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# The Whipping Boy of Love: Atonement and Aggression in Alcott's Fiction

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1.

In her 1990 article, "Reading for Love: Canons, Paracanons, and Whistling Jo March," Catharine Stimpson calls for a reassessment of literary merit based on affective rather than aesthetic standards of taste — on how works of literature make readers *feel*. Stimpson emphasizes the value of reading both for the love of reading and for the love certain familiar works of literature evoke in us. On one level, this love is its own reward; however, for Stimpson, it also becomes a political tool, a way of addressing the question of literary merit on different terms: "A paracanonical work [in contrast to a canonical one] may or may not have 'literary value,' however critics define that term," writes Stimpson. "Its worth exists in its capacity to inspire love. The paracanon asks that we systematically expand our theoretical investigations of 'the good' to include 'the lovable'" (958). The exemplum of Stimpson's study is Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, a text she has chosen, she says, because she "once worshipped it." She was not alone in this regard. Stimpson quotes a 1968 reviewer of the novel who, upon being assigned the story for the novel's centennial publication, claimed that she was ill-equipped to address the merits of *Little Women*, "either academically or by temperament." She was, she says, too much in love with the book when she was young to evaluate it dispassionately now (970). But then this is the point of Stimpson's piece: to set up a system of evaluation based on a novel's capacity to inspire a feeling that is, in her terms, inherently

biased and therefore uncritical. Although Stimpson herself never actually defines what she means by “love,” she implies that a lovable work is one that can engage, even *attract* the reader to such an extent that the novel’s world view becomes inseparable from the reader’s own. This idea is supported by Stimpson’s admission that her own critical judgment has probably been informed by the novel’s values: “Possibly, the *ethical* standards of *Little Women* have subconsciously influenced my invention of the paracanonical. Alcott testifies to the morality of love” (966; emphasis added).

The conflation of ethics and aesthetics implicit in Stimpson’s statement (“good” refers both to something morally sound and above average in quality) speaks to the slippage inhering in such loaded and overdetermined concepts as goodness and love. In fact, Alcott’s beloved heroine Jo March has a difficult time herself disentangling these two ideas from one another. Jo fears that unless she is good (that is, morally sound *and* above average in quality), she will never be loved. Lamenting that she is capable of doing anything when she gets in a passion, Jo confesses, “I get so savage, I could hurt any one, and *enjoy it*. I’m afraid I shall do something dreadful some day, and spoil my life, and make everybody hate me” (79; emphasis added).<sup>1</sup> Despite Jo’s assumed equation between the “good” and the “lovable,” however, what we find woven throughout *Little Women* and its sequel, *Little Men*, is a complex web of emotion and abuse, goodness and hostility. When read in relation to each other, these novels suggest that it is aggression — toward self and others — that gives love meaning and makes love possible.

One could argue that Stimpson’s larger point, the idea that we must develop alternative or “para-” canons for the literature we love, itself arises out of her sense of the unjustified exclusion — or abuse, if you will — such works have suffered at the hands of hostile and unsympathetic scholars. For Stimpson, Alcott’s beloved *Little Women* series has become the virtual whipping boy of an elitist literary hierarchy committed to eradicating the principles of love. What we see in this idea, however, are the ways in which exclusion operates to deny the validity of one’s sensibilities, while at the same time animating them. Stimpson herself, in fact, acknowledges that exclusion forms a necessary component of readerly love. Comparing the conventions of paracanonical love to those of the Western romance, Stimpson draws a picture of two people in love, each bound by the other’s spell, “quivering and burning in a separate space,” deliciously excluded from the rest of the world. For Stimpson, “passionate reading” reproduces this attachment, but it does so by substituting reader and text for lover and beloved (958). The depiction of love as a kind of “spell” one is under is certainly relevant to Alcott’s stories; it is an especially salient feature of her sensation fiction. But the fusion of identity that Stimpson associates with romance is never fully figured in Alcott’s fiction. Rather, the spell of love is most often articulated through the grammar of mastery, the struggle for control of the other (even when the “other” is one’s own rejected self) that, once finally achieved, buries all traces of the battle.

Stimpson’s article serves as a useful model for the ways in which both academic and non-academic readers have approached *Little Women*: they have read the novel according to its own sentimental conventions. Sentimental lit-

erature is characterized by its ability to evoke emotion; what is more, sentimentalism is in the business of facilitating a sympathetic consonance — a *union*, in effect — between subjects, including readers and characters.<sup>2</sup> *Little Women's* success in achieving union between reader and character is amply recorded by Barbara Sicherman, who cites, among other examples, well-known authors and critics whose childhood responses to Alcott's novel reveal a powerful attachment to the main character: "I read *Little Women* a thousand times. Ten thousand," writes Cynthia Ozick. "I am Jo in her 'vortex'; not Jo, exactly, but some Jo-of-the-future. I am under an enchantment." Simone de Beauvoir confided that in reading *Little Women*, she felt she had "caught a glimpse of my future self": "I identified passionately with Jo, the intellectual." Even racial differences did not completely undermine the mystical transfer of identity so important to sentimental stories. The African-American writer Ann Petry claimed that she "couldn't stop reading" *Little Women* because she "had encountered Jo March. I felt as though I was part of Jo and she was part of me" (quoted in Sicherman 247, 259, 260-1). Clearly, a large part of *Little Women's* influence lies in its ability to foster an identification with Jo March, a phenomenon from which even Alcott herself was not exempt: "An unusual feature of [the novel's reception]," notes Sicherman, "was the perception that author and heroine were interchangeable. Alcott's work was marketed to encourage the illusion not only that Jo was Alcott but that Alcott was Jo" (252-3).

Ironically, despite their overwhelming tendency to abandon themselves to a kind of vicarious attachment, readers aren't presented with a unified subject in *Little Women* — or in Jo, for that matter. Rather, the novel offers Jo as a split subject, a fractured consciousness the pieces of which only violence can bring together. Violence initially directed toward others and ultimately turned against the self becomes a catalyst for authoring the fictions of self-unification. Self-negation becomes a part of Jo's makeup; it also becomes part of the reader's experience. After all, identification with Jo necessitates the substitution of the reader's identity (regardless of how tenuous an identity it might be at a young age) for what the reader perceives as Jo's identity. What I am ultimately suggesting is that we must do violence to conventional readings of *Little Women* — a move that involves recognizing and articulating the split in subjectivity first required for identification to occur — in order to identify the aggression that lies at the heart of Alcott's domestic productions of sentimental love.<sup>3</sup>

It is not my intention to argue the ways in which Alcott's stories present a true or false picture of love; rather, I am interested in how Alcott's particular rendering of love is informed by the very characteristics that critics of sentimental literature have traditionally come to think of as antithetical to the novel's designs. From Nina Baym to Jane Tompkins, literary critics have assumed that sentimental "domestic" values represented the obverse of a corrupting "market" mentality, characterized by competition, aggression and abuse.<sup>4</sup> But the structures of identification on which *Little Women* relies bring together, rather than hold apart, such ostensibly contradictory categories as love and hostility, sympathy and violence. It is in connection with these pairings that I invoke the paradigm of the "whipping boy," a paradigm with which I see much American literature engaged.<sup>5</sup> The whipping boy refers to the child who,

of similar age and body to a young prince, takes the prince's place when the latter is to be beaten for a fault. Explicit in this arrangement is the idea that the prince's royal body is not to be abused; the whipping boy therefore serves as both example to and substitute for the offending prince. In liberal constructions of the model, the prince resists doing wrong in the future in order to save his "double" pain. He thus practices self-discipline not only for his own sake but for the sake of another with whom he identifies. Physical suffering proves both crucial and beside the point, as the suffering of pity and shame becomes the prince's true punishment.

I call on the image of the whipping boy not only for its dramatization of the relationship between identification and violence, and the staging of "doubleness" on which the prince's identification presumably rests, but also because it raises the issue of atonement. Atonement can be defined as the restoration to righteousness of a person or a community through the punishment of an individual. The Christian ethos of nineteenth-century America contributes to such a preoccupation, idealizing as it does the paradigm of Christ as the ultimate whipping boy. The concept of Christ's body as sinless magnifies the importance of the substitutionary body in nineteenth-century American liberal culture. Relying on Foucauldian paradigms of the modern state as one in which *corporal* punishment is superseded by the internalization of authority (most notably exemplified in Jeremy Bentham's model prison, the Panopticon), cultural critics such as Jay Fliegelman, John Bender, Richard Brodhead, and Gillian Brown have pointed to early Anglo-American novels' participation in a growing ethos of noncoercive, non-corporal modes of discipline. I am arguing for our need to reevaluate the scope of this movement by recognizing the critical role of abused bodies in liberal constructions of discipline. One of the questions the whipping boy raises is the extent to which the fiction of the middle-class body maintains its ideological integrity — its status as whole and unabused — at the expense of other bodies that come to stand in for it.

One could say that Christianity contains within it the blueprint for American culture's architecture of goodness: the story of Love erected through violence. The relationship between atonement and self-abuse is perpetuated by the exhortation of individuals to identify with Christ. Individuals are meant not only to believe in Christ's substitution and suffering on their behalf but to *imitate* it.<sup>6</sup> Vicarious substitution is thus something done both *for* and *to* the individual: only by internalizing the machinery of violence, by turning it on oneself, will one ever be redeemed. Through its ability to incorporate the concepts of both substitution and identification, vicariousness makes conceivable the psychological equation between sadism and masochism. Whereas in sadism the "other" might serve as a substitute for the self, masochism requires the self to perform its own vicarious substitution, to act as both subject and object, "self" and "other." In this scenario, external violence, that which solidifies a community's sense of itself, is focused inward.<sup>7</sup>

Alcott's novels reflect the Christian culture out of which they arise, and masochistic tendencies become represented as crucial to the project of learning to love not only others but oneself. Considered in terms of gender, one could say that *Little Women* explores the relationship among sadism, masochism and

love in relation to girls while *Little Men* explores it in relation to boys. However, the symmetry becomes complicated in interesting ways in each of these books by Alcott's refusal to adhere to type: Jo, who evinces stereotypically masculine qualities throughout *Little Women* (and who repeatedly expresses her desire to be a man), resists identifying with conventional models of femaleness as self-sacrificing and submissive until the end of the novel. Likewise, Nat, one of the main characters in *Little Men*, reveals the feminizing effects on boys of vicarious atonement as a method of discipline. Thus in both of these children's novels, the notion of what is "feminine," what is "masculine," and what is "good" remains essentially problematic.

## 2.

As an adolescent, Alcott once wrote in her journal, "I have made a plan for my life. . . . I am going to be good. I've made many resolutions, and written sad notes, and cried over my sins, but it doesn't seem to do any good! Now I'm going to *work really*, for I feel a true desire to improve, and be a help and comfort, not a care, to my dear mother" (quoted in Saxton 165). That Alcott was often preoccupied with her own moral development is hardly surprising. After all, as Richard Brodhead notes, for Louisa May Alcott, "life with father . . . was life with self-reformation as the continuing agenda" (73). Such an agenda led Alcott, in Brodhead's words, to "identify with the parental view of her character as morally problematic and to find a desired new self in the project of controlling herself on their behalf." Various models for this new self lie in *Little Women*, which Alcott wrote, according to both Brodhead and Martha Saxton, Alcott's biographer, in loving — if idealized — tribute to her parents. "I came to believe," writes Saxton, "that Alcott wrote *Little Women* for her parents, obeying the expressed wishes of her father by writing a tale which would provide moral lessons for her children, and the unexpressed wishes of her mother in making her the heroine of a story, which, in reality, had been both painful and complex" (xi-xii). What we get, however, is not an idealized portrait but a novel that reveals the cracks and fissures that reconstituted selves necessarily betray. And in these cracks we see how Alcott's version of loving selves is formed.

According to Brodhead, part of *Little Women's* continued popularity lies in its reactivation of a disciplinary model made familiar by novels of the 1840s and 1850s. In this model, which Brodhead calls disciplinary intimacy, or "discipline through love," influence rather than coercion plays the principal role. In short, children are made to internalize proper values by absorbing them through the parent's, and specifically the mother's, affection:

The little women of Alcott's first famous novel live, as the domestic manuals of the previous generation would prescribe, within a loving parental presence, in an enclosed family space warmed by maternal affection and so oriented toward the mother's beliefs. This enveloping presence, operating without the aid of overt or physical coercion, has the power almost magi-

cally to mold character in the direction of parental ideals, to transpose parental preference into an imperative from within. (71)

As Brodhead observes, disciplinary intimacy renders correction indistinguishable from the filial affection that shapes and motivates that correction.

Although Brodhead's model is invaluable for understanding some of the ways both children and readers were taught to take the novel-as-parent's teachings to heart, it doesn't account for the aggressive tendencies inherent in Alcott's paradigm of transformational love. Nor does it truly represent the process as a process: that is, as an ongoing cycle of love and (self-) abuse where-in goodness is defined by struggle rather than stasis. Jo March, for example, never successfully internalizes the mother's teachings; rather, what she inherits is the mother's constant battle against anger and abuse. In a mother-daughter tête à tête early in the novel, Marmee confesses to Jo her terrible secret:

"You think your temper is the worst in the world; but mine used to be just like it."

"Yours, mother? Why, you are never angry!" and, for the moment, Jo forgot remorse in surprise.

"I've been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it; and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so." (79)

The reader suspects that another forty years will in fact *not* do the trick, since the first forty have been insufficient. But the lesson Marmee offers Jo seems to lie in fighting the battle rather than winning the war: "I've learned to check the hasty words that rise to my lips," says Mrs. March, "and when I feel that they mean to break out against my will, I just go away a minute, and give myself a little shake, for being so weak and wicked" (79-80). Marmee describes herself as two people here, one "weak and wicked" and one strong, but both angry. In order to be the one person she wants, she must turn her aggression against herself. The point here is not to contrast goodness with aggression but to see aggression itself as the means to achieving goodness. In this scenario, anger can never be overcome, for it is not simply the enemy, but the means by which the enemy may ultimately be defeated.

Jo and Marmee's discussion takes place in the context of Jo's own battle with anger, the consequences of which have just proven devastating for her. After Amy burns Jo's manuscript in the fireplace, Jo vows never to speak to her again. Nevertheless, in typical little sister fashion, Amy follows Jo and Laurie when the two go ice skating out on the pond. While there, Amy, ignored and unprotected by her sister, falls through the ice and nearly drowns. Jo sees her own "hardness of heart" as responsible for the accident, confessing to Marmee that "if [Amy] *should* die, it would be my fault" (78). In a passion of penitent tears, the narration goes on to say, Jo sobs out her gratitude "for being spared the heavy punishment which might have come upon her" (79). Jo takes on both the responsibility and the suffering for experiences that are chiefly Amy's.

Although Amy's fall was an accident, Jo reads the event as divine punishment for her own stubborn will; in a fantasy of animate anger, Jo's temper becomes for her a live, physical force, shaping events in the world around her and drawing others into its powerful vortex.

A similar psychology develops for Jo around Beth's contraction of scarlet fever. When Marmee goes to visit her ailing husband in the army hospital, she enjoins her daughters not to forget their impoverished neighbors, the Hummels. Beth the dutiful takes up the responsibility, but on one particular day she asks that one of the other girls go. All three claim previous engagements. When Beth returns from her visit, she reports in a shaky voice that the Hummel children are sick, and that the Hummel baby, whom Beth had been tending, is dead. The doctor "told me to go home and take belladonna right away," Beth tells Jo, "or I'd have the fever" (177). "No you won't!" cried Jo, hugging her close, with a frightened look. "Oh, Beth, if you should be sick I never could forgive myself!" Of course, Beth does come down with the fever and Jo suffers the pangs of self-remorse: "serve me right" to catch the fever again, mutters Jo; "selfish pig, to let you go, and stay writing rubbish myself!" (178). Amy, who has never had scarlet fever, is sent away to Aunt March's, while Jo becomes chief nurse and domestic comfort to her martyred sister.

Critics have long commented on the strength of Jo's character in comparison to the other March girls. But as Alcott presents it, this strength has its potential dangers. The fullness of Jo's will, her ambition and her passionate feeling threaten to overwhelm the other characters — to kill them off one by one. Reading the March history as Jo reads it, Jo herself is the author of events. What happens, happens by her will. The departure of each of her sisters — Meg in marriage, Amy to Europe, Beth dying — is thus no accident but a manifestation of her authorial plan. It serves to remove competing models of womanhood from the home. In fact, each of the March girls could be said to present a different facet of nineteenth-century womanhood; together they comprise what Alcott might have considered the perfect woman. But Alcott's vision goes awry when each of the sisters in her own way tries to do the others in. Jo's character in particular resists integration. She sees her sisters as parts of herself and fights to keep them at home, yet she wants to become autonomous and so struggles to eradicate them. This is a conflict that cannot ultimately be resolved in the novel, for though Jo desires her liberation, she has been taught to see her family as the essence of who she is. She is never sure whether in losing her sisters she will be made empty or made whole.

In order to understand the pressure under which other models of womanhood put Jo, we must only look to her conversation with Beth right before the latter's death. Jo has returned from her independent life in New York to take care of Beth in the months before she dies. Once Jo is at home, Beth tries to instill in her what her mother never could, the inestimable comfort of self-abnegation:

You must take my place, Jo, and be everything to father and mother when I'm gone. They will turn to you — don't fail them; and if it's hard to work alone, remember that I don't forget you, and that you'll be happier in doing



that, than writing splendid books, or seeing all the world; for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy. (418)

In asking Jo to “take her place,” Beth attempts to obliterate Jo’s personality and replace it with her own. She thus proves a dangerous rival for Jo in the competition to define true womanhood. One such definition lies in giving up one’s self for another. That Beth’s construction of love involves a rejection of one’s most deeply held wishes is made clear in the next few lines, for in response to Beth’s plea, Jo “then and there . . . renounced her old ambition” and “pledged herself to a new and better one, acknowledging the poverty of other desires, and feeling the blessed solace of a belief in the immortality of love” (418-9). Like the ideal mother, Beth manages to “mold [Jo’s] character in the direction of parental ideals” (Brodhead 71). In Jo’s response, however, we see the violence to self that the imperatives of parental preference cost.

What this suggests is that the sentimental concept of love as self-sacrifice tells only half the story, for Jo learns her lessons in love first by her real and imagined abuses of others, and then by turning that aggression back on herself. That the objects of her wrath and remorse are almost exclusively family members suggests how intimately connected the concepts of abuse and self-abuse are for Alcott. Coincident with the novel’s depiction of the home as moral haven, or, as Nina Auerbach claims, as an idealized and self-sustaining community of women, is the idea of the home as battleground, where enemies are wounded and then taken in one’s arms. Rather than providing a safe space for the confessing and unleashing of anger, the home functions as a kind of emotional hot-house, a seedbed for pent-up resentments and hostilities. Jo’s worst fear has been realized. Once concerned that her temper would spoil her life and turn everyone against her, Jo now finds herself alone — alone in a house with nothing but ghosts and a temper that seems never to die:

[Jo] tried in a blind hopeless way to do her duty, secretly rebelling against it all the while, for it seemed unjust that her few joys should be lessened, her burdens made heavier, and life get harder and harder as she toiled along. Some people seemed to get all sunshine, and some all shadow; it was not fair, for she tried more than Amy to be good, but never got any reward, — only disappointment, trouble, and hard work. . . . “I can’t do it. I wasn’t meant for a life like this, and I know I shall break away and do something desperate if somebody don’t come and help me,” she said to herself, when her first efforts failed, and she fell into the moody, miserable state of mind which often comes when strong wills have to yield to the inevitable. (432-3)

Though parental influence has infiltrated Jo’s heart, the battle with self still remains.

As the narrator goes on to tell us, somebody did help her. Jo asks her father to talk to her as he used to talk to Beth, and sitting in Beth’s chair, Jo imbibes her father’s patient wisdom. Jo takes on Beth’s duties in the home as well, for

now “[b]rooms and dishcloths never could be as distasteful as they once had been, for Beth had presided over both; and something of her housewifely spirit it seemed to linger” around them (434). As she used these articles, Jo “found herself humming the songs Beth used to hum, imitating Beth’s orderly ways, and giving the little touches here and there” that made “home happy.” Of course, Jo takes Beth’s place in order to atone for killing her off; more than this, however, Beth has to die in order for Jo to become lovable. This is the law of atonement: someone must be hurt for others to be made good. After Beth’s death, Jo’s writing changes as well. Jo gives up writing her sensation stories, lurid tales of murder and intrigue, to write stories from the heart, “without thought of fame or money” (436). When she registers surprise at the success of her new venture, Mr. March responds, “There is truth in it, Jo — that’s the secret; humor and pathos make it alive, and you have found your style at last.” “If there *is* anything good or true in what I write,” replies Jo, “it isn’t mine; I owe it all to you and mother, and to Beth.” The talent that once defined Jo’s individuality is now accredited to others. This is not simply false humility, however, for in a real sense, the “goodness” in Jo’s stories is *not* hers; it is a trace of the sister-parent for whom Jo has sacrificed herself, knowing no other way to prove her love.

Jo’s writing about what she knows — family — signals her reintegration into the home. In shifting styles, she has followed the guidance of her surrogate father and future husband, Professor Bhaer, who gives Jo the same advice that Alcott’s father once gave her: to write “plain stories for boys and girls about childish victories over selfishness and anger” (Saxton 3). Whether or not *Little Women* qualifies as such is up for debate, but Alcott continues to pursue the relationship between anger and love in her sequel to *Little Women*, entitled *Little Men*. In this novel Jo and Friedrich Bhaer are now married, and together they open a school for boys on the Plumfield estate Jo has just inherited from her aunt March. Jo’s chief labor in *Little Men*, as Brodhead articulates it, is “to tame boys as wild as she once was through the methods that worked with her” (71). The success of those methods, as well as the implications of them, is what I turn to next.

### 3.

In 1871, Alcott published *Little Men* as a loving testimonial to her brother-in-law, John Pratt, who had died the year before. The proceeds of the book were to go to Louisa’s sister Anna, to keep Anna and her children from debt after John’s death. In fact, according to Saxton, “Louisa’s sacrifice was financially uncalled for,” since John had carefully provided for his family. Nevertheless, Louisa’s psyche seemed to demand the gesture: “In writing and thinking of the little lads to whom I must be a father now, I found comfort for my sorrow” (quoted in Saxton 310). Since her own father had never been a successful wage earner, Alcott had assumed early on the burden of economic responsibility for her family. Her writing thus became for her a kind of fatherly enterprise, establishing her position in the family as a financial, if not emotional, caregiver.

In many ways, *Little Men* reflects Alcott's attempts to come to terms with the legacy her father *did* hand down, a legacy of moral instruction through progressive education. Bronson Alcott published a number of books and articles on child development and even ran several schools. The most successful of these was the Temple School, which ran for only a year and a half. According to Dorothy McCuskey, "The main object of Bronson Alcott's Temple School" was "to turn the child's mind upon itself, that the child might gain a knowledge of the divinity of his inner being, and that he might learn to appeal to that inner principle as a guide to conduct" (82). Bronson Alcott was a Lockean rationalist as well as a Transcendentalist; he believed that people were born good by nature and made good or bad afterwards by education. It was the work of the schoolmaster, even more than the minister, to draw to the surface a child's innate spirituality. At times Alcott's interest in child psychology appears excessive, if not obsessive: for example, he devoted forty pages of manuscript to analyzing the development of his first child, Anna, before she was four months old. For Alcott, the point of pedagogy was not the dissemination of information, but the inculcation of spiritual truth. He measured the success of his teachings by how well-behaved his children turned out to be.

Bronson Alcott's methods of education were calculated to camouflage his own authority and to encourage self-discipline among his pupils. To this end, Alcott instituted a jury system in his Temple School whereby an offender of the moral or social code would be judged by his or her peers. Whatever the jury's findings, punishment rarely resulted in physical correction, for Alcott believed corporal punishment to be a rather ineffective mode of discipline. What was more effective, it seems, was making children suffer remorse for their actions by showing them the ways in which their actions hurt others, particularly the parent or teacher. Perhaps the most strikingly perverse example of such a strategy occurred when Alcott forced a child to beat *him* for the child's own crime. The boy did so and immediately burst into tears. McCuskey reports that "[f]orty years later, two ministers debated publicly as to whether or not this was an instance of vicarious atonement" (85).

Although McCuskey claims that Alcott resorted to this experimental mode of discipline only a single time, there is more than one reference to it in his journals. On February 2, 1839, for instance, Alcott made a note of all the children who promised to try to be faithful to conscience that day. The only exception was a boy who had refused to strike Alcott the morning before. Whether Bronson saw the child's refusal to make the promise as a cause or as an effect of his unwillingness to beat the teacher is not made clear. What is clear is that these instances of vicarious atonement made a lasting impression on Louisa; such an incident and its aftermath make their way into *Little Men* with dramatic effect.

In an effort to cure Nat, one of the boys at Plumfield, of his nasty habit of lying, Professor Bhaer tells him that the next time Nat lies, "I shall not punish you, but you shall punish me. . . . You shall ferule me in the good old-fashioned way. I seldom do it myself, but it may make you remember better to give me pain than to feel it yourself" (57). Although Nat is cured of his evil habit for some time, one day he is caught off guard and tells a lie. Bhaer keeps true to

his word, and commands the boy to give him six strokes across the hand. At the same time he exhorts Nat to remember to tell the truth from now on. After laying the sixth stroke, Nat “threw the rule across the room, and hugging the kind hand in both his own, laid his face down on it sobbing in a passion of love, shame and penitence: ‘I will remember! Oh, I will!’” (59). The scene is witnessed by one boy, Tommy, who goes back to the group “excited and sober” and reports the amazing event. “He made me do the same thing once,” says Bhaer’s nephew Emil, “as if confessing a crime of the deepest dye.” When asked how he could do such a thing, Emil explains his psychological conversion: “I was hopping mad at the time, and thought I shouldn’t mind a bit, rather like it, perhaps. But when I’d hit uncle one good crack, everything he had ever done for me came into my head all at once somehow, and I couldn’t go on. No, sir! If he’d laid me down and walked on me, I wouldn’t have minded. I felt so mean.” What Bhaer has succeeded in instituting is a method of punishment that turns aggression back on the aggressor. The shame of committing an unjust act, epitomized in the culprit’s abuse of an innocent person, reinforces the child’s sense of his own criminality. What Emil gains from the lesson is a sense not only of his unworthiness — his fitness to be “laid down and walked on” by his uncle — but of his powerlessness. Emil’s is the impotence of the *justly* accused; his feelings of retaliation have been driven into submission by shame .

Whereas earlier domestic fiction shows children who have learned to kiss the hand that beats them,<sup>8</sup> in *Little Men*, Professor Bhaer teaches his children to kiss the hand that they have beaten. What we learn even before the incident is that Bhaer himself had grown up under more coercive conditions, a fact he rather cheerfully recalls. He tells Nat that when he himself was a boy, he had a problem with lying, too. “Then said [my] dear old grandmother, ‘I shall help you to remember’ . . . [and] with that she drew out my tongue and snipped the end with her scissors till the blood ran” (56). According to Bhaer, this was all for the best, because, as his tongue was sore for days, his words came very slowly and he had time to think. “After that I was more careful, and got on better, for I feared the big scissors” (56-7).

Although Bhaer’s affective approach to discipline seems at first to be a way of avoiding the castrating effects of corporal punishment, it actually proves an even more emasculating method of correction than his grandmother’s. For like Emil, Nat also feels the prostrating effects of his encounter with the Professor. The experience produces feelings in him that he is unable to control and can only give full vent to in sobbing, in a passionate surrender of “love, shame and penitence” (59). Nat’s response underscores the extent to which Bhaer’s punishment feminizes his subjects, first requiring them to commit the aggressive act, and then to atone for it through tears. But then Nat’s relationship to his parent-teacher has all along been represented as a female-male dynamic. While Nat “was very fond of Mrs. Bhaer,” the novel tells us, he “found something even more attractive in the good professor, who took care of the shy feeble boy” (55). Bhaer returns the filial affection, but he does so by constructing Nat as a little woman rather than as a little man: “Father Bhaer took pleasure in fostering poor Nat’s virtues, and in curing his faults, finding his new pupil as docile and

affectionate as a girl. He often called Nat his 'daughter' when speaking of him to Mrs. Jo, and she used to laugh at his fancy, for Madame liked manly boys, and thought Nat amiable but weak" (56). This characterization of Nat occurs before his experience with vicarious atonement, suggesting that his stereotypically feminine traits are as much a cause of his punishment as an effect of them. These traits make him an ideal candidate for a method of discipline working chiefly on and by one's sentiments. Only a sensitive soul would be able to achieve that transformation previously described by Emil: the conversion of anger into self-abuse.

What Nat and Emil have in common is their familial connection to Father Bhaer. This makes sense, for an intimate relation between victim and aggressor is crucial to the success of vicarious substitution. The whipping boy can only provide a disciplinary function if the guilty one's sympathies and shame are evoked. The nearer the relation, the greater the tendency to identify. By seeing a father figure punished in their place, Nat and Emil are forced to confront both their guilt and their fear. It is not simply that each thinks, "This could have been me," because, in point of fact, it *should* have been them. Sympathy thus becomes inextricably linked with shame; the child learns to internalize other people's pain as, literally, his or her fault. This in part explains my earlier example of Jo's guilt in relation to her sisters' suffering. As two of the people with whom Jo most closely identifies, Amy and Beth become vicarious substitutes, or whipping boys, for Jo's aggressive instincts.

The tradition of the whipping boy stems from an era honoring royal privilege — specifically, the privilege of the royal body to remain autonomous and untouched. One could argue that in the nineteenth century, sentimental constructions of discipline seek to accord the middle-class body the privileges of a prince. The emphasis on non-corporal, noncoercive methods of discipline redirects attention from the body to the mind. In taking the blows of the chastening rod upon himself, Bhaer hopes to develop in his charges a more aggressive conscience. He is also, however, hoping to circumvent the disaffection that can occur through corporal punishment. Seen in this way, vicarious atonement represents a way of instituting love by negating the difference between punisher and punished. It gives new meaning to the parent's hollow phrase, "This hurts me more than it does you." After all, when Father Bhaer says this, he means it. By instituting shame instead of rebellion, the offending subjects are reincorporated into the community seemingly of their own accord. Ideally, with their wills aligned with the parent-teacher's, children never have to suffer the discomfort of autonomy or independence. Child and parent can remain indefinitely yoked in a bond of filial love.

*Little Men's* example of vicarious atonement epitomizes the ways in which parental imperatives can do harm to the child who is supposed to internalize the parent's teachings for his or her own good. In contrast to Brodhead's reading, I suggest that the internalization of parental discipline in Alcott's writing becomes an internalization of aggression, of attempts to master the self through various forms of self-abuse. At its most successful, the child might even *seek out* punishment in order to be assured of the parent's love. Thus Saxton records that Bronson Alcott's eldest daughter, Anna, used to greet her father at the door

with an account of her faults so that he might discipline her. She would then say, "Father, I love you for punishing me," or "Father, you are good" (89). One such event — now infamous in Alcott lore — takes place after Bronson leaves Anna and Louisa alone with an apple that he has forbidden them to eat. When, at Louisa's instigation, the children do eat the apple, Anna confesses to her father: "I was naughty — I stole, didn't I. I didn't ask you, as I ought to — shall you punish me father, for it?" (91). Louisa, on the other hand, brazenly goes over and sits on her father's knee. Bronson asks if she has eaten the apple too. "Yes, I did," she replies. "Why did you take it before father said you might have it?' 'I wanted it,' she answered with a big smile. As soon as she saw Bronson's serious mien she threw in, 'But I was naughty.'" Bronson later wrote of Louisa, "[She] refuses, and that obstinately, whatever opposes her inclinations: her violence is at times alarming — father, mother, sister, objects, all are equally defied, and not infrequently, the menace terminates in blows" (89-90). Though one sister welcomed the punishment that the other sister defied, both had their sense of goodness and love defined by violence, and both, in their individual ways, embraced it.

The resurrection of Alcott's sensation fiction in the last two decades has served to introduce the concept of aggression into Alcott criticism, but seemingly without a way to reconcile — or even account for — her sensational and domestic accomplishments. On the contrary, critics have come to believe that, as Madeleine Stern puts it, "America's best-loved author of juvenile fiction, led a double literary life" (xi).<sup>9</sup> According to Stern, Alcott held a "low regard for her sensational output," which dealt mainly with the darkness; her tales of "intrigue and suspense, violence and evil, jealousy and revenge . . . [seem] to have little in common with the wholesome domesticity of [Alcott's] masterpiece" (xi). Whereas Stern assumes Alcott's embarrassment over her lurid but lucrative stories, Octavia Davis sees these stories as confirming Alcott's true feelings about women, domesticity and love. In the introduction to Alcott's Faustian novel, *A Modern Mephistopheles*, Davis writes that "[i]t comes as a shock to discover that Louisa May Alcott disdained the moral standards she developed in her children's books and was, in fact, a strikingly independent, strong-willed and ambitious woman who held her public and private lives in such separate spheres that the dichotomy was irreconcilable" (v). Davis claims that *Little Women*, though beloved by the critics, was "spurned by its author, and its phenomenal success both startled and angered her — the Louisa May Alcott envisioned by her adoring public was nothing like the woman who 'never liked girls, or knew many, except my sisters,' and who preferred 'lurid' stories to 'wholesome' ones if 'true and strong also'" (v).

To say that Alcott led one life in private and one in public, to say that she, like the beloved Jo, showed the strains of "self-division," is in some ways to admit our refusal to acknowledge the relationship between love and desire, and to close our eyes to the ways in which the licit and the illicit, the public and the private, inform and construct each other. Alcott shows domestic *and* sensational tendencies, and in her journals she registers ambivalence about both. This woman who learned to write with both hands speaks out of both sides of

her mouth as well. What she tells us by doing so may go a long way to furthering our understanding of how feelings of love and hate, protection and abuse, become inextricably tied to one another in the postbellum era.

As if to make plain from the outset the intimate relationship between goodness and aggression, *Little Women's* first chapter offers Mr. March's exhortation to his daughters to continue the battle against self-satisfaction. In the first and only letter we read from him, Mr. March writes reminding his girls to "*fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully,*" that when he comes back to them he may be "fonder and prouder than ever" of his "little women" (8; emphasis added). The father's words speak to the primacy of aggression in the formation of moral character. It is, as I have tried to suggest, a paradox at the heart of Christian culture: the construction of goodness — "redemption" — from the bodily ruins of the innocent. Given this model, we should not be surprised to find recorded in Alcott's journal at eleven years old what would become a characteristic refrain: "I was cross today, and I cried when I went to bed. I made good resolutions, and felt better in my heart. If I only *kept* all I make, I should be the best girl in the world. But I don't, and so am very bad" (*Journals* 45). At the bottom of this entry is an addendum by Alcott written many years later: "Poor sinner! She says the same at fifty." Contrary to her own reading, Alcott's recurring battle with self does not signal a failure of will but rather points to the impossibility of extricating either "goodness" or "love" from the aggressive tendencies that seem to belie them. "Goodness" becomes an ever-retreating vision, undermined by the very structures of aggression that are necessary to achieve it, while love is built on the conversion of violence and hostility into self-reproach. In essence, love proves the final achievement of sadism successfully converted to masochism. It is no wonder, then, that at the end of her life, Alcott believed she was still not the "good" child, the "lovable" child she had always meant to become. After all, she could only prove her goodness by learning to do violence to that which was to be the instrument of love: herself.

## Notes

1. According to Alcott biographer Martha Saxton, Alcott's own temper was very like her protagonist's, only stronger: "Louisa wrote about her anger in a vocabularly sufficiently mild that it seemed as if she were discussing a quick, sparking temper that flared up and went out. Instead, she suffered from a sullen, vaporous rage that smoked from a pit of disappointment, long-cherished grievances, sorrow and loneliness. The anger carried with it tremendous guilt and frequently was inverted into depression" (6).

2. For a book-length treatment of this claim, see Barnes.

3. On a broader level, *Little Women* can be said to be part of a cultural moment in which violence becomes seen as necessary to the preservation of Union. As Fetterley has claimed, *Little Women's* Civil War setting serves as a metaphor for Jo's internal struggle for integration. More than this, however, the setting sheds light on the broader implications of this "girl's story." *Little*

*Women*, much like the classic “boy’s” book, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, contributes to a cultural paradigm in which violence becomes formulated — consciously and unconsciously — as the vehicle by which communal harmony is to be achieved. What both *Little Women*, *Little Men* and Alcott’s own life offer is a surprising look at how such formulations get introduced into the home, and even into that most seemingly benign of literary genres: sentimental fiction.

4. Two notable exceptions are Brown, who argues that much domestic literature is informed by the economic principles of “possessive individualism,” and Sanchez-Eppler, who puts the idea of abuse at the center of sentimental temperance literature.

5. Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and Melville’s *Billy Budd*, for instance, all in their various ways teach readers that love is made perfect through abuse. In each of these novels, the main characters sacrifice personal well-being for the good of the community that has already rejected them. Far from negating the social efficacy of their sacrifice, their alienation from the community intensifies it. Thus by the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, the “A” that stands both for adultery and for the woman taken in it has been transformed in the eyes of society. It is transformed by Hester’s willingness to live *outside* the geographical boundaries of society while agreeing to live *within* its moral ones. So, too, Uncle Tom, though himself innocent of wrongdoing, must be ostracized and finally killed in order to prove that love is worth dying for. And finally, Billy Budd, as he ascends the makeshift scaffold, utters his defense of the paternalistic Captain who sends him to his death. Billy’s “God bless Captain Vere” is echoed by a chorus of fellow sailors whose response signifies Billy’s success in converting hostility and possible rebellion into unanimous acquiescence. Billy proves his goodness not by being innocent (since he has in fact killed Claggart) but by being abused and still loving in spite of it. His example is followed by those sailors (and readers) who love him — and in fact love him more perfectly for his martyrdom.

All three protagonists become complicit in their own martyrdom by willingly sacrificing their lives for a society that can only accept their individualism if it is divorced from their bodies. Their fates indicate not only a cultural dependence on aggression to create social consensus but the fact that such abuse is a prerequisite for proving and, perhaps more importantly, engendering love. Considered in terms of the sentimental response these protagonists are meant to evoke, Hester, Tom, and Billy *must* be abused in order for readers to love them. Our sympathetic response is contingent upon the reality of the pain we see them suffer. In Philip Fisher’s view, our sympathy is heightened precisely because, as readers, we are powerless to prevent such pain. My point is that such pain must *not* be prevented, because to prevent or relieve the pain is to destroy the dynamic that creates love out of abuse. It is in the discipline of abusing others that one is to learn love. But as the characters’ complicity in their own destruction attests, the disciplinary aspect of abuse does not stop with abusing others. For Hester, Tom, and Billy, the secret of disciplinary love lies in turning aggression back on oneself. “Goodness” — the quality that signifies an object’s fitness for inclusion in the community — is ultimately equated with self-abuse.



6. Although numerous nineteenth-century texts concern themselves with the theological issue of atonement, two key works that deal with the subject of vicariousness and its importance in producing a communal or national spirit are Thayer and Bushnell.

7. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud defines masochism in relation to sadism in a similar way: "It can often be shown that masochism is nothing more than an extension of sadism turned round upon the subject's own self, which thus, to begin with, takes the place of the sexual object" (24).

Freud's pertinence to my argument arises again in his case study of the "Wolf Man." One fantasy of the Wolf Man involved "boys being chastised and beaten, and especially being beaten on the penis. And from other phantasies, which represented the heir to the throne being shut up in a narrow room and beaten, it was easy to guess for whom it was that the anonymous figures served as whipping boys. The heir to the throne was evidently he himself; his sadism had therefore turned round in phantasy against himself, and had been converted into masochism" (*Three Case Histories* 182).

My intention here is not to offer a psychoanalytic reading of Alcott's work but to suggest one of the cultural paradigms present in the late nineteenth century on which Freud had an opportunity to draw. What is left out of Freud's investigation, and what I am attempting to explore here, is the question of sadomasochism's relation to love.

8. See Brodhead and Goshgarian.

9. For the most part, critics have taken up one or another of Alcott's genres, pitting them against one another as if the legitimacy of the one proved the undoing, or "unmasking" of the other. Auerbach holds *Little Women* up as a testament to the power of the female community, a sisterhood of women that provides an alternative world to the rigid constraints of a male-dominated society. Bedell cites *Little Women* as "the American female myth," with Jo March as the plucky pilgrim who depicts the New Woman's progress. That Jo's values appear to change during the course of the novel has given many critics pause; for, as Stimpson observes, part of the problem of the novel, at least in terms of its moral, is that "the untamed Jo in the beginning of *Little Women* seems more lovable than the tamed Jo at the end" (968). And therein lies the dilemma. It is a dilemma not only for those readers trying to figure out with which Jo they are supposed to identify, but for those critics trying to identify the "real" Louisa May Alcott.

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