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Behind a Mask: Performativity In The Gothic Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott

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by

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the theoretical concept of performativity—the construction of identities through the performance of a discourse—in two pseudonymous gothic thrillers of nineteenth-century American author Louisa May Alcott, "Behind a Mask, or A Woman's Power" and "A Marble Woman." Many of Alcott's gothic novellas depict women in revolt against patriarchal ideals of femininity, situating Alcott in a tradition first described by literary critic Ellen Moers as the "female gothic," a sub-genre of the traditional gothic that concerns itself with the ambiguity of the female identity in a male-dominated society. The gothic was seen in the nineteenth century as a distinctly "feminine" literary form, and has traditionally been used, in works like mystery novels and popular romances, to formulate and reinforce the singular domestic roles which it accords its heroines. Furthermore, the feminine stigma popularly attached to the gothic excluded the genre from the realm of literary critical interest in the nineteenth century and for much of its history, problematizing the integrity of the female gothic as a vehicle of social dissent. As Diane Long Hoeveler claims, writers of the female gothic can only articulate their ideological concerns, and dissent, through a variation of "victim feminism" in which female characters achieve agency through pretend submission, pretend absence. The two Alcott heroines in this analysis, Jean Muir and Cecil Stein, achieve agency by employing what I have termed a counter-performativity to the patriarchal ideological framework of the traditional gothic: through dissimulating acceptable nineteenth-century conventions of femininity, they are capable of covertly undermining the literal and figurative fathers who oppress them. In "Behind a Mask," Jean Muir instigates a real-life romance plot to disguise her mercenary machinations; Cecil Stein of "A Marble Woman," rather than fleeing the father who imprisons her in her marble identity, opposes him through her rigid submission to that identity, forcing him to see how his own self-assumed identity has entrapped him and cut him off from his desire. Alcott's use of performativity in these stories, as performances that have an ideological signification, suggests not only her divide with the traditional gothic story but also her struggle to realize her own identity as a nineteenth-century woman writer. Central to this paper is the recognition that Alcott wrote from behind a mask of sentimentality, professionally dependent as she was on her status as "The Children's Friend." Her use of performativity signals both her ideological position toward a patriarchal literary tradition and her complex development as a woman of the pen.

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This thesis is dedicated to Paco.

Introduction

Louisa May Alcott is something of a literary contradiction. One the one hand, she is almost solely known for her domestic fiction, which earned her the genteel title "The Children's Friend." On the other hand, she has to her credit a series of lurid thrillers, collected by Madeleine Stern, which she published in serial issues such as *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* either anonymously or as the pseudonymous A.M. Barnard. Both her domestic classics and secret fantasies embody biographical aspects of Alcott's life, such as her work experiences and her efforts toward becoming a writer (Jo March from *Little Women*, herself an avid scribbler and inventor of gothic tales, is the most common point of comparison). Both also in some measure subscribe to—and in some measure challenge—Victorian social values. And yet, these two types of works are fundamentally different. As an acquaintance of hers quoted Alcott from a discussion of *Little Women*, "I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies and wish that I dared inscribe them upon my pages and set them before the public" (Stern, Critical Essays 42). Though her domestic fiction would bring Alcott fame and financial independence, it wouldn't allow her to vent her "gorgeous fancies," her vibrant sense of feminist anger—for this, she embraced the gothic.

The gothic, since its inception and through its development in the works of authors such as Emily Bronte and Mary Shelley, has often represented social realities. It is therefore helpful, even crucial, to become acquainted with the circumstances of a gothic writer's life in order to better understand what themes he (or she) represents in the fiction. Alcott critics have faithfully identified many vital connections between the

writer's repressed life and her explosive "potboilers." As Madeline Stern notes, "Her own anger at an unjust world she transformed into the anger of her heroines, who made of it a powerful weapon with which to challenge fate" (Stern, *Behind a Mask* xxviii). Many, such as Martha Saxton[1], place Alcott's feminist values in the context of her early development: her conflict with her father's policing morality, her inability to fulfill the contemporary ideal of the passive woman, and even indignities she faced as a young working girl struggling to support her family. All of these influences find their way into Alcott's thrillers, which portray vengeful women revolting in a carefully executed drama of power against the fate which the patriarchy has accorded them. And yet, for someone with such intimate claims of opposition to her male-dominated society, Alcott does not even give her name to her feminist fantasies. Furthermore, through her use of the gothic she effectively shores up these stories within formal constraints, for the gothic not only expresses social outrage but also, by its very nature, conceals it.

As Juliann Fleenor states in *The Female Gothic*, "The Gothic has generally had a negative critical reception," which is largely attributable to its lurid excesses and its characteristically "feminine," i.e., emotional, sensibility (8). It has been placed in the order of the Sentimental novel, another literary misfit that was subject to nose thumbing by the 19th-century male intelligentsia. In the first issue of *Weekly Magazine* (Philadelphia, 1798) one senses the contemporary attitude of the American literary mainstream toward the literature of sensibility: "Novels not only pollute the imaginations of young women, but likewise give them false ideas of life, which too often

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1 See *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.

make them act improperly; owing to the romantic turn of thinking they imbibe from their favourite studies" (qtd. in Brown 7-8). In this connection gothic literature came to be seen as fantastical and therefore trivial, though this assumption recognizes an important part of what makes the gothic so appealing to readers: its surface element of fantasy, underneath which lurk the human realities of the everyday. Of course, in our modern era the genre has garnered a much fuller appreciation, as can be seen in a number of cultural narratives that are based in the gothic tradition (e.g., horror movies such as *The Exorcist,* and hosts of novels by Stephen King). Many of these productions reflect the nature of the gothic in that they generate supernatural (or just sensational) thrills while simultaneously exploring the distortions and transgressions that define their characters' lives. The popular television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), for instance, portrays a heroine who fights the forces of darkness—these forces can be said to represent her conflict with social and sexual constructs of identity, her struggle to realize her womanhood[2]. A variety of gothic works written in the nineteenth century also treat female identity and, importantly, suggest how it is delimited by men's perceptions of women. Sometimes this results in a subtextual discussion of the delimiting effects of the genre itself. In *Wuthering Heights*, for example, the spirited and individualized Catherine Earnshaw fundamentally defies the generic ideal of the submissive, helpless heroine; it is thus that Emily Brontë partakes in a "literature which deliberately reorders

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[2] *Buffy* takes place, quite self-consciously, in America—its "gothic" content, its world of vampires and demons, is frequently subsumed by the ubiquitous capitalism that defines our national culture. Through reflecting on present-day gender and socioeconomic realities, *Buffy* exemplifies how the modern gothic at once participates in the gothic tradition and redeems its perceived superficiality.

the Gothic experience in order to speak to women about themselves in a new way."[3] Yet for its inventiveness and sensitive exploration of issues of identity, the gothic novel, like the sentimental novel, has survived on the outskirts of the patriarchal literary canon.

The historical lack of critical interest in the gothic reflects the feminine stigma attached to it. Furthermore, the medium has long had a tendency to assimilate this stigma into its own expression. The purpose of the gothic, especially that written by women, has been as much to display social realities as to conceal them beneath a pervasive social mythology. Kay J. Mussell explains this in the context of women's mystery, or romance, novels:

> The plot of Gothic romances always has a dual character; through identification with the heroine, the reader finds in escape fiction a world in which excitement, mystery, danger, and action occur side by side with the domestic activities and social roles that women have traditionally performed. There is no conflict between these two worlds; in fact, they enhance each other . . . The popularity of the Female Gothic novel derives from this dual pattern set in the context of the society that socializes the reader. (58-61)

What Mussell refers to singularly as the Female Gothic, Juliann Fleenor sees as comprising both the "popular" gothic, e.g., romances, and the "serious," e.g., Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (7). While the latter tends to express "the author's fear of ambiguity [i.e., the ambiguity of the female identity] and patriarchal strictures," the

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[3] Syndy McMillen Conger. "The Reconstruction of the Gothic Feminine Ideal in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*." *The Female Gothic*. Juliann Fleenor, ed. Montreal, London: Eden Press Inc., 1983.

popular gothic reinforces those "social truths . . . that support the traditional, accepted roles for women and assert that the performance of those roles has meaning and significance" (Mussell 61). This dichotomy of the ambiguous (and therefore subversive) and the conventional has rendered the gothic complex as social narrative; if female gothics register protest against the patriarchal tradition that defines women, their larger situation within that tradition, or their underlying conventionalism, effectively blurs this protest.

Louisa May Alcott's thrillers embody their own problematic ambiguity. Stories such as "A Marble Woman" seem mere escapism, but on closer analysis one sees them as narratives of social protest in which Alcott tries to mediate sexual limitations faced by women. (The story of Cecilia Stein achieving a sexually egalitarian fate with her male oppressor, for instance, may be interpreted as a symbolic call for women's suffrage.) When women in these stories can't find a compromise with their male oppressors, they instead channel their frustration into destructive outlets, as does the deceitful and sexualized Jean Muir in "Behind a Mask." Both outcomes are radical—on the one hand, Alcott's heroines bringing changes to the established social order, and on the other hand, these heroines subverting that order. If presented in a more literary focus—as the subjects of adult novels, for instance—these plots doubtless would have jarred the public with their defiance of Victorian notions of femininity. So why did Alcott conceive them as thrillers, which at the time existed outside the literary mainstream and were considered trivial, excessive, conventional, and politically immaterial? The superficial reason is repeated in Alcott's journals so many times it is something of a truism: "I can't

afford to starve on praise," she resigns, "when sensation stories are written in half the time & keep the family cosy [sic]" (139). And yet it is difficult to believe that Alcott wrote such thematically rich and nuanced stories, which she obviously didn't want to associate with her name, simply to turn a profit or just to achieve a psychological catharsis. It is as if she intentionally wrested these stories from the realm of *Little Women*—the realm of what was perceived as the literary, the significant—and disguised them as entertainments, afraid to "set them before the public" in their true form. She might well have thought that editors would dismiss her visions as merely a woman's fancy.

Two of Alcott's gothic novellas, "Behind a Mask" and "A Marble Woman," epitomize the author's ambiguous identity as sentimentalist and sensationalist. Both narratives make use of performativity, the concept of constructing identity through forms of discourse, and reveal Alcott in conversation with the gothic mode of storytelling. As Judith Butler states in *Bodies That Matter*, peformativity finds application in the female body itself, which can be seen as a site of social regulation through which gender is constructed (x). In the story of Jean Muir, the disenfranchised heroine employs a highly sexualized performativity, using her womanly charm and appearance of domesticity to endear herself to the male household which she is actually trying to claim for her own. Muir represents a break with the traditional gothic female villain, as she is in some ways a sympathetic character who has been forced to her life of deception by the constraining dictates of femininity which she parodies. Cecil Stein of "A Marble Woman," too, is forced to act the part of the "true woman," but her pretend submission to an oppressive

father, rather than allowing her to settle a score, serves to bring about an eventual resolution with her oppressor. As I will argue later in this introduction, Jean Muir and Cecil Stein capture something of Alcott's own problematic identity as a nineteenth-century female author. Their respective performativities situate Alcott in a female gothic tradition that strives to account for the transgressions which define women's identities in a patriarchal society.

The Life Behind the Gothic

Louisa May, born the second child of Bronson Alcott and his wife Abigail in 1832, was reared during what was known as the "sentimental revolution." At this time notions of courtship, marriage, and family were being largely reconfigured in American society. Says Charles Strickland, "Many Americans worried in particular about the materialistic and secular tendencies of the age . . . [The family] was to serve as a moral counterweight to a restless, materialistic, individualistic, and egalitarian society" (5). As a result of industrialization and jobs moving away from rural communities, the family unit became divided along lines of sex: men were the expected breadwinners who left home to attend to industry, and women served as stewards of their domestic sphere (9-10). While this segregation of roles could cause domestic tensions, sentimentalists held women to a standard of enduring submission and passivity—as one critic characterizes this ethos, "woman's charm lay in her winning helplessness" (Brown 119). Much sentimental literature of the time champions the conceit of the suffering wife (also the "True Woman"), whose obligation is to yield to the center of the family, the man.

Bronson Alcott was an adherent of the sentimental model of family. An educator, philosophical mouthpiece, and idealist, he brought all these influences to bear on how he raised his children. For an idealist and liberal, though, Bronson was yet a strict, exacting, and patriarchal presence in his daughter's life. His parenting style was marked by rigid moralism: he would tell his daughters stories and "dramas" whose lessons reinforced their behavior, and would even monitor the girls' journals in order to reinforce their thought (Meyerson et al., Journal 5). This surveillance seemed to spur in Louisa May both her desire for self-improvement and her awareness of the troubled notion of the self, aspects of her early experience that inform her writings. When Bronson once remarked on how Louisa's journal was only "about herself," she noted: "That is true, for I don't *talk* about myself; yet must always think of the wilful, moody girl I try to manage, and in my journal I write of her to see how she gets on" (61). Bronson acknowledged that from a young age his daughter's "associations [were] *dramatic*," and often expressed displeasure at Louisa's tomboyish activity (Strickland 30-32). He may have smiled upon his daughter's barnstorming theatrics—as when she and her sisters would perform hoary revenge plots for their neighbors in Concord—but he punished her in private life for what he considered her "moods of mind" and regularly withheld affection (33). Yet despite her peculiarities of behavior, Louisa still strove to please her father and to conform to his sentimentalized vision of femininity. At seventeen she wrote, "so much remains to be done before I begin to be what I desire,—a truly good and useful woman"[4] (Meyerson et al., Journal 61).

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[4] This sentiment would find a distorted echo in *Jo's Boys* (1886), when "Naughty Nan"

If Louisa failed to be a "good and useful woman" in the sense that Bronson Alcott envisioned, it was in part due to his own failure to satisfy the role of breadwinner that he had appropriated for himself. A line from one of Louisa's juvenile poems assures that "the father will provide," which is a rather ironic paean to a man who struggled to make a dollar for his family. Shortly after his Temple School closed in 1839, Bronson relocated his family to the community of Fruitlands in Harvard, Massachusetts, where he and some associates tried to establish a communal paradise; with its emphasis on the centrality of family and its naturalistic setting, this place was to emulate the sentimental household itself, which domestic writers held up as a kind of utopia (Strickland 8). The project's precipitous failure set the tenor for Louisa's fraught relationship with sentimental values.

By midcentury the Alcott's prospects had become bleak (Louisa endearingly calling her family's home the "Alcott sinking fund"). Bronson's inability to earn a living endangered his ideal that industry was the man's sphere: now the Alcott women would have to brave the world outside the home. Having supported her husband's domestic code more in precept than in practice, Abigail lamented that women were disallowed meaningful employment. In a letter she even anticipates the central conceit of "Behind a Mask": "Girls are taught to seem, to appear, not to be and do. Costume, not armour, dress, not panoply, is the covering for woman" (qtd. in Strickland 44). Shortly after Fruitlands, Abigail took employment as a social worker in Boston, and Louisa had already begun to do odd jobs outside of the home. The conflict which began as a

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proclaims her desire to be "a useful, happy and independent spinster"—an affront to the sentimental concept of woman's place in the social order.

dichotomy between Louisa's sense of self and her desire to appease her father soon mutated into a dichotomy between her autonomy and her financial duty to her family. This problem would never go away for Louisa; in a journal entry from 1868 she exclaimed, still adamant, "I want to realize my dream of supporting the family and being perfectly independent. Heavenly hope!" (Meyerson et al. 162). As a girl she worked at sewing, teaching school, and eventually writing stories to make an income. Her artistic efforts were first recognized in 1852, when her tale "The Rival Painters" was published in the periodical *The Olive Branch*—however, what money she made from her craft went only so far to palliate her family's circumstances, and she wouldn't be able to draw security from her works until the publication of *Little Women* (1868) brought her international fame. In a fiasco that would in part inspire the setting and characters of "Behind a Mask," Louisa briefly stayed her literary pursuits to serve as a governess for an affluent lawyer, the Honorable James Richardson. Though he promised her an easy job, he made amorous overtures to her and then punished her with hard labor when she didn't reciprocate[5], for which Alcott quit her services (Stern, *Behind a Mask* ix-x).

A Mother of Necessity

Alcott didn't keep her critique of societal conventions contained to her gothic excursions. As various critics have noted, even in sentimental works such as *Little Women,* Alcott resists the normative social attitudes of her time. She revels nostalgically in her depiction of Jo March, a tomboy who recalls Louisa herself. And while the March

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[5] Alcott would later provide a comical, diluted narrative of this experience, "How I Went Out to Service."

girls grow into the poised, graceful, obedient women contemporary audiences expected of sentimental heroines, they yet form their own microcosm of female independence—the home for them isn't just a female sanctuary, but a sanctuary from the presence of a male father figure (MacDonald, 28). This idealization of the feminine has greater significance for Alcott than it might seem from a reading of her book. In the summer of 1868, after the first portion of *Little Women* was published to popular acclaim, Alcott vented, "Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I *won't* marry Jo to Laurie to please any one" (Meyerson et al., Journal 166). The author dismisses women's dependence on the institution of marriage even more forcibly in her essay "Happy Women," warning: "the loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called 'Mrs.' instead of 'Miss'" (Showalter 203).

Though self-consciously, even defiantly a spinster who never conceded to the "barren honor" of matrimony, Louisa May Alcott sometimes regretted not having children. She once said of her sister Anna, a mother, "She is a happy woman! I sell *my* children; and though they feed me, they don't love me as hers do" (Meyerson et al., Journals 163). It could be that just as her writing provided her a means of independence she couldn't find outside the home, so it provided a structure of compensation for her lack of a maternal role (in effect, she replaced parenthood with authorship). In her domestic novella *Diana and Persis*, Alcott frames a woman's conflict between her artistic ambition and her desire to have a family, and ultimately suggests the two are irreconcilable in the context of her Victorian society. This narrative embodies the

ineluctable tension between Alcott's different identities as both a creator and not—i.e., as a literary "mother" and a spinster in real life. One particularly senses this tension in Alcott's correspondences with James R. Elliott, editor of *The Flag of Our Union*, who encouraged her to use a pseudonym when submitting him thrillers: "You may send me anything," he says, "in either the sketch or novelette line that you do not wish to 'father', or that you wish A.M. Barnard, or 'any other man' to be responsible for, & if they suit me I will purchase them" (qtd. in Sterne, Blood and Thunder 76). Alcott participated in the literary marketplace as a conflicted mother-father, giving life to her "children" only so she could sell them off to fulfill the male role of economic provider. While an analysis of this gender-role ambiguity would exceed the scope of this paper, the phenomenon proves relevant to Alcott's use of performativity in her gothic thrillers. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have identified a sort of literary complex they attribute to nineteenth-century women writers, and which informs an understanding of Alcott's relationship with her work: an "anxiety of authorship" (13). This is a variation on Harold Bloom's psychosexual model of the "anxiety of influence," which sees male writers of the Western literary canon as engaging in a fierce Oedipal battle with their literary forefathers (Varadharajan 461). The female equivalent of this battle, a woman writer's anxiety of authorship is principally a battle with *herself*, a reaction against her repressed subjectivity. Put simply, she doesn't belong:

> If we return to the question . . . where does a woman writer "fit in" to the overwhelmingly and essentially male literary history Bloom describes?—we find we have to answer that a woman writer does *not* "fit in." At first glance, indeed,

> she seems to be anomalous, indefinable, alienated, a freakish outsider . . . On the one hand, therefore, the woman writer's male precursors symbolize authority; on the other hand, despite their authority, they fail to define the ways in which she experiences her own identity as a writer. (Gilbert and Gubar 11)

One can apprehend Alcott's troubled experience as a female writer as early on as her journal entries from 1856, when she describes, for example, how a company of male acquaintances "teased [her] for being an authoress" (Meyerson et al. 81). Her "chief idol" was Goethe (60); in the way of female literary idols she had none, and only ever expressed hesitant identification with the likes of Charlotte Brontë: "Wonder if I shall ever be famous enough for people to care to read my story and struggles. I can't be a C.B., but I may do a little something yet" (85). Alcott's literary ambitions found gratification in her sentimental works, but her gothic stories—her closest ties to female writers like Brontë—remained obscure in the public consciousness. In "Behind A Mask" and "A Marble Woman," Alcott conceives of heroines who, like her, can only defy their place in society by self-consciously claiming that very place. Their performativity reveals an aspect of authorial consciousness that suggests that Alcott wrote these potboilers, at least in part, to turn to account her transgressive female identity.

Ch. 1

"Behind a Mask" and the Performativity of the Nineteenth-Century Woman

> Now this was altogether romantic and sensational, and I felt
> as if about to enter one of those delightfully dangerous houses
> we read of in novels, where perils, mysteries, and sins freely
> disport themselves, till the newcomer sets all to rights, after un-
> heard of trials and escapes.
>
> Louisa May Alcott, "How I Went Out To Service"

We know that Louisa May Alcott was both a devotee of the gothic and a proponent of feminist political causes, having immersed herself in the phantasmagoria of Hawthorne and the progressive readings of "Mrs. Bremer"[6] alike. In a journal passage the eighteen-year-old Alcott intimates how these two specific influences relate to one another: "Mother likes Mrs. B. better, as more wholesome. I fancy 'lurid' things, if true and strong also" (63). Here we get a hint of the structure the writer envisioned for her thrillers: "lurid" stories underpinned with a "true and strong" feminist ethos. And yet, her "potboilers," as one might expect from the dismissive term, do not explicitly or legitimately avow feminist principles. The only stories that do—such as *Work: A Story of Experience* and *Moods*—belong to Alcott's domestic repertoire, and can be described at best as mild activisms. In *Work*, for instance, the dispossessed Christie Devon finds some small liberation in making her own living, and ultimately becomes part of a community of interdependent women—but this last development only occurs as the result of her husband and provider, David Sterling, dying in the Civil War. *Moods* was

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[6] In *Little Women*, Mrs. March (who is modeled closely after Alcott's own mother) reads Frederika Bremer to her daughters.

considered radical for merely suggesting the possibility of social independence for women outside of marriage; however, the novel does not encourage any kind of change in the patriarchal model of marriage itself. Indeed, whereas in the original (1864) manuscript Sylvia Yule dies without committing herself to either of her lovers, in the revised 1881 edition she survives her tuberculosis to lead a dutiful life with Geoffrey Moor, whom she had been growing increasingly estranged from up until this happy juncture. In her domestic fiction, Alcott was constantly working from within a patriarchal framework that she couldn't undermine without risking her fundamental loyalty to sentimental values. The only way she could safely reject these values was to put a rhetorical distance between herself and them, which she did through adopting the gothic (and the pen name A.M. Barnard). As a narrative mode that both transgresses social boundaries and reinforces those boundaries, however, the gothic simply forced Alcott within another stultifying tradition.

To understand the rather schizophrenic nature of the gothic is to first apprehend the patriarchal structures with which it engages, and to understand that the gothic gives rise to those structures through a masculinist ideology. Donna Heiland locates the origin of the gothic in the upheavals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the English civil wars, the French Revolution, and the dawn of the era of enlightenment all forced an awareness of the "instabilities in . . . socio-political structures" of the time (3). The codifying of gender roles was a reaction to this instability, as the economic (male) and domestic (female) spheres were rigidly separated and maintained by a patriarchy that feared transgression of its authority. This authority, once constituted in the belief

that society was intrinsically patriarchal and that male rulers perpetuated the social order through their relationships with women, found a new configuration in Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* (1690). As Heiland cites political scientist Carol Pateman, Locke's assertion of man's "conjugal right" over woman effectively removed her to a submissive domestic role, conceiving a masculinist political order dependent solely on men for its function. The gothic has its provenance in this patriarchal ideal of the centrality of male relations, of "a male creative power that demands the suppression—and sometimes the outright sacrifice—of women" (10).

In Gothic romances the women traditionally tend to be suppressed (not *re*pressed) both emotionally and intellectually, and tend to lack individual characteristics. They are domestic angels who are put upon by supernatural circumstances, made the victims of inexplicable violence that only men can save them from. Or, they are blatantly villainous, socially deviant women who defy male notions of proper femininity and therefore stand for the "bad" in woman's nature. This turn has much to do with the Sentimental novel, which, as Juliann Fleenor notes, also depicts women as being "stereotyped into the good/evil dichotomy, with good and evil easily recognizable" (9). The major difference between sentimental works and gothics written by *women*, however, is that often "this recognition is less certain in the Gothic, where the woman looks in the mirror . . . and sees fragmented versions of herself." The female gothic, as first described by Ellen Moers, figures the woman's identity in patriarchal society and her fear of the ambiguity of that identity (Smith and Wallace 1; DeLamotte 13). This ambiguity arises from the woman's entrapment in the domestic sphere and her

resulting paralysis of meaning, her helplessness to reach beyond the social boundaries that define her. Diane Long Hoeveler helpfully characterizes the female gothic not as a literary genre, but more so a "highly ideological signifying system" through which women writers fantasize a resolution to their struggle with patriarchal forces (8). Fleenor argues for the female gothic as centrally a representation of a "patriarchal literary paradigm [in which] the woman is motherless, defective, and defined by a male God" (11), the mother's absence reflecting both the obtrusive presence of the patriarchy and the gothic female writer's ambivalent role as the mother of her own work. In this light it is easy to see why Alcott was fundamentally drawn to the female gothic mode, preoccupied as she was with the distorted reflection she saw in the mirror—an image of a mother who existed and at the same time didn't, of a daughter constantly at odds with her father's ideology.

The main reason the gothic as a genre has been considered trivial is its formulaic machinery, its lurid "trappings" and histrionic excesses. It has been associated with a distinctly feminine sensibility, and indeed often depicts naive and dutiful heroines in some way affirming their socially prescribed femininity in an encounter with the sublime. Much terror-gothic and romance, especially that produced by women, makes use of this sensationalism and conventionalism both to offer female audiences agreeable thrills and to reinforce a social mythology of gender roles, as I will discuss in my analysis of "Behind a Mask." One would think that the *female* gothic—which collapses this mythology in a highly psychological, inner representation of female identity—would be sufficiently estranged from this overarching tradition of shock-value and social

gratification. Certainly, what critics have termed “the female gothic” deliberately problematizes and defies the conventions of the traditional, patriarchal Gothic in order to provide a representation of women’s realities—but its ideological concerns have historically been ignored, its complex heroines shunted into the background of male characters. As Eugenia C. DeLamotte argues, the heroine is often seen only as serving to bring the male villain into relief. “The reading of the heroine herself as absence recalls those readings of Gothic that see Gothic itself as quest romance, a vision that tends to blank out the female Gothic altogether” (12-13).

If heroines of the female gothic were read within a patriarchal literary tradition as absence, as necessary but insignificant characters in a “romance,” how can they be said to have achieved any agency through their creators in the first place? Hoeveler proposes that female gothic heroines, such as those in the Radcliffe novels that both typified and existed at the periphery of the larger Gothic tradition, make use of their very absence to undermine patriarchal notions of femininity. Long terms this ideology “gothic feminism,” a variant of so-called “victim feminism”—“an ideology of female power through pretended and staged weakness” (7). The innocent “victim” exists within a complex interrelation of spaces, where the power of the patriarchal father is figured as a masculine space—i.e., the oppressive castle—that she overthrows in order to ultimately create a “new privatized, feminized world” (4). She can do this only by engaging in “a passive-aggressive dance of rebellion and compliance,” ironically reinforcing the very roles she dissimulates (24).

Many of Louisa May Alcott's potboilers take part in the gothic feminist ideology, obsessed as they are with presenting heroines who play-act their feminine roles in an attempt to subvert a figurative (or literal) father's authority. This performance, as Hoeveler suggests, is localized in a highly gendered "body" that characterizes "the female author's contradictory desire both to conform outwardly and to subvert, that is, to be both a body and a machine at odds with itself" (18). While Hoeveler explores this tension as a socioeconomic result of capitalism—"the greatest of dualism machines"—in the subsequent chapter of this paper I will present a more restricted discussion of the body in "Behind a Mask" and "A Marble Woman."

In her domestic works, Louisa May Alcott endorses the sentimental tradition vouchsafed her by her father and her larger society; in her thrillers, she represents this tradition as she truly saw it, a limiting and even a corrupting force in women's lives. Through this representation she simultaneously expresses aspects of her own experience. In "Behind a Mask, or A Woman's Power," the story of a governess who orchestrates the downfall of wealthy male aristocrats, Alcott would essentially "give it back" to the Honorable James Richardson. By 1862 the writer had already dabbled in the gothic for the first time (not including the theatrical, Walpolean romps of her youth) under the alias A.M. Barnard, with one hundred dollars of prize money to her credit for her story "Pauline's Passion and Punishment." In this tale we are given the donnée that reigns over her thrillers, a revengeful woman acting out her anger in an insidious, destructive drama. As Alcott wrote a friend at the time: "I intend to illuminate the Ledger with a blood & thunder tale as they are easy to 'compoze' & are better paid than moral &

elaborate works" (Myerson et al., Selected Letters 79). While perhaps not "moral & elaborate," Alcott's aptly labeled "necessity stories" transcend mere pulp fiction. Many of these narratives suggest the necessity of challenging Victorian social constructs of sex, the determinants of behavior that force women such as Pauline Valary and Jean Muir to dissemble their motivations. "Behind a Mask" is a particularly significant subject for this discussion, as it self-consciously distances itself from the patriarchal Gothic formulae, using a gothic narrative to instead represent the nineteenth-century woman's inner conflict with her society.

To appearances, Jean Muir is the supreme realization of the True Woman: faint, delicate, touched by an afflicted grace and "meek obedience" (7). She comes to the Coventry household on the recommendation of a neighbor; having just been ill, or so she says, she appears "[s]mall, thin, and colorless," and professes to be only nineteen-years-old. In a spectacular transformation at the end of the first chapter, however, she finds herself alone in her quarters and,

> slipping off her dress appear[s] herself indeed, a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least. The metamorphosis was wonderful, but the disguise was more in the expression she assumed than in any art of costume or false adornments . . . For an hour she sat so . . . and once she half uncovered her breast to eye with a terrible glance the scar of a newly healed wound. At last she rose and crept to bed, like one worn with weariness and mental pain. (12)

Jean actually inflicted her physical wound on herself to spite the suitor who had previously scorned her. This self-mutilation, especially as it is done to her breast,

suggests a painful consciousness of her plight as a disenfranchised woman; and the issue of her class, though unacknowledged by the Coventry's except in dismissive remarks, points up her motive for manipulating them. The family first takes notice of Jean with a collective condescension: "Of course, everyone looked at her then, and all felt a touch of pity at the sight of the pale-faced girl in her plain black dress, with no ornament but a little silver cross at her throat . . . Poverty seemed to have set its bond stamp upon her . . ." (6). As Gerald, the languid oldest son to the widowed Mrs. Coventry, had previously neglected to send a carriage for Jean (pleasantly admitting that he has "an inveterate aversion to the whole tribe" of governesses), the younger son Edward vows to treat the governess with greater civility—to which his younger sister Bella exclaims, "That is my dear, good-hearted Ned! We'll stand by *poor little Muir*, won't we?" (4) Indeed Edward does stand by the "[p]oor little woman," tending to her after she feigns a fainting spell, and thereafter "beg[inning] his charitable work by suggesting that she might be tired" (11). Ironically, Jean's tragic life grew out of charity: as we learn later in the tale, a titled woman conceived her from an affair and abandoned her at an orphanage, where she was then raised. The governess has spent her life trying to compensate for the inherent material and psychological loss of being disowned from her mother, only to further endure the particular privations of her sex in a rigid social order that limits women to the domestic sphere.

Gerald is the only one to doubt Jean's motives shortly after she comes to the estate, though she appears an exemplary model for the kind of domestic instruction that Mrs. Coventry desires for Bella. Jean's superior domestic competencies, her ability to

make perfect tea and to perform pieces on the piano—in short, her self-professed "art of making people comfortable" (8)—cast her as simultaneously a conventional and an unconventional female figure in the context of traditional Gothic fiction, as she is performing these acts simply as a *ruse*, a parody of the woman's sphere. Kay J. Mussell asserts that gothic novels and stories portray women in active and competent roles to offer them an escape from, and yet to reinforce, domesticity:

> The novels do this by portraying women who perform in the areas of the domestic test [display of their "art"] in situations where they really matter, and where the achievement of the right to perform the roles is symbolic of the moral worth of the heroine . . . Protagonists in Gothic fiction are always essentially domestic women, concerned with proving their femininity through domestic activities, so the novels provide a "safe" escape, one which . . . reinforces the validity of the social myths which cause tensions that lead women to read them in the first place. (67)

That Jean performs her "art" not in submission to the domestic test, but in opposition to it, situates her against the very social myths that sanction the cult of domesticity.

After Jean's faint in the earlier scene, Gerald detects her theatricality, remarking to his cousin Lucia, "Scene first, very well done"—

> but [Jean] heard, and looked over her shoulder with a gesture like Rachel. Her eyes were gray, but at that instant they seemed black with some strong emotion of anger, pride, or defiance. A curious smile passed over her face as she bowed,

> and said in her penetrating voice, "Thanks. The last scene shall be still better."
> (Stern, Behind a Mask 7)

After Gerald speculates about her reason for leaving her former mistress—which he correctly believes is because Jean was involved with the woman's son—the governess shows up in an instant to reprove him, causing Gerald to startle, "How the deuce did she get there?" (10) Her transporting presence identifies her with another of Alcott's lurid heroines, Pauline Valary, who appears to her former lover "as if a ghost had suddenly confronted him" (Behind a Mask 120). Jean can be seen as representing Alcott's own experience, both as a poor working class woman among the leisured nobility and as a woman who, with violent literalness, defies the passivity expected of her sex. This identification perhaps reveals a greater authorial emphasis in a line Jean writes to her devious confidante, to whom she boasts of her exploits in the Coventry household: "Bah! how I hate sentiment!" (99).

Though "Behind a Mask" has the impedimenta of a gothic thriller—intrigue, betrayal, romance—Alcott deliberately fashions the story at a remove from the gothic tradition. As Cheri Louise Ross says, "In choosing to create central female characters who operate covertly rather than blatantly, she subverts sensation fiction's most stable convention . . . mask[ing] her real story under the surface of the formulaic thriller" (Periodical Fiction 912). This layering, like Jean Muir's methodical ruse, reflects the devastating sermon at the heart of the story. When women are prevented from being financially and socially independent, Alcott says, they instead become duplicitous and connive to have what they are otherwise forbidden. In this case the poor, socially outcast

Jean Muir schemes to marry one of the Coventry men in order to satisfy her economic needs; given her class status, she cannot do this through respectable courtship but only by invoking "a woman's wit and will," the true essences of her power (Stern 11). In keeping with the sentimentalist belief that women needed to marry to have any kind of meaningful life, Charles Strickland notes that "[d]eath was the only alternative . . . in fact, suicide was a favorite theme of sentimental authors, an act much in keeping with the delicate, sensitive natures of women"[7] (8). Forced within the sanctions of her patriarchal society, Jean grooms her "delicate, sensitive" appearance and plunges the Coventry clan into a veritable drama of passions. Gerald, conjecturing about Jean's obscure past, unwittingly lights on this in the first chapter when he says, " . . . I have a fancy that [Jean] is at the bottom of Sydney's [her former suitor's] mystery. He's not been himself lately, and now he is gone without a word.[8] I rather like romances in real life, if they are not too long, or difficult to read" (9). He simply doesn't realize that he *is* in a romance, or that it is in fact more difficult to read than he might suspect. Thus Jean wins over the men: charming Sir John Coventry with her graceful modesty; endearing herself to Edward with both her "womanly sympathy" (25) and its concomitant sexual suggestion; and mystifying Gerald with her melodious night airs, which rouse him from

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[7] In "V.V., or Plots and Counterplots," the danseuse Virginie Varens tries to ensnare the wealthy brother of her slain former lover—lacking Jean Muir's subtlety and skill, she is found out, and so she kills herself.

[8] Sydney went abroad after his torrid relationship with Muir proved to be a manipulation and she tried to kill herself through a self-inflicted knife wound—hence the scar on her breast. Some time after Edward stabs his brother in a jealous rage over Jean, Gerald calls for Muir to fix his bandage, as "she understands wounds better than anyone in the house" (38)—a tragic double meaning, to be sure.

his languor. In a passage of arresting psychological nuance, Gerald, finding himself growing warmer toward Jean, projects his fascination with her onto Edward:

> . . . there he is, devouring her with his eyes, while she reads a fascinating novel in the most fascinating style. Bella and Mamma are absorbed in the tale, and see nothing; but Ned [Edward] makes himself the hero, Miss Muir the heroine, and lives the love scene with all the ardor of a man whose heart has just waked up. Poor lad! Poor lad!" (27)

When Edward professes his love for Jean, she manipulates him into violently attacking his brother out of jealousy (an outburst Jean stages artfully, of course, using her body language to make it appear that she desires Gerald). As Jean later tends to Gerald's wound and sings to him, "sooth[ing] the listener like a spell" (40), he becomes aroused: " . . . soon a subtle warmth seemed to steal from the soft palms that enclosed his own, his heart beat quicker, his breath grew unequal, and a thousand fancies danced through his brain . . . and when he woke . . . his fair-haired enchantress was gone."

The "formulaic thriller" that Jean has now brought to life in the Coventry household, replete with violence and seduction, finds its sharpest expression in a series of dramatic tableaux the Coventry's put on in Sir John's hall. As when Jean exposes her scar, the scene is both sensational and deeply metaphoric: she appears in character "robed with barbaric splendor," wielding a scimitar over a sleeping man who has passed out over half-drunk goblets of wine. There is a significant parallelism as Coventry observes Jean's sinister, genuinely excited visage: "Coventry felt as if he caught a glimpse of the truth . . . It was but a glimpse, however, for the curtain dropped before he

had half analyzed the significance of that strange face" (51). "Still feeling as if he had suddenly stepped into a romance" (59), Coventry remains unconscious of Jean's dangerous intentions even after he sees behind her mask; therefore, he remains unconscious of the larger significance of the story of which he has become a part. Jean has trapped him in a parody of a romance, effectively by doing nothing more than playing the role of a woman. She has inverted the convention which Alcott alludes to in the epigraph to this chapter—rather than setting "all to rights, after unheard of trials and escapes," the anti-heroine has invaded the gothic space, Lord John's romantic estate, and disturbed the patriarchal family structure.

By the end of Jean's duplicitous reign, the actress seduces the elderly Lord John into marriage and claims his wealth and title. By donning her mask she at once observes the socially imposed limitations of her sex and undermines them, and to devastating effect. Yet in his essay "Precocious Incest: First Novels by Louisa May Alcott and Henry James," Alfred Habegger suggests that Jean in fact has no power or control within her patriarchal society, a deficiency he imputes to Alcott's "politically regressive" outlook. "The shocking thing about Alcott's pseudonymous thrillers is the degree to which they accept male primacy or dominance," he says. "Her heroines are either submissive girls who grow up to share ecstasy with their stern fathers, or they are sirens and femme fatales who are obsessed with revenge; either way, men are the one thing on their mind" (236). But one must recognize that this singular preoccupation with men is central to Alcott's critique, for men's ideologies of gender and social class decide the woman's fate. This is in particular evidence throughout "Behind a Mask," beginning

with the scene in which Jean, contriving to appear "in girlish admiration" of Sir John Coventry's flowers, comes upon the lord himself. Under the cover of anonymity she is capable of charming him, but on revealing that she is governess to the young Bella, "[a] slight change passed over Sir John's manner. Few would have perceived it, but Miss Muir felt it at once, and bit her lips with an angry feeling at her heart" (Stern, Behind the Mask 15). Despite his attraction to Jean's feminine pleasantness, Lord Coventry instinctively balks at her station, and will only allow in the way of a compliment that she is "accomplished and well-bred, which is better for one of her class" (23). Jean later reveals her secret bloodline to Lord Coventry in order to align herself with his privileged background, otherwise she cannot have his hand.

Habegger's diagnosis of Alcott's thrillers as somehow repudiating the true political aims of feminism doesn't take into account what makes Jean Muir's story, dependent as it is on men as the subject of its vengeance, ultimately a story about a woman's power. It is a power necessarily derived from this dependence. The "politically regressive" dimensions of Alcott's story can only be seen as such when taken at face value—in other words, in disarticulation from the larger context in which Alcott makes her critique of the patriarchy. The form of the story itself, which exposes the ideological possibilities of the gothic by dissimulating its conventions, finds a perfect mirror in Jean Muir's deliberate theatricality. She may only achieve agency from within the male dictates of femininity she opposes. Jean's desire to marry Lord Coventry's fortune demonstrates her ultimate dependence on a social order in which men are providers; as a woman who works, she still does domestic duties within a household, rather than

actually performing her own industry. Her entire character is conceived in the image of the nineteenth-century true woman, and the only way out of this (self-)image is for her to parody it, subverting it as a representation of her inner life. The challenge of maintaining separate inner and outer lives speaks to the ideological foundation of Hoeveler's theory of gothic feminism, and is taken up by Alcott in "Behind a Mask" as a signifier of her own struggle to maintain a writing life shielded from the patriarchal influences under which she lived.

Ch. 2

"A Marble Woman" and the Performativity of Desire

Judith Butler, in "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions," examines how political forces shape the female "body," and how the body becomes a site of cultural inscription: "What constitutes through division the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control . . . In what language is 'inner space' figured? . . . How does a body figure on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depth?" (469). This bears notably on a discussion of Alcott's "Behind a Mask," insofar as Jean Muir's ruse is predicated on bodily transfigurations that enable her to mimic cultural stereotypes of femininity. She appears a light, beautiful, meek girl, but behind her mask she is "a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least . . . worn with weariness and mental pain" (Stern, Behind a Mask 12). Whereas her domesticized identity is that of a girl, her true, inner identity is that of an old maid, the reviled spinster. Muir's impersonation of a young girl—pliable, obedient—is an apt correlative for one of the central tropes of the gothic, women submitting to a "natural ideal" of the hierarchical relationship between the man (older, authority-invested) and themselves (figured as timelessly young, naive, dependent on the man). Butler posits that "for inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct, the entire surface of the body would have to achieve an impossible impermeability . . . but this enclosure would invariably be exploded by precisely that excremental filth that it fears" (469). The fear of an excremental filth—or of a distorted self-image—characterizes the heroines of the female gothic, who are caught between

their private, dangerous desires and the life they are forced to live in the presence of society. This dichotomy may assume physical expression in the female body itself, which becomes a locus of performativity. Butler says that performativity "must not be understood as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Bodies That Matter 2). Thus performativity amounts to an ideological system through which constructs such as gender are affirmed and perpetuated; it can be seen as a discursive model of social regulation, in this regard. Female gothic heroines represent, in a sense, a counter-performativity to the patriarchal model. Theirs is a nightmare in which the patriarchal regulatory ideal of gender is figured as a kind of space, and they can only oppose it while trapped inside of it. In "Behind a Mask," Alcott interprets performativity as an actual performance within this space. Jean Muir uses her body to undermine the very conventions she imitates, placing herself at the center of the domestic sphere. She must maintain strict, self-effacing separation of her inner and outer lives in order to overtake the Coventry estate; in doing so, she employs a sexualized performativity, instigating passions and effectively raising up a romance where there actually exists, underneath it all, a profoundly psychological tragedy. If Muir uses her sexuality as a weapon to deceive the Coventry's, however, Cecilia Stein of "A Marble Woman" is trapped in hers, opposed as it is to a dominating fatherly presence who represses her desire.

Louisa May Alcott wrote "A Marble Woman" in 1864, just after she had written a score of other thrillers in efforts to buoy up the Alcott sinking fund. At the time she was also working on *Work,* and had recently composed *Moods*, a novel whose frankness

she believed the general public found distasteful—as she put it, "some fear it isn't moral because it speaks freely of marriage" (Journals, 139). "A Marble Woman," however, as with her other sensation fiction, was designed not as an overt critique of her society so much as a means of staying financially afloat. At the time that she was writing the story Alcott noted, "Wrote a little on poor old 'Success' [*Work*] but being tired of novels I soon dropped it & fell back on rubbishy tales, for they pay the best" (139). And yet, "A Marble Woman," like its sister thrillers in the Alcott repertoire, challenges the patriarchal family system in a way that supersedes its "rubbishy" content and aligns it more with Alcott's serious literary endeavors. The story is a variation on the Pygmalion theme: the sculptor Bazil Yorke, who was left by his wife for another suitor, decides to revenge past wrongs by "molding" his wife's daughter, Cecilia (whose name he shortens into the masculine Cecil), into a marble woman—"with no heart to love you, only grace and beauty to please your eye," as she puts it to him (Plots 151). With the distraction of a young lover, Alfred, and the appearance of the mysterious Germain, Cecil finds her mask of cold detachment disintegrating. The ensuing dichotomy between Cecil's desire and Bazil's authority speaks to a greater, constitutive tension in the Victorian woman's identity, the inevitable opposition embodied in her marble-coated life of sexual subservience. And yet, this dichotomy finally finds a striking resolution in Alcott's vision of a natural relationship based on gender equality. Whereas Jean Muir's pretended submission to patriarchal authority signals the performativity of nineteenth-century womanhood, Cecil's actually brings about a reconciliation between man and woman—and, significantly, father and daughter. The somewhat incestuous plot of "A Marble

Woman," rather than suggesting Alcott's ultimate submission to patriarchal influence, signals the symbolic union of father and daughter, an end to the female gothic heroine's constant flight from the oppressive father figure.

The story begins as Cecil, a young girl, enters the home of Bazil Yorke, having been sent by her now deceased mother to live with the lonely sculptor. Her first night in Yorke's house, Cecil is haunted in her sleep by a man who earlier she had seen peeking at her through a window—a figure shrouded in gothic mystique, with a "strange, uncanny face, half-concealed by a black beard that made the pallor of the upper part more striking" (138). All Bazil tells Cecil of this man is that his name is Germain and that he is one of his models. This man's appearance coincides with Cecil's perception of the house as dark and grim, a formative experience that dispossesses her of her independent will. "Fascinated by fear" at the sight of Germain spying her through the window, "the child sat motionless, longing to cry out, yet restrained by timidity and the hope that [Bazil] would look up and see the intruder for himself." This initial immobility then escalates into "an uncontrollable longing to be near Mr. Yorke" (140). After the incident at the window, Bazil leads Cecil "along dimly lighted halls, up wide staircases, into a chamber that seemed immense to its small occupant, while the darkly curtained bed was so like a hearse she instantly decided that it would be impossible to sleep in it" (139). Bazil's home, like Germain's enigmatic presence, becomes an oppression, a masculine space that contains Cecil within it.

As Cecil matures into a woman, Bazil's dark influence over her manifests as a compulsive need to sanction her behavior. He forbids her from reading poetry and seeing

her neighbor and suitor, Alfred, so as to prevent her from developing romantic notions. A parallel is drawn between Cecil and one of her master's sculptures, "a lovely, Psyche-bending form" (144)—both marble women whose grace and sterility endear them to Bazil's bare sense of beauty. "[Cecil] dressed for him alone, unconscious that she served as a model for his fairest work." The overshadowing influence Bazil has over Cecil, though ingrained in her since childhood, gradually forces her to find destructive outlets for her repressed emotions. After Bazil expels a passionate Alfred from his house, he lectures Cecil on the dangers of love (symbolized by her miniature sculpture of Cupid):

> Cecil listened and answered with her usual submission, stood motionless till the sound of a closing door assured her that he was gone, then . . . a woman's passionate pride trembled in her voice as she echoed his last words.
>
> "I am done with love!" And lifting the little Cupid let it drop broken at her feet. (151)

At some point, Cecil is outside the house when she finds herself accosted by the man known as Germain, who kisses her and calls her "'my darling' in a very tender voice" (149). As it happens, Germain is really August Stein, Cecil's biological father and the man for whom her mother had left Bazil. And yet, Bazil does not seem ruffled by Germain's affectionate assault of Cecil—soon after he even invites Germain to dinner, forcing Cecil to play "little mistress of the house" (153) so as to test her "powers of self-control" in the presence of the man who once haunted her as a child. But Bazil's selfish experiment backfires, as Cecil warms to her refined guest, and even sings with him in the parlor. When Bazil confronts Cecil about this, he marvels, "Seclude a woman

as you may; when an opportunity comes, she will find her tongue" (159). His protégé and subject merely responds, "I am sorry, but I did not know what I was doing till it was done. You gave me a part to play, and I am no actress, as you see. Is the masquerade over now?" This retort discloses Cecil's newfound sense of independence, as Germain has penetrated her contained reality, and in the process effectively liberated her from her (sexually) symbolic "darkly curtained bed." Though she claims she is not an actress, her submission to Bazil becomes a masquerade of the patriarchal values he has imposed on her—subservience, immobility, and voicelessness. As Elizabeth Lennox Keyser says, these qualities "that Yorke enjoins on the child Cecil . . . are conventional feminine virtues [of the Victorian period], and the passionlessness he . . . encourages was also part of the prevailing ideology" (Whispers in the Dark 34).

Thus, Germain represents a liberating force in the life of women, the passion they are denied by their fathers. As Keyser points out, however, in this way he also embodies "the outlawed passion that legitimates male domination of women" (38). Bazil's gothic fortress is raised against male suitors (Alfred, Germain)—against, that is, the male passion that Bazil will struggle, and fail, to master within himself. After Cecil discovers an affinity for Germain, Bazil vows never to let him come to his house again; when Germain sneaks in to see Cecil, Bazil intercedes. "A quick movement followed . . . the stamp of feet, the hard breathing of men wrestling near at hand, the crash of a falling statue and a human body . . . In that silence Cecil lost her consciousness, for her quiet life had ill prepared her for such scenes" (Plots 162). The sculpture of Psyche injures Bazil in the fall and is itself beheaded, symbolizing the danger of men's reckless

passions (and, as an extension, their need for control) both to women and to themselves. Still, Bazil does not realize the violence he has committed toward Cecil or the collateral toll it has taken. The closest he comes to such a realization is an unconscious reflection on the actual sculpture: "I never thought my Psyche would cause me so much suffering, but I forgive her for her beauty's sake" (164). Cecil's symbolic destruction of the Cupid is now being visited upon Bazil in the consequences of his own destructive authority.

Bazil's patriarchal possession over his subject continues, pointedly, into their marriage, which he procures to ward off the attentions of Alfred and Germain. The domestic arrangement is to remain the same—"We must remember that before others I am your husband, and you my little wife," he instructs Cecil, "else I shall call you 'Miss Cecil' again, and you say 'master'" (175). And yet, his wife becomes the object of his pride, his "best work" (177), and he finds himself desiring her affection. She, however, accepts their union as nothing more than a "pretty play" meant to solidify Bazil's control over her.

The paralysis of Cecil's life, the marble heaviness of her mask, finds a physical correlative in a drug habit she develops soon after her marriage. One night, preparing for an evening ball, Bazil observes Cecil in a state of restlessness "infinitely more becoming than her usual immobility" (178); she explains that she needs to go out alone, into the storm, for some secret errand. Bazil, now less tantalized than threatened by her secrecy, demands, "tell me like an obedient little wife, and ask me to go with or for you." But Cecil defies him in a moment of pure resolution, leaving him to wonder at her behavior. When she returns it is as a "fair apparition standing in the light of the newly kindled

chandelier" (180), transformed back into Bazil's ideal of calm, passive, womanly beauty. At the ball, Bazil overhears two men joke of how he married one of his statues; inflamed, he pressures Cecil to impersonate a more convivial woman among the company, licensing her performance for the sake of saving face. Indeed, Cecil plays the part well: "Amazed at the rapidity of the change, yet touched by her obedience and charmed with her address, her husband could only look and listen for the first few minutes, wondering what spirit possessed the girl" (184). Cecil explains, mysteriously, that it is an "evil spirit" that possesses her. After she passes out later in bed, a doctor in fact diagnoses the evil as an opium addiction. The significance of the opium dependence lies in its dual effects: as compensation for a loveless and controlling marriage, it allows Cecil to secretly defy her husband and mask her emotions; however, the resulting numbness simply makes her more susceptible of the inert role Bazil has prescribed for her. What's more, Bazil rationalizes his wife's drug abuse in order to preserve that role. The doctor ascribes her habit to "a whim, perhaps, ennui, wakefulness; a woman's reasons for such freaks are many" (187). This is the essence of performativity in Alcott's thrillers: an antic game in which women must lose to win, and in which men must legitimate their domestic tyranny as a means of protecting women from themselves.

After Cecil wakes, Bazil forgives her for her overdose, as if it were a tantrum, and takes her to the seashore to restore her to her former self. He reveals that he has bought her a new home, his symbolic attempt to temper her containment within another masculine space. But he begins to realize that Cecil is too enameled in her former self, that she cannot love him because he has conditioned her through her very containment.

The only person whose presence injects passion into her is Germain; thus, despite his distrust of him, Bazil lets Germain visit Cecil in an attempt to soften her cold exterior. In doing so, Bazil reconciles himself to Germain's symbolic potential as a liberating force, despite that he may also prove to be a seductive danger and ultimately a threat to Bazil's patriarchal authority.

In the chapters titled "Masks" and "At Last," Germain's character gradually achieves symbolic closure, and Alcott gives her plot of sexual rivalry its own uncharacteristically hopeful, idealized closure. At a masquerade, Cecil has accompanied a strange man dressed as an Elizabethan courtier. Bazil, dressed (significantly) as Hamlet, tries to discover who the man is. To this end he impersonates Germain so that he may question Cecil, though he also takes up the persona so he can enjoy her unguarded warmth. When Bazil, in character, makes sudden overtures to Cecil—communicating Germain's love for her, but simultaneously expressing his own—she recoils, thinking him Germain. "His sudden violence terrified her . . . Remembering his [Germain's] wild nature, and fearing some harm to Bazil . . . she laid her hand upon his arm, saying with well-feigned coldness, 'How can I love [Bazil], when I have been taught for years only to respect and obey him?'" (208). A significant change has taken place, as the sex-type performances have reversed: it is now Bazil who masks his repressed emotions, struggles to find his true voice, and Cecil who in effect tries to protect him from himself.

Bazil discovers that Cecil's companion is Alfred, and jealously accosts him on a balcony overhanging a cliff. Germain, however, steps in to save Alfred, signifying his

(male) potential for good as opposed to his dangerous passion. Afterward, Bazil feels "beside himself" (211), and must return "to play the courteous host." Much like Hamlet, he has subsumed so many different identities—master, husband, Germain—that his own identity, and the spiteful certainty of his authority, has begun to blur.

At the end of "A Marble Woman," Bazil discovers a new identity and a new respect for his wife, who also has a personal revelation. She and Germain are sailing when they are set upon by a storm. Eventually they become stranded and take shelter in a hut, where the sickly Germain lies down to die. Cecil proceeds to care for him "with the heartiness of a true woman"—not the True Woman, paralyzed and single-mindedly obedient, in whose image Bazil had sculpted her, but a woman transformed into a natural ideal. This transformation culminates when Germain reveals himself to be August Stein, Cecil's father. "Cecil's heart did speak; instinct was quicker than memory or reason . . . the one word 'father' had unlocked her heart, and all its pent-up passion flowed freely now that a natural vent was found" (227-28). Ironically, the father ultimately releases Cecil from her patriarchal oppression. This turn of events might seem, as some critics have interpreted it, to reflect Alcott's desire for her own father's acceptance—it may even suggest how painfully intertwined her identity was with that acceptance, how her love for Bronson crystallized in the pain of their estrangement. Her biography makes this a persuasive case. (As with Cecil's marriage to Bazil, biographers of Alcott have also found a compelling case for applying psychosexual theory to Cecil's spiritual, and latently sexual, release at the hands of her father.) But the father freeing the daughter is of more immediate significance in the story as a gesture toward a resolution between

women and the patriarchy that can only be achieved outside of the limitations of the traditional gothic narrative. Germain has now given Cecil the strength to confront, and transform, Bazil's confining authority—in effect, to transform the gothic (surrogate) father.

Soon after Cecil discovers her father's true identity, Bazil arrives at the hut, fearing that Cecil and Alfred had tried to elope, and threatens to harm Alfred; but Cecil "closed the door between them and the sleeper, keeping her place upon the threshold, as if ready to defend him" (231). Before she even tells him that August is the one in the hut, Cecil openly confronts Bazil, sans mask, and forces him to admit his feelings. "I could not conquer it," he says, speaking of the "delusion" that he had perfect control over her. "You can never know how hard I tried . . . but all failed, and I was forced to own that my happiness, my peace, depended upon you . . . I have suffered one long torment since I married you, longing for my true place, yet not daring to claim it" (233-34). His "true place," that is, is in a sexually egalitarian relationship with Cecil, one in which neither deceives nor manipulates the other. As the two witness Germain's death, it seems that such a relationship is to be their fate, now that Germain has liberated them from their mutual deception. As Keyser notes, "That which, its dangers exaggerated, shrouded in mystery, and concealed, erupts in male violence and justifies female repression can—when confronted, acknowledged, and embraced—effect psychic wholeness and reciprocal relationships" (Whispers 43).

In "A Marble Woman," Cecil Stein's performativity is founded less firmly than Jean Muir's on material ends, and is designed more as a means to a political end. Her

reconciliation with Bazil, incestuous as it might ultimately seem, effectively signals the end of Bazil's identity as father and inaugurates his new identity as Cecil's sexual equal. Thus the story perfectly services the purpose of the female gothic as an "ideological signifying system" through imagining a resolution to the typical gothic trope of the female entrapped and victimized by a father figure. If Jean Muir subverts the performativity of the patriarchal gothic tradition through sexual cunning, Cecil Stein transforms it through, in a sense, a counter-performativity of desire. She denies Bazil her love, and only licenses his desire for her once she herself has been made whole through realizing *her* desire, which is to recognize her affinity with Germain. And once she has recognized this affinity, she is free to see Bazil not as her oppressive father, but as the lover she has sought throughout the story; Bazil, in turn, is free of his delusion of control.

Conclusion

Accounting for the theoretical dimensions of Louisa May Alcott's gothic thrillers can never be a sure task. Perhaps, after all, Cecil Stein's marriage to Bazil is simply a manifestation of Alcott's desire to please her father; perhaps Alcott conceived Jean Muir simply as an electrifying villainess, with only a vague awareness of the significance of her gendered performativity. But these conclusions are unlikely, not to mention almost directly contradicted by Alcott's character as an author. Her own writing, from her self-conscious journal recordings to her mildly rebellious sentimental works, suggests her desire to separate herself from the patriarchal influences of her professional and private life. Her youthful identity, and subsequent identity as a woman of the pen, was always shaped by her conflict with her father's conception of femininity. Through her gothic inventions she could fictionally resolve this conflict, or at least do violence by it.

Furthermore, Alcott's turn to the gothic may suggest also her psychological distress over her lack of motherhood, her break with the wholesome maternal element of *Little Women.* Her thrillers allow her to formulate, and express anxiety over, the ambiguity of her female identity, an ambiguity she couldn't properly express in Jo March. The gothic tradition, however, doesn't commend itself to explorations of female identity—rather, it offers a conventional framework of masculinist ideology that codifies women's social limitations, defines their womanhood as being of a domestic character. To undermine this framework, Alcott created two female characters who subvert the true woman by adopting her outward identity. This performativity aligns Alcott with other writers of the female gothic who innovated the medium as a means of expressing

ideological opposition to patriarchal constructs of gender. Their female characters embody this opposition through pretending to submit to the very conventions they dissimulate. Diane Long Hoeveler sees the heroines of the female gothic as "characterized, unlike their creators, by repression and silence, acceptance or at least the pose of complaisancy" (15). They are figured as absence, as a negative space within which their desires and passions may attain the quality of dissent. Thus Jean Muir can work her scheme under the cover of pleasant domesticity; thus Cecil Stein can disempower her surrogate father by claiming the marble identity he has forced on her. But Alcott doesn't simply use performativity to demonstrate the ways in which women pretend to conform to and at the same time resist social regulation—she also uses it as a means of suggesting how men too become entrapped by their own ideology. As Butler would argue, the performance signaled in a literary work doesn't simply suggest a person's interiority, but creates the interiority. The prime representative of this phenomenon is Bazil Yorke, who through his compulsive assumption of paternal authority becomes a veritable Hamlet, both in his costume and in his person, trapped within the very identity he has subsumed in order to maintain control over Cecil. Gerald Coventry is quite self-consciously involved in a beguiling "romance" that is only made possible through his uneasy complacency in a patriarchal ideal of femininity: it is as if he can just see Jean Muir's true person behind her mask, but refuses to consciously recognize it.

As Butler claims, "gender is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints that not only produce but also regulate various bodily

beings"—in other words, gender is not innate, but is constructed through performance (Bodies x). Thus men must constantly assert their authority over women through a performance that reinforces and simultaneously undermines the thing of which it is a repetition, for men's performance of power—in their roles as leaders of industry, in their literary discourse—relies upon women's complementary performance of submission. This exposes a structure of social control which may only remain viable through a persistent reaffirmation of its basic ideology—through a performance that is self-fulfilling, so to speak. The female gothic functions in large part to lay bare the hollowness beneath this performance, to show how, as with Jean Muir, it was only ever a mask. Thus Alcott's stories put readers at a critical distance from the traditional gothic, allowing them to see how the genre's ideological underpinnings express themselves in standardized performances that create the very reality they seek to portray.

To see social or political significance in a literary work, however, is not necessarily to prove it is there. Alfred Habegger, for instance, argues that Cecil's marriage to Bazil is ultimately indicative of Louisa May Alcott's submission to the patriarchy (243)—he does not see in it any performative significance, except perhaps for the way in which it reinforces the gothic discourses which depict women as being dependent on men. Any discussion of Alcott's thrillers must weigh their feminist element with their larger situation as entertainments in the gothic tradition—and there is no easy equivalence to be drawn between these. While we may ascribe "Behind a Mask" and "A Marble Woman" to Alcott's strong feminist tendencies and her desire to figure her ambiguous identity as a female writer, we must also take into account the simpler

explanations for her seemingly controversial decision to write gothic stories. Perhaps they were just a monetary convenience, or a literary exercise, or a bauble of her imagination. Critics will only ever be able to contribute astute inferences to this matter, but no concrete proofs. This, in a sense, gets at the essence of Alcott's own performativity, and can be paraphrased from Judith Butler's question of the body as a site of cultural inscription: How do Alcott's gothic stories figure on their surface the very invisibility of the author's hidden depth?

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