

Karolina Korycka

**Louisa May Alcott's
"Behind a Mask, or a Woman's Power":
The Woman as an Actress, Femininity as a Mask**

Abstract: This essay discusses the ways in which Louisa May Alcott's 1866 novella "Behind a Mask, or a Woman's Power" expresses the author's frustration with her familial, social, and cultural reality. It explains the numerous feminist implications of the Gothic tale, in which Alcott, more or less directly, tackles the issue of female labor in post Civil War America, mocks the basic assumptions of the sentimental revolution and challenges contemporary notions regarding femininity.

Keywords: Louisa May Alcott, Gothic, femme fatale, femininity, masquerade, True Womanhood, sentimentalism, Transcendentalism

For about a century after the publication of *Little Women* in 1868, nineteenth-century New England writer Louisa May Alcott was seen primarily as an author of children's fiction and was most readily associated with her famous novel for girls. However, Madeleine Stern's discovery of Alcott's sensational stories—published anonymously or under the pseudonym A. M. Barnard in the 1860s—and the subsequent publication of these stories by Stern in the 1970s led to a sudden increase in academic interest in the author. Literary critics began to question Alcott's reputation as the Children's Friend and the degree to which she truly subscribed to the values she preached in her domestic fiction. Some have dismissed these so-called thrillers as pot-boilers: a reasonable conclusion considering the difficult financial situation of the Alcott family and the fact that Alcott herself had referred to them as "rubbishy tales," which she wrote because they "paid best" and took little time to write (qtd. in Cheney 165). However, many, including Judith Fetterley and Karen Halttunen, have come to believe that by writing sentimental fiction Alcott was merely "assuming a mask of propriety" (Halttunen 242), while her Gothic stories permitted sincere self-expression, which she had to sacrifice after the success of *Little Women*. In a similar vein, Eugenia Kaledin writes that Alcott's "willingness to buy success by catering to middle class ideals aborted the promise of her art and led her to betray her most deeply felt values" (251). These critics have been inclined to see Alcott's sensational fiction as an outlet for her bottled up anger and repressed sexuality, as well as an expression of her feminism. Not only did anonymous publication allow Alcott to

explore more sinister themes—including mind control, drug use, murder, and madness—but it also provided her with the opportunity to confront and comment on her familial, social, and cultural reality more openly and, hence, more critically.

Of all her Gothic tales, Louisa May Alcott's 1866 novella "Behind a Mask, or a Woman's Power" provides perhaps the most personal critique of the society she lived in and the ideologies that governed it: especially those pertaining to women. The protagonist, Jean Muir, is a divorced thirty-year-old woman with an implied alcohol addiction; significantly, she is also a former actress. In a desperate, yet carefully planned attempt to gain both title and wealth, she disguises herself as a nineteen-year-old governess and enters the lives of the prosperous Coventries. She gradually gains the trust of the family, which includes Mrs. Coventry, her two sons: Edward and Gerald, her daughter: sixteen-year-old Bella, and Lucia, their cousin, to whom Gerald is betrothed. Although Lucia never learns to like Jean, the governess, nonetheless, succeeds in fooling all of the remaining members of the household. She seduces both brothers, but finally marries her initial target: their wealthy elderly uncle—Mr. Coventry. The marriage takes place in the last possible moment, just as the family discovers the truth about Jean Muir. The story is fascinating primarily due to its scheming protagonist, whom the reader, though it may come as a surprise, quickly learns to sympathize with. Instead of condemning the heroine for her often unethical behavior, the reader is likely to admire her ability to overcome any obstacles that might stand in her way.

In many ways, the story expresses Louisa May Alcott's frustration with the situation of women in nineteenth-century America: Jean's fictional experiences are not entirely disconnected from their day to day struggles. Having a governess as a main character allows Alcott to shed light on the working conditions of female domestic servants and to reveal the abuse they often had to suffer at the hands of their employers. Also, through Jean's marriage at the end of the story, based on falsehoods and manipulation, presented as the character's only way out of her difficult financial situation, as a matter of necessity rather than of love, Alcott challenges sentimental clichés regarding courtship and questions the possibility of a truly happy marriage. It is no coincidence that Jean is a talented actress, not only in a professional sense, but also in her everyday life and in her relationships with others. Louisa May Alcott makes it clear that this ability to act is crucial to the protagonist's ultimate success. The ease with which the ruthless Jean Muir—motivated by greed, ambition and vengeance—can *act* according to social codes which she does not respect and *play the role* of a submissive Victorian woman, a role expected of her by society, is telling. By presenting certain sets of behavior merely as performances, as roles women must play in order to persevere in a hostile environment, Alcott challenges socially imposed norms and contemporary notions regarding femininity. Overall, the Gothic tale offers much insight into the mind of its author—an extraordinarily perceptive nineteenth-century woman—and her thoughts on the oppressive ideas and ideologies that reigned during her lifetime.

Working Women

There is a significant autobiographical element in Louisa May Alcott's "Behind a Mask" for, like the governess Jean Muir, Alcott had her own experiences working as a domestic servant, which undoubtedly influenced her unfavorable portrayal of the Coventry family and her descriptions of the relationship between Jean and her employers. At age eighteen, Louisa May Alcott began working for Reverend James Richardson, encouraged by his reassurances that her responsibilities would be limited to "light housework and attending to his sickly sister, Eliza" (Maibor, "Upstairs, Downstairs" 67). It did not take long for young Louisa to realize that her life in the Richardson household would be far from what she had originally imagined: the ordeal affected her so deeply that she wrote a story about it twenty-three years later. "How I Went Out of Service," written in 1874, describes Louisa's brief, seven-week experience as a domestic servant, which included "overwork, isolation, sexual advances from her employer, and a loss of self-possession" (Maibor, "Upstairs, Downstairs" 67). One can safely assume that this period of Alcott's life inspired, albeit in different ways, not only the story "How I Went Out of Service," but also her novella "Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power."

The employers featured in these stories fail to inspire much sympathy. Like James Richardson, the Coventry family displays behavior indicative of a strong sense of superiority: they are self-absorbed, rude, and disrespectful. Alcott portrays both Reverend Richardson and Mrs. Coventry as self-appointed martyrs, who are childlike in their need for attention and care. The Coventry family's conversation prior to Jean's arrival testifies to their incredible prejudice. Mrs. Coventry declares that she "dreads the coming of a stranger" and claims that only for her daughter has she "nerved herself to endure this woman" (4). Gerald, the indolent heir of the Coventry estate, speaks of his "inveterate aversion to the whole tribe," meaning governesses, and forgets to send a carriage for Jean to the station (3). Even Edward and Bella, the more sympathetic members of the family, speak of the new governess in a condescending, patronizing tone, referring to her as "poor little Muir" (4).

Once Jean shows up, she overhears Lucia and Gerald gossiping about her in a scene reminiscent of the one in *Jane Eyre*, during which Jane overhears Rochester's guests speaking ill of governesses. Jane must silently bear the slander directed at women such as herself because she is, like Louisa May Alcott and Jean Muir, a victim of class distinctions that posit all of these women as inferior beings undeserving of respect. The attitude of their "superiors" is emblematic of nineteenth-century mentality regarding domestic servants, whose status was often reduced to that of objects.

In "How I Went Out of Service," Alcott provides an interesting description of how she was treated during her visits to her employer's study upon his cordial invitation. The passage exhibits Richardson's vain conviction that his company could contribute to the cultural elevation of his servant:

I was not to read; but to be read to. I was not to enjoy the flowers, pictures, fire, and books; but to keep them in order for my lord to enjoy. I was also to be a passive bucket, into which he was to pour all manner of philosophic, metaphysical, and sentimental rubbish. I was to serve his needs, soothe his sufferings, and sympathize with all his sorrows—be a galley slave, in fact. (358)

By treating her as an object at his disposal, Richardson demonstrates his disregard for young Alcott's status as subject. In a similar manner, Jean is denied her individuality and talked about in terms of her belonging to a lower class of people: governesses.

Both narratives express an understandable rage resulting from humiliation. Louisa May Alcott claims to have lost much of her respect for mankind as a result of her brief employment at the Richardson household. Insult was added to injury when she discovered that her hard work was rewarded with the appalling sum of four dollars: "I have had a good many bitter minutes in my life; but one of the bitterest came to me as I stood there in the windy road, with the sixpenny pocket-book open before me, and looked from my poor chapped, grimy, chill-blained hands to the paltry sum that was considered reward enough for all the hard and humble labor they had done" (363). Her subsequent anger, although justified, has to be contained and the only way for Alcott to save what remains of her honor is to send the money back. Clearly, the disappointment and anger which remained within Louisa as a residue of this traumatic period were channeled into "Behind a Mask." Furthermore, the novella was written in 1866, soon after Alcott's return from a year long stay in Europe, where she had taken care of "a fretful invalid," Anna Weld (Saxton 285). Her time spent with this woman seems to have amplified the already existing sense of indignation she felt regarding the way domestic servants were treated. Moreover, upon arrival, Alcott had to return to the difficult financial reality of her family life and the responsibilities that this reality entailed: her family members depended on her to support them. All of these emotions—rage, frustration, anxiety—found expression in the novella she proceeded to author.

Alcott's anger is embodied in the character of Jean Muir. The heroine quickly "reveals that she is disgusted by the Coventry family's superior attitude towards her" and resents "being discriminated against on the grounds of her class" (Mulatu 21). Their preoccupation with class distinctions is further emphasized when Jean lies about her background and tells Mr. Coventry that she is the daughter of Lady Howard, a "lady of rank," whom Jean's father actually married after Jean's mother's death. In a letter to a friend, Jean writes that "it worked like a charm; he told Monsieur, and both felt the most chivalrous compassion for Lady Howard's daughter, though before they had secretly looked down on me, and my real poverty and my lowliness" (100). The reader, who learns about Jean's contempt for her employers early on in the story, cannot help but sympathize with her dislike for them.

Jean Muir's and Louisa May Alcott's experiences with domestic service seem

all the more infuriating when one considers the larger question of female labor in the nineteenth century. Due to her father's infamous inability to earn money, Louisa May Alcott and the women in her family had to learn how to work beyond the home in order to support themselves. The experiences she gathered while in domestic service, as a teacher, an author, and a seamstress, led to the painful realization of the uncomfortable position of women in society trying to make a living. In "How I Went Out of Service," Alcott specifically writes about the few options available to women as having serious drawbacks: acting was seen as an occupation not meant for proper women, sewing was low-paid and detrimental to health, domestic service was degrading, and there was teaching, which Alcott simply did not enjoy. Hence, "frustration over women's limited opportunities for employment" is apparent in most of Alcott's fiction (Maibor, "Upstairs, Downstairs" 67).

After the Civil War, tension arose as women began to realize their worth. Carolyn R. Maibor claims that "while their experience during the war showed women, including Alcott, the depth of their capabilities as well as the enormous benefits of a variety of vocations, mainstream society worked actively to suppress women's desires for continued and increased access to the professions" (*Labor Pains* 108). Because among the few jobs women could perform none were particularly appealing, women had to learn to cope with the sense of entrapment caused by their restrictive reality. These problems lurk in the background of "Behind a Mask," which, according to Judith Fetterley, "presents an incisive analysis of the economic situation of the white middle-class woman in late nineteenth century society" ("Impersonating 'Little Women'" 2). In this sense, Jean Muir is not unlike other femme fatales, who, according to Jennifer Hedgecock, expose "the exploitative and oppressive nature of the hegemonic power structure that limits economic and social opportunities for women" (28). Taking into consideration such an oppressive reality, the reader cannot blame Jean Muir for using any tools available in order to improve her life as much as it is possible. Although she is ruthless in conquering the obstacles that stand in her way, one cannot help but empathize with her struggle.

Louisa May Alcott on Marriage

Jean's ultimate goal is to marry Mr. Coventry, but romantic feelings play no part in her desire to become his wife: his wealth and the promise of financial stability should she become Mrs. Coventry are the only things that interest her. As is the case with other femme fatales, her "true goal" is "the pursuit of upward social mobility" (Hedgecock 22). The union between the rich Mr. Coventry and the beautiful, charming Jean, whose attention appeals to the former's vanity, may reflect Alcott's cynical approach towards the institution of marriage and the sentimental clichés associated with it.

Born in 1832, Alcott was deeply affected by the sentimental revolution of the early nineteenth century, which led to the emergence of a new family model, which "was to serve as a moral counterweight to a restless, materialistic, individualistic, and

egalitarian society” (Strickland 5). Charles Strickland describes the literature of the time, which:

reinforced a series of cults, all interrelated and all dealing with aspects of marriage and family life. The cult of romantic love dealt with the formation of families, and specifically with the rituals of courtship and marriage. The cult of domesticity was a way of marking boundaries between the nuclear family and the world outside it. Finally, the interrelated cults of motherhood and childhood specified the central purpose of family life and the place women were to occupy within it. Together these sentimental cults provided the cultural context within which Alcott came of age and the literary heritage with which she had to come to terms in working out her own views of family life. (6)

Louisa May Alcott had to confront dominant ideological notions concerning the role of family, as well as the place of the woman within society, and either adhere to them or reject them. Hence, while her books for children apparently glorify home and emphasize the moral power of the institution of family, her sensational stories present the potential danger of robbing women of any power outside of the domestic sphere. In “Behind a Mask,” Alcott seems to be responding to the sentimental fiction of the time, which constantly emphasized the importance of love, while in reality marriage was the only reasonable option from a purely economic standpoint for most nineteenth-century women.

Even Alcott’s *Little Women* reveals conflicting emotions concerning marriage. Mrs. March idealizes it and claims that “to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman; and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience” (105), which Judith Fetterley comments upon by stating that “she might as well have said it is the only thing that can happen. There are no other viable options” (“Alcott’s Civil War” 376). At a different point in the novel, Meg expresses a view much closer to Fetterley’s than her mother’s: “men have to work, and women to marry for money. It’s a dreadfully unjust world” (168) and the author herself seems to be in much greater accord with Meg than Mrs. March. Eventually, even Mrs. March admits to being “angry nearly every day of [her] life” (85), implying that perhaps, despite her husband’s efforts to help her, marital bliss isn’t all that she had imagined it would be. Agnieszka Soltysik makes a valid point that Marmee’s method of coping with anger—tightening her lips and leaving the room—could be interpreted in terms of the pressure placed on women to remain “passive and unthreatening,” if they want “to survive in a social order that strictly regulates both female speech and sexuality” (89). Instead of bringing joy and having a liberating effect, marriage is presented as a form of entrapment.

It is noteworthy that Abba May Alcott, Louisa’s mother and the inspiration for Marmee, did not have a carefree, joyful marriage. She could not rely on her husband financially and often found herself submitting to his eccentric ideas. In 1850, one of

Louisa's journal entries contains the following line: "I often think what a hard life she has had since she married,—so full of wandering and all sorts of worry" (qtd. in Cheney 62). At another time, while describing *Moods*, Alcott writes that the novel "was meant to show a life affected by moods, not a discussion of marriage which I know little about, except observing that very few were happy ones" (qtd. in Seelye 149). All this leads back to the divorced Jean Muir, who is also, in all likelihood, a victim of an unhappy union.

Jean Muir's troubled past, though never truly revealed, is alluded to multiple times throughout the novella. At the very beginning of the story, soon after she first meets the Coventry family, the reader discovers her dark secret: she is not a meek, innocent governess, but an angry woman with a plan. Yet as she takes off her disguise, we learn that some tragic secret haunts her past: "she had been lovely once, happy, innocent, and tender; but nothing of all this remained to the gloomy woman who leaned there brooding over some wrong, or loss, or disappointment which her darkened all her life" (12). Later, in a letter to a friend, she writes that she was once "lovely and young, good and gay" (99), not the bitter, vengeful woman she is now. These allusions are sufficient to classify "Behind a Mask" as an example of the literature of misery: a literary art form "produced mainly by women who felt to the depths of their being their painful powerlessness and their exclusion from a male-dominated society" (Reynolds 395). David S. Reynolds, the author of *Beneath the American Renaissance*, describes Jean as a "wronged woman who has been severely wounded in love" and "takes vengeance against men by attracting them with her sweet, docile appearance, scheming all the while to take advantage of them" (408). The reader realizes how desperate Jean is to succeed when she declares that she will "end all at once" if her plan fails (77). Because suicide is preferable to returning to her "old life," one can only imagine the devastating financial and mental state she is in.

Jean as Performer, Witch and Mesmerist

Despite all these hardships—limited access to employment, difficult working conditions, oppressive class distinctions, demeaning social norms, a past unhappy marriage—Jean Muir refuses to be discouraged. She learns to mask her anger, frustration, and disappointment. She is acutely aware of what is expected of her, but instead of submitting to social norms, she *performs* such submission.

Jean's punctuality makes the initial good impression as she enters the stage. She gains favor with her polite manner and at once proceeds to enchant the family with her many talents, which include playing the piano and singing: "Miss Muir played like one who loved music and was perfect mistress of her art. She charmed them all by the magic of this spell; even indolent Gerald sat up to listen, and Lucia put down her needle, while Ned watched the slender white fingers as they flew, and wondered at the strength and skill which they possessed" (6). When asked to sing, the new governess brings some of the family members to tears. She then impresses Mrs.

Coventry with her ability to prepare perfect tea. The family appreciates her modesty and apparent reluctance to gossip about her previous employers. They later discover that another one of Jean's abilities is arranging beautiful bouquets, which she agrees to prepare for Mrs. Coventry every day.

Jean quickly proves a delightful addition to their household, enchanting with her numerous graces. In addition to these simple charms, she uses every possible opportunity to put her acting skills to test and performs a series of scenes for the family. On her first night, she pretends to have fainted and calls out to her dead mother for help while in a supposed daze, winning the pity of most, if not all, of those present. Judith Fetterley writes that "the Alcott who created 'Marmee' knew what she was doing; here she identifies the idea of mother as one of the great sentimental cliches of her culture, capable of being used for considerable theatrical effect" ("Impersonating 'Little Women'" 8). Because Jean's treacherous use of this cliché proves effective, Alcott makes a mockery of the same sentimental ideas that she herself uses in her domestic fiction.

Many of Jean's miniature performances are prepared for specific male members of the family. During her first encounter with Mr. Coventry, she acts as if she did not know with whom she was speaking and, by feigning ignorance, flatters him immensely without seeming obtrusive. On another occasion, when she is alone and aware of the fact that she is being watched, Jean begins to weep, adding to her mysterious aura and inspiring the compassion of the man she wishes to marry. At a crucial moment, Jean confesses her alleged love for Mr. Coventry by kissing his portrait, when she is sure he can see her and equally sure that he does not know that she knows it. It is this gesture that seals her fate, for now the old gentleman is convinced of her love and offers to marry her. In each of these cases, Jean transcends boundaries. Her performances entertain the audience that does not realize it is being deceived: they believe that they have access to her mystery, but, in reality, they only see and know what she wants them to.

Because Jean realizes that she is under constant scrutiny, she is careful to heed even minor details. The former actress skillfully uses her surroundings and her own body to frame femininity itself:

Miss Muir sat in the recess of a deep window, in a low lounging chair, working at an embroidery frame with a graceful industry pleasant to see. Of late she had worn colors, for Bella had been generous in gifts, and the pale blue muslin which flowed in soft waves about her was very becoming to her fair skin and golden hair. The close braids were gone, and loose curls dropped here and there from the heavy coil wound around her well-shaped head. The tip of one dainty foot was visible, and a petulant little gesture now and then shook back the falling sleeve gave glimpses of a round white arm.... she made a charming picture of all that is most womanly and winning; a picture which few men's eyes would not have like to rest upon. (71)

This ethereal image of the gentle maiden busy with her sweet domestic duty is one Jean Muir obviously creates consciously. As she subtly tries to draw Gerald's attention to herself, Jean makes herself the object of male desire and of the male gaze.

The male gaze is also referred to briefly in Alcott's 1874 story. During her time spent working for Richardson, Louisa May Alcott falls prey to the controlling gaze of her male employer and she feels intimidated when she catches him observing her silently as she cleans his study. He asks her not to leave and his address to her reveals the nature of the pleasure he derives from looking at her: "It pleases me to see you here and lends a sweet, domestic charm to my solitary room. I like that graceful cap, that housewifely apron, and I beg you to wear them often; for it refreshes my eye to see something tasteful, young, and womanly about me" (357). This short passage exposes the many layers of oppression female domestic servants had to face. Their jobs were made unbearable by the knowledge that their lower social status also made them vulnerable to various forms of sexual prejudice and advances. The objectifying gaze turns the woman servant into a reflection of the male employer's desires, which are largely based on the patriarchal placement of the woman in the private domestic sphere, where she happily performs the duties destined for her.

It is telling that when Alcott rebels against his incessant harassment and declares that she had been hired to be his sister's companion, not his, Richardson punishes her by simultaneously humiliating her both as a servant and as a woman. Of the many chores suddenly added to her workload the most striking is that of boot-blackening, which is "considered humiliating work for a woman," although Alcott admits she fails to understand why it is so (360). The teenaged Louisa's rejection of male authority, her refusal to play the role of the "passive bucket," and her "declaration of independence," as she calls her rebellious speech directed at Richardson, allow her to reclaim her subjectivity and individuality; however, in the process she acts against the feminine ideal of submission and, as punishment, her femininity itself is attacked. By saying "far be it from me to accuse one of the nobler sex of spite or the small revenge on underhand annoyance and slights to one who could not escape and would not retaliate" (360), Alcott sarcastically suggests exactly the contrary: she does accuse "the nobler sex" and implies that it is not uncommon for male employers to abuse their power over their helpless female employees.

Jean Muir, aware of the hopelessness of outright rebellion, attacks the system from within. The daring heroine does so by transitioning from the traditional passive role of woman-object-servant to the subversive active role of actress-director. While the young Louisa May Alcott is the passive victim of a controlling male gaze, who is punished for her rebellion against this state of affairs, Jean is the active creator of the image which she allows others to see. She is acutely aware of her surroundings and of what is expected of her by society and various individuals. Every word she utters and every posture she assumes is carefully thought out, as if scripted. The former actress takes into consideration scenery, posture, light, color, textures, props: anything that will make the picture attract the gaze and leave the viewer with a sense of pleasure

from looking at what he believes to be the natural representation of feminine charm.

Jean cunningly stages her audience's desires while they remain oblivious to the fact that everything that they see is a performance. In her relationship with Gerald, for example, the devious governess wears the mask of true womanhood. She lures him by simultaneously avoiding him, thereby awakening his curiosity, and offering him brief glimpses at her enticing femininity. When he asks her whether she considers him the master of the estate, she replies that she does with "a sweet, submissive intonation which made [her response] expressive of the respect, regard, and confidence which men find pleasantest when women feel and show it" (44). When Gerald is wounded by his brother in a jealous rage, Jean contributes to his recovery by proving herself a gifted nurse and by soothing him with her singing, her touch, and her overall presence: the scene alludes to the sentimental glorification of the woman's natural predisposition for caring for others and her miraculous healing abilities. Here and throughout the novella, Jean enacts "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity": the cardinal virtues of True Womanhood (Welter 152).

The irony lies in the fact that while this villainous heroine, like many other female characters in Alcott's sensational writing, "use[s] [her] dramatic skills to fulfill [her] selfish ambitions in flagrant defiance of the cult of domesticity," she demonstrates a perfect awareness of its basic assumptions, which she can then use in her rebellion (Halttunen 240). Perhaps Jean has learned from her Gothic literary sisters that the only accessible forms of escape from oppressive patriarchal structures are madness or death and so, in order to avoid this fate, she must learn to cope within and rebel against these very structures by hiding behind a mask. Jean Muir "poses as the Conventional moral exemplar" (Reynolds 408) and easily convinces most of the members of the Coventry family of her innocence, modesty, and morality. For her, "conventional values are mere cloaks worn to manipulate others" (Reynolds 408). According to John Seelye, "in Jean Muir Alcott seems to be putting the vampirelike Bertha into a Jane Eyre outfit" (158): one cannot help but admire how gracefully she slips into her costume. In the end, her theatrical abilities and "her uncanny use of mock virtue" prove so effective that they "[enable] her to become the wealthy Lady Coventry" (Reynolds 409). The reader is amazed by Jean's ability to deliver a convincing performance despite not identifying with the character she plays in any way.

There is something unsettling about Jean's unbelievably convincing performance. According to Agnieszka Soltysik, it "borders on the supernatural" (102). On her first night at the Coventry home, after she has made a good first impression on the family, Jean retreats to her room, where she takes off her disguise, revealing to the reader that she is not who she seems:

Still sitting on the floor she unbound and removed the long abundant braids from her head, wiped the pink from her face, took out several pearly teeth, and slipping off her dress appeared 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 adornment. (11)

This description reinforces her supernatural, witch-like quality: the ease with which she transforms her body, face, expression, and behavior testifies to the extent of her self-control, which, in Soltysik's words, "exceeds the realistically credible," for Jean "masters all her bodily symptoms of fear, anxiety, and especially desire" (101). References to witches do appear throughout the story: Gerald calls Jean "the Scotch witch" (28) and Jean herself writes about "bewitching" Gerald in a letter to a friend (99). When Edward discovers her secret and is prepared to announce it to his family, he says "she has the art of a devil" (97). John Seelye draws a parallel between Jean Muir and other deceptive female characters: Lady Geraldine from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel," a supernatural creature disguised as someone she is not, and Duessa from Edmund Spenser's "The Faerie Queen" (156).

Another interesting comparison is the one Theresa Strough Gaul draws between Jean's ability to influence those around her and mesmerism, which was popular in Alcott's time. Although "Jean is never identified as a mesmerist, nor is mesmerism ever explicitly mentioned, Alcott grants her heroine the traits indelibly associated with mesmerism in the nineteenth century: a piercing gaze, the ability to provoke physical sensations, and a mysterious power to conform others' wills to her own" (835). Gaul goes on to describe how, through Gerald and Jean, Alcott creates a "mesmeric relationship" that is "a distorted sexual configuration, consisting of a passive male complying with the physical gestures of an active, dominating female" (842). Yet while Jean reverses gender roles with her mesmeric influence, she also plays out her female role by exercising a positive influence on the members of the Coventry family. There is, therefore, an "overlap of mesmeric powers with sentimental influence" (Gaul 843).

The Mask of Femininity

Jean's performances are so convincing that even the reader may occasionally find themselves wondering what to believe. Throughout the story lines are blurred between appearances and truth, performance and natural behavior, deception and sincerity, the theatrical stage and reality, the public and the private. On the one hand, the reader is aware that everything Jean does is planned, intentional and a part of her greater scheme. Instead of submitting to society's expectations, she takes control and "commands total sway over the lives of others by means of a monstrous perversion of the sentimental concept of woman's influence" (Halttunen 241). Jean Muir rejects "cultural codes that hold out the promise of power to women if they accept passivity, objectification, and submission as their lot; boldly, she replaces sentiment with the 'power in a woman's wit and will'" (Gaul 849). All of her actions are motivated by

vengeance and relentless ambition. Like Alcott's other Gothic heroines, Jean Muir "[leads an] aggressive, selfish [life] from 'behind a mask,' a mask that disguises a rebellion against the cult of true womanhood" (Halttunen 241). On the other hand, the distinction between real and mock virtue is not a simple one. Jean's manipulation of contemporary notions regarding femininity is uncanny because there is no clear boundary between the woman she is and the woman she pretends to be. She actually possesses the feminine abilities and domestic talents that initially make her so attractive to her employers; she knows how to cater to the needs of others, treats her employers with reverence, and displays a wide range of skills desirable in a woman: among other things, she is a gifted musician and an able nurse.

All the while, one must remember that Jean obviously does not identify with the sentimental view of womanhood: she only uses it as the most efficient tool in achieving her own selfish, *unfeminine* goals. She exhibits desirable feminine traits in order to gain the favor of the male members of the Coventry family: her apparent modesty, humility and submission appeal to their vanity, ego-centrism and sense of superiority. In this way, the myth of femininity is challenged as Jean Muir plans and participates "in a series of poses and attitudes based on cultural cliches of femininity, exposing both the socially constructed nature of men's desire and her own expert, almost *professional*, distance from it" (Soltysik 90). In the introduction to *Alternative Alcott*, Elaine Showalter writes that Jean Muir "always acts the feminine parts that her society allows her, but acts them with a brilliance that exposes their artifice and emptiness" (xxx). Because it is often unclear whether she is playing a part or whether she is herself, it becomes impossible to measure the *naturalness* of her femininity: the implication being that femininity itself is *unnatural*, an *act*.

By deconstructing the concept of femininity, "Behind a Mask" offers a comment on the situation of the nineteenth-century woman in America: perhaps women who adhered to the values propagated by the cult of true womanhood were all actresses wearing masks, living up to socially imposed norms simply due to lack of any other option. In fact, if one looks at Alcott's literary output as a whole, many of her protagonists act, pretend, and impersonate in one way or another:

While the March family saga is clearly concerned with learning how to 'act' properly in everyday life, the sensational fiction is entirely about improper uses of acting, i.e., dissimulation and deception. Many of the characters are professional actors and actresses. Yet, even when the characters are not stage professionals, they perform or 'act' constantly[.] (Soltysik 100)

Although there seem to be significant disparities between her domestic fiction and her sensational writing as far as the purpose of acting is concerned, ultimately, it seems that either way acting is inevitable in the life of a woman. The hidden message in both her domestic fiction and her sensational writing could therefore be that

submission to the prevailing ideology, acting out "little womanhood," is preferable considering that rebellion against it will be severely punished. Alcott's work implies that:

the true Victorian woman was, above all, a skilled actress, who schooled her emotions, curbed her rebelliousness, and learned to play the role assigned to her within her family. Behind her mask of domestic respectability might lurk and angry Apollyon or a villainous Hugo, but within the domestic drama the inner demon might be controlled, even if it could not be exorcized. (Halttunen 245)

Jean's final triumph has everything to do with her being able to hide behind a mask and playing the part of "little woman." Judith Fetterley writes that "[the] sub-title is 'A Woman's Power'; that power is located in Jean's ability to act. To the degree that an actor is an artist, *Behind a Mask* asserts that women are powerful in proportion to their success as artists" and that "Alcott's tale links women's survival to their artistic ability" ("Impersonating 'Little Women'" 12).

Alcott emphasizes this connection and adds depth to her character by making an analogy between Jean Muir and the biblical heroine Judith, whom Jean portrays during a dramatic evening, when the Coventry family gathers with friends to participate in a series of *tableaux vivants*:

A swarthy, darkly bearded man lay asleep on a tiger skin, in the shadow of a tent. Oriental arms and a drapery surrounded him; an antique silver lamp burned dimly on a table where fruit lay heaped in costly dishes, and wine shone redly in half-emptied goblets. Bending over the sleeper was a woman robed with barbaric splendor. One hand turned back the embroidered sleeve from the arm which held a scimitar; one slender foot in a scarlet sandal was visible under the white tunic; her purple mantle swept down from snowy shoulders; fillets of gold bound her hair, and jewels shone on neck and arms. She was looking over her shoulder toward the entrance of the tent, with a steady yet stealthy look, so effective that for a moment the spectators held their breath, as if they also heard a passing footstep. (50)

There are many ways in which one could read the aligning of Jean with Judith, a woman who seduces and murders her oppressor. Elaine Showalter writes that for many nineteenth-century artists "the story of Judith had become an icon of the vengeful and castrating woman" ("Introduction" to *Alternative Alcott* xxx). Because playing the part of Judith allows Jean to display the intensity of her own personal hatred and desire for power, even Gerald notices that what he sees is "not all art" (51). Just as Judith succeeds in beheading the drunk Holofernes after being invited to his tent, Jean succeeds in deceiving the Coventry family. However, at this point in the story the lines between art and reality, performance and truth, are effectively blurred:

this scene reveals as much as it conceals. After all, Judith was a virtuous woman, whose actions saved her city from the attack of Holofernes's brutal army. Perhaps the suggestion is that Jean's actions could also be justified, that she acts the way she does not only out of sheer spite and anger, but also out of necessity, because she sees no other way of saving herself.

A Life Governed by Inner Conflict

In many ways, Jean Muir represents Alcott's own inner conflict regarding the simultaneous need to adhere to expectations and the desire to rebel against them. One must keep in mind that the ideologies the author cynically attacks in "Behind a Mask" affected her on a very personal level. When she was a child, her parents, Amos Bronson Alcott and his wife Abigail May Alcott "struggled, as the cult of domesticity demanded, to make their household into an enclave against the materialism and conformity of Jacksonian society" (Strickland 19). Bronson Alcott, an educational reformer, actively participated in the upbringing and education of his daughters: his primary concern being their moral character. His methods were based on "reasoning with children, giving praise and affection as a reward, and practicing isolation and withdrawal of affection as forms of punishment" (Strickland 28). One can only imagine the influence this type of upbringing had on an energetic, stubborn and willful child such as Louis was. Elaine Showalter claims that Bronson's methods caused the rebellious girl Louisa to become a self-doubting adult with a low self-esteem and depressing sense of worthlessness ("Introduction" to *Alternative Alcott* xii). Louisa May Alcott desperately wanted to live up to her father's expectations, but she never could, and so their relationship was based on a constant struggle and lack of understanding.

Alcott began to rebel and express her resentment early on: like Jean Muir, she did so by being a subversive actress. While her father believed in the educational value of "theatrical performances of moral allegories," Louisa expressed far more interest in turbulent melodramas (Halttunen 233). The theater accompanied her throughout her entire childhood and early adulthood. When she was ten years old, she was the author-director of the "Louy Alcott Troupe," which later "gave way to family tableaux and dramatic performances in the Hillside barn" in Concord (Stern, "Introduction" to *Behind a Mask* xi). In 1848, due to serious financial difficulties, the family moved to Boston (Cheney 53), where the Alcott sisters continued to nurture their avid interest in the theater. Louisa wrote and directed, Anna was responsible for sets and props, Lizzie was in charge of costumes, and all of the girls performed on stage (Saxton 174). Martha Saxton, Louisa May Alcott's somewhat controversial biographer, claims that the plays Alcott authored at the time were inspired by "her own tragical sense of being unloved" (174). The critic continues her argument by referring to Alcott's particular fondness for male roles: "Louisa played the male roles, with lots of mustache-twirling and stomping of boots, to Anna's breathless

leading ladies. Louisa wrote about women's heartbreak, but she dissociated herself from it at the performance, lining herself up on the side of the strong, who are not victims of their hearts" (174). Like Jean Muir, Alcott refused to simply accept the part of gentle, passive, meek "breathless leading lady"—instead she sought roles that enabled her to seize power from "behind a mask." In this sense, the novella seems to be a continuation of Alcott's "rebellion against her father's utopian domestic ideal," which began when she was a child delving into the depths of thrilling melodramas (Halttunen 233).

Louisa May Alcott also had a strained relationship with the larger philosophical movement to which her father belonged: Transcendentalism. The Transcendentalists—particular Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and, of course, her own father, Amos Bronson Alcott—had an enormous influence on Alcott. It is telling that both Emerson, a close friend of the Alcott family, and Thoreau, whom the young Louisa often accompanied "on his daily hikes through the Concord woods" (Seelye 150), served as inspirations for the male characters of Alcott's literature. While she "embraced the transcendental ideals of self-expression, self-reliance, and self-exploration" (Estes and Lant 99), as well as their contempt for materialism and conformity, Alcott remained aware of the shortcomings of the transcendental philosophy. In *Labor Pains: Emerson, Hawthorne, and Alcott on Work and the Woman Question*, Carolyn R. Maibor writes about "the repressed frustration... evident to varying degrees in much of Alcott's writing" (88). She describes it as:

stemming in large part from her constant struggle to align her inner sense of her own needs and abilities with her awareness of the outer limitations and expectations of the world around her—not only society at large, but more particularly, the vibrant yet constraining society of Transcendental Concord. As her journals frequently show, the 'progressive' world of her father and his friends and neighbors—including Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau—was both stimulating and burdensome. (88)

Maibor goes on to discuss the ways in which the transcendental philosophy often excluded women; for example, Emersonian self-reliance applied specifically to young men, for whom personal development was much easier than for women, who were "restricted in terms of entrance to the professions" and by prevalent social norms regarding femininity, which was associated with domesticity, family life, motherhood, and passivity (88).

Martha Saxton even writes about the inscription of these notions into the transcendentalist thought. Nineteenth-century American author Octavius Brooks Frothingham described the "spiritual eminence of woman" as "a transcendental tenet" (66). However, this preoccupation with women had to do specifically with the woman's relationship to the man. Saxton notes that "[Bronson] Alcott and Emerson repeatedly used the word womanly to describe traits such as intuitive understanding, diffidence, receptivity, warmth—in short, qualities that made the men feel welcome"

(66). This ideology was particularly oppressive for unmarried women, such as Louisa May Alcott:

Victorian single women had not so much a role as a caricature to play. And while the transcendentalists idealized women, it was their qualities in contrast and in relation to men that preoccupied them. They were not concerned with the woman by herself, as an assortment of human characteristics. She was defined in terms of her pliability, her maternal qualities, her ability to soothe, comfort, support, and respond to men. Her own desires, talents, and concerns were of no weight in measuring her social desirability. (220)

Femininity, therefore, emerges as a social construct, which reflects male desires and is designed to cater to the needs of men. The woman as an individual simply does not exist.

Louisa May Alcott was a victim of her times. She was aware that quite often her behavior, her beliefs and her desires were incompatible with social norms regarding womanhood, with the philosophy her father and the transcendentalists preached, and with the expectations of her family. Her life and, by extension, literary career were haunted by the constant struggle between “self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment, social respectability and personal gratification, allegiance to family and desire for autonomy, yearning for ambition and retreat into disparaging self-effacement” (Grasso 180).

The author channeled much of her anger, frustration and anxiety into her story about Jean Muir, but, in the course of the story, she also succeeded in partially resolving some of these negative emotions. Martha Saxton has said of Alcott’s writing that it was “a receptacle for her fantasies and desires” and that the author “literally emptied herself into her books” (8): this statement surely holds true for “Behind a Mask: or, A Woman’s Power.” During her brief experience as a domestic servant, the teenaged Alcott learned that she could either passively accept degrading treatment or rebel and be punished. The older, more devious Jean Muir—in all likelihood Alcott’s alter ego—manages to overcome this impasse. Through her, Alcott is able to make accusations, unleash “her feminist anger at a world of James Richardsons” (Stern, “Introduction” to *Behind a Mask* xiv), and symbolically avenge her wrongs.

Jean Muir and Louisa May Alcott as Little Women

The connection between Louisa May Alcott and her character is all the more fascinating when one considers the way in which the story foreshadows its author’s fate or, more specifically, the fate of her literary career. Alcott eventually abandoned sensational writing, which provided her with the liberty to critique from behind a mask (writing anonymously or under a pseudonym), instead turning to the more acceptable domestic fiction that brought her fame and fortune. Judith Fetterley,

who describes *Little Women* as a mask in itself, writes that in her Gothic tale "Alcott provides us with a frighteningly prophetic vision of the act she will eventually perform: in order to survive economically, Jean Muir, the heroine of the story, adopts the mask of femininity and impersonates the character of a 'little woman'" ("Impersonating 'Little Women'" 1). Similarly, Elaine Showalter suggests that Alcott, "like Jean Muir, cynically played 'little woman' in order to succeed in the terms allowed by her society" ("Introduction" to *Alternative Alcott* xlii): both women *act* according to nineteenth-century gender expectations and publicly subscribe to the cult of true womanhood and this ability to wear the mask of femininity leads to their success.

The significant difference between Jean Muir and Louisa May Alcott is that in her use of the mask of femininity the former is primarily motivated by the desire to gain wealth, something which cannot, with full sincerity, be said of the latter. To claim that *Little Women* was written solely to bring financial gain is a mistake. Alcott herself doubted that her novel would be very successful: a sentiment she recorded in her journal at the time (Cheney 198). She did not enjoy the process of writing it either. Given these circumstances, how is one to understand the author's decision to accept the task of writing a novel for girls?

In seeking the answer to this question, it is useful to turn to Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as Masquerade" and to notice the similarities between the puzzling behavior of the patient described in the paper and that of Louisa May Alcott. The woman whom Riviere describes is a confident, intelligent woman who, as part of her profession, often has to speak before an audience. However, "in spite of her unquestionable success and ability" after each such public performance "she would be excited and apprehensive all night after, with misgivings whether she had done anything inappropriate, and obsessed by a need for reassurance" (304). This in turn would lead her to seek attention from the male members of the audience, with whom she would flirt "in a more or less veiled manner" (305). In searching for the source of this woman's anxiety, Riviere looks at her patient's childhood experiences with her parents and discovers that "her adolescence had been characterized by conscious revolt against [her father], with rivalry and contempt of him" (305) and that later in life "she had quite conscious feelings of rivalry" over other men (father-figures): the same men, surprisingly, whose attention she would seek after her speeches. Apparently, because the speech act put the woman in a temporary position of power, the anxiety she experienced after these performances was a result of her fear that the father would discover that she had stolen something that was rightfully his and punish her for it. To avoid this fate, the woman "renounces her status as the subject of speech (as a lecturer, as an intellectual woman with a certain amount of power), and becomes the very image of femininity" (Doane 42). In Riviere's own words:

The exhibition in public of her intellectual proficiency, which was in itself carried through successfully, signified an exhibition of herself in possession of the father's penis, having castrated him. The display once

over, she was seized by a horrible dread of the retribution the father would then exact. Obviously it was a step towards propitiating the anger to endeavour to offer herself to him sexually. (305)

Of course, to describe Alcott's relationship with her father as one based on rivalry and contempt would be a risky overstatement. Nonetheless, there was a frequent lack of understanding between them. Bronson Alcott made it clear that he found Louisa a difficult child to raise. As she grew older, Alcott's attitude towards her father and his philosophical views was marked by ambivalence. While she admired some of his ideas, she mocked others, such as her father's failed attempt to establish a utopian community.

Louisa May Alcott may not have identified so much with her father as she did with the general concept of masculinity itself, which she associated with energy, strength, activity, agency, ambition and power. A teenaged Alcott wrote in her journal: "I was born with a boy's spirit under my bib and tucker" (Cheney 85). As an adult, she was an active supporter of woman's suffrage and fought so that a strictly male right could become a female one as well. Once the Civil War began, Alcott was disappointed that she could not take part as a soldier, so she chose to participate in the war as a nurse instead: "I long to be a man," she wrote in her journal, "but as I can't fight, I will content myself with working for those who can" (Cheney 127). Louisa May Alcott also fulfilled a typically male role by supporting her family financially throughout her entire life.

The author could not reconcile her identification with the masculine with her father's expectations and society's requirements regarding women. Hence, as Riviere's patient flirts with men, offering herself to them "in order to compensate for her 'lapse' into subjectivity (i.e., masculinity in Riviere's analysis)" (Doane 42), Alcott, analogously, puts on the mask of femininity by writing *Little Women*. "Through the character of Jo March, Alcott performed literary penance for her greatest sins against the cult of domesticity: her flight to Washington, her Gothic period, her consuming literary ambition, and her refusal to marry" (Halttunen 243). In a number of ways, Alcott returns masculinity to the castrated father. For one, she wrote the novel as a favor to her father: the publisher Thomas Niles refused to publish a book that Bronson Alcott was working on at the time, unless his daughter wrote a children's novel for him. Additionally, the story preaches many of her father's values and the March sisters strive for moral excellence by using Bronson Alcott's favorite allegory, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Halttunen 243). Furthermore, in the course of the story, Jo, based on Louisa May Alcott herself, undergoes a drastic change owing to the positive influence of the apparently morally and intellectually superior father-figure Professor Bhaer, who later becomes her husband. It is also significant that in *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott has the head of the March family participate in the Civil War, while his wife and daughters stay at home awaiting his return. Through the novel, order is restored.

Jean Muir, like Louisa May Alcott, is motivated by desires that are gendered masculine in her cultural setting—the governess is overcome by “the desire to win; the desire for revenge; the desire to manipulate, dominate, and control” (Fetterley, “Impersonating ‘Little Women’” 11)—but her use of the mask of femininity challenges the “natural order” rather than restoring it. At the end of the story, Edward Coventry brings his family together in order to reveal to them Jean’s true identity and intentions by reading a series of letters that she had previously written to a close female friend. In theory, Edward is “unmasking” Jean. However, the reader is already rather well acquainted with Jean’s schemes and hardly learns anything new about her. In an interesting twist, her letters, which are meant to incriminate her, contain details about the Coventry family, which hardly make them out to be innocent victims. While it is true that Jean deceives the family, the tricks that they fall for say more about them and their flaws than they do about her. Furthermore, the ease with which the devious Jean manages to play the part of perfect “little woman” exposes (unmasks) the inherent absurdity of sentimental clichés and the myth of femininity. Moreover, she reveals that the concept of masculinity could just as easily be deconstructed. Her success largely depends on the foolish arrogance of men who sincerely believe in their superiority over women and so, are willing to accept Jean’s feminine behaviors as natural and normal: indeed, “since Gerald has done nothing to merit respect, regard, or confidence, the arrogance behind his calm acceptance of these attitudes as his due is considerable” (Fetterley, “Impersonating ‘Little Women’” 9). Once it is revealed that it was all an act, that Jean had succeeded in fooling him by using his assumption of his own superiority against him, Gerald comes to the realization that it was she who had been in control, in a position of power all along and his actual inferiority is exposed. In a similar way “Riviere’s patient, looking out at her own male audience, with impropriety, throws the image of their own sexuality back to them as ‘game,’ as ‘joke,’ investing it, too, with the instability and the emptiness of masquerade” (Doane 52).

The greatest shortcoming of Louisa May Alcott’s novella is that although the author successfully uses Jean in order to attack nineteenth-century society and its values, she fails to say much about a female identity that could be found once socially imposed masks had been removed. Judith Fetterley notes that throughout the story the reader learns close to nothing about Jean’s past and knows even less about her future: “both blank [of her past] and vacuum [of her future] indicate an absence of identity” (“Impersonating ‘Little Women’” 13). The heroine consciously wears a mask, but it is unclear who exactly is beneath it.

During her first night at the Coventry home, after Jean has gone to her room and removed her disguise, she says to herself that “the curtain is down, so I may be myself for a few hours, if actresses ever are themselves” (11). Assuming that all women must be actresses in order to survive in a patriarchal society, this quote leads to the greater question: are women in such a society ever themselves? Perhaps, based on her own experiences, Alcott does not believe it to be possible. Ultimately, “Behind

a Mask: or, A Woman's Power" fails to provide any satisfactory, alternative identity for nineteenth-century women.

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