The Story of Jo: Literary Tomboys, Little WOmen, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire by Karin Quimby

This article gives an excellent overview of tomboy and gender theory, and how it relates to the Jo March. Quimby talks about the historical context of, perhaps, why Alcott wrote the Jo they way she did. However, it is not 100% clear weather this was Alcott's intent or simply a by-product of the time, a subconscious choice. Quimby talks in great detail about how other academics have written about this issue, she discusses the failings and positives of many of these often opposing viewpoints. Summed up, she believes that most people want Jo to remain a Tomboy, independent of men, and to a certain degree her family. Jo manages to do this successfully, making clear strides against Laurie, however, is eventually married off to Professor Bhaer. Alcott wanted Jo to remain single, but as a result of the times and pressure from publishers eventually had to make this decision.

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Quimby, Karin.

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THE STORY OF JO

Literary Tomboys, *Little Women*, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire

Karin Quimby

Few would have imagined that a girl like Jo March, the tomboy heroine of Louisa May Alcott's 1868 novel *Little Women*, who exclaims, "It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boy's games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy," would become one of the most enduringly popular girlhood characters in Anglo-American literature.[1] Fewer would have predicted that what seems to fuel the imaginations and excite the desires of generations of girlhood readers is precisely Jo's refusal of normative girlhood identifications and desires; she wants to be the man of the family, not the little woman; she wants to be a soldier, not a seamstress; and she wants to be like Laurie, not have him. So while *Little Women* offers up a whole family of girls, evidence widely confirms that "most readers love *Little Women* because they love Jo March."[2]

But what are we to make of Jo's mass appeal when the figure of the tomboy has always presented a particularly queer dilemma? She is, first of all, a figure defined by incoherent oppositions: at once cute and dangerous, understandably boyish and abnormally male-identified, merely passing through a common stage of girlhood development and becoming an avatar of protolesbian girlhood.[3] If we understand *queer* to mean what undermines or exceeds the fantasy of stable identity categories of gender and sexuality, then the tomboy may well be seen in this regard as paradigmatic. For by eschewing the feminine and expressing masculine identifications and desires, the tomboy, by definition, points up that such categories as male and female, or masculine and feminine, are indeterminate and unstable. The tomboy, in other words, exemplifies that the notion of gender identity is not anchored to any secure, incontestable foundations but is "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."[4] By refusing to learn

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and enact femininity, the tomboy destabilizes gender as a "natural" construct. Moreover, because some tomboys refuse to perform femininity over a lifetime, preferring a variously male-identified expression both physical and psychic, they expose the assumption that such tomboyism is temporary and safely confined to childhood. That some tomboys do dramatically change their gender expression and enact femininity convincingly (often in response to the disciplining pressures of "concerned" family and friends), finally, further confirms the instability of the supposedly predetermined, or "biological," structure of gender development.

Because the tomboy is unhinged from and in turn unhinges the fiction that gender identity is natural, she in many ways only reveals in the extreme what is true of *all* children: that the possibilities of identification *and* desire are vast, perverse, and ultimately unmanageable. Jacqueline Rose reminds us that "the task of [making coherent] the fragmented, component and perverse sexuality of the child . . . is always on some level an impossible task." Moreover, "the fact that Freud used a myth to describe how ordering is meant to take place (the myth of Oedipus) should alert us to the fictional nature of this process, which is at best precarious, and never complete."[5] In narrative, the demand that the tomboy exchange her overalls for a dress to signal her availability for heterosexual romance is a clear attempt to "order" her "precarious" gender development into an acceptable heterosexual narrative framework.

It is precisely because the tomboy's plot always threatens to "turn queer" that it arouses so much anxiety at a certain pubescent point, no matter how "normal" the girl is perceived at first to be. As a result, strategies for containing the tomboy's queer energies are not in short supply. For instance, Sharon O'Brien discovers a curious reference to tomboys in post–Civil War child-raising advice literature that recommended "free, active, untrammeled childhoods for little girls and even advocated tomboyism." This literature promoted tomboyism specifically as a way to ward off the fear that white, middle- and upper-class women were becoming too feeble (one is tempted to say "too feminine") to carry out the duties of motherhood. Its authors reasoned that "an active tomboy would surely develop the resourcefulness, self-confidence and, most important, the physical health required for motherhood."[6] By linking tomboyism so completely to the development of a stronger motherhood, by forcefully orienting the tomboy's cross-gender expression toward woman's biological imperative, these advice givers assuaged the threat that the boy-girl might present to the social patriarchy.

Although arguing that the tomboy will make a better mother is an inventive patriarchal strategy, the threat of her potentially queer narrative is most often dematerialized through the tomboy's abandonment of pants for a dress. In his

analysis of the tomboy in fiction, Leslie A. Fiedler suggests not only how generic codes in literature shape desire but how readerly expectation produces, or demands, certain desired ends: "The 'tomboy' figure, the rebel against femininity, . . . as every genteel reader knows, will be transformed at the moment that she steps out of her overalls into her first party dress and is revealed as worthy of love!"[7] In his exclamatory way Fiedler exposes how the "knowing" readerly desire for the girl's containment in a narrative of heterosexuality works toward prescribing the expected end. Yet his comment simultaneously reveals the very tension engendered by the tomboy protagonist: the narrative trajectory fueled by her cross-gendered identity threatens to delay, cut off, or reroute the heterosexual end. Once heightened, this tension must be relieved by the insistent expectation—"as every genteel reader knows"—of a heterosexual conclusion. Tomboy plots like Jo's are popular in part because they provoke in readers a temporary imaginative investment in the possibilities of "perverse" identifications and desires, only to contain—or repress—such desires with resolve. By returning to normality (heterosexuality) at the end, the tomboy plot confirms the identities of the "genteel" readers to whom Fiedler refers.

Could we perhaps Challenge this theory by having JO wear Something more like Act Scene 2 in the Final moment w/ Mr Professor Bhaer?

Other strategies of containment have obscured or diminished the challenge that the tomboy presents to the patriarchal social order. In his 1871 novel *Tattered Tom*, for instance, Horatio Alger stages her surrender to femininity as a convenient way, it seems, to erase the threat that some women began to pose to male representational jurisdiction and economic control in the late nineteenth century.[8] The girl hero, appropriately named Tom, lives on the street and disguises herself as a boy not only to survive but to compete on an equal footing with the other street urchins. Reflecting perhaps the hope of many in the late nineteenth century that women would fail in their attempt to appropriate male power, Tom, unlike Alger's boy heroes, does not succeed. Instead, she is rescued from the street and returned to her rich mother, from whom she was abducted years earlier. Tom then resumes her proper feminine identity as Jane Lindsay.

On the surface, Alger's rendition of the tomboy plot clearly works to contain the tomboy's threat, but it is surprising that Michael Moon dismisses it as merely "a conventional story of a tomboy who . . . is rescued and reclaimed for genteel femininity."[9] Moon's disregard for the possible complexities of queer girlhood in Alger's novel becomes apparent once we find that his own "queer boy" argument depends on his erasing the reality of females altogether. That is, Moon claims that Tom's narrative is in fact "a highly unconventional story of a partially feminized street boy" who happens to become "entirely feminine" rather than the "mixed composite" of masculine and feminine qualities that Alger's heroes usu-

ally embody (96).[10] Most troublingly, to read the boy's queer plot as one that radically disrupts the representation of childhood as a model of heterosexual coherence, Moon must tacitly confirm Alger's construction of the tomboy as intelligible within that hegemonic developmental frame. The conventional tomboy narrative, which Fiedler, Alger, and Moon all confirm, if with different aims, reroutes a girl's early cross-gender identification into the heterosexual coherence implied by the oedipal scenario.

So powerful is this convention that in her book on "female masculinity" Judith Halberstam scarcely analyzes representations of the literary tomboy. Rather, she "refuses the futility long associated with the tomboy narrative and instead seizes on the opportunity to recognize and ratify differently gendered bodies and subjectivities."[11] Although most fictional tomboys are disciplined and representationally forced into feminine masquerade, it still is possible to "recognize and ratify" not only the queer energies that enliven the figure of the tomboy and the tomboy plot but also those that imbue the insistent readerly responses to such stories. Even though *Little Women* brings its tomboy heroine to the expected end of marriage, this conclusion is so unsatisfying and incoherent that most readers reject it in favor of the far more queer middle of Jo's plot, where meanings do not line up into a seamless, univocal whole. In this way Alcott, perhaps unknowingly, presented all readers with an epistemological occasion to develop a queer reading praxis. Catharine R. Stimpson confirms the rerouting of narrative desire made necessary by this novel: "Generations of female readers . . . have maneuvered themselves around Alcott's most obviously constrictive maneuvers. They have continued to tutor themselves in unfeminine will through choosing which parts of *Little Women* and which Jo they will imitate, or, at the very least, find enchanting. Recidivists of reading, they return again and again to the far naughtier beginning and middle of the narrative."[12] The "repeated acts" through which these readers engage with Alcott's text do not shore up gender and sexual identifications but leave them in their far more unsettled form or, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would say, in an "open mesh of possibilities."[13]

Theories of narrative desire often fail to recognize the narrative middle as more than a space that delays, through sometimes perverse subplots, the ultimate climax. But it is more accurate to say that this middle space traces the movement and trajectory of the tomboy or queer girl's plot. One trope that defines the middle space in many tomboy plots, including Jo's, is the girl's cross-gender identification with a brother or male peer, such as the relationship Jo forms with Laurie.[14] Through this identification the tomboy explores a range of male-identified behaviors that generally direct her plot away from the expected trajectory of the girlhood

narrative. We might consider the middle space a space of "narrative arrest" (like the space of perversity in Freudian theory) that paradoxically serves as a counter-traditional model of narrative desire. In contrast to the logic of the female bildungsroman, which usually concludes either in marriage or in death, the tomboy's "perverse" detours away from the marriage plot—and the attachment of some readers to such emplotted figures—signify the presence of other significant forms of desire and identification that, for many girls and women, are ends in themselves.

But it has been almost impossible to recognize and ratify these readerly responses to the tomboy text, because a language regulated by heterosexual logic usually limits a more complex examination of the responses of those who bring to their reading of Jo's plot a set of needs and desires that differ from those of their heterosexual, or "genteel," counterparts. In a study of *Little Women*'s readership that does attempt to examine the wider mappings of desire that inform reader responses to the novel, Barbara Sicherman at first gestures toward this complexity when she suggests that "readers' testimony in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries points to *Little Women* as a text that opens up possibilities rather than foreclosing them."[15] Yet the two primary plots she identifies in the novel are the quest plot (in which Jo becomes the model of independent womanhood and intellectual and literary achievement) and the marriage plot. Sicherman discusses two notable women (among others) who read *Little Women* and passionately identified with Jo: M. Carey Thomas, an aspiring writer and a future president of Bryn Mawr College, and Simone de Beauvoir. Both Thomas and Beauvoir, Sicherman argues, view Jo as a model of literary achievement (as a girl, Sicherman claims, Thomas identified with Jo so deeply that she renamed herself Jo in her childhood journals), thereby identifying with the quest plot. Beauvoir, however, struggles with reconciling her desire for Jo to marry with her desire for Jo to live as an independent woman. Summing up her analysis of these passionate readerly identifications, Sicherman writes: "Thomas, whose love relations were with women, never mentions the marriage plot, but for de Beauvoir . . . it was both important and compatible with a quest plot" (260). Because Thomas "never mentions" the marriage plot, or any other possible love plot, there is an absence in the narrative of erotic or sexual desire that is accorded to Beauvoir's heterosexual existence. Although Thomas's passionate identification with Jo throughout her youth may both signal and shape her early sense of erotic and gendered difference and inform her later love relations with women, such possibilities are consigned to the realm of the "never mentioned." This example does more than expose the power of the closet to foreclose a more complex understanding of the way some readerly responses to Jo evidence unconventional erotic possibilities. It also shows how the tomboy figure and plot

can nevertheless provoke desires and identifications that exist outside heterosexual narrative trajectories. That Thomas "never mentions" Jo's marriage may well indicate that she is one of those readers who identify far more with the (queer) middle of Jo's plot.

Some critics who do seem to sense the wider possibilities of erotic identification and sexual desire that Jo provokes in some readers feel compelled to reject, especially, the implication that Jo serves as a protolesbian model for these readers. For instance, Elizabeth Janeway first acknowledges, at *Little Women*'s centennial in 1968, that "the real attraction is not the book as a whole, but its heroine, Jo, and Jo is a unique creation." While "Jo's story is the heart of *Little Women*," Janeway continues, "just what that story represents has not, to my knowledge, been explored." Curiously, however, she declares definitively what this "unique creation" is *not*: "Jo is a tomboy, but never a masculinized or Lesbian figure." One would certainly grant that the identity category of lesbian was not available to Alcott. But Janeway claims that the tomboy, Jo, is not a male-identified girl, either. Instead, she argues that Jo represents "the dream of growing up into full humanity with all its potentialities instead of into limited femininity." This definition of "full humanity" apparently requires a heterosexual identity, since Janeway declares that Jo is not a lesbian, or even mannish. After proposing this broadly humanist definition that has something to do with not being feminine (but also with not being masculine), Janeway struggles further to specify Jo: "She is, somehow, an idealized 'New Woman,' capable of male virtues but not, as the Victorians would have said, 'unsexed.'"[16] It seems to me that "somehow" Jo may defy description from a purely feminist (or a Victorian) vocabulary; Janeway wants to read her as a nineteenth-century feminist, a "New Woman," but wants to make sure that such a figure is "sexed," or retains an essential heterosexuality, despite her mannish claims to power. Like Sicherman, Janeway relies on a language of negation in her attempt to define Jo, who is "never . . . masculinized or Lesbian," "not . . . 'unsexed.'" Such language, of course, signals the difficulty of defining what Jo is. These critics seem sure that she is a tomboy, but what the tomboy represents is open—literally and figuratively—to possibility. The impulse to normalize Jo is understandable, but it is an impulse defined by the regulatory frame of heterosexuality, which must expel the tomboy's queer identifications and queer plot—a plot that renders gender and sexuality unfixed, a plot, indeed, that we may someday understand as representative, precisely, of a "full humanity."

In other words, some feminist analysis, along with criticism like Fiedler's and Moon's, views tomboys as "rebel[s] against femininity" without considering that representations of girlhood male identification may express networks of desires

and identifications that convey other more "queer" possibilities.[17] Alcott's representation of Jo in *Little Women* may in fact have been an attempt to express not only the "choice between domestic life and individual identity," as Sarah Elbert puts it, or between the marriage plot and the quest plot, as Sicherman says, but the experience of being "born with a boy's spirit under [her] bib and tucker," of being a "freak of nature," of having "a man's soul" in "a woman's body," as Alcott described herself on several occasions.[18] Although Alcott herself seems to have explored this wider realm of linguistic and psychic possibility in an attempt to define her own existence, much feminist criticism concerning *Little Women* has been oddly complicit with the patriarchal insistence that girls grow up to be heterosexual women. Feminism, in this sense, has reproduced the conceptual closet that has kept more queer identifications and desires culturally and narratively illegible.[19]

If this was Alcott's intent, reasonably more exploring

Redressing the Tomboy

Although most feminist criticism has powerfully exposed how such narrative designs as the marriage plot limit representations of girls and women, at times it still reinforces heterosexual narrative logic when responding to the tomboy plot by centering on what I like to call the "dress scene," the inevitable "signature" moment at which the tomboy sheds her overalls for a dress and ascends to heterosexual womanhood (pained as that transition might be). Elbert argues, for instance, that the defining moment of Jo's symbolic maturation into womanhood occurs rather early in *Little Women* when she is forced to don the proverbial dress and attend a dance. This scene, which I believe underscores Jo's queer desire to "be a boy" rather than become a woman, is the one in which Elbert suggests that Jo's transformation to womanhood occurs. Elbert begins her analysis with the suggestion that Jo's notion that she is "the man of the family" is a "serious problem in the story," and that in a "strange way" this problem resolves itself around fashion.[20]

As a typical tomboy, and unlike her sisters and most girls her age, Jo, Alcott writes, "never trouble[s] herself much about dress"; instead, there tends to be a "fly-away look to her clothes," and she prefers to romp about the countryside and to play the male parts in minidramas with her sisters, in part so that she can wear her favorite "russet-leather boots."[21] However, her sister Meg insists that Jo attend a dance with her, and in preparation for it Jo is made to put on a "poplin" gown, the back of which she immediately burns (a perhaps not-so-subtle repudiation of this masquerade). At the dance she avoids the offers of boys eager to dance by retreating to a "curtained recess," and so it is at the margins of this heterosex-

ual spectacle—in this liminal, closeted space—that she meets her male ego ideal in the person of Laurie, an effeminate boy in nearly every regard (his school chums even call him Dora, he complains). Together they establish a kind of common identity on the fringes. Jo, for instance, closely examines Laurie's build, dress, and manner, comparing them to her own: "little hands and feet, tall as I am; very polite for a boy" (30). Although Laurie is at first bashful, we learn that "Jo's gentlemanly demeanor amused and set him at his ease," a point Alcott makes as if to underscore Jo's immediate assumption of the type of male model Laurie represents. Moreover, Jo listens acutely to Laurie's "boyish praise of her sister" as if receiving a lesson in gentlemanly deportment and "stores it up to repeat to Meg" (30).[22] Later, facing the invasion of male heterosexual desire into the all-female March household when a suitor arrives to take Meg away, Jo again assumes a male subject position by declaring, "I wish I could marry Meg myself" (271). (Nina Auerbach's analysis of this statement shows precisely how some feminist discourse works to disavow the queer possibility of Jo's cross-gender identification here. Auerbach suggests that what Alcott presents in this situation is a "militant vision of permanent sisterhood.")[23]

So Jo sees Laurie as a friend and gender ally.

Despite these examples of her male identification, Jo undergoes a transformation to womanhood, according to Elbert, at the very moment that she and Laurie converse in the "curtained recess." There "Jo is suddenly aware that the gentility she rejects as too 'lady-like' can be quite acceptable when it is 'gentlemanly,' or in other words, gender-free. Her regret at having only one good glove (the other is stained with lemonade) signals her growth from tomboyhood to womanhood in the feminist sense of the term."[24] Perhaps it is because Elbert reads Jo's male identification as a "serious problem in the story" that she insists that Jo relinquishes all traces of male identification this early in the novel. Ironically, Elbert's suggestion that Jo attains womanhood "in the feminist sense of the term" uses an ambiguous feminist vocabulary (what does *gender-free* mean, exactly?) that effectively displaces Jo's growing awareness of a self that is certainly more male-identified than "gender-free." Such feminist phrases work to render illegible—and thereby to disavow—the "serious problem" of Jo's male identification. What Jo understands and regrets in this scene, in fact, is that she is not a gallant, handsomely dressed boy like Laurie, with two "nice pearl-colored" gloves. Jo's sartorial desires do indicate a kind of development, but her instant identification with Laurie leads her to desire even more to become a gentleman, not a woman, even in a "feminist sense." This scene not only patently fails to represent Jo's transformation to womanhood but underscores her queer desire to become the "gentleman" of the family.[25]

The sense Elbert makes of this scene suggests the inability of a purely feminist critical vocabulary to render queer identification legible. Her analysis of the scene even contradicts her earlier argument, in which Jo's refusal to yield what Elbert considers one pole of her identity—either "her desire for domesticity or her assertion of individuality"—seems to doom her "to wander forever in the secret garden of female adolescence, never becoming an adult," as if the only kind of adult she could become were a heterosexual woman (albeit a gender-free feminist one).[26] Elbert's apparent inability to decide whether Jo should grow up or not reveals, I suggest, a form of critical arrest generated by the queer tension that energizes Jo's plot—that if she does grow up, it will be as a good little man, not a good little woman. Elbert's struggle with the dilemma of Jo's gender identification exposes the threat that the tomboy produces—that the perilous, unfixed realm of gender and sexual possibility does not have to be set at a certain age. Carolyn G. Heilbrun resolves the crisis in this way: "Jo reinvented girlhood, but the task of reinventing womanhood was beyond her"—beyond whom, one should ask?[27]

Such anxiety is also part of the textual world. As Jo matures, her male identification becomes nettlesome to others. Her sister Meg admonishes her more than once: "You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and behave better, Josephine," to which Jo firmly replies, "I ain't."[28] Many critics note that Alcott intended to leave Jo single at the end of the text, and within the coherent energies of that untold plot Jo might well have achieved the fantasized status of manhood she so desired. Instead, Alcott was forced to submit to generic plot expectations and marry Jo off, restoring the heterosexual social order and assuaging, on some level, the panic that her queer anomalous status has unleashed.

The Disappointing End

At the outset of *Little Women*, when Jo complains in often quoted lines that "it's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boy's games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go fight with Papa, and I can only stay home and knit, like a poky old woman," she registers what is at stake for the queer girl herself in growing up.[29] The psychic experience of disappointment in not being able to do what a boy gets to do mirrors, in reverse, the loss suffered by some heterosexual readers if the tomboy should fail to fulfill the heterosexual contract.

Although Alcott herself remained vigilantly single her entire life, social and generic conventions compelled her to bring Jo's narrative to a different end. In a letter penned to a friend soon after *Little Women* was finished in 1867, Alcott

reveals the pressures to which narratives such as her own were made to yield: "Publishers won't let authors finish up as they like but insist on having people married off in a wholesale manner which much afflicts me. Jo should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, *or* somebody, that I didn't dare refuse and out of perversity went and made a funny match for her."[30] Indeed, narratives of childhood often have extreme or didactic endings contrived to impose order on any ungovernable fantasies that animate into the middle of the plot. These endings expose, specifically, the anxiety aroused in the reader by characters whose sexual identities or desires are not fixed. In girlhood plots, such endings almost invariably take the form of marriage or death, and thus the narrative frame routes the often contradictory modalities of girlhood development into linear sequence by privileging an end that either expunges the girl's "depravity" or ensures that the threat and titillation it causes are fully contained in an accepted cultural order. Ironically, Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer powerfully disrupts the textual and sexual narrative logic rather than render it coherent. By ending the novel in this "perverse" way, Alcott signals her own ambivalence over reproducing the codes of heterosexuality.

But it is the anxiety registered by the youthful female readers of Alcott's serial novel that *their* desires (never mind Jo's) would not be fulfilled that exposes how narrative both reflects and shapes desire. The girls' "clamorous" response also suggests the fragility of normative gender and sexual identities within the construction of girlhood itself: if Jo's plot failed to meet their heterosexual expectations, it would reveal the narrative mechanisms by which the fiction of a coherent heterosexual identity was instituted in the first place. The girls' response not only shows how deeply engrained was the fear that something would be lost if the story of a girl like Jo did not end in marriage; it also suggests the power of narrative convention at once to invoke that loss and to assuage the terror of it. Moreover, the girls' anxiety may have been driven by something akin to "heterosexual melancholy," which Judith Butler defines as the effect of a woman's (or girl's) "renunciation of the *possibility* of homosexuality." Although the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality were not available to Alcott's original girlhood readers, this ungrieved loss, as Butler argues, would have been "preserved" through the "heightening of feminine identification itself."[31] The end the girls desired for Jo's plot thereby signaled the foreclosure of the possibility of "homosexuality," or of queer possibility, for the girls themselves, and perhaps it was from this unacknowledged loss as well that their anxiety sprang.

Judith Fetterley captures, however, the other side of this story of loss in her

response to Jo's fate: "The process of getting [Jo] out of her boots and doublet and her misguided male-identification and into her role as a future Marmee is completed by placing her securely in the arms of Papa Bhaer. We do not, of course, view this transformation with unqualified rejoicing. It is difficult not to see it as capitulation and difficult not to respond to it with regret."[32] Fetterley's understated disappointment that Jo's queer narrative is turned, at the very end, into a classic oedipal drama (in which the girl gets "Papa" in getting a husband) hinges on the same axis of loss as the one articulated by Alcott's contemporary girlhood readers. Many modern lesbian or queer critics read with a trepidation similar to theirs, but along more ironic lines. For the dread that lesbian or queer readers experience is that the tomboy will not fulfill their *queer* narrative expectations. Thus while many feminists need Jo to become a woman "in the feminist sense," and Alcott's contemporary readers needed Jo's romantic end to confirm their own emerging heterosexual identities, readers such as Fetterley want Jo's plot to end with her disidentification with femininity (and hence her heterosexuality) intact in order, perhaps, to confirm their own identities. Jo has become such a popular fictional heroine, I believe, for the very reason that she evokes these widely dissimilar expectations and desires, all of which respond to the sexual incoherencies at the center of everyone's psychic and social life. Fictions that replay the oedipal myth impress a certain order on one's unconscious and thus help structure one's more ambiguous desires. The different narrative expectations that Jo, as a tomboy, evokes seem rooted, at least in part, in each reader's fundamental need for psychic and social validation. What becomes clear, then, is that the tomboy narrative is fueled by the very terror of sexual incoherence itself—by the fact that the story of sexuality can never be concluded once and for all. The different categories of readers, who bring such different needs to the text, all seem to have a lot to lose.

Indeed, when Jo states, "I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy," she herself sets in motion her narrative's prevailing dynamic, which not only informs her own thwarted desires but compels the range of readerly disappointments or senses of loss I have discussed. But Jo's initial disappointment configures her plot even more complexly by constructing a problem that can never be solved satisfactorily, for she will not become a boy no matter how hard she tries. Madelon Bedell approaches the impossibility of ending Jo's plot by arguing that while *Little Women* "may be *the* American female myth, its subject the primordial one of the passage from childhood, from girl to woman," there is "a haunting sense of incompleteness about the legend, as there is not to the tidy story." So incongruous is the end to Jo's plot, Bedell suggests, that readers must locate their identification in an extratextual realm: "We identify in the end not so much with the Jo of the

book as with 'some Jo of the future,' the independent woman she failed to become." As such, the legend "is eternally unfinished."[33] What Bedell may be amplifying is the theoretical impossibility of completing Jo's queer narrative, which by definition exposes the very thing that children often represent—that sexual and gender identity is eternally unfinished. All of Jo's detours away from the finally enforced frame of the oedipal ending situate her true plot, if you will, "in the middle."

Is it finally the fact of Jo's refusal to "become a woman" (in the beginning and middle of her plot) that has entranced so many readers? Is the allure of her male identification so powerful as to contest narrative's ability to explain the unsolvable problem of origins and sexuality? Invoking the logic of the oedipal plot, which he considers to inform all narrative desire, Peter Brooks submits that narrative "is the ordering of the inexplicable and impossible situation" and that it "somehow mediates and forcefully connects its discrete elements, so that we accept the necessity of what cannot logically be discoursed of."[34] As I have suggested, the tomboy "cannot logically be discoursed of," or, as Butler would say, is "foreclosed," in the terms of a heterosexual, oedipal, or patriarchal framework. The lesbian philosopher Monique Wittig suggests the consequential effect of queer sexuality on the gender system: "The refusal to become (or to remain) heterosexual always has meant to refuse to become a man or a woman, consciously or not."[35] The tomboy's refusal to "become . . . a woman, consciously or not" has always meant, on some level, the refusal to participate in the heterosexual system. This is the very fantasy that the tomboy narrative allows readers phantasmatically to consider. So dangerous to the entire social system is such a fantasy, however, that the oedipal masterplot must return—as it does at the end of Jo's plot—to reconnect "forcefully" what cannot, in the realm of patriarchal logic, "be discoursed of." That the tomboy's specter of queer difference has captivated so many girls and women since the late nineteenth century suggests just how close to the surface such desires reside.

Anxieties of Influence: Reading for the Queer Girl's Plot

Theories of children's literature further illuminate the dynamics that inform representations of the tomboy plot; they also help explain why Jo's story is one of the most popular and provocative literary representations of Anglo-American girlhood itself. As Rose and James R. Kincaid argue persuasively, the primary characteristic that the child possesses but that must simultaneously be disavowed is "polymorphous perversity," comprising the ungoverned sexual aims that have not yet

been influenced by social rules. The child, because it is "originally" sexual in a polymorphous way, challenges our adult investment in the concept that sexuality is both normative and fixed. Therefore, if sexual desires and identities can never be established once and for all, it may be that we turn again and again to narratives of childhood to replay the pleasure and terror of sexual possibility.[36] In fact, the literary children who have the greatest hold on the Anglo-American imagination seem to be those whose erotic aims remain, in some fashion, ungoverned by social and gender rules, such as Twain's Huck Finn, who shares a queer, cross-racial intimacy with Jim, or Stowe's Little Eva, whose potential transgressions with Tom are so great as to demand her early death.[37] In both cases, by constituting the child as innocent (despite the unruly sexual aims lurking in her or him just below the surface), we do not so much repress *the child's* sexuality, Rose argues, as "hold off any possible challenge to our own." Kincaid similarly notes the stakes adults have in children's literature. While children's novels "participat[e] in the formation of a cultural reality," he asserts, they "are also fantasies, adult projections onto an erotic field they are at the same time framing."[38] Adult interpretations of a novel like *Little Women* tell us not only about how we understand the child but about what we are willing or able to acknowledge in ourselves. Implicating the adult reader or critic of children's literature in this way opens an important avenue to an understanding of our cultural and critical fascination with the story of Jo.

In an 1889 review of *Little Women* Ednah D. Cheney addresses the anxiety produced by the perceived power that the authors of children's stories wield over the hearts and minds of their "innocent" charges. Although Cheney means to praise Alcott, her celebration of Alcott's authorial influence also comes across as a warning:

> Louisa May Alcott is universally recognized as the greatest and most popular story-teller for children in her generation. She has known the way to the hearts of young people. . . . Plato says: "Beware of those who teach fables to children"; and it is impossible to estimate the influence which the popular writer of fiction has over the audience [she] wins to listen to [her] tale. . . . [Her] seductive powers of imagination and sentiment takes [*sic*] possession of the fancy and the heart before judgement and reason are aroused to defend the citadel.[39]

Given our recognition of Jo's power to enchant readers for over a century with her unruly, queer desires, Cheney's warning seems especially resonant today. As if sensing that Jo's story is not quite what it seems on the surface—a tale of a girl

learning obedience and self-discipline, marked by "judgement and reason"—Cheney betrays the anxiety that the story contains something more subversive, more seductive, in the regions of imagination and feeling. Indeed, we have seen that Alcott's novel "takes possession of the fancy and the heart," producing in its readers a range of identifications and desires that often breach the walls of the child's supposedly innocent and normative realm.

One may well say that Alcott has authorized generations of readers, young and old, to develop a queer reading praxis, inasmuch as she has made Jo's plot appeal to those "fragmented, component and perverse" impulses that reside in us all. When Patricia Meyer Spacks writes in 1975 that her students, all of them female, had "identified with Jo. Not with noble Beth, or domestic Meg, or artistic Amy . . . but with boyish Jo," she concludes that "all of them yearned somehow to be boy and girl simultaneously. Who can blame them?" If Spacks implies that *most* girls want to be both boy and girl, which Jo's popularity seems to bear out on some level, how does that fact affect our notion of "normative" girlhood? Or womanhood? Is the desire to be boy as well as girl purely the desire for the independence that boys enjoy? Spacks's language betrays other, perhaps more complicated, possibilities as well. She writes that "Jo is a dangerous figure" and that Jo's resistance to her mother's lessons in self-discipline emanates from an interiority that does not answer to the logic of judgment and reason that orders girls' more ambiguous desires: "She reveals her creator's awareness that women have needs deeper than Mrs. March allows herself to know."[40] While for many girls and women Jo certainly represents independence broadly defined, to limit a discussion of these deeper needs to such defining oppositions as independence/domesticity and unruliness/self-discipline, which many feminist critics have constructed to analyze Jo's story, narrows our understanding of the "deeper," more "dangerous" passions Jo expresses and incites.

These passions have as much to do with identification as with desire. Heterosexual logic, following Freud, requires us to limit the range of identificatory possibilities to rigidly gendered positions. Girls must identify only with girls, and boys only with boys. Butler argues, and readerly responses to Jo's story emphasize, that "it is important to consider that identification and desire can coexist, and that their formulation in terms of mutually exclusive oppositions serves a heterosexual matrix."[41] So what are we to make of the identifications that normatively gendered little girls form with the cross-gendered tomboy Jo March? Or of the identification that Jo forms with her male ego ideal Laurie? Or of the reader who wants both to be and to have Jo? Bringing queer theory to bear on theories of readership, Kathryn R. Kent points out that "few if any critics explore the psychological

processes involved in reading as producing multiple forms of identification." Kent specifically challenges the rigid Freudian logic that requires the gendered separation of identification and desire: "Rather than interpret the reading subject as in a one-to-one relation to the text, . . . I explore . . . the ways in which reading decenters the subject." Arguing for the multiple attachments readers form to characters and narratives that have no heterosexual framework, Kent suggests that Jo and Laurie offer such identificatory indeterminacies: "Who identifies 'with'/'as' which gender, as well as who might end up desiring whom, becomes difficult to determine and even more difficult to control, at least within the narrative of Jo and Laurie's ambiguous adolescence. This might enable the reader herself to 'try all kinds of lovers' within the narrative frame of compulsory heterosexuality."[42] Kent is one of the few critics to articulate plainly the challenge Jo's character and plot issue to the fixed system of heterosexual desire and identification.

In an autobiographical essay that addresses the queer possibilities of identification provoked by children's literature, Biddy Martin recalls the books that preoccupied her as a child. These books "produc[ed] the fantasies into which [she] escaped or imagined escaping the painful effects of the rules governing sexuality, gender, and maturity in the specifically racialized and class-specific immediate environments in which [she] grew up." Bringing together the terms of gender and sexuality, Martin considers "at what point the infoldings of an outside become psychological processes that remain, at least to some extent, characteristics from childhood sustained over a lifetime, despite the subsequent integration and working through." "What," she asks, "does gender have to do with those processes?"[43]

To answer this question, Martin first provides a literary example of the multiplicity and mobility of desires and identifications that might be attached to a single fictional character, and in the process she unfolds a protolesbian scene. The fiction that triggered such complex networks of desire and identification in Martin's queer girlhood was the Chip Hilton series, ostensibly written for boys, about a high school football star. Reading these stories placed Martin right in the middle of the male athletic arena:

> I not only wanted to be Chip, I loved Chip. . . . An identification with Chip involve[d] disowning other aspects of self, aspects that are, were, in that environment, gendered in very predictable ways. In reality and fantasmatically, I occupied the positions of Chip's teammates and those of his fans as well. . . . But my position as his fan included my expert knowledge of the game and my contempt for the girls whose interest in the boys on the field was what I considered to be frivolous. Here, my place among the girls in

the stands is masked by my identification with Chip and then by my contempt for what got coded in that environment as femininity. In my fantasy, being in the stands at all also allowed me to disown more thoroughly, when I needed to, the desires and aggressions coded male.

As Chip, I hoped to become the object of my mother's adoration, and love, the butch who desires to be the object of the mother's desire, by way of an identification with and aggression toward the brother.[44]

By demonstrating how fiction may function as a space of psychic exploration in which children probe a range of identities and desires, Martin argues against the tendency of adult critics to fix gender and sexuality in definitive relations to each other. By stressing the forms of attachment and separation mirrored in the narratives she read in her own childhood, Martin emphasizes that "the issues raised by the stories and by [my] analysis of them could never be aligned in any simple way with gender difference or with sexual object choice, with the differences between apparently straight and apparently queer sexualities" (37). Finally, by interrogating the assumptions of the alignment between gender identifications and disidentifications, on the one hand, and future sexual object choice, on the other, Martin shifts the discussion of childhood identities and desires into a queer discourse suggesting that the mobility within such development may extend into adulthood through the act of recollection. That is, through the retrospective act of reading the queer girl's plot (her own), Martin pleads that we not "prematurely put the brakes on our attention to those folds and pleats that constitute subjectivity, supplying social or formulaic psychoanalytic explanations for the links among society, psyche, and self" (43).

In many ways, the queer reading practice Martin theorizes is consonant with a Barthesian paradigm in which reading or interpretation ought not "consist in stopping the chain of systems, in establishing a truth, a legality of the text. . . . [Rather] it consists in coupling these systems, not according to their finite quantity, but according to their plurality."[45] We might consider this paradigm a metaphor for a queer readerly practice, in which the open chain of textual signification is understood, in turn, as a metaphor for the multiple, unfixed, mobile potentiality that accompanies the queer childhood desires and identifications developed in response to fictional narratives. As critics, we cannot begin to imagine the plurality of meanings for the queer child—or for any child—of texts that may, like *Little Women* and the Chip Hilton series, tell highly conventional stories on the surface.

Rose reminds us that "sexuality works above all at the level of fantasy, and

that what we take to be our sexual identity is always precarious and can never be assumed. Sexuality persists, for all of us, at the level of the unconscious precisely because it is a question which is never quite settled, *a story which can never be brought to a close*."[46] If so, we should also consider how this understanding of sexuality affects theories of narrative that typically argue that the "close" of a plot confers meaning retrospectively on the entire story. Such narrative ends, of course, tend to shore up the "coherence" of heterosexuality and other hegemonic social forms.[47] If we want to read with a clearer sense of the crucial ways that sexuality functions in life and hence in narrative, then it is important for us to examine more carefully the machinations that occur in the middle of the plot—the narrative detours, like Jo's retreat into the "curtained recess" to encounter her male ego ideal in Laurie and her desire to act the male parts in minidramas—because they become telling indices of many of the more complex aspects of girlhood development.

The Gypsy Breynton Footnote

If Jo's plot could not end as its author wanted, with Jo as a literary spinster, we might turn to an obscure progenitor of Jo March for a glimpse of what happens to a tomboy who does refuse to marry. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's title character in the Gypsy Breynton series (1866–67) challenges heterosexual developmental logic by resolutely proclaiming her own queer desires for adulthood. "I'm not going to stay at home and keep house, and look sober," she says; "I'd rather be an old maid, and have a pony, and run around in the woods."[48] Such a fantasy lands this tomboy astride a pony, riding free of the erotic and economic control of men, for the first four books in the series. Still, in the final novel Gypsy's cousin Joy—a blond, well-to-do city girl—asks Gypsy the inevitable marriage question. In response to Joy's own dreamy desire to marry someday, clad in "a white velvet dress," Gypsy replies emphatically, "I wouldn't [marry] for a whole trunkful of white velvet dresses."[49] Phelps, who seems to understand the power of the dress as a signifier of a tomboy's acquiescence to femininity *and* heterosexuality, has Gypsy repudiate it many times over—by the trunkful, as it were. As perhaps *the* signifier of heterosexuality in tomboy narratives, the dress functions, precisely, to cover up the complex psychic forces at work when a tomboy is reclaimed for men. So powerful is Gypsy's rejection of the dress that she is soon anxiously wondering "what in this world was I ever made for. I suppose there's got to be a reason" (201). The very fact that she feels there must be "a reason" signals her loss of position within the narrative of heterosexuality, a narrative that works primarily to render coherent the child's "fragmented, component and perverse" sexuality. Phelps's refusal to answer

Gypsy's question is, if we can recognize it as such, the most coherent response, for it leaves Gypsy's sexual and gender identities, along with ours, in the obliquity of the queer narrative middle.

Notes

1. Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, ed. Valerie Alderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7. The novel has been called "the most popular girls' story in American literature" (Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* [New York: Macmillan, 1947], 102).
2. Catharine R. Stimpson, "Reading for Love: Canons, Paracanons, and Whistling Jo March," *New Literary History* 21 (1990): 967.
3. Although neither protolesbian nor lesbian were identity categories available to Alcott at the time that she wrote *Little Women*, today we recognize that tomboys who grow up to form primary erotic relationships with women are not in short supply. The late-nineteenth-century journals and records of such notables as Willa Cather and M. Carey Thomas (a president of Bryn Mawr College) reveal the nature of their tomboy childhoods, their identifications with Jo March specifically, and their later passionate relationships with women. In fiction, such male-identified or tomboy characters as Stephen Gordon in Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* and Molly Bolt in Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* illustrate how a girl's male identification may fold into her adult lesbian (or invert) identity. Testimonials by young tomboys also reveal the relationship between tomboy identity and lesbian desire. One such tomboy recently confirmed that her peers also understood the tomboy as a protolesbian or lesbian figure when she described the disciplining force of antilesbian harassment in junior high school: "I was a tomboy, wore 'boyish' clothes, played sports. I did things that they [didn't] think girls should be doing" (Devon Powers, "Back to the Basics," *Respect* 10 [2002]: 8). To avoid the harassment, this tomboy not only changed schools but considered changing her look: "I was going to be Miss Feminine Popularity—buy girly clothes, wear makeup—so I would fit in at my new school" (8). This sartorial solution is usually forced on the tomboy by parents and peers when the tomboy reaches puberty; this tomboy, like many before her, understood the power of visual conformity represented through dress, but because such a move was anathema to her, she decided not to "redress" herself and as a result continued to endure antilesbian harassment.
4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.
5. Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan; or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 14.
6. Sharon O'Brien, "Tomboyism and Adolescent Conflict: Three Nineteenth-Century Case Studies," in *Woman's Being, Woman's Place: Female Identity and Vocation in American History*, ed. Mary Kelley (Boston: Hall, 1979), 352.

7. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed. (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), 333.
8. Horatio Alger, *Tattered Tom; or, The Story of a Street Arab* (Boston: Loring, 1871).
9. Michael Moon, "'The Gentle Boy from the Dangerous Classes': Pederasty, Domesticity, and Capitalism in Horatio Alger," *Representations* 19 (1987): 96.
10. Moon's dismissal of Alger's tomboy plot as "conventional" proceeds from the assumption that some girls suffer from the perfectly understandable desire to be boys, which they will invariably—and naturally—outgrow. This logic rests on Freud's theory of penis envy, which Moon seems—quite surprisingly, given his usual feminist sympathies—to accept uncritically, but only, it appears, so that he can then reveal the truly *queer-male* dynamics in Alger's story. The appropriation of the tomboy or cross-dressed girl as a figure of queer boyhood has become almost a trend in gay male criticism. For instance, Min Song argues that a 1912 story of a Chinese American cross-dressed girl is actually a representation of the effeminized Asian male ("The Unknowable and Sui Sin Far: The Epistemological Limits of 'Oriental' Sexuality," in *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, ed. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998], 304–22).
11. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 8.
12. Stimpson, "Reading for Love," 969.
13. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.
14. As I discuss in the study from which this article is drawn, other tropes besides cross-gender identification with brothers or male peers often mark the queer girl's story; they include same-sex flirtation, the girl's turn away from the mother, the adoption of queer mentors, and cross-racial alliance ("The Queer Girl's Plot: Counter-narrative Traditions in American Women's Literature" [PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2000]).
15. Barbara Sicherman, "Reading *Little Women*: The Many Lives of a Text," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 265.
16. Elizabeth Janeway, "Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, and Louisa," in *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: Hall, 1984), 98.
17. Fiedler, *Love and Death*, 333.
18. Sarah Elbert, *A Hunger for Home: Louisa May Alcott and "Little Women"* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), xi. Alcott's feelings, revealed to a woman journalist in her day, are quoted in Leo Lerman, "*Little Women*: Who's in Love with Miss Louisa May Alcott? I Am," *Mademoiselle*, December 1973, 40. Like Elbert, other critics have noted the tension in Jo's plot between the conventional, "domestic" narrative and the more progressive, feminist one. Shirley Foster and Judy Simons argue: "Close analysis of the text elicits unresolved tensions in the depictions of girlhood and the narratives available to women. . . . In its ability to promote a double set of value systems, the book maintains a precarious balancing act, simultaneously providing for its

readers a positive image of the values of home and female domesticity *and* arguing for the importance of creative independence for women" (*What Katy Read: Feminist Re-readings of "Classic" Stories for Girls* [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995], 87). Stimpson agrees: "A grumpy tension remains between the softening of gender categories, which tomboy Jo March emblematizes, and the hardening of an ideology of a happy family that clings to those very gender categories, a belief system that *Little Women* valorizes. To keep this conflict from tearing the story apart, *Little Women* shows both Jo March and Jo Bhaer needing and enjoying a happy family" ("Reading for Love," 968–69).

19. On the feminist tendency to disavow the tomboy's queer potential see Barbara A. White, *Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1985); and Susan Jackson and Eve Kornfeld, "The Female Bildungsroman in Nineteenth-Century America: Parameters of a Vision," *Journal of American Culture* 10, no. 4 (1987): 69–75.
20. Elbert, *Hunger for Home*, 158.
21. Alcott, *Little Women*, 25, 8, 19. Not only does Jo love her male attire, but the male parts she loves to play often situate her in highly romantic relationships to the female parts. In this theatrical realm she may play out the entire range of desire and identification that a cross-gender identity allows.
22. Laurie appears in this marginal space plainly representing the boy Jo hopes to become. Such an identification with a male peer or a brother is often the most significant relationship a tomboy develops in childhood, because it allows her to explore a circuit of male identification and desire.
23. Quoted in Stern, *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, 135.
24. Elbert, *Hunger for Home*, 158.
25. Indeed, even Freud may be helpful here in explaining the nature of Jo's desire. In "Mourning and Melancholia" he writes that identification is a form of desire, "a preliminary stage of object-choice" (*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, ed. and trans. James Strachey [New York: Norton, 1989], 249). Diana Fuss extends the logic of this theory by asking, "What is identification if not a way to assume the desires of the other?" (*Identification Papers* [New York: Routledge, 1995], 12).
26. Elbert, *Hunger for Home*, xi.
27. Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Reinventing Womanhood* (New York: Norton, 1979), 212. Rather than refuse Jo her male identification, Kathryn R. Kent argues that in fact "it is her persistent masculine identification throughout all of the books in the series that constitutes the most obvious challenge to any reading of her as submitting in full to the limits of domesticity." Kent contends that even in the sequels to *Little Women* Jo maintains that identification, that even as a mother of boys "Jo feels herself a boy." She "identif[ies] with [her male pupils] at the same time that she compels through her seductive example their identifications with her." Thus, Kent argues, "through a masculine form of maternality, Jo preserves her (his?) own erotic relation to maleness,

including her (his) own." By turning to how Jo "mothers" her boys in ways that sustain her male identification, Kent points to the particular nature of Jo's queer identity. Not only does "Jo's history of queer identifications [occur] within what are so obviously circumscribed limits—the limits of . . . domesticity," but "Alcott's *Little Women* series, and her entire oeuvre, dramatizes the need for women (and men) to find other identity categories and social spaces besides those offered by the nuclear family, even as her novels appropriate, revise, and queer the familial" (*Making Girls into Women: American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2003], 54, 58, 59).

28. Alcott, *Little Women*, 7.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., xxiii.
31. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 235.
32. Judith Fetterley, "*Little Women*: Alcott's Civil War," *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979): 381.
33. See Stern, *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, 146, 148, 149.
34. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 9, 10.
35. Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 13.
36. See Rose, *Case of Peter Pan*; and James R. Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). Queer theorists have argued this point in various contexts as well. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Sedgwick, *Tendencies*; and Ken Corbett, "Homosexual Boyhood: Notes on Girlyboys," in *Sissies and Tomboys: Gender Nonconformity and Homosexual Childhood*, ed. Matthew Rottnek (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 107–39.
37. Fiedler argues that Little Eva's closeness to Tom raises the threat of a dangerous liaison that must be symbolically contained by her overdetermined representation as the blond, white, asexual angel of the nursery. Yet so threatening is her devotion to Tom that it must be wiped out before it can signify anything more than an innocent love for the humanity of the enslaved African.
38. Rose, *Case of Peter Pan*, 4; Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 67.
39. Ednah D. Cheney, "Her Works Are a Revelation of Herself," in Stern, *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, 211.
40. Patricia Meyer Spacks, "*Little Women* and the Female Imagination," in Stern, *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, 114–15, 119.
41. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 26.
42. Kent, *Making Girls into Women*, 76–77, 81.
43. Biddy Martin, *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 35.

44. Ibid., 41.
45. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Noonday, 1975), 11.
46. Rose, *Case of Peter Pan*, 4; my emphasis.
47. For theories on endings see Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*; and Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*.
48. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Gypsy's Cousin Joy* (1866) (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1876), 199–200. See Elizabeth Segel, "The *Gypsy Breynton* Series: Setting the Pattern for American Tomboy Heroines," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1989): 67–71.
49. Phelps, *Gypsy's Cousin Joy*, 200.

Portraying Little Women Through The Ages By Anne Hollander

This article examines how *Little Women* has been seen and felt since it's publication. This article mostly focuses on how other women academics, or writers have been affected by the novel and how it has shaped their interpretation on its legacy. It also talks about how each new adaptation, film or play is a product of its time just as much as Alcott's first draft was.

Portraying *Little Women* Through the Ages

Anne Hollander

The three extant film versions of *Little Women* give audiences a view of prevailing tastes in American movie good girls. Through the medium of a beloved classic story, each one displays the current fashion in what groups of girls in movies should be like. The 1933 version had the Sweetheart and the Siren trumped by the Enthusiast, with Mother an aging character part. The 1949 version had the Girl Next Door take precedence over two types of Prom Queen, and Mother was Still Lovely. And the current version offers a range of Self-Realized Women of all ages—today, nobody is old. We could even guess that the lost silent-film versions—an American one in 1918 and an earlier British one—had Madcap Hoydens balanced with Submissive Damsels, and that Mother had the correct silver hair.

But fashion in movie girls really means specific ones, the popular stars of the moment in their characteristic personae. The 26-year-old Katharine Hepburn played Jo March in 1933 with her usual refined recklessness, backed up by the ripely sullen Joan Bennett, who then seemed fine as the selfish child Amy, despite being 24 and pregnant. The child part would prefigure the yummy blonde Amy would later become. In 1949, it was bouncy, hoarse-voiced June Allyson, then 32, as Jo, set off against the lush 17-year-old Elizabeth Taylor as Amy, another precocious bombshell, and Janet Leigh in her usual brittle and bosomy style as Meg.

In 1994, the young Amy is our currently fiendish child actress, Kirsten Dunst of *Interview With the Vampire* fame; frail Beth can be our most sympathetic television teen-ager, Claire Danes, while Jo must be the ubiquitously grinning and chirping Winona Ryder. And nowadays, Mother can be one of the girls, as the always young, beautiful and determined Susan Sarandon.

For many viewers of George Cukor's 1933 *Little Women*, the look

Who's Who in the past

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back at family unity and homemade pleasures, enjoyed in long skirts and horse-drawn vehicles, contrasted favorably with harsh modern horrors, to say nothing of harsh modern pleasures. Poverty, all too grim in bread lines and Hoovervilles, in the March home had the comfortable glow of nostalgia, which gave a heartening strength to the film's vision of courage in the face of want.

For those to whom the safe 19th century seemed only a short way back, even the delights of modernity—with its fast cars and fast music—could be a real shock. Some would doubtless have agreed with Thornton Delehanty, who wrote in *The New York Post* that the film was "a reminder that emotions and vitality and truth can be evoked from lavender and lace as well as from machine guns and precision dancing."

The screenplay, by Sarah Y. Mason and Victor Heerman, frequently borrowed word for word from the book; in fact, the 19th-century tone could still be un-self-consciously assumed by screen actors in 1933, many of whom were accustomed to classic rhetoric and old-fashioned theatrical expression. Ms. Hepburn, for example, was to win the 1933 Oscar for her very stagy performance in the film *Morning Glory*.

The general atmosphere of effortless decorum in *Little Women* threw Ms. Hepburn's farouche quality into fine relief. She flung herself about with just enough abandon to look right as the gawky Jo, without being gawky at all, only modern and ready to move away from Victoriana. She looked just as great in the March family theatricals wearing boots and doublet as she would have on stage playing Rosalind. In either case, audiences knew she was still a proper feminine heroine quite prepared to wear skirts and fall in love, even though Alcott's Jo was made out to be ungainly and prickly, entirely unfit for nice dresses and coquetry.

The 1949 screenplay, directed by Mervyn LeRoy, was virtually the same as the earlier one, and the additional material by Andrew Solt simply made everything more obvious—in keeping with the self-conscious 50's tone and Technicolor. Color helped and hindered in its usual ways, making the film more fun to watch but much less real, even though each sister could at least have hair of the correct hue.

As usual for a film from this period, every head is forever perfectly coiffed, and the girls' faces are thoroughly made up. Disbelief was the most painfully suspended, however, at the sight of the tiny, waiflike, 12-year-old Margaret O'Brien playing Beth, whom viewers were expected to accept as older than the voluptuous Amy, played by the nubile and strapping Ms. Taylor.

While once more telling the story of the impoverished Marches, this

film actually celebrates the fresh postwar pleasure of acquiring sleek new possessions. The 1949 March girls don't just dream of what they would like to buy with their Christmas money, before unselfishly spending it on presents for their mother. In LeRoy's remake, the girls make a gala expedition to the general store and, with great fanfare, purchase wonderful things for themselves. Then they change their minds, take everything back to the store, and buy brand-new, useful gifts for their mother, Marmee—no homemade presents from these dedicated young consumers.

Thus two elaborate shopping trips are required and the national female pastime for the next decade is marked out. Girls henceforth must stay home and have large families, which they must lovingly supply and resupply with purchases. Alcott's March family, with its makeshift amusements and threadbare arrangements, is visually played down by LeRoy. Postwar Americans would not find signs of want entertaining. What was clearly very pleasing, however, was the sight of so many girls in enormous skirts, with aprons firmly tied. True to her screen nature, though, June Allyson bounces around so much that her skirts go straight up and allow waist-down views of white pantalettes—an effect considered comic in 1949, but truly out of bounds for the 1860's, whether Jo was a tomboy or not.

Marmee and Father are, in fact, very well played in the 1949 version by Mary Astor and Leon Ames, who had only lately been the handsome and loving parents of Margaret O'Brien (along with some other notable 19th-century sisters) in the glorious Vincente Minnelli musical of 1944 *Meet Me in St. Louis*. The memory of that film, not faith in Alcott's book, creates the form and flavor of those three 1949 performances. They borrow a warm spirit of family harmony sustained by music, not morality. So we get a jolly musical-comedy father, and an indulgent, beautiful mother in an otherwise arch, somewhat hysterical movie.

Gillian Armstrong's new film is written by Robin Swicord, and Alcott's own dialogue has largely gone by the board. Instead we get informed utterance based on historical research apparently using Alcott's own journal, read in voice-over by Ms. Ryder. Besides Transcendentalism, references are added to the temperance and women's suffrage movements of the time, as if to make both Jo and Marmee pure Alcott substitutes. This is done mainly to suggest that she and they were ahead of their time and would have been more at home among us. To support this idea, the film consists of wholly modern-sounding dialogue, so as to leave the real 19th century behind—except of course for its visually delicious trappings.

One or two holdovers from the 1933 screenplay are modern additions: in a scene apparently designed to keep faith with 20th-century movie

tradition, Jo goes to the opera with the German professor she meets in New York. This rather amorously charged scene is not in the book—and rightly. No well-bred young woman of the 1860's would ever have gone out with a strange gentleman in a strange city; Alcott's Jo made her evening excursions under the wing of one Miss Norton, a mature and cultivated spinster who lived in the boardinghouse.

Both period shabbiness and period elegance are admirably rendered in Ms. Armstrong's film, and the actresses appear to be performing in little makeup; but their modern language and diction are jarringly out of keeping with the visual ambience. This *Little Women* caresses our love for "period" in the Ralph Lauren spirit, but it seems to want to keep its characters speaking familiarly in our own slurred idiom.

In the 1860's educated speech was of the utmost importance in the March class of New England society. For the Marches themselves, this would have been doubly true, since they had lost the solid income that would otherwise have sustained their honor. These gentlewomen would have all been known by their well-bred usages, clear articulation and modulated tones; but Ms. Sarandon's Marmee says "different than," and Ms. Ryder speaks in the same modern squawk she has used in all her films. In it, she can even refer to *Dombey and Sons* with impunity. Energy and strength of will, not a credible 19th-century speech, seem to be the desired qualities in a 90's Jo.

Ms. Sarandon plays Marmee as another of her attractive-feisty-woman-and-heroic-mom parts, not as Alcott's gentle character. She, not the absent but potent father so important in the novel, is the moral authority of this 90's film. She objects to slavery, child labor and corsets. She speaks her mind, has lots of spunk and urges her spunky daughter to go further than she could herself. These qualities are the paramount female virtues in this film—modern female virtues, the properties of a contemporary woman who can take charge of all aspects of moral and practical life without depending on male support or advice.

It is Alcott herself, not her fictional characters, who is the main personality behind this new film—Alcott who, in fact, did not marry and who accomplished a great deal despite the early influence of a rather formidable father. Ms. Armstrong seems determined to be true to Alcott the woman, and to see hers as a 1990's sensibility, rather than to respect her dated fictional efforts.

In this *Little Women*, Jo's rebellion against polite feminine society had to be omitted, since polite feminine society itself now seems unreal. Moreover Ms. Ryder's neat small prettiness makes Jo's boyish, lanky awkwardness impossible, apart from its having no modern importance as a social

detriment. Jo is not made to seem modern against an old-fashioned background; the whole of Concord seems as modern as she.

All three film versions have handily tossed out the religion that permeates the novel, embodied in the girls' wise, godlike father. In fact, all the male characters have been somewhat stunted by the film makers, so the romance is a bit scanted, just like the religion. Alcott carefully made Laurie (the boy next door) an incredibly handsome, sexually attractive and sexually enterprising young man, a musician and a vigorous lover of beauty—too much for the unsensual Jo, as doubtless for Alcott, his creator. She portrays Meg's suitor as dark, sweet and serious, but all of the movies make him a ninny—as if they felt the force of Alcott's independent female spirit and her clear distrust of sexuality. And all the movies emphasize Jo's hatred of Meg's marriage. In the book, Alcott's own private professorial fantasy is comically benevolent and not very erotic. The earlier films have even kept him a bit ridiculous.

Ms. Armstrong's Professor Bhaer is played by the Byronic Gabriel Byrne as a youngish held-over Romantic, with dark hair and an intense gaze. No eyeglasses, which Alcott gave him, no absent-minded untidiness for this professor. Ms. Armstrong's movie is the only one to reward Jo's forceful independence with a really sexy, intelligent lover who also won't interfere with her work. And that's a true 1990's invention.

I don't think reviser should feature at all, but romance must in the novel.

- This is what's lacking in Laurie's dialogue. The Sexpress

- Could Laurie be sexy & the Professor boolish?

- This might make Laurie's denial more regn