is harder to make due to the honest communication of feelings being verbally—though not explicitly—poured out. When Meg praises John's German, her bright face is "downcast"; when John asks Meg to read aloud a section of German poetry, she "never looked up"; and when John confides in Meg his future plans to be a soldier, he remains "busily punching holes in the turf" and then "absently putting the dead rose in the hole he had made" (192-94). Furthermore, when Meg's admirer Ned sends Meg a "lackadaisical" look during the lines of a poem he reads aloud, "We each are young, we each have a heart, / Oh, why should we stand thus coldly apart?" (196), he is

effectively laughed into shame by the group of companions for his trite naivety in thinking love is based on superficial similarities. Within *Little Women*, in complete opposition to Ned's form of courtship, love is seldom communicated through mute looks but conversation, and neither is love shallow enough to be based on superficial and trite similarities such as being young and having feelings, but rather found between those who do not initially seem to be the most 'right' for each other, whether because of age, poverty, or personality.

Once John and Meg engage in sharing of their lives through conversation, though, Alcott does utilize looks as a means of their expressing love. Meg stays awake at night thinking of "handsome faces, eyes particularly," specifically John's brown eyes (228). Of course, it is not a random pair of expressionless eyes which consume Meg's thoughts; it is the idea that John's eyes would reflect a love and desire *for Meg* which enralls her and leaves her wondering if she is in love. When Jo recognizes what is happening, she is quite distressed at the prospect of Meg leaving her family, and shows contempt that "When John comes back...she'll see his [feelings] in those handsome eyes that she talks about, and then it will be all up with her...she'll melt like butter in the sun if anyone looks sentimentally at her" (269). Indeed, Jo's prophecy will come to pass. First, though, Laurie plays a prank by sending a mock love letter to Meg, supposedly from the pen of John, asking for correspondence confirming her love for him. Meg is humiliated and her pride is wounded, but more significantly, she learns that when it comes to love, words not paired with outward expression can deceive. However, redemption comes in the timely *combination* of looks and verbal communication, as they prove vital in the fulfillment of Jo's prophecy. When John visits the March family, Meg cannot keep her eyes off him and has to "sidle," or move sidewise, to close the door behind John so that she does not lose eye contact with him (295). Though Meg had prepared a rejection speech, she remembers none of it when

John opens his mouth and effectively proposes to her. The import of the looks and the voice is juxtaposed in Alcott's depiction of Meg's response to him: "His tone was properly beseeching; but, stealing a shy look at him, Meg saw that his eyes were merry as well as tender" (296). While John's honest communication "beseeches" and causes her to forget her previous conviction to deny him, his eyes express a self-assurance which infuriates Meg and causes her to "follow a capricious impulse" and adamantly refuse him (296). The lovers within *Little Women* discover that they must cautiously navigate the art of verbal and non-verbal expression, if they are to successfully find marriageable love.

Meg and John's engagement follows the pattern of a double-proposal, a name Karen Tracey gives to the plot device popular in nineteenth-century novels, in which a strong female character denies a suitor's proposal, only to end up marrying that very suitor later on in the novel (4). The double-proposal within *Little Women* seems to function as a point of tension, highlighting both Alcott's subtle protest against traditional courtship and a return to Meg's submissiveness. Tracey argues that the double-proposal, in its initial rejection of the suitor, "challenges [male] dominance at a vulnerable point: the proposal scene that should ensure the transference of woman from father to husband" (3). The fact that Alcott includes Meg's initial refusal—brought on by a fit of coquetry and rebellion to John's assumption that she will submit to his advances—suggests an alternative to the traditionally male-dominated courtship procedures of the nineteenth century. How far this challenge to acceptable courtship reaches, though, is limited by Alcott's return to a marriageable, happy ending, as Meg realizes her true feelings for John in a transition from the earlier naivety and lack of insight into the relationship. As soon as crotchety Aunt March insists Meg *not* marry him because of his poverty, she cries out, "I couldn't do better if I waited half my life!...I'm not afraid of being poor, for I've been

happy so far, and I know I shall be with him, because he loves me” (Alcott 300). Here, Meg’s love could be defined as sacrificial, for she gives up financial comfort for John, yet it is also encompasses happiness and self-fulfillment in accepting John’s love for her. This is certainly preferable to Sylvia’s joyless and dutiful marriage to Geoffery in *Moods*, or even her failure to achieve marriageable love with Adam; one could trace the difference back to the fact that Meg participates in an honest, spoken revealing of true feelings, unlike Sylvia’s sole reliance upon looks. Tracey goes on to claim that scenes such as these “argue for more egalitarian concepts of marriage and for greater autonomy for women both without and within marriage” (4). Indeed, Meg’s initial recognition and acknowledgement in rejecting John, and her self-discovery and self-expression of her feelings to the dissenting Aunt March, provides Meg autonomy in her choice to marry John. Nonetheless, Meg does still fall back into submission, giving up communication for a return to mute looks. After her acknowledgement of her feelings, Jo’s perceives Meg quickly collapsing back into “meekly whispering” to John, “hiding her face on [his] waistcoat,” and sitting “enthroned upon his knee, and wearing an expression of the most abject submission” (301-2). Still, Meg’s blissful submission is completely unlike Sylvia’s unhappy submission; furthermore, it *uplifts* Meg into an *enthroned* position, and completes the natural progression from looks to conversation to physicality. At the least, Alcott whispers a critique of the traditional mode of nineteenth-century courtship, if not giving Meg autonomy through employing the double-proposal device.

While young Jo is annoyed that Meg gets married, Alcott allows her protagonist to mature and discover her own marriageable love in the older, wise, and steadfast Professor Fritz Bhaer. Though Jo’s marriage is preceded by Amy’s engagement and marriage to Jo’s rejected lover Laurie, Alcott seems to most highlight and endorse Jo’s wedding, as it closes the novel and

only comes after a deep and emotive transformation. Young Jo is, as Thomas Pauly points out, “a distinct nonconformist” in wishing to remain the same age, be “the man of the house,” and to have an iron on her head to keep her from growing up (586-87). Young Jo is lovable in her tomboyish refusal to conform to standards of femininity in matters of dress, manners, and conversation, but mature Jo desires and succeeds in finding a marriageable love. Jennifer Doyle argues that Jo’s turning point into this larger transformation, the maturation of femininity, comes with grief, loss, or self-denial (389). Doyle claims that Jo’s readying for marriage derives from the most heartrending moment in the entire novel—Beth’s death scene. At the moment of Jo’s darkest grief, Jo asks Beth within the lines of a poem she writes to her beloved sister to “bequeath me that great patience / ...a cheerful, uncomplaining spirit / ...which has made the path of *duty* / Green beneath your willing feet” (Alcott 514, italics added). In effusions of emotion, Jo implores to receive the same gentle femininity which has allowed Beth to cheerfully and sacrificially carry out her duties as acts of love. Doyle argues that grief feminizes Jo, as she becomes more housewifely and more solemn in memory of Beth, and in this way Doyle’s reading suggests the idea that Jo’s journey to possess self-denial was the key to unlocking her true maturity and readiness for marriage—in which sacrificial loss of self will be required (388).

Amidst the March sisters’ deeply emotional transformations into womanhood and subsequent marriages, a problematic tension arises. Feminist critics often point out the frustrations of trying to understand why Alcott would allow “Jo’s bold opposition to matrimony [to] crumble,” which as Matteson contends, denies Jo her true passion for being a writer and makes *Little Women* a story about “dreams at best compromised and at worst thwarted” (347). And certainly many readers have found themselves disappointed by Jo’s quick and passive entrance into marriage: “Almost before she knew where she was, Jo found herself married and

settled at Plumfield” (Alcott 589). If Meg gained autonomy in first rejecting John, Jo loses autonomy in choosing marriage. According to another critic, Doyle, the novel disturbingly presents only two viable options for the little women: “marriage or death,” which is “an uninhabitable choice between submission and disappearance” (376-77). If each of the March girls achieves finding a husband, then Beth’s husband is death, and dying is her metaphorical marriage. Though, as earlier argued, one higher purpose of Beth’s death scene is the maturation of Jo in readying her for sacrificial marriage, the parallel between death and marriage cannot be ignored but instead invites an ominous comparison. If Beth’s sacrificial and dutiful act leads her to experience a literal and finite loss of self—*death*—then one cannot fully applaud Jo’s maturation into dutiful marriage or sacrificial love, either.

It seems that even Alcott herself may have not been satisfied with Jo’s leaving boyish childhood so radically for sacrificial marriage, or for that matter, any heroine necessarily being married off. One can find some insight by looking at the resistance Alcott put forth against relaying the message that entrance into womanhood requires marriage. Between writing the first (1868) and second (1869) part of *Little Women*, Alcott was frustrated with her fans, complaining: “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman’s life” (Shealy 19). Indeed, Alcott felt strongly against this, and vowed in her journals that “I *won’t* marry Jo to Laurie to please any one” (Shealy 19). A stubborn woman of principles, Alcott refused to wed her character to the “logical choice” of a match simply for the sake of having Jo marry. Standing in stark contrast to the message behind her fans’ pleas were Alcott’s later passionate encouragements for single women to find fulfillment in their lives in meaningful work, as most clearly laid out in an essay she had just recently written, “Happy Women,” and her later novel, *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873). In “Happy Women,” Alcott depicts women who

bring honor to the label “old maid”—including a “busy, happy, and useful” physician, a music teacher who bravely refuses a proposal because she does not love the man, and a content, servant-hearted elderly woman (Stern 146-48). Finally, in a commonly understood reference to herself, Alcott tells of “a woman of a strongly individual type” who chooses not to marry because she knows “that for one of a peculiar nature like herself such an experiment would be doubly hazardous” (Stern 148). “Filial and fraternal love must satisfy” this unnamed woman A., and “literature is a fond and faithful spouse” to her (Stern 148). Certainly, Alcott’s beliefs—as well as the trajectory of her own single, fulfilled life—show that Alcott was at variance with the idea that a girl’s entrance into womanhood must be accompanied by marriage.<sup>6</sup> While Alcott was quite satisfied in being an honorable old maid, she knew she could not get away with having Jo remain a literary spinster, though both Alcott and Jo thought that would have been more appropriate. The final decision was made: “So many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me [Alcott] clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, *or* somebody that I didn’t dare to refuse & out of perversity went & made a funny match for her” (Shealy 20). And thus, Jo March finds marriageable love in Professor Bhaer, as Alcott’s way of critiquing traditional, expected marriage.

While analyzing what kind of love is compelling enough for Jo March to put away her desire for freedom, a difficulty necessarily exists—one which Alcott herself poses and never satisfactorily answers. Right at the time when Amy’s marriage to Laurie ushers in a period of loneliness to Jo’s life, in which she wonders if her family and career will provide her sufficient fulfillment when she could have had love, Jo finds a collection of her friend Fritz Bhaer’s school

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<sup>6</sup> While Alcott’s likeness to the literary spinster in “Happy Women” is clear, LMA denied any autobiographical connection to Jo March. However, she often referred to herself as “Aunt Jo” in both private and public writings, and there are enough understood similarities to validate considering why Alcott chose to wed Jo and Professor Bhaer while remaining happily unmarried herself (Blackwell 80).



books, and thinks fondly of their time together. Similarly to Meg, words hold significance for Jo; she finds an old letter from the Professor and “sat looking at the friendly words, as they took a new meaning, and touched a tender spot in her heart” (538). Thus far this moment holds promise for marriageable love, according to Alcott’s earlier theme of conversation intimating truth. However, this conversation on paper, thus void of looks, is all too unreliable in its interpretation. The more significant question—is Jo’s feeling friendship or love?—comes in the form of Alcott’s subsequent musing: “Was it all self-pity, loneliness, or low spirits? Or was it the waking up of a sentiment which had bided its time as patiently as its inspirer? Who shall say” (539). Indeed, none shall say—until Fritz and Jo are allowed an interaction of shared, expressive looks *and* mutual, verbal expression.

If anything, the look on Fritz’s face when he first surprises Jo at her front door is one of nothing more than benevolent friendship, though Jo will soon give way to acknowledging assurance of love. Alcott describes his face as “sympathetic,” eyes as “kind,” and grasp of his hand as “warm” (551). Reciprocally, Jo’s “face and tone” simply exude “pride and pleasure” as she introduces him to her family (551). It is as if Alcott is introducing a different kind of love, one in which its greatest quality is that Fritz fits so well in the familial context, for the friendship continues in the form of him singing medleys with the family, talking philosophy with Mr. March, and accompanying Jo between her home and the Brook’s. While the sexual element seems to be missing, and eagerness seems to give way to contentment, this is indeed a marriageable love, filled with mutual esteem, affection, and respect. With her most developed character, Jo, Alcott carefully offers a different model of marriageable love even superior to Meg’s and Amy’s—one which is, as Fuller would render, like a tea bag, “steeped...In one pure love, and it will last thee long” (83). Love comes slowly and resembles friendship and familial

duty, but love does come—and comes certainly, in contrast to the uncertainty presented in unreliable looks and words. Alcott pens the epitome of this initial confusion in the chapter, “Under the Umbrella,” in which Fritz is attempting to discern Jo’s feelings for him:

Mr. Bhaer could read several languages, but he had not learned to read women yet. He flattered himself that he knew Jo pretty well, and was, therefore, much amazed by the contradictions of voice, face and manner, which [Jo] showed him in rapid succession that day—for she was in half a dozen different moods in the course of half an hour. (574)

Jo’s inflecting emotions between surprise, joy, despair that he is going away, feigned apathy, and chilled iciness put Fritz into a state of abject confusion. Finally, it is not looks or words, but Jo’s overflow of the heart—*tears*—and Jo’s explanation of them as deriving from her genuine sadness that Fritz is going away, which give Fritz the courage to propose and convince her to accept his question, “Can you make a little place in your heart for old Fritz?” (Alcott 578). While the girl Jo has been headstrong and hard-headed, the woman Jo uses the emotions of her *heart* to acknowledge and express inward desires for a marriageable love, for even if that love be sacrificial, it is deep and coming forth from the grieving process during and after Beth’s death, resulting in mutual personal happiness and a confirmation of love.

Alcott upholds the marriageable love between Meg and John as successful due to its emphasis on communication, yet still posits Jo and Fritz’s love as superior for exemplifying a basis for an egalitarian courtship, including mutual affection, admiration, and respect. Each represented relationship, though, in some way contains an aspect of submission and self-denying sacrifice. Still, hidden within the domestic, innocent pages of *Little Women*, one can certainly trace elements of critique—Meg’s double-proposal, Beth’s husband as death, and Jo’s superior

love of mutual happiness—through which Alcott condemns traditional, male dominated courtship and puts forth her own practice of egalitarian courtship leading to marriageable love.

*Work: A Story of Experience* (1873) and *Moods* (1884)

Louisa May Alcott's *Work: A Story of Experience* was published in 1873, but Alcott's journals indicate that she had been writing pieces of it since 1861, concurrently with *Moods*. Especially after the poor reception of *Moods*, though, Alcott had to turn to more financially promising efforts: "Wrote a little on poor old *Work* but...I soon dropped it and fell back to rubbishy tales, for they pay best" (Kaledin 254). Alcott's "rubbishy tales" refer to the succession of sensation stories she anonymously sold to reach a broad audience and bring in an income for her family (Kaledin 255). While the sensation stories explore sexual roles, male domination and female manipulation, *Work* is by contrast more conservative, presenting a new standard for marriageable love and offering a safe yet progressive model for a woman to live out singleness. The novel follows the life of Christie Devon, an orphaned young woman who leaves home to escape the dull farm life she would be fated to if she remained with her Aunt Betsey and Uncle Enos and made a life for herself. Christie finds gainful employment in different jobs open to women: servant, actress, governess, companion, and seamstress. As governess, she receives a proposal from her employer, the wealthy widower Philip Fletcher, and as servant, she falls in love with David Sterling, the head of the household she serves. Believing David does not love her, Christie has to choose between accepting the second proposal of Philip, though she does not love him, or refusing him with the slight hope that David will return her love. Remaining true to her emotions even though that means turning down financial stability turns out for the best. As a result of Christie's insistence upon "rejecting shadow for substance," David is finally able to explain why he was held back from expressing his love for Christie, and they marry in what is

perhaps Alcott's most optimistic expression of marriageable love. This ending seems not to satisfy Alcott, though, for its limiting nature and dependence on closure. To compensate, Alcott opens a new possibility for all women by creating a second ending, in which David dies and Christie's widowhood affords a potential for women to be politically, intellectually, and socially-bound in a sisterhood of women.

To understand how Alcott posits the marriageable love between David and Christie as holding the most egalitarian potential, one must look at the relationship between Christie and Philip Fletcher as a negative example of marriageable love, first for its tendency to deception and lack of genuine emotional connections. Their relationship begins on a promising note: Christie catches Philip's attention for having a "want of coquetry" (59) unlike the other young women who flirt with the wealthy Philip in hopes of gaining his marriage, and he finds more excuses to be around the governess. They even participate in the confirmations so important to Alcott's other novels, looks and conversation—though mostly in the form of Christie allowing him "the pleasure of...looking at and listening to me" (60). Nevertheless, the problem with their relationship lies in its inauthenticity, as Philip's attraction merely originates out of a craving for the "amusement" and "novelty" (57, 59) that flirtation with Christie provides. Similarly, while Christie intimates a reciprocal interest to Philip "by those small signs and symbol which lovers' eyes are so quick to see and understand—an artful bow on her hat, a flower in her belt, fresh muslin gowns, and the most becoming arrangement of hair," her attention to physical appearance is merely a reaction from her "vanity [being] flattered" (60). Even though Christie quickly preserves her integrity by acknowledging pride as the source of her affections and refusing to further mislead Philip, the fact of the matter remains that something in the very nature of Philip and Christie's relationship allowed for and invited deception, making evident that the feelings

Philip and Christie experience are merely a *shadow* of true love. Alcott frequently pens a phrase to praise the boldness of women who refuse to “accept the shadow for the substance” (258), elaborating upon this phrase in her essay, “Happy Women,” by admonishing women: “If [love] never comes, then in God’s name reject the shadow of it, for that can never satisfy a hungry heart” (Stern 149). Unlike Christie’s relationship with David, which will teach her “the substance” of egalitarianism, Christie’s “shadow” of a relationship with Philip does not bring satisfaction. If the interactions within a marriageable love include looks and communication rooted in genuine feelings of emotion, then Philip and Christie’s interactions, laced with dishonest expressions, point to a non-marriageable relationship.

Secondly, Alcott depicts the relationship between Christie and Philip Fletcher as a negative example of marriageable love for the domination-subordination dynamic within it. Already domineering by nature of being elder, male, and Christie’s employer, Philip poses his first proposal in the form of a possessive decree: “Will you go to Paris as *my* governess?...When we come back, you shall take your place in the world as my wife” (66-67). Though Christie had beforehand determined to accept any potential offer from Philip, the possessive, dominating language of his proposal irritates her and causes her to change her mind. As Philip continues his speech, his pretentious attitude further reveals itself in his words: “I’ve had my way all my life, and I mean to have it now, so smile, and say ‘Yes, Philip’” (67). The proposal is less a humble descent to one knee and more a supercilious handout, which Philip feels sure Christie will accept with thanks. When Christie protests, trying to get Philip to express some genuine affection for her, Philip arrogantly thinks she is protesting “the weight of the honor he did her, and tried to reassure her with the gracious air of one who wishes to lighten the favor he confers” (67). By having Christie resolutely refuse Philip’s offer because of his perception of his own superiority,

Alcott suggests that a marriage built on the dynamic of giver and receiver, or lender and debtor, would not benefit the receiver/debtor, but merely perpetuate the domination-submission effect within their relationship. This suggestion is a progressive step in Alcott's thinking, for it shows that she no longer seems to be enamored by the obedient, docile woman submitting to marriage (or death, in the tragic case of *Little Women's* Beth and, eventually, *Mood's* Sylvia). What saves Christie from the same fate as Sylvia, who naïvely condemns herself to a marriage with a man she does not love because of her ignorance of her own feelings for Adam, is that Christie is granted timely awareness of Philip's true arrogant nature and her own vanity. Alcott describes Christie's cognizance by contrasting it with "the sweet unconsciousness of those heroines [in Alcott's contemporaneous literature] who can live through three volumes with a burning passion before their eyes, and never see it till the proper moment comes, and Eugene goes down upon his knee" (60). Alcott's humorous jibe sounds uncannily like her own heroines, Sylvia and Meg, who remain naïvely unaware of their admirers' intentions, or even Jo, who shows nothing but friendship to Fritz until he proposes. By naming the heroine of *Work* to be *unlike* the other heroines, who cannot see or understand "a burning passion," Alcott essentially grants Christie sexual awareness, a key step in releasing her from the potential domination-subordination effects within her relationship with Philip that had denounced their relationship to a state of non-marriageability.

*Work* offers a far more desirable vision of marriageable love in David and Christie's relationship, as it points towards egalitarianism in its foundation of mutual respect and sharing of interior and exterior lives. It is significant that, unlike with Philip, Christie's interactions with David—though he is also older than Christie and her employer—are characterized by honesty and are void of coquetry. David does not mislead her by flirtations, but treats her with reciprocal

“respect, affection, and gratitude” (219). Rather than inciting dishonesty or inauthenticity, David and Christie’s relationship mutually awakens *positive* qualities in the other person that had previously lain dormant. Exemplifying this, when Christie first comes to work in the Sterling household as a servant, he puts her to work *beside* him in his conservatory, acknowledging that Christie can accomplish things that even florist David cannot—for she is able to put together a box of flowers with “a tender way of doing things that [men] can never learn” (182). David’s recognition of Christie’s strengths and ensuing commitment to equality comes as a breath of fresh air following her threatened subordination to Philip. Furthermore, just as Christie brings out “more cheerfulness and less silence” (220) in David, David as “the good gardener” (220) cultivates and enlivens Christie, becoming to her in her time of loneliness and depression “like a tonic to weak natures and wavering wills; and Christie felt a general revival going on within herself” (192). As well as bringing out the best qualities in each other, David and Christie’s friendship includes the sharing of favorite pastimes such as poetry and gardening, and even a language—hidden meanings found within flowers. As one of many instances, Christie makes herself a bouquet on her birthday and interprets the meanings of the flowers she chose to David: “these lovely blue ones of all shades my girlish dreams and hopes and plans...these [red ones] passion...my violet flowers the best and purest love we can know” (201). Because the floral language they speak is non-verbal, it takes skilled training—both in floristry and in knowing the other person’s character—to interpret the meanings. Fortunately, Alcott has built David and Christie’s friendship on an egalitarian platform of mutual respect and encouragement of the other’s positive inner qualities, and so they are able to engage in the sharing and interpretation of outward expressions as well.

Though Christie initially attempts to subordinate herself to David, the nature of their marriageable love is such that their relationship ultimately dismisses any power dynamic and presents itself as a companionate marriage. Even before Christie meets David, who is the head of the Sterling household in which she had just entered service, she assumes she will be subordinated under him. Of course, she certainly is entering an employer-employee relationship, and yet there is something deeper within Christie's expectation for submission—almost a *desire* for it. Looking for David to call him in to dinner, “Christie demurely tied on the little pumpkin-hood, wrapped the gray shawl about her, and set out to find her ‘master,’ as she had a fancy to call this unknown David” (174-75). Though the power dynamic Philip wielded over her once distressed her, loneliness and craving for love have primed her back into a “fancy” for submission. Another example of this occurs later on in the novel, when Christie performs a speech from *The Merchant of Venice* for the Sterlings, taking the part of Portia when speaking to her suitor: “Happiest of all, is that her willing spirit / Commits itself to yours to be directed, / As from her lord, her governor, her king” (212). Christie is practically asking to be mastered! However, though Alcott acknowledges Christie's desire to submit, Alcott effectively *corrects* that desire and moves past it, subtly pointing women to a new model for marriageable love: companionate marriage.

Christie's first interaction with David after she performs Portia's soliloquy does not emulate that of a king and subject, but in fact consists of him humbling himself to her. Christie admits that she is not the “peaceful, pious nun” that her “pretty shawl” makes her out to be (213), and David self-depreciatingly concurs that he, too, is not as “cheerful, contented, generous and good” as he may seem, but is “in reality sad, dissatisfied, bad and selfish” (214). Moreover, Alcott pinpoints humility as the reason which holds David back from telling Christie his feelings



for her. He is so beset by guilt from not forgiving his missing sister when he had the chance that he laments, “I have no right or hope to ask for any woman’s love until I am worthier of it” (230). David’s life experiences have pierced a hole in his male egotism; he is *not* used to getting his own way, as Philip and *Moods’* Adam are. Relating to Christie how he came to be humbled, David tells of his suffering and then that: “I turned to God...and slowly something like submission came to me...and courage seemed to spring up again” (217). The first of Alcott’s male characters who has willingly placed himself *below* anything greater, whether God or Nature, David is willing to humble himself and extend equality to Christie because he has known submission. Alcott uses Christie’s initial desire for submission as a backdrop to highlight the benefits of her relationship with David, in which the traditional domination-subordination power dynamic is dismissed for a better model of marriageable love based on humility.

Following the theme of Alcott’s other novels, looks play a role in David and Christie’s relationship by communicating an honesty so strong that Christie cannot always meet David’s “steady, straightforward look” for fear of him gleaning too much of her soul (179). When Philip re-enters Christie’s life, she is tempted back into dishonest coquetry by impetuously flirting with him in an attempt to erase her feelings for David. But when David and Christie make eye contact through a looking glass, her deceit is found out by the “intentness of his gaze” (248). Unlike the detrimental relationship of Philip and Christie, which brings out dishonesty, eye contact between David and Christie compels *honest* expression between the two; Christie asks David what he is thinking, and he answers truthfully that he was admiring her and finds her “good and lovely” (248). Furthermore, immediately after they break their eye contact, David’s face plainly reveals his inner turmoil in witnessing Christie’s flirtation—an expression “of a man intent on subduing some strong impulse by a yet stronger will” (249). David’s open expression of his restrained

affection towards Christie (for he still cannot *act* upon his feelings due to his guilt about his sister) challenges her to stop compromising honesty by her attempts to cover or erase her feelings for David. Going further, looks do not only encourage honesty within David and Christie's relationship, but they also operate by turning their trajectory inwards. From Karen Lystra's assertion that "One of the dominant activities of nineteenth-century courtship was introspection" (31), one can infer that true lovers should push each other more fully *inwards* before they can relate to each other on an equal level. Ironically, even while Christie believes David does not love her, he still performs in this scene as a marriageable lover, pushing her inwards to an introspective acknowledgement that she has been cruel to Philip by misleading him into thinking her heart had grown in affection towards him. Once again, Alcott employs looks between two lovers as means of confirming the lovers' marriageability for their drawing out honest with themselves and with each other.

Why—after Christie finally finds a marriageable love within a relationship which offers mutual respect, affection, sharing of lives, humility, and honesty—does Alcott then allow David to die? The marriage chapter, "Midsummer," ends with Christie's quip that "double flowers *are* loveliest and best" (274), yet summer almost immediately comes to a close for David and Christie, and the first page of the next chapter foreshadows, "Something will happen: such perfect happiness is not possible in this world" (275). More than in any of Alcott's other novels, David and Christie's love is based on "substance" rather than "shadow" (258); their engagement makes "everything [in the world] beautiful" (276); and their marriage ushers in egalitarianism, as the Civil War offers equal opportunity for the both of them to serve, as soldier and nurse, "march[ing in] shoulder to shoulder...as faithful comrades" (282). Yet Alcott decides to conclude *Work* not with a meditation of this progressive relationship, but with "one hour" (293)

of a honeymoon before Christie and David both march off to service—and David’s death. Alcott is proposing that even the egalitarian marriage is not the only happy ending, and by David’s death opens up another possibility for Christie, and on a larger level, all women. James Wallace argues that the “happy intervention” of the Civil War provides the convenient means to “remove or to curb the dominating masculine presences” (268) in Christie’s life; indeed, her ex-suitor Philip Fletcher loses his arm and gives up his relentless pursuit of her, and more soberly, her husband David dies. The removal of the “dominating masculine presences,” as Wallace calls them—for one could argue that by the legal, historical, and social implications of marriage, a husband was by definition a dominating presence—allows Christie to spend the rest of her life laboring in purpose, joining a sisterhood of women from all social classes to work together in fighting injustice. *Work* certainly does not dismiss love as something to be thrown away or devalued, especially when the courtship is as egalitarian as it was between David and Christie. However, Alcott does critique the idea that marriage is the ideal or only option for nineteenth-century women, and instead presents both avenues—an egalitarian marriage and singleness full of political activism—as desirable and personally satisfying.

The single, satisfied woman is not a new for concept for Alcott—for the author would quickly place herself in this category; however, Christie is set apart from Alcott’s other characters for being widowed, a freedom which in turn allows her to pursue an option atypical for women at the time and sets up the novel up for a more feminist ending. Remembering that Alcott had once desired a different ending for *Moods* than her editor insisted, or one where she “intended to have [Sylvia] spend the rest of her life alone, busy & happy” (Bannett 345), one can see that where Alcott failed with Sylvia, she finally fulfilled her desire for this path to be explored through Christie’s widowhood. Of course, for women in the nineteenth century,

singleness was not necessarily a conduit of freedom, as Tiffany Wayne points out, but was often seen as a reason for women either to remain at home as a caretaker or to find gainful employment in providing for her family (7). A woman caught in such a situation, Clementia Smith of Pennsylvania, complained: “Even in a state of single blessedness when ladies are supposed to have their own way, they are not always without restraint...Spinsters are no more independent than married people” (Wayne 8). Single women who did break away from their family experienced great guilt and could only justify their decision by gauging their contribution to the greater good of society (Wayne 8). Indeed, it seems that at this time, as similarly represented within Alcott’s novels, there are only three viable options for single women at this time: 1) marriage, 2) singleness while being dependent on the family, or 3) death. However, Alcott offers a new possibility for women in *Christie*. Because David dies, the first option of marriage is removed, and though she is young and technically still marriageable, her widowhood redefines her singleness. She is not bound to dependence on her family as the second option dictates, for she does not have any family except the child she conceived in her one-hour honeymoon, a household of which widowhood has made her the head. Finally, though both *Little Women’s* Beth and *Mood’s* Sylvia yielded to the third option of death, entering its refuge “safe across the river” (Alcott, *Little Women* 515), Christie escapes this fate and returns from the Civil War widowed but happily single with her baby girl and the “loving league of sisters” (343) she joins. Her role as an integral part of this social and intellectual group of working-class and upper-class women, united in their cause to bring together the two classes, serves as an ideal platform for her to achieve the goal she first had at the beginning of the novel to be a “useful, happy woman” (329). Thus, Christie’s re-entrance into singleness after David dies, though it is an

admittedly tragic circumstance, opens up a new possibility for women to possess a public identity and agency in creating her own life and happiness.

With the image of a group of politically-minded women closing out the novel, so undeniably suggestive of Fuller and her *Conversations*, the modern reader could wish Alcott's advocacy for women's rights was made clearer. While the reader understands that Christie makes a speech producing peace and unity within the women's group, the speech is never documented, causing Wallace to lament that this "fantasy of a mediating woman's voice" between upper and lower classes is merely that—Alcott's fantasy (272). Furthermore, Alcott does not take full advantage of the platform for women's rights her alternate ending could have achieved. At the very end of the novel, when the democratic sisterhood is gathered around the table in an optimistic image reifying Alcott's most progressive beliefs in the grand scheme of achieving women's rights and equal opportunities, David's face looks down upon the gathered women from a picture frame. Christie, still referred to as Mrs. Sterling, remarks: "There's just a hint of Davy in it that is very comforting to me" (342). Like the absent yet oft-mentioned Mr. March in *Little Women*, Wallace argues that David's absence almost has a stronger effect on Christie than his presence (269). Even without a living husband, Christie is still obligated to "look up [at him] with her devout eyes full of love" (Alcott 342). It is disappointing that though Alcott seems to have the perfect opportunity—afforded to her by the unprecedented success of her *Little Women*—to boldly advocate for women's rights within *Work*, she still conforms in some ways to traditional marriage ideals.

Even more frustratingly, Alcott's next authorial decision was not to continue moving towards a wholly egalitarian representation of marriageable love as the trajectory from *Moods* to *Little Women* to *Work* had thus far implied. Rather, Alcott began to revise a second edition of

*Moods* into an even more domestic novel—in likeness of that novel which had made her rich and famous, *Little Women*—republishing *Moods* in 1882 immediately after she finally received copyrights upon previous editor A.K. Loring’s bankruptcy. While *Work* had toiled to approve female friendships centered on a common cause as an equally satisfying and viable path of life as marriage, Alcott’s revision of *Moods* seems to undo everything she had achieved. And, more tellingly, the major difference between the two editions is that Sylvia does not escape her loveless marriage by dying, but remains married with her husband at the end of the novel. This time, it is not Geoffery but Sylvia who finds herself sitting and waiting for his return, anxious that Geoffery has died in the shipwreck, and thus comes to appreciate him and possesses a “fervent desire to atone” (279). Sylvia is no longer represented as a victim of moods or universal feminine emotions, but is seen as a “motherless girl hiding a spiritual sorrow” (257) in need of learning “principle, not pleasure” (271). In both editions of *Moods*, there is a sense of duty and sacrifice being an integral part of love, but in nowhere does she equate love and duty as strongly as she does in the moralistic concluding sentence of the 1882 edition: “She had learned to live by principle, not impulse, and this made it both sweet and possible for love and duty to go hand in hand” (280). The most disconcerting of all shifts between the two editions is that Alcott completely removes the Emersonian epigraph at the beginning of the novel! This marks a shift from the vivacity of Sylvia’s moods in “many colored lenses, which paint their own hue” (*Moods*, 1864, 1) to the gloomy traditionalism of domesticity. This shift can and should be problematized, for Louisa May Alcott has abandoned any conviction to portray individualism she once carried, and replaced it with conformity to social norms and reader preferences. Of course, this surely would have been a tempting shift to make, since by 1882 she would have realized that marriage and sentimentality, rather than the Gothic sensationalism of her early short

stories or overt egalitarian messages, as she may have wished to produce, paid the bills and pleased the audiences. Nonetheless, she seems to have forgotten that, as Sylvia tragically failed to learn, “the duty we owe ourselves is greater than that we owe to others” (*Moods*, 1864, 100).

If Alcott has forgotten the satisfaction in critiquing traditional marriage ideals, though, the reader has not. One can best view the tension between the progressive and regressive elements within the novel by understanding that *Work: A Story of Experience* was originally entitled *Success* in Alcott’s early drafts, a title change which reflects both the open-endedness of the novel as an ongoing story rather than a conclusive tale, as well as a more realistic view of women’s rights and equal opportunities. During the span of her time writing *Work* between 1861 and 1873, Alcott surely changed and matured her outlook, now viewing the life of women not as an undisputed success, but as a more subjectively acknowledged life of experience. On an individual level, “Success” would have meant to Christie achieving a perfect life consisting either of a wholly egalitarian marriage or singleness while knowing equal opportunities, but “Work” means her experiencing different avenues and working *towards* their social acceptance and possibility within the sphere of nineteenth-century women. And as for women as a whole, it means their share in the experience—marriageable love and working opportunities—and in the fight for those rights. By offering two different endings, Alcott offers resists closure in ways that her other novels do not, and is thus able to achieve offering both a new standard for marriageable love and a new model for a work opportunity providing happy, useful singleness.

#### Coda

It is beneficial to remember the heartrending plight of Mary Seargeant Gove Nichols, who found herself locked in a marriage to a tyrannical husband who denied her access to her own earnings and the right to make decisions for herself, and took from her the person she loved

the most—their daughter. Recalling this extreme case illuminates Louisa May Alcott's historical context and suggests how her novels spoke to a system of oppression and predetermined roles of domination and subordination for men and women. Margaret Fuller's influence—especially her radical arguments for women's rights derived from Transcendental principles of self-reliance—can be seen within Alcott's works, as her novels at least address and respond to Fuller's call for egalitarian relations between men and women. Alcott's push against or critique of traditional nineteenth-century methods of courtship and marriage is most clearly seen through the positive alternatives to marriage, including companionate marriages, widowhood, or happy, useful singleness, as represented within her three novels: *Moods* (1864), *Little Women* (1868-69), and *Work* (1882).

If Louisa May Alcott set out to discover exactly what constituted a marriageable love certain of its affections and egalitarian in its nature, she surely did not achieve her goal. The closest she gets to an explanation of love is in her analogy of love being “substance” and anti-love being “shadow” (*Work*, 258). Even so, her analogy intimates that it is easier to spot the shadow—the unauthentic, not-quite-right, pretended feelings of affection—than some unspecified, indescribable substance—the real thing. This ambiguity does not stop Alcott, though, from using the genre of novels to attempt to represent marriageable love and problematize traditional nineteenth-century marriage. Furthermore, Alcott's use of the novel as critique is legitimized by the realization that she is not the only author who uses the novel at this time to address these issues. Indeed, if one is to look contemporaneously at the literature of Alcott's peers, or slightly forward to those who come after her, they can follow a trend in which novels question the position of love, courtship, and marriage within nineteenth-century America.



Henry James explores alternatives to traditional marriage in *The Bostonians* (1886), presenting as the grand theme of the novel: the choice of a young woman, Verena Tarrant, between staying with her mentor, a woman's rights advocate who also is in love with Verena, or leaving with the man she is in love with and feeling like she is conforming to traditional nineteenth-century marriage. Often spoken of in discussion with James is Edith Wharton, who likewise confronts the issues of finding marriageable love in two of her most famous works, *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Ethan Frome is stuck married to the older, sickly and nagging Zeena; but when he and Zeena's younger and vibrant caretaker, Mattie, fall in love, they cannot help but contemplate an alternative to Ethan's unhappy marriage. Similarly, in *The Age of Innocence*, the upper-class Newland Archer is happily engaged to the equally respectable May Welland when he meets May's cousin, Ellen Olenski, who has returned to New York after a stay in Europe. The elite New York society is cruel to Ellen for her odd personality and unstylish dress, but they truly make her life miserable when they discover that she has divorced her abusive first husband. Of course, Archer falls in love with Ellen's honest peculiarities and is forced to make a choice between love or the respectable lifestyle of upper-class living, which would include marrying May.

Among other examples, Wharton and James imagine unhappy marriages and love triangles as universal, implying that whether one is in a small New England town where nothing exciting happens, Boston, the center of intellectual reform, or within the Golden-Age society of New York elite, he or she *will* encounter questions of true love, whether that love is marriageable, and what to do once one enters a marriage. Of course, Alcott was addressing these issues half a century earlier, and her novels were constructing a trajectory pointing toward a more egalitarian future. For this reason, her novels deserve a space within the history of

women's rights alongside Stanton, Anthony, Fuller, as well as a larger space within the literary canon alongside James and Wharton. As proven by Alcott, the novel is a legitimate space for opening up questions about love, courtship and marriage and standing against traditional nineteenth-century marriage, with all its restrictive legal and social ramifications, as well as its expected spheres of action. In fact, the nineteenth-century novel has potential for creating even bolder polemics against its awry society than a public speaker, political candidate, or even a newspaper could—for much can be told when truth is guised in fiction.

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