

**Domestic Narratives in the Transatlantic  
Community: Elizabeth Gaskell and Louisa  
May Alcott**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## **Abstract**

My thesis investigates the processes of reciprocal, transatlantic literary exchange between Britain and the United States in the nineteenth century. While these specific transnational relations have received much critical attention in recent years, I extend current theoretical frameworks by focusing on how women's domestic fiction operates as a currency for literal and ideological interchanges between Britain and the United States.

Concentrating primarily upon Elizabeth Gaskell's and Louisa May Alcott's fictions, I trace how they operate as 'transatlantic domestic narratives'. I use this term to refer to the mobility of their material texts as they circulate within a transatlantic community, and also to articulate the generic narrative tropes on which their domestic fictions rely. I explore, therefore, how the rhetoric of domesticity – as transmitted through the transatlantic domestic narrative – becomes a shared medium through which specific localised concerns can be articulated and circulated within a transatlantic arena.

Focusing on four domestic tropes which were common on both sides of the Atlantic – home, the worker, the nurse, and the witch – I illustrate how both Gaskell and Alcott mobilise these four narrative structures in order to contribute to local and transnational debates in which national, literary and gendered identities are created and contested. Both authors' fictions, I demonstrate, exemplify, and have a significant impact upon, a transatlantic literary marketplace.

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# Introduction

## Transatlantic Domestic Narratives

### Transatlantic (Dis)Satisfactions

In 1857, literary agent Sampson Low approached British novelist Elizabeth Gaskell proposing that she edit a British version of Maria Cummins's American bestseller *Mabel Vaughan*, published that year. Gaskell willingly complied with the proposal.<sup>1</sup> Acting as the London agents for U.S. publishers Harper Bros., and conversely as the U.S. contacts for authors such as Gaskell, Sampson Low had established themselves as one of *the* literary agents of the period, boasting a catalogue of authors that included Wilkie Collins, Harriet Beecher Stowe, as well as Louisa May Alcott.<sup>2</sup> Recognising the significance of a transatlantic publishing network facilitated by agents such as Low, Gaskell prefaces her edition of *Mabel Vaughan* with a discussion of the 'pleasant intercourse' established through the 'interchange of novels which seems to be going on pretty constantly' between Britain and the United States.<sup>3</sup> This exchange, she implies, is facilitated through the exchange of domestic fiction and the ideology of domesticity:

Our cousinly connection with the Americans dates from our common ancestors of whom we are both proud [...] When we are stirred to our utmost depths by some passage or other in "Uncle Tom", we say from our full hearts, "And I am also of the same race as this woman" [...] It is our Anglo-Saxon descent which makes us both so undemonstrative; or perhaps I should say, so ready to express our little dissatisfactions with each other, while the deeper feelings (such as our love and confidence in each other,) are unspoken [...] Through the means of works of fiction, we obtain glimpses into American home-life; of their modes of thought, their traditional observances, and their social

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<sup>1</sup> She received £50 for her work.

<sup>2</sup> Gaskell did, however, have a difficult relationship with Low. In a letter to her friend Charles Eliot Norton (1857) she describes the agent as a 'tricky man' who she would 'like to out-dodge', believing he had deliberately not paid her for her story 'Doom of the Griffiths'. *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 488. The story was, however, published in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in January 1858.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, 'Introduction', to Maria Cummins, *Mabel Vaughan* (London: Sampson Low, 1857), p. vi.

temptations, quite beyond and apart from the observations of travellers, who, after all, only see the family in the street, or on the festival-days, not in the quiet domestic circle, into which the stranger is rarely admitted.<sup>4</sup>

Gaskell constructs an extended familial metaphor to emphasise the shared linguistic and ancestral heritage that connect the two nations. The ‘cousinly’ relations, predicated upon a common ‘Anglo-Saxon’ descent, enable texts such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) to enter into British reading circles and provoke empathetic responses. Gaskell’s use of the term ‘race’ here as a conjoining metaphor is significant; it is a reference to an explicitly white Anglo-Saxon heritage that structures British-U.S. familial relations, forming an exclusive forum in which transnational issues such as abolitionism could be debated.<sup>5</sup> Gaskell, therefore, positions the ‘little dissatisfactions’ which sometimes characterise transatlantic relations as merely superficial familial squabbles that hide a deep-rooted mutual respect.

However, while texts such as *Mabel Vaughan* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* both facilitate and affirm these connections, they are also the vehicles through which difference is asserted. The ‘little dissatisfactions’ between the nations are underplayed, yet they register in Gaskell’s unconscious slippage between the prepositions ‘we’ and ‘our’ used to describe American ‘home-life’. While the latter denotes shared ties of transnational affection, ‘we’ is used as a national-specific pronoun – a British reading public that gazes upon and consumes ‘the quiet domestic circle’ in which U.S. difference is performed. The brief ‘glimpses’ of ‘home-life’ presented to the ‘stranger’ are depicted as both instantly recognisable and essentially foreign as national difference is respectively bridged and affirmed. Domestic texts like *Mabel Vaughan*, therefore, have a dual identity. They operate both as depictions of localised or national concerns,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. vi.

<sup>5</sup> Important new work on the relationship between Anglo-Saxonism, British and American relations and ethnicity has been done by Elisa Tamarkin in *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion and Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 239-40.



and also manifest themselves as mobile cultural products that are consumed by audiences on the other side of the Atlantic. These domestic fictions, Gaskell implies, speak to both a specific and an expansive transatlantic community of readers.

Sampson Low's edition and Gaskell's 'Preface', I contend, neatly articulate the dynamics of the transatlantic literary relationship between Britain and the United States in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The British edition of *Mabel Vaughan* exemplifies the processes of *reciprocal* exchange that enabled both Cummins's text to cross the Atlantic, and Gaskell's work to reach U.S. audiences.<sup>7</sup> This anecdote encapsulates many of the preoccupations that inform my work. In this thesis I explore how women's domestic fiction operated as a currency for transatlantic exchanges. Focusing upon the works of Elizabeth Gaskell as well as her U.S. contemporary Louisa May Alcott, authors whose careers exemplify processes of transnational interaction, I trace how their domestic texts circulate within, and manifest as products of, a transatlantic community. In order to describe the mobility and pervasiveness of fictions such as *Mabel Vaughan* I use the term 'transatlantic domestic narrative'. I invoke this concept to refer to the circulation of an individual text such as Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851-53), or Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-69) within the literary marketplace, *and* also to articulate the generic narrative tropes – such as 'home-life' – on which their domestic fictions rely. Moreover, this thesis explores how both authors use the rhetoric of domesticity to articulate female

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<sup>6</sup> Gaskell's perplexing decision to insert a section of her own composition into Cummins's completed manuscript, entitled 'an Incident at Niagara Falls', is another example of how the literary marketplace operated transatlantically. In this strange insertion, she describes the fate of two Irishmen, who, in a failed attempt to cross the river above the falls, find themselves fortuitously beached on a small island located in the centre of the river. Both manage to escape unharmed. This literary digression does little to enhance the novel's narrative structure, nor to reflect upon the characters of Cummins's main protagonists. For more information see Angus Easson, 'Elizabeth Gaskell, "An Incident at Niagara Falls," and the Editing of *Mabel Vaughan*', *English Language Notes*, 17 (1980), 273-277. Easson is unable to discover Gaskell's intention in her re-writing of Cummins's material; however, he does concede that in her editorial interventions 'no adverse reflection seems intended on the United States' (p. 276). The fact that 'An Incident' was later published separately by Sampson Low in June 1858 in the American journal *Harper's New Monthly* illustrates the extent to which *Mabel Vaughan* and the domestic genre of which it is a part, participated in, and facilitated the development of, a transatlantic literary system.

<sup>7</sup> Gaskell's work was extremely popular in the United States, particularly *Cranford*, as I explore in Chapter One.

experience in a local and transnational context. As Gaskell's 'Preface' demonstrates, domestic discourse can be mobilised to articulate a specific 'home-life', as well as construct a white, British-U.S. familial community.<sup>8</sup> Through a transatlantic framework, then, I explore how Gaskell and Alcott mobilise domestic narrative structures to contribute to local and transnational debates in which national, literary and gendered identities are created and contested.

In doing so, I aim to affirm the significance of women's domestic writing in shaping cultural and political exchanges between Britain and the United States.<sup>9</sup> While transatlantic paradigms have been increasingly and productively applied to nineteenth-century literary interaction to destabilise nation-based models of literary and cultural identity, the significance of women's domestic writing within this process has remained largely ignored by critics. This body of writing has generally been conceived through national literary paradigms (Tompkins, Baym, Kaplan, Armstrong) which has hindered transatlantic readings.<sup>10</sup> While some recent author-specific studies have explored the transatlantic legacies of texts by female authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe (Meer) and George Eliot (Mueller), the primacy of domestic fiction, largely produced and read

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<sup>8</sup> While race and ethnicity do not form the central focus of my thesis, it is worth noting the transatlantic community Gaskell is referring to in this instance is mainly white. She is, therefore, working on a set of assumptions based upon her own experiences rather than making an explicit choice.

<sup>9</sup> While I focus here upon exchanges between Britain and the United States important work has been done on the significance of the wider Atlantic world within literary, cultural and historical exchanges. See *The British Atlantic World 1500-1800*, ed. by David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), and Ralph Bauer, *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Bauer argues that the Mediterranean setting and literary legacy of Shakespeare's Anglo-American play *The Tempest* 'urges us to adopt not only an imperial and transatlantic but also a hemispheric and transnational perspective on the modern world' and its literary products (pp. 2-3). Anna Brickhouse, on the other hand, adapts transatlantic methodologies to explore literary interchange within the American continent: see *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-century Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Moreover, transatlantic methodologies have also been used to explore the linguistic plurality of 'national' literatures: see Colleen Glenney Bogg's *Transnationalism and American Literature: Literary Translation, 1773-1892* (London: Routledge, 2007). See Joel Pace, 'Towards a Taxonomy of Transatlantic Romanticism(s)', *Literature Compass*, 5:2 (2008), 228-291 for an extensive discussion of recent transatlantic study and its geographical constructs or limitations.

<sup>10</sup> See Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America 1820-1870*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Amy Kaplan, 'Manifest Domesticity', *American Literature*, 70:3. (1998), 581-606; Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

by white women, as a medium for transatlantic exchange has remained relatively unexplored.<sup>11</sup> I discuss these critical trends in more detail in the fourth section of this introduction. By exploring how this literature written by women contributed to and shaped transnational debates, I affirm the significance of Gaskell and Alcott's domestic oeuvre in the formation and consolidation of, firstly, a national literary identity and, secondly, a developing notion of female vocation that helped established a transatlantic community.

In order to illustrate this point, I focus upon four tropes of female identity represented in accessible narrative frameworks and addressed by Gaskell and Alcott: home(maker), work(er)/author, the nurse and the witch. I choose these categories as they are, foremost, common narrative structures within domestic fiction on both sides of the Atlantic. By exploring how these tropes are adapted and re-written by Gaskell and Alcott, I trace the similarities and differences that compose British and U.S. versions of the same story. The points of comparison and departure can, I contend, be read as pertinent commentaries on the contemporary social and political climate that circulate within a concurrently localised and transatlantic literary community. These four tropes also operate self-reflexively. I consider how the figure of the home-maker, the worker, the nurse and her ideological antithesis, the witch, place pressure upon the gendered and nationalised boundaries – both ideological and spatial – that define them and the sphere in which they operate. Both asserting hegemonic ideological structures and the binary oppositions between public/private spaces, male/female, professional/amateur, domestic/foreign and challenging these absolute categories, these tropes become

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<sup>11</sup> As Sarah Meer has persuasively argued, Stowe's novel was a transatlantic consumer commodity, as well as a highly accessible and adaptable narrative, that became a conceptual space in which conflicting ideologies of slavery and formations of gender identity were played out. *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2005). See also: Monika Mueller, *George Eliot U.S.: Transatlantic Literary and Cultural Perspectives* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2005), and Jennifer Cognard Smith, *Narrative in the Professional Age: Transatlantic Readings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and George Eliot* (London: Routledge, 2004).

dynamic literary tools. As they are contained within mobile domestic narratives, they also draw attention to the processes of identity formation.

In locating Gaskell and Alcott within a transnational framework in which I highlight the process of transatlantic exchange, I build on a recent body of criticism that has challenged the specific nationalised paradigms traditionally applied to their domestic works.<sup>12</sup> Gaskell's fiction in particular has been increasingly placed in a wider interpretive framework: from describing her intertextual dialogues with U.S. author, Sarah Orne Jewett (Shelston); to exploring the transnational movements of *North and South* (Lee); and to juxtaposing the tensions between the industrial North and the rural South with the imperial boundaries drawn between East and West (Markovits).<sup>13</sup> While Gaskell's texts relied upon, and contributed to, transnational debate, work by Shelston, Uglow, Skrine and Silvey has collectively affirmed the author's personal influence and participation within nineteenth-century literary society.<sup>14</sup> Visited by authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Charlotte Brontë, in correspondence with Charles Dickens, and George Eliot, friends with the influential American Charles Eliot Norton, reading works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and James Fields's *The Atlantic*, Gaskell contributes to the creation and consolidation of a transatlantic community.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), for example, has been traditionally located within 'condition of England' studies – as a political commentary on Northern England, but located within a national framework of commercialization. See Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Alcott's *Little Women*, as I demonstrate in Chapter Two, has been conceived through national and gendered paradigms, structures which I argue her text both manipulates and undermines.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Shelston, 'From *Cranford* to the *Country of the Pointed Firs*: Elizabeth Gaskell's American Publication and the work of Sarah Orne Jewett', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 17 (2003), 79-91; Julia Sun-Hoo Lee, 'The Return of the "Unnative": The Transnational Politics of Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Nineteenth-century Literature*, 61:4 (2007), 449-478; Stephanie Markovits, *North and South, East and West: Elizabeth Gaskell, the Crimean War, and the Condition of England*, *Nineteenth-century Literature*, 59:4 (2005), 463-493.

<sup>14</sup> See: Jane Silvey, 'It all began with *Jane Eyre*: The Complex Transatlantic Web of Women Writers', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 19 (2005), 52-68; Peter Skrine, 'Goethe and Emerson in Elizabeth Gaskell's Manchester', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 19 (2005) 69-85; Alan Shelston, 'Alligators Infesting the Stream: Elizabeth Gaskell and the USA', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 15 (2001), 53-63; Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 309-311.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the relationship between Stowe and Gaskell, see Whitney Womack Smith, 'Stowe, Gaskell and the Woman Reformer', in *Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture*, ed. by Denise Kohn, Sarah Meer, and Emily B. Todd (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press,

Louisa May Alcott similarly operates at the forefront of a cultural exchange system, while her fictional works also reflect and engage with (trans)national paradigms.<sup>16</sup> As Maibor, Shealy and Fahy have demonstrated, Alcott's literature was shaped by her influential literary neighbours: Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson – renowned U.S. authors with transatlantic reputations.<sup>17</sup> Her domestic fiction, they contend, operates a space in which she comments upon and re-structures the transcendental literary and gendered models she inherited.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Alcott's placing within a (trans)national literary tradition has

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2006), pp. 89-110. For details on her friendship with Norton see Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, pp. 418-426. Gaskell's relationship with Charlotte Brontë will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, while her (re)readings of Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) – particularly representations of witchcraft – are explored in Chapter Four. Gaskell had narrowly missed meeting the Hawthornes in December 1853, when Sophia's indisposition prevented a meeting at James Martineau's silver wedding anniversary. See Raymona E. Hall, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The English Experience, 1853-1864* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> The work of Madeleine B. Stern, Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, in particular, have been pivotal in (re-)introducing Alcott's works into the literary canon. These include: Stern's biography, *Louisa May Alcott* (London: Peter Nevill, 1952), *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005), *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), and the publication (and discovery of) Alcott's sensational thrillers, written under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard. These are collated in *Louisa May Alcott: Unmasked: Collected Thrillers*, ed. by Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: Northeastern Press, 1995) and *Louisa May Alcott: Selected Fiction*, ed. by Shealy, Myerson, and Stern (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990). Furthermore, unlike Gaskell who never visited the United States, Alcott visited Europe on two separate occasions. Shealy's recent volume brings together the Alcott sisters' letters from abroad affirming the significance of this visit for both sisters. See *Little Women Abroad: The Alcott Sisters' Letters from Europe, 1870-1871*, ed. by Daniel Shealy (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008). The significance of Alcott's fiction within the formation of national literary identity has recently been explored by Naomi Sofer in *Making the America of Art: Cultural Nationalism and Nineteenth-century Women Writers* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2005), and Richard Brodhead in *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). I explore Alcott's role within both an American and transatlantic literary marketplace in Chapter Two.

<sup>17</sup> While my thesis focuses upon literary relations between Britain and the United States, it is worth noting that these transcendentalist writers were also engaged with, and were known in, European literary circles. Fuller translated many German works into English, including Johann Peter Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe* (1836), translated by Fuller in 1838, and Bettine von Arnim's *Die Günderrode* (1840), translated in 1842. Emerson was also fascinated by the works of Schiller and Goethe, and also took his lecture tour to Europe in 1832. For more on Emerson's complex relationship with Europe, as a scene of private enjoyment, and also a trope which needs to be negated, see Robert Weisbuch, 'Post-Colonial Emerson and the Erasure of Europe', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 192-217 (p. 194).

<sup>18</sup> Carolyn Maibor, *Labor Pains: Emerson, Hawthorne and Alcott on Work and the Woman Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Daniel Shealy, 'Singing Mignon's Song: The Friendship of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Louisa May Alcott', in *Emersonian Circles*, ed. by W. Mott and R. Burkholder (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1997), pp. 225-235; Christopher A. Fahy, 'Dark Mirrorings: The Influence of Fuller on Alcott's "Pair of Eyes"', e, 45:2 (1999), 131-159. The influence of Emerson's philosophies, and the reading material he suggested (including Goethe,

been explicated via her adaptations of British literary sources, including Charlotte Brontë (Doyle) and Charlotte Yonge (Sands O'Connor).<sup>19</sup> In locating her work within a transatlantic framework, I juxtapose these respective critical paradigms, considering how both her engagement with U.S. literary sources *and* her readings of British fiction correspond to produce a series of textual experiments and intertextual antagonisms that create a specific domestic narrative unique to Alcott. By placing Gaskell and Alcott's works within a transatlantic paradigm, therefore, I establish a comparative framework which demonstrates the extent to which both authors' domestic fictions are constituted, negotiated and transmitted through a series of transatlantic dialogues. In order to illustrate and contextualise my readings of Gaskell's and Alcott's fiction, I will first detail the processes of transatlantic exchange, and the business models that enabled and discouraged this exchange within the nineteenth-century literary marketplace, before situating my study within recent critical trends concerning transatlantic paradigms and national, domestic traditions.

### **The Transatlantic Literary Marketplace**

The literary industries of Britain and the United States at mid-century were interdependent, operating together to complete what Robert Darnton has deemed a 'communications circuit' between author, publisher and reader through which a literary product is disseminated and interpreted.<sup>20</sup> The resulting cultural and material exchanges between the two nations were facilitated and encouraged by technological advances – including the installation of the transatlantic telegraph cable in 1858 and 1865, and the

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Schiller and the British Romantics), on Alcott's fiction is explored in more detail in Chapter Two; similarly, her engagement with the works of Margaret Fuller through the trope of mesmerism/witchcraft is detailed in Chapter Four.

<sup>19</sup> Karen Sands-O'Connor, 'Why Jo Didn't Marry Laurie?: Louisa May Alcott and *The Heir of Redclyffe*', *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 15:1 (2001), 23-41; Christine Doyle, *Transatlantic Translations: Louisa May Alcott and Charlotte Brontë* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Darnton, 'What is the History of Books', in *The Book History Reader*, ed. by David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 9-26 (p. 11).

implementation of a regular steamboat service between Liverpool and the U.S. North-eastern ports. The absence of international copyright laws encouraged a predilection for what Meredith McGill has termed a ‘culture of reprinting’ within the United States, as well as a fascination with the culture and politics of the other nation.<sup>21</sup> As the transatlantic literary marketplace was enabled by and predicated upon the material exchange of goods, it operated as a space of possibility in which texts could reach expansive audiences and readers could encounter material from across the Atlantic – as exemplified by Sampson Low’s prosperous business. The transatlantic movements within the marketplace, however, also functioned as limitations to sales figures and to authorial control. While the national character of Alcott’s *Old Fashioned Girl* (1870) was cited as a reason for curtailed transatlantic sales, the lack of international copyright meant that authors found it difficult retain control of their texts. This was an issue that consistently angered Charles Dickens and also irked Elizabeth Gaskell, especially when her tale *Lizzie Leigh* was published in the United States under Dickens’s name.<sup>22</sup>

The transatlantic journey of Louisa May Alcott’s works exemplifies the material problems, possibilities and cross-cultural tensions that arose as texts crossed national boundaries. After *Little Women* had sold 300,000 copies in the United States by the end of 1869, Alcott turned to Sampson Low to replicate similar financial and popular success in Europe.<sup>23</sup> The fractious correspondence between author and publisher,

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<sup>21</sup> Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2002), p. 3. McGill chooses this term over ‘piracy’ to emphasise the legality of the practice of reprinting within the antebellum U.S., a practice, she argues, that ‘was implicated in the larger struggle over the course of national development’ (p. 4).

<sup>22</sup> It is important to mention that the issue of international copyright was experienced differently on both sides of the Atlantic. In her study of the antebellum literary period in the U.S McGill argues, ‘the redundancies and manifest inefficiencies of the antebellum literary marketplace were not the misfirings of a system in a primitive stage of development, they were characteristic features of a social structure that many thought could fend off the stultifying effects of British publishing monopolies’ (p. 5). Reprinting, in other words, enabled and facilitated the development of an American literary system in spite of the influx of British texts into the market. Dickens’s persistent campaigning for international copyright legislation, therefore, made him few friends in the United States. For more on this see Claudia Stokes, ‘Copyrighting American History: International Copyright and the Periodization of the Nineteenth Century’, *American Literature*, 27:2 (2005), 291-317.

<sup>23</sup> For sales figures see Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Bestsellers in the United*

however, reveals the extent to which the issues of copyright and national prejudice both marred and problematised this process of transatlantic exchange. The lack of international copyright legislation was a permanent concern for Low. His letters repeatedly emphasise the importance of Alcott being resident in British territory at the moment her novel is released to a British market. Her failure to visit Canada to coincide with the release of *Old Fashioned Girl*, he argues, leaves the publishers to fight with ‘very weak and doubtful weapons should pirates turn up as they undoubtedly will if the book proves to be a success and they can discover a flaw in the law.’<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, while piracy threatened both Low and Alcott’s profits, the disappointing sales figures were attributed to her novel’s intrinsic ‘Americanness’, a characteristic that, Low argues, fails to translate into British cultural circles. Sending Alcott a mere £20 on account, Low writes: ‘[t]his compared with your American profits may seem a very trifling sum but you must not count upon such success here as you have found there. Your books although charming are *too essentially American* to furnish a very large circle of readers here. [A]t least we fear so’ [my emphasis].<sup>25</sup> Low emphasises what Gaskell would call the ‘little dissatisfactions’ that render U.S. home-life strange to British readers. The apparently insurmountable cultural differences within *Little Women*, coupled with a lack of international copyright legislature to protect author’s and publisher’s interests, Low suggests, are to blame for the text’s comparative financial failure.<sup>26</sup>

Low’s claims, however, are somewhat exaggerated. William Niles, the London-resident brother of Alcott’s U.S. publisher Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers, acts as

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*States* (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1947), p. 309.

<sup>24</sup> Sampson Low to Louisa May Alcott (21 May 1870), Boston, MA., Houghton Library, MS Am 800.23 (167).

<sup>25</sup> Sampson Low to Louisa May Alcott (31 May 1870), Boston, MA., Houghton Library, MS Am 800. 23 (168).

<sup>26</sup> The cheap, successful two volume edition of *Little Women* and *Good Wives* produced by rival publishers Ward & Lock proves particularly irksome to the irascible Low. Sampson Low to Louisa May Alcott (2 November 1872), Boston, MA., Houghton Library, MS Am 800.23 (169).



adviser to the author and liaison with Low's firm. Both agreeing and disagreeing with the latter's pessimistic views, Niles writes: 'We have done the best we could and can't help it if the English public won't buy good books. However, there are few American authors who are as popular here as yourself. The new work [*Old Fashioned Girl*] must increase it and draw attention to the others'.<sup>27</sup> Niles's letter confirms that it is intrinsic cultural differences, rather than poor marketing, that prevent English audiences buying Alcott's text in large numbers.

His letter, therefore, reverses some traditional transatlantic paradigms. Firstly, his assumption that the English public is unable to recognise or appreciate 'good books' operates as a counter-statement to Briton Sydney Smith's (in)famous quip: 'Who in the four quarters of the globe reads an American book?'<sup>28</sup> Niles's response to Smith's rhetorical question would, therefore, be: all appreciative readers. Secondly, and following from this point, his letter also emphasises the significance of U.S. literature within British reading circles. The transatlantic marketplace, therefore, did not facilitate just one-way traffic from Britain to the United States, but as Paul Giles has recognised, it enabled authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Antony Trollope to respect, and comment favourably upon, each others' work.<sup>29</sup>

The publishing history of Louisa May Alcott's work, then, neatly demonstrates, firstly, the complex business of a transatlantic literary marketplace and, moreover, how this culture of exchange both affirmed and mediated between national differences. As

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<sup>27</sup> William Niles to Louisa May Alcott (18 March 1871), Boston, MA, Houghton Library, MS Am 800.23 (127). A later letter, however, confirms that Alcott's text was selling reasonably well, and had received favourable critical attention: 'Old Fashioned Girl continues to sell [...] It has been well noticed in the leading reviews – short notices but very good ones. It is more creditable as very few American authors have much of an audience here.' William Niles to Louisa May Alcott, (no date), Boston, MA, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 800.23 (126).

<sup>28</sup> Sydney Smith, 'Who Reads an American Book?', *The Edinburgh Review*, January 1820. Cited in <<http://www.usgennet.org/usa/topic/preservation/epochs/vol5/pg144.htm>> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> September 2010].

<sup>29</sup> For more on the relationship between Trollope and Hawthorne see Paul Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature 1730-1860* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2001). He argues that both authors are linked in their 'perverse reflections of British and American culture', a characteristic they were both able to appreciate in each other's work (pp. 164-186).

the letters between author and publisher indicate, in many ways the problems inherent within this literary exchange were predicated upon the assertion of nation-based variations; the absence of international legislature, for example, is cited as the reason for Low and Alcott's small profits, while the national-specific character of the latter's text is perceived to be the pivotal detail in its poor sales. However, the transatlantic marketplace also facilitated a circulation of fictions that established a dialogue between the two nations and, moreover, a platform that enabled U.S. authors to enter into British reading circles and vice versa.<sup>30</sup>

### **Exchange in a Transatlantic Community**

Until this point I have mapped out the historical and cultural factors that established a transatlantic literary system in the nineteenth century. I now want to locate my study of Gaskell and Alcott's domestic fiction within current critical trends within transatlantic and transnational studies. Throughout this thesis I use the term 'transatlantic' – in its literal translation to move 'across' the Atlantic – to refer to, firstly, the relationship between Britain and the United States in the nineteenth century; secondly, to articulate the exchange of material goods and ideological concepts across the ocean; and thirdly, to explore the tensions caused when national models of British or U.S. identity come into contact with its respective other. In doing so I draw together David Armitage's three distinct, yet interlinked conceptions of Atlantic history: the 'circum-Atlantic', the 'transatlantic' and the 'cis-Atlantic'. Arguing that the 'transatlantic' functions as an *international* history – a comparative story of relations between nations – Armitage utilises the term 'circum-Atlantic' to describe the exchanges and interchanges that operated within, and across the Atlantic basin – a *transnational* history. This focus upon

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<sup>30</sup> Although, as Gaskell found out, publishing in the United States for British authors was not always easy. In a letter to highly-influential publisher James T. Fields, she slyly notes: 'I suppose my writings are more popular here than in America, – for the rate of payment is certainly very different'. *Letters*, p. 560.

the ocean places emphasis less upon the boundaries of the nation as the basis for a comparative framework, and instead constructs a fluid metaphor of circulation that takes precedent over national agendas. The cis-Atlantic, on the other hand, functions as a history of a specific site within this ‘Atlantic World’, a study of how a region was defined by its relationship to the ocean based upon circum-Atlantic and transatlantic methodologies.<sup>31</sup>

Ulf Hannerz helpfully defines the transnational as a ‘label for phenomena which can be of quite variable scale and distribution, [that] share the characteristics of not being contained within a state’.<sup>32</sup> The transnational is predicated, therefore, upon an ‘overall connectedness’ of processes and relationships that flow across national boundaries, operating in opposition to ‘international’ frameworks that rely upon formulations of the nation to construct systems of exchange.<sup>33</sup> In other words, while a transnational approach emphasises connectivity, its international counterpart consolidates national boundaries as it places them in dialogue.

The exchanges that occur between Britain and the United States in the nineteenth century, I contend, encompass ‘national’, ‘international’ and ‘transnational’ strategies – respectively, the cis-Atlantic, transatlantic, and circum-Atlantic methodologies defined by Armitage. My transatlantic approach, therefore, explores the ‘overall connectedness’ that enables texts to make the journey across the fluid spaces of the Atlantic, while also considering how national differences and variations are established, upheld, and mediated through the consistent dialogue between the two nations.

In exploring, rather than bypassing, the national within nineteenth-century transatlantic literary interactions, I rely on, and build upon, a body of work that exposes the productive tensions between local and global pressures. John Carlos Rowe argues

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<sup>31</sup> See David Armitage, ‘Three Concepts of Atlantic History’, in *The British Atlantic World 1500-1800*, eds. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 15-19.

<sup>32</sup> Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People and Places* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Hannerz, *Transnational Connections*, p. 6.

that a critical transnational paradigm which places emphasis on movements across spaces has the potential to reveal any inconsistencies within conceptualisations of the nation. Placing pressure upon the national as a homogeneous category of identity, this approach identifies the outside pressures that concurrently cement and question these ideologies of belonging.<sup>34</sup> As Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake argue, a critical

global/local assemblage would [...] refigure one-way models of domination to the social formations of the modern nation-state and, in its more optimistic formulations, activate multiple lines of social intervention, contestation, mobility, reimagining, coalition and flight.<sup>35</sup>

Amy Kaplan develops this argument. In her exploration of ‘the anarchies of empire’ she demonstrates how the formation of an internal, domestic and national identity within the United States was devolved through a series of external imperial conflicts.<sup>36</sup>

Collectively, the work of Rowe, Wilson and Kaplan shows that a juxtaposition between national and transnational approaches enables boundaries to be interrogated, negotiated and upheld as the specific location and wider cultural contexts are brought into tension.

I utilise transatlanticism, therefore, as a concurrently specific and expansive paradigm that can destabilise and deconstruct the myths of origin through which absolute categories of identity are formulated. In doing so, I build upon a wealth of recent scholarship that mobilises a transatlantic methodology in order to deconstruct formulations of identity based upon nationhood. In his highly influential work *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy presents the Atlantic as a ‘single, complex unit of analysis’ that can be adapted by cultural historians to produce ‘an explicitly

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<sup>34</sup> John Carlos Rowe, ‘Nineteenth-century U.S. Literary Culture and Transnationality’, *PMLA*, 118:1 (2003), 78-88 (pp. 79-80). See also Paul Giles, ‘Transnationalism and Classic American Literature’, *PMLA*, 118:1 (2003), 62-77 (pp. 63 & 65) and Colleen Glenney Boggs, *Transnationalism and American Literature*, pp. 1 & 3.

<sup>35</sup> Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake’s ‘Introduction’ to *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, ed. by Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 1.

transnational and intercultural perspective'.<sup>37</sup> Retracing the movements of the black population by exploring their literal and cultural routes/roots, Gilroy uses the concept of the 'Black Atlantic' to move beyond the binary oppositions that constitute identity formations – black/white, right/left and national/local. In positioning the Atlantic as both the site of, and the pre-condition for, transnational cultural production, Gilroy's work demonstrates the possibility of transatlanticism as a methodology that destabilises absolute categories of identity formation, articulating the plurality and diversity of a 'transnational black creativity' (p. 16).

Through seminal works such as Gilroy's, transatlanticism has emerged as a productive framework for literary critics seeking to move beyond increasingly restrictive nationalistic models of analysis. In retracing what Richard Gravil has called the 'lost continent of literary exchange' critics have been able to challenge the pervasive myth of U.S. exceptionalism.<sup>38</sup> Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor's recent collection *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader* (2007) emphasises the possibility of transatlanticism as a methodology that 'draw[s] attention to the ways in which, within the discipline of American Studies, ideas of crossing and connection have helped to rethink the ways national identity has been formulated'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly aiming to challenge the applicability of the term 'American literature' as a meaningful label of literary identity, Wai Chee Dimock applies a transnational paradigm that destabilises the predefined series of interpretative strategies that rely upon national geographies and chronologies, proposing a new temporal system: 'deep time'. This 'crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures' enable Dimock to place U.S. authors Emerson and

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 15. All further references to this text will be cited in parenthesis.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Gravil, *Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 2000), p. xx.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor, 'Introduction' to *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, ed. by Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 4.

Thoreau in dialogue with, respectively, world religions and *Bhagavad Gita*.<sup>40</sup> These extensive spatio-temporal frameworks – Edward Cutler uses the term ‘synchronic dynamic[s]’ to describe the intersection between these disparate geographies and times<sup>41</sup> – establish a series of, to use Dimock’s phrase, ‘kinship networks’ that construct a heterogeneous literary identity.<sup>42</sup>

By tracing the ‘kinship networks’ between Britain and the United States, as exemplified in Gaskell’s ‘Preface’ to *Mabel Vaughan*, I aim to explore not just how U.S. literature is constructed through transnational dialogues, but conjointly, how British literary identity is conceived through an awareness of their neighbours across the Atlantic.<sup>43</sup> In so doing I build upon the methodology favoured by Paul Giles and Amanda Claybaugh. The latter traces the transatlantic formations of political reform movements, echoed and reinforced through a system of literary exchange, that enabled reformers in both Great Britain and the United States to be ‘allied with those in the other to alter both’.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Giles maintains that these two national literary bodies exist not in isolation, but as ‘heretical alternatives’ to each other.<sup>45</sup> He argues:

To restore an American dimension to British Literature of this period is to denaturalise it, to suggest the historical

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<sup>40</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Edward Cutler uses the term to explicate the relationship between twentieth-century modernism and nineteenth-century popular print culture. Arguing that the ruins that made up twentieth-century modernity were the rubbish of nineteenth-century urban culture, he places Paris, London and New York in a ‘synchronic dynamic’ that translates any modern urban experience into patterns of text and type. This critical framework enables, for example, Edgar Allen Poe to use ‘Paris’ as a virtual accessible transatlantic motif that enables him to ‘correspond’ with Baudelaire. See Edward Cutler, *Recovering the New: Transatlantic Roots of Modernism* (University of New Hampshire Press, 2003), p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Dimock, p. 3. See also Robert Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986) and Lawrence Buell, ‘American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon’, *American Literary History*, 4:3 (1992), 411-42, for more on how U.S. literary identity was defined through a series of transatlantic negotiations and confrontations.

<sup>43</sup> However, while complicating and deconstructing formulations of ‘American literature’, this methodology has sometimes been in danger of replicating the nationalistic focus it seeks to avoid. Colleen Gleeney Boggs has argued: “‘Transatlantic’ defines what is American and what it means to be in America [...] [T]ransatlantic is a synonym for America’. See Boggs, *Transnationalism and American Literature*, p. 6. The transatlantic is utilised, paradoxically, as a methodology in which an American literary identity is performed and consolidated.

<sup>44</sup> Amanda Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 16

<sup>45</sup> Paul Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections*, p. 2.

contingencies that helped to formulate the dynamic of Augustan order and imperial control. Conversely, to restore a British dimension to American literature is to politicize it: to reveal its intertwinement with the discourses of heresy, blasphemy and insurrection, rather than understanding that writing primarily as an expression of local cultures or natural rights.<sup>46</sup>

Giles attempts to 'denaturalise' British literary identity by restoring the 'historical contingencies' between the coloniser and its former colony, thereby affirming the significance of the American Republic in shaping the British literary imagination.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, a reciprocal transatlantic paradigm places emphasis upon the divisions within U.S. culture – the 'heresies' and 'insurrections' – that inform its literary productions, and understanding of national identity. Through this comparative framework, Giles, therefore, both (re)politicises and 'denaturalises' British and U.S. fiction, tracing how the latter 'introduces an element of strangeness into British culture, just as British traditions, often in weirdly hollowed out or parodic forms, shadow the democratic designs of the American republic'.<sup>48</sup> Utilising the term 'transatlantic imaginary' – 'the interiorization – and exclusion – of a liberal or metaphorical Atlantic world in all of its expansive dimensions' – he is able to articulate the overall connectedness and mutually constitutive literary relations between the two nations.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections*, p. 10-11.

<sup>47</sup> This is an approach that is also favoured by Richard Gravil. Recreating the 'intimacy of the dialogue' between the American Romantics and their British predecessors, he establishes how the former redeemed the English 'prototypes' from 'the tentativeness, the doubt, the indirections, the failures and the compromises' by creating a 'more liberated art' (p. xix). However, despite Gravil's claims that British Romantic literature was shaped by the imaginative and political influence of the United States, these reciprocal processes of influence remain largely unexplored.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Giles, *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Giles, *Virtual Americas*, p. 1. It is worth summarising at this point the terms used to describe the connections between nations and national literatures, and, moreover, between individuals and the abstract national body. Giles's 'transatlantic imaginary', like Arjun Appadurai's 'transnational imaginary' relies upon Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community'. Anderson argues that national identity is constituted through an 'imagined community', a group of disparate individuals connected in an imaginary and anonymous mutual identification. Both Appadurai and Giles extend these imaginary connections to include transnational community as the former summarises: the imagination 'is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern.' See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Verso, 1993), p. 35 and Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 3. The concept of a 'transnational (or transatlantic) imaginary', therefore, encompasses the

I develop this critical paradigm by introducing domestic fiction written by women into this comparative transatlantic framework. To incorporate the imaginative processes of identification and exclusion that Giles identifies, as well as the material culture of exchange that produced Gaskell's edition of *Mabel Vaughan* and that enabled the publication of Alcott's *Old Fashioned Girl* within Britain, I consider how both authors' fictions operate within a transatlantic community.<sup>50</sup> In other words, I trace how the rhetoric of domesticity – as transmitted through the transatlantic domestic narrative – provides an accessible set of discourses, or tropes, that resonate in both Britain and the United States. The domestic, therefore, becomes a shared medium through which both similarities and differences can be asserted within a transatlantic arena. Through this approach, therefore, I necessarily destabilise nationalised critical paradigms applied to domestic fiction.

### **The Critical Domestic Tradition in Britain and the United States**

The critical field concerning domestic fiction in Britain and the United States in the nineteenth century is both vast and varied. This majority of this work is characterised by national and regional variants, with labels such as the 'sentimental novel' (Kete), 'sensational fiction' (Tompkins), 'woman's fiction' (Baym), 'domestic' fiction (Armstrong, Romero, Poovey, Kaplan) utilised to help formulate a sense of gendered literary identity – particularly in relation to male-authored variants<sup>51</sup> – and to articulate the contexts in which women writers entered the marketplace.<sup>52</sup> The variety of these

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homogeneous and heterogeneous identity – or the local/global dynamic – of transatlantic relations. Dimock uses the term 'kinship networks' to describe a similar process of transnational bonding through imaginary connections.

<sup>50</sup> In doing so I explore how their domestic fictions help to establish what Arjun Appadurai has termed a 'community of sentiment' – a group that begins to imagine and feel things together – that extends across the Atlantic (p. 8).

<sup>51</sup> This is not to suggest that men could not write domestic fiction. Hawthorne's *House of The Seven Gables* has been traditionally conceived as a domestic text.

<sup>52</sup> Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*; Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction*; Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*; Lora Romero, *Home*



categories is, on the one hand, very useful; as Nina Baym reminds us through her label ‘woman’s fiction’ – a brand of highly formulaic, inherently middle-class, educational fiction unique to the U.S. – this type of narrative was not all women wrote and certainly not all they read.<sup>53</sup> Defining *women’s* fiction as a homogeneous entity would, therefore, be a reductive task for the critic tracing the multifarious nature of female writing and reading practices within a British-U.S. marketplace.

However, the national basis through which these categories of female literary identity have been organised has perhaps prevented women’s writing from being considered within transnational framework. In recent decades, writing by women in both Britain and the United States has been positioned as composite parts of a shared dialogue. Sandra S. Gilbert and Susan Gubar contend that ‘for English speaking women, there are not a number of different, nationally defined nineteenth-centuries: there is only one which contains and sustains the achievements of British and American writers’.<sup>54</sup> However, their study falls short of employing a reciprocal transatlantic methodology. With their primary emphasis upon canonical British writers Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, Gilbert and Gubar do little to differentiate between the differing national cultural conditions that enabled women to enter the publishing industry. The contexts that caused U.S. authors Maria Cummins and Fanny Fern to write were not analogous with those that brought Brontë and Eliot to the literary marketplace. Moreover, Emily Dickinson, an author who on the whole shunned publication, remains the sole representative of an U.S. literary tradition in which her career was an anomaly.

Nina Auerbach also applies a transatlantic framework through which domestic fiction and female community is created and upheld.<sup>55</sup> This work, which draws

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*Fronts: Domesticity and its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Amy Kaplan, ‘Manifest Domesticity’.

<sup>53</sup> Baym, p. xlii.

<sup>54</sup> Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) p. xxxi.

<sup>55</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University

connections between the familial groupings in Louisa Alcott's *Little Women* and the homosocial environment of Gaskell's *Cranford*, does not, however, extend the theme of female community to include the literal landscape of the transatlantic marketplace in which these novels circulated. Sandra Zagarell, similarly, identifies a genre – 'the narrative of community' – which was popular in both Britain and the United States in the early nineteenth century, without detailing how these narratives crossed or affected readers on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>56</sup>

My approach, which traces the circulation of domestic narratives within a transatlantic community, aims to address, firstly, the notable absence of reception studies within critical analysis of transatlantic paradigms as above, while secondly, addressing the disparity between British and U.S. critical paradigms by bringing them into a transnational dialogue. In order to do so, I trace how women's domestic fiction contributes to, and questions, the formation of national identity through the mobile rhetoric of domesticity. The correlation between the domestic and national identity within Britain and the United States has been well-documented. In her seminal book *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), Nancy Armstrong argues that the domestic was the founding movement of a new British bourgeois social order based upon essentially female characteristics.<sup>57</sup> Writing about the nineteenth-century United States, Richard Brodhead argues that women's domestic fiction both created and responded to a new

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Press, 1978).

<sup>56</sup> Sandra Zagarell, 'Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre', *Signs*, 13:3 (1988), 489-527 (p. 499). The 'narrative of community' genre was dominated by white, middle-class women writers formulating their response to a changing modern world. The shared structural elements of the genre includes: an emphasis upon the self as part of a community rather than an individualistic unit; the depiction of a local community rooted in one geographical place; and an emphasis upon domestic trivialities (p. 503). These narratives, she argues, place emphasis upon episodic negotiation, as the bonds between a diverse, changeable community have to be 'continually reintegrated' in the face of momentous social change (p. 520). Utilising a transatlantic framework, she concludes that such British narratives focused upon more negotiations between the classes, whereas American variants were generally located in a 'semi-mythological past' at a moments of pivotal historical change (p. 503). I explore this conclusion in more detail in Chapter One.

<sup>57</sup> Nancy Armstrong, p. 5.

leisured class of wealthy readers.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, Amy Kaplan in her highly influential ‘Manifest Domesticity’ neatly articulates the dynamism of domestic ideology. She contends that as the imperial project of ‘Manifest Destiny’ extended the boundaries of the United States further westward, the processes of domestication, of civilising the uncivilised other within the national domestic space, became particularly significant.<sup>59</sup> This process, reflected in the domestic fiction of Catherine Sedgwick and Harriet Beecher Stowe, made the ideology of domesticity an ordering principle for the consolidation of national identity. ‘Domesticity’, Kaplan maintains, ‘is more or less stabilising, it travels in contradictory circuits both to expand and contract the boundaries of home and nation and to produce shifting conceptions of the foreign’.<sup>60</sup>

Through my study of four transatlantic domestic narratives as written and adapted by Elizabeth Gaskell and Louisa May Alcott, I extend Kaplan’s thesis – tracing how the ‘stable’ yet ‘conflicting circuits’ which underlie domestic rhetoric and the domestic narrative can ‘expand and contract’ to include both a transatlantic imaginary and a national/localised body. The transatlantic domestic narrative is predicated therefore upon ‘shifting conceptions’ that allow categories of nationalised, gendered identity to be explored. In Chapter One, ‘Spaces of Home and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*’, I explore the relationship between conceptualisations of home, national identity and transatlantic literary relations. Examining how Gaskell’s domestic narrative constructs, and draws attention to, the boundaries of home, I trace how her text operates as both a representation of a specific English setting, and also as a narrative which circulates within a transatlantic community. I examine how *Cranford* functions as a paradigmatic literary model adapted by U.S. author Sarah Orne Jewett to construct her own story of home set in regional New England. By focusing upon how home operates

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<sup>58</sup> Richard Brodhead, p. 79.

<sup>59</sup> Amy Kaplan, ‘Manifest Domesticity’, p. 581. Domesticity, she argues, posits a ‘sense of the nation as a domestic space imbued with a sense of at-homeness, in contrast to an external world perceived as alien and threatening’ (p. 582).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 586.

as both a static and mobile trope, I also consider how Gaskell uses this logic to (de)construct her domestic narrative. I contend that through an intertextual dialogue with the work of Charles Dickens and Samuel Johnson, she explores the significance of home as a site of female domestic and authorial experience.

Chapter Two continues this line of inquiry, exploring the self-reflexive tendencies of the transatlantic domestic narrative. Focusing on Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, a text which is usually conceived within nationalised paradigms, I examine how this bestseller operates as a critical commentary upon a transatlantic literary marketplace. Concentrating upon the trope of 'work', I expose Alcott's text as an innovative re-writing – based upon the turbulent creative 'vortex' – of both British and U.S. male and female traditions. I examine how Alcott uses a transatlantic framing to negotiate a model of female work and authorship that encompasses principles of Emersonian self-reliance and vocation, and a (transatlantic) domestic community.

Chapter Three, moreover, extends the paradigm of female work to consider manifestations of a specific employment – nursing – within Britain and the United States. Utilising a comparative framework, I juxtapose Gaskell and Alcott's nursing narratives, placing them within the context of a transatlantic reform movement which precipitated the professionalisation of nursing, and also within a domestic literary tradition in which the figure of the nurse was prominent. Both authors, I contend, focus upon the potential of the nurse to move between class, national and gendered borders in order to map how an explicitly gendered domestic ideology both aided and hindered female professionalisation. Detailing how the domestic space can be extended and contracted to, respectively, to encourage and limit female labour – including that of the woman writer – both authors, I argue, offer a critical commentary upon the nineteenth-century gender codes that informed their writing and the work of their contemporary nurses within both nations.

If the nurse represents the socially-acceptable face of women's work, the witch is her ideological antithesis: a monstrous body of negative identity that must be displaced. Chapter Four explores nineteenth-century representations of witchcraft, locating Gaskell's gothic novella *Lois the Witch* (1859) – which, as I shall demonstrate, is a truly transatlantic text – and Alcott's sensational tale *A Pair of Eyes: Or Modern Magic* (1863) within (trans)national critical paradigms. Exploring how Gaskell adapts U.S. male-authored accounts of the Salem witchcraft trials, and how Alcott responds to a literary tradition on both sides of the Atlantic that was concerned with mesmeric practices, I examine how both authors use the supernatural body of the witch to challenge the 'naturalised' boundaries between national spaces and gendered aesthetic models. Moreover, I explore how Gaskell and Alcott critique the hegemonic narratives that condemn the witch as a monstrous body, particularly an idealised domestic ideology that positions women as superficial bewitching bodies.

In this thesis, then, I utilise a comparative framework in which I position Gaskell and Alcott's domestic fictions less within rigid national paradigms than within a dynamic transatlantic community in which identities are conferred. In other words, by exploring, firstly, the four transatlantic tropes within both women's fiction, secondly, how these thematic strands were developed through their respective engagements with British and U.S. cultures, and finally, how their domestic works circulated transnationally, I situate Gaskell's and Alcott's canonical texts within a wider interpretive framework, tracing both authors' impact upon a literary marketplace that was constituted transatlantically.

## Chapter One

### Spaces of Home and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*

#### 'The Last Generation in England'

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853), a semi-historical representation of the author's former home in Knutsford, Cheshire where she spent most of her childhood years, was published in spasmodic instalments in Charles Dickens's *Household Words* between 1851-1853.<sup>61</sup> This popular text, however, began life as a short article entitled 'The Last Generation in England' that was published in the U.S. journal *Sartain's Union Magazine of Literature and Art* in July 1849. This was the first and only time in her career in which Gaskell chose to give initial rights to a publication from the United States. *Sartain's* was, however, in many ways the perfect container for Gaskell's light, comic study of an idiosyncratic English community.<sup>62</sup> The journal, edited by Caroline Kirkland, aimed to tell 'domestic home tales and sketches calculated to elevate the moral and intellectual faculties [sic]<sup>63</sup>, thereby creating a 'gay and gossipy' tone.<sup>64</sup> 'The Last Generation' formed the conclusive part of a critical series on English manners written by Kirkland.<sup>65</sup> In his study on the U.S. origins of *Cranford*, Larry Uffelman has argued that by positioning Gaskell's essay as the final piece within the series, Kirkland effectively: 'lightens the critique of English life offered by an outsider from a developing nation uncertain of exactly how to regard itself in relation to its

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<sup>61</sup> The 'Cranford Papers', as Gaskell termed them, were collated into a complete volume in 1853, published by Chapman and Hall. It was published in the United States by Harper Bros. in the same year.

<sup>62</sup> Gaskell's reasons for publishing in *Sartain's* are unclear. Larry Uffelman suggests that Gaskell's friend Mary Howitt was influential in persuading the young author to publish with Kirkland. See Larry Uffelman, 'To Cranford via Philadelphia', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 19 (2005), 86-95 (p. 88).

<sup>63</sup> Cited in Uffelman, p. 87.

<sup>64</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1930* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 770.

<sup>65</sup> These articles were written after Kirkland visited Europe. 'Detached Thoughts about England' appeared in the journal in February 1849, followed by 'English Characteristics' and 'English and American Manners' in May and June respectively.

acknowledged parent'.<sup>66</sup> 'The Last Generation', therefore, evokes reflection on English manners, while also speaking to a 'gay and gossipy' community which extends across the Atlantic.

In this chapter I develop this line of inquiry, exploring how *Cranford* operates as text about a specific location and also as a mobile product that reached audiences in the U.S. In doing so, I bring together two strands within the novel's critical history. While recent critical work on the text by Shelston, Recchio and Uffelman has demonstrated how *Cranford* operates as a mobile, literary model which affected readers on both sides of the Atlantic, criticism which explores the novel's form and content has typically focused upon gendered paradigms of stasis.<sup>67</sup> While Jeffrey Cass, for example, argues that 'Gaskell's Cranfordianisms are signs of cultural belatedness' which draw attention to the social transformations which will soon be taking place,<sup>68</sup> Nina Auerbach maintains that this fixity operates as a critique, particularly of the failures of patriarchy to include this marginalised community within its wider narrative of progression.<sup>69</sup>

By juxtaposing these two critical approaches, I expose the tension between the novel's readily identifiable and adaptable model of home which allows it to move into U.S. reading circles and the literal and ideological fixity of the community of spinsters. *Cranford*, I argue, is able to contain and work through these tensions. I contend that the text, rather than depict the town as a static inert space, creates and maintains home as a series of imaginative identifiers which are consistently adapted. Gaskell's work, therefore, concerns less resistance to change and social development than the processes

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<sup>66</sup> Uffelman, p. 90.

<sup>67</sup> See: Alan Shelston, 'From *Cranford* to the *Country of the Pointed Firs*' and 'Alligators Infesting the Stream'; Larry Uffelman; and Thomas Recchio, *Elizabeth Gaskell's 'Cranford': A Publishing History* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> Jeffrey Cass, 'The Scraps, Patches and Rags of Daily Life: Gaskell's Oriental Other and the Conservation of Cranford', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 35: 4 (1999), 417-433 (p. 417).

<sup>69</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women*, p. 87. Cranford, the town, she argues, is both 'a sanctuary of unreality' and a 'repository of sudden, quasi-magical power that destroys or appropriates the reality it excludes' (p. 82). It is, therefore, defined by negations – by what is excluded from its 'sanctuary'. It is also a 'repository of quasi-magical power' that has the potential to transform, or destroy everything which exists outside its ideological and geographical boundaries of home.

of assimilation which allow disruptive, foreign elements to be consistently subsumed within its textual dynamic. This persistent process of re-imagining the elements which exist outside, and intrude upon, (narratives of) home establishes a paradoxically fluid representation of a specific geographical and temporal location in Northern England. Moreover, through this consistent questioning of the borders which define home, I contend, Gaskell undertakes a self-reflexive exploration of her own domestic narrative, and its position within literary traditions.

It is this adaptability and reflexivity which explains the text's appeal to audiences within the United States, as both an entertaining narrative depicting local idioms and as a pervasive literary model which can be readily adapted. In other words, the text resonated with readers in the United States through the same transatlantic relations Gaskell invoked in her 'Preface' to *Mabel Vaughan*.<sup>70</sup> It enabled U.S. readers to consume, for entertainment and instruction, a representation of English, rural life. However, like *Mabel Vaughan*, the text also required translation. This included changing the spelling and removing some of the more obscure English idioms for a U.S. audience.<sup>71</sup> For Louisa May Alcott, Gaskell's text was both an entertaining read and an intertextual reference which she used to contextualise her own narrative of home. In *Old Fashioned Girl* (1870) she explicitly references *Cranford* to emphasise the progressive female community of artists which her narrative supports. Protagonist Polly Milton asks her 'authoress' friend about the progress of her latest novel, while sucking an orange 'in public with a composure which would have scandalized the good ladies of

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<sup>70</sup> As Thomas Recchio has shown, Gaskell's text was extremely popular in the United States: both at the time of its initial publication, and in the early twentieth century when the text became part of the school curriculum; between the years 1905 and 1914 nine school editions were printed in the United States. *Cranford* was used in U.S. schools, he argues, as 'a fantasy of race and class amelioration in the midst of an irreversible process of change through actual race and class conflict.' See Recchio, p. 31. Louisa May Alcott's bestselling work *Little Women*, which has been read in conjunction with *Cranford* by Nina Auerbach in *Communities of Women*, was also read as a idealist fantasy of domestic harmony by U.S. immigrant workers. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

<sup>71</sup> See Dorothy Collin, 'The Composition and Publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*', *John Rylands University Library of Manchester Bulletin*, 69:1 (1986), 59-95 (p. 66)



“Cranford””.<sup>72</sup> The out-moded manners of the community of spinsters in the latter are juxtaposed with the ambitious creative characteristics of this modern, U.S. sisterhood of young and single women. Alcott’s *Old Fashioned Girl* affirms the authority and pervasiveness of Gaskell’s narrative about gendered community, while also demonstrating how it can be adapted to explore and structure a progressive female artistic identity unique to the U.S.

In order to trace how *Cranford* operates as a paradoxically dynamic model of stasis, and a self-reflexive examination of home and the domestic narrative that contains it, this chapter is split into two sections. Firstly, I explore how Gaskell formulates her specific representation of home through a series of adaptations and negotiations with all that her community of spinsters necessarily includes and excludes. This process is undertaken through a dialogue with Charles Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) and Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759). These texts become part of *Cranford*’s self-reflexive strategy which is used to concurrently mock and affirm stories of home. This process is furthered by the ladies’ negotiation with ‘foreign’ Oriental bodies which invade Cranford’s (textual) spaces. Secondly, I explore how her text operates as a paradigmatic model through which female authors, such as the U.S. regionalist writer Sarah Orne Jewett, could formulate and assess their own narrative of belonging. Tracing the impact of *Cranford* upon Jewett’s novel *Deephaven* (1877), I expose the tensions caused when Gaskell’s English text circulates within a transatlantic imaginary, highlighting both the inclusive and divisive potential of the bonds of home.

### **Spaces of Home**

By exploring how home operates as a mobile yet static construction within Gaskell’s domestic narrative, I define both ‘home’ and the ‘domestic’ in a specific way. Amy Kaplan has argued that within nineteenth-century United States the feminised rhetoric of

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<sup>72</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *An Old-Fashioned Girl* [1870] (Mineola, New York: Dover, 2007), p. 209.

domesticity was often mobilised to explore the boundaries of home: articulating not just the relations which tie the household to the nation, but also to identify and ‘domesticate’ the foreign bodies which exist outside and within the domestic space.<sup>73</sup> The ‘domestic’, therefore, becomes the medium through which the personal ties of home are maintained and articulated and, moreover, the space in which those not-home elements are identified and assimilated.

‘Home’, then, is defined by a series of emotional relationships which give meaning to a site or location. As Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling neatly summarise: home is ‘*a spatial imaginary*: a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings, which are related to context, and which construct places, extend across spaces and scales, and connect places [their emphasis]’.<sup>74</sup> By defining home in spatial rather than solely geographical terms, Blunt and Dowling are able to explore both the material setting and imaginative relationships which comprise home. In doing so they rely upon Henri LeFebvre’s definition of ‘spatiality’ in *The Production of Space* (1974), and Gaston Bachelard’s work on the imaginative function of home in *The Poetics of Space* (1958). LeFebvre argues that space is a socially produced phenomenon which manifests as: physical (conceptualised space), mental (representational space) and social (lived spaces).<sup>75</sup> By placing emphasis upon the production of space, he seeks to expose and decode the processes by which spaces are inscribed with meaning. Space is, therefore, not an intrinsic geography but an active and fluid process which is consistently being re-imagined and coded by society. As Doreen Massey succinctly summarises: space is a series of ‘interrelations, a multiplicity of stories that exist contemporaneously’.<sup>76</sup> Spatiality can, therefore, be conceived as the process of telling and exchanging numerous stories at the same time.

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<sup>73</sup> Amy Kaplan, *Manifest Domesticity*, p. 581.

<sup>74</sup> Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 2-3.

<sup>75</sup> See Henri LeFebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>76</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 9.

Using this same logic, Bachelard argues that space is both creative and physical and, therefore, essential for creative thought. The fundamental function of the house, he argues, is to ‘shelter day-dreaming’-- the process through which the spaces of our lives are given meaning.<sup>77</sup> The house functions as a material construction which enables and provokes the imaginative processes necessary to connect the individual with their social and physical surroundings.<sup>78</sup> Blunt and Dowling, however, extend Bachelard’s thesis by exploring how spaces of home are constructed through physical structures such as the house, and also through the processes which foster ties of community and belonging. If home is no longer defined by the limitations of place but conceived through emotional, social and physical connections, they argue, it has the potential to ‘extend across spaces and scales’, connecting individuals in what Benedict Anderson would term ‘an imagined community’ – a ‘horizontal comradeship’ that is formed from people who have never met, but who share the capacity to imagine themselves as part of a local or national community.<sup>79</sup> Home is, therefore, a mobile concept. It supports the individual imagination by fostering relationships with the society in which they operate. Moreover, it functions as an expansive space which encompasses everything from the single dwelling to a (trans)national imagined community.

I examine how Gaskell constructs such a ‘spatial imaginary’ both within and through her text. Her novel establishes and maintains a fictional society of spinsters connected by their imaginary relations to the space they occupy, while concurrently bringing together a transatlantic community as her material text crossed the Atlantic and was read by readers in the U.S. In defining *Cranford* as a text which explores imaginary relations to space, and thereby the processes of making home, I explore the text’s critical potential. Just as Henri LeFebvre explores the production of spatiology to

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<sup>77</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 7.

expose and decode the processes of production, Gaskell places emphasis upon, to use Massey's analogy, the 'stories' of home in order to find a productive textual model through which the complexities of a specifically female 'spatial imaginary' can be contained.<sup>80</sup> The notion of 'elegant economy', I contend, provides a vehicle through which such gendered models of home can be explored.

### **'Elegant Economy'**

Cranfordian spaces of home are formulated and sustained through the logic of 'elegant economy'. This neat phrase refers to the Cranford ladies' anxious desire to conceal their poverty by making economising a virtue and excess an indulgent, indecorous practice. We are told by the narrator Mary Smith that 'none of us spoke of money, because that subject savoured of commerce and trade, and though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic'.<sup>81</sup> The philosophy of 'elegant economy' codifies the processes through which physical and imaginative spaces are given meaning. In the novel's famous opening paragraph the gendered connotations of this 'spatial imaginary' unfold:

In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses above a certain rent are women. If a married couple come to settle in the town, somehow the gentleman disappears; he is either fairly frightened to death by being the only man in the Cranford evening parties, or he is accounted for by being with his regiment, his ship, or closely engaged in business all the week in the great neighbouring commercial town of Drumble, distant only twenty miles on a railroad. In short, whatever does become of the gentlemen, they are not at Cranford. (*Cranford*, p. 89)

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<sup>80</sup> For more on the production and construction of space within women's fiction and art in the nineteenth century, see Liana Frances Piehler, *Spatial Dynamics and Female Development in Victorian Art and Novels* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003). She demonstrates that the dynamic of space was significant for women writers, such as Gaskell, as it enabled them to consider the symbolic meaning of movements between and across spaces which were distinctly gendered (p. 4). Moreover, she argues that there is a correlation between movements across material spaces and psychological conflict and negotiation. A mobile protagonist, such as Molly Gibson from Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1865), is able to negotiate with gender ideologies which would restrict her to the domestic space (p. 78).

<sup>81</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford* [1853], in *The Cranford Chronicles*, (London: Vintage, 2007), pp. 87-279 (p. 91). All further references to this text will be cited in parenthesis.

Gaskell places emphasis upon ‘possession’. The ‘Amazons’ do not simply live in Cranford, they own it: ‘all the holders of houses above a certain rent are women’. By emphasising the property rights of her community of spinsters and widows, Gaskell is making a pertinent political statement. In the early 1850s the issue of what to do with ‘superfluous’ female bodies – such as the spinster, the prostitute and the widow – formed a significant political debate.<sup>82</sup> By focusing her narrative around the experiences of these ‘superabundant’ bodies, Gaskell affirms their ‘spatial imaginary’, thereby posing a challenge to male rights of ownership and questioning the ladies’ political subordination.<sup>83</sup> The fiction of ‘elegant economy’ in its denunciation of all ‘excesses’ thereby functions as an alternative narrative which destabilises the authority of a political rhetoric that would define their female bodies as superfluous.

The town of Cranford is, therefore, defined in paradoxical terms – as both a space of excess which is defined through negations and also as an alternative ‘spatial imaginary’ in which the supposedly ‘superfluous’ experiences of the ladies are affirmed. In the text’s opening paragraph the town is defined through the negations of absence and distance. Men seem to ‘disappear’ upon settling in the town. Instead, the ‘great neighbouring commercial town of Drumble’ becomes the nexus of these male activities, whose onomatopoeic name suggests not only the humdrum grind of its machinery but also the certain dissatisfaction of its grumbling inhabitants. The railroad which connects these two ideologically disparate spaces serves as a constant reminder to the Cranfordians of their distance from, and proximity to, such a site of commercial activity. The purpose of the railroad, it can be deduced, is not as a means of travel – who, after all, would use such a transport link when both towns define themselves

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<sup>82</sup> Gaskell, in particular, had a disagreement with Dickens regarding a reformed prostitute who was a resident at the latter’s Urania Cottage. While Dickens advocated transportation, Gaskell argued for social re-integration. For more on this see Elsie Michie, *Outside the Pale: Cultural Exclusion, Gender Difference and the Victorian Woman Writer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 80-81.

<sup>83</sup> Caroline P. Huber, “‘Heroic Pioneers’” *The Ladies of Cranford*, 21 (2007), 38-49 (p. 39). Gaskell’s support for the cause saw her sign the ‘Married Women’s Property Petition’ in 1854.

against the negatives of the other? – but is emphasised in order to draw attention to the very specific distance of twenty miles that is both manageable space and an impenetrable chasm. Drumble operates, then, as both a separate geographical and ideological space which the ladies of Cranford necessarily resist and, moreover, as a possible threat which must be assimilated into their ‘spatial imaginary’.

By emphasising the distance of Cranford’s ‘superabundant’ space from hegemonic political practice and the distinctly un-aristocratic discourse of commerce used in Drumble, Gaskell affirms the town’s alternative perspective, while also highlighting its critical potential. Unlike the latter, the former is less a capitalist space in which the individual can achieve financial success than a cohesive, communal body. Individual actions, therefore, are necessarily codified as part of the town’s distinct fiction of ‘elegant economy’. We are told that:

for keeping the trim gardens full of choice flowers without a weed to speck them; for frightening away little boys who look wistfully at the said flowers through the railings; for rushing out at the geese that occasionally venture in to the gardens if the gates are left open; for deciding all questions of literature and politics without troubling themselves with unnecessary reasons or arguments; for obtaining clear and correct knowledge of everybody’s affairs in the parish; for keeping their neat maid-servants in admirable order; for kindness (somewhat dictatorial) to the poor, and real tender good offices to each other whenever they are in distress, the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient. "A man," as one of them observed to me once, "is *so* in the way in the house!" (*Cranford*, p. 89)

In this description what are presumably isolated events – the reprimanding of small boys intent on picking flowers from private gardens, chasing geese and partaking in, albeit uninformed, literary discussions – become representative characteristics of an entire community. The ‘ladies of Cranford’ thus declare their collective authority ‘quite sufficient’ in dealing with issues of discipline, literature and social organisation. When one resident remarks, ‘a man is *so* in the way in the house!’, she shows the extent to which men are marginalised figures: they are superfluous bodies who merely get ‘in the

way' of the real work that needs to be done. In what becomes a neat, comic twist on the issue of 'superabundant' women, *Cranford* questions the social position of superfluous men who would disrupt and undermine the processes of home-making.

Cranford's geographical spaces are, therefore, mapped by what they are not: what constitutes 'excess' and, significantly, what gets in the way and needs to be removed. By placing emphasis upon what Cranford excludes, Gaskell paradoxically highlights the *inclusive* imaginative process of 'elegant economy'. By imagining a standard of domesticity removed from economic and materialistic factors, the ladies are able to bypass the problematic social relations formulated from class distinctions:

When Mrs Forrester, for instance, gave a party in her baby-house of a dwelling, and the little maiden disturbed the ladies on the sofa by a request that she might get the tea-tray out from underneath, everyone took this novel proceeding as the most natural thing in the world, and talked on about household forms and ceremonies as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants' hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward, instead of the one little charity-school maiden, whose short ruddy arms could never have been strong enough to carry the tray upstairs, if she had not been assisted in private by her mistress, who now sat in state, pretending not to know what cakes were sent up, though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes. (*Cranford*, p. 91)

Mrs Forrester is allowed to appear 'aristocratic' in her domestic activities because the ladies of Cranford imagine her to be so. They steadfastly refuse to react to their hostess's poverty, transforming her 'baby-house of a dwelling' into a house fit for a member of the aristocracy, peopled with servants and cooks. By a complicit series of denials the hostess is transformed from a poor widow into a lady sitting 'in state' who is able to feign real surprise when the cakes she cooked are served to her guests.

This incident serves to show the centrality of the imagination within the processes of home-making. The multi-functional use of objects – the sofa as a convenient storage device, for example – is imagined as an example of 'elegant

economy', where the hostess's ingenious use of space may be praised. As a result of these imaginative processes, spaces are re-defined as the communal fiction of 'elegant economy' re-codes them within its own ideological system. Mrs Forrester's home thus becomes a microcosm of her local society. All homes within *Cranford*, it seems, *will be* made fit for their aristocratic occupants by the sheer will of the communal imagination.

### **Trivia, Trains and Charles Dickens**

The creation of Cranford's 'spatial imaginary' is also achieved through its preoccupation with texts. Hilary Schor, and Michael Lund and Linda Hughes have explored the significance of the proliferation of texts within Gaskell's novel. In *Scheherazade in the Market Place* (1992) Schor argues that *Cranford* explores the mutually constitutive relationship between text and reader. It does this, she argues, by encouraging the reader to negotiate between the series of letters, digressions and anecdotes that comprise the novel in order to assemble a narrative that is 'the story of its stories'.<sup>84</sup> This intertextuality is further complicated by the issue of gender. Hughes and Lund argue that *Cranford* restructures language and traditional forms of writing, such as the letter, the diary and books in order to give texts which have a particular meaning outside Cranfordian society a new, feminised significance.<sup>85</sup>

Newspapers, for example, are not read as political and social commentary, but are used to protect the new carpet from fading in the sunlight. When narrator Mary Smith asks, '[d]o you make paper paths for every guest to walk upon in London?' (*Cranford*, p. 19) she contrasts the reading practices of the fashionable capital with the practical reconfiguration of the material text by the Cranford ladies. While the resulting comparison emphasises the absurd impracticality of creating a series of newspaper paths

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<sup>84</sup> Hilary Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 87.

<sup>85</sup> See Michael Lund and Linda K. Hughes, *Victorian Publishing and Mrs Gaskell's Work* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 70.



to protect a carpet, the rules of ‘elegant economy’ make such a practice as socially acceptable as the act of reading. The text of the city newspaper is thus repositioned as a domestic tool. By highlighting the function of the newspaper within the distinctly feminised process of home-making, Gaskell examines how the text can be mobilised to articulate domestic spaces. As Mary Smith’s rhetorical question suggests, the practices of the Cranfordian ladies are concurrently ingenious and ludicrous, thereby affirming, but also gently mocking, the re-configuration of objects to suit their genteel manners.

By using texts – such as newspapers – within her narrative to create her distinct story of home, Gaskell draws attention to *Cranford’s* status as domestic fiction. By placing emphasis upon home as an imaginative construction, derived through ‘elegant economy’ and a series of intertextual references, the text offers a self-reflexive commentary. Gaskell explores how domestic experience be articulated in a manner which can encompass its everyday, trivial subject matter and also affirm its wider social significance and authority. This paradoxical logic is enabled through a semantic instability within *Cranford’s* narrative structure, which J. H. Miller terms Gaskell’s use of ‘quiet, yet devastating irony’.<sup>86</sup> The novel’s subversive potential is enabled, he argues, through an ironic technique that relies upon instability of meaning created by ‘an endless looping or feedback.’ With such an emphasis on repetition, ‘the interpreter can never go beyond any passage he or she takes as a starting place [...] [He] remains, rather, suspended interminably in an impossible attempt to still the passage’s internal movement so that it can be used as a firm stepping-off place for a more complete journey of interpretation’.<sup>87</sup> The reader is unable to create a stable reading from a text that insists upon questioning and covering up its own internal logic. By denying any single interpretation the authority to assert absolute meaning, the text encourages the

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<sup>86</sup> J.H. Miller, ‘Reading Narrative’, in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000*, ed. by Dorothy J. Hale (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 242-256 (p. 245).

<sup>87</sup> Miller, p. 246.

continual re-assessment of its own representation of home.

Gaskell's decision to include two textual authorities – Charles Dickens and Samuel Johnson – into her narrative provokes this dual process of critique and affirmation of the Cranford ladies' stories of home. The explicit references to Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* evoke a debate between male and female models of literary and interpretive authority and between gendered spaces of home. While *Pickwick* encompasses all that is modern, male and mobile, the rules of 'elegant economy' are depicted as static, trivial and out-moded. In other words, Gaskell invokes Dickensian literary models to question whether the authority of the ladies of Cranford is indeed 'quite sufficient' (*Cranford*, p. 89). This debate is instigated through a literary discussion between Captain Brown, the champion of Dickens, and Miss Deborah Jenkyns, the self-ordained authority of genteel behaviour, who 'considered herself literary, and looked upon any conversation about books as a challenge to her' (*Cranford*, p. 98). Asked whether she has seen any of *Pickwick's* numbers, Deborah replies: '[y]es, she had seen them; indeed, she *might* say she had read them' (*Cranford*, p. 98) [my emphasis]. Whether Deborah's supercilious tone is the result of her deigning the text too vulgar for reading matter, or, whether it portrays an affront at the Captain's patronising question, cannot easily be ascertained. However, this trivial literary disagreement becomes a central metaphor within the text: defining not just the relationship between Captain Brown and Miss Jenkyns, but structuring *Cranford's* self-reflexive assessment of its relationship with literary authority.

By juxtaposing Dickensian fiction with her own story of home, Gaskell ironically uses Dickens's text to puncture the logic of 'elegant economy'. In an attempt to persuade the company of the superiority of Dickens's fiction, Captain Brown reads aloud the humorous account of Samuel Weller's 'swarry' at Bath. The extract recounts the time where Mr. Pickwick's servant was invited to a 'soiree' by the pompous footman

of the Master of Ceremonies, which the latter described as a friendly gathering of ‘a select company of the Bath footmen [...] [and] a boiled leg of mutton with the usual trimmings’.<sup>88</sup> The aristocratic pretensions of the haughty footman, made all the more amusing by the fact he is only able to spell soiree phonetically, is set in contrast to the honest humour of Samuel Weller who declares: ‘I never heerd a biled leg o’ mutton called a swarry afore. I wonder wot they’d call a roast one’ (*Pickwick*, p. 485). Sam, an outsider yet to be initiated into the ways of Bath society, is able to recognise the incongruity between a pretentious soiree and a homely boiled leg of mutton and wonder: what aristocratic title would grace an event in which a leg of roast mutton is served? The ‘swarry’ is revealed as a gathering of domestic servants playing at aristocratic practices.

The huge popularity of the *Pickwick Papers* when it was published in numbers between March 1836 and October 1837 meant that Gaskell could rely upon her reader’s prior understanding of Sam’s adventures, whilst also ensuring that they could draw parallels between pompous footmen of Bath and the Cranford ladies’ aristocratic pretensions. Gaskell positions Captain Brown as a Samuel Weller figure – a voice of reason and humour within a community that lives in a self-fabricated illusion of grandeur. Both are thereby able to enter into their respective company in order to challenge such stories and expose their comic consequences. Indeed, Captain Brown’s authority is held in such high regard in Cranford that when Miss Betsy Barker’s Alderney cow, ‘which she looked upon as a daughter’ (*Cranford*, p. 93), loses most of its hair after an unfortunate tumble into a lime-pit, his advice – either to shoot the animal or, he jokes, get it ‘a flannel waistcoat and flannel drawers’ (*Cranford*, p. 94) – is immediately put into effect. In what becomes a joke worthy of Samuel Weller, ‘all the town turned out to see the Alderney cow meekly going out to pasture, clad in dark grey

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<sup>88</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* [1836-37] (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1993), p. 484. All further references will be cited in parenthesis.

flannel' (*Cranford*, p. 94). Captain Brown's practical, if somewhat violent advice, to put the animal out of its suffering, is ignored in favour of its ludicrous alternative. His appropriation of *The Pickwick Papers* and his sensible advice to a distraught Miss Barker, represent a masculine language that interrupts Cranfordian stories with its practicality and realism. Miss Betsy Barker's 'daughter' is exposed for the animal she really is.

Captain Brown's function within the novel, then, is to reflect Mr Pickwick's own conceptualisation of the trivial and ludicrous nature of domestic spaces. From the outset the latter is beset with a desire to travel. Looking out of his window, Mr Pickwick observes 'Goswell Street was at his feet, Goswell Street was on his right hand – as far as the eye could reach, Goswell Street extended on his left; and the opposite side of Goswell Street was over the way' (*Pickwick*, p. 10). The repetition of the street name traps the reader in a circle of continuity; there is no beginning and no end of Goswell Street, as it represents both the origin and the destination. Our eyes, just like Mr. Pickwick's, cannot see beyond its extensive yet specific boundaries. Ruminating on such a view, the latter pronounces: 'such [...] are the narrow views of those philosophers who, content with examining the things that lie before them, look not to the truths which are hidden beyond' (*Pickwick*, p. 10). The world that exists directly beneath one's window is characterised as a self-perpetuating fiction that is only surmountable through travel and the discovery of 'truths'. Mr. Pickwick views home as a barrier to such discovery. With these sentiments, and by assembling a group of his fellow Pickwickians to travel the breadths of the country in the name of scientific discovery, he rejects the feminised model of home which *Cranford* explores. Instead, spaces of home are characterised as dangerous; they are the places in which men fall victims to cunning women seeking marriage, or to outspoken landladies who demand their rent with violence. Within *The Pickwick Papers* home is a fixed site: one which

must be transgressed in order to gain knowledge, and one that must be avoided at all costs. Gaskell's dialogue with *The Pickwick Papers* positions Cranfordian spaces of home as a specific set of cultural and social demarcations that become so insular they cannot conceive of a world beyond their metaphorical 'Goswell Street'.

However, by utilising Dickensian satire to deconstruct the ladies' stories of home Gaskell, paradoxically, affirms their significance as an alternative 'spatial imaginary'. *Cranford* occupies itself with the spaces of home *The Pickwick Papers* consciously bypasses, as the extensive spaces of 'Goswell Street' that extend as far as the eye can reach are reclaimed as sites of meaning. *Cranford* tells the story of the daily lives of women, women like Arabella Allen and Emily Wardle who disappear from the pages of *Pickwick* while they patiently wait for the return of their lovers. It is a space in which the unfortunate Rachel Wardle, the innocent victim of the schemes of Mr. Jingle banished from the pages of Dickens's novel as punishment for her elopement, could find herself, succoured by a supportive female community. *Cranford* constitutes an alternative narrative in which superfluous bodies and redundant domestic spaces become part of an inclusive vision of homeliness.

The ladies of Cranford through the text's ironic techniques transform the meaning of Dickens's text. This is shown in the literary debate between Deborah Jenkyns and Captain Brown, which climaxes in the death of the latter. In another example of Gaskell's devastating irony, he is killed by a train when, while reading a number of *Pickwick*, he sees a child wandering onto the track and attempts to save her. In the confused mind of a dying Miss Jenkyns, this incident becomes connected to the Captain's reading practices: she can only recall that 'strange old book, with the queer name, [that] poor Captain Brown was killed for reading' (*Cranford*, p. 31). *The Pickwick Papers* is re-imagined, not as an alternative model of home, nor as a contentious body of reading material, but as a deadly weapon that turns against its

champion. Dickens's text is transformed from a threat to the ladies' stories of home to being the means of vanquishing the very threat it poses. The combined significance of the train – presumably from Drumble – and Dickens's mobile text, make this incident a significant comment upon gender roles, as the tools of male authority are applied against their own champion.

Elsie Michie has argued that this incident can also be read as part of Gaskell's continual wrangling with her editor over control of her work. While their association remained cordial during the period of *Cranford's* publication between 1851-1853, a series of wrangles during the serialisation of *North and South* (1854-55) threatened to fracture their working relationship. In this context, Michie argues that the symbolic 'death' of Dickens and his champion can, therefore, be interpreted as a triumphant moment in which his editorial voice is silenced and Gaskell assumes command of her own text.<sup>89</sup> However, despite this ironic commentary that appears to destabilise Dickens's textual authority, it is telling that on its publication in *Household Words* her editor saw fit to remove this reference to himself from *Cranford's* numbers, arguing that he could not be seen to support such flagrant self-promotion. Replacing his own name with that of *Hood's Poems* he, consciously or otherwise, relocates the target of her critique. Despite his protestation that 'I would rather do anything than cause you a moment's vexation', an incensed Gaskell lost no time in reinstating Dickens's name in the two-volume edition of *Cranford* in 1853.<sup>90</sup> In what becomes a reflection of Miss Jenkyns and Captain's Brown's literary debate, this trivial wrangling between editor and author is transformed into a significant challenge to literary authority.

Within the textual spaces of *Cranford*, however, explicit references to *The Pickwick Papers* function ironically. Subsuming Dickens's text within her narrative,

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<sup>89</sup> Elsie Michie, *Outside the Pale*, p. 96. Indeed this incident demonstrates the extent to which Gaskell is playing with textual authority. In what becomes a bizarre back-handed compliment to her editor, she praises his power of story-telling that transports the reader directly into the mobile world of Mr. Pickwick, encouraging him to disregard the physical spaces he occupies, ultimately to his detriment.

<sup>90</sup> *Letters*, p. 361

Gaskell uses his critical satirical method to assert her own stories of home. In other words, by allowing Captain Brown and his choice of reading material to intrude into the Cranford ladies' sitting-rooms, Gaskell destabilises Deborah Jenkyns's literary authority only to re-affirm it through the Captain's untimely end. Both *Pickwick* and its champion are, therefore, rendered redundant. Men, it seems, are indeed 'so in the way' within the homes of Cranford.

Moreover, by inviting a juxtaposition between Goswell Street and Cranford, Gaskell exposes the absence of domestic spaces within *The Pickwick Papers*, positioning her text as the 'superfluous' space in which home is reclaimed as a site of meaning. This also becomes a significant, if subtle, subversion of Dickensian authority, particularly when his editorial choices had (deliberately or otherwise) lessened her critique. Through her explicit reference to the editor of *Household Words* coupled with her ironic technique, Gaskell shows Cranfordian spaces of home to be trivial yet significant, confining yet subversive, redundant and yet politically mobile.

**Letters, Butchers, and Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas: Prince of Abissinia***

Gaskell's self-reflexive exploration of narratives of home is developed through a comparative framework which brings *The Pickwick Papers* into juxtaposition with the work of Samuel Johnson. As Katherine Turner has discussed, the reputation of Samuel Johnson's texts in the nineteenth century was varied in its extremities: from being described as reading matter for scholars only, and consequently ignored by most of the younger generation, to having a significant impact upon writers such as a young George Eliot and Thomas Carlyle.<sup>91</sup> Gaskell's 'Johnson' appears to correspond with that of

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<sup>91</sup> See Katherine Turner, 'The Link of Transition: Samuel Johnson and the Victorians', in *The Victorians and the Eighteenth Century: Reassessing the Tradition*, ed. by Francis O' Gorman and Katherine Turner (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 119-143 (pp. 120-123). Also see B.W. Young, *The Victorian*

William Thackeray's Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* (1848) and Charlotte Brontë's protagonist in *Jane Eyre* (1847). While the former throws a copy of Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) out of the coach window as a symbol of her resistance to authority, Jane Eyre dismisses her friend Helen Burns's choice of *The History of Rasselas: Prince of Abissinia* (1759) as reading material as looking 'dull to my trifling taste. I saw nothing about fairies, nothing about genii; no bright variety seemed spread over the closely printed pages'.<sup>92</sup> The intrinsic appeal of Johnson's 'dull', 'closely printed' texts to Deborah Jenkyns is clear. Representing the intellectual authority of a past age, his works operate as metaphor for her stoicism. The numbers of *Pickwick* are, therefore, not 'by any means equal to Dr. Johnson. Still, the author is young. Let him persevere, and who knows what he may become if he will take the great doctor as his model' (*Cranford*, p. 98).

Deborah, therefore, attempts to undermine Captain Brown's literary authority through the best weapon in her armoury. By reading out a short section from *Rasselas* to counter the latter's rendition of Samuel Weller's 'swarry', she reaffirms not only Johnson's authorial superiority, but also the community's opinion of her own intellectual authority. Deborah's explicit references to the eighteenth-century literary paragon are also attempts to affirm the stories of 'elegant economy' which have been trivialised by Dickens and Captain Brown's realist satires. As Jeffrey Cass has argued, *Rasselas* operates as an 'orientalist inter-text' through which change can be resisted and countered.<sup>93</sup> Functioning as the textual antithesis to Dickens, Johnson's work becomes an appropriate method through which to challenge the pretensions of this new authority.

However, to read Gaskell's intertextual dialogue with Johnson as a strategic tool which structures the text's resistance to change is to ignore the pointed significance of

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*Eighteenth Century: An Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 109.

<sup>92</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* [1847] (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 52.

<sup>93</sup> Jeffrey Cass, p. 422.



her explicit references to *Rasselas* and, moreover, to bypass the allusions which the majority of her audience would have recognised. Johnson's text symbolically articulates Deborah Jenkyns's ambitions and frustrations. *Rasselas* is the story of a young Prince living in a comfortable state of ignorance in The Happy Valley. When he becomes restless in his passive state *Rasselas*, with aid of his worldly-wise guide, the poet Imlac, his sister Nekayah and her servant, begins a quest to find true happiness outside the boundaries of home. However, when they are unable to find a way of living that is utterly conducive to happiness, they return home with a newly acquired knowledge of the world. It is entirely feasible that Gaskell's audience would have drawn parallels between the Happy Valley and Cranford's community of women: two homes which are concurrently utopian ideals and also spaces of willed ignorance. Moreover, there are also distinct parallels between Deborah Jenkyns and *Rasselas*'s sister Nekayah. The latter finds the idle talk of women uninspiring, and seeks to gain knowledge by founding 'a college of learned women, in which she would preside, that, by conversing with the old, and educating the young, she might divide her time between the acquisition and communication of wisdom, and raise up for the next age models of prudence and patterns of piety.'<sup>94</sup> For a woman such as Miss Jenkyns, who desired to become the wife of an Archdeacon, Nekayah's ambitions represent an attractive prospect.<sup>95</sup>

Within *Cranford*, then, *Rasselas* functions as a subtle intertextual reference which rather than structuring resistance to change, actually examines the significance of

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<sup>94</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas: Prince of Abissinia* (London: Oxford University Press [1759], 1971) p. 133.

<sup>95</sup> For more on how *Rasselas* is adopted and adapted by nineteenth-century women writers as a model, rather than a foil for female ambition, see Jessica Richard, "'I Am Equally Weary of Confinement': Women Writers and *Rasselas* from *Dinarbus* to *Jane Eyre*", *Tulsa Studies*, 22:2 (2003), 335-356. Also see, Eithne Henson 'Johnson and the Condition of Women', in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. by Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 67-84 for a discussion on Johnson's exploration of female education, and James G. Basker's 'Dancing Dogs, Women Preachers and the Myth of Johnson's Misogyny', *The Age of Johnson*, 3 (1990), 63-91 for a discussion on his supportive relationships with young female writers, such as Fanny Burney.

home within individual and societal development. By imagining ways in which the boundaries of home can be transgressed and/or expanded, both texts affirm the spaces of home they concurrently critique. As Jessica Richard has argued, ‘*Rasselas* itself licenses a weariness of confinement that had – and continues to have – expansive potential’.<sup>96</sup> The same could be said of *Cranford*. In the context of the literary debate which rages between Captain Brown and Miss Jenkyns, and subsequently between Dickens and Gaskell, *Rasselas* is appropriated as a feminine text: a work which articulates a domestic space which *Pickwick* only derides. Rather than just represent a model of resistance, then, Johnson’s novel becomes integrated into *Cranford*’s internal project: to juxtapose different textual representations of home in order to expose and undermine their intrinsic authority.

However, while *Rasselas* operates as an efficacious representation of home, Johnsonian rhetoric cannot easily be translated into domestic spaces. This is demonstrated in Deborah Jenkyns’s letter-writing. Using her favourite model of literary and intellectual authority to articulate the occasion in which Captain Brown receives a visit from Lord Mauleverer, she writes:

The Honourable Mrs Jamieson has only just quitted me; and, in the course of conversation, she communicated to me the intelligence that she had yesterday received a call from her revered husband’s quondam friend, Lord Mauleverer. You will not easily conjecture what brought his lordship within the precincts of our little town. It was to see Captain Brown, with whom, it appears, his lordship was acquainted in the ‘plumed wars,’ and who had the privilege of averting destruction from his lordship’s head when some great peril was impending over it, off the misnomered Cape of Good Hope ... Mrs Johnson, our civil butcher’s wife, informs me that Miss Jessie purchased a leg of lamb; but, besides this, I can hear of no preparation whatever to give a suitable reception to so distinguished a visitor. (*Cranford*, p. 103)

Phrases such as ‘quondam’ and ‘misnomered’ are inserted to provide a Johnsonian

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<sup>96</sup> Richard, p. 352.

rhetorical flourish which the author believes demonstrates her intellectual ability. However, the incongruity between the choice of language and the trivial subject matter has a comic effect which negates Deborah's lofty ambitions. As Hilary Schor has argued, Miss Jenkyns's attempts to emulate this literary figure are fundamentally flawed.<sup>97</sup> Unable to use Johnsonian rhetoric to discuss weighty theological matters, she is only able to make use of her literary talents to describe a visit to the butchers. As Schor has identified, it is of no little significance, in one of the novel's ironic twists, that the butcher's name is Johnson.<sup>98</sup> While mocking Deborah's misplaced allegiances, Gaskell also exposes the inapplicability of an intellectual, yet antiquated Johnsonian rhetoric as a method of articulating home.

Miss Matty's letters, while differing widely from her sister's, prove to be similarly ineffective. Comparing the writing style of both siblings, Mary Smith comments:

Miss Matilda Jenkyns (who did not mind being called Miss Matty, when Miss Jenkyns was not by) wrote nice, kind, rambling letters, now and then venturing into an opinion of her own; but suddenly pulling herself up, and either begging me not to name what she had said, as Deborah thought differently, and *she* knew, or else putting in a postscript to the effect that, since writing the above, she had been talking over the subject with Deborah, and was quite convinced that, etc. - (here probably followed a recantation of every opinion she had given in the letter). (*Cranford*, p. 102)

For Matty Jenkyns, the more passive and approachable of the two sisters, the private letter provides a space in which she can articulate herself in a 'nice, kind' yet somewhat 'rambling' manner. Mary's tone here, however, is ambivalent. While Matty's letters impress kindness they are not successful as a method of conveying information. Ever respectful of her elder sister's superior intelligence, Matty is unable to freely express herself. In a similar manner to the way in which *The Pickwick Papers* is introduced into

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<sup>97</sup> Schor, pp. 90-91

<sup>98</sup> Schor, p. 109

*Cranford* to emphasise the processes through which a ‘spatial imaginary’ is constructed, Deborah acts as an authoritarian presence. Matty may venture to have an opinion of her own, but this is soon recanted in a hasty post-script. By comparing each sister’s epistles, Gaskell suggests that in order to write about their domestic experiences, women to have to choose between adapting masculine language, however inappropriate, or to use the space of the letter to say nothing but impress kindly feeling.

The problem of how to articulate domestic experience is again emphasised in the letter reading scene in which Miss Matty begins the painful yet necessary task of destroying her family letters. With Mary’s help, she begins to sort and categorise the correspondence between her mother and father, the Rector of Cranford. Mary is moved to draw a comparison between the Rector’s business letters and his private correspondence. The latter, she explains, ‘were full of eager passionate ardour, short homely sentences right from the heart – (very different from the grand Latinised, Johnsonian style of the printed sermon)’ (*Cranford*, p. 139). However, this division between the authoritarian language of work and ‘homely’ rhetoric is not sustainable and the formalised style of his sermons inevitably makes its way into his domestic literature. Mary notices that after the publication of one of his sermons, ‘the worthy Rector seemed to be so strung up by the occasion to a high literary pitch, for he could hardly write a letter to his wife without cropping out into Latin’ (*Cranford*, p. 141). In his desire to assert his literary authority he composes a letter which is not only inaccessible to its correspondent, but it fails to communicate issues of domestic import. On a letter in which her husband has written a poetic Ode, his wife writes, ‘Hebrew verses sent me by my honoured husband. I thowt to have had a letter about killing the pig, but must wait’ (*Cranford*, p. 142).

Johnsonian-style letters, it is revealed, say nothing about the domestic affairs they attempt to articulate. Rather the ‘admirably calculated’ sheets are filled with

‘many-syllabled words’ that are then crossed with more words that ‘gather like snow-balls’ (*Cranford*, p. 144), bombarding the confused reader. In these densely covered pages individual words merge into a mass of indecipherable physical markings, thereby becoming destabilised from their semantic roots and far removed from the author’s original intentions. It is not surprising that looking back upon the experience Mary notes: ‘Oh dear! How I wanted facts instead of reflections, before those letters were concluded! They lasted us two nights; and I won’t deny that I made use of the time to think of many other things’ (*Cranford*, p. 143). Like Mrs Jenkyns, Mary craves domestic ‘facts’ over moral sermonising.

Gaskell, therefore, emphasises the difficulty of articulating homely experience. Both the Johnsonian-style epistles favoured by Deborah and Miss Matty’s ‘kind’ but ‘rambling’ notes are characterised by their deficiencies. While the former becomes unintelligible markings on a blank page, the latter can only hint of, rather than assert, the generous spirit which characterises *Cranford*’s communal ‘spatial imaginary’. Gaskell’s examination of Samuel Johnson’s epistolary style and *Rasselas*, then, emphasises both the problems and possibilities inherent within the process of writing and imagining spaces of home. While dismissing his rhetorical style and his overtly intellectual literary methodology as an effective means of articulating home, Gaskell deliberately references *Rasselas* to emphasise how home is less a fixed static site than a consistent imaginative process which relies upon the formation of communal bonds. In other words, Johnson’s presence within *Cranford* is to affirm ‘elegant economy’ by functioning as the antithesis to a Dickensian authority which would condemn Deborah Jenkyns and the community she supports. Moreover, by invoking the works of her literary predecessor, Gaskell also considers how to use and adapt male rhetorical models to articulate domestic experience without undermining the stories of home the ladies of *Cranford* consistently re-work. She does, however, negotiate a solution to this structural,

and linguistic problem, a remedy which comes in the form of the Cranford conjurer.

### **Balls, Ballrooms and the Transformative Effect of the Conjurer**

The arrival of the conjurer – a male performer within the feminised spaces of Cranford – affirms the imaginative processes which create and sustain an inclusive sense of home. In this way, the introduction of the magician enacts the same critical function as Gaskell's intertextual dialogue with Dickens and Johnson. However, while the assimilation of the latter into the Cranfordian home poses both interpretive and linguistic problems for the ladies of the town and their ambitious writer, the conjurer functions as a metaphor for the town's transformative potential. Consequently, while his entertainment show is positioned as antithetical to spaces of home, it also operates as an inclusive paradigm, demonstrating the accessible and dynamic community *Cranford* is able to create.

The arrival of Signor Brunoni within the town, however, soon provokes linguistic chaos and social 'anarchy'. His forthcoming performance is communicated to Mary Smith by Miss Matty in a letter which is constructed of sentences that begin but never end and combine in 'much the same confused sort of way in which written words run together on blotting paper' (*Cranford*, p. 183). The event turns Matty's typically kindly but rambling letters into an unintelligible mass of words, devoid of grammatical structure. The conjurer, therefore, like Johnsonian rhetoric, problematises domestic communication. It is, however, Matty's plea for Mary to order her a turban in her favourite colour, sea-green, which registers the extent of the conjurer's disruption. In a novel whose attention to domestic detail such as clothing is so pertinent and relevant, Miss Matty's request is characterised as a shocking development which Mary feels the need to amend. Choosing instead a 'pretty, neat, middle-aged cap' in lavender, Mary saves her friend from 'disfiguring her small gentle mousey face with a great Saracen's-

head turban' (*Cranford*, p. 184). She is, however, too late to rescue her friend from the desire to disrupt the status-quo, manifested here in the strongest terms *Cranford* can muster: the desire to be fashionable.

The disruption of the core values of 'elegant economy' is furthered during the entertainment event. During the performance the ladies begin express their unease about the propriety of the show, as Mary observes:

'Miss Matty asked Mrs Forrester "if she thought it was quite right to have come to see such things? She could not help fearing they were lending encouragement to something that was not quite --" a little shake of the head filled up the blank. Mrs Forrester replied, that the same feeling had crossed her mind; she, too, was feeling very uncomfortable; it was so very strange. She was quite certain that it was her pocket-handkerchief which was in loaf just now; and it had been in her hand five minutes before'. (*Cranford*, p. 191)

While Gaskell jokes that this 'uncomfortable' feeling is connected to a paranoid anxiety about disappearing handkerchiefs, the threat the conjurer poses to the ladies' 'spatial imaginary' is significant. His performance exemplifies difference, only unlike the businessmen of Drumble whose threat is managed at a comparative distance, Signor Brunoni's foreign body presents itself at the centre of the community in the site of youthful female experience: the assembly rooms. By bringing his travelling trade into the inner sanctum of *Cranford's* gendered spaces, he transforms the meaning of the rooms, making them into a space for masculine performance and, as Miss Matty suggests, the site of the unspeakable horrors of commercialised entertainment.

The 'uncomfortable' feelings provoked by Signor Brunoni's uncanny abilities do not dissipate with the departure of the performer. The chapter immediately proceeding the conjurer's appearance is entitled 'The Panic', a connection which Mary explicates: 'I think a series of circumstances dated from Signor Brunoni's visit to Cranford, which seemed; at the time connected in our minds with him, though I don't know that he had anything really to do with them. All sort of uncomfortable rumours got afloat in the

town' (*Cranford*, p. 193). In the overactive imaginations of the ladies of Cranford, the threat of a foreign invasion – embodied in the ambiguous figure of Signor Brunoni – combines with the fear invoked by the trial of some 'bona fide' robbers in a nearby district to create a widespread panic. In their terror the ladies undertake elaborate routines to guard their properties – Matty, for example, takes to rolling a ball under her bed in order to ascertain whether a burglar is hiding there (*Cranford*, p. 204), while Miss Pole borrows some men's attire to hang in the hall-way to deter any thieves intent on targeting the properties of single women (*Cranford*, p. 193). The cumulative effect of 'The Panic' is to disrupt the stories of home the ladies of Cranford perpetuate. The boundaries of their 'spatial imaginary' are made apparent through the appearance of (imaginary) foreign bodies that violate the sanctity of home. In this self-perpetuating 'panic', the ladies imagine themselves to be disorientated, trapped and in danger of personal violation.

It is, however, through this interrogation of the Cranfordian home that Gaskell is able to, paradoxically, emphasise the dynamic qualities of the ladies' 'spatial imaginary'. The ladies of Cranford are able to imagine a space within their community in which the disruptive body of the conjurer can be contained. They achieve this by re-assigning meaning to the body of Signor Brunoni. The literal disappearance of the 'Grand Turk' from the pages of the novel proceeding his performance – an act that mirrors the performative aspect of his shows – is later explicated as less a threatening act of magic than as a tragic accident. The enigmatic conjurer is revealed as poor ex-soldier by the name of Samuel Brown who is injured in a carriage accident when leaving Cranford. This revelation has the immediate effect of quelling the community's anxious state, as Mary explains: 'Somehow, we all forgot to be afraid. I dare say it was that finding out that he, who had first excited our love of the marvellous by his unprecedented arts, had not sufficient everyday gifts to manage a shying horse, made us



feel ourselves again' (*Cranford*, p. 211). The mysterious man is brought into Cranford's spaces of home: his 'unprecedented arts' reinterpreted as a lack of domestic, homely attributes – including basic horse-management skills – that only the ladies of Cranford can rectify.

This process of domestication is furthered through the revelation that Samuel Brown's foreign appearance and exotic aura are the result of a lengthy military deployment in India, which, in turn, taught him the skills necessary to perform as a conjurer. Redefined as a British citizen, his new identity as a neighbour and family man, coupled with his weakened state, allows Signor Brunoni to be admitted, harmless and passive, into the care of the community of Amazons. The disruptive presence of the conjurer is nullified through the process of familiarisation that includes the constant re-imagination of the boundaries of homeliness. The 'Grand Turk' is therefore offered no place within Cranford; Samuel Brown, the member of the British Empire, is able to take his place within the community. The symbol of this transformation, of the independent, enigmatic conjurer into the sympathetic figure, is manifested in the small ball Miss Matty once used to roll under her bed. Now adorned with ribbons, it becomes a present for Phoebe Brown, the daughter of Samuel (*Cranford*, pp. 211-12). An innocuous object made into a weapon against invasion, the ball now becomes a thoughtful game for the amusement of a child.

While the assimilation of Samuel Brown into Cranford's community of spinsters remains ambiguous – it is only when the enigmatic conjurer is discovered to be an injured British man that this process of integration is allowed to take place – his re-defined body becomes a lasting symbol of Cranford's dynamic community. Under the care of the community of Amazons, a healthy Samuel Brown is able to once again assume the guise of the conjurer, a process of acceptance that mirrors the reception of Peter Jenkyns – the long lost brother – within his old home. The community is,

therefore, able to extend its 'spatial imaginary' to include the bodies of these two foreign, disruptive men. It is indicative of how far the Cranfordian rules of 'elegant economy' have evolved that Peter Jenkyns is liked all the better 'for being what they called "so very Oriental"' (*Cranford*, p. 270). In the same way that poor Mrs Forrester is believed to be a 'lady sitting in state', Peter and Samuel's 'Oriental' bodies are re-codified by the rules of 'elegant economy' as exemplars of the dynamic qualities of home. When Samuel Brown, for example, appears to perform once again, he is invested with a wealth of titles that stress his exoticism. In what is another example of the creative ingenuity of 'elegant economy', the penniless British man performs under the guises of 'Signor Brunoni, Magician to the King of Dehli, the Rajah of Oude, and the great Lama of Tibet'. As an intrinsic member of the Cranfordian 'spatial imaginary', Samuel Brown can now also claim 'aristocratic' connections.

The arrival, assimilation and acceptance of the conjurer, therefore, operates as a metaphor for the way in which both *Cranford*, the text, and Cranford, the town, create and affirm (stories of) home. Through the consistent disruption, and ironic subversion of the maxims of 'elegant economy' by 'foreign' bodies such as *The Pickwick Papers*, Johnsonian rhetoric as well as the magician's show, both the ladies, and their author have to constantly re-assess the home they construct. The transformation of Signor Brunoni into Samuel Brown, and then into 'the great Lama of Tibet', exemplifies this dynamic, imaginative process. The home *Cranford* constructs is a space of imaginative potential, a constantly changing and developing set of stories which can be re-worked to include members as diverse as Mrs Forester, her Alderney cow as well as magicians from the Orient.

Gaskell's text therefore operates as a self-reflexive commentary which affirms its own stories of home. Both Johnsonian rhetoric and Dickensian satire are introduced and assimilated into the narrative in order to assert the dynamic possibilities of the

domestic genre. Despite its concern with the fixed geographies of the town or the individual dwelling, *Cranford* maps the influence of other sites – such as Drumble – upon domestic spaces, while also, through an intertextual dialogue, tracing the impact of other authorial narrative techniques upon its own ‘spatial imaginary’. The story of home *Cranford* affirms is, therefore, less a fiction which emulates male models to undermine its own construction, than a part of a process which encourages re-imagination, transformation and consistent change. It what can be seen as one of the conjurer’s tricks, Dickensian and Johnsonian authority is made to disappear, re-written and re-imagined within *Cranford*’s story of home. It is this process of creating and maintaining a ‘spatial imaginary’ which makes *Cranford* one of Gaskell’s most critical, and yet dynamic depictions of English, domestic community.

### **Regionalism, Sarah Orne Jewett’s *Deephaven* and Lethargic Clowns**

Until this point I have been considering how Gaskell uses intertextual references and foreign bodies to explore constructions of home. This section will examine how *Cranford* is mobilised by regionalist writer Sarah Orne Jewett to structure her depiction of the ailing New England maritime communities. The profound effect Gaskell had upon the young U.S. writer – Jewett had been given a copy of *Cranford* as a young woman – is particularly evident in her novel *Deephaven*.<sup>99</sup> The latter was, in a similar manner to Gaskell’s text, published at irregular intervals, appearing in *The Atlantic* between 1873-1876. Along with structural similarities, *Deephaven* shares with *Cranford* a focus upon an idiosyncratic community populated mainly by women whose husbands, brothers and fathers are absent. Like the Cranford train, then, the Deephaven boats

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<sup>99</sup> The connection between Gaskell and Jewett is not limited merely to literary influences. In 1896, on the third of her European tours with Annie Adam Fields, Jewett visited Gaskell’s daughters Meta and Julia at the family home, 84 Plymouth Grove, Manchester, and this established a correspondence that continued after Julia’s death in 1908. In a letter to Jewett a few months later, a grieving Meta remarks how she has read Jewett’s ‘delightful book [that] brought back a whole flood of memories’. See Silvey, ‘It all began with Jane Eyre’, pp. 64-65. The processes of reading, identification and influence have thus come full-circle, and it is now Jewett’s turn to comfort a grieving Meta.

operate a one-way journey. Moreover, the eccentric inhabitants of the maritime town are critically observed by two young female visitors from Boston: Kate Lancaster and Helen Denis. Like Mary Smith, Helen is able to observe and record life in Deephaven through her objective distance while simultaneously enjoying the benefits of intimate, emotional attachments. If Jewett's assimilation of *Cranford* into an U.S. setting is not obvious enough, Helen draws a direct comparison between the two novels. In describing Widow Tully, a poor yet well-respected member of the community, she remarks: 'she occupied, on the whole, much the same position that Mrs. Betty Barker did in Cranford. And, indeed, Kate and I were often reminded of that estimable town.'<sup>100</sup>

Jewett's direct references to *Cranford* and her appropriation of Gaskell's methodology to articulate a late nineteenth-century U.S., maritime community may seem to be an incongruous comparison. Alan Shelston, however, has argued that Jewett chooses to adopt and adapt *Cranford*'s narrative format in an attempt to preserve the local colour character of Deephaven.<sup>101</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, reader responses to Gaskell's text underwent a significant change. Contrary to their predecessors in the eighteenth-fifties, turn of the century British and U.S. audiences read *Cranford* less as an 'affectionate commentary on a society at the point of its passing' than a 'nostalgic reminiscence of an earlier and more genteel provincial society'.<sup>102</sup> Shelston suggests that Gaskell's novel provides an exemplary method in which to explore 'genteel provincial' communities that have passed, or are in the moment of passing. I will argue, however, that *Cranford* offers Jewett both a model through which to represent and preserve the idioms of a local community. It also, moreover, provides a critical methodology which enables her to explore late nineteenth-century responses to

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<sup>100</sup> Sarah Orne Jewett, *Deephaven and Selected Stories and Sketches* (Gloucester: Dodo Press, [1877] 2005), p. 33. All references to this text will be cited in parenthesis.

<sup>101</sup> See Alan Shelston, 'From *Cranford* to the *Country of the Pointed Firs*', pp. 80-85.

<sup>102</sup> Shelston, 'From *Cranford* to the *Country of the Pointed Firs*', p. 82

the maritime society she depicts. Furthermore, through her transatlantic dialogue with a text set in the 1830s and published in the 1850s, Jewett is able to consider alternative temporal, spatial and literary modes which can be adapted to affirm her story of a specific North-Eastern U.S. home.

The critical potential of literature from the locale has been explored in recent critic work on the regionalist genre. In *Writing out of Place: Regionalism, Women and American Literary Culture* (2003) Fetterley and Pryse define regionalism as ‘a dialogical critical conversation’ that occurs at the intersection between the local and the national.<sup>103</sup> The regional genre is, therefore, highly self-reflexive. Operating as a textual model which preserves local customs, it also demonstrates an awareness of all that it necessarily excludes. This intrinsic tension enables the regionalist text to operate as a critical tool. The accessibility of the regionalist motif – anyone who could write, Brodhead notes, could construct a text based on regionalist principles – enables the genre to articulate an alternative perspective upon hegemonic social structures.<sup>104</sup> Consequently, as Fetterley and Pryse argue, a regionalist author can ‘ultimately critique the commodification of regions in local colour as a destructive form of cultural entertainment that reifies not only the subordinate status of regions but also hierarchical structures of gender, race, class and nation’.<sup>105</sup> Regionalism, then, emphasises the alternative often alienated voices which comprise marginalised local communities. The genre is also fundamentally critical of its own exploitative representation of these different voices.

The regionalist text also played a pivotal role in drawing connections between urban and rural spaces in appreciation of a shared past. Regional texts were published and consumed in urban centres such as Boston and New York. As Amy Kaplan has

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<sup>103</sup> Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing out of Place: Regionalism, Women and American Literary Culture* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>104</sup> Brodhead, p. 132.

<sup>105</sup> Fetterley, p. 6.

argued: ‘this readership was solidified as an imagined community by consuming images of rural ‘others’ as a nostalgic point of origin and a measure of cosmopolitan development’.<sup>106</sup> Regionalist literature becomes a commodity to be consumed and digested by a mobile society, particularly as a means of gauging urban social progression. Through its intrinsic reliance upon the notion of distance, as well as kinship, regionalist literature is, paradoxically, able to bypass geographical constraint and create a community of readers united in appreciation of a common past.<sup>107</sup>

Jewett’s *Deephaven* exemplifies all the tensions implicit within the regionalist genre. As a literary text consumed by a mass audience, it affirms the idioms of the region of which it is a product.<sup>108</sup> However, her text also critiques the processes of urbanization and industrialization which have a detrimental effect upon these rural communities, but which also enable her literary success. In other words, through her regionalist text Jewett explores the construction and disintegration of imagined communities joined and separated by ties of kinship and geographical distance. This exploratory purpose, I argue, is furthered by her explicit references to, and her implicit adaptation of, *Cranford*. Jewett brings Cranfordian spaces of home into, to use Fetterley and Pryse’s phrase, an intertextual, ‘dialogical, critical conversation’. Gaskell’s text functions, then, as an alternative ‘spatial imaginary’ which is used comparatively to structure and comment upon nineteenth-century, U.S. coastal communities.

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<sup>106</sup> Amy Kaplan, ‘Nation, Region and Empire’, in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. by Emory Elliott (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 240-67 (p. 251).

<sup>107</sup> In *Cultures of Letters* (1993) Richard Brodhead argues that regionalism was consumed by an emerging ‘upper-class’ U.S. citizen. This urbanised, leisured class enjoyed an increasing mobility. Their interests were reflected in journals such as the *Atlantic*, *Harper’s* and *The Century* all of which included a combination of regional literature and novels with an international focus. Regionalism is thus essentially linked to expansion. It encompasses not only the annexation of the region ‘with an elite need for the primitive made available as leisured outlet’ (p. 133), but also of international imperial expansion. A genre which is fundamentally inseparable from the urban industry that produces and consumes it, regionalism, Brodhead argues, has an influence far beyond the locale which produced it.

<sup>108</sup> See Sandra A. Zagarell, ‘Troubling Regionalism: Rural Life and the Cosmopolitan Eye in Jewett’s *Deephaven*’, *American Literary History*, 10 (1998), 639-663. Zagarell argues that Jewett’s regionalism is ‘self-questioning’, exploring the authenticity of *Deephaven*’s self-supporting economy by insisting upon its relationship with the cosmopolitan centre.

Like her literary predecessor, Jewett uses intertextual dialogue to expose the ideological and spatial limitations of her construction of home, while concurrently affirming the (transatlantic) female community which creates and supports these stories of home. In order to illustrate this process, I will compare the arrival of the conjurer in *Cranford* with the circus performance in *Deephaven*. The latter, I contend, acts out in microcosm the tensions abounding within the regionalist genre: the juxtaposition between the local and the national; the rural and the urban; as well as the affirmation and critique of local, isolated communities. The circus, like the conjurer in *Cranford*, then, destabilizes the boundaries between these binary oppositions, enabling home to be reassessed and re-imagined.

The function of the circus in *Deephaven* is, therefore, to place emphasis upon the movement between urban and rural centres and the effect this has upon the construction of community.<sup>109</sup> It is significant that the show takes place not in *Deephaven*, but in Denby: that ‘uninteresting town which had grown up around some Mills’ (*Deephaven*, p. 61). By removing the residents of *Deephaven* to the antithetical spaces of Denby, a town in which economics rather than emotional succour inform individual relationships, Jewett brings together the rural and urban community in appreciation of a mobile trade – a process which enacts the production and circulation of her own regionalist text. Unlike the linguistic and interpretive ‘panic’ created by the arrival of the conjurer in *Cranford*, the circus draws the local urban and rural population together in anticipation. As Helen Denis explains, this excitement extends from town’s younger generation to the affable Mrs Kew, while even Helen and Kate admit to looking to it ‘with as much eagerness as if we had been little school-boys’ (*Deephaven*, p. 59).

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<sup>109</sup> Brenda Assael has argued that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century the circus emerged as a mobile entertainment business based upon the display of the skilful or extraordinary body. See Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), p. 2. By placing emphasis upon bodies and their movements across spaces, be that within the confines of performance, or as a result of their travelling between sites of performance, Assael depicts a phenomenon that is as mobile and accessible as it was extremely popular.

While Miss Matty worries that the diverse audience gathered for the conjurer's performance is evidence of the impropriety of the performance, the conjoining metaphors which characterise the reception of the circus bring together ages, classes, and genders in an inclusive communal event.

It is, therefore, the dynamics of this diverse yet inclusive audience which make the show a success. Helen admits that 'I cannot truthfully say that it was a good show; it was somewhat dreary, now that I think of it quietly and without excitement. The creatures looked tired, and as if they had been on the road for a great many years (*Deephaven*, pp. 62-63). In what becomes an interesting twist upon the fixed spaces of home and the phenomenon of the travelling performances, it is the audience which becomes mobile and dynamic. The lethargic stasis of the circus performers contrasts dramatically with the excited crowd, whose enthusiasm proves to be infectious. Helen notes that:

The audience was hilarious, and cheered and laughed at the tired clown until he looked as if he thought his speeches might possibly be funny, after all. We were so glad we had pleased the poor thing; and when he sang a song our satisfaction was still greater, and so he sang it all over again. (*Deephaven*, p. 63)

The audience's positive response provokes the clown out of his lethargic state, allowing him to believe that 'his speeches might possibly be funny after all'. Helen's repetitive use of the plural 'we' and 'our' suggests that her sympathetic response to 'the poor thing' is one shared by the whole audience. The performers are re-imagined as part of an 'imagined community' affected by public response.

Kate Lancaster also contributes to this process of integration and conjoining. For Kate the circus evokes memories of her childhood in Deephaven and her late Uncle. She asks:

"Doesn't it seem as if you were a child again?" Kate asked me. "I am sure this is just the same as the first circus I ever saw. It grows more and more familiar, and it puzzles me to think they should not have altered in the least while I have changed so



much. (*Deephaven*, p. 64)

The meaning of the circus performance is transformed; it is no longer an entertainment show but part of a childhood memory. The memory is a positive one for Kate; it reminds her of her home, the games she played with her Uncle and her grief at his untimely death (*Deephaven*, pp. 64-65). The circus is able to grow 'more and more familiar' because it becomes part of a personal past: a nostalgic connection to a lost experience. This memory is not just personal, but communal. Kate assumes that everyone will be reminded of their childhood through the shared experience of the performance, asking Helen, "Doesn't it seem as if you were a child again?" The circus becomes part of Kate's 'spatial imaginary', connecting her not only to her individual past, but to the community of Deephaven. The spaces of the circus are thereby subsumed into the communal consciousness.

Deephaven's ability to integrate the stranger into its midst is also demonstrated through the example of the 'Kentucky Giantess'. The Giantess, billed as 'the largest woman in America', forms part of the circus's freak show. The piteous spectacle of the unhappy woman, however, soon turns any curiosity the party felt into embarrassment: Mrs Kew whispers to her young companions 'doesn't she look discouraged, poor creatur'?' (*Deephaven*, p. 65). It is in this moment of sympathy that the elder woman recognises not a freakish body, but the figure of her long-lost neighbour. Marilly – her identity as a former resident of Deephaven is emphasised through Mrs Kew's use of her real name – tells of her difficult life as the daughter of a spendthrift alcoholic. Forced into accepting the travelling life style through economic necessity, she is nevertheless grateful to her employers and proud of her position as a professional performer. While this optimism is contradicted by her 'discouraged' appearance, the kindness of Kate and Mrs Kew is able to restore some of the 'absurd, pitiful creature[s]' former spirits (*Deephaven*, p. 67). She says:

“It has done me sights of good to see you,” said our new acquaintance; “I was feeling down-hearted just before you came in. I’m pleased to see somebody that remembers me as I used to be”. (*Deephaven*, p. 67)

The Kentucky Giantess is transformed from a grotesque spectacle into a member of the community. This connection with the home she has left reinstates her identity as a daughter and a neighbour, allowing her into the familiar and reinvigorating spaces of Deephaven’s community.

While this demonstrates how the circus can be integrated into Deephaven’s ‘spatial imaginary’ the relationship between the spaces of performance and the sites of domestic experience remains in tension. Precariously positioned as both a neighbour and a stranger, ‘The Kentucky Giantess’ illustrates the boundaries of the town’s imagined community. Despite all her protestations of contentment, and her professional pride at her weight and appearance, Marilly admits that: ‘I believe I’d rather die than get any bigger. I do lose heart sometimes, and I wish I was a smart woman and could keep house’ (*Deephaven*, p. 67). The phrase ‘keep house’ suggests that Marilly has not only been denied paid employment as a housekeeper, but perhaps even her own home in which to assume the role. Deephaven, rather than embracing one of its residents in difficulty, has denied her occupation and the space in which to act out these employments. This is a situation that Mrs Kew’s concluding comments confirm:

I was running over in my mind to see if there was anything I could do for her, but I don’t know as there is... I guess your treating her so polite did her as much good as anything. She used to be real ambitious. I had it on my tongue’s end to ask her if she couldn’t get a few days’ leave and come out to stop with me, but I thought just in time that she’d sink the dory in a minute. (*Deephaven*, p. 67)

Marilly is unable to be re-assimilated into the community due to the very practical problem of transporting her there. This darkly comic moment, that is very reminiscent of *Cranford*’s ‘devastating irony’, becomes a critique of the community’s inability to

imagine the Giantess as part of their constructions of home. Jewett also emphasises the intrinsic danger in doing so. The sinking of Mrs Kew's boat would not only endanger its passengers, but would leave the matron with no method of returning home herself. The best Marilly can hope for is a transitory feeling of attachment, brought about by Kate's polite and respectful treatment. Her identity as the 'Kentucky Giantess' – a place to which she has never belonged – becomes her only identity.

Deephaven's intrinsic failure to integrate the wayward neighbour into the community can be seen as part of Jewett's complex political critique. Using Gaskell's text as a structural framework and significant point of reference, she is able to critique the processes of modernisation that destabilise community and, paradoxically, the 'spatial imaginary' that *Cranford* constructs. This is demonstrated most effectively in Kate and Helen's visit to Miss Chauncey – who demonstrates similar characteristics to Miss Deborah Jenkyns. This elegant woman displays the aristocratic pretensions of Cranfordian 'elegant economy', using 'long words and ceremonious phrases' (*Deephaven*, p. 111), and imagining that her sparsely decorated, cobwebbed home is equipped to reflect her illustrious personage. Where the ladies of Cranford affect this outcome through the communal imagination, Miss Chauncey's creative thinking, we are informed, is the result of 'insan[ity]' (*Deephaven*, p. 110). Cranfordian 'elegant economy' within the context of *Deephaven's* textual dynamic is reimagined pragmatically: as a realistic depiction of a decaying mind mirrored by its fragmenting surroundings.

Jewett's critique of the fragmentation of community through the processes of modernisation, commercialism and urbanisation, is reflected in Miss Honora's description of Miss Chauncey's predicament:

The town makes her an allowance every year, and she has some friends who take care that she does not suffer, though her wants are few. She is an elegant woman still ... you must go to make her a call. I hope she will happen to be talkative, for I'm sure

you would enjoy her. (*Deephaven*, p. 110)

Though the town supports the ‘elegant woman’ and her few financial needs, she is not part of the town’s ‘spatial imaginary’. While the Cranfordian ladies such as Miss Matty can expect to be supported by the local community when in difficulty, particularly after the collapse of her savings bank, Miss Chauncey, by contrast, becomes a poignant example of the failure of these imaginative communal bonds. Moreover, the suggestion that Kate and Helen would ‘enjoy her’ positions Miss Chauncey as an exhibition, which, not unlike the Kentucky Giantess, is to be consumed by the two young visitors from Boston. Jewett places emphasis upon consumption rather than assimilation. While *Cranford*’s Mrs Forrester is imagined to be one of the ladies ‘sitting in state’, Miss Chauncey is a spectacle to be viewed. While the conjurer comes to represent Cranford’s dynamic integration process, both the Kentucky Giantess and Miss Chauncey demonstrate how Deephaven cannot support these stories of home. Jewett’s deliberate adaptation of the story of Deborah Jenkyns can, therefore, be read as a critique of the processes of modernisation that mean *Cranford*’s utopian vision of homeliness cannot be assimilated in *Deephaven*’s fragmented and pragmatic modern world.

Jewett’s exploration of local community and spaces of home through Gaskell’s textual model is, therefore, extremely complex. Using *Cranford* as a paradigmatic narrative of home, she both affirms the community of Deephaven – particularly through the circus – while exposing the fragility of its ‘spatial imaginary’. The Cranfordian model of ‘elegant economy’, which encourages the assimilation of other textual authorities, gendered/urban spaces and foreign bodies into its consistently evolving stories of home, cannot be sustained in *Deephaven*. Through her dialogue with Gaskell, Jewett critiques the processes of industrialisation and modernisation which effect late nineteenth-century United States, thereby destabilising the local communities both she and her literary predecessor construct. *Deephaven*, then, becomes a critical exploration

of how to write about and preserve these localised stories of home within a (trans)national literary system. In other words, Jewett exposes the gulf between a specific, localised ‘spatial imaginary’ which articulates regional idioms and the vast interpretive communities in which her text circulates. While *Cranford* is able to bridge this ideological and geographical ‘gap’ through its adaptable stories of home – as Jewett’s direct references illustrate – *Deephaven* is unable to mediate between the local and the national without causing damage to the community it upholds. The immediate social and economic pressures from outside the fictional town and the novel’s regional setting, destabilise Jewett’s fragile yet ultimately critical story of home.

### **Returning to *Cranford***

While Jewett depicts a home which is both literally and ideologically difficult to return to, *Cranford* remained a ‘spatial imaginary’ which Gaskell could always revisit. In a letter to John Ruskin in February 1865, she describes her text as ‘the only one of my books that I can read again; -- but whenever I am ailing or ill, I take *Cranford* and – I was going to say enjoy it (but that would not be pretty!) laugh over it afresh!’<sup>110</sup> The text is invested with cathartic properties which not only cure ill health but assuage authorial anxiety. The ‘only one of her books [she] can read again’ without shame or self-criticism, it confirms her literary authority, aptly through its humorous, self-reflexive assertion of stories of home. Unlike her later novel *Ruth* (1853) – the construction and reception of which made Gaskell physically ill – *Cranford* has a re-invigorating effect.

Gaskell’s confession to Ruskin, therefore, exemplifies, and explicates her text’s intrinsic success. Through her self-reflexive exploration of how to articulate spaces of home, via and in spite of, male authorial models, she finds a successful method of

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<sup>110</sup> *Letters*, p. 747.

writing about domestic experience and its inclusive, dynamic properties. By depicting home less as a fixed, static narrative than as an adaptable, extendable and ultimately mobile phenomenon, Gaskell's *Cranford* becomes a pervasive literary model which enables a transatlantic dialogue with other female writers. This intertextual conversation, which occurs across regional divides, national boundaries and within a transatlantic community, provokes an investigation of the literal and ideological terrains which define home. While *Deephaven* uses this approach to question the permeability of home amid wide social change, questioning in the process the viability of the popular regionalist motif, Gaskell's mobile text is able to successfully articulate, extend and sustain its own 'spatial imaginary'. *Cranford*'s stories of home, in other words, can always be re-read afresh.

## Chapter Two

### Louisa May Alcott's Literary Experiments: *Little Women* and Transatlantic Tradition

#### *Little Women*: the 'American', Domestic 'Myth'?

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-9) has traditionally been read as 'the American myth':<sup>111</sup> a text which embodies the white, middle-class ideologies which have come to be associated with a post-bellum domestic idealism. As Barbara Sicherman has demonstrated this reading is intrinsically problematic. Assuming a 'universality of female experience and a single mode of reading', it positions Alcott's novel as a straightforward representation of an instantly recognisable, innate 'Americanness'.<sup>112</sup> *Little Women*, however, resists such 'a single mode of reading'. The text's meaning, Sicherman argues, 'resides in the social location, interpretive conventions and perceived needs of disparate communities of readers'.<sup>113</sup> *Little Women*'s mythological status therefore belies the various class, gendered and geographical interpretive communities which confer its specific representation of domesticity. In other words, the 'Americanness' of this international bestseller is negotiated and explored through a series of disparate interpretive positions.

This chapter extends Sicherman's thesis, examining how *Little Women* operates as a literary product within a transatlantic marketplace. Tracing how Alcott's text engages with and responds to its British textual precedents, as well as the national domestic tradition exemplified by the fiction of Catherine Sedgwick and Harriet Beecher Stowe, I deconstruct her mythological 'American' novel. I argue that *Little*

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<sup>111</sup> Madelon Bedell, 'Introduction' to Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1947), p. xi.

<sup>112</sup> Barbara Sicherman, 'Reading *Little Women*: The Many Lives of a Text,' in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. by Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 245-267 (p. 248).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

*Women's* national identity is conferred through a series of intertextual confrontations with seminal works such as John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37). While utilising a comparative, transatlantic framework to affirm U.S. difference, this overtly self-reflexive text also engages with the domestic tradition fostered by authors such as Susan Warner and E.D.E.N Southworth. Through the literary career of Jo March, a thinly veiled semi-autobiographical account of her own literary endeavours, Alcott explores the options open to ambitious female writers within a burgeoning U.S. literary marketplace. As a result of this complex engagement with national and transnational literature Alcott is able to assert her own model of the U.S. domestic aesthetic, predicated upon the turbulent creative 'vortex' of experimental adaptations and narrative disruptions.<sup>114</sup> This experimental mode allows Alcott to expose the limitations of the literary marketplace for U.S. women writers, while also the outlining the possibilities which her new understanding of this domestic fiction facilitates.

In order to explore Alcott's depiction of the role and work of the female author in the post-bellum United States, I focus on the ways in which she engages with literary tradition and generic convention. Historically, criticism of *Little Women* has been feminist in its approach, concentrating upon the novel's representations of female discontent and Jo's contentious decision to reject her childhood friend Laurie and his offer of marriage.<sup>115</sup> Consequently the novel's explicit references to examples of British, European and U.S. literature has been largely overlooked; the work of Jesse Crister, Michele Ann Abate and Karen Sands O'Connor are notable exceptions to this general critical trend.<sup>116</sup> Yet *Little Women* is an overtly metafictional text; volumes 1 and 2

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<sup>114</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* [1868-69], ed. by Anne K. Philips and Gregory Eislein, (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 211.

<sup>115</sup> For a concise review of Alcott criticism, see Ann B. Murphy, 'The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in *Little Women*,' *Signs*, 15:3 (1990), 562- 585.

<sup>116</sup> Comparing 'topsy-turvey' Jo and the character of Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's international bestseller *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851), Michele Ann Abate argues that *Little Women* should be read as



contain references to no fewer than thirty different authors of more than five nationalities, each engaging with a distinct literary tradition.<sup>117</sup> Through her ambitious, and learned protagonists, the March sisters, Alcott reads and adapts the conventional allegorical tale, epitomized in *The Pilgrim's Progress*; fiction for leisure, through Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1851); satirical journalism via *The Pickwick Papers*; sensational literature in both the pictorial broadsheets and the works of E.D.E.N Southworth; as well as the moral, juvenile fiction exemplified by the works of Maria Edgeworth. By focusing on the novel's exploration of genre and convention, I draw attention to the ways in which Alcott engages in a dialogue with her literary precedents in order to negotiate her place within a transatlantic marketplace. In manipulating, adapting and sometimes dismissing these inherited models of writing, she is able to construct her own literary identity as part of both a uniquely U.S., transcendental movement and as part of a wider transatlantic community of female writers.

In the process of deconstructing and re-imagining the literary tradition she inherits, Alcott exposes how conceptions of authorship in the nineteenth century were subject to pervasive national and gendered paradigms. These become apparent as she engages with, respectively, an established British masculine tradition, and an U.S., domestic tradition dominated by women writers. Manipulating these national and gendered traditions, Alcott establishes a productive model of female authorial work, while concurrently emphasising the problems inherent in women's artistic endeavour. In order to trace Alcott's negotiations with her literary heritage, the first section of this

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part of a social discourse that reflected the racial confrontations and antagonisms in mid-nineteenth-century U.S. See Michelle Ann Abate, 'Topsy and Topsy-Turvey Jo: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and/in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*', *Children's Literature*, 34 (2006), 59-82 (p. 78). Karen Sands-O'Connor argues that the structure of Alcott's novel owes much to Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*, particularly the characterisation and eventual union of Laurie and Amy. See Karen Sands-O'Connor 'Why Jo Didn't Marry Laurie: Louisa May Alcott and *The Heir of Redclyffe*', *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 15:1 (2001), pp. 23-41. Neither critic, however, explores the wider significance of Alcott's reading practices and her transatlantic literary heritage, particularly how they inform her construction of national identity. See Jesse Crister for a concise summary of all Alcott's literary sources in *Little Women: 'Alcott's Reading in Little Women: Shaping the Autobiographical Self'*, *Resources for American Literary Study*, 20:1 (1994), 27-36.

<sup>117</sup> For more details, see Crister.

chapter focuses upon the ways in which John Bunyan's *A Pilgrim's Progress* and Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* are translated into an U.S. domestic setting to structure the March sisters' literal and metaphorical pilgrimages towards self-fulfilment. Within the context of *Little Women* both texts, I argue, are mobilised to establish an explicitly gendered model of success to which the girls aspire: Bunyan's allegorical tale of sin and righteousness is transcribed into a nineteenth-century urban setting, while Dickens's satirical model is re-imagined as a helpful guide for young, female aspiring writers. Both British texts, moreover, configure Alcott's representation of U.S. difference – manifested here as a specific work ethic and literary identity based upon Emersonian transcendentalist principles. Reimagining both texts as examples of a feminine form of 'Self-Reliance' based upon female 'vocation', Alcott, I will argue, establishes a pervasive set of parameters against which the white, U.S., working woman can be judged, and against which her British counterpart can be found wanting.

These defining parameters of success, however, also form the basis of Alcott's critique. She suggests that within the framework adopted from male authors such as Bunyan and Emerson, female creativity is, paradoxically, limited and even discouraged, imagined as a digression from a feminine duty. The second section of this chapter explores Alcott's ambivalent presentation of the suffering female author within this context as she negotiates the double-bind in which the nineteenth-century woman writer found herself – attempting to balance one's artistic and aesthetic ambitions with the duties of domestic work. By bringing aspiring writer Jo March into the company of Fanny Fern's Ruth Hall and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh, and with figures such as Charlotte Brontë as described by Elizabeth Gaskell, I explore how Alcott contributes to a debate on female creativity which transcends national borders. Utilising this expansive framework to structure Jo March's literary experiments with the sensational and juvenile genres, Alcott critiques the limitations of national and

transnational women's writing. In doing so, however, she is concurrently able to affirm Jo's experimental, turbulent creativity, predicated upon a series of negotiations with the narratives she inherits. Both Jo and Alcott's narratives, therefore, operate as insightful commentaries on the role of the woman writer within nineteenth-century United States. The protagonist's experimental literary career functions as a metaphor through which Alcott's relationship to her literary predecessors in a developing U.S. marketplace can be articulated.

### **Gender and Genre in the Transnational Literary Marketplace**

When she began her writing career in the late 1850s, Louisa Alcott inherited a series of cultural paradigms that both facilitated her entry into the literary marketplace and defined her creative output. Her authorial career exemplifies what Naomi Sofer has termed the 'transitional period' in U.S. literary history: bridging the gap between the popular, domestic fiction of the antebellum years and the highly aesthetic, self-consciously literary art of the postbellum decades.<sup>118</sup> Alcott's career pinpoints the moment at which these two literary models diverged. In the 1860s her work was published in places as diverse as *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* – a cheap story-paper associated with popular sensational fiction – and James Fields's high-brow, European focused journal, *The Atlantic*. The latter, however, refused to publish her work after 1864. As Richard Brodhead has argued, this refusal can be explicated in part due to the different conceptions of authorial labour on which these 'low' and 'high' brow publications relied: respectively, mass-market commercial production, and genteel

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<sup>118</sup> Sofer argues, however, that these two distinct literary movements, often characterised by the 'low' and 'high' brow dichotomy, are more complex than they initially appear. As a writer of this 'transitional' period, Alcott's literary career helps to account for this cultural divergence and makes the cultural processes that facilitated these changes within the literary marketplace visible. See Naomi Sofer, *Making the America of Art: Cultural Nationalism and Nineteenth-century Women Writers* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2005), pp. 1 & 11.

highly aesthetic models of writing.<sup>119</sup> The sensational, domestic fiction Alcott was producing at this juncture was aligned with the former category. Her work, therefore, was deemed unsuitable for the pages of Fields's ambitious publication.

The fact Alcott was not published in *The Atlantic* after 1864 can also be explicated in gendered terms, with the division between 'popular' and the 'aesthetic' increasingly characterised as, respectively, 'female' and 'male' genres. Alcott's fiction relied upon a popular, domestic tradition she had inherited from writers such as Catherine Sedgwick, Susan Warner and Harriet Beecher Stowe. This female-dominated literary movement almost single-handedly changed the antebellum U.S. publishing landscape. From the 1820s onwards, the industry expanded on an unprecedented scale, with technological advancements and the introduction of sophisticated marketing systems fuelling and fulfilling the demand for mass-produced popular, accessible fiction.<sup>120</sup> The publishing history of Sedgwick, Warner and Stowe demonstrates the rate of expansion. Sedgwick's *Redwood* (1825), for example, was deemed successful as it sold over 2,000 copies; by the 1850s, however, a bestselling work such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* would expect to sell around 40,000 copies in its first year. Both novels, however, were outdone by the phenomenal success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851-2). In the year 1853 alone, 305,000 copies were sold in the United States and a further 1,500,000 in England and the colonies.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>120</sup> The birth of the 'bestselling' novel and the introduction of national copyright laws that protected the works and profits of U.S. authors in 1831 brought about new understandings of the activity of authorship. Once the realm of the genteel man of letters writing as a hobby, the newly professionalized author of the antebellum period found themselves integrated into, and defined by, the complex workings of commercial marketplace. As the role of author took on a new cultural significance, both female and male writers found themselves having to negotiate their position within the social order: were they public servants whose didactic writings served to educate the public?; artists who used their commercial success to promote their aesthetic vision?; or, were they entertainers who satisfied the market's demand? The terms of this debate were, as Michael Newbury has argued, more often than not predicated upon the rhetoric of work. The 'mass market' production came to represent cheap and popular fiction, while the less-popular work of the artisan was seen as the aesthetically superior work. See Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>121</sup> Mary Kelley, pp. 26, 18, 13. For a detailed discussion of the unprecedented popularity of these female

U.S. domestic fiction had become internationally renowned.

The success of these domestic fictions was predicated upon their accessibility – both in terms of literal production and their subject matter. These were fictions of the ‘everyday’, works which centred upon the traditional middle-class values of morality, domesticity and sentiment associated primarily with female sensibility.<sup>122</sup> These novels tutored their young, female protagonists and audience in self-discipline and familial duty, while also encouraging and facilitating self-expression.<sup>123</sup> Louisa Alcott relied upon these traditional, domestic frameworks to facilitate her entry into the literary market place. The favourable critical response to *Little Women* typically reflected these critical paradigms with publications like *The Galaxy* invariably focusing upon Alcott’s accurate, and sensitive portrayal of family life: ‘The incidents are those of everyday child-life; the talk is natural and childlike; the narrative is lively, and the moral teaching conveyed in a manner to make a lasting impression on the children who read the book’.<sup>124</sup> *Little Women* was extremely popular across the Atlantic with British criticism concurrently recognizing the novel’s universal domestic appeal, as well as its uniquely U.S. elements. British journal *Hearth and Home* recognised that the novel ‘will never die while the world is full of girls and girl lovers’ but recommended the new edition by Messrs Abbott Jones and Co. in which the ‘Americanisms have been translated’ thereby removing ‘much in the delightful book, which may have puzzled readers of very tender

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authors, and the revolutions in the publishing industry, including nationalisation, which made this possible, see Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>122</sup> For more information on the cultural and social import of the work of domestic fiction in the nineteenth-century United States see Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* and Nina Baym, *Women’s Fiction*.

<sup>123</sup> Baym argues that while men produced domestic fiction, it was women’s writing that produced the audience for it. In other words, one of the aims of female-authored fiction was to educate their young women readers, teaching them to value self-discipline and self-expression via literature. She argues: ‘[woman’s fiction] was a typically womanly undertaking in its desire to serve rather than to dominate; but it also expressed a democratic faith [...] that people at large were capable of absorbing and appreciating good literature’ (p. xviii).

<sup>124</sup> [Anonymous] ‘Review of *Little Women*, *The Galaxy*, Issue 137 (January 1869) <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ACB8727-0007&byte=11708802>> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> December 2008].

years'.<sup>125</sup> As familiar as the U.S. domestic space seemed to British readers it also required some degree of translation. The readily accessible trope of domestic community provided the means by which Alcott could achieve financial and commercial success on an international stage. Through her mobile transatlantic domestic narrative she also establishes a framework in which she could explore her specifically U.S. literary identity within a transnational marketplace.

However, as Sofer has demonstrated in her study of 'transitional' authors Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Alcott, this pervasive, popular tradition operated as a double-bind for this new generation of domestic writers. These authors had to negotiate between their aesthetic ambitions and the tradition of popular domestic women's writing which had provided a significant public platform on which to articulate their concerns.<sup>126</sup> They also had to contend with a pervasive rhetoric that drew parallels between popularity and aesthetic deficiency. In his often cited letter to William Ticknor in 1855, Nathaniel Hawthorne gives substance to this cultural debate:

America is now wholly given over to a d-----d mob of scribbling women and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash – and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed.<sup>127</sup>

Through his reliance upon a gendered rhetoric of commodification, Hawthorne casts the works of popular female authors as aesthetically deficient commodities: products of a newly emerging consumer led culture. He distinguishes between 'the trash' of mass-market production and his own literature, distancing his work from a popular culture by imagining his literary labour as an artisan, independent enterprise.<sup>128</sup> In discriminating between two conceptualisations of authorship, Hawthorne demonstrates what Susan

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<sup>125</sup> [Anonymous], 'Review of *Little Women*', *Hearth and Home*, Issue 308, (August 1897) in *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals* <<http://find.galegroup.com/ukpc>> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> December 2008].

<sup>126</sup> Sofer, p. 115.

<sup>127</sup> *The Letters: Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1853-1856*, ed. by Thomas Woodson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), p. 304.

<sup>128</sup> For more on the relationship between Nathaniel Hawthorne, working class culture and mass production see Newbury, p. 38.

Williams argues is a deliberate distinction between the terms ‘writer’ and ‘author’ on behalf of the nineteenth-century literary critic in which women’s domestic, realistic ‘writing’ becomes the negative standard by which to define the professionalised, male category of ‘authorship’.<sup>129</sup> Alcott, therefore, found that her commercial and critical success was dependent upon her conformity with middle-class domestic values, while this achievement similarly compounded her failure as a serious, professional ‘author’. As Alcott’s literary career demonstrates, the professional female author within the United States was an unstable figure whose aesthetic credibility was continually debated as the terms of her employment were explored.<sup>130</sup>

These paradigms of gendered authorial work which informed the prevalent cultural stereotypes of the woman writer in the United States were also at work in British literary culture. John Stuart Mill’s assessment of the female artist as an ‘amateur’, whose subjugation to domestic responsibility positioned her in ideological opposition to her professional male counterpart, was reflected in the discourse of many anxious female commentators.<sup>131</sup> In February 1850, in a letter to the artist Eliza Fox, Elizabeth Gaskell attempted to justify writing as a legitimate employment for women. Positioning art as a cathartic practice which encompasses domestic responsibility and authorial ambitions, she states:

One thing is pretty clear, *Women*, must give up living an artist’s

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<sup>129</sup> Susan Williams, *Reclaiming Authorship: Literary Women in America 1850-1900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 5.

<sup>130</sup> For a fuller discussion of the U.S. female writer’s double-bind see Sofer, pp. 9 & 13, and Kelley, p. 28.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in N.N. Feltes, *Modes of Production in Victorian Novels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 41. In a process that Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin have termed ‘edging women out’, British female authors also found themselves precariously positioned within a literary system. They argue that the marketplace identified female writing with ‘mass audience, passive entertainment and flutter’, and male writers with activity and the kind of intellectual stimuli that defined the high culture experience. Tuchman and Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 7-8 & 78. This reading, however, is somewhat simplistic, and does not account for what Sofer would call ‘transitional’ authors who bridge these aesthetic categories. Moreover, as Patricia Zakreski has demonstrated, British female writers more often than not used their alienated position within the marketplace to define a specifically female professional space in which their authorial identity could develop. See Patricia Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), p. 138.

life, if home duties are to be paramount. It is different with men, whose home duties are so small a part of their life. However we are talking of women. I am sure it is healthy for them to have refuge in the hidden world of Art to shelter themselves in when too much pressed upon by daily small Lilliputian arrows of peddling cares; it keeps them from being morbid.<sup>132</sup>

This 'hidden world of art' is depicted as a personal refuge which cures a 'morbid' fascination with trivial 'Lilliputian' concerns. Becoming, in effect, a cathartic, necessary activity for women subjugated by domestic responsibilities, this hidden art paradoxically justifies the female artist's excursion into the professional literary marketplace.<sup>133</sup> In *Folly as it Flies* (1868) U.S. writer Fanny Fern articulates similar concerns. Affirming art as a necessary practice born out of a frustration with homely duty, she calls to her discontented readers: 'Write! Rescue a part of each week at least for reading, and putting down on paper, for your own private benefit, your thought and feelings.'<sup>134</sup> In presenting writing as an acceptable method of self-expression, successful authors Fern and Gaskell affirm the private, everyday traditions of domestic writing by using these established cultural paradigms to structure their own forays into the publishing industry.

However, as Gaskell implies, this justification also provides the tools of its own critique. In affirming the 'peddling cares' of the everyday as *the* impetus for writing, women necessarily 'give up living an artist's life', affirming their role as literary amateurs. Fern's semi-autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall* (1854) corroborates Gaskell's experience of the literary industry. The novel traces the protagonist's struggles to support her young family through her writing, emphasizing the 'amateurish' pay, and lack of authorial control which is afforded the female writer. While Ruth is able to

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<sup>132</sup> J.A.V. Chappell, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Portrait in Letters* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 106.

<sup>133</sup> For a further discussion on how this justification informs Gaskell's own social reform novels such as *Mary Barton* (1848), *North and South* (1853-54), see Alexis Easley, *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media, 1830-1870* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2004), p. 83.

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America 1837-1883*, Vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 16.



secure a publishing contract which reflects her growing popularity, attaining the role of professional author to complement her role as supportive mother, Fern highlights the intrinsic problems which faced the female writer on both sides of the Atlantic. As Gaskell later noted in her biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), the dual facets of a female artist's experience, balancing artistic and domestic responsibility are, at best, 'difficult to be reconciled'.<sup>135</sup>

The authorial experience of the U.S. female writer, however, while subject to similar ideological pressures, did differ in significant ways from that of her British counterpart. Nina Baym has argued the 'anxiety of the author' was more likely to afflict the latter than her U.S. colleague.<sup>136</sup> British female writers inherited a rich literary tradition which enabled them to engage in many generic forms, such as social problem texts and works of historical realism, but their interventions in these public debates could be contentious and divisive. In the United States, on the other hand, female writers inherited a distinct domestic tradition predicated upon socially acceptable literary conventions. They were able to enter into the literary marketplace within these culturally prescribed parameters. However, despite the dominance of the female novel over its male equivalent in the popular market, U.S. women writers had to contend with a strictly defined division between mass-produced fiction, and its more 'serious' counterpart. They were therefore less likely to earn the money and the space in leading journals than popular British authors. While Alcott was rejected from journals such as *The Atlantic*, writers such as George Eliot continued to contribute to leading periodicals such as *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, the influx of British texts into the developing U.S. marketplace – particularly in Fields's journal –

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<sup>135</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* [1857], ed. Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 211.

<sup>136</sup> Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, p. x.

<sup>137</sup> See Richard Brodhead for a detailed account of how Alcott's writing career documents in microcosm the changing social and class relations, including the emergence of a new leisured, upper class, that facilitated the ideological and historical divergence of the U.S. literary market. Brodhead, pp. 77-81.

meant that writers such as Alcott had the added pressure of competing with their British precedents as they participated in the project of creating and negotiating a distinctively U.S. authorial identity.

This transatlantic, cultural pressure helps to explain Alcott's writing history. Her authorial endeavours in the 1850s were more often than not explicit re-writings of British textual precedents which she adapts to structure her exploration of female artist in the United States. Her short story *Marion Earle; or, Only an Actress* (1858) reinvents Elizabeth Barrett Browning's character Marian Earle, from her international bestseller *Aurora Leigh* (1857). In Alcott's tale Browning's character is transformed from a penniless rape victim, into a successful actress who abandons her career to care for a young girl and her child, the victims of a wealthy man's deception. Acting as forerunner of her sensational fiction career, Alcott's short story explores the figure of the controversial female artist forced into a self abnegation, while like Browning, affirming the female community that educates and sustains the female artist.<sup>138</sup> However, while *Aurora Leigh* is able to negotiate a role for her art as a response to domestic duty, *Marion Earle's* artistic career is undone by these same social responsibilities. Alcott, therefore, adapts Barrett Browning's poem as a framing device through which to explore the problematic figure of the female artist, if that is only to emphasise the social conditions which make her embrace of art impossible. *Marion Earle; or, Only an Actress* neatly demonstrates the transatlantic scope of the debate concerning women writers. It also draws attention to the national and gendered paradigms which defined and limited female authorial output.

By the time Alcott wrote *Little Women*, however, her literary sensibilities had changed. A successful, established author in her own right, she no longer required an

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<sup>138</sup> For more on Alcott's short story as an adaptation of Browning's poem, see Madeleine B. Stern, *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood and Thunder to Hearth and Home* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 1998), pp. 63-72.

authoritative British precedent to structure her foray into the literary industry. Moving away from the largely European settings of her sensational fiction, Alcott focuses upon the U.S. domestic space and the career of the ambitious female writer who occupies this sphere. *Little Women* therefore necessarily engages in a self-reflexive dialogue with British, U.S., male and female-authored texts – all the influences which created and consolidated U.S. women’s literary production – to explore the consequences of Jo’s various authorial endeavours. Through her fictional alter-ego, Alcott is able to, as Naomi Sofer puts it, ‘imagine an escape from the haunted house of domestic fiction’.<sup>139</sup> This ‘escape’ is constituted through a comparative framework which emphasises the distinct differences within the British and U.S. women’s writing as well as their shared premises. Examining the national and gendered paradigms of authorship she inherited, Alcott can address directly questions of aesthetic deficiency in women’s writing and moreover, the problem of reconciling authorial endeavour with domestic and filial responsibility. Through her wide-ranging intertextual references, she affirms the domestic tradition which consolidated her writing career and exposes the limitations of this paradigm of female authorial identity.

### **John Bunyan and Self-Reliance**

This persistent self-reflexive dialogue with transatlantic literary sources is in evidence from the novel’s opening chapter, ‘Playing Pilgrims’, an explicit reference to John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). Bunyan’s work operates as the pivotal intertextual source within *Little Women*, establishing a pervasive central metaphor of journeying and self-discovery which structures the novel. Alcott’s text relocates the allegorical journey of Bunyan’s ‘Christian’ into an urban, nineteenth-century domestic

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<sup>139</sup> Sofer, p. 134. While Sofer maintains that this project of emancipation is achieved through an expansive philanthropic project which supports female artists – such as the work undertaken by Amy March and her husband Laurie at the end of Volume 2 of *Little Women* – I argue that Alcott’s negotiation with the domestic tradition, and the affirmation of her own unique authorial identity, is conferred through a complex transnational framing.

setting. Reconfiguring the epic journey into a domestic expedition, Alcott has her protagonists move from the cellar's dark 'City of Destruction' to the 'Celestial City', located, obviously, in the attic.<sup>140</sup> The simple journey up the stairs teaches the young sisters the value of introspective evaluation. The obstacles which impede Christian's spiritual progression, moreover, are also used to form the names of chapters, with each of Bunyan's challenges given a modern, feminine setting in which to test the young pilgrim. In the chapter entitled 'Amy's Valley of Humiliation', for example, the youngest March is forced to endure humiliating punishment over the forbidden limes found in her school desk, and while on a trip to Boston with her fashionable friends, Meg has to battle with the seductions of 'Vanity Fair'. In adapting Bunyan's imagery into her domestic text, Alcott instils a set of narrative expectations which emphasise the linear trajectory of the little woman's journey towards spiritual and physical maturation, and the obstacles which impede this process of self-discovery.

Alcott's adaptation can be seen as part of a series of literary re-imaginings of *The Pilgrim's Progress* within the nineteenth century. As Isabel Hofmeyr demonstrates in her recent work *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of the Pilgrim's Progress* (2004), Bunyan's widely influential text functions as a transnational 'archive': a mobile vehicle which can encompass and disseminate various political, cultural and national beliefs. This adaptability was predicated upon the text's ambiguous religious and secular imagery, its emphasis upon struggle as well as pleasure and its unstable, allegorical structure.<sup>141</sup> This flexibility meant that Bunyan's text could be easily adapted to articulate U.S. cultural and political challenges. Within the nation's expanding literary and literal frontiers, Christian's journey through the wilderness and

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<sup>140</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* [1868-69], ed. by Anne K. Philips and Gregory Eislein, (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 17. All further references to this text will be cited in parenthesis.

<sup>141</sup> Focusing particularly upon the reception and re-imaginings of Bunyan's text in African colonies, Hofmeyr traces how the Christian black population used this text of the missionaries to experiment with religious ideas. See Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2004), p. 18.

progression towards enlightenment became a readily accessible trope that could be made relevant to those wishing to explore and critique modern ideologies, religious practices, as well as new geographical territory on the edge of the frontier. William R. Weeks's *The Pilgrim's Progress in the Nineteenth Century* (1849), for example, adapted Bunyan's framework in order to critique the free-thinking ideologies such as Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, transforming the devilish figures of *The Pilgrim's Progress* into exemplars of religious dissent tempting Christian away from his righteous path.<sup>142</sup>

The most famous of these nineteenth-century reworkings of Bunyan's narrative, a text with which Alcott may have been familiar, is Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Celestial Railroad* (1843). In Hawthorne's adaptation modern methods of transport render Christian's weary meanderings obsolete. Obstacles such as the Slough of Despond are bypassed railway bridges and, conveniently, the modern pilgrim, rather than carrying his load, is able to see his 'enormous burden [...] snugly deposited in the baggage car'.<sup>143</sup> While the object of Hawthorne's complicated critique appears to centre upon the misguided pilgrim figure, who, in his desire to reach salvation through the easiest route possible neglects the hardships necessary to achieve this salvation, he also satirises Emersonian transcendentalism. Reinventing Bunyan's terrible giants, Pope and Pagan, as the Giant Transcendentalist who 'makes it his business to seize upon honest travellers and fatten them for his table with plentiful meals of smoke, mist, moonshine, raw potatoes, and sawdust', Hawthorne situates Transcendentalism as an insubstantial philosophy which impedes rather than enables the pilgrim's journey towards

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<sup>142</sup> See David E. Smith for a comprehensive account of U.S. nineteenth-century adaptations of Bunyan's text, particularly their treatment of religious dissent and how the English pilgrimage was adapted into the U.S. wilderness: *John Bunyan in America: Indiana University Humanities Series, No. 61* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 4, 10, 20-1.

<sup>143</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'The Celestial Railroad' [1843], in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), p. 146. For more on Hawthorne and the problematic figure of the male pilgrim see, Robert Stanton, 'Hawthorne, Bunyan and the American Romances', *PMLA*, 71 (1956), 55-165.

enlightenment.<sup>144</sup> Alcott's short story *Transcendental Wild Oats* (1873) – a critical depiction of her father's disastrous Fruitlands experiment between 1st June 1842 and January 1843 – similarly uses Bunyan's text as a structuring mechanism to critique transcendental practice. Like Hawthorne, Alcott uses the pilgrimage metaphor ironically to expose the futility of the 'modern pilgrim's journey [...] out of the new world to find a new one in the wilderness'.<sup>145</sup> Both *The Celestial Railroad* and *Transcendental Wild Oats* demonstrate that as a means of satirising religious practices, and articulating a journey towards an uncertain goal, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an efficacious literary form.

Historically, Bunyan's text also functioned as a model through which female experience can be explored. In Cummins's *Mabel Vaughan*, for example, *Pilgrim's Progress* is used as a didactic tool to educate the young protagonist in her spiritual as well as her familial duties. Mabel meets Rosy Hope, a terminally ill child, who teaches the former the symbolic meaning of Bunyan's text through an etching which adorns the wall of her sick room. The picture's message is eloquently translated through the child's look of 'holy contentment and religious calm' as she ponders the image's 'sacred truths'.<sup>146</sup> While teaching the protagonist the divinity of the feminine qualities of patience and acceptance, Rosy also affirms the importance of familial responsibility and duty to the local community. When Mabel offers to buy her friend a new copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* with 'rich binding, gilt-edged leaves and illuminated margins' to replace her 'exceedingly ragged and shabby-looking' volume, Rosy refuses, preferring to accept six copies of the New Testament for her Sunday school children.<sup>147</sup> Bunyan's text therefore structures Mabel's lessons in self-denial, a teaching which fundamentally

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<sup>144</sup> Hawthorne, *Celestial Railroad*, p. 152.

<sup>145</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Transcendental Wild Oats* [1873], in Daniel Shealy, Madeleine B. Stern and Joel Myerson eds., *Louisa May Alcott: Selected Fiction* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), p. 448.

<sup>146</sup> Maria Cummins, *Mabel Vaughan* ed. Elizabeth Gaskell, p.78.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, p. 160.

alters her behaviour towards the family members she had previously neglected when pursuing fashionable social life. Collectively *Mabel Vaughan*, *The Celestial Railroad* and *Pilgrim's Progress in the Nineteenth Century* demonstrate the translatability of Bunyan's text into U.S. religious, gendered and geographical discourses. Through Bunyan's mobile narrative, each author is able to articulate processes of self-development and/or national progression, while concurrently identifying a correct 'path' through which these changes necessarily take shape.

Alcott's reimagining of *Pilgrim's Progress* within *Little Women* is no different. Like her predecessors, she utilises her textual precedent to map out boundaries, manipulating the established trope of the allegorical journey to chart unknown geographical, spiritual and psychological territories. What is unusual about Alcott's re-writing, however, is that it combines the domestic, female focus of Cummins's adaptation and its conservative emphasis on female discipline, with the metaphor of the journey associated with male authors like Hawthorne. Unlike her later work *Transcendental Wild Oats*, which uses Bunyan's metaphor to satirise the commune's divine pretensions, *Little Women* is able to negotiate with its male literary and philosophical precedents. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, with its widely translatable imagery and its emphasis upon self-development, provides an effective model through which Alcott can re-work the philosophies of her neighbour and mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, within an explicitly feminised, domestic setting.<sup>148</sup>

The latter's works had a significant impact on Alcott's literary career. In a

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<sup>148</sup> As Karen Halttunen has argued, Alcott's dialogue with Bunyan's work becomes a reenactment of her father's favourite educational method – using allegorical imagery to structure lessons in female self-control. Karen Halttunen, *The Domestic Drama of Louisa May Alcott*, *Feminist Studies*, 10:2 (1984), 233-254 (p. 234). Halttunen maintains that *Pilgrim's Progress* represents a patriarchal model of self-control and discipline which characterised Alcott's relationship with her father Bronson. The play 'The Witch's Curse' in which Jo dresses as a man operates as the alternative 'maternal' stage in which subversions of gender roles can be played out. Her engagement with Bunyan's text is therefore an example of what Showalter terms Alcott's 'literary ambidexterity' as she enters into dialogue with both male and female paradigms of self-expression and discipline. See Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 44.

journal entry in 1882 she admitted that Emerson's essays 'Self-Reliance' (1841), 'Character' (1844), 'Love and Friendship' (1841) were pivotal in helping her 'understand myself & life & God & Nature'.<sup>149</sup> From his seminal 'Self-Reliance' Alcott inherited a pervasive definition of the role of the self within an often repressive social framework. Emerson presupposes that the individual exists in an unhappy state of conformism which only implicit trust in oneself can break:

Each man being the universe, if he attempts to join himself to others, he is instantly jostled, crowded, cramped, halved, quartered, or on all sides diminished of his proportion. And the stricter the union the less & more pitiable he is. But let him go alone, & recognising the Perfect in every moment with entire obedience, he will go up & down doing the works of a true *member*, and, to the astonishment of all, the whole work will be done with concert, though no man spoke.<sup>150</sup>

With the individual placed at the centre of 'the universe' all their attempts to integrate into strict social systems prove destructive. Paradoxically, it is only when he 'go[es] alone' that the 'true member' is able to affect the real work of social change. By understanding the role their unique skills can have within the wider social fabric, the 'self-reliant' individual can favourably alter life within the community. As George Kateb has recently argued, Emerson positions this active form of self-reliance as 'vocation': 'active vocation is the expression and completion of one's being, but it is also the reason for being'.<sup>151</sup> A true vocation is, therefore, derived from recognising and utilising the unique skills the self-reliant individual possesses. It is this sense of working on, and within, the self which creates and sustains meaningful connections with others by performing the work for which the individual's unique vocation fits them.

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<sup>149</sup> 27<sup>th</sup> April, 1882, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. by Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p. 125. For more on Alcott's relationship with Emerson, see Daniel Shealy, 'Singing Mignon's Song: The Friendship of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Louisa May Alcott', in *Emersonian Circles*, ed. by W. Mott and R. Burkholder (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1997), pp. 225-235.

<sup>150</sup> *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. 8, ed. by William H. Gilman and J.E Parsons (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1970), p. 251.

<sup>151</sup> George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), p. 24. See also p. 162 & 166.



As Alcott's adaptation of *Pilgrim's Progress* makes evident, her understanding of individualism as an arduous process of self-development within a communal setting owes much to Emerson's work. The March sisters are employed upon a journey of self-discovery which enables them to negotiate their individual positions within the local, familial community. However, by applying male transcendental rhetoric with its strict linear narrative trajectory to the domestic space, Alcott currently questions the applicability of Emersonian philosophy to female models of vocation and experience. As Carolyn R. Maibor has demonstrated, Emerson's understanding of female labour is fundamentally ambiguous. While his essay 'Women' (1855) affirms women's role as nurturers within the domestic space – a function which utilises their unique skills – he does not outline the limitations this labour necessitates. Furthermore, Emerson does not clarify whether women's socially constructed labour effectively 'crowd[s], cramp[s], [and] halve[s]' their self-reliant individuality.<sup>152</sup>

*Little Women* directly addresses these questions. Focusing upon an explicitly female pilgrimage or process of development, Alcott traces her young protagonists' problematic search for a female 'vocation' in which they can express themselves. Creating a central metaphor which brings together *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Emersonian philosophy, as well as domestic literary conventions, Alcott is able to explore and manipulate gendered and national paradigms of identity, or work. In doing so, she exposes the ideologies of labour which codify and judge the behaviour of her distinctly U.S. pilgrims.

Within *Little Women* this process is in evidence at 'Camp Lawrence', a gathering organised by Laurie, which brings the March sisters into contact with an English family: the Vaughns. Miss Kate, the eldest daughter, betrays her aristocratic understanding of

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<sup>152</sup> See Carolyn Maibor, *Labor Pains: Emerson, Hawthorne and Alcott on Work and the Woman Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 43. Maibor suggests, however, that Emerson's opinion on women changes throughout his career, culminating in 'Success' (1870) which argues women need to bring their unique skills into the public space (pp. 41 & 48).

labour through her chill reaction to Meg's occupation as a governess and her patronising response to Mr. Brooke's declaration that 'young ladies in America love independence as much as their ancestors did, and are admired and respected for supporting themselves' (*LW*, p. 110). Echoing the response of Blanche Ingram to Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë's popular and influential text, Kate's disparaging tone is representative of an older model of social organisation which focuses upon inherent status through a rigid class system. By failing to recognise the intrinsic worth of a vocation which is both psychological and physical, Kate devalues Meg's independent labour. Instead, unable to appreciate the self-reliant work of her U.S. counterparts, she divides, rather than unites, the small community gathered at Camp Lawrence through her social and political prejudices.

Aptly, Kate Vaughn's attitude towards her U.S. companions is contextualised not just by her disparaging comments, but by her expressionless rendition of Friedrich von Schiller's *Mary Stuart* (1800) – appropriately, a depiction of the Scottish Queen's tragic struggle with the English monarch. Unable to represent the pathos and passion of Schiller's text in her reading, Kate's perfect German accent does little to recommend her to her audience, her efforts revealing her to be an incompetent reader of both Schiller and her U.S. counterparts. Within the context of Alcott's progressive model of self-development, Kate's inability to 'read' correctly, demonstrates not only her inability to recognise and sympathise with emotional struggle in others, but also her incapacity to develop the kind of self-critical tools necessary to reach a self-reliant state. It is with no little irony, then, that Alcott has her pass judgement on Meg's reading: 'You've a nice accent, and, in time will be a clever reader' (*LW*, p. 111), when it is evident that the eldest March's struggle to reach independence has endowed her with the interpretive skills necessary to recognise the presence of a distinctly '[un]clever reader'.

By juxtaposing these two traditionally nationalised conceptions of labour, Alcott

adapts the system of value judgments devolved from her reading of *A Pilgrim's Progress* and Emerson's 'Self Reliance' to structure her depiction of a distinctly U.S. model of working identity. Through her dialogue with Kate, Meg is reconciled to her laborious life: 'I don't like my work, but I get a good deal of satisfaction out of it, after all, and I won't complain' (*LW*, p.112). The eldest March is now able to recognise the connection between physical labour and moral and emotional well-being. This was a relationship which Alcott consistently affirmed: '[w]ork is such a beautiful & helpful thing & independence so delightful that I wonder there are any lazy people in the world'.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, Meg's conclusion not only highlights the role of a European cultural heritage in framing notions of U.S. difference, but also instils the importance of women's work within the cultural fabric. Mr. Brooke's pronouncement that 'there's no place like America for us workers' (*LW*, p.112) therefore reflects and relies upon an explicitly nationalised rhetoric, which emphasises both U.S. independence and the centrality of the figure of worker/pilgrim to the nation's present and future progression. Meg's change of heart does no less than situate female endeavour at the centre of this national project.

Alcott, however, problematises this model of work by transcribing this specifically U.S. working identity into the domestic space. She mobilises the concept of Emersonian 'vocation' to affirm women's unwaged domestic labour as a worthwhile endeavour, while concurrently emphasising the self-denial these domestic duties necessitate. The chapter entitled 'Experiments', which can be seen a response to Emerson's declaration 'I am only an experimenter [...] I unsettle all things', problematises this conceptualisation of work. Marmee encourages her daughters to

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<sup>153</sup> Louisa May Alcott, letter to the Lukens sisters. Cited in Daniel Shealy, 'The Growth of Little Things: Louisa May Alcott and the Lukens Sisters' Family Newspaper', *Resources for American Literary Study*, 30 (2005), 160-177 (pp.167-168).

relinquish their domestic responsibilities for a trial period.<sup>154</sup> These newly discovered leisure hours are framed by a series of female digressions, from not filling the vases with flowers, to neglecting the dirty dishes and daydreaming over a much-coveted dress (*LW*, p. 93). Jo chooses to use her increased leisure time to improve her mind by a select course of reading; Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* is one of the texts she peruses (*LW*, p. 93). Through this intertextual dialogue, Alcott directly addresses the female, domestic tradition she inherited by using Warner's text as a critical tool. Jo's reading practices are depicted as neither conducive to domestic comfort nor to her personal development: instead she reads 'till her eyes gave out, and she was sick of books; got so fidgety that even good-natured Laurie had a quarrel with her' (*LW*, p. 94). Alcott constructs a negative image of a leisured female reader. No longer concerned with her working responsibilities, she is in danger of harming her own body – specifically her eyes, thereby damaging her ability to accurately interpret events – and severing the ties between the self and the local community. Like Kate Vaughn, Jo is positioned as an [un]clever reader.

Alcott's derogatory representation of the leisured female figure, then, relies upon the conservative well-established rhetoric which had also denounced the work of the woman writer. This discourse positioned a woman's reading and writing practices as disruptive to domestic stability and female duty. In replicating the nationalised, gendered and literary hierarchies which defined women's domestic fiction as a disposable commodity of an increasingly leisured class of readers, Alcott positions Warner's domestic fiction as neither wholesome nor conducive to educative development. Utilising this conservative rhetoric to dismiss Warner's novel, Alcott demonstrates what she sees as the shortcomings of the U.S. domestic tradition. The paradigm of authorship it espouses and the model of reading it creates are no longer

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<sup>154</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Circles', in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Larzer Ziff (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 225-239 (p. 236).

useful for the ambitious author anxious to depict accurately the lives of U.S. women and to embark upon her own pilgrimage to literary success. Instead, adapting the masculine models of transcendental 'vocation' and the metaphor of linear development to affirm women's waged and unwaged labour, Alcott negotiates with her inherited literary and philosophical models to define an U.S. working female subject.

However, while her complicated critique positions Warner's text as a consumer product which encourages self-indulgence rather than self-reliance, Alcott's reference to *The Wide, Wide World* also stages the paradox which Alcott's domestic text must negotiate. Marmee's experiment teaches her daughters to recognise positive and negative models of female vocation; she advises her despondent pilgrims

to take up your little burdens again; for though they seem heavy sometimes, they are good for us, and lighten as we learn to carry them. Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for everyone; it keeps us from ennui and mischief; it is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion. (*LW*, p. 99)

While Marmee affirms the discipline of work as a means of alleviating 'ennui and mischief', affirming women's 'power' and 'independence', the object of her experiment is also fundamentally critical. Work is depicted as a 'burden' which cannot be discarded without damaging the individual pilgrim and the community on which she depends.

Domestic work, in this instance, functions as a conservative metaphor which limits the leisure hours in which women can explore other alternatives. The 'Experiments' chapter can therefore be read in conjunction with Alcott's *Transcendental Wild Oats* (1873). Exploring the implications of the 'male' philosophy of transcendentalism upon the female characters, the short story depicts its main protagonist busying herself in a 'large, dilapidated kitchen' cooking a meal for eleven, forbidden to use 'luxuries' such as salt, milk and spice, while the male members of the community absolve themselves from practical responsibility in order to contemplate

larger mysteries.<sup>155</sup> In both texts, Alcott suggests that a feminine form of self-reliance will always be tempered by a woman's obligations to her domestic duty.

Through Marmee's experiment, therefore, Alcott stages the problem which Emerson's 'Woman' was unable to reconcile: domestic work is positioned as the means through which young women can improve themselves; however, it is also the only labour which is made available to them. This paradox reflects Alcott's own engagement with the literary tradition which had facilitated her entry into the literary marketplace, but which also defined her text's critical reception. In dismissing Warner's text as an effective model of domestic authorial labour, Alcott turns to male literary and philosophical precedents to structure her explorative project. However, these masculine models prove difficult to translate into a domestic setting. While establishing a forum of imaginative play, they also cause subjugation of the female subject and her 'burden' of work. Alcott, however, is able to imagine, an albeit, temporary solution to these problems. By re-working the texts of Charles Dickens to articulate women's vocation within a familial community, Alcott establishes a paradigmatic model of juvenile female authorial identity.

### **Charles Dickens and the 'Pickwick Portfolio'**

The work of Charles Dickens acts as persistent source of reference throughout *Little Women*. While *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Hard Times* (1854), and *David Copperfield* (1849-50) are all explicitly invoked within the novel, *The Pickwick Papers* functions as a central intertextual source, adapted by the March sisters into their own journal: 'The Pickwick Portfolio'. In a similar manner to Elizabeth Gaskell, Alcott deploys Dickensian satire in order to affirm a self-critical, self-reflexive model of female

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<sup>155</sup> For more on *Transcendental Wild Oats* and Alcott's celebration of female pragmatism, see Claudia Durst Johnson, "'Transcendental Wild Oats' or the Cost of an Idea", *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 12:1 (1998), 45-65.

authorial production. Unlike her British counterpart, however, Alcott uses *The Pickwick Papers* as a forum through which to shape a specifically feminine, U.S., transcendental literary philosophy which brings together domestic labour and the work of self-improvement. The girls' journal is therefore able to transcend Emerson's paradox by positioning the little woman's work within the home as an imaginative, explorative medium for self-expression.

'The Pickwick Portfolio' is constructed by the playful March sisters, who find occupation in assuming the guise of the male characters in Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*. To this weekly newspaper each sister contributes her own small portion of 'original tales, poetry, local news, funny advertisements, and hints, in which they good naturedly reminded each other of their own faults and shortcomings' (*LW*, p. 85). The paper's focus is explicitly domestic: from announcing the sad disappearance and presumed loss of the beloved pet Mrs Snowball Pat Paw, to describing with a humorous solemnity the 'sad accident' that led 'Mr. Pickwick' to fall head-first into a tub of water. Mr. Pickwick's desire to uncover 'truths', to travel the land in order to collect experience, his desire to contribute his findings in writing in pursuit of these objectives, is transformed into a structuring mechanism to contain and express what are decidedly female preoccupations – from shopping excursions to cooking lessons.

In this playful carnivalesque atmosphere, the little women can assume the roles of pompous men, exploring the humour of everyday circumstance and to 'good naturedly' correct (*LW*, p. 85) their free and generally uninhibited play through the section entitled 'Hints'. Retaining the titles of their male alter-egos, the girls write:

If S.P. didn't use so much soap on his hands, he wouldn't always be late at breakfast. A.S. is requested not to whistle in the street. T.T., please don't forget Amy's napkin. N.W. must not fret because his dress has not nine tucks. (*LW*, p. 89)

Demonstrating the extent to which she is indebted to Dickens's literary precedent, Alcott adapts his comic characters to inform her depiction of the sisters and their

domestic failures: Samuel Pickwick, fastidious in certain points, corresponds with Meg; A. Snodgrass's sentimental preferences reflect Jo's reading habits – she is often depicted crying over novels; Beth's occasional lapses of concentration parallel those of the well meaning Mr. Tupman; and Amy's pretensions allow her to assume the name of Nathaniel Winkle with no little irony.

While Dickens's text supports Alcott's construction of character, it also provides a male precedent against which its female variant can be judged. As the 'Weekly Report' section concludes – 'Meg – Good. Jo – Bad. Beth – Very Good. Amy – Middling' (*LW*, p. 87) – the sisters are judged on how closely their behaviour respects the ordered, feminine, domestic habits that the 'Portfolio' promotes. Jo's 'bad' week, we can presume, is a result of her alias 'Mr. Snodgrass's' bad masculine habit of whistling in the street. Dickens's text, therefore, provides a model of professional, satirical and masculine behaviour that in turn identifies and condemns female dissent. But this is a critique over which the March sisters retain control. Their re-reading invites a comparison between the male homosocial community centred around the hapless Mr. Pickwick with the supportive familial bonds of the sisters, each offering an explicitly gendered standard by which to assess the other. Through adapting this literary precedent, the girls are able to author their own critiques and, unlike the ladies of *Cranford*, retain control of their own stories. They promote a supportive, yet critical community of women.

The 'burdens' of domestic work therefore become less obstacles to development than the tools to structure the sisters' imaginative, communal play. Like their fictional counterparts, the Alcott sisters also found in Dickens's text a productive outlet for their artistic ambitions. 'The Olive Leaf', which later became 'The Portfolio', was started in July 1849 and ran until early 1851. Alcott directly transcribed articles such as 'The History of a Squash', 'Hints' and the 'Weekly Report' from 'The Olive Leaf' into the



*Little Women's* 'The Pickwick Portfolio'. The March sisters, however, prove to be more generous and deserving than their real-life compatriots; in the 'Weekly Report' section of the 'The Olive Leaf' July 1849, Louisa, Elizabeth and May are all reported as 'bad', while eldest sister Anna is 'bad x 3'.<sup>156</sup> In the context of all these journals, the serious business of duty and self-discipline become humorous critiques. Within 'The Olive Leaf', for example, weighty subject matter is consistently subverted through a series of incongruous juxtapositions. The 'Letters to the Editor' section, for example, contains an epistle which emphasises the lack of religious matter within the journal. The letter remains unanswered, and is followed by a simple domestic fable.<sup>157</sup> Both the March and Alcott sisters, therefore, find a narrative method which affirms serious subject matter, including feminine self-discipline as well as moral and emotional well-being, while allowing for imaginative play within the communal domestic sphere.

As Daniel Shealy has recently demonstrated, this specific model of domestic authorship inspired another group of aspiring young writers called the Lukens sisters. Carrie, Maggie, Nellie, Emma and Helen created a family newspaper entitled 'Little Things'. The paper ran between March 1871 and May 1874, totalling 39 issues. Focused primarily upon children's fiction, the paper drew upon Alcott's 'Pickwick Portfolio' as well as journals such as 'The Youth's Companion'. Its numbers contained short stories with educational purposes, and persuasive essays which affirmed 'women's rights' and the need for new models of female education. Beginning as an amateur production circulated among friends, the girls expanded their enterprise by purchasing a professional printing press. By the end of its run in 1874, the Lukens sisters had 1,000 subscribers which included Louisa May Alcott.<sup>158</sup> Anxious to support the sisters' ambitious endeavour, Alcott wrote an original piece 'Patty's Place' which was

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<sup>156</sup> 'The Olive Leaf' (19<sup>th</sup> July 1849), Boston, MA, Houghton Library, MS Am 1817.2 (23).

<sup>157</sup> 'The Olive Leaf' (16<sup>th</sup> June 1848), Boston, MA, Houghton Library, MS Am 1817, (29).

<sup>158</sup> Shealy, p. 175.

exclusively published in the Lukens sisters' production in three parts from January 1874.<sup>159</sup>

Collectively, 'Little Things', 'The Olive Leaf' and 'The Pickwick Portfolio' encourage and affirm female vocation in a way which Emersonian philosophy and Alcott's re-imagining of Bunyan's text were unable to accommodate. They achieve this by establishing a female community which supports and structures the development of the self through artistic production. While this community is familial, it is also distinctly literary. As Alcott's support of the Lukens sisters demonstrates and, moreover, her engagement with *The Pickwick Papers* exemplifies, constructions of female authorship were conferred through an engagement with a national and transnational literary heritage. 'The Pickwick Portfolio' can therefore be read in conjunction with Warner's *Wide, Wide World*. While the latter encourages selfish leisure at the expense of self-exploration within the community, the March sisters' production both literally – through the artistic productions it inspires – and within the context of the novel, positions female, artistic and domestic labour as part of the work of self-development. The 'Pickwick Portfolio' represents a juvenile, efficacious literary production to which rest of *Little Women* compares itself.

### **Becoming a 'C.B.'**

The pervasive model of authorship established in 'Pickwick Portfolio', however, cannot be sustained. While girls' literary production facilitated individual growth within a supportive community, their artistic productions are subject to the pervasive gendered authorial paradigms which produced and problematised women's writing. Although Alcott is able temporarily to re-work masculine authoritative precedents into an efficacious domestic text, she cannot subvert some models of female authorial identity, particularly the figure of the suffering woman artist. In her depiction of Jo's independent

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<sup>159</sup> Shealy, p. 173

authorial career, Alcott relies upon a series of common generic and cultural conventions which are consistently invoked in women's domestic fiction. Fanny Fern's semi-autobiographical *Ruth Hall*, for example, documents the relationship between writing for financial gain and the pain of overwork. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, moreover, is made to suffer through her desire for artistic autonomy and recognition, while suppressing her love for Romney Leigh. Moreover, as Elizabeth Gaskell's letter to Eliza Fox neatly articulated, female creative output within a 'hidden world of art' was both necessary, but also impossible for a woman oppressed by the 'Lilliputian arrows of peddling cares'. Collectively, these examples emphasise the public, yet private duty of female writing, which simultaneously sustains and divides the woman artist. Jo's turbulent literary career within *Little Women* should, therefore, be read as a product of, and a response to, these transatlantic cultural and literary paradigms of female authorship. Situating Alcott's work in this context, the ways in which she critiques and adapts the often restrictive, gendered modes of authorial production she inherits, become evident.

Throughout Alcott's literary career, the life and works of Charlotte Brontë were particularly influential. In her recent work, *Louisa May Alcott and Charlotte Brontë: Transatlantic Translations* (2000), Christine Doyle has argued that an examination of Alcott's explicit adoptions and implicit adaptations of Brontëan motifs demonstrates how she re-imagined these stories to suit her U.S. literary productions.<sup>160</sup> Alcott endows her Brontëan heroines with an active agency that differentiates them from their British counterparts. *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe, the object of surveillance and the victim of unrequited love, for example, is re-imagined as Jo March, the young author who is given the option to refuse her lover, as well as the ability to spy upon her Professor

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<sup>160</sup> See Christine Doyle, p. 166.

rather than be the object of his intense gaze.<sup>161</sup>

While Doyle documents the impact Charlotte Brontë had upon a writer seeking to articulate her U.S. identity, she does not address the model of authorship Alcott inherited from her British contemporary. Through her reading of Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* Alcott was presented with a complex image of authorship where the female writer, divided between domestic duty and their artistic ambitions, leads a solitary suffering existence. Writing in her diary after reading Gaskell's biography, Alcott notes:

Read Charlotte Brontë's life. A very interesting, but sad one. So full of talent, and after working long, just as success, love, and happiness come, she dies.

Wonder if I shall ever be famous enough for people to care to read my story and struggles. I can't be a C.B., but I may do a little something yet.<sup>162</sup>

Alcott's response is tellingly ambivalent. While Brontë's fame and her exemplary literary 'talent' are objects of envy, reflecting Alcott's own literary ambitions, her diary entry also expresses some misgivings about becoming a 'C.B.' While this reticence stems from her self-deprecating view of her literary talents, she also shrinks from the image of this talented, yet stifled literary paragon. The desire to 'do a little something yet' can, therefore, be read as Alcott's commitment to a literary endeavour which emulates Brontë's in aesthetic quality, but also lays claim to alternative understanding of female authorship: based less upon the rhetoric of sacrifice and suffering than as a paradigm of hard work and community. Revealing, then, what is an anxious concern for her own literary legacy, Alcott uses the figure of Brontë to imagine the limitations and possibilities of her own literary career.

In her complex response to *The Life* Alcott reveals herself to be an astute reader, recognising in Gaskell's representation of her fellow novelist competing understandings

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, pp. 66-67.

<sup>162</sup> *Journals*, p. 85.

of authorship jostling for position. Elizabeth Gaskell was in many ways the obvious choice to compose such a public, yet intensely private, project of biographical recovery. She was personally acquainted with Brontë during her lifetime and a popular female author in her own right who, like the writer of *Jane Eyre*, had similarly provoked a critical furore over the publication of *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Ruth* (1853). Brontë's husband and father prevailed upon Gaskell to compile the work in July 1855, motivated in part to address some of the issues raised by an obituary written in *Sharpe's London Magazine*, June 1855. Drawing upon an earlier article written in the same journal in 1848, the anonymous reviewer accuses the author of *Jane Eyre* of a vulgarity and coarseness which was not only unaccountable in a man, but inconceivable in a woman.<sup>163</sup>

With the *Sharpe's* review, amongst others, creating an image of Brontë as a transgressive 'masculine' writer, Gaskell used her biography to challenge popular conceptions of the author as a coarse, vulgar and 'masculine' writer. *The Life* therefore constructs an image of authorship as female martyrdom. Brontë's writing career is depicted as an intense struggle between her morbidly insular but creative capacities and her feminine duties: caring for her ailing sisters and an increasingly weak father.<sup>164</sup> Gaskell conceptualises these two distinctly gendered facets of Brontë's identity as composite parts of a divided self. Discussing the split between 'Currer Bell', the controversial 'male' author, and Charlotte Brontë, the dutiful daughter and frail body, she comments:

there were separate duties belonging to each character – not opposing each other; not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled. When a man becomes an author, it is probably

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<sup>163</sup> [Anonymous], *Sharpe's London Magazine* (August 1848), vii. Cited in Miriam Allott, ed., *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 263-4.

<sup>164</sup> This alternative understanding of Brontë's authorship was provided, the writer confesses, from a 'private, and we believe authentic source', a source which Richard Gilbertson has recognised as Elizabeth Gaskell's own letter to Catherine Wentworth, dated 25<sup>th</sup> August 1850. Gaskell is placed in the extraordinary situation of writing a biography to repudiate the reputation of an author that her letter had helped create. For more on this see: Hughes and Lund, pp. 129-131.

merely a change of employment to him [...] But no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother, as well as she whom God has appointed to fill that particular place [...] And yet she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents. She must not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others. In a humble and faithful spirit must she labour to do what is not impossible, or God would not have set her to do it. (*Life*, p. 271-2)

The activity of writing is conferred through gendered paradigms: from the ‘employment’ of the male author, to the ‘quiet, regular duties’ expected of the woman writer. Gaskell asserts that the female writer’s gift is meant in ‘the use and service of others’, as a labour which necessitates not private employment, but public interaction.

In what can be read as a reversal of gender roles, Gaskell positions female art as an essential public service, rendering masculine writing as an introspective, private employment which is removed from social and domestic duty. In differentiating between male employment and feminine duty, Gaskell defines female authorship as a naturalised process that, while it offers women little choice, also enables the writer to fulfil her God-given ‘domestic charges’ through her public writings. In positioning female domestic responsibility as a prerequisite for, rather than an imposition on, public interaction, she finds herself able to reconcile Charlotte Brontë, the woman, with Currer Bell, the author, in an, albeit uneasy, subordination to a woman’s private, yet intensely public, duty.<sup>165</sup> This unstable marriage also forms the basis of Gaskell’s critique. This model of authorship re-enacts the paradox staged in Emerson’s ‘Woman’. While women’s writing is validated as the public expression of an innate female duty, it is also differentiated from masculine professionalism by the limitations this duty imposes.

In her own semi-autobiographical depiction of female authorship in *Little Women*, Alcott constructs an image of the woman writer, that while it differs from

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<sup>165</sup> For more analysis on Gaskell’s attempt to reconcile feminine duty and masculine employment in *The Life* see: Alison Kershaw, ‘The Business of a Woman’s Life: Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*’, *Brontë Society Transactions*, 20:1 (1990), 11-24 (pp. 19-21).

Gaskell's portrayal of Charlotte Brontë, can be seen as a response to a similar set of cultural and social conditions. While there is no evidence that Gaskell's biography directly affected Alcott's depiction of Jo March's literary career, a comparative reading of these two texts exposes the often restrictive models of gendered authorship which circulated amongst women writers. In the context of her biography, Gaskell frames Brontë's literary experiences with domestic duty:

When [she came to write], all her care was to discharge her household and filial duties, so as to obtain leisure to sit down and write [...] Yet not withstanding this 'possession' (as it were), those who survive, of her daily and household companions are clear in their testimony, that never was the claim of any duty, never was the call of another for help, neglected for an instant. (*Life*, p. 245-46)

The claim of 'filial duty' persistently disrupts Brontë's writing process, in what is depicted as the female writer's devotion to her domestic responsibility. The premise of Gaskell's redemptive project goes some way to explain why the details of Brontë's isolated writing process remain relatively unexplored.

The depiction of Jo March's creative fervour, however, is unusual in both its detail and its progressive representation of the labour of the woman writer. Instead of being subject to interruption – from both a narrative voice like Gaskell's, and the activities of the domestic duty – the protagonist's work is allowed to develop, completely unchecked by responsibility. In her 'garret', a space that is ambiguously constructed as an extended part of the house and yet a definitively separate private area, Jo allows her 'vortex' to take hold:

When the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, unconscious of want, care or bad weather, while she sat safe and happy in an imaginary world, full of friends almost as real and dear to her as any in the flesh. Sleep forsook her eyes, meals stood untested, day and night were all too short to enjoy the happiness which blessed her only at such times, and made these hours worth living if they bore no other fruit. The divine afflatus usually lasted a week or two, and then she emerged from her 'vortex' hungry, sleepy, cross or despondent. (*LW*, p. 211)

In her literal and imaginative refuge, Jo March discovers what Gaskell would term ‘a hidden world’ of art. In her creative absorption, Jo finds an alternative model of community: ‘an imaginary world, full of friends almost as real and dear as any in the flesh’ in which she is able to lead a ‘safe’, ‘happy’ and ‘blissful life’. This other world, therefore, offers itself as an alternative domestic space in which Jo can express her autonomy and creativity. The values of friendship, comfort and stability on which the domestic community is predicated, are re-imagined to create a safe but illusory alternative in which the female author can prosper.

However, within a narrative that is framed by Bunyan’s *Pilgrims’ Progress* and Emerson’s ‘Self Reliance’, Jo’s retreat from domestic duty is inevitably criticised. Her writing, although cathartic, is also injurious to her health. In what becomes a repetition of Marmee’s series of ‘experiments’, the young writer finds herself suffering physical symptoms as a result of her intense mental exertions – from hunger, to sleepiness and ill temper. Relying upon a medicinal rhetoric to describe Jo’s creative periods, Alcott illustrates how these ‘attacks’ periodically afflict her protagonist, requiring a lengthy period of recovery on the emergence ‘from her vortex’ (*LW*, p. 211). The term ‘vortex’ was often applied in the nineteenth century to literary production in order to articulate the disordered, absorbing whirlwind of the creative process; Alcott often used the term to describe her own flurry of creative activity. For Emerson, importantly, it distinguished between the ordered process of manufacturing art on a mass scale, and the unique creative process that defines works of individual genius, or the ‘Self-Reliant’ man. In *Transcendental Wild Oats* (1873) Alcott would later criticize the impracticality of ‘the vortex’ as an isolating, self-indulgent practice practised by the men of her fictional commune. As an all-absorbing, individualised process, Jo’s creative flurry, then, can be interpreted in a similar vein. Disturbing rather than promoting the communal values on which her writing should be predicated, her creativity causes an



inability to eat, sleep or participate in any form of everyday activity as she allows her 'genius' full scope 'to burn' (p. 211). Alcott's critique is explicit.

However, while Jo's writing practices are inevitably condemned as they disrupt transcendental notions of female vocation – causing ill health through isolation and self-indulgent overwork – Alcott's aim is to expose and criticize the normative gender codes which structured female authorial endeavour. She does this by allowing her protagonist to play at being a professional masculine author. Jo becomes a parodic figure, donning a 'scribbling suit [...] consisting of a black pinafore on which she could wipe her pen at will, and a cap of the same material, adorned with a cheerful red bow, into which she bundled her hair when the decks were cleared for action' (*LW*, p. 211). Jo's femininity is disguised by an oversize suit which becomes a convenience onto which she can dispose of excess ink, while a 'cheerful bow' is used to cover her abundant hair, her 'one [feminine] beauty' (*LW*, p. 132).

The removal of hair is particularly significant. In an action that can be likened to the passionate Maggie Tulliver's shearing of her locks in George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* (1860), both Maggie and Jo rebel against traditional stereotypes, as the narrator of *Mill on the Floss* explains: '[Maggie] didn't want her hair to look pretty – that was out of the question – she only wanted people to think her a clever little girl and not find fault with her'.<sup>166</sup> By removing her feminine attributes, Maggie desires to draw attention to her intellect, wishing to be judged and valued on the same terms as her brother Tom. In this symbolic violent anger against her femininity, she is, therefore, able to find 'a sense of clearness and freedom, as if she had emerged from a wood into the open plain', as she imagines loosening the ties to her domestic responsibilities.<sup>167</sup>

While Jo's re-styling is less an aggressive shearing than a practical removal of a troublesome object, *Little Women* also draws parallels between hair loss and

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<sup>166</sup> George Eliot, *Mill on the Floss* [1860] (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 62.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

intellectual capacity. When Jo sells her hair to fund her mother's trip to Washington in order that she can care for her injured husband, she is able to reflect: 'it will do my brains good to have that mop taken off; my head feels deliciously light and cool, and the barber said I shall soon have a curly crop, which will be boyish' (*LW*, p. 132). Both Maggie and Jo draw parallels between 'freedom', 'light[ness]', 'clearness' and the removal of their feminine beauty. Alcott allows Jo to be 'boyish' and thereby explore the imaginative possibilities inherent within her de-gendering, turbulent 'vortex'.

However, by enabling their female protagonists to experiment with stereotypical gender codes, Alcott and Eliot criticise the restrictive models of female authorship and education which necessitate this sexual subversion. Maggie and Jo are only able to assert their autonomy through the paradoxical activity of removing or destroying their female self; while Jo's masculine writing practices cause physical and mental pain via her removal from the domestic space, Maggie's subversive behaviour leads to her ultimate 'fall'. By concurrently critiquing the limited models of women's education and work, while using these same gendered discourses to condemn their protagonists, Eliot and Alcott stage the paradox of the suffering female artist: their autonomous activities enable self-expression, but this self-assertion provokes subjugation.

In her complex representation of Jo's writing process, Alcott therefore relies on a common set of cultural trends replicated in domestic narratives on both sides of the Atlantic. She validates her protagonist's rebellious activity by allowing her the space in which her 'vortex' can take hold, while criticising the isolation and overwork this practice entails. This multi-layered critique is demonstrated in the variety of ways in which Jo's hair is interpreted. While the position of her 'cheerful bow' is used to communicate her mood to her family – 'if this expressive article of dress was drawn low upon the forehead, it was a sign that hard work was going on [...] [N]ot until the red

bow was seen gaily erect upon the gifted brow did any one dare address Jo' (*LW*, p. 211) – the worthy sacrifice of her feminine beauty both relies upon and creates the communal bonds her 'scribbling suit' denies. While Alcott indulges the creative moods of her tempestuous protagonist, she also depicts Jo's writing process as a rejection of the values of the female vocation established in the jointly-authored 'Pickwick Portfolio'. Within this complex critical framework, then, Jo is not allowed to become the morbidly insular divided self Elizabeth Gaskell establishes in her depiction of 'CB'. However, this is also a decision for which Jo is necessarily punished.

### **Sensational Literature**

While Alcott both utilises and criticises accepted gendered paradigms of authorial practice in her depiction of Jo's 'vortex', she also explores the modes of writing available to women writers. One of these pervasive generic models was the sensational tale. By the late 1860s, the sensational phenomena had taken hold on both sides of the Atlantic with texts by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins capturing audience's imaginations in both Britain and the United States. This form of literature, constructed by both men and women, was read by a largely middle-class audience and soon became renowned for its emotive and shocking content as well as its moral overtones.

Jo March's foray into the sensational market is, by contrast, contextualised by its relationship to an earlier, distinctly U.S., form of sensation fiction, exemplified by the story-paper. Her interest in the generic form is provoked by 'a studious-looking lad' who lends Jo a paper adorned with a 'melodramatic illustration of an Indian in full war costume tumbling over a precipice with a wolf at his throat, while two infuriated young gentlemen, with unnaturally small feet and big eyes, were stabbing each other close by, and a dishevelled female was flying away in the background, with her mouth wide open' (*LW*, p. 213). While Alcott leaves this particular newspaper unidentified, she relies upon her audience recognising an image typical of the genre's traditionally

dramatic character. This lurid picture replicates the kind of gender and racial stereotypes depicted by illustrated publications such as *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and Frederick Gleason and Maturin Murray Ballou's *The Flag of Our Union* in the antebellum period. The sensational story paper was a popular, accessible literary form with an explicitly nationalistic focus. Many of the papers, specifically *The Flag of Union*, promoted and popularised an ideal image of the white U.S. man whose manliness was affirmed through contact with various 'unmanly' others.<sup>168</sup>

While these story-papers appealed to a cross-section of the population which included women, middle- and working-class readers – Alcott herself, of course, had her early sensational work published by both *The Flag* and *Leslie* – within *Little Women*, however, this specific generic form is depicted as intrinsically problematic for the woman writer. By allowing Jo to create material for a publication which historically did not attract many contributions from white, middle-class women writers, Alcott places her protagonist in a precarious position in which both her class and gender identity are put at risk.<sup>169</sup> In her endeavours Jo is likened to the figure of popular sensational writer E.D.E.N Southworth. The writer of *The Hidden Hand* (1859) is reincarnated in *Little Women* as S.L.A.N.G Northbury. Parodying Southworth's appeal to a low-brow or 'slang' culture, Alcott belittles both her subject matter and her financial and literary success – 'she knows just what folks like, and gets paid well for writing it' (*LW*, p. 213). In echoing the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne as he reluctantly praises and describes the bestselling writer, the narrator relies upon well-established understandings of 'popular fiction' – as easily produced, 'low-brow' and aesthetically deficient commodities.

The fiction Jo attempts to write is classified in this vein. She depicts the

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<sup>168</sup> Gleason wanted 'American heroes or heroines or, failing that, working class protagonist in foreign countries who overcame aristocratic villains'. Quoted in Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class Empire and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 91.

<sup>169</sup> Shelley Streeby argues that women sensation writers would combine the sentimental and sensational modes. Violent sensational devices were tempered by sentimental morals which re-asserted middle-class values. Women were forced to occupy this middle-ground as they were more vulnerable to charges of 'ungenteel' behaviour (pp. 36-37).

usual labyrinth of love, mystery and murder, for the story belonged to that class of light literature in which the passions have a holiday, and when the author's invention fails, a grand catastrophe clears half the stage of its dramatis personae, leaving the other half to exult over their downfall. (*LW*, p. 213)

Jo's writing is represented as formulaic and ill-conceived. Her stories of 'desperation and despair', despite their reasonable popularity, are contextualised as lesser literary products which are haphazardly composed through the author's 'theatrical experience and miscellaneous reading' (*LW*, p. 214). They also rely upon a traditional cast of foreign characters from banditti, counts, gypsies and nuns to Duchesses (*LW*, p. 274) far removed from her domestic experiences.

Indeed Jo's search for exotic material for her sensational thrillers leads her further from home. She searches

newspapers for accidents, incidents and crimes; she excited the suspicion of public librarians by asking for works on poisons; [...] She thought she was prospering finely; but, unconsciously she was beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character. She was living in bad society; and imaginary though it was, its influence affected her, for she was feeding heart and fancy on dangerous unsubstantial food, and was fast brushing the innocent bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life, which comes soon enough to all of us. (*LW*, p. 275)

While her insatiable desire for material provokes the suspicions of a librarian, she is also vulnerable to charges of sexual transgression. Jo 'desecrate[s] some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character' – the use of the noun as adjective only enhances her fall. Alcott's choice of rhetoric is pointed: drawing parallels between her imaginary fall and a descent into sexual promiscuity, where she 'liv[es] in bad society' and covets the 'darker side of life'.

It is in this context that Jo's friend and eventual husband, Professor Bhaer, interprets her literary activity. Drawing a distinction between male and female readers, he identifies the implicit danger such literature holds for women, while stressing its unhelpful influence on boys: "I do not like to think that good girls should see such

things. They are made pleasant to some but I would rather give my boys gunpowder to play with than this bad trash” (LW, p. 280). While young men are adversely affected by reading such deficient fiction, ‘good girls’ simply should never read it at all. For Alcott, and for Professor Bhaer, the abject failure of the sensational tale as an effective literary medium lies in its moral defectiveness, its aesthetic deficiency and its connections with sexual promiscuity. It is not surprising, therefore, that when made to understand the danger her fictions provoke, Jo feels as if the words ‘Weekly Volcano’, the journal which publishes her works, are emblazoned across her head. She is forced like Hester Prynne of the *Scarlet Letter* to wear the symbol of her own disgrace. Unlike Hester, however, who can consistently re-imagine the meaning of the ‘A’ which adorns her breast, Jo is branded by a pervasive set of gendered authorial models which cannot be so easily re-invented.

However, to read Alcott’s dismissal of sensation fiction as a simple, highly conservative critique is to deny the complexity of her literary project. Alcott’s own literary history, for example, forbids such an easy conclusion. While Richard Brodhead has argued that her decision to move from the story-paper sensational tale into the realm of moral juvenile fiction is a response to the development of a new distinctive high-brow literary culture within U.S. society, Elizabeth Keyser has demonstrated the thematic connections between these two literary forms.<sup>170</sup> Juxtaposing *Little Women* with the earlier sensational tale *Behind A Mask* (1866) published in *The Flag of our Union*, Keyser notes similarities in the depictions of actress Jean Muir and writer Jo March as they negotiate and manipulate established gender codes.<sup>171</sup> I propose that Jo’s attempt at sensation fiction can therefore be read as a critical tool. Alcott uses the generic form to expose the pervasive gendered ideologies which both prevent Jo’s work

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<sup>170</sup> Brodhead, pp. 79-80.

<sup>171</sup> Elizabeth Keyser, *Whispers in the Dark: The Fiction of Louisa May Alcott* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), p. 47.

from achieving aesthetic excellence and place her body in danger. Rather than undermining the autonomous creative potential of the 'vortex', Alcott experiments with an established generic convention to critique the ideological structures which it supports.

Alcott is also ambivalent in her representation of the financial rewards Jo achieves via sensational writing. While her writing practices and subject matter lead her further away from her female vocation, the monetary gains she secures support her ailing household:

[Jo] fell to work with a cheery spirit, bent on earning more of those delightful checks. She did earn several that year, and began to feel herself a power in the house; for by the magic of a pen, her "rubbish" turned into comforts for them all. "The Duke's Daughter" paid the butcher's bill, "A Phantom Hand" put down a new carpet, and "The Curse of the Coventrys" proved the blessing of the Marches in the ways of groceries and gowns. (*LW*, p. 215)

Through the use of her 'magic' pen, Jo begins to 'feel herself a power in her house'. Like the ladies of Cranford, Jo is able transform stories into articles of domestic comfort. Her 'rubbish' becomes homely 'blessings'. By imposing a domestic value upon her protagonist's sensational fiction, Alcott questions the applicability of gendered paradigms which would brand her protagonist a sexual deviant and, moreover, which necessitate a split between her authorial persona and her domestic identity. Alcott's own literary career, on the contrary, was predicated upon the desire for individual artistic expression and on the potential financial rewards she could reap in support of her impoverished family. Indeed, Alcott demonstrates an almost obsessive compulsion to record all her earnings in diaries and journals. In the 1880s she compiled an entire volume, listing all her retrospective financial successes for each individual year: 1859 is the year in which her professional career begins to blossom: '[m]y first tale came out in the Atlantic and my pen began to pay'; in 1865 she begins 'to feel rich[,] for stories were asked for faster than I could write them[,] and my dream of supporting the family

seemed to be coming true at last'.<sup>172</sup> By 1886, however, the pressure of her role as breadwinner was beginning to take its toll. In her diary a tired and despondent Alcott writes: '[w]ant a great deal of money [...] Every soul I ever knew comes for help and expenses increase. I am the only money maker[.]'<sup>173</sup> While her enthusiasm for writing waned in later years, her interest in the domestic security conferred through literary and financial success is consistently affirmed.

Alcott's ambivalent response to Jo's sensational literary career, therefore, concurrently articulates her concerns regarding the ability of this generic form to successfully incorporate domestic experience, while also affirming the financial success of the professional woman writer within the burgeoning U.S. marketplace. As a result of this intrinsic ambivalence *Little Women* offers a significant critique of the gendered paradigms of writing which structured women writer's entry into the industry on both sides of the Atlantic. Her critique of E.D.E.N Southworth – 'she knows just what folks like, and gets paid well for writing it' (*LW*, p. 213) – can be explicated, therefore, less as a criticism of the individual author than of the attitudes which condemn the professional activity of the successful woman writer. *Little Women* stages the dilemma which ambitious women writers such as Louisa Alcott had to negotiate; desiring to make a success of their careers in both financial and aesthetic terms, they found themselves pilloried if they did and financially crippled if they did not.

### **Re-imagining the U.S. 'Moral Story-Book'**

Alcott's exploration of sensational fiction, while invoking gendered paradigms of authorship which affected literary production within Britain and the United States, also operates as a specific critical assessment of the U.S. literary marketplace. By invoking

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<sup>172</sup> 'Details of Alcott's Career and Accounts, as written by her between 1850-1883', Boston, MA, Houghton Library, MS Am 1130.13 (8).

<sup>173</sup> Louisa May Alcott, 'Diary 1879-1886', Boston, MA, Houghton Library, MS Am 1130.13 (3).



an U.S., masculine form of sensation fiction, rather than the popular model espoused by British author Mary Elizabeth Braddon in the 1860s, Alcott emphasises the limited opportunities available to women writers within the United States. The U.S. woman writer is depicted as a particular example of authorial suffering, not least as a result of the influx of British literary precedents with which they had to contend. These cultural pressures are evident in Jo's series of literary experiments. After her failed attempt at the sensational style, she tries her skills at other genres available to U.S. women writers: moral literature and children's writing. In her desire to create some form of marketable fiction, Jo turns to British literary precedents Maria Edgeworth, Hannah More and Mary Martha Sherwood. Rather than translate their didactic works into a contemporary U.S. present, however, she reproduces kind of 'the stiff and cumbrous costume of the last century' that is neither appropriate to a young writer who has a penchant for 'lively fancy and girlish romance' (*LW*, p. 281) nor has an audience within mid-century United States.

When the didacticism of the eighteenth-century moral sermon proves to be unsuccessful, Jo tries children's fiction. In what is an interesting self-reflexive moment Alcott mocks the traditions of her chosen genre:

The only person who offered enough to make it worth her while to try juvenile literature, was a worthy gentleman who felt it his mission to convert all the world to his particular belief. But as much as she liked to write for children, Jo could not consent to depict all her naughty boys as being eaten by bears, or tossed by mad bulls because they didn't go to a certain Sunday school, nor all the good infants who did go, of course, as rewarded with by every kind of bliss, from gilded gingerbread to escorts of angels, when they departed this life, with psalms or sermons on their lispng tongues. (*LW*, p. 281)

Alcott satirises the apocalyptic tone of juvenile fiction; frightening children with images of 'being eaten by bears, or tossed by mad bulls', or rewarding them with futile gifts such as gingerbread, these moral tales offer no room for creative experimentation. The fixed narrative structures, imbibed from religious moral codes and out-moded British

eighteenth-century didactic fiction, restrict Jo's creative vortex. Both static and inaccessible, the exacting moral tale for young children and the didactic fiction aimed at adults are neither suitable models through which to articulate mid-nineteenth-century U.S. domestic experience, nor do they support Alcott's model of female vocation. Having exhausted all available possible models of female authorship, Jo, therefore, 'cork[s]-up her inkstand' (*LW*, p. 281). Forced to choose between desecrating one's womanly character, moral sermonising, or depicting little boys being torn up by bulls, her decision is depicted as the only correct one.

It is, however, in this pivotal moment of failure in which no experimentation is possible that both Jo and her author 'find their style at last' (*LW*, p. 340). Jo's decision to 'cork her inkstand' implements a move away from worthless imitation and sensational commodity production back to the domestic space. Returning home after the death of her homely sibling Beth, Jo attempts to fulfil her domestic duties but is unable to find any satisfaction in her work. The narrator states:

Now, if she had been the heroine of a moral story-book, she ought at this period of her life to have gone about doing good in a mortified bonnet, with tracts in her pocket. But you see Jo wasn't a heroine; she was only a struggling human girl, like hundreds of others, and she just acted out her nature, being sad, cross, listless or energetic as the mood suggested. (*LW*, p. 339)

In positioning her protagonist as a form of anti-heroine, Alcott deliberately distances her literary creation from the stock conventions of 'moral story-book' fiction. In affirming Jo's individuality, however, she paradoxically places her juxtaposition with 'hundreds of other' young women disappointed in their ambitions. While on one level this 'corking of the inkstand' stages the moment in which, in the words of Angela Estes and Kathleen Lant, Alcott mutilates her rebellious heroine by forcing her into compliance – it also represents an affirmation of the creative vortex.<sup>174</sup> It is no accident that Alcott's use of

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<sup>174</sup> Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant, 'Dismembering the Text: the Horror of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*', *Children's Literature*, 17 (1989), 98-123 (repr. in eds., Anne K. Philips and

rhetoric here parallels her earlier description of the creative process. The tumbling list of emotions which characterise the vortex cannot be controlled so as to be clothed in a ‘mortified bonnet’, nor can they be contained by heroic narrative conventions. At the moment in which Jo becomes a conventional heroine within a traditional moral-story, Alcott’s self-referential commentary affirms the creative process which distinguishes her protagonist.

While on one level, therefore, the eldest March’s literary failures can be read as Alcott’s retreat from a progressive mode of literary production into a conformist model of domestic authorial identity, they also assert the process of creative experimentation which affirms the unique U.S., domestic aesthetic *Little Women* propagates. Donning her ‘black pinafore’ once again, Jo gets ‘out her desk, and [begins] to overhaul her half-finished manuscripts’ (*LW*, p. 339).

Jo never knew how it happened, but something got into that story that went straight to the heart of those who read it; for, when her family had laughed and cried over it, her father sent it much against her will, to one of the popular magazines, and, to her utter surprise, it was not only paid for, but others requested. Letters from several persons, whose praise was honour, followed the appearance of the little story, newspapers copied it, and strangers as well as friends admired it. For a small thing, it was a great success. (*LW*, pp. 339-40)

Alcott invokes the same images which she earlier uses to condemn her protagonist’s writing practice. Jo’s later appropriation of the scribbling suit, however, indicates less her subversive avoidance of familial duty than an affirmation of the domestic aesthetic. The ‘something’ in the story which ‘goes straight to the heart’ of its readers is the successful corroboration between Jo’s authorial and domestic identity. While her previous authorial endeavours were predicated upon imitation, financial gain, or the desire for aesthetic success, facets which alienated her from the values affirmed in ‘The Pickwick Portfolio’, in this new formulation of writing Jo’s domestic work becomes her

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Gregory Eislein, *Little Women* [1868-69] (New York: Norton, 2004), pp. 564-583. See pages 576, 578-79).

domestic narrative and vice versa.

Her writing is, therefore, able to support and complement her female vocation. Jo's unique skills, instead of causing isolation, are incorporated into a literary production which reproduces close familial bonds within a wider interpretive community. Both 'friends' and 'strangers' are united their appreciation of her 'small thing'. Her independent creative process, therefore, is reconfigured as a contribution to, and affirmation of, a domestic community. Jo finds a style which can both replicate and affirm feminine vocation within the home, while concurrently achieving the public literary success she covets. Rather than limit her authorial endeavours, the logic of the domestic narrative is mobilised to support and structure, Jo's 'self-reliant' literary talents.

Alcott, therefore, imagines a way in which the gendered and nationalised paradigms of authorship which affect women's writing, particularly in the United States, can be re-worked. She explicitly locates Jo's literary endeavours within a transatlantic framework in order to expose the pervasive discourses which both facilitated women's writing and which limited their authorial production on both sides of the Atlantic. Consequently, like many of her literary counterparts, Jo suffers for her writing; she is made ill, masculinised, criminalised and deprecated. She is also, however, given a unique space in which to experiment. Within this literal and conceptual arena, Alcott allows her protagonist to re-imagine the various literary paradigms she inherits, thereby mapping the boundaries of their U.S. authorial experience.

Utilising the progressive narrative structure derived from *Pilgrim's Progress*, Alcott structures Jo's series of literary experiments. Through a juxtaposition of British and U.S. textual and philosophical precedents and their respective cultural class-systems, she is able to formulate a nationalised communal work ethic which is translated into a 'self-reliant' literary model in 'The Pickwick Portfolio'. While this

transatlantic framework is mobilised to assert an U.S. working identity, Alcott also uses this comparative structure to critique the modes of authorship available to U.S. women writers. Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide, World* and E.D.E.N Southworth's sensation fiction are both criticised as they not only encourage isolation, but also subvert female, domestic vocation. Rather than provide a vehicle through which women's domestic experience can be articulated, these models perpetuate female suffering. Alcott's critique also extends to the British literature which saturates the U.S. market. Neither relevant nor accessible, these authoritative sources, rather than inspire experimentation, merely 'cork' the inkstand'.

Jo's eventual 'small' success, however, is able to negotiate between these national, transnational and gendered authorial pressures. By allowing her protagonist the space to indulge in the cathartic euphoria and the debilitating suffering of the vortex, Alcott stages the semantic chaos which defined the U.S. woman writer as a producer of (deficient) domestic commodities and a suffering divided figure. Exploring the turbulence of this creative process, both Alcott and her protagonist experiment with literary form, generic convention and paradigms of authorship. The result of this series of negotiations is a distinctly U.S. literary aesthetic. Adapting a specifically U.S. work-ethic formulated through Bunyan's British text, and transcendentalist principles, into an accessible domestic narrative, Jo and her author establish a model of production which can successfully incorporate female authorial and domestic vocation. Authoritative British narratives – such as *The Pickwick Papers* – and pervasive transatlantic paradigms of female authorship – Elizabeth Gaskell's 'C.B.' – therefore, become narrative tools used to identify the limitations of, and the possibilities within, the U.S. literary marketplace.

When Alcott describes Jo's work, and implicitly her own narrative, as 'humble wanderers' within a 'charitable world' (*LW*, p. 340), she is guilty of belittling their

literary achievements. Their ‘wandering’, self-reflexive narratives insist upon being read within a transnational framework in which myths of feminine creativity are disseminated, appropriated and re-written. In this transatlantic imaginary Alcott finds the space to succumb to the vortex – battling with and re-imagining the national and transnational literary conventions she inherits. Invoking a comparative framework in which an U.S. literary identity is juxtaposed and formulated, she also instils her own unique model of self-reliant experimentation. Like her protagonist she is able to affirm her authorial identity through a series of negotiations with domestic traditions and literary community which support and judge her work. In this way, Alcott is able to offer an implicit critique of the opportunities afforded to women writers within the U.S. marketplace, and an affirmation of her own experimental, and eminently successful, literary project. She might not be a ‘C.B.’, but she has achieved ‘a little something yet’.

## Chapter Three

### 'I did a woman's work': Nursing and Female Labour

#### The Nurse with 'a Face for Every Occasion'

During her brief experience as a nurse during the Civil War, Louisa May Alcott amused the soldiers in her care by reading to them. A particular favourite was the work of Charles Dickens. The post-script to Alcott's popular *Civil War Hospital Sketches* (1863), a semi-autobiographical account of her work in the Union Hospital in Washington, acknowledges the cathartic effect of this pastime. Sergeant P, one of Alcott's 'worthy boys', 'when his nerves got the better' of him, begged her:

"I'd rather laugh than cry, when I must sing out anyhow, so just say that bit from Dickens again please, and I'll stand it like a man." He did; for "Mrs Cluppins", "Chadband" and "Sam Weller" always helped him through.<sup>175</sup>

Alcott's reading helps Sergeant P to 'stand [his pain] like a man' by transforming crying out in anguish into laughing aloud with pleasure. The relationship between nurse and patient is represented as symbiotic: the work of the nurse produces a cathartic effect upon her patient, while his recovery in turn affirms her professional labour. By emphasising the fundamental role literature plays within this specific healing process, Alcott anticipates how nursing functioned as a literary trope through which the issue of female professionalisation was debated.

Tellingly absent, however, within Alcott's recitations of Dickens in the hospital is her performance of the infamous nurse Sairy Gamp from *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44). One of the most popular satirical nursing figures of the nineteenth-century on both sides of the Atlantic, Sairy makes only brief appearances in *Hospital Sketches*, invoked by protagonist Tribulation Periwinkle to describe the after-dark rounds performed by

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<sup>175</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Civil War Hospital Sketches* [1863], in *Alternative Alcott*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 1-74 (p. 67). All further references to this text will be cited in parenthesis.

herself and a colleague: ‘we two taking care of the ward, between us, like the immortal Sairy and Betsy, “turn and turn about”’ (*HS*, p.31). As Alcott’s journals and her handwritten compilation volume ‘Sketches and Charades’ demonstrate, the mismanaged and brutal attempts of Betsy and Sairy to make toilette for their young male patient was a favourite scene with the Alcott sisters. They even performed the sketch in which Sairy almost strangles her patients with a badly applied starched collar at ‘Sanitary Fair’ in Boston in December 1863, a community event whose aim was to raise funds for war relief.<sup>176</sup> Whether Alcott did or did not enact this comical scene within the Union hospital is the subject of conjecture. However, the fact that Sairy Gamp is not one of the characters mentioned within these ‘sketches’ in a hospital can be seen as representative of a crisis of identity which plagued the professional nurse, and indeed the professional woman writer, throughout the nineteenth century.

Alcott’s fascination with Sairy Gamp and her absence from the list of hospital performances above is significant, therefore, as it emphasises the anxieties and possibilities inherent in the occupation of nursing. While Alcott was writing *Hospital Sketches* the nursing reform movement was gathering momentum on both sides of the Atlantic. Nursing was increasingly advertised as a viable and fulfilling professional employment for middle-class women with the rhetoric of domesticity utilised to justify women’s moral and caring interventions into a male-dominated medical profession. Working-class nurses operating as independent savvy business women became outmoded and a well-policed, hospital-based and efficient work force put in their place. The absence of Sairy’s ‘hospital sketch’, then, emphasises Alcott’s concern that a

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<sup>176</sup> This Dickensian scene is one of many performed at the Sanitary Fair. See *Journals*, p. 121. ‘Scenes and Charades’ details the precise scenes the sisters enacted, merging together the ‘toilette’ dressing scene with Betsy and Sairey’s comic argument. ‘Scenes and Charades’, Boston MA., Houghton Library, MS Am.1130.13 (14). For more on the role of the Sanitary Commission within the war relief effort see, Jeanie Attie, ‘Warwork and the Crisis of Domesticity in the North’, in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. by Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 249-259. Before Alcott enlisted as a nurse she was among the many female volunteers who made supplies for the troops – such as clothing and socks.



performance of her inept nursing routines would undermine her own professional identity as a competent, middle-class medical assistant. A rendition of Sairy's ineptitude, moreover, would do little to produce the kind of cathartic effects as experienced by Sergeant P, but would endanger Alcott's working identity as a nurse-writer.

At the same time, however, Alcott's sketches rely upon a model of female autonomy that has more in common with Dickens's woman of trade with a 'face for every occasion' than with a post-reform nurse modelled upon a subservient domestic ideal.<sup>177</sup> Sairy's independence, mobility and ability to adapt her persona to suit every occasion – we are informed that 'she went a lying-in or a laying-out with equal zest and relish' (*MC*, p. 307) – correlates with the experiences of Alcott's thinly veiled alter-ego, Tribulation Periwinkle, during her nursing career. Alcott's literary persona utilises the nurse's dynamic qualities to extend her influence from the homely domestic space into the 'Hurly-burly' (*HS*, p. 5) setting of the war hospital. Relocating her domestic skills – such as reading aloud – into a public place, she imagines a scenario in which female labour can affect not just the healing of the individual soldier, but, by extension, the national consciousness. Sairy Gamp, therefore, haunts the pages of *Hospital Sketches* as a model of both negative and positive female professional identity. She represents the fear of incompetence that would lead to an erasure of the nurse's subjectivity, as well as emphasising the possibility of nursing as a valuable occupation – in financial, as well as social terms. It is these conflicting 'many faces' of the female carer which the nurse and author, Louisa May Alcott, has to negotiate.

This chapter explores how the nurse functions as a metonym for female professional identity. I trace the ways in which nursing operates as a productive mode of

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<sup>177</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* [1843-44] (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1997), p. 306. All further references will be cited in parenthesis. For more on Sairy Gamp and the independent model of nursing she represents, see Anne Summers, 'The Mysterious Demise of Sarah Gamp: The Domiciliary Nurse and Her Detractors, c. 1830-1860', *Victorian Studies*, 32:3 (1989), 365-386 (pp. 372, 377-378).

female labour, and as a literary tool which draws attention to the nurse's ideological work, and the work of the narrative which contains her. I therefore position the nurse as what Mary Poovey, in her seminal work *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender* (1988), has termed a 'border case': a trope through which constructions of gender ideology are both exposed and challenged.<sup>178</sup> Rather than simply reflecting the binary naturalised oppositions between men and women that were epitomised in the body of the maternal-minded domestic woman, the figure of the Victorian nurse, she argues, was predicated upon paradoxes and instabilities that left it 'open to a variety of readings that could be mobilized in contradictory practices'.<sup>179</sup>

I extend Poovey's thesis by exploring the nurse's literal and ideological border-crossing potential within a transatlantic framework. Concentrating specifically upon Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* (1863) and *Work* (1872), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-55) and *Ruth* (1853), I examine how both authors use the nurse's cultural and literary legacy to explore the complex issue of female labour. I trace how their nursing narratives become vital tools within debates on female professionalisation as they demonstrate how the ideology of domesticity was mobilised to both support and hinder this professionalisation. By exposing the 'contradictory practices' the nurse embodies and mediates between, both Gaskell and Alcott work to destabilise definitive binaries, such as between the domestic and the public, the individual and the community, as well as working- and middle-class sensibilities.<sup>180</sup> In doing so, both the British and U.S. authors expose the limitations as well as the possibilities inherent in this developing category of 'women's work' and identity.

Drawing parallels between the occupations of nursing and writing, I explore

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<sup>178</sup> Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 12.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

<sup>180</sup> This chapter focuses upon the figure of the white nurse within Gaskell and Alcott's domestic fiction. While I do not address the issue of race within the professionalisation of nursing, important work has been done on the subject by Jane Schultz, *Women at the Front: Female Workers in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004).

Arlene Young's hypothesis that the professionalisation of nursing allowed women 'to define a corporate identity [...] justif[ying] the entry of genteel women into the workforce and validat[ing] the professionalised working woman in other areas of endeavour'.<sup>181</sup> I trace, therefore, the correlation between nursing and authorship as viable yet contested female occupations. I do so by exposing how the material text and their female authors operate as nurses – how they attempt to heal breaches within the national and local consciousness through their fictionalized imaginaries.

For Louisa Alcott nursing not only formulated part of her own work experience, but was a theme that also structured many of her literary works. In my study of *Hospital Sketches* and *Work: A Story of Experience*, I demonstrate how Alcott uses the nurse to expose the paradoxes within the U.S. workplace on which women's labour was predicated – paradoxes that hindered and supported her literary and medical career. Nursing for Alcott, I contend, becomes a practice through which women's work, and the domestic narrative that supports it, can be validated. Within her narratives it also operates a critical tool, exposing the sacrifices which nursing necessitated. By extending this domestic metaphor beyond the confines of home and hospital, she imagines a scenario in which women's work and the 'sisterhood' it constructs can effect a reconciliation of a fragmented national body.

While Alcott, however, is able to create an intrinsically U.S. domestic narrative that supports nursing (and writing) as the pinnacle of feminine achievement, Elizabeth Gaskell's depiction of the occupation, I argue, remains ambivalent. Focusing on Gaskell's dialogue with her friend, the iconic nurse Florence Nightingale, I explore how she uses her novel *North and South* (1854-55) to expose problems inherent within a female labour that is predicated upon a pervasive yet contradictory domestic ideology. Juxtaposing her representations of protagonist Margaret Hale with her depiction of Ruth

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<sup>181</sup> Arlene Young, "'Entirely a Woman's Question?': Class, Gender and the Victorian Nurse", *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13:1 (2008), 8-41 (p. 19).

Hilton in *Ruth* (1853), I contend that Gaskell positions her nurse protagonists as victims of these ideological paradoxes. Therefore, unlike her U.S. counterpart, the British novelist *deconstructs* the domestic narrative – particularly the story of the fallen woman. By exposing the ideological construction of this traditional generic form, and of the idealised middle-class nurse, her narrative becomes a self-reflexive exploration of the unstable discourses and pervasive literary traditions that define female working identity.

Furthermore, through a comparative framework, I explore how both authors also have to grapple with the strictures of a transnational literary tradition and the hegemonic discourses of domesticity that seek to define and limit their women's work. Gaskell and Alcott, therefore, utilise their narratives of nursing to expose and to heal the ideological paradoxes that both destabilise and facilitate female labour. In order to contextualise both authors' personal responses to what was a transnational reform movement, I identify two historical and literary models of nursing common on both sides of the Atlantic with which they engage: the nurse-at-home and the nurse-at-war.

### **The Nurse-at-Home and the Nurse-at-War: Her Literary and Cultural Legacy**

Throughout the early and mid-century decades, the model of care that was most prevalent was nursing-at-home – employing an independent individual to enter the home to attend to a sick relative. These women were predominantly members of the working classes, generally white, often widowed and middle-aged. Performing various duties from 'wet-nursing' to child care, and carrying out the wishes of the attending physician accurately, these 'professed' or 'natural' nurses were employed by middle- and upper-class families to attend the sick. With hospital care at a minimum on both sides of the Atlantic – there were only 200 hospitals in the U.S. in 1873, and those were alm-houses, charitable institutions or hospices – most care was performed at home by a

stranger.<sup>182</sup>

Consequently, the visiting nurse invited into middle- and upper-class households occupied a liminal position. They were not ‘domestic servants’ but operated instead as independent mobile bodies who were employed in many households.<sup>183</sup> Yet the presence of an ‘ungenteel’ strange body within the private domain, particularly an employee of the household who was not subject to the same rules as domestic servants, often caused tension. Novels such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Shirley* (1849) reflect this incongruous mixing of class sensibilities. Visiting nurses are depicted as, respectively, strangers within a household who are neglected by the family and rough, brusque and hardy women who, while effective, appreciate nothing but the value of money. Brontë’s novels both demonstrate the class-based prejudices that undermined the work of the visiting nurse and emphasise her unstable position within a household based upon a hierarchical model of master and servant. The working-class domiciliary nurse, therefore, crosses class, social and gendered borders as she insists upon an independent professional status.

Domiciliary care within the middle-class household was, however, predominately performed by female members of the family as an unwaged occupation. Domestic ideology traditionally allied the home space with feminine care, as the site in which moral and physical well-being are succoured and maintained. The occupation of nursing sick family members, positioned as an intrinsic function of a woman’s domestic duty, was a model of unpaid nursing which, unlike its comparative working-class counterpart, was socially acceptable for middle-class women. It is not surprising, therefore, that Florence Nightingale in her hugely popular *Notes on Nursing: What it is,*

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<sup>182</sup> See Anne Summers for a discussion on British hospitals before the 1850s (p. 367), and Susan M. Reverby, *Ordered to Care: The Dilemma Of American Nursing, 1850-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 13-15, 21, for U.S. models of domiciliary health-care in the antebellum period.

<sup>183</sup> Barbara Melosh, ‘Every Woman is a Nurse: Work and Gender in the Emergence of Nursing’ in “*Send us a Lady Physician*”: *Women Doctors in America, 1835-1920*, ed. by Ruth J. Abram (New York: Norton, 1985), pp. 120-129 (p. 123).

*and what it is not* (1859) chose to emphasise this ‘naturalised’ model of female care as part of her project to reform the profession of nursing. She positions her book as a series of notes that

are meant simply to give hints for thought to women who have personal charge of the health of others. Every woman, or at least almost every woman, in England has, at one time or another in her life, charge of the personal health of somebody, whether child or invalid, – in other words, every woman is a nurse.<sup>184</sup>

The volume sold 15,000 copies in its first month.<sup>185</sup> *Notes on Nursing* aims to care for the nurse, training the unprofessional everyday woman in issues such as ‘ventilation and warming’, ‘what food?’ and ‘chattering hopes and advices’. Nightingale, in her attempt to answer the question ‘what [nursing] is, and what it is not’, relies upon the rhetoric of domesticity to promote good nursing practices among the dutiful domestic woman. ‘Every woman is’, after all, ‘a nurse’.

The availability of nursing as a waged and unwaged occupation for women made it a common trope in literary works on both sides of the Atlantic. Representations of nursing included: Gerty Flint’s activities in Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (1854), Caroline Helstone in Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), Esther Summerson in Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852-53), and figure of the companion/nurse in Louisa May Alcott’s sensation tales *The Nurse’s Story* (1865-66) and *Taming a Tartar* (1867). The significance of the nursing metaphor for these authors lay in its ability to offer an opportunity for women to prove their innate, domestic skills, while functioning as a physical manifestation of their internal psychological condition. As both Catherine Judd and Bronwyn Rivers have argued, representations of the domestic female nurse within nineteenth-century fiction functioned as metaphors through which issues of morality and the female self could be explored. Arguing that ‘nursing functions as a metonym

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<sup>184</sup> Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing: What it is, and What it is Not* [1860] (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 3.

<sup>185</sup> See Virginia M. Dubar’s ‘Foreword to the Reprint Edition’, *Ibid*, p. xviii.

for morality', Rivers maintains that the act of nursing mirrors the psychological conflicts and the inner reflections of its practitioner – Caroline Helstone in *Shirley* is a paradigmatic example of this process.<sup>186</sup> Reflecting a socially acceptable model of unwaged female occupation with its emphasis upon morality and private care, this 'body' of literary nurses collectively affirms the domestic values on which this activity is predicated.

These narratives of nursing, however, concurrently function as critiques. In their exploration of inner turmoil and female discontent, these literary depictions emphasise the wider issues of women's work and professionalization as they were debated and contested throughout the nineteenth century. The narratives listed above mobilise the nursing paradigm to address the lack of acceptable vocation open to genteel women. The simple practice of caring is explicated as a method through which an occupation can be procured. Caroline Helstone and her mother, Mrs Pryor, in *Shirley*, for example, find solace in the activity of nursing, alleviating the morbid, depressive thoughts that oppress them, while in *The Lamplighter*, through her care of Emily Graham, Gerty Flint is concurrently educated in morals, manners and domestic sensibility. While ultimately conforming to a traditional domestic narrative predicated upon a model of femininity akin to the 'Angel in the House', the trope of nursing offered a model through which the issue of female suffering could be addressed and also mediated. The figure of the nurse, therefore, emphasises what Mary Poovey would deem the 'uneven development' of Victorian gender ideology as it emphasises the lack of female occupation while fulfilling a need for employment.<sup>187</sup>

The activity of nursing within these domestic fictions is also depicted as a

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<sup>186</sup> Bronwyn Rivers, *Women at Work in the Victorian Novel: The Question of Middle-class Women's Employment 1840-1880* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press Ltd, 2006), pp. 148-150.

<sup>187</sup> See Poovey, *Uneven Developments*. Taking Althusser's definition of ideology – 'the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence' – Poovey maintains that Victorian gender ideology was consistently under construction, always open to revision and predominately uneven in its development (pp. 3-4).

fundamentally dangerous occupation. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, protagonist Margaret Hale is made physically ill by the pressures of her familial duties. Her parents fail to understand what her 'pale and quiet' demeanour hides: 'how her heart was aching all the time', and how only 'constant exertion' keeps her from 'crying out in pain'.<sup>188</sup> While over-exertion causes suffering in the female nurse, her caring role also necessitates her proximity to dangerous illnesses. In both Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, protagonists Esther Summerson and Beth March succumb, respectively to small pox and scarlet fever in their humanitarian desire to care for working-class invalids: Joe the sweeper, and the Hummel family. Their desire to nurse emphasises their intrinsic moral and emotional superiority, distinguishing them from 'bad' nurses, such as Mrs Jellby who is too focused on her African missionary work to tend to her own children, and the other March sisters who forget to attend the Hummels in pursuit of their own selfish preoccupations. The ill female nurse, therefore, functions as an affirmation of feminine care, while also emphasising the limitations of her woman's work: the complete erasure of her female subjectivity as she succumbs to illness. The nurse within nineteenth-century fiction concurrently operates as a dutiful passive figure who is written into a domestic narrative that eventually dismisses her, while also functioning as a paradigmatic example of productive female activity that transcends class hierarchies. Transatlantic domestic literature, therefore, becomes the space in which the suitability of nursing as a fitting occupation for women of all class-distinctions is explored.

### **The Nurse-at-War: Florence Nightingale and Transatlantic Reform**

The transatlantic scope of the nursing debate is also epitomised by the reformist work and mobile image of Florence Nightingale. While she tutored the amateur domiciliary

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<sup>188</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* [1855], ed. Alan Shelston (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 50. All further references will be cited in parenthesis.



nurse in *Notes on Nursing*, her reformist intentions were primarily focused upon the training and recruitment of professional female nurses. The training hospital schools that preceded the conflict in the Crimea were based upon a new model of nursing and medical administration Nightingale had successfully instigated in Scutari.<sup>189</sup> A female hierarchy was created, overseen by the sister – usually a well-educated genteel woman – who would discipline and co-ordinate her ward of young, efficient female nurses. This new nurse, possessing esoteric knowledge, replaced the male orderly and the convalescing male patient-nurse, as well as her untrained working-class counterpart. The individualised care, the overt moral influence and the dutiful obedient service of the unpaid domiciliary nurse were key traits of the nurse working in military hospitals. Through her new model nurse, Nightingale extended the domestic space of woman's influence into the public wards, while concurrently adapting military-style order and discipline to create an efficient workforce. The 'Nightingale' nurse, then, was able to combine public service while concurrently fulfilling cultural expectations of a woman's role.

These reforms took place upon a transnational stage, influencing the development of health care systems, and setting a precedent for female professional identity, on both sides of the Atlantic. After the outbreak of the Civil War, the governing bodies of the United States looked to Britain's new nursing training schools, and Florence Nightingale's reforms, for guidance on how to structure their own medical system. The nursing schools that were opened in 1873 at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston; Bellevue, New York; and Connecticut Hospital, New Haven, were modelled upon British nursing schools like Nightingale's St. Thomas's which had opened in 1860.

Nightingale's training systems, and administrative re-structuring processes,

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<sup>189</sup> See Ellen Jordan, *The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth-century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 127.

were also brought across the Atlantic through individual nurses who served in both the Crimea and the American Civil War. In December 1862 *The Glasgow Herald* devoted a column to the transatlantic exploits of Mrs Henry Grinnell, the daughter of English aristocrat Sir John Musgrove. Mrs Grinnell was among the few ‘upper-class’ nurses who accompanied Nightingale to the Crimea. The ‘constant companion, day and night, of that angel of mercy in her ministrations to the dying and wounded soldiers’, Miss Musgrove returned to England a trained and competent nurse. Later that year she married the New York merchant, Henry Grinnell. When her husband decided to ‘link his fortunes with the South’ at the outbreak of war in 1861, she accompanied him. Utilising the skills she learnt in the Crimea, she now cared for the soldiers of the Confederacy in one of the hospitals in Richmond. This ‘angel of earth’, the reporter concluded, is ‘the Florence Nightingale of America’.<sup>190</sup>

As this short article demonstrates, Nightingale’s pervasive model of female labour had an extensive effect on both sides of the Atlantic. While literally affecting perceptions of the newly professional female nurse, however, Nightingale’s impact upon transatlantic reform was also the result of the image she personified. Despite the fact that other influential women, such as the first female doctor Elizabeth Blackwell who was British but who had received her medical training in the United States, had also directly affected the developments in medicine on both sides of the Atlantic, Nightingale became *the* iconic, transatlantic female carer.<sup>191</sup> Ellen Jordan has termed this process ‘the Nightingale effect’, arguing that the British nurse’s image was more effective than the material reforms she implemented. Mary Poovey also argues that Nightingale’s success can be explicated by the fact she ‘created the conditions for the

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<sup>190</sup> Richmond Whig, ‘The Florence Nightingale of America’, *The Glasgow Herald* (19 December, 1862) [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> December 2009].

<sup>191</sup> For more on the relationship between Nightingale and Blackwell, see Julia Boyd, ‘The Art of Medicine: Florence Nightingale and Elizabeth Blackwell’, *The Lancet*, 373, (2009), 1516-17.

deployment of an image'.<sup>192</sup> The image Nightingale both inspired and embodied was the trope of the 'heroic nurse', a concurrently militarised, domestic body. The product of both male, militarised rhetoric and of the same domestic logic that informed literary depictions of the middle-class, amateur carer, the 'Nightingale nurse' was able to successfully combine these stereotypically gendered roles.

However, the heroic model of professionalised nursing that Florence Nightingale represented was consistently contested and was fundamentally unstable. The same domestic rhetoric that supported women's professional participation in the health care system also undermined it. As the 'heroic' model of nursing crossed the Atlantic, the fissures within this ideological construct became apparent. The majority of the 20,000 women who entered the service during the Civil War found themselves less welcomed by surgeons than the object of their critique. Male surgeons objected to female nurses for a variety of reasons. Their primary grievance was that when the Union army appointed Dorothea Dix superintendent of Army Nurses in June 1861, surgeons were no longer able to choose who assisted them in their wards. Many complained that women simply were not capable of working within such an environment due to a lack of formal training, while some dismissed women's role within the hospital on the grounds of simple biological determinism.<sup>193</sup> Surgeon John Brinton represented an extreme point of view when he complained: 'Can you fancy half a dozen or a dozen hags, for *that* is what they were... surrounding a bewildered army surgeon, each one clamouring for her little wants?'<sup>194</sup> Brinton combines prejudice with a concern for the suitability of relatively untrained women within the chaotic and grisly environment of a military

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<sup>192</sup> Jordan, p. 126 and Poovey, p. 197. For more on the 'image' of Florence Nightingale, see Poovey, p. 198; Jordan, pp. 134-136; and Judd, p. 2.

<sup>193</sup> See Jane Schultz, 'The Inhospitable Hospital: Gender and Professionalism in Civil War Medicine', *Signs*, 17:21 (1992), 363-392 (pp. 372-73). In British hospitals the medical hierarchy was similarly threatened by the newly professionalised female nurses. Doctors from working-class backgrounds found themselves working alongside upper-class women (such as Nightingale) causing embarrassment and tensions. See Arlene Young, p. 26.

<sup>194</sup> Quoted in Schultz, p. 376.

hospital.

While many learned to appreciate the service of their best female assistants, the war nurse continued to pose problems to the medical hierarchy. Women's suitability for nursing was predicated upon their monopoly on personalised, individual care which included attending to moral as well as physical well-being. This focus upon morality and personal care meant that female nurses often clashed with their medical superiors, with the latter being more likely to view the patients as generic, or interesting cases, rather than as individual people.<sup>195</sup> Periwinkle Tribulation of Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* consistently bemoans Dr. P's 'somewhat trying habit of regarding a man and his wound as separate institutions', producing in the irascible nurse 'a desire to insinuate a few of his own disagreeable knives and scissors into him to see how he liked it' (*HS*, pp. 70-71). Alcott attempts to correct her superior's 'habit' through a determined attention to the individual soldier. The 'heroism' of the female nurse, therefore, often manifested as the bravery required to question their male superiors. However these acts of heroism were defined, the nurse-at-war had to negotiate the explicitly gendered male medical military practice and her own feminine domestic ideology. Her position, always fundamentally unstable, provided her with an unusual vantage point through which to articulate and mediate between these two warring factions.

Both the iconic image of the nurse-at-war and the physical realities of her labour highlight the dual passive and active faces of the nineteenth-century literary and historical nurse. Like her nursing-at-home counterpart, the professional nurse-at-war valorises female domestic influence. The latter, however, extends this sphere beyond the home into the spaces of the male-dominated hospital and to the edges of imperial

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<sup>195</sup> This primary focus upon the individual was not just characteristic of female nurses. Walt Whitman's *Memoranda During the War: Written on the Spot* also details individual cases and patients; he viewed 'the main interest of the War' as 'the Common People, emblemized in thousands of specimens of first-class Heroism'. See *Memoranda During the War: Written on the Spot in 1863-'65*, ed. by Peter Coviello (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1875-76] 2004), p. 5. The female nurse was, however, more likely to question the ethics and morality of their superior's behaviour towards their patients.

territory, thereby creating a new, progressive model of women's work and influence.

Like the domiciliary nurse of the British and U.S. literary traditions, the nurse-at-war's productive literal and ideological work within a transnational arena, therefore, introduces the debate on female professional labour to a transatlantic stage.

She also, however, emphasises the limitations of that work. The challenges her esoteric feminine knowledge poses to a medical-military system based upon strict hierarchical models made her presence within the hospital fundamentally precarious and often untenable. The image of the heroic nurse-at-war, moreover, proves just as unstable. The practicalities of war-hospital work expose the myth of the idealised female heroic nurse, thereby emphasising the limitations of the latter's sphere of influence within a medical-military environment. While Nightingale's image was mobilised to promote female labour, therefore, it also undermined the reformist work it sought to perform. It is the ambiguity of nursing as a profession which makes it a productive literary tool for Elizabeth Gaskell in her exploration of female labour in her novel *North and South*. Utilising her dialogue with friend Florence Nightingale to structure her depiction of her protagonist's caring activities, Gaskell defines and scrutinises the category of 'women's work'.

### **Gaskell and Nightingale: 'settling] that most difficult problem for women'**

While Gaskell's industrial novel *North and South* can be seen as representative of the condition-of-England genre in its focus on social conflict and cross-class antagonisms, it is also a novel about nursing.<sup>196</sup> Gaskell wrote the majority of her novel during a stay

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<sup>196</sup> Margaret Hale's role as a nurse within the text has received comparatively little critical attention; the work of Uglow and Markovits are exceptions. Criticism on the novel has tended to focus upon Margaret Hale's political transgression between gendered public/private spaces: see Barbara Leigh Harman, 'In Promiscuous Company: Female Public Appearance in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Victorian Studies*, 31: 3 (1988), 351-374 (p. 361), or upon her 'fallen' status, as a result of these transgressions – see Michie, pp. 79-110. For more on Gaskell's work as an example of 'condition of England' literature that offers itself as an albeit problematic intervention into social conflict, see Josephine Guy, *The Social Problem Novel* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 162-172

at Lea Hurst, the Nightingale family home, in late 1853.<sup>197</sup> During her residence, *The Times* published its dispatches from the Crimea, informing an irate British public of the appalling conditions and inept management systems that were hindering the war effort and needlessly endangering British soldiers. Gaskell witnessed the resulting effect of these reports upon her friend Florence, who immediately hurried to London to prepare for her what would be an imminent journey to Scutari. Gaskell, meanwhile, stayed at Lea Hurst and continued writing.

While composing *North and South*, then, Gaskell was able to consider the relationship between female work, duty and conflict at first hand. Admiring Nightingale's devotion to a cause and her indefatigable energy, Gaskell also found her friend's total disregard of the individual troubling. In a letter to Emily Shaen, she wrote:

[Florence] and I had a grand quarrel one day. She is, I think, too much for institutions, sisterhoods and associations, and she said if she had influence enough not a mother should bring up a child herself: there should be crèches for the rich as well as the poor [...] That exactly tells of what seems to me *the* want – but then this want of love for individuals becomes a gift and a very rare one, if one takes it into conjunction with her intense love for the *race*: her utter unselfishness in serving and ministering.<sup>198</sup>

Gaskell, on one hand, views Nightingale's preference for controlled, institutionalised care as a 'gift', a perspective that enables her to 'minister' for a large number of people for the benefit of the 'race'. On the other hand, she objects to the depersonalisation this process necessitates. In the extreme example Nightingale presents, children should be nursed, educated and cared for in crèches supervised by trained employees; the role of the 'natural' mother, the crux of nineteenth-century domestic ideology would, therefore, be obsolete. In recommending an institution over mother-child bond, Nightingale imagines the professionalization of maternal care: no longer the duty of the individual,

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and Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 166-183.

<sup>197</sup> For more on Gaskell's stay at Lea Hurst with the Nightingale family see Jenny Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, pp. 362-365.

<sup>198</sup> *Letters*, pp. 319-20.

it becomes a trained employment dedicated to providing a standardised education regardless of class distinction. Gaskell's objection to Nightingale's 'love for the race' is predicated upon this symbolic dismissal of the bond between mother and child and, consequently, the feminised values of sympathetic understanding that affirm individual worth. She implies that the innate maternal and empathetic instincts within women which, according to nineteenth-century domestic ideology made them ideal nurses, are devalued by Nightingale's emphasis upon systems that abstract rather than emphasise individual suffering.

*North and South* becomes the site in which Gaskell formulates her response to Nightingale. Exploring the relationships between the individual and the institution within an industrialized economy, she exposes the specifically gendered models of social intervention; a 'feminised' model of individual care, represented by protagonist Margaret Hale and her author, is pitted against a 'masculinised' system in which the individual is subjugated within a larger social 'machine'. The latter is represented by John Thornton's ambitious industrial politics and also by Florence Nightingale's strategic abstraction of the subject into the larger 'race' of which he is a part. Gaskell positions Margaret's localized, but productive attempts to aid those individuals connected to her, in direct opposition with the systems of progress represented by the mill owner and the female reformer.

In what is a rare direct address to the reader, the narrator asks a series of rhetorical questions:

[Margaret] was thrown with one or two of those who, in all measures affecting masses of people, must be acute sufferers for the good of the many. The question is, has everything been done to make the suffering of those exceptions as small as possible? Or, in the triumph of the crowded procession, have the helpless been trampled on, instead of being gently lifted aside out of the roadway of the conqueror whom they have no power to accompany on his march? (*North and South*, p. 64)

Gaskell implies that the impersonal nature of the processes of industrialization and even

imperialism – denoted by the term ‘conqueror’ – create ‘helpless’ victims that are trampled upon as society relentlessly marches towards progress. She could almost be speaking directly to Nightingale. The iconic nurse’s engagement within an imperial conflict, and in her work reforming the medical administrative system, align her more with the ‘triumph[ant]’ ‘procession’ than with Margaret’s individualised focus upon the ‘one or two [...] [who are] acute sufferers for the good of the many’. Indeed, as Stephanie Markovits has persuasively argued, Margaret Hale can be seen as a ‘home-front counterpart’ to Nightingale. While the latter battled on an international, public stage for a reformation of the health care system, Gaskell’s protagonist concentrates her efforts upon those family members in whom she has a ‘human interest’, such as Bessie Higgins, the mill worker, her first acquaintance within Milton.<sup>199</sup> This feminised model of care focused on the microcosmic level is favoured by the novel above the macrocosmic scope of Nightingale’s ‘love of the race’.

Through this dialogue with this iconic nineteenth-century female nurse, Gaskell is forced to question the nature of ‘women’s work’. Nightingale’s model of female labour is presented as exceptional, beyond the capacity of most ordinary women, while, paradoxically, also reliant upon a masculinised rhetoric. By destabilising the authority of this paradigm of women’s work, Gaskell has to seek another. *North and South* can be seen as her attempt to negotiate a socially acceptable and effective mode of female labour that supports both the individual as well as the wider community in which they operate.

Protagonist Margaret Hale nurses no less than three patients, including her mother and father, while also caring for the orphaned children of a family devastated by the lengthy industrial strikes.<sup>200</sup> While the novel focuses upon the domestic sick room

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<sup>199</sup> Stephanie Markovits, ‘*North and South*, East and West: Elizabeth Gaskell, the Crimean War, and the Condition of England’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 59:4 (2005), 463-493 (p. 491).

<sup>200</sup> There are numerous deaths within the novel, and many sick-room scenes. Gaskell was perhaps half in



and the individualised care provided by a close nurse-patient relationship, Gaskell extends the nursing metaphor to structure Margaret's intervention into public cross-class confrontations and into the ongoing debate between opposing Northern and Southern political ideologies. Mediating between these oppositions through her benevolent social interactions, Margaret attempts to establish a paradigm of effective female work based upon strategies of sympathetic identification that have the potential to heal conflict and alleviate bodily harm.

This project, however, proves to be insupportable. Margaret defends her intervention in the riot scene at the Thornton's mill as part of her woman's work, providing a mediatory service and a compassionate voice to heal divisions between the two opposing sides. However, in her desire to protect both the striking disgruntled factory workers and the stubborn mill owner from harm, Margaret is injured. Struck down by a rock thrown by a member of the crowd, she is incapacitated and unable to effectively mediate between the individual worker and the public systems of which he is a part. Moreover, Margaret's literal fall is re-inscribed by the inhabitants of Milton as less a public act of benevolence than a dramatic expression of sexual desire for John Thornton. Her 'woman's work' places her body in danger: of being publicly misinterpreted and of suffering physical harm.

While Nightingale was able to successfully mediate between her socially acceptable role as the caring 'lady with the lamp' and her work reforming the military-medical administration systems, Gaskell's nurse struggles to balance her individual duties with her working life. After the death of both her parents and her guardian, Margaret 'tries to settle that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged obedience to authority, and how much might to be set apart for freedom in working' (*North and South*, p. 377). The nurse in *North and South* cannot safely

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earnest when she suggested to editor Charles Dickens that a more apt name for her text would be 'Death and Variations'.

juxtapose ‘obedience to authority’ with ‘freedom in working’, torn between her duty to authority and her desire to be self-sufficient. Margaret’s dilemma emphasizes the contradictory nature of nineteenth-century gender ideology, which concurrently affirms her ‘freedom’ to work while designating the boundaries within which this work can operate.

Ironically, Nightingale had previously grappled with this ‘most difficult problem for women’ in her highly political polemic, *Cassandra* (1852). Arguing that the nineteenth-century middle-class woman needs to be taken from her current state of subordinate dependency through an active sense of purpose, she asks:

What else is conventional life? Passivity when we want to be active. So many hours spent every day in passively doing what conventional life tells us, when we would so gladly be at work [...] Women dream of a great sphere of steady, not sketchy benevolence, of moral activity, for which they would fain be trained and fitted, instead of working in the dark, neither knowing nor registering whither their steps led, whether farther or nearer to the aim.<sup>201</sup>

Nightingale notes the lack of a ‘sphere of steady [...] moral activity’ in which women can perform a productive labour for which they have been ‘trained’ and are ‘fitted’. Without this sense of purpose, she imagines the female population as ‘working in the dark’ without a definitive aim. While Nightingale’s later career would shed light upon the potential of nursing as an occupation which fulfils these moral and personal desires, Gaskell’s dialogue with her friend emphasises the paradoxes of ‘women’s work’ as a social category which is defined as both passivity and activity. She recognises that Nightingale has solved this ‘most difficult problem for women’ (*North and South*, p. 377) through a series of abstractions which subjugate the individual female worker to the system she represents. Gaskell, therefore, has to deconstruct the ‘heroic’ nursing trope Nightingale embodies. Revealing the latter’s model of work to be fundamentally

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<sup>201</sup> Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra* [1852], ed. by Myra Stark (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1979), p. 38.

untenable, she affirms Margaret's personal sphere of individualised care with its localised, but limited effects. Reading *North and South* as part of Gaskell's extended dialogue with the iconic face of nursing, thereby exposes the limitations of the female domestic influence within societal conflicts. It also, however, concurrently offers a model of microcosmic, individualised, female care as the only means whereby this conflict can be mediated.

### **The Life and Demise of Nurse Periwinkle: Constructing a Hospital Sketch**

While Gaskell deconstructs the narrative of the nurse-at war to expose the ambivalent work of the nurse-at-home, her U.S. literary counterpart mobilises these shared literary and cultural tropes to create a more progressive model of female professional activity. Tribulation Periwinkle, the semi-autobiographical protagonist of Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*, has been interpreted by critics as: a nurse-witness, a body whose censored sight is able to, paradoxically, bring what is hidden into view (Cappello);<sup>202</sup> as a nurse-author, who utilises the chaos of the Civil War setting to explore the internal psychological conflict that afflicted Alcott as a young female writer (Young);<sup>203</sup> and as a nurse-soldier, who operates as a mediatory body between the two warring discourses of the military and the domestic (Schultz).<sup>204</sup> Collectively these interpretations emphasise the diverse symbolic functions of Alcott's nurse. It is this diversity, I contend, which enables Trib to offer a critique and affirmation of the systems which underpinned Alcott's Civil War nursing and authorial experience. Both author and nurse construct a pervasive domestic narrative that acts as an productive, yet transitory intervention in national conflict.

*Hospital Sketches*, therefore, represents Alcott's attempt to domesticate the war.

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<sup>202</sup> Mary Cappello, 'Looking About Me With All My Eyes: Censored Viewing, Carnival and Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*', *Arizona Quarterly*, 50:3 (1994), 59-88 (p. 62).

<sup>203</sup> Elizabeth Young, *Disarming the Nation: Women's Writing and the American Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), particularly pp. 69-101.

<sup>204</sup> Jane E. Schultz, 'Embattled Care: Narrative Authority in Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*', *Legacy*, 9:2 (1991), 104-118.

In its motivations, her text is representative of a body of literature that feminises the Civil War. As Alice Fahs has demonstrated, this type of fiction placed a female protagonist at the centre of the narrative, emphasizing the intensity of women's suffering and grief within the masculine narrative of war and, in doing so, valorising women's contribution to the war effort.<sup>205</sup> While Alcott's text conforms to this generic model, it is also unusual in its emphasis upon a female order, a metaphorical sisterhood of women workers that is offered not just as a solution to an inefficient medical service, but as a paradigmatic model of community that can re-connect a fragmented nation. This sisterhood is constructed and affirmed through an extended domestic metaphor that emphasizes the political, medical and emotional worth of female influence. Alcott creates a narrative which offers itself as an aesthetic, metaphorical joining of warring factions. The male body is, therefore, symbolically displaced and the working female body, and the narrative she constructs, put in its place.

However, this assimilation of nurse and author within the domestic narrative cannot be sustained. With the demise of nurse Periwinkle the model of women's work she valorises, and the female order she represents, is destabilized. Alcott betrays an intrinsic anxiety concerning the sustainability of a female labour that is predicated upon an unstable domestic ideology. Positioning female-sacrifice as an inevitable end to such excursions into the workplace, Alcott implies that the effects of the nurse's healing skills are merely transitory. Through her nurse protagonist, then, she validates her experiences as a domestic writer and a nurse, while also assessing and critiquing the limitations of their literary and healing work.

In the creation of a domestic narrative that supports her labour, Trib's most important task is to utilise her skills to imagine resolutions for the disorderly chaos of her Civil War experience. Like the majority of her nurse-at-war counterparts she

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<sup>205</sup> Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 120-23.

validates her working experience by extending the domestic metaphor into the medical-military setting of the hospital. She is aided in this process by the historical blueprint of the building they inhabit. 'Hurly-burly House' (*HS*, p. 5) is a former hotel: its doors still bear 'their old names; some not so inappropriate as might be imagined, for my ward was in truth a ball-room, if gun-shot wounds could christen it' (*HS*, p. 22). Through her metaphor Trib brings together the incongruous spaces of the ball-room containing young debutantes, and the hospital ward full of broken bodies. In drawing parallels between the bullet and a party of people, and between the bodies who are 'christened' by such phenomena, she, with sparing words, creates a poignant image of the brutal loss of young life. Unlike Walt Whitman, who in his *Memoranda During the War: Written on the Spot in 1863- '65* (1875-76) describes the war through negations: '[the war] was not a quadrille in a ball room [...] [it] will never be written', Alcott utilizes the same domestic metaphor to make the war experience tangible.<sup>206</sup> In doing so, she emphasizes the centrality of the female nurse's role within this process of metaphorical and literal conjoining. The function of the nurse is no less than to imagine and create the conditions whereby these healing processes can take effect and then to record it.

Trib's narrative, therefore, draws explicit parallels between the metaphorical engagement of domestic and military imagery and the ability to physically heal broken bodies. This is manifested in the nurse's ability to take control of the working-space in which she operates. After being promoted to 'night nurse', Tribulation oversees a re-organisation of her ward:

[N]ow divided into three rooms [...] I had managed to sort out the patients in such a way that I had what I called, "my duty room," my "pleasure room," and my "pathetic room," and worked for each in a different way. One, I visited, armed with a dressing tray, full of rollers, plasters, and pins; another, with books, flowers, games, and gossip; a third, with teapots, lullabies, consolation, and sometimes, a shroud. (*HS*, p. 33)

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<sup>206</sup> Whitman, *Memoranda*, p. 7.

Trib, once again, draws parallels between the everyday domestic and the wounded male body. The physical space of the military hospital and its injured inmates are ordered into three discernible character traits: ‘duty’, ‘pleasure’ and ‘pathetic’, each of which are each given a spatial location. The wards of ‘Hurly-burly House’ (again) become designated rooms within an extended domestic household. Displaced from its military setting, the ‘dressing tray full of rollers, plasters, and pins’ could be the components of a young woman’s toilette, while the ‘books [...] games and gossip’ brought to the pleasure room could comprise the basis of an evening of family entertainment. The men of the pathetic room, on the other hand, are likened to ailing children, soothed by lullabies and tea.

In her imaginative re-structuring of the hospital ward, Trib, like Sairy Gamp before her, emphasizes the many faces of the nurse-housekeeper. Able to move between these domesticated demarcated zones, working ‘for each in a different way’, she takes on the role of servant, sister and mother to her ailing charges. This is a method which both Trib and her charges consistently find comforting. As Schultz argues, only by re-imagining the wounded men as ‘sleepy children, leaning their tired heads against me’ and as blushing ‘bashful’ girls (*HS*, p. 24), is Trib able to confront the intimidating prospect of washing her patients.<sup>207</sup> Through this extension of the domestic space Alcott imagines an alternative model of healthcare that utilises the skills of the middle-class housekeeper to effect the healing process. The idealized image of the nurse, then, is manifested in the ‘the matron’s motherly face [which] brought more comfort to many a poor soul, than the cordial draughts she administered, or the cheery words that welcomed all, making [...] the hospital a home’ (*HS*, p. 22).

In the imaginative process of ‘making the hospital a home’, Trib provides an important link between the lonely soldier and his family by writing their letters home.

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<sup>207</sup> Schultz, ‘Embattled Care’, p. 109.

Letter-writing was an intrinsic part of the nurse's duties. In his *Memoranda*, Whitman writes that the gifts men most desire of him are writing paper and envelopes rather than money or tobacco. In his role as nurse/missionary Whitman often wrote dictated letters, sometimes sending letters to a bereaved family describing their son's brave battle with illness. The letters Trib writes for her patients, however, are less dictated than constructed by the nurse herself. She states:

[H]aving got the bodies of my boys into something like order, the next task was to minister to their minds, by writing letters to the anxious souls at home [...] The letters dictated to me, and revised by me, that afternoon, would have made an excellent chapter for some future history of the war; for, like that which Thackeray's "Ensign Spooney" wrote his mother just before Waterloo, they were "full of affection, pluck, and bad spelling;" nearly all giving lively accounts of the battle, and ending with a somewhat sudden plunge from patriotism to provender, desiring "Marm," "Mary Ann," or "Aunt Peters," to send along some pies, pickles, sweet stuff, and apples, "to yourn in haste," Joe, Sam, or Ned, as the case might be. (*HS*, p. 29-30)

Their letters, (re)written by Trib within a domestic framework, are no less than 'an excellent chapter for some future history of the war'. The soldierly writers are characterized by a mixture of male bravado and boyish enthusiasm. Their letters, on the other hand, resemble less pathetic accounts from wounded men than epistles written by school-boys, badly-spelt and affectionate, begging their mother for some home-made comforts.

By emphasising the 'provender' over the 'patriotic', Alcott re-defines male heroism. The heroic Civil War soldier is not the hardened, battle-worn man but is the domesticated boy who can write home to his family with affection. In this process of domestication, the war is repositioned as simply an absence from home that must be remedied through an imaginative reconnection. The nurse facilitates this convergence of the military within the domestic through her letter-writing. Positioning 'the history of the war' as the story of the domestic fragmentation and reconnection (re)written by a

nurse, Alcott emphasizes the central function of the woman worker/writer in imagining solutions to this internal conflict. Re-connecting the man with his roots, and thereby facilitating the ‘ministration’ of the Union soldier’s body and mind, this narrative also re-imagines a consolidated national consciousness based upon a shared sense of home.

Trib’s narrative, however, becomes increasingly critical as she extends the domestic metaphor beyond the home to structure both her medical-military experience and her patriotic fervour. Her critique is expounded through a direct juxtaposition between the female order her domestic narrative supports and the chaos and disorder of the governmental institution: the Senate Chamber. Alcott depicts Armory House as the successful example of this new feminised order, visited by ‘covetous’ nurses who marvel at ‘the neatness, comfort, and convenience which makes it an honor to its presiding genius’ (*HS*, p. 53). Trib’s description of the hospital is characteristically feminised and is noticeable once again for the absence of male bodies – of both patients and staff. In the Armory she finds a

cheery, bright-eyed, white-aproned little lady, reading at her post near the stove; matting under her feet; a draft of fresh air flowing in above her head; a table full of trays, glasses, and such matters, on one side, a large, well-stocked medicine chest on the other; and all her duty seemed to be going about now and then to give doses, issue orders, which well-trained attendants executed, and pet, advise, or comfort Tom, Dick, or Harry, as she found best. (*HS*, p. 53)

While Alcott draws a parallel between the airy rooms, the well-stocked cabinets of the Armory and the ‘cold, dirty’ wards and mismanaged resources of ‘Hurly-burly House’ for critical effect, her deliberate placing of the ‘cheery, bright-eyed, white-aproned little lady’ at the physical centre of this successful institution demonstrates the benefits of female work. The organized, well-sanitized ward is maintained by efficient women workers: from the sister and her ‘well-trained attendants’, to the efforts of Florence Nightingale whose reformist and medical ideas are put into practice in the wards of the



Armory.

The efficaciousness of these female workers contrasts with the inefficiency of the male attendants, usually former patients, at ‘Hurly-burly House’, who are usually characterized by their absence. Their incompetence, Trib bemoans, results in female nurses taking on ‘double duty’ and then being ‘blamed for breaking down’ (*HS*, p. 53). In what constitutes a direct appeal to her medical superiors Alcott pleads: ‘if any hospital director fancies this is a good and economical arrangement, allow one used up nurse to tell him it isn’t, and beg him to spare the sisterhood, who sometimes, in their sympathy, forget that they are mortal, and run the risk of being made immortal, sooner than is agreeable to their partial friends’ (*HS*, p 53). Alcott suggests that the ‘sisterhood’s’ medical expertise, effective working model and their symbolic appropriation of domestic comforts within a medical-military environment, offers a solution to national medical and emotional needs. She develops this concept of a familial, medical and national ‘sisterhood’ into full symbolic fruition in her later novel *Work: A Story of Experience* (1872).<sup>208</sup>

Alcott’s valorisation of female labour as an appropriate response and solution to the chaotic effects of Civil War is further demonstrated through the juxtaposition of the feminised order successfully implemented at Armory Hospital and the disorganization of the Senate Chamber. Visiting this governmental institution in the hope of seeing ‘if this large machine was run any better than some smaller ones I know of’ (*HS*, p. 53), Trib encounters a scene of comic disorder:

‘[I] found the speaker’s chair occupied by a coloured gentleman of ten; while two others were “on their legs”, having a hot debate on the Cornhill question, as they gathered waste paper strewn about the floor into bags; and several white members played leapfrog over the desks, a much wholesomer occupation than some of the older Senators indulge in, I fancy’. (*HS*, p. 53)

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<sup>208</sup> Schultz argues, on the other hand, that sisterhood within *Hospital Sketches* is ‘shadowy, undefined and contested’. See ‘Embattled Care’, p. 109.

In 'Hurly-burly House', Trib mobilized domestic rhetoric to infantilize her male patients, positioning the female nurse as the maternal influence needed to re-connect broken bodies, families and nations. In the Senate Chamber, however, the male decision-making body is entirely absent, literally, rather than symbolically, displaced by children. In this vacuum, chaos ensues: children frolic by leapfrogging over desks, they enact a comic subversion of political duties by discussing the 'Cornhill' question, while a 'coloured gentleman of ten' uses the opportunity to occupy the speaker's chair. This displacement operates as a playful yet damning critique of governmental inadequacy and ineffectiveness. The children, Alcott implies, through their innocent game playing are employed in a 'wholesome occupation' than their senior counterparts, hinting perhaps at some implicit corruption at the heart of the governmental system. In comparison with the well-organised Armory House this national institution is disreputable and disorganized.

However, it also presents an opportunity. In this carnivalesque moment, Alcott, the staunch abolitionist, relishes the sight of a 'coloured gentleman' in the speaker's chair.<sup>209</sup> Moreover, on 'finding the coast clear', Trib 'likewise gambol[s] up and down' (*HS*, p. 53), sitting on chairs and examining books, freed by the absence of the male body to examine and re-imagine the machinations of the governmental 'machine'. The disorder of the Senate Chamber allows others to re-order it. The conflict, therefore, offers an imaginative opportunity for women like Alcott to critique the hegemonic order of government and to offer an alternative. Through her rhetorical juxtapositions, she imagines the nation as an 'Armory House': domesticated, well-supplied, efficient and, importantly, accessible to any 'Tom, Dick, or Harry' regardless of race and gender.

By enlarging the domestic space in which she operates, however, Trib's feminized, domesticated order cannot escape the challenge posed by the hegemonic

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<sup>209</sup> For more on the role of the 'carnavalesque' within Alcott's text see Cappello, p. 61.

system. As she becomes more critical her narrative is put under increasing threat. Dr. P, the ward surgeon, who teaches her the ‘first lesson the art of dressing wounds’, is particularly singled out for critique:

[He] fell to work with a vigour which soon convinced me that I was a weaker vessel, though nothing would have induced me to confess it then. He had served in the Crimea, and seemed to regard a dilapidated body very much as I should have regarded a damaged garment; and, turning up his cuffs, whipped out a very unpleasant looking housewife, cutting, sawing, patching and piecing, with the enthusiasm of an accomplished surgical seamstress; explaining the process, in scientific terms, to the patient, meantime; which, of course, was immensely cheering and comfortable. There was an uncanny sort of fascination in watching him, as he peered and probed into the mechanism of those wonderful bodies, whose mysteries he understood so well. The more intricate the wound, the better he liked it. A poor private, with both legs off, and shot through the lungs, possessed more attractions for him than a dozen generals, slightly scratched in some "masterly retreat;" and had any one appeared in small pieces, requesting to be put together again, he would have considered it a special dispensation. (*HS*, pp. 28-29)

Dr. P’s understanding of the ‘art’ of medical care is in binary opposition to Trib’s own. While Trib confines her ‘cutting, sawing, patching and piecing’ to dilapidated garments – after enlisting for service, she sends her ‘weak and wounded’ clothes ‘to the Work-basket Hospital, to be made ready for service again’ (*HS*, p. 5) – the ‘surgical seamstress’ uses these domestic skills to practice upon broken, depersonalised bodies. While the surgeon’s skills are literally akin to that of the seamstress, constructing a whole from its composite parts, the metaphor ‘surgical seamstress’ is unstable. The occupations of ‘seamstress’ and ‘surgeon’ are explicitly gendered. While the seamstress rejuvenates the tired garment, bringing it back into everyday use, the surgeon, on the other hand, undoes this process. His ‘cutting, sawing, patching and piecing’ – the word ‘sawing’ deliberately jars with the other domestic verbs – is focused less upon re-connecting the patient with his domestic, private life than upon literally re-constructing his body.

Through this emphasis upon literal rather than metaphorical healing, the consciousness of the patient is subjugated to his physical form; his body is given meaning through the complexity of his ailment and, therefore, the challenge he poses to the competent surgeon. Dr. P's focus upon physicality and dismemberment are, consequently, at odds with Trib's larger aesthetic project of conjoining metaphors and imagining a solution to the broken national body. His unfeeling reconstructions of the human body destabilise Trib's imaginative, domestic solution to internal, political conflict by emphasising the physical reality of a warring nation. The surgical seamstress highlights the divisiveness implicit in the process of wounding and, concurrently, in the divisions created by Civil War. Within the context of Trib's extended domestic metaphor, Dr. P's physical solutions to his patient's and to the nation's internal struggles and pains are depicted as fundamentally inadequate.<sup>210</sup>

However, while Trib assumes a critical voice to question the masculine order that Dr. P's arts represent, she also acknowledges the threat they pose. His work ethic makes Trib nervous as she imagines herself a 'weaker vessel' in comparison with his physical endeavours. In acknowledging the insecurities of the female nurse, Alcott confronts the problem of the woman worker within nineteenth-century culture. While reformers such as Florence Nightingale utilized a traditional gendered logic to naturalise and to valorise professional feminine care, these same rhetorical devices undervalued this labour. This paradox forms the basis of both author and protagonist's main anxiety. When placed in comparison with Dr. P's masculine physical prowess and his esoteric medical knowledge, Trib's professional endeavours are devalued, becoming the work of a 'weaker vessel'. Within this hierarchical, specialist medical order, the female nurse's alternative model of care can be easily dismissed, threatening her identity as a health

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<sup>210</sup> It is possible to argue here that Dr. P's British medical training in the Crimea can be blamed for his lack of appreciation for the individual body he treats. As both Jane Schultz and Alice Fahs have argued, the reliance upon the individual body or the self can be characterized as a typically U.S. literary and political trope. See Schultz, 'Embattled Care', p. 115 and Fahs, p. 12.

professional. Alcott, therefore betrays a fundamental anxiety that the domestic narrative she constructs to validate women's work can, through its reliance upon an unevenly developed gendered rhetoric, undermine its own premise. In writing an alternative narrative that challenges the order Dr. P represents, Trib paradoxically emphasizes the precarious position she occupies as a female professional within a masculine space.

The domestic rhetoric that Trib uses to validate her artistic and medical work operates, therefore, as a double-bind. Through her extension of the domestic metaphor, Trib becomes politically active, offering a critique of medical-military hierarchies while instilling an alternative feminised order in its place. In doing so, she not only validates her own occupation, but emphasizes the potential benefit of women's work, particularly in the midst of conflict. However, the 'domestic heroine' model of nursing on which Alcott relies in her representation of Trib, is also predicated upon notions of female self-sacrifice. Within *Hospital Sketches* this paradox both threatens and affirms the authenticity of Trib's nursing narrative and, subsequently, Alcott's domestic text.

The novella's concluding chapter 'Off-Duty' explores these manifestations of sacrifice and subjugation. Trib succumbs to the physical and imaginative weakness anticipated in her conflict with Dr. P, losing control of her mental faculties and suffering from the hallucinations and delusions that portend typhoid fever. While this ending accurately reflects Alcott's own battle with the condition that left her weak and ailing for the rest of her life, her protagonist's illness is also a rhetorical device. Trib's 'complaint' is an acknowledgement of feminine fragility and female self-sacrifice, while also functioning as a telling critique of these feminine 'duties'. Sent home from 'battle' much against her will, Trib retrospectively examines the wounds inflicted by her brief nursing career:

I never shall regret the going, though a sharp tussle with typhoid, ten dollars, and a wig, are all the visible results of the experiment [...] I take some satisfaction in the thought that, if I could not lay my head on the altar of my country, I have my

hair; and that is more than handsome Helen did for her dead husband, when she sacrificed only the ends of her ringlets on his urn. Therefore, I close this little chapter of hospital experiences, with the regret that they were no better worth recording; and add the poetical gem with which I console myself for the untimely demise of "Nurse Periwinkle:"  
Oh, lay her in a little pit,  
With a marble stone to cover it. (*HS*, p. 61)

In imagining the 'untimely demise' of Nurse Periwinkle Trib once again conflates military and domestic metaphors. On one level, as Elizabeth Young has persuasively argued, her battle-scars – the loss of her hair – operate as a 'strategic redefinition of female subjectivity, one that reframes female inadequacy as male wounding'.<sup>211</sup> Trib's physical 'wound' and her return home are, therefore, recoded by the narrative as less evidence of failure than heroic battle-scars that mark only the most patriotic soldiers. In this way, Young suggests, Alcott demonstrates 'femininity might inevitably be a wound, but at least the terms of this wounding could be valorised'.<sup>212</sup> However, by imagining the death of 'Nurse Periwinkle', the narrator exposes the fissures in the domestic ideology on which the nurse's narrative was predicated. Her demise represents the limits of domestic metaphor; while valorising feminine sacrifice to the high principles of duty to country and family, it also represents the end of viable occupation and the erasure of the nurse's subjectivity. This ending, therefore, betrays Alcott's intrinsic ambivalence regarding nineteenth-century notions of female duty and sacrifice. Closing her narrative with a pithy little verse, she implies there will be no resurrection for the female nurse from this metaphorical tomb.

With the 'untimely death' of the nurse, however, another voice emerges. This is the voice of a modest writer, regretting that her 'little chapter of hospital experiences

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<sup>211</sup> Young, p. 87. Parallels can be drawn here between Jo March's loss of hair in *Little Women*. Jo sells her hair to, aptly, fund her mother's trip to Washington to nurse her wounded father. Jo's sacrifice of her 'one beauty', discussed in the previous chapter, also functions as a form of feminine wounding. On the one hand, through her 'wound' tom-boy Jo attempts to become masculine, while on the other she also succumbs to the sentimental, domestic rhetoric of female sacrifice that only confirms her womanhood. This conflation between sacrifice and self-affirmation, and nursing and soldiering remain, therefore, prominent concerns for Alcott throughout her literary career.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87.

[...] were no better worth recording'. This is a definitive change of tone from the nurse who imagined she was writing a history of the war. This self-declamation is a form of self-sacrifice, indicating Alcott's acceptance that both her domestic narrative and female body cannot presuppose to alter the medical-military order represented by Dr. P. On the other hand, the eradication of the professionalized nurse can also be read as an affirmation of her authorial alter-ego. The elaborate domestic metaphor Alcott constructs through her semi-autobiographical protagonist is, therefore, is finally validated through the material text she creates.

*Hospital Sketches* becomes not just a narrative about nursing, but a narrative that is able to affect the nursing process. During her convalescence period, Alcott compiled the text from a series of letters written home to her family. She found the process cathartic. *Hospital Sketches* proved to be an immediate commercial success, instigating the birth of Alcott the writer of domestic fiction. Her status as an author, therefore, displaces her working identity as a nurse, but her text continues to produce cathartic effects. Just as Alcott read Dickens to cheer her ailing patients, her text was also read aloud in the wards. Nurse Amanda Akin Stearn notes in her memoirs *The Lady Nurse of Ward E* (1909) that she read *Hospital Sketches* to a patient 'to keep him from feeling lonely and dispirited [...] thoughts of home came very sweet and its comforts seemed very far off.'<sup>213</sup>

Within *Hospital Sketches*, then, Alcott imagines the occupation of nursing as writing a domestic narrative that extends the emotional, medical and even political influence of the female sphere, valorising woman's work in the process. While the body of the professionalized nurse cannot survive the conflict and physical reality of war work, her textual body, and the conjoining metaphors she manipulates, have longevity beyond the Civil War. *Hospital Sketches*, therefore, extends the domestic space to offer

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<sup>213</sup> Amanda Akin Stearns, *Lady Nurse of Ward E* (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1909), cited in Fahs, p. 115.

an albeit transitory model of efficient, productive and organized female work, only to expose the precarious nature of her position, predicated upon notions of feminine duty and self-sacrifice. The fact, however, that the voice of the author is able to transcend the death of the working nurse suggests that the domestic narrative the nurse creates is sustainable and can be successfully translated into at least one aspect of women's work.

### ***Work: A Story of Nursing***

If, in 1863, Alcott could not imagine a successful ending for the professional nurse, affirming instead the work of the 'modest' author, by the time she completed her novel *Work: A Story of Experience*, she was able to imagine nursing in a new way. While *Hospital Sketches* could not contain the nurse's subversive alternative perspective, *Work* fashions a new understanding of the occupation as the pinnacle of female achievement and endeavour. In what constitutes a reversal of the trajectory of *Hospital Sketches*, nursing is positioned as an esoteric model of female work, and a symbolic model of sisterhood, that protagonist Christie Devon can only experience at the end of her journey towards womanhood. In a novel that is bent upon exploring 'work' as an occupation and a process, nursing is, therefore, validated as the paradigmatic model of both home-bound and professionalized labour. The nurse is not displaced by her counterpart the writer as in *Hospital Sketches*, but rather her success as a paragon of domestic female labour, both on an individual level and as part of a wider communitarian project, is metonymically aligned to the achievement of the author. Just as nursing marks Christie's achievements as an 'accomplished woman', so *Work* consolidates Alcott's success as a domestic author.

*Work* was published in instalments between 1872-1873 in Henry Beecher's *The Christian Union*. It follows Christie Devon in her search for productive occupation through a variety of employments available to impoverished gentlewomen, including: domestic servant, actress, companion and seamstress, before eventually finding comfort



in married life, motherhood and sisterhood.<sup>214</sup> Like *Hospital Sketches* the text is semi-autobiographical. Alcott had begun *Work* in 1861 under the working title *Success* and had used material from her own experiences to structure her protagonist's exploration of the labour market.<sup>215</sup> Like the young Alcott, Christie is searching for a financially sound and emotionally fulfilling vocation in order to achieve self-sufficiency. *Work* opens with Christie's radical announcement: 'Aunt Betsy, there is going to be a new Declaration of Independence [...] I mean that, being of age, I'm going to take care of myself, and not be a burden any longer.'<sup>216</sup> Her desire for self-sufficiency is located within a highly politicized rhetoric. Invoking both Jeffersonian discourse and, moreover, echoing the language of the 'Declaration of Sentiments' composed by members of Women's Rights Movement at the Seneca Falls Convention (1848), Christie's declaration locates her struggle for independence within a nationalistic and feminised framework. Presenting her desire for meaningful occupation as an intrinsically U.S. democratic trait, Christie utilizes this equalitarian rhetoric to validate her excursion from the domestic space into the wider working world.

Within the context of Alcott's text, then, 'work' is invested with a dual meaning: a noun that represents a named employment such as 'actress' or 'servant', through which social status is formulated, *and* also the present participle 'working'. Finding meaningful work is, therefore, a process which needs to be worked at, particularly as one's working title comes to define not just a sense of self, but the relation that self has

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<sup>214</sup> For more on how *Work* is a very unusual domestic text, see Jean Yellin, 'From Success to Experience: Louisa May Alcott's *Work*', *The Massachusetts Review*, 21:3 (1980), 527-539 (pp. 527-528).

<sup>215</sup> Before becoming a successful writer, Alcott provided for her family through employment such as domestic service, but was unable to find much financial or emotional value in the labour; her essay 'When I went out to Service' articulates this discontent. While this disillusionment is evident in the early chapters of *Work*, the fact that the novel's working title was *Success* suggests that Alcott had at some stage envisaged a positive conclusion to Christie's quest for employment. While it is not known how much of the earlier manuscript Alcott saw fit to revise before its eventual publication, the change in title from the optimistic *Success* to the more ambivalent *Work* could be said to reflect the mature Alcott's increasing awareness of the limited opportunities open to middle-class women seeking to validate their experiences through worthwhile labour.

<sup>216</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Work: A Story of Experience* [1873], ed. by Joy S Casson (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 5. All references to this text will be cited in parenthesis.

to the wider commercial and social community. In this context, Alcott positions Christie's 'work' as no less than an internal and external recognition of her social and moral worth. Echoing the transcendentalist principles of her upbringing, she implies that only the self-reliant individual can operate as a worthwhile member of a wider community. Christie's search for work, therefore, combines feminist, radical transcendentalist and U.S. democratic ideologies in order to find a model of employment for women that recognises individual worth and the significant role female labour can play within a nationalized framework. Within *Work* the occupation of nursing fulfils this need.<sup>217</sup>

Christie's first encounter with nursing is explored in the chapter entitled 'Companion', a re-working of Alcott's sensational text *A Nurse's Story*, published in *Frank Leslie's The Chimney Corner* between December 1865 and January 1866. Both segments focus upon the experience of the nurse/companion as she enters into a wealthy household blighted by a 'family curse' – a hereditary madness. The main protagonists, respectively Christie/Kate Snow, care for eldest daughter Helen/Elinor who has been afflicted by a nervous disorder and confined to a room within the upper-regions of house. Both women assuage their patient's anxieties and mediate reconciliations between the parents and offspring of their respectively divided houses. However, this status quo proves to be transitory. While the nurses are able heal broken familial bonds, the suicide of both Helen and Elinor undermines the model of care both women provide.

Despite the obvious similarities between the 'Companion' section of *Work* and *A Nurse's Story*, it is, however, interesting that Alcott makes a distinction between roles of 'nurse' and 'companion'. When questioned about her suitability for the difficult role of caring for a patient with mental illness, Kate Snow of *A Nurse's Story* replies:

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<sup>217</sup> Elizabeth Keyser has argued that the novel's central premise, and Christie's eventual success, is structured through one paradigmatic occupation: acting. See Keyser, *Whispers in the Dark*, p. 105 & p. 120.

Though the profession is a sad one, I like it better than being a governess or a companion; and the very fact that I am fitted for it makes me glad to do my best for these who need the help and tenderness their fellow beings can bestow upon them.<sup>218</sup>

Kate implies that nursing offers a more worthwhile occupation than either companionship or the duties of the governess for those who enjoy helping and caring for others. Nursing, she seems to suggest, requires specialist skills, manifesting as *the* expression of the feminine duties of care and support.<sup>219</sup> Christie's work as a companion, however, requires no specialist skills except a willingness to sympathise. When asked the same question, she replies: 'I have never been with an invalid, but I think I can promise to be patient, willing and cheerful. My own experience of illness has taught me how to sympathise with others and love to lighten pain' (*Work*, p. 75). Christie's response affirms a model of care based upon democratic understanding and sympathetic identification that is also shared by her counterpart the nurse. In this way the job of the nurse and companion cannot be separated: the nurse is a companion. However, Christie's lack of experience at this juncture in Alcott's novel can perhaps account for the author's assiduous avoidance of the title 'nurse' to describe her protagonist's duties.<sup>220</sup> Helen's death emphasizes the failure of the bonds of companionship that connect nurse and patient, as well as signifying the fragmentation of this small familial community of female characters. Nursing, as Alcott now understands it, is an occupation Christie must endeavour to 'work' towards.

It is, therefore, only much later in her journey towards maturation that she is able to assume the title 'nurse', at a juncture when she is able to offer a model of care

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<sup>218</sup> Louisa May Alcott, 'A Nurse's Story' [1865-66], in Madeleine Stern ed., *Louisa May Alcott Unmasked: Collected Thrillers* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), pp. 294-361 (p. 295).

<sup>219</sup> One of Kate's special skills is the use of mesmeric techniques to calm Elinor and to lead her into a peaceful sleep.

<sup>220</sup> The title of 'nurse' may also be unpleasant to Christie within this context as the role of home-bound nurse was often associated with working-class women, thereby an inadvisable title for Christie the impoverished gentlewoman. Kate's experience could perhaps account for her ready acceptance of the title. She could not be confused with the inept 'Sairy Gamp' nursing figures satirised in the nineteenth century.

that can support a feminised community. Like Trib and Alcott, Christie volunteers as Union nurse. Unlike both her literary counterpart and her author, however, Christie's occupation as a carer merges with her role as a wife and partner to David Sterling. Coinciding with Christie and David's engagement, the outbreak of the Civil War operates as a framing device which validates their co-operative model of work. After David enlists, Christie aptly takes the role of the nurse to complement his duty as soldier, affirming the values of co-operation, symbiosis and hard work on which their relationship is predicated. If the crowning moment of their relationship is epitomised by their jobs as nurse and soldier, it is apt that Christie and David's wedding ceremony is centred upon their chosen labour. Refusing to wear her white lace, Christie explains to her husband, "I want to consecrate my uniform as you do yours by being married in it. Isn't it fitter for a soldier's wife than lace and silk at such a time as this?" (*Work*, p. 293). By getting married in her uniform she symbolically 'consecrates' her employment with the same domestic values that form her relationship with David. Alcott, therefore, invests the traditional concluding marriage of the domestic genre – usually positioned as the pinnacle of a woman's achievement – with an affirmation of a model of co-operative productive female work based upon domestic values.

In becoming a nurse-wife within a civil conflict, Christie is able to consolidate and affirm her skills as an accomplished worker, and, therefore, as a working woman. In a conversation with her superior, Mrs Amory, she discusses her immediate success as a medical professional:

Mrs. Sterling, Jr., certainly did look like an efficient nurse, who thought more of "the boys" than of herself; for one hand bore a pitcher of gruel, the other a bag of oranges, clean shirts hung over the right arm, a rubber cushion under the left, and every pocket in the big apron was full of bottles and bandages, papers and letters.

"I never discovered what an *accomplished woman* I was till I came here," answered Christie, laughing. "I'm getting vain with so much praise, but I like it immensely, and never was so

pleased in my life as I was yesterday when Dr. Harvey came for me to take care of poor Dunbar, because no one else could manage him."

"It's your firm yet pitiful way the men like so well. I can't describe it better than in big Ben's words: 'Mis Sterlin' is the nuss for me, marm. She takes care of me as ef she was my own mother, and it's a comfort jest to see her round.' It's a gift, my dear, and you may thank heaven you have got it, for it works wonders in a place like this." [my emphasis]. (*Work*, pp. 297-298)

Unlike Trib, whose nursing career is initially characterised by the bravado she uses to mask her fear of her male patients, Christie is immediately comfortable in her new role. In her aptitude for the job she resembles the neat sister who oversees the wards in Armory Hospital – a parallel that is emphasised through her employer's name, Amory. Like her counterpart in *Hospital Sketches* Christie is well-supplied: not only with goods such as foods, clothing, writing materials and medical supplies, but with the domestic skills required to utilise this equipment in an effective manner. It is these skills that mark her as not just an efficient nurse, but as an 'accomplished woman'. Alcott invests this term with a new progressive meaning. Rather than relate to the inept, superficial, fashionably educated ladies who Christie worked under as a domestic servant, the 'accomplished woman' the novel affirms is a domestic professional whose skills are epitomised and honed through her role as a nurse.

One of these 'gifts' is manifested in Christie's 'firm yet pitiful' manner towards her patients. Her 'firmness' relies upon her confidence as a nurse and on her now completely formulated sense of self. Christie has learnt to temper her role as sympathiser from the passive, ultimately destructive empathy she shared with her 'companion' Helen, to displaying sympathy through the act of self-affirmation. In other words, Christie's 'gift' in her accomplished womanhood is her reliance upon strategies of identification to promote the physical and emotional connections which aid healing, while concurrently verifying the self through which these processes are able to occur.

While Christie shares many characteristics with the protagonist of *Hospital Sketches* – including maternal care and an emphasis upon the domestic – unlike Trib, she is able to find a way of reconciling her role as a nurse with her subjectivity as a woman. The efficient nurse-woman of *Work* operates as a socially acceptable representative of female labour, who is also able to affirm her subjectivity through her refined model of empathy and ‘firmness’. Christie is therefore able to achieve tangible success within the masculine medical-military environment.

These achievements are also predicated upon the co-operative model of labour that Christie effectively translates from her domestic life with David into their working-life on the battle-fields and in the hospitals. Christie’s achievements match, even surpass, those of her husband:

Like David, Christie had enlisted for the war, and in the two years that followed, she saw all sorts of service; for Mrs. Amory had influence, and her right-hand woman, after a few months’ apprenticeship, was ready for any post. The gray gown and comforting face were known in many hospitals, seen on crowded transports, among the ambulances at the front, invalid cars, relief tents, and food depots up and down the land, and many men went out of life like tired children holding the hand that did its work so well. (*Work*, p. 299)

Christie’s success is manifested in her ability to be ‘ready for any post’ from the edges of the battlefield to the urban hospitals, deploying her maternal faculties and her ‘firm yet pitiable’ demeanour to lessen suffering. She, like David, is promoted accordingly. In endowing both spouses with equal relative success, Alcott imagines a labour system that is able to support and value the work of both sexes. Choosing not to focus upon the disputes that often characterised the relationship between doctor and nurse within the military hospitals, Alcott instead places emphasis upon an equalitarian model of work that can value Christie’s skills as an accomplished woman as much as David’s competency as a soldier.

*Work*, therefore, imagines a scenario in which the work of nurse becomes the

solution to the complex issue of ‘woman’s labour’ within the nineteenth-century United States. Through her protagonist, Alcott creates a scenario in which traditionally gendered labour is not only equally valued by society, but is predicated upon co-operative domestic ideals. In this symbiotic model of labour, both male and female worker are responsible to themselves as independent agents and to the wider community in which they operate. Rather than utilising the nurse as a trope through which the uneven development of gender ideology can be explored and interrogated as in *Hospital Sketches*, Alcott positions Christie’s nursing as a paradigmatic model of productive, democratic and domestic labour that can extend beyond its Civil War framing.

This extension of the nurse’s role beyond the hospital is exemplified in the novel’s final chapter ‘At Forty’, when Christie finds ‘the task her life has been fitting [her] for’ (*Work*, p. 334): a speaker within a small organisation of women workers and lady philanthropists. Witnessing the inability of both classes of women to empathise with the other to form productive solutions to the issue of female work, Christie is moved to speak to the assembly. She is recognised by many of the delegates as ‘David Sterling’s wife, or an army nurse who had done well’ (*Work*, p. 332). Christie’s career as a nurse-wife, therefore, frames her entrance onto this public stage and provides a rhetoric whereby her role as a mediator within conflict is established. Her audience recognises

a genuine woman stood down there among them like a sister, ready with head, heart and hand to help them help themselves [...] They needed such a mediator to bridge across the space that now divided them from those they wished to serve. She certainly seemed fitted to act as interpreter between the two classes [...] Such women were much needed and are not always easy to find [...] even in democratic America. (*Work*, pp. 333-334)

Christie acts as a mediatory body, building ‘bridges’ across class boundaries, and also as an ‘interpreter’ who translates the language of the benevolent ladies and the practical rhetoric of the working women. By drawing connections between opposing factions

through her speech, and by offering herself a symbol of this inter-class dialogue, Christie utilises the skills she has acquired as a nurse. She acts as a literal healer of cross-class ‘wounds’ through her interpretive role, while also functioning as a representative ‘accomplished woman’ who has discovered a fulfilling and socially acceptable working career. In this way, Christie operates as both *a* woman worker and *the* woman worker, establishing a paradigm of work that is based less upon abstract principles than upon her individual experiences. She invests in her role as public speaker the democratic model of labour she secured with David, which she was able to successfully translate into her hospital work. In her speeches does not rely upon hierarchies of class and gender, but instead offers a solution that enables women ‘to help them help themselves’. In what becomes another example of her ‘firm, yet pitiful’ manner, Christie extends her sympathies to all, establishing a model of democratic empathetic identification.<sup>221</sup> Moreover, in her appreciation of role of the individual within a community of women, she does not subjugate her own subjectivity to that of the group, affirming instead the qualities of the ‘accomplished woman’ and the model of cross-class communication she represents.<sup>222</sup> These are the type of mediatory nursing figures, Alcott suggests, that ‘even democratic American’ needs (*Work*, p. 334).

*Work*, then, re-imagines nursing as the art of reconciling warring factions on a microcosmic level. In this it differs pointedly from *Hospital Sketches*; Alcott’s later novel ends by affirming a model of female community that the previous novel could only fleetingly uphold. This group of women is drawn together from all aspects of the social strata, including: Christie, her daughter Pansy, her mother-in-law, Bella the upper-middle class philanthropist, Hepsy the fugitive slave, Mrs Wilkins the laundress and

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<sup>221</sup> Jean Fagin Yellin, however, argues that Christie’s role as mediator is fundamentally undermined by novel’s inability to acknowledge industrialisation: ‘Alcott’s waged gentlewoman would need to embrace not one stigmatised girl, but an entire class of women whose very existence she remains unprepared to acknowledge’ (p. 537).

<sup>222</sup> For a different reading of this ending see Glenn Hendler, ‘The Limits of Sympathy: Louisa May Alcott and the Sentimental Novel’, *American Literary History*, 3:4 (1991), 685-706 (p. 700).



Aunt Letty, the fallen woman. Together they form a model utopian society: a group of female workers and activists, whose productive literal and ideological work has the potential to extend beyond the site they inhabit. This progressive model of women's solidarity and order is no less than 'pioneering', as Christie ponders: '[t]his new task seems to offer me the chance of being among the pioneers, to do the hard work, share the persecution, and to help lay the foundation of a new emancipation whose happy success I may never see' (*Work*, p. 334). Her 'new task' is to labour for 'emancipation' – for all those who are enslaved within a system that does not recognise the economic or political value of their work. The future challenge for 'accomplished woman' of *Work* is, therefore, to build a paradigmatic model of productive female community that can pioneer national re-generation.

The work of Alcott's narrative is to define the scope, and illustrate the potential of, female labour. While this project is structured through the nursing paradigm, it is also intrinsically connected to the labour of the author. Despite the fact that in her exploration of all models of work available to the middle-class woman writing is not made available to Christie as a viable occupation, both the protagonist and the author's endeavours are metonymically aligned. This is achieved both through the text's semi-autobiographical overtones and via the pervasive domestic narrative both author and protagonist construct. While *Work* posits nursing as the pinnacle of the latter's career, Alcott's novel also represents the author's achievements as a mature, 'accomplished woman' writer. Just as Christie positions herself at the centre of a pioneering community of women reformers, Alcott imagines the way in which her material domestic text can inspire her female readers to productive, self-affirming labour.

### **‘She is no common woman’: (De)Constructing the Nurse in *Ruth***

On the surface Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel *Ruth* (1853) demonstrates an engagement with many of the concerns that preoccupy the author of *Work*. Both novels explore female development through models of work, focusing particularly upon nursing as a paradigmatic model of female occupation. Their respective protagonists are, therefore, subjugated and fulfilled via the work they are denied and the labour they undertake. However, while *Work* depicts nursing as the occupation befitting the mature ‘accomplished woman’ as the pinnacle of her achievement, *Ruth* draws parallels between the feminine nurse and her ideological antithesis: the fallen woman. While Alcott’s depiction of the nurse was fundamentally progressive in its social and political symbolism, *Ruth*, with its central focus upon an ‘innocent’ fallen woman, was much more controversial.<sup>223</sup> Gaskell’s depiction of the naïve, victimised woman was not unusual within nineteenth-century literature – *Aurora Leigh*’s Marian Earle evokes the same sympathetic response – however, the manner in which Ruth negotiates class-distinctions through her intrinsic morality presented a particular point of contention for Victorian readers. As a consequence of the public censure she received over her subject matter, Gaskell complained of a ‘Ruth-fever’; her internal anxiety that she may be ‘an improper woman without knowing it’ manifested in physical symptoms that stopped her from leaving the house.<sup>224</sup> Less a cathartic text that metaphorically effects the healing process like *Work* and *Hospital Sketches*, *Ruth*, therefore, represents a wound inflicting its suffering author that needs to be repaired.

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<sup>223</sup> Conservative readers were shocked by novel’s depiction of female sexual desire. They also objected to Gaskell’s depiction of how a lower-class ‘fallen woman’ can raise herself to the position of a middle-class governess. Gaskell even draws attention to this by having Mr. Donne/Bellingham, after seeing Ruth for the first time since he seduced and left her, ponder: ‘how the devil had she played her cards so well as to be the governess – the respected governess, in a family such as Mr. Bradshaw’s?’ (*Ruth*, p. 229). As Jenny Uglow demonstrates, however, while the conservatives condemned the text, liberals (such as Charlotte Brontë) praised Gaskell’s decision to tackle this sensitive issue, while radicals such as Harriet Martineau condemned *Ruth* as ‘sadly feeble and *wrong*, I think [... especially] making Mr. Benson such a nincompoop’. See Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, pp. 341-342.

<sup>224</sup> Letter to Eliza Fox, February 1853, *Letters*, pp. 222-223.

Critical commentary on Gaskell's text has, therefore, focused upon the processes of redemption which the text investigates. Bronwyn Rivers has argued that Ruth's work as a carer 'recuperate[s] [her] ultimate womanly moral failing' by reinstating her femininity through her domestic skills.<sup>225</sup> Hilary Schor, moreover, maintains that through her work in the fever hospitals Ruth is able to critique the isolation her fallen status brought upon her and to structure her (re)integration into society.<sup>226</sup> However, while critics have focused primarily upon these final scenes of the narrative in which Ruth's nursing activities help reinstate her to a respectable position in society, less attention has been paid to her caring skills as they operate throughout the novel. I argue, therefore, that while scenes of nursing within Gaskell's novel are intrinsically connected to Ruth's final self-assertion and ultimate destruction, they also operate as persistent and paradigmatic sites of conflict in which the nurse battles for control over her own representation. This is because unlike both her other literary nursing counterparts Trib and Christie, Ruth has much of her story written for her – by the well-meaning Bensons, who create the character of widowed Mrs Denbigh to hide her shame; by her seducer who sees only a bewitchingly beautiful girl-woman ready to receive his attentions; and moreover, by a judgmental society familiar with the trajectory of the traditional fallen woman narrative.

Scenes of nursing within the text reflect Ruth's subjugation within a traditional fallen woman narrative that is being constructed around her while, concurrently, affirming her activities as a female carer. By consistently emphasizing Ruth's natural propensity to nurse – a job which, as we have seen, is predicated upon the skills assigned to the middle-class domesticated woman – Gaskell questions the authenticity of the narrative that would condemn her protagonist as a woman who has 'fallen' short

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<sup>225</sup> Rivers, p. 148.

<sup>226</sup> Hilary Schor, 'The Plot of the Beautiful Ignoramus: *Ruth* and the Tradition of the Fallen Woman', *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature*, ed. by Regina Barreca (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 158-177 (p. 171).

of these socially prescribed standards. In juxtaposing sexual transgression with nursing Gaskell furthermore draws parallels between the ideological work of the traditional fallen woman narrative with its particular focus upon the need for redemption, with Ruth's physical labour as a nurse working for the benefit of, and within, a judgemental society.<sup>227</sup> In this context, nursing functions as a corrective to society's judgements, providing an alternative model of female identity and labour that can heal, rather than sever, the links between the individual and the community. The process of redemption is, therefore, redundant. Ruth's nursing exemplifies the concurrently passive and active role she plays within the narrative, while also representing Gaskell's attempts to re-work the traditional fallen woman story by exposing the hypocrisy at the centre of nineteenth-century gender ideology.

Nursing operates in *Ruth* as a productive trope through which Gaskell can explore the relationship between the female worker and systems of authority. Ruth's relationship with authority is problematic. She lacks the pedagogical support necessary to educate her in the ways of the world and, therefore, remains in a child-like state of dependence upon dubious figures of 'authority', such as the rakish Bellingham. It is this lack of knowledge that instigates her participation in the pervasive fallen woman narrative:

She was too young when her mother died to have received any cautions or words of advice respecting *the* subject of a woman's life – if, indeed, wise parents ever directly speak of what, in its depth and power, cannot but put into words – which is a

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<sup>227</sup> For more on definitions of 'fallenness' within Victorian literature and culture see Nina Auerbach, *The Woman and the Demon* (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 1982); Deborah Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die or Do Worse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998); Angela Leighton, 'Because Men Made the Laws: The Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet', in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by J. Bristow (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 225-241; Poovey, *Uneven Developments*; and Michie, *Outside the Pale*. Both Poovey and Logan emphasise the consistent comparisons drawn between the chaste 'Angel in the House' model of femininity and the transgressive model of womanhood represented by Eve – both facets of a pervasive nineteenth-century gender ideology (Logan, p. 6; Poovey, p. 9). Auerbach also highlights the dual image of the fallen woman as both an example of 'criminal degradation' and 'missionary heroism' within nineteenth-century popular discourse (Auerbach, p. 152). The critical potential of the 'fallen woman' as a narrative tool, therefore, makes her an ideal vehicle for Gaskell's exploration and exposure of women's work.

brooding spirit with no definite form or shape that men should know it, but which is there, and present before we have recognised and realised its existence. Ruth was innocent and snow pure. (*Ruth*, pp. 39-40) [emphasis is Gaskell's own]

Through her emphasis upon 'the subject of a woman's life' Gaskell invites comparisons between Ruth and Margaret Hale of *North and South*. While the latter struggles 'to settle that most difficult problem for women', finding the balance between obedience to authority and the freedom to work, the former is unable to formulate such a question. Her relationship with authority at this juncture is less to question it than to remain ignorant of its machinations and remain child-like in her dependence on others. Her ignorance on 'the subject of a woman's life' can be seen, therefore, as both her inability to recognise sexual desire in its 'brooding spirit with no definite form' and also a lack of awareness of her own subjectivity through which she could question the authority of the narrative which encloses her. Her 'snow pure' innocence, while defending her from charges of moral transgression, cannot forestall the trajectory of her story.

This tension between her natural innocence or moral purity and the hegemonic discourses that construct the literary genre of the fallen woman is manifested in, and exposed through, Ruth's nursing activities. Gaskell emphasises her protagonist's 'snow purity' through her natural talent for caring for others: 'I like being about sick and helpless people; I always feel so sorry for them; and then I think I have the gift of a very delicate touch, which is such a comfort in many cases. And I should try to be very watchful and patient' (*Ruth*, p. 318). Her intrinsic skills – including delicacy, empathetic tendencies and dutiful patience – are typically less aligned with the generic fallen woman than with her middle-class domestic counterpart. By challenging these binary, class-based depictions of Victorian femininity, Gaskell questions the authority of the discourses that construct the fallen woman paradigm. However, by constructing a narrative that either contests or denies this role, she exposes a society which can neither value Ruth's innate feminine qualities, nor provide her with a productive outlet in which

to demonstrate her skills. Gaskell's text, therefore, interrogates its own construction as a fallen woman narrative through the paradox exposed in the figure of the nurse.

It is significant, then, that Ruth's propensity to nurse those around her remains a constant throughout the text. Her natural inclination for the role is initially expressed in her desire to nurse her consumptive fellow seamstress, Jenny. The latter nurses Ruth by offering the emotional and pedagogical support she is lacking, so when Jenny's illness grows worse, she is keen to return the favour:

She would gladly have nursed Jenny herself, and often longed to do it, but she could not be spared. Hands, unskilled in fine and delicate work, would be well enough qualified to tend the sick, until the mother arrived from home. (*Ruth*, p. 27)

This nursing scene becomes less a site of healing than a place of conflict. Ruth's voice, asserted in the first line of this short extract, is silenced by a second voice who dissuades her intervention: Mrs Mason, her employer. Nursing, it is argued, is not a job for the skilled seamstress and can be fulfilled by any unskilled hand until the rightful nurse – the mother – arrives. The activity of personal care is thereby devalued, while the specialist work of the seamstress is valorised. This is noteworthy given the fact that Ruth recognises her needlework is neither exemplary, nor is her attitude particularly diligent. Mrs Mason's refusal to let her nurse her colleague, therefore, exemplifies the extent to which Ruth's body is appropriated by those around her. She is chosen to represent Mrs Mason's establishment at the Hunt Ball not because of her skill with a needle but because her natural beauty makes her a visible asset to the firm. This denial of the nursing role, then, can be seen as an extension of her employer's control over both her employee's body and her desires.

The scene also registers a third person whose voice and actions are juxtaposed with Ruth's and set in contrast to Mrs Mason's work ethic. Jenny's mother is depicted as her daughter's rightful nurse, a role which requires, contrary to the proprietress's belief, specialist skills. This 'pale, gentle-looking woman' is liked by everyone: 'she was so

sweet-looking, and gave so little trouble, and seemed so patient' (*Ruth*, p. 27). Gaskell emphasises the ennobling and cathartic effects of esoteric maternal care. While Mrs Mason abstracts the individual subject into a body that can be worked and displayed, Mrs Wood provides individualised care that affirms both the subject and the human interest that connects them – exemplified in the mother-child bond. Juxtaposing the trade of needlework with the work of the nurse, Gaskell, therefore, exposes the former's exploitative potential, while emphasising the support offered by the unwaged domestic-minded maternal figure.

The activities of Jenny's mother operate as a narrative strategy that subtly foreshadow Ruth's career. She represents the idealised nurse and a productive model of female labour – patient, unobtrusive and comforting – that Gaskell's protagonist has the potential to emulate. However, the deftness with which the text introduces and dismisses Mrs Wood mirrors the objectification of Ruth within her own narrative. Patient, passive and giving 'so little trouble', the mother-nurse and the would-be-nurse, respectively, are easily erased from the text, or dissuaded from their vocation. Placing emphasis upon these processes of subjugation, Gaskell critiques the normative gender codes that identify docility as a pre-requisite for the ideal nurse-woman. In doing so, she exposes a double-bind: the same set of discourses that value the nurse as an exemplar of female care and sympathy codify that same body as obedient and dutiful. Gaskell places emphasis, therefore, upon the ease with which these hegemonic discourses inscribe the body of the woman-nurse with meaning only to dismiss her from the scene.

These processes of self-affirmation and self-destruction are exemplified in Ruth's care of her lover when he falls ill with a 'brain fever'. His illness leaves Ruth alone and isolated within the secluded boarding house they have occupied since their departure from Fordham. It also makes her his chief nurse and only companion. As

such, Ruth is in a particularly precarious situation; her concern for her lover makes her physically ill and, moreover, with his incapacitation she loses the financial and emotional security he provided. In this vulnerable state: ‘she sat by the bedside all night long. It was a new form of illness to the miserable Ruth’ (*Ruth* p. 65). This ‘new form of illness’ is not just concern for her lover, but an acknowledgement of her isolated and unstable position which manifests in physical symptoms and mental anxiety. Her illness is, therefore, not unlike Gaskell’s own ‘Ruth-fever’ as both author and protagonist come to terms with their altered position within society. Their respective illnesses express their powerlessness as a result of, and within, a pervasive fallen woman narrative that codifies their respective bodies. This passivity is also manifested, paradoxically, through Ruth’s nursing activities. With no skills to effect the healing process in her delirious victim, she becomes literally ‘worn out with watching’ (*Ruth*, p. 69) and removed from the sick-room.

While Gaskell emphasizes the dangers implicit in the activities of nursing – creating ‘a new form of illness’ that reflects the fallen woman’s unstable position – she concurrently affirms Ruth’s nursing activities, reclaiming her subjectivity within the narrative. Through her care of Bellingham, Ruth is able to alter the ways in which people in authority regard her, effecting the way in which her body is assigned with meaning. She demonstrates this in her shy, but decisive dealings with his attending Dr., Mr. Jones:

“I wish you, sir, to be so kind as to tell me, clearly and distinctly, what I must do for Mr Bellingham. Every direction you give me shall be most carefully attended to” [...] Her manner was calm and serious, and her countenance and deportment showed that the occasion was calling out strength sufficient enough to meet it. Mr Jones spoke with a deference which he had not thought of using up-stairs, even when he supposed her to be the sister of the invalid. Ruth listened gravely; she repeated some of the injunctions, in order that she might be sure that she fully comprehended them, and then bowing, left the room. “She is no common person,” said Mr. Jones. (*Ruth*, pp. 69-70)



Ruth manages to wrest control of her own body from others; she is able to transform her ‘white and trembling’ (*Ruth*, p. 69) passive manner into a ‘calm and serious’ demeanour that reflects her intrinsic ‘strength’. Her desire to nurse, therefore, enables her to remain deferential to authority – in this instance, the knowledge of the doctor – but also to instil that feeling within others, allowing the health professional to recognize that Ruth’s skill is that of ‘no common person’. Her natural predilection for caring – codified by the narrative as overtly feminine – becomes the means through which she asserts her moral and emotional superiority over others.

Ruth’s model of care, however, is tested by the arrival of Mrs Bellingham, who ‘swe[eps] into her son’s room as if she were unconscious what poor young creature had lately haunted it’ (*Ruth*, p. 69). The sick-room, once again, functions as the site of conflict in which both women’s widely different models of care are juxtaposed. The narrative, however, favours Ruth’s model of care. Listening outside the window to ascertain any news of her lover’s health, ‘[s]he heard a rustle of a silken gown, and knew it ought not to have been worn in a sick room; for her sense seemed to have passed into the keeping of the invalid, and only to feel as he felt’ (*Ruth*, p. 71). Ruth recognizes that constant rustle of Mrs Bellingham’s silk gown would disturb the patient, a thought that emphasizes the former’s consideration, while concurrently exposing the latter’s insensitivity. By not replacing her refined clothes with more suitable garments, Mrs Bellingham seeks to affirm the class distinctions which distinguish her from Ruth, the former seamstress. As Deborah Logan has argued, in nineteenth-century popular thought clothing reflected moral authority, with upper-class women displaying their innate propriety through their refined dress, while the torn clothing of working-class women became the physical symbol of their intrinsic depravity.<sup>228</sup>

If Gaskell was relying upon these markers of class to define Ruth’s relationship

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<sup>228</sup> Logan, p. 37.

with Mrs Bellingham, she takes pains to undermine them. Throughout the text, clothing functions as a literal manifestation of Ruth's relationship with authority: she is employed by Mrs Mason as a seamstress and exploited in her position; her attendance as an employee at the County Ball as a dress-repairer brings her into contact with Mr. Bellingham; and Mrs. Bellingham, a patron of Mrs Mason's establishment, attempts to assert her moral superiority over Ruth through a dress that the latter may have made. By critiquing the inappropriateness of Mrs Bellingham's choice of clothing, therefore, Ruth symbolically challenges her class-based moral authority by drawing attention to her lack of nursing skills.

It is this knowledge of her superiority as a nurse that gives Ruth the courage to confront Mrs Bellingham, desiring news of the patient's recovery. Typically, however, the latter misinterprets Ruth's motives; she is the 'girl whose profligacy had led her son astray' and the desperate woman who would force her way into the sick-room. She retorts:

"Young woman, if you have any propriety or decency left, I trust that you will not dare to force yourself into his room." She stood for a moment as if waiting for an answer, and half expecting it to be a defiance. But she did not understand Ruth. She did not imagine the faithful trustfulness of her heart. Ruth believed that if Mr. Bellingham was alive and likely to live, all was well. (*Ruth*, p. 73)

This battle for control of Mr. Bellingham's sick body, therefore, becomes a struggle for the rights of representation. Denying her access to the patient, the mother attempts to redefine her son's role within the seduction, positing Ruth as the propagator of his fall. However, by positioning her protagonist as the superior nurse, Gaskell undermines the processes through which Mrs Bellingham re-writes Ruth's motivations. The latter's priority is revealed to be less her son's recovery from illness than the re-assertion of the family honour through a class-based hierarchy. Ruth, on the other hand, exists in a heightened state of sensitive empathy with her patient, becoming more maternal in her

emotional connection with her charge than the mother herself. Ruth's subtle, yet telling criticism of her lover's mother becomes an assertion of her own model of care based upon what are middle-class domestic values. She is, therefore, despite her 'lower-class', fallen status, able to renegotiate her position within a moral hierarchy, challenging definitive class distinctions through her empathetic and maternal skills. Through these activities, she undermines Mrs Bellingham's reading of 'profligate' body, destabilizing the generic narrative conventions that would define her fallen person as superfluous or inadequate.

Gaskell, therefore, positions Ruth as 'no common woman' who is able to question the authenticity of her supposed 'fallen' state. Through her protagonist's nursing activities, Gaskell exposes the processes by which Ruth is codified by the local community, while undermining the class-based, moral hierarchies on which such interpretations are based. Yet, these scenes of nursing also exemplify Ruth's passivity within her own narrative; it is her deference to figures of authority, such as the doctor, which make her a good nurse. Moreover, while she is able to empathise successfully with Bellingham's suffering, the fact she is denied physical access to his sick-room compounds her position as a marginalised figure. Ruth's nursing, therefore, exposes the double-bind in which she operates. Her skills of observation, empathetic identification and her notions of duty combine to subjugate her within the conventions of the fallen woman narrative. It is, however, only through these same set of skills that she is able to imbibe some authority of her own.

While Ruth's nursing remains consistent throughout the narrative the response of the local community to her activities is anything but stable. Gaskell deconstructs the traditional fallen woman narrative by focusing less upon redemption – tracing Ruth's need to rectify her past mistakes – than emphasising society's changing responses to her consistent desire to nurse. After her 'fallen' past is discovered by her outraged

employer Mr. Bradshaw, Ruth is forced from economic necessity and fear of idleness to take work as a professional sick-nurse: a role which, as we have seen, was usually associated with middle-aged, working-class women. Jemima Bradshaw's response to her friend's new occupation is telling. By questioning 'delicate' Ruth's ability to undertake such hard labour, she demonstrates the extent to which her friend's nursing activities have successfully challenged class hierarchies. Jemima's views represent in microcosm those of wider society in its changing perceptions of Ruth's body.

It is apt, then, that Ruth's conflicting relationship with society is couched in terms of warfare. Her decision to enter the battlefield of the fever hospital is reminiscent of Trib's enlistment and David Sterling's enrolment in the Union army. It is with an unusual amount of self assertiveness that Ruth declares to an astonished Mr Benson: 'I want to tell you, that I have been this morning and offered myself as matron to the fever-ward while it is so full. They have accepted me; and I am going this evening' (*Ruth*, p. 348). While Ruth is not as ambitious in her aims as her literary counterparts, her work as a nurse is just as effective in healing conflict as Trib and Christie's work in imagining a cure for a fractured national consciousness:

As she had foretold, she found a use for all her powers. The poor patients themselves were unconsciously gratified and soothed by her harmony and refinement of manner, voice and gesture. If this harmony had been merely superficial, it would not have this balmy effect. That arose from its being the true expression of a kind, modest and humble spirit. (*Ruth*, p. 320)

Ruth's 'powers' are grounded in her middle-class sensibilities: in her 'refinement of manner' and her 'kind, modest and humble spirit'. Through this 'harmony' between manner and motive, she is able to create a 'balmy effect' which bonds not just the nurse and her individual patient, but also effects a model of cross-class interaction in which middle-class benevolent work is given a productive outlet. In 'going to war' in the fever hospital, therefore, Ruth paradoxically achieves a symbolic harmony that not only effects a dialogue between social bodies, but also changes the way in which her body is

interpreted by the community. When Ruth's fallen past is alluded to by one of the locals, a stranger, who she has lately helped, leaps to her defence: 'I could feli you [...] for calling that woman a great sinner. The blessing of them who were ready to perish is upon her' (*Ruth* p. 351).

Despite the changing meanings applied to her body, however, Ruth remains constant: '[s]he herself did not feel changed. She felt just as faulty – as far from being what she wanted to be, as ever [...] She did not feel much changed from the earliest Ruth she could remember. Everything seemed to change but herself (*Ruth*, p. 321). This stability is manifested in the two parallel scenes of nursing in which Ruth cares for her Mr. Bellingham: commencing with his 'brain fever' and concluding with 'typhus fever'. Gaskell invites comparisons between the two nursing scenes by repeating images such as Ruth using her 'pretty hands' to cool his brow (*Ruth*, p. 362), while she once again allows 'every sense [to be] strained in watching – every power of thought or judgment had been kept on the full stretch' (*Ruth*, p. 363). While she remains unchanged 'from the earliest Ruth she could remember' in her desire to and her skill in nursing, the very fact that she now has access to her lover's rooms emphasizes the extent to which the wider community has learnt to value her talents.

This final scene, however, while the setting for Ruth's triumph, is also the site of her downfall. Her stability, and her unchanging nature, are re-codified as the symptoms of illness. She dies of the typhus fever, caught from her former lover, singing songs from her childhood in 'sweet and child-like insanity' (*Ruth*, p. 366). This ending has proved contentious; while Gaskell's contemporaries Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Charlotte Brontë bemoaned Ruth's death, recent criticism has highlighted the incongruity between the protagonist's newly attained favour in society with the punishment the narrative bestows.<sup>229</sup> Attempting to reconcile these paradoxes, Audrey

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<sup>229</sup> See Uglow, p. 339-342 for more contemporary reactions to *Ruth*.

Jaffe has argued that Ruth's unconsciousness within these final scenes functions as a metaphor for her intrinsic passivity throughout the text. She states: 'Mrs Denbigh, the novel seems to assure us, was never anything more than a fantasy about social mobility.'<sup>230</sup> Never more than a mobile body that is defined and negated by the society who creates her, Ruth's death is, in Jaffe's view, inevitable.

To read the ending in such a way, however, is to ignore the critical work that Gaskell's self-reflexive novel achieves. Ruth's death functions as a rhetorical device. Emphasising what is done to her protagonist's body – she is infected, and removed from the narrative – positions Ruth as a victim of a pervasive narrative structure that cannot be subverted. However, while she remains passive in a delirious state, her image is active with meaning. The absence of Ruth's body is able to effect reconciliations between the Bensons and the Bradshaws with both families drawn together in a shared sense of mourning. Her nursing and healing skills, therefore, operate beyond the grave.

Ruth's death also emphasises the self-reflexive nature of Gaskell's text and the strategies the author deploys to question the authenticity of the fallen woman narrative. Like her nurse protagonist, Gaskell can be seen as both passive and active within this process. Ruth's unhappy end is an example of the authority of the established fallen woman narrative, a trajectory that even the critical author cannot destabilise. However, through a series of subtle subversions – by depicting Ruth as a snow-pure, intrinsically middle-class 'fallen' woman – Gaskell questions the applicability of the hegemonic discourses that determine the story of the sexually transgressive woman. She uses these strategies to destabilise the narrative that is constructed around both the novel's innocent protagonist and her anxious author. Ironically, Gaskell uses the work of the unchanging, diplomatic nurse to structure her own deconstruction project. With the accomplishment of this task, we are left with a text that emphasises the dual passive and

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<sup>230</sup> Audrey Jaffe, 'Under Cover of Sympathy: 'Resentment' in Gaskell's *Ruth*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 21 (1993), 51-65 (p. 60).

active faces of the nurse and her author, and a narrative that concurrently affirms the work of the nurse-author in exposing the ideological paradoxes of an uneven gender ideology.

### **The Nurse at Work (in the Narrative)**

Both Elizabeth Gaskell and Louisa Alcott manipulate the transatlantic, literary and historical tropes of the nurse-at-war and the nurse-at-home to explore, and define women's work. By locating their texts within a transnational framework, I have emphasised the similarities and differences within their nursing narratives as they operate as products of their respective national and political contexts. Through the carnivalesque chaos of the American Civil War, Alcott is able to extend female working space, creating a pervasive domestic narrative that can heal intra-national conflict through the imaginative task of creating a shared sense of home. Within post-bellum 'democratic' U.S., with its changing sense of national community and identity, Alcott is able to create an ephemeral sisterhood who propagate this imaginative project. While the limitations of this working community and the symbolic nursing activities they undertake are consistently highlighted, Alcott also emphasises the potential of this microcosmic domestic community to bring about meaningful social change. In both *Hospital Sketches* and *Work* Alcott utilises the metaphor of nursing to structure an imaginary healing of the national consciousness. In doing so, she asserts the pervasiveness of a domestic narrative that would support the ideological and literal work of the nineteenth-century nurse and, moreover, define her career as a successful female author.

While Alcott utilises the nursing paradigm to construct a domestic narrative that supports female labour as part of a national re-construction project, Gaskell mobilises her nurse to destabilize traditional narratives of women's work. *North and South* and

*Ruth* question the authority of models of female labour and identity personified in, respectively, the iconic female nurse Florence Nightingale and in the narrative of the ‘fallen woman’. She uses her nursing protagonists, Margaret Hale and Ruth Hilton, to highlight the paradoxes within a pervasive domestic ideology that concurrently valorises women’s caring work as a socially acceptable labour, while also detailing the limitations of that occupation. The former is mobilised to deconstruct Nightingale’s model of care, predicated upon the subjugation of the individual sufferer to greater good. While favouring, like Alcott’s *Work*, a microcosmic model of change embodied in a small community across class-divides, *North and South* lacks the model of sisterhood needed to support this female labour. This demonstrates Gaskell’s intrinsic anxiety concerning the applicability of women’s work as a productive and long-lasting social category.

This anxiety is amplified in *Ruth*. Like her U.S. counterpart Gaskell aligns the work of the nurse with that of her author; this is exemplified in the illness they share. Unlike Alcott’s fictions, however, Gaskell’s self-reflexive text questions its own construction. By juxtaposing the traditional fallen woman paradigm with the story of middle-class nurse, she exposes the instability of a gender ideology which constructs both antithetical categories of female identity. Her text, therefore, questions the basis of the domestic metaphor on which it is predicated. Emphasising the concurrently active and passive faces of the nurse as she is affirmed and written out of her own narrative, she questions both the work of the female nurse and the author that creates her. *Ruth*, like *North and South*, investigates models of female professionalisation, while highlighting the significant work of the nurse and the woman writer in exposing the paradoxes that support and hinder their labour.

Placed in juxtaposition with the work of her U.S. counterpart, Gaskell’s nursing narratives can be seen to betray an intrinsic anxiety concerning the role of the female



professional within a workplace that relies upon contradictory gender rhetoric. While Gaskell finds the British literary tradition and the narratives it constructs difficult to negotiate, Alcott is able to manipulate and extend existing narrative structures. She uses this not just to facilitate women's entry into new work spaces, such as the hospital, but to imagine a way in which domestic influence can work towards the imaginative process of re-constructing a nation.

Tracing these intrinsic differences it is possible to see how the figure of transatlantic nurse operates as an exemplar of local, or national working models, while, moreover, functioning as a pervasive transnational trope through which debates on women's work took shape. Gaskell and Alcott's narratives, therefore, should be positioned as paradigmatic examples of a wider, transnational debate that aptly explores and expounds the potential scope of female labour. The journey of their material nursing narratives through the processes of transatlantic literary exchange mirrors the movements of their nursing protagonists across established boundaries into new work spaces. Both author and nurse are, therefore, joined in an exploratory purpose— to map out the possibilities and limitations of female professional labour within a transnational arena.

## Chapter Four

### The Monstrous Witchcraft Narrative

#### The Witch: the 'Perfect Figure for Negative Identity

In many ways the witch exists in ideological opposition to the nurse: while one represents the socially-acceptable face of female work and vocation, the other is identified by her subversive, unnatural activities.<sup>231</sup> However, the identities of the witch and the nurse have been consistently blurred throughout their turbulent histories. Both sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witchcraft pamphlets that detailed the proceedings of the trials, and the nineteenth-century narratives that attempted to rationalise and re-interpret these earlier histories, demonstrate the slippage between the work of the carer and the activities traditionally associated with the witch. Popular early modern beliefs in the 'magic' of the process of child-birth instigated a confusion between the function of the female mid-wife/healer and the malevolent intent of the witch.<sup>232</sup> Moreover, nineteenth-century practitioners of mesmerism, a science which its detractors linked to witchery and the occult, advertised their skills for healing purposes.<sup>233</sup>

The blurring between these two categories of female identity is also evident in

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<sup>231</sup> Marion Gibson argues that a witch is a 'person defined as such by his or her society'. It is a label that the witch may choose to accept or contest. See *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 5.

<sup>232</sup> As Diane Purkiss argues, the mid-wife was employed partly to prevent harm caused by the witch, who would use the process of child-birth to harm vulnerable women. See *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 100-101. However, the *Malleus Maleficium* (1486), one of the most popular treatises on witchcraft throughout the late medieval and early modern periods, listed two of the seven methods of witchcraft as preventing pregnancy and abortions – two medical aspects which could be practiced by a mid-wife/female healer. The differences between 'healer' and 'witch' were therefore not necessarily clearly distinguished in popular discourse of the era.

<sup>233</sup> Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Brontë are just a few of many British and U.S. authors who tried the healing potential of mesmeric practices. Alcott, however, found little comfort in the treatment. It did little to improve her symptoms which had been caused by the treatment for typhoid fever she caught while working as a nurse in Washington. In January 1885, she noted in her journal, 'My mind cure not a success. First I am told to be "passive". So I do, say & think nothing. No effect. Then I am not "positive" enough, must exert my mind. Do so and try to grasp the mystery. Then I am "too positive" and must not try to *understand* anything. Inconsistency and too much hurry. God and Nature cant [sic] be hustled about every ten minutes to cure a dozen different ails. Too much money made & too much delusion all round.' *Journals*, p. 250.

nineteenth-century witchcraft narratives. Female characters that courted or were given the title of ‘witch’ used nursing either to mask their devious purposes, or to re-integrate themselves into society through their useful, practical skills. Both Jean Muir in Louisa May Alcott’s *Behind A Mask: Or, a Woman’s Power* (1866) and Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) respectively mobilise these facets of the witchcraft stereotype to manipulate or alter their social standing, with Hester’s letter ‘A’ being re-codified to represent her ‘Able’ nursing skills.<sup>234</sup>

In a similar manner to her nursing counterpart and antithesis, then, the witch exposes, to use Poovey’s term, the ‘uneven development of gender ideology’.<sup>235</sup> Manifesting as both a potentially disruptive body, and a victim of the hegemonic discourses which condemn her behaviour, she emphasises the contradictory facets of a belief system which allow her to be both the manipulator and the manipulated. Moreover, the consistent ideological slippage between the work of the nurse and the activities of the witch underlines the instability of a series of gender codes which allows a woman to be identified dually as an idealised embodiment of domesticity and all that subverts these codes.

However, while both the witch and the nurse expose the processes through which a supposedly naturalised system of religious orthodoxy, moral certainty and gender difference is constructed, they differ in one essential way. While the nurse practices her vocation based upon traditional gender roles, the supernatural witch is identified through the negation and subversion of these codes. The label ‘witch’ is therefore applied rather than earned, *created* rather than established. She operates as what Judith Halberstam has termed ‘a gothic monster’: a ‘meaning machine [...] that

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<sup>234</sup> Through her nursing activities Hester becomes ‘self-ordained, a Sister of Mercy’: ‘[i]n all seasons of calamity, indeed, [...] the outcast of society at once found her place’. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* [1850] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 161. The parallels between Gaskell’s Ruth and Hester Prynne are explicit. Gaskell had certainly read Hawthorne’s text in the early 1850s, before the publication of *Ruth*.

<sup>235</sup> Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, p. 12.

produce[s] the perfect figure for negative identity'.<sup>236</sup> Functioning, to use Purkiss's term, as a 'blank screen' onto which fantasies of subversion and rebellion are projected, the witch becomes a convenient body that isolates all negative connotations of alterity.<sup>237</sup> Moreover, the fact that the work of witchcraft does not refer to a tangible set of conditions which can be easily articulated means that it is she, rather than her nursing counterpart, who poses the greatest interpretative and representational problem to the hegemonic order which both creates and victimises her.<sup>238</sup> Examining the ways in which the witch is conceptualised by a community, or within a narrative, therefore, exposes the interpretive and representational processes which fabricate and define this wayward figure of female identity.

In this chapter I explore how Elizabeth Gaskell and Louisa May Alcott adapt and mobilise the traditional witchcraft narrative to explore contemporary constructions of femininity. Focusing upon Gaskell's rewriting of both Charles W. Upham and Cotton Mather's accounts of the Salem witchcraft trials in her novella *Lois the Witch* (1859) and Alcott's exploration of mesmerism in *A Pair of Eyes: Or Modern Magic* (1863), I explore how both authors contest the negative connotations that are applied to the witch as a derogatory demarcation of female identity. Emphasising the processes and social determinants through which the label 'witch' is necessarily applied, they expose the boundaries that this 'perfect figure for negative identity' has transgressed. As a result of this deconstructive process, then, both author and witch are able to question and disrupt the monstrous witchcraft narrative they create. I argue that within Gaskell and Alcott's fiction, the witch both operates as, respectively, a storyteller with the ability to 'possess' a narrative, and an artist who can transform her own image. This metafictional trope,

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<sup>236</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>237</sup> Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth Century Representations*, p. 101.

<sup>238</sup> See also Robin Briggs, 'Many Reasons Why: Witchcraft and the Problem of Multiple Explanation', in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 49-64 (p. 53).

then, enables both authors to reflect upon their own position as writers and artists within the nineteenth-century literary marketplace.

By exploring the strategic function of the witch within *Lois the Witch*, and *A Pair of Eyes*, I locate these narratives within a transatlantic, historical and comparative framework. By tracing the ways in which Elizabeth Gaskell adapts sources such as Charles Upham's *Lectures*, I explore how the witchcraft narrative provides a lucid structure through which she, like her witch protagonist, can both affirm and undermine categories of gendered, literary and social identity. The conjointly British and colonial American historical setting of the narrative, I contend, provided both a safe distance, and yet distinctly familiar space, in which these issues concerning negative formations of identity could be explored. Through this critical approach, I consider why Gaskell chose to write about an event which was, by the 1850s, viewed as part of a distinctly U.S. history, despite a wealth of British and European sources which were available to her.<sup>239</sup>

Louisa May Alcott's *A Pair of Eyes*, by contrast, is not concerned with seventeenth-century New England histories, but explores a nineteenth-century invocation of the witchcraft trope popular on both sides of the Atlantic: mesmerism. *A Pair of Eyes*, I argue, exposes the violent confrontation between male and female artistic strategies through the mesmeric gaze. I consider how the metaphor of 'modern magic' enables Alcott to explore female artistic and literary authority and also to condemn a witchcraft narrative that can only affirm the binary of domination/submission. By situating Gaskell and Alcott's witchcraft narratives within a comparative transatlantic framework, I explore the ways in which both authors use the figure of the witch to encourage a re-assessment of the processes of gendered, national and artistic

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<sup>239</sup> While Gaskell's biographer Jenny Uglow has identified Upham's *Lectures*, William Howitt's *Popular History of Priestcraft* (1833) and Harriet Martineau's article *On Witchcraft* (1831) as sources for *Lois*, she is unable to explain why Gaskell chose such subject matter. However, she does argue that the events in Salem fitted with other narrative frameworks Gaskell had employed in the 1850s and 60s. These texts examined the workings of social authorities, how they were mystified to bring about an unquestioning acceptance, and the rituals and rules through which these authorities were imposed. See Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, p. 472 & p. 475.

identity formation.

### **Transatlantic Readings of Seventeenth-century Histories in Nineteenth-century Narratives**

Both Gaskell and Alcott's witchcraft narratives exemplify the pervasiveness of the witch paradigm within British and U.S. nineteenth-century culture. Indeed, both authors were fascinated by witches. Before she became an established household name, Gaskell published her work in *Howitt's Journal* under the pseudonym 'Cotton Mather Mills'. Constructing her literary identity through the witchcraft narrative and nineteenth-century industry, she creates a specifically transatlantic pseudonym that incorporated her interest in U.S. history, as well as the British-U.S. cotton trade that effected life in Lancashire. Her choice of name, moreover, anticipates the profound impact both tropes would have upon her literary output. The work of 'Cotton Mather Mills' presupposes and enacts the process of transatlantic literary exchange that would significantly impact upon Gaskell's success as an author on both sides of the Atlantic.

Louisa Alcott's personal and literary identities were also imbricated with the witchcraft narrative. While suffering from delusions and hallucinations caused by typhoid fever, she believed that '[a] mob at Baltimore [was] breaking down the door to get me; being hung for a witch, burned, stoned & otherwise maltreated were some of my fancies. Also being tempted to join Dr W. & two of the nurses in worshipping the Devil'.<sup>240</sup> This correlation between witchcraft and self in Alcott's imagination had no doubt been cemented by her mother, who told stories of witchcraft in which her ancestor Judge Samuel Sewell had played a part, and her father who drew parallels between Alcott's temper and devilry. Writing in his diary in 1846, Bronson noted that he was

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<sup>240</sup> January 1863, *Journals*, p. 117. In Alcott's fevered imagination the relationship between 'nurse' and 'witch' become confused. During these delusions, she also thought that she was 'tending millions of sick men who never died or got well' (p. 117).

living with ‘two devils [...] the mother fiend and her daughter’: Abigail and Louisa.<sup>241</sup>

For both Gaskell and Alcott, then, the witchcraft paradigm provided a pervasive discursive framework which they used to structure their authorial exploits. Moreover, it also played a fundamental role in the process of identity formation, establishing a rhetoric through which the self could be imagined and articulated.

Gaskell and Alcott’s explorations of authorship, authority and identity through the witchcraft narrative corresponded with a body of work which appeared on both sides of the Atlantic from the 1830s onwards. In the United States, the Salem witchcraft trials were re-visited and re-assessed in texts such as John Neal’s *Rachel Dyer* (1829) and Charles W. Upham’s *Lectures on Witchcraft Comprising the History of the Delusion in Salem in 1692* (1831). Both narratives aimed to explicate the witchcraft hysteria by placing emphasis upon the extenuating circumstances affecting their Puritan ancestors which provoked the persecutions in Salem. Utilising a rhetoric associated with nineteenth-century rational enlightenment, both authors depict a community which, as a result of the consistent threat of invasion from native Indians, Pirates and the French from Canada, feared for the security of its geographical borders, its political system and its religious orthodoxy. Upham thereby characterises his seventeenth-century subjects as peculiarly affected by superstition: ‘[t]he imagination had been expanded by credulity until it had reached a wild and monstrous growth. The [P]uritans were always prone to subject themselves to its influence; and New England [...] was a most fit and congenial theatre upon which to display its power’.<sup>242</sup> The ‘wild and monstrous growth’ of the imagination, therefore, expanded to encompass and contain all the foreign

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<sup>241</sup> See Alcott’s journals and Bronson Alcott’s *Journal* (1846) cited in Halttunen, ‘The Domestic Drama’, p. 235. Examining the function of ‘The Witch’s Curse’, a play enacted by the March Sisters in *Little Women*, both Halttunen and Elaine Showalter argue that the witch’s narrative operates in binary opposition to *Pilgrim’s Progress*, with the former functioning as a feminine methodology and the latter representing masculine authority. While the witch narrative encourages self-expression, *Pilgrim’s Progress* stifles these imaginative processes. See Halttunen, p. 233 and Showalter, p. 46.

<sup>242</sup> Charles W. Upham, *Lectures on Witchcraft Comprising a History of the Delusion in Salem in 1692* (Boston: Carter, Hendee and Babcock, 1831), p. 10. All further references to this text will be cited in parenthesis.

elements – imaginary or otherwise – which threatened the New England communities. The witch, Upham maintains, became a physical manifestation of this ‘monstrous growth’ of the imagination, functioning as a convenient body onto which these insecurities could be projected.

By emphasising the reality of the hysteria which created the witch, and thereby deconstructing the history’s more supernatural elements, this body of work also positioned itself as a project of reclamation – restoring the reputation of the community which suffered from these delusions. In his *Lectures* Upham maintains that his purpose in re-visiting such events is to enable residents of New England to ‘possess ourselves of correct and just views of a transaction, thus indissolubly connected with the reputation of our home, with the memory of our fathers, and of course with the most precious part of the inheritance of our children’ (*Lectures*, p. 7). The desire to ‘possess’ knowledge of the witchcraft trials is, of course, ironic. For Upham, however, the story of Salem becomes intrinsically connected with the region as the ‘delusion’ of 1692 spread across the New England colonies (*Lectures*, p. 26) and, moreover, with a sense of national identity. Restoring the ‘reputation of our home’ by identifying a ‘correct and just’ reading of events within his *Lectures*, Upham firmly locates his nineteenth-century history within a national narrative of U.S. enlightened rationalism. This nationalistic, restorative focus also explains Upham’s consistent references to corresponding European witchcraft trials which, he argues, made use of ‘barbarous and inhuman practices [...] not countenanced by our forefathers to the same extent’ (*Lectures*, p. 41). The trials at Salem are, therefore, endowed with a specific identity within what was a transnational phenomenon.

This desire to establish and authorize a national history coincided with the clamour for a distinctly U.S., national literature. Neal and Upham’s semi-fictional, yet historical accounts of the Salem trials, had the advantage of fulfilling both these



objectives. In Neal's 'Unpublished Preface' to *Rachel Dyer*, included in the 1829 edition, for example, he bemoans Sidney Smith's 'insolent question [...] repeated on every side of me by native Americans—"Who reads an American Book?"' [Neal's emphasis]. He also complains about the absence of 'one true Yankee [...] in any of our native books'.<sup>243</sup> His witchcraft narrative set in colonial America of 1692, therefore, creates a transatlantic dialogue which imagines 'another DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE in the great REPUBLIC OF LETTERS' in which an U.S. narrative can stand alongside a British literary work.<sup>244</sup>

This applicability of the witchcraft paradigm to a nineteenth-century U.S. political and literary consciousness is also in evidence within another type of witchcraft narrative which focused upon fictitious, rather than pseudo-historical, representations of the witch. This genre, exemplified by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, oversaw what Gabriele Schwab has termed the 'internalisation of the witchcraft pattern'.<sup>245</sup> *The Scarlet Letter* draws parallels between protagonist Hester Prynne, her daughter Pearl and witchcraft. The latter is consistently referred to as a 'demon offspring', a 'little baggage [with] witchcraft in her [...] who needs no old woman's broomstick to fly withal'. Hester, moreover, is more than once invited by notorious 'witch' Ann Hibbins to join her in meeting 'the black man'.<sup>246</sup> Hawthorne's text demonstrates how the witch evolved from a supernatural body who posed a threat to seventeenth-century colonial politics, to a series of cultural stereotypes which were embedded within the nineteenth-century social consciousness. Witchcraft, therefore,

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<sup>243</sup> John Neal, 'Unpublished Preface' to *Rachel Dyer* [1829] (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1996), pp ix-x & xv. Interestingly, Neal was going to publish 'a skeleton' form of his tale in the British journal *Blackwood's Magazine* as the first of a series entitled 'North-American Stories'. Due to a misunderstanding with the editors, however, the story was never published. The 'Unpublished Preface' was originally intended for this edition, and, therefore, explains Neal's exploration of transatlantic literary relations, and, moreover, the nationalistic focus of his story.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid, p. xviii.

<sup>245</sup> Gabriele Schwab, 'Seduced by Witches: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in the Context of New England Witchcraft Fictions', in *Seduction and Theory: Readings of Gender, Representation and Rhetoric*, ed. by Dianne Hunter (Schuras: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 170-191 (p. 180).

<sup>246</sup> Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, pp. 99, 116, 117 & 154.

operates as an aesthetic method which enables Hawthorne to explore paradoxical representations of the witch as both a victim of, and active agent within, authoritarian social structures.<sup>247</sup> As I will demonstrate, Louisa May Alcott's *A Pair of Eyes* both represents and manipulates this established literary paradigm.

While Hawthorne's text exemplifies the potent symbolism of the witch within the nineteenth-century cultural consciousness, it also becomes a vehicle through which transatlantic literary relations, and thereby a distinctly U.S. literary identity, were expounded.<sup>248</sup> Hawthorne's text was extremely popular in Britain. Gaskell's letters demonstrate that she had requested a copy of Hawthorne's text in January 1851 from her publisher, Edward Chapman. The novel also had a significant impact upon a young George Eliot.<sup>249</sup> The effect of *The Scarlet Letter* upon *Adam Bede* (1859) manifests in a number of obvious parallels, including the correlation between the names of the protagonists (Hester and Hetty, Arthur Dimmesdale and Arthur Donnithorne), the presence of illegitimate children, and the centrality of the witchcraft metaphor. These similarities show the increasing impact of U.S. narratives upon British texts – just as John Neal had anticipated.<sup>250</sup>

While the New England witchcraft narrative proved fruitful material for U.S. writers ambitious for international recognition in the early decades of the nineteenth century, British accounts of the Salem trials were scarce. Gaskell's *Lois*, a fictional

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid, p. 179.

<sup>248</sup> The *Scarlet Letter* has, therefore, often been read in nationalistic terms, as a text which explores issues specific to the United States, including the development of a national, historical and literary identity. As Ellen Weiner persuasively argues, the metaphor of 'possession' provides a productive central conceit through which the author can explore not just his own impulses to write, but the issues of property rights within mid-century United States. These include women's property owning laws and also copyright legislation, which made retaining ownership of one's own (literary) work a problem. See Ellen Weiner, 'Considering Possession in *The Scarlet Letter*', *Studies in American Fiction*, 29 (2001), 93-112 (pp. 94 & 105). Emphasising the symbolic national significance of Hawthorne's text Karl Wentersdorf argues that he uses *The Scarlet Letter* to foreground his doubts concerning the authenticity and applicability of the national history he inherited. See Karl P. Wentersdorf, 'The Element of Witchcraft in *The Scarlet Letter*', *Folklore*, 82:2 (1972), 132-153 (p. 136).

<sup>249</sup> *Letters*, p. 142.

<sup>250</sup> For more on the relationship between George Eliot and the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, see Monika Mueller, *George Eliot U.S.*, pp. 13-15.

account of U.S. historical events, was highly unusual. Upham's *Lectures* had, however, been read and reviewed in Britain. Harriet Martineau, a fellow Unitarian who had visited Salem and knew the minister personally, undertook a critical review of his *Lectures* in an article entitled 'On Witchcraft' written for the *Monthly Repository* (1831) and an article 'Salem Witchcraft' (1868) which expostulated Upham's two volume book of the same name. Like her U.S. counterpart, Martineau drew parallels between this colonial history and contemporary issues, deeming the Salem story 'a tale of our times'.<sup>251</sup> Seeking to reflect on past events through an enlightened lens, Martineau uses this transatlantic witchcraft narrative to advocate 'openness in the pursuit of knowledge' with the aim of 'exposing indefatigably the machinery of spiritual delusion'.<sup>252</sup> In other words, Martineau, a renowned supporter of the scientific learning, including mesmerism and psychological studies, used the Salem witchcraft narrative to advocate against superstition and ignorance, particularly within orthodox religious orders. This colonial history, she argues, connects both nineteenth-century Britain and the United States through a shared narrative which writes both past and future relations: '[i]t will be long before either [nation] will have outgrown its uses as a remonstrance in regard to some faults in the past and present, and as a warning as to recurring liabilities in the future'.<sup>253</sup>

While Martineau may have misjudged the significance of Salem's history upon the British national consciousness, witchcraft was a potent and pervasive metaphor within cultural commentaries. The development of Animal Magnetism and the publication of books such as James Braid's *Magic, Witchcraft, Animal Magnetism*,

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<sup>251</sup> Harriet Martineau, 'On Witchcraft', *The Monthly Repository* (1831), pp. 529-534 (p. 529). Rebecca Styler has argued that Gaskell's text also operates as a 'tale of the times'. It functions as not just a direct critique of Puritan ideology, but an attack upon nineteenth-century religious orthodoxy that stigmatised Unitarian beliefs. See Styler, 'Lois the Witch: A Unitarian Tale', *Gaskell Society Journal*, 21 (2007), 73-86 (p. 73).

<sup>252</sup> Martineau, 'Salem Witchcraft', *Edinburgh Review* (1868). For more on Martineau's fascination with the Salem witchcraft trials, see Susan Hoecker-Drysdale, 'Witchhunts and Enlightenment: Harriet Martineau's Critical Reflections', Vasilikie Demos and Marcia Segal eds., *Advancing Gender Research from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Centuries: Advances in Gender Research*, Volume 12 (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2008), pp. 7-21 (pp. 8-11).

<sup>253</sup> This is cited in the proofs for the 'Salem Witchcraft' article for *The Edinburgh Review* (1868). These words remained unpublished. Cited in Hoecker-Drysdale, p. 20.

*Hypnotism and Electro-biology* (1852) served not just to popularize the rhetoric of witchcraft, but also to fuel a renewed interest in British and European history. Popular journals such as Dickens's *All the Year Round*, in which *Lois* was published in three parts between 8<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1859, included many short pieces on both historical and modern witchcraft.<sup>254</sup> Articles such as 'Our Eye Witness and An Infant Magnet', which reviewed a performance in which a child employed mesmeric techniques to create a binding of the lower limbs known as 'Rigid Legs',<sup>255</sup> and 'Hysteria and Delusion', a piece which drew parallels between 'extraordinary religious experience[s]' that occurs across temporal and geographical borders, respectively accompanied and preceded the publication of *Lois* within the journal.<sup>256</sup> Gaskell's text, therefore, both responded to, and developed, a contemporary interest in witchcraft.<sup>257</sup>

This rejuvenated interest in witchcraft perhaps explains, or is explained by, a number of witchcraft 'trials' which occurred throughout the late 1850s in Britain. *The Times* newspaper recounts at least three of these events in which gullible labourers paid a third body to rid them of the 'curses' and 'bewitchments' they believed were being practiced upon them. Eventually realising their error of judgment, the supposedly 'bewitched' labourer took the 'healer' to court to retrieve the fees he had been duped into paying.<sup>258</sup> While these accounts filled the pages and editorial columns of the

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<sup>254</sup> Further articles in the British press on the subject include: 'The Witch', *All the Year Round* (9 January 1869); [Anon] 'Witchcraft in the Nineteenth Century', *All the Year Round* (6 November 1869). For more on nineteenth-century British re-incarnations of the witch paradigm in both literature and journalism see, Maureen F. Moran, "Light no Smithfield Fires": Some Victorian Attitudes to Witchcraft', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 33:4 (2000), 23-51.

<sup>255</sup> [Anon], 'Our Eye Witness and an Infant Magnet', *All the Year Round* (13 October 1859), pp. 597-600.

<sup>256</sup> [Anon], 'Hysteria and Delusion', *All the Year Round* (5 November 1859), pp. 31-34.

<sup>257</sup> Deborah Wynne persuasively argues that Gaskell used *Lois the Witch* to contribute to contemporary debates about women and the public sphere. In the British press journalists made links between the Salem witchcraft trials and the behaviour of hysterical women in Ireland and revolutionary France. Dickens's *A Tale of Cities* was published in *All the Year Round* at the same time as *Lois*. See Wynne, 'Hysteria Repeating Itself: Elizabeth Gaskell's *Lois the Witch*', *Women's Writing*, 12:1 (2005), 85-97 (p. 87).

<sup>258</sup> These three incidents include the above mentioned Charlesworth versus James Tunnicliff (see 'Witchcraft in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Times*, (March 7 1857). The second article is 'Witchcraft in Somersetshire' (3 November 1856), in which a local 'witch' who was employed to rid a woman named Bathe of some enchantments under which she believed she was labouring, only to be

moment, publications such as *Punch* mobilized the witchcraft metaphor to illustrate and critique Prime Minister Lord Palmerston's foreign policies. Depicting the latter as an effigy made and defaced by 'Russian cabalists [...] who weave their spells, and practice their enchantments in the various courts of Europe', the journal exemplifies the potential of the witchcraft narrative as a political critique and a literary methodology which was just as applicable to the British social consciousness as it was to the nineteenth-century United States.<sup>259</sup>

The witchcraft narrative is, therefore, thoroughly transatlantic. It traces a seventeenth-century, British colonial history which brought English law, including its legal precedents, to both facilitate and bear upon witchcraft prosecutions in the American colonies. In its nineteenth-century incarnations, this narrative also established transatlantic dialogues, enabling a series of literary exchanges and critical conversations through which national issues and transnational tropes could be explored. Both Gaskell's *Lois the Witch* and Alcott's *A Pair of Eyes* exemplify this process.

These narratives are, however, unusual in their dual focus upon gendered and (trans)national identity. While Hawthorne, Upham and Eliot locate their witchcraft narratives within their respective national settings to comment upon contemporary concerns, Gaskell locates her text within a colonial American setting, while Alcott adapts an established sensational trope that was recognizable on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>260</sup> Their respective transatlantic witchcraft narratives, therefore, use the figure of the witch to explore local/national issues, while considering her import as a transnational paradigm of female identity within the nineteenth-century cultural

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duped out of money (and health) by the 'witch' she employed. Lastly, a County Magistrate wrote to *The Times* on 10th April 1857 giving details of a local farmer who wanted to have a reputed witch 'proved' or 'swum'. All three cases had the effect of bringing the witchcraft paradigm into popular discourse, while also re-enforcing a class-based hierarchy which depicted the people labouring under the delusion of witchcraft as lower-class, ignorant workers who have not been educated to recognize the folly of their superstitious ways.

<sup>259</sup> [Anon], *Punch* (25 April, 1857), p. 161.

<sup>260</sup> The exact setting of *A Pair of Eyes* is difficult to ascertain. Despite a reference to 'the West End', Alcott does not explicitly state whether the story is located in Britain or the United States.

consciousness. In other words, by examining how and why the witch is created, thereby identifying all that the community needs to exclude, both authors, like their literary predecessors, are able to make pertinent comments upon contemporary life. They critique the pervasive nineteenth-century gender paradigms which make the witch a potent cultural symbol even within enlightened, rational, transatlantic circuits.

### ***Lois the Witch and Gothic Storytelling***

Gaskell's depiction of the complex literary, political and national identity of the nineteenth-century witch is facilitated by the narrative form she chose to employ: the gothic. The gothic, as both Fred Botting and Judith Halberstam have argued, is preoccupied with the 'excessive'. This is encapsulated in the genre's self-reflexive exploration of the unbounded, or supernatural experiences which exist outside usual societal norms and literary convention, while also drawing attention to the very borders which these excessive movements transgress.<sup>261</sup> The gothic text also produces horror through an excess of meaning, creating multiple interpretations which are collectively embodied and contained within the gothic monster. In this way, all racial, sexual and supernatural threats to the national, political and individual body are condensed into a monstrous form which can be readily consumed by the reader, and significantly, easily expelled from within the narrative.<sup>262</sup> As Halberstam neatly summarises, this 'remarkably mobile, permeable and infinitely interpretable body [...] is a machine [...] that produces meaning and can represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the

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<sup>261</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.1; Halberstam, p. 2.

<sup>262</sup> In *Rule of Darkness* (1988) Patrick Brantlinger identifies a particular form of British imperial gothic prevalent at the end of the century which can be identified by its preoccupation with regression, degeneration and an 'invasion of civilisation by the forces of barbarism and demonism'. See Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 301. The British gothic locates the source of anxiety as the threat the external foreign body poses to domestic culture. It represents the disruptive elements within imperialism that come to infect the heart of the empire.

narrative’.<sup>263</sup>

*Lois the Witch* deconstructs this monstrous body. As Laura Kranzler has argued, Gaskell recognised the potential of the gothic as a literary medium through which she could explore the relationship between systems of authority – that would condemn the witch as a body of excessive negations – and the disenfranchised victims of these judgments. This confrontation between those in authority and the subjugated had also structured many of Gaskell’s early works, including *Mary Barton* (1849), *Ruth* (1853) and *North and South* (1854-55), in which the experience of working-class labourers is sympathetically brought into a dialectical relationship with the ruling elite. The voices of the silenced and the marginalised are, therefore, brought to bear upon systems authenticated by the hegemonic order.

However, while *Lois the Witch* similarly foregrounds the experiences of the victims of social institutionalism, exposing how and why the subjects of persecution are identified and condemned, Lois is also depicted as a storyteller who has control of her own narrative. By drawing parallels between authorship and monstrosity, Gaskell manipulates the gothic form in order to explore the role of the storyteller and their relationship with systems of authority. As David Punter argues, the gothic proves to be a paradigmatic literary form which explicitly engages with intertextual relations. He maintains that gothic is no less than ‘the paradigm of all fiction’ because it recognises a ‘ghostly shape’ which exists beyond the text.<sup>264</sup> ‘All writing’, he contends, ‘is haunted by the shapes of all that it is not. Gothic is forever caught in the act; caught in the act of

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<sup>263</sup> Halberstam, p. 21. While both Halberstam and Botting concentrate upon a British gothic tradition, the U.S. gothic similarly creates monstrous bodies through which to expunge voices of alterity. Both Julia Stern and Andy Doolen argue that the central tenet of the U.S. gothic experience involves the reanimation of the nation’s ‘non-citizens’ – including African Americans, women and indigenous peoples – whose disenfranchisement formed the basis of the ideology of Federalism. See Julia Stern, *The Plight of Feeling* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 2; Andy Doolen, *Fugitive Empire: Locating Early American Imperialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. xx–xxi. This particular brand of national gothic is an exploration of the underside of U.S. myths of freedom, the silenced voices that exist within, and because of, domestic political practices.

<sup>264</sup> David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1998), p. 1.

creating or recreating books'.<sup>265</sup> Punter identifies the presence of a spectre which haunts all (gothic) fiction. This ghostly entity, he argues, arises 'on the site of vanished cultural territories', thereby asserting the forgotten fictions which exist beyond and yet within the gothic narrative structure.<sup>266</sup> Recognising the multiple competing stories which exist contemporaneously within, and beyond its narrative, gothic operates as an intrinsically self-reflexive form that tries to contain these excessive strands through the body of the monster.<sup>267</sup>

Gaskell's text, I argue, operates as an allegory of storytelling that manipulates its self-reflexive gothic structure to elucidate the excessive meanings that are brought to bear upon the body of the witch. By exploring who can tell a story, what they can say, how their stories are read and interpreted by others, and finally, how this storytelling affects and informs identity formation, Gaskell exposes the processes of articulation, representation and interpretation that construct and condemn the witch as a female storyteller. Moreover, *Lois* also exemplifies how the nineteenth-century author functions as a witch. Gaskell's witchcraft narrative possesses multiple identities: as both Puritan and Unitarian; colonial American and British; as a seventeenth-century factual history, and as a nineteenth-century fictionalised account. As a result of its multiple temporal, geographic and generic modes, Gaskell's text encompasses a variety of interpretive strategies, which effectively align the excessive identities of author with her witch protagonist as their respective roles as storytellers are explored.

### **'New' and 'Old' England**

For both Gaskell and Lois Barclay the United States becomes a disconcertingly new

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<sup>265</sup> Punter, p. 3.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>267</sup> See also Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (Routledge: London, 1995). Kilgour argues that the gothic narrative is fundamentally fragmented, brought together as conflicting composite parts: 'at times the gothic seems hardly a unified narrative at all, but a series of framed conventions [and] static moments of extreme emotions – displayed by characters or in the landscape, and reproduced in the reader – which are tenuously strung together in order to be temporised both through and into a narrative, but which do not form a coherent and continuous whole' (p. 5).



terrain which impacts significantly upon their respective authorial and social identities. In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton in March 1859, Gaskell confided: ‘I should much *much* prefer [*Lois*] being published in America, either as a whole or by ‘the Atlantic’’.<sup>268</sup> Her continual wranglings with Dickens over his editing of her work, coupled with his infamous separation from his wife, meant that Gaskell was particularly keen to distance herself from her editor and publications such as *All the Year Round*.<sup>269</sup> However, despite the fact that *Lois* was not published in Fields’s journal – although, it would have been in many ways an apt receptacle for her transatlantic novella – *The Atlantic* enabled Gaskell to imagine not just increased popularity within a transatlantic marketplace, but also a new editorial relationship – away from Dickens. She recognised that a publication within Fields’s elite U.S. journal could do much to establish a new literary identity for an author at the pinnacle of her literary career.

The protagonist of *Lois the Witch* similarly enacts a transatlantic movement, a journey which affects the processes of identity formation. Like Gaskell and the seventeenth-century Pilgrims before her, *Lois* seeks to affirm a new life on the colonial American shores. By focusing on the arrival of a British native into New England, Gaskell’s witchcraft narrative offers a different perspective on the (literary) history of Salem. Unlike Upham and Neal who offer a nineteenth-century rationalist opinion on the delusions and superstitions inherent *within* the Puritan community, Gaskell and her protagonist interpret seventeenth-century New England through British perspectives. As outsiders intruding upon colonial American geographical and historical territories, both women draw attention to the (de)construction of the ideological and literal boundaries

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<sup>268</sup> *Letters*, p. 535.

<sup>269</sup> The reason why *The Atlantic* did not publish *Lois* remains unknown. This may have been one of the many instances in which Gaskell changed her mind regarding publishers. However, as Jenny Uglow argues, the eventual publication of *Lois* in Dickens’s journal could be explicated as the result of obligation – Gaskell was indebted to the former editor of *Household Words* who had advanced her a sum of money in the summer of 1858 in anticipation of a new story. Or perhaps, as Louisa May Alcott would later find out, Fields’s *Atlantic* did not always accept work from the most popular female authors. Indeed, Gaskell admits to Norton that her new story was ‘not very good; too melodramatic a plot; only I have grown interested in it, and cannot put it aside.’ See *ibid.*, p. 535.

which they have to negotiate in order to tell their respective stories.

However, while Gaskell imagines the possibility implicit in such a literal and imaginative journey, the land in which Lois embarks is depicted as imminently foreboding. This ‘New’ England is both uncomfortably ‘strange’ and frighteningly ‘different’ from the ‘old’ country and the parsonage in Warwickshire she once called home.<sup>270</sup> Lois draws an inevitable comparison between the welcoming ‘Austrian roses and yellow jasmine’ that adorned the dignified old parsonage, and the intimidating outline of the New England forests of a ‘different shade of green’ (*Lois*, p. 139). Even the colours of nature become disconcertingly foreign.

Where natural growth in the old country signified a hospitable space of lived experience, the foliage of the new country, to Lois’s eyes, is not domesticated by any visible human habitation. While we are assured that ‘the forests which showed in the distance [...] were not very far from the wooden houses forming the town of Boston’ (*Lois*, p.139), the imposing boundary of the trees impresses upon young Lois. Without a friendly welcoming face to reassure the young orphan, the land in which she is to find her new home appears impregnable, imposing and, through this explicit comparison with her old dwellings, frighteningly foreign. The natural demarcations such as the ocean and the forest are thereby mobilised by the Puritan authorities to support the psychological boundaries that separate the familiar from the foreign. The inhospitable unbounded terrain of the Northern American continent is rewritten into a series of distinctive, intelligible geographies.

While Gaskell’s overtly transatlantic framing differs from the structure used by her U.S. literary predecessors, she also borrows from these sources to explicate and rationalise Puritan anxiety. Captain Holderness, Lois’s guide and British sailor, directly paraphrases Upham, attributing the sources of the disquiet within the community to a

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<sup>270</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Lois the Witch* in *Gothic Tales* [1859], ed. Laura Kranzler (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 139. All further references to this text will be cited in parenthesis.

series of colonial border struggles made more intense through a vengeful religious fervour. They are: ‘a queer set [...] They are rare chaps for praying down on their knees at every turn of their life [...] The French colonists [...] are vowing vengeance for the expedition against Canada, and the people here are raging like heathens – at least, as like as godly folk can be – for the loss of their charter’ (*Lois*, p. 143). The Captain depicts the Puritans both as the aggressive colonisers who attempted to move into French territory in Canada, and also as colonial subjects living under British laws and jurisdictions. Such an ambiguous characterisation emphasises the Puritans’ uneasy relationship with systems of authority. Although overtly pious, they are also capable of subverting God’s laws through a savage ungodly rage, and despite the fact they write the laws that govern their immediate society, power is wielded over them by their colonial rulers. This state of constant ambiguity destabilises communal cohesiveness while inspiring an overwhelming need to order.

Salem becomes, therefore, a typically gothic setting. This is a territory which is haunted by spectres that take the form of other political regimes seeking to invade the Puritan consciousness. These excessive meanings destabilise the communal imagination and therefore require strict regulation through systematic repression. Like her literary predecessors Gaskell was particularly interested in the scientific reasoning behind the morbidity and states of psychological unrest which provoked the witchcraft trials. While these tendencies are repeatedly stressed by Upham and Martineau, Gaskell, through her fictionalised account of the history of Salem, is able to explore these manifestations of repression in more detail via her depiction of the Hickson family. Lois’s relatives, we are informed,

had become wealthy people, without any great exertions of their own – partly, also, by the silent process of accumulation, for they had never cared to change their manner of living, from the time when it had been suitable to a far smaller income than that which they at present enjoyed. So much for worldly circumstances. As for their worldly character, it stood as high.

No one could say a word against any of their habits or actions. Their righteousness and godliness were patent in everyone's eyes. (*Lois*, p. 168)

Gaskell criticises the confusion between 'worldly character' and 'worldly circumstances' within a communal psyche which allows wealth to become a metaphor for moral 'righteousness and godliness'. While indicating the corruption within Salem's social structure, Gaskell also emphasises the silence and repression which come to characterise this colonial community.

The Hicksons' material circumstances are depicted as excessive. Despite the fact they have 'by the silent process of accumulation' acquired the means to improve their 'manner of living', they 'never care' to do anything but retain their old ways. Money is, therefore, accumulated in silence and left unspent. These 'worldly circumstances' become a metaphor for the Hicksons' mental states. Each member of the family suffers in silence, checking and repressing their emotions. Manasseh, the eldest of the children, is depicted as either a silent and imposing figure, or a raving delusional who can only endlessly repeat unintelligible biblical language. His younger sisters also betray signs of mental instability. The eldest daughter Faith internalises her unrequited love for Pastor Nolan to the extent that she experiences physical convulsions. Imprisoned within her body and poisoned by her unspoken desire, Faith represents a brooding, unnaturally restrained figure. Prudence, the youngest daughter, presents a more lively aspect than both her siblings, but she uses her energies to torment members of her family, including pinching the old servant Nattee until she is 'black and blue' with what the narrator describes as a 'lack of natural feeling and an impish delight in mischief' (*Lois*, p. 161).

In their repressive and violent tendencies, the Hicksons operate as metonym for the community of Salem. As the narrator explains, the winter of 1691 was an especially trying time for the population of the town as all the 'old temptations and hauntings, and devilish terrors were [...] particularly rife. Salem was, as it were, snowed up and left to

prey upon itself' (*Lois*, p. 172). The town's self-erected enclosure creates a cannibalistic tendency which, in an attempt to expel the foreign element, consumes its own communal body. Through her critical nineteenth-century lens, Gaskell affirms that these hereditary traits which affect the communal body and which are escalated by colonial conflict and unrest, are ailments that 'any physician of modern times' (*Lois*, p. 180) would recognise. The population of Salem is depicted as a victim of imperial pressures and mental illness, but it is also a volatile body bent upon violence and self-destruction. While Gaskell takes pains to emphasise the persecution of the Puritan community, like her fellow nineteenth-century cultural commentators she also affirms the inevitability of the witchcraft trials within this dangerously repressive cultural and political environment.

### **A Witch by Law**

Captain Holderness is the first to draw parallels between colonial anxiety and the threat of witchcraft: 'Folk get affrighted of the real dangers, and in their fright imagine, perchance, dangers that are not. But who knows? Holy Scripture speaks of witches and wizards and the power of the Evil One in desert places' (*Lois*, p. 149). The Captain again employs a nineteenth-century perspective, conceding that there is a correlation between 'real dangers' and 'dangers which are not' within the over-active Puritan imagination. However, he also undermines this rationalist conclusion through his rhetorical question, hinting that the 'desert places' within the partially colonised North American continent are haunted by a Satanic presence. Holderness here imitates a long-standing Puritan claim epitomised by the language of Puritan minister, Cotton Mather. In his treatise *On Witchcraft* Mather characterises the New England settlers as 'a people of God settled in those, which were once the *Devil's* territories'. The Devil being 'exceedingly disturbed when he perceived such a People here accomplishing the Promise of old made unto our Blessed Jesus' takes revenge by luring men into his

service.<sup>271</sup>

For Mather, as for many judicial systems in Europe and the Americas, witchcraft was *the* manifestation of this pact with the ‘Evil One’. As P.G. Maxwell-Stuart demonstrates, while witchcraft was never a monolithic set of beliefs and practices but was consistently moulded and manipulated to suit a particular purpose, convictions for witchcraft were usually secured by demonstrating three key components: the accused’s malevolent intentions, the performance of harmful magic, as well as their Satanic alliance.<sup>272</sup> By emphasising the correlation between witchcraft and devilry in *On Witchcraft*, Cotton Mather positions all those who exist outside the geographical and religious dwellings of the ‘people of God’ as residing within the ‘Devil’s territories’. Heathens such as the Native Indians and Heretics such as the Catholics are, according to Mather’s logic, more than likely to be colluding with Satan and therefore guilty of the sin of witchcraft.

By juxtaposing nineteenth-century rationalism with seventeenth-century religious and legal rhetoric within Holderness’s short speech, Gaskell concurrently justifies the fear of witchcraft while also deconstructing the naturalised boundaries Mather employs to define and condemn the foreign – the heathen, heretic, other – as supernatural. While evoking sympathy for the colonists, then, she explores and critiques the rigid social and legal constructs that victimise the disenfranchised. One of the ways Gaskell achieves this aim is by introducing a fictional Cotton Mather into her text. After the trial and execution of the first witch in the novella, the Tappaus’ Indian servant Hota, Gaskell has the fictional minister address the hysterical crowd gathered at Salem’s meeting-house, and in a ‘quiet, argumentative way’ (p. 203) retell his own experiences of witchcraft through the story of the ‘Irish witch’:

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<sup>271</sup> Cotton Mather, *On Witchcraft: Being the Wonders of the Invisible World, 1692 [1692]* (New York: Dover, 2005), p. 14

<sup>272</sup> P.G. Maxwell Stuart, *Witchcraft in Europe and the New World, 1400-1800* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), p. 10.

I was the humble means, under God, of loosing from the power of Satan the four children of that religious and blessed man, Mr. Goodwin. These four babes of grace were bewitched by an Irish witch; there is no end of the narration of the torments they had to submit to. At one time they would bark like dogs, at another purr like cats; yea, they would fly like geese, and be carried with an incredible swiftness, having but just their toes now and then upon the ground, sometimes not once in twenty feet, and their arms waved like those of a bird. Yet, at other times, by the hellish devices of the woman who had bewitched them, they could not stir without limping; for, by means of an invisible chain, she hampered their limbs, or sometimes, by means of a noose, almost choked them. (*Lois*, p. 203)

The ‘Irish witch’ practices ‘hellish devices’ upon her young victims, inverting the laws of nature and converting the human into the bestial. The witch is particularly dangerous to a colonial community because she instigates the processes of degeneration by impeding physical action and encouraging the worship of idolatrous Gods. She also causes inversion of traditional gender roles.<sup>273</sup> Natural maternal instinct becomes malevolent intent, while her subversive unnatural practices undermine the gender ideologies that promoted an orderly, obedient and respectful figure of womanhood within Puritan society.<sup>274</sup> As Mather states ‘there is no end of the narration’ of the excessive torture practiced by this gothic monster upon her once civilized victims.

Gaskell adapts this material directly from Mather’s *Memorable Providences: Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions* (1689) and his account of the ‘Irish witch’ (Goody Glover) who was found guilty of witchcraft in 1689. In many ways her

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<sup>273</sup> For a further discussion of how the witch is conceived as an inversion of the ideal Puritan woman, particularly in relation to the concept of a witch’s ‘disorderly speech’ and disrespect for authority figures such as Mather, see Jane Kamensky, ‘Words, Witches, and Woman Trouble: Witchcraft, Disorderly Speech and Gender Boundaries in Puritan New England’, in *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*, Vol. 4, ed. by Brian P. Levak (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 196-205 (p. 198).

<sup>274</sup> The ideology of witchcraft, therefore, is able to discern and condemn voices of female dissent – whether these are religious, political or social – within the Puritan community. Carol Karlsen, in her book, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (New York: Vintage, 1989) argues that the ideology of witchcraft was fundamental in establishing and maintaining gender divisions in seventeenth-century New England. Female witches were understood as those who refused to subordinate themselves to male authority figures, thereby making them a danger to their family and to the community at large (pp. 149 -150). Karlsen also discusses how the majority of women accused of witchcraft in an outbreak of witch trials in 1647 were independent women who were either propertied or likely to inherit property (p 196). The witchcraft trials became a means of relocating power and property from the ‘accused’ women to Puritan men.

description of this incident closely mirrors Mather's: they both emphasise the children's transfiguration into beasts and the injuries caused by their demoniac possession.<sup>275</sup>

*Memorable Providences*, however, includes an account of Glover's personal history.

Mather depicts her as an 'ignorant scandalous old woman' who reacts angrily to a claim that her daughter has been stealing linen from a local family by cursing their four children. The Minister notes that when questioned by the authorities, 'the hag had not the power to deny her interest in the Enchantment of the Children', a denial that, he maintains, proves her guilt.<sup>276</sup> The witch's lack of 'power', in this instance, could be understood as the Irish woman's inability to speak the English language that prevents her from articulating a denial, or, Mather could be referring to the witch's demoniac tendencies that make her both unwilling and unable to deny her role in the children's continued afflictions.

Gaskell, ironically, removes all of Goody Glover's personal history from her reworking of Mather's account. The effect of this is to focus attention solely upon the supernatural activities that the woman had practiced and therefore on the only personal evidence needed to condemn her – her foreignness. In Gaskell's narrative, the fictional Mather argues that the Irish woman's guilt is predicated upon the fact that although she can read Popish texts, she cannot recite the Lord's prayer, 'proving thereby *distinctly*

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<sup>275</sup> Mather's text describes the plight of Goody Glover's victims as follows: 'The Fits of the Children yet more arriv'd unto such Motions as were beyond the Efficacy of any natural Distemper in the World. They would bark at one another like Dogs, and again purr like so many Cats. They would sometimes complain, that they were in a Red-hot Oven, sweating and panting at the same time unreasonably: Anon they would say, Cold water was thrown upon them, at which they would shiver very much. They would cry out of dismal Blowes with great Cudgels laid upon them; and tho' we saw no cudgels nor blowes, yet we could see the Marks left by them in Red Streaks upon their bodies afterward. And one of them would be roasted on an invisible Spit, run into his Mouth, and out at his Foot, he lying, and rolling, and groaning as if it had been so in the most sensible manner in the world; and then he would shriek, that Knives were cutting of him [...] Yea, They would fly like Geese; and be carried with an incredible Swiftness thro the air, having but just their Toes now and then upon the ground, and their Arms waved like the Wings of a Bird. One of them, in the House of a kind Neighbour and Gentleman (Mr. Willis) flew the length of the Room, about 20 foot, and flew just into an Infants high armed Chair; (as tis affirmed) none seeing her feet all the way touch the floor.' See Cotton Mather, *Memorable Providences, Witchcrafts, Possessions* [1689], <[www.piney.com/MatherWitch.html](http://www.piney.com/MatherWitch.html)> [accessed 17.04.07], Section XIII.

<sup>276</sup> See Cotton Mather, *Memorable Providences, Witchcrafts, Possessions* [1689], <[www.piney.com/MatherWitch.html](http://www.piney.com/MatherWitch.html)> [accessed 17.04.07], 'First Example', sections II – VIII.



that she was in league with the devil' [my emphasis] (*Lois*, p. 204). It is the witch's 'Irishness' and her Catholic beliefs that combine to provide the irrefutable evidence of her guilt within Gaskell's account. By choosing to omit a vital piece of information – that the historical Goody Glover could not speak English, and therefore would be unable to recite the Lord's prayer under any circumstances – she characterizes Cotton Mather, and the legal and religious bodies he represents, as relentless persecutors of all those who exist outside Puritan ideologies. In Gaskell's account the Irish woman becomes another nameless foreigner within a pervasive witchcraft narrative written by those in authority.

This story, however, is not unique to New England. Asking her British audience to accept some responsibility for a tragic transnational history, Gaskell collapses the temporal and geographical distances between the seventeenth-century Puritan community and her nineteenth-century readers. She states: '[w]e can afford to smile at them now; but our English ancestors entertained superstitions of much the same character at the same period, and with less excuse as circumstances around them were better known, and consequently more explicable by common sense than the real mysteries of the deep, untrodden forests of New England' (*Lois*, p. 161). Typically, Gaskell elicits sympathy not just for the victims of the witch persecutions in both England and U.S., but for the colonists, utilising her transatlantic framing to collapse the destructive boundaries which cement the dichotomy of 'us' and 'them'.

Gaskell further extends her survey of witchcraft to British shores through her storytelling protagonist. Recalling events from her childhood, Lois recounts the case of old Hannah, the witch. Arriving into Barford, Warwickshire, without a history or a purpose, Hannah immediately excites the suspicions of the locals. Her age, her continual mutterings and archaic choice of dwelling all combine to make her a figure of dislike, gossip and fear in the community. Lois explains how the old woman became a

scapegoat for, or suspect in – the tale is deliberately ambiguous on this point – a spate of deaths that occur within the community. This charge eventually leads her to be tried and convicted as a witch.

Both Lois and Hannah are unable to articulate any form of effective defence against the allegations – the latter because her denials are not heard by Lois's father, Minister Barclay, and the former because the coherency of her narrative is fundamentally affected by her childish perspective. As such, Lois's story is characterised by a series of vague impressions and personal denials: 'How it came to pass I cannot say, but many a one fell sick in the village, and much cattle died one spring [...] I never heard much about it, for my father said it was ill talking about such things' (*Lois*, p. 149). Her lack of cohesion and self-conscious omissions make her story appear as a reiteration of an unsubstantiated piece of communal gossip. This fragmented, flimsy evidence, however, is enough to condemn Hannah.

The only words the latter is able to articulate are used to corroborate the witchcraft narrative which victimises her. She curses Lois to suffer a similar fate: 'Parson's wench, thy dad hath never tried to save me, and none shall save thee when thou art brought up for a witch' (*Lois*, p. 150). Her words not only eerily predict Lois's future, anticipating the latter's faltering defence for both her own and Hannah's supposed crimes, but they perpetuate the witchcraft narrative. The identification and condemnation of witches becomes a self-policing strategy in which the local authorities construct and affirm the boundaries that comprise their respective identity through the expulsion of the foreigner. Witchcraft, therefore, also becomes self-perpetuating – the community creates witches while the subsequent convictions only heighten the communal belief in the supernatural, thereby escalating persecution. However, by drawing attention to the witch's subjugation within pervasive legal and religious systems, Gaskell paradoxically explores the role of the witch as a co-author within her

own story. As Lois's tale demonstrates, the witchcraft narrative contains and exposes the spectres of alterity – such as Old Hannah – and gives these voices from what Punter terms 'vanished cultural territories' narrative space and therefore an, albeit transitory, authority of their own.

### **The Witch as Storyteller**

Gaskell's representation of the witch as a storyteller is highly unusual, if not unprecedented, within seventeenth- and nineteenth-century accounts of the events of 1692.<sup>277</sup> Her depiction of Nattee, a fictionalized re-interpretation of Tituba the Indian slave accused of witchcraft, is of particular note. Upham's *Lectures* do not mention Tituba by name, but she is recognizable as an 'old Indian woman', who 'by declaring herself guilty of the charge of witchcraft first gave credit and powers to the accusers' (*Lectures*, p. 56). John Neal similarly acknowledges Tituba's central role within the history of Salem, but he depicts her as 'a woman of diabolical power'.<sup>278</sup> Gaskell's representation of 'the Indian slave' embellishes both Upham and Neal's accounts. In her hands Tituba is re-imagined as a central figure within a narrative that explores the role of the witch as co-author of her own story.<sup>279</sup>

Nattee is positioned as a foreigner through her age, race and position within the Hickson family. She is unflatteringly described by the narrator as 'an old Indian woman of a greenish-brown colour, shrivelled up and bent with apparent age' (*Lois*, p. 153). She becomes a form of 'waste', the excrement of society that has been buried within the

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<sup>277</sup> I have been unable to locate any other source that depicts witches in this manner. In his study entitled 'Tituba's Story', Bernard Rosenthal concludes that Gaskell's representation of the two Indian servants Hota and Nattee, and their native magical activities, is completely original. See Rosenthal, 'Tituba's Story', in *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*, Vol. 3, ed. by Brian P. Levak (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 430-443 (p. 433).

<sup>278</sup> John Neal, *Rachel Dyer*, p. 59.

<sup>279</sup> Marion Gibson argues that seventeenth-century accounts of the witchcraft trials, particularly the pamphlets, are best understood as a dialogue between co-authors: the witch, the accuser, the questioner and the scribe. This dialogue produces a coherent and cohesive narrative structure. The witch, therefore, plays an active role in shaping her own story, even if that story condemns her. See Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft*, p. 7 & 25. In *Lois the Witch*, I argue, Gaskell similarly explores the witch's role as writer/teller of her own story, even if this story victimises her.

heart of the domestic sphere. While Gaskell's use of racialised rhetoric mimics Mather's treatise *On Witchcraft*, it also draws attention to the Indian woman's enslaved state, and the potential of her heathen arts to alter the power dynamics through which she is subjugated.<sup>280</sup> In an attempt to help her beloved Faith gain the affection of Pastor Nolan, Nattee uses the arts of her people to make 'love potions' that can bind the will of the white man to the Indian servant's wishes, even though 'the old Indian woman have spoken never a word, and white man have heard nothing with his ears' (*Lois*, p. 176). Nattee's witchcraft involves subverting the laws of nature and Puritan politics: not only can she summon without making any audible sounds, but she can also move beyond her allocated social designation and directly influence the actions of a white man.

Nattee further exerts her influence over her white masters by telling terrifying tales to the young women of the house:

It was often in the kitchen, in the darkening evening, while some 'cooking' process was going on, that the old Indian crone, sitting on her haunches by the bright red wood embers which sent up no flame, but a lurid light reversing the shadows of all the faces around, told her weird stories [...] [T]he poor old creature [...] took a strange unconscious pleasure in the power over her young hearers – young girls of the oppressing race, which had brought her down into a state little differing from slavery, and reduced her people to outcasts on the hunting grounds which had belonged to her fathers. (*Lois*, p. 160)

Gaskell positions Nattee's cultural and historical background as a critical alternative to the story of (American) colonialism. This is, in itself, a form of witchcraft. Her stories create an alternative narrative in which the slave wrests authority from the master. This strange scene, therefore, hinges upon the promise, or threat, of 'the reversing of shadows' in which the disempowered are given the words and time to tell a story that challenges the ideologies that support bringing individuals 'down into a state little differing from slavery'. Gaskell positions Nattee's native witchcraft as a story of

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<sup>280</sup> As Kate Flint notes, British cultural commentators in the nineteenth century read the figure of the Indian as a way of understanding and interpreting U.S. politics and cultural differences. See Flint, *The Transatlantic Indian, 1776-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 2.

victimisation transformed into a self-affirming narrative.

Like old Nattee the protagonist is also an outsider. Her royalist religious beliefs ostracise her from her American cousins to the extent that she too is understood as a political slave – someone who is disenfranchised both within the Puritan community and in the English political system. Both Grace Hickson and her son Manasseh display a ‘positive, active antipathy’ (*Lois* p. 158) to what they see as the heroine’s ‘superstitious observance of the directions of a Popish rubric, and a *servile* regard for the family of an oppressing and irreligious king’ [my emphasis] (*Lois*, pp. 158-59). Gaskell, therefore, draws an interesting, if not incongruous parallel, between the disenfranchised Indian slave and the royalist English woman from the land of the colonizer. She positions both women as suspicious and threatening bodies within an unstable society. Like Nattee, therefore, Lois is forced to tell stories to alter, and thereby improve, her social standing within this insular community.

The protagonist’s tales, however, are differentiated from all other stories within the text by their sympathetic and empathic purpose. Filled with compassion for her cousin who is suffering from unrequited love, Lois embarks on a series of tales about English customs in order to occupy Faith’s thoughts. On the subject of Halloween, Lois

told of tricks she had often played, of the apple eaten facing a mirror, of the dripping sheet, of the basins of water, of the nuts burning side by side, and many other such innocent ways of divination, by which laughing, trembling English maidens sought to see the form of their future husbands, if husbands they were to have: then Faith listened breathlessly, asking short eager questions, as if some ray of hope had entered into her gloomy heart. Lois went on speaking, telling her of all the stories that would confirm the truth of the second sight vouchsafed to all seekers in the accustomed methods; half believing, half incredulous herself, but desiring, above all things, to cheer up poor Faith. (*Lois*, p. 28)

Like Nattee’s stories, these tales concern a heathen magic that effects transformation. In this instance Lois imagines the reversal of gender roles in which ‘laughing, trembling English maidens’ can divine the identity of their male suitors. Their ‘second sight’

inevitably appeals to the suffering and repressed Faith, offering a potential avenue whereby she can affect her own future. While Lois is ‘half believing, half incredulous’ towards her own narrative, she not only uses her tale to alter her relationship with her cousin, but, like the Indian slave, she employs her native culture to (re)animate stagnant interpersonal relations within a repressive social structure. In other words, this empathetic story, rather than encouraging the identification and vilification of the foreign, acts as a counter-narrative which imagines and sustains connections between individuals.

### **Telling Tales About Witches**

However, while Nattee and Lois’s magical stories produce a positive subversion of repressive, hierarchical structures, they are paradoxically re-written by the Hickson sisters into a narrative which re-affirms both women’s subjugated position. As Margaret Homans suggests, Lois’s voyage across the Atlantic is also a journey ‘from a world of relatively figurative understanding to a world that takes everything literally’.<sup>281</sup> Within Puritan U.S., then, to be called a witch is simply to be one. Within this cultural climate both Lois’s stories, which she uses to forge emotional connections, and the accusations made against her, will be literally interpreted.

The theatrical, impish Prudence initiates this process, deeming Lois a ‘wicked English witch’ who goes out to ‘meet Satan by the brookside’ (*Lois*, p. 165). The protagonist’s nationality is therefore re-affirmed as an indicator of difference through which the supernatural inevitably manifests. Faith also asserts her cousin’s demoniac identity. Believing that Lois’s good looks and natural empathy have captured the heart of her beloved Pastor Nolan, she urges her sister to

‘[t]ake care, another time, how you meddle with a witch’s things,’ said Faith, as one scarcely believing her own words, but at enmity with all the world in her bitter jealousy of heart.

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<sup>281</sup> Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 239.

Prudence rubbed her arm, and looked stealthily at Lois.

‘Witch Lois! Witch Lois!’ said she at last, softly, pulling a childish face of spite at her. (*Lois*, p. 201)

Gaskell extends her literary predecessors’ rationalisation of the events at Salem by affirming the individual justifications of Lois’s accusers. Faith’s ‘bitter jealousy of heart’ explicates her almost involuntary imputation, whereas Prudence’s childish yet explicit accusation is an expression of dissatisfaction with her own disenfranchised state. After seeing Abigail and Hester Tappan, the daughters of the local minister, collapse in bewitched convulsions in the packed local meeting house, she wonders: ‘I wonder how long I might wriggle, before great and godly folk would take so much notice of me?’ (*Lois*, p. 190). Prudence imagines the witchcraft narrative as an opportunity whereby she can impress her story upon the community’s ‘great and godly folk’.

The ‘wicked English witch’, therefore, operates as a cipher within the local community to be manipulated by those intent on re-writing her subjectivity for selfish purposes. In what becomes a neat paradox, the attributes common to the witch within legal discourses, including malevolent intent and the ability to effect harmful transformations such as possession, are aligned with the accusers. Like Upham before her, Gaskell inverts Cotton Mather’s monstrous witch, depicting the informants as guilty of their own form of witchcraft. In his *Lectures* Upham states:

It would be much more congenial with our feelings to believe that these misguided and wretched young persons early in the proceedings became themselves victims of the delusion into which they plunged everyone else. But we are forbidden to form this charitable judgment by the manifestations of art and contrivance, of deliberate cunning and cool malice they exhibited to the end. (*Lectures*, p. 52)

The accusers show an unnatural lack of empathy for their victims, using a ‘deliberate cunning and cool malice’ which forbids any ‘charitable judgment’ from nineteenth-century cultural interpreters. Gaskell, however, develops both the informant-as-witch

metaphor and the Salem minister's history, by displacing guilt from the individual accusers onto the Puritan social hierarchy and the gothicised terrain they inhabit. In other words, Gaskell explicates the Hickson family's participation within the witchcraft narrative by emphasising the absence of efficacious outlets for (female) self-expression within the Puritan social structure.

The revelation of Manasseh Hickson's madness becomes a case in point. As he pleads Lois's innocence with an increasingly incoherent desperation, his mother is forced to admit his ailment to an astonished audience. Grace's public testimony is, however, soon re-codified as evidence of witchcraft:

The grave young citizen, who had silently taken his part in life close by them in their daily lives - not mixing much with them, it was true, but looked up to, perhaps, all the more - the student of abstruse books on theology, fit to converse with the most learned ministers that ever came about those parts - was he the same with the man now pouring out wild words to Lois the witch, as if he and she were the only two present? A solution of it all occurred to them. He was another victim. Great was the power of Satan! Through the arts of the devil, that white statue of a girl had mastered the soul of Manasseh Hickson. So the word spread from mouth to mouth. And Grace heard it. It seemed a healing balsam for her shame. (*Lois*, p. 73)

Gaskell's description details the interpretive process as it shifts and unfolds. The incongruity between the 'grave, young citizen' who was able to use words and reason to assert his, and thereby the community's, authority to visiting ministers and the man 'pouring out wild words to Lois the witch', can only be explicated as evidence of witchcraft. Grace's unwilling confession is, therefore, re-interpreted as an accusation, and the veracity of the mother's shameful secret is re-codified to fuel a fabrication that is upheld by the entire community. By empathizing with Grace's grateful acceptance of this new understanding of events, the narrator attributes blame not to the individual informant, but to a communal imagination which positions the witch's monstrous body as the 'solution' to all interpretive problems.

Lois, therefore, finally loses control of the story she attempted to construct.



Unable to recognise herself within this vivid narrative written before her eyes, she is not only unable to articulate a denial, but unable to comprehend the charges brought against her. When her death sentence is pronounced it only meets her consciousness with a 'dim' understanding (*Lois*, p. 214). Offered the chance to confess her sins by her accusers, she replies: 'I am not a witch. I know not hardly what you mean, when you say I am' (*Lois*, p. 218). Despite an intrinsic fear of Satanism that she articulates repeatedly throughout the narrative – she even expresses her fear of the heathen Nattee to a condescending Faith (*Lois*, p. 186) – the concept of Mather's monstrous witch remains ironically foreign to her. She cannot understand, nor use the rhetoric associated with Puritan witchcraft, to re-claim authorship of her own story.

Gaskell, therefore, makes a final and emphatic distinction between Lois's empathetic stories and the gothicised narrative which can only victimise and condemn all it deems excessive. While the witchcraft trials create a public platform that can be manipulated by the disenfranchised, temporarily making visible the spectres which haunt the gothic tale, this narrative trajectory, Gaskell implies, can only re-assert their silent marginalisation. In other words, *Lois the Witch* enacts a self-reflexive exploration of the other alternative voices it cannot sustain without endangering its own cohesive structure. However, in the process of condemning the protagonist to an untimely death, Gaskell draws attention to the potential of witchcraft as a transformative trope that can not only affect empathetic responses, but can disrupt the masculinised Puritan hierarchy's sole right to representation and interpretation.

Indeed, *Lois* concludes with a full and accurate transcription of the pardon issued by the community of Salem in 1713. Admitting that they were 'sadly deluded and mistaken [...] being then under the power of a strong and general delusion' (*Lois*, p. 220), they beg the pardon of all those injured by their actions. While this proves to be little consolation to Lois's embittered lover Hugh Lucy, by recognising the monstrous

effects of their actions and by uniting in a plea for empathetic understanding, the community of Salem effectively hands Lois the witch the authoritative final word.

### **Seeing an Invisible World: *A Pair of Eyes: or, Modern Magic***

Louisa May Alcott's *A Pair of Eyes: Or, Modern Magic* (1863), written in 1861 but published four years after Gaskell's narrative, utilises the witchcraft narrative to similar critical effect.<sup>282</sup> Like her contemporary Alcott explores how witchcraft, or, in this instance, the modern magic of mesmerism, operates an aesthetic strategy which enables the silenced or unseen to participate in the creation of their own stories. The witch's arts, therefore, subvert established social, gendered and racialised hierarchies. Where Alcott's text differs from Gaskell's, however, is in its explicit exploration of art, both as a profession and a creative self-affirming process.

*A Pair of Eyes* centres upon Max Erdman's search for the specific 'pair of eyes' needed to complete his masterpiece, a painting of Lady Macbeth that will cement his artistic reputation. This literal search for a model, however, also operates as an extended metaphor, enabling Alcott to explore the relationship between two 'I's, or the individual subjectivities within marital, mesmeric and aesthetic partnerships. In what becomes, I contend, a damning critique of a witchcraft narrative predicated upon the binaries of possession and dispossession and the master and the slave, Alcott's text demonstrates the need for a model of artistic co-operation that can transcend these normative social categories.<sup>283</sup> Her exploration of gendered and racialised power relations can be read,

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<sup>282</sup> Like the majority of Alcott's early sensational works, *A Pair of Eyes* was printed in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* between 24<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> October 1863.

<sup>283</sup> In drawing parallels between mesmerism and the role of the artist with Alcott's tale, I build upon Ann Heilmann's thesis in 'Medusa's Blinding Art: Mesmerism and Female Artistic Agency in Louisa May Alcott's *A Pair of Eyes, or Modern Magic*', in *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture*, ed. by Lucy Frank (Surrey: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 205-217. While, Heilmann argues that Alcott uses mesmerism to interrogate 'masculinist attitudes to the woman artist and to plead for an aesthetic that accommodated both male mythology and female "magic"' (p. 205), I argue that Alcott's text demonstrates the ineffectiveness of both magic and mythology – phenomena based upon the binaries of the possessed/dispossessed – within artistic and literary production.

then, both as a response to an established literary tradition which transcended the Atlantic and, moreover, as timely social commentary upon a nation plagued by internal divisions over slavery.

Like *Lois the Witch*, Alcott's sensational narrative begins by establishing a series of pervasive social structures that the activities of the witch necessarily disrupt. In *A Pair of Eyes* authority is derived and sustained through 'art'. For ambitious artist Max Erdman art operates less as a creative process than a system of public order which confers his position within society. Consequently, it is no less than the 'one idea of [his] life';<sup>284</sup> he explains: 'impetuous and resolute in all things, I had given myself body and soul to the profession I had chosen [...] Art was wife, child, friend, food and fire to me; the pursuit of fame as reason for my long labour was the object for which I lived' (*Eyes* pp. 59-60). Rejecting personal relations and emotional sustenance in favour of the 'pursuit of fame', he is both literally and emotionally 'impotent' (*Eyes*, p. 59). Moreover, his inability to 'reproduce' the 'haunted images' (*Eyes*, p. 59) he requires leads to artistic impotence: 'though I looked into every face I met, and visited afflicted humanity in many shapes, I could find no eyes that visibly presented the vacant yet not unmeaning stare of Lady Macbeth' (*Eyes*, p. 59). Max displaces his artistic failure onto all 'afflicted humanity' who cannot, in their despair, provide the aesthetic stimulus he requires. His first person narration, therefore, effectively subjugates the experiences of the suffering into one short subjunctive clause, while using the main clause of the sentence to assert the importance of his artistic project, ostensibly at their expense. Max's search for a pair of eyes, therefore, is endemic of his social and emotional myopia.

This short-sightedness is, however, immediately challenged. Attending the

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<sup>284</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *A Pair of Eyes; Or, Modern Magic* [1863], in *Louisa May Alcott: Unmasked: Collected Thrillers*, ed. by Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: Northeastern Press, 1995), pp. 59-82 (p. 59). All further references to this text will be cited in parenthesis.

theatre in the hope of finding artistic inspiration in the eyes of the leading actress, Max suddenly becomes aware of

a disturbing influence whose power invaded my momentary isolation, and took shape in the uncomfortable conviction that some one was looking at me [...] [T]he thought that I was watched annoyed me like a silent insult [...] A vague consciousness that some stronger nature was covertly exerting its power upon my own; I smiled as this whim first suggested itself, but it rapidly grew upon me, and a curious feeling of *impotent resistance* took *possession* of me, for I was indignant without knowing why, and longed to rebel against – I know not what [my emphasis]. (*Eyes*, p. 60)

In a neat reversal of power relations, Max becomes the interpreted body; his frustration and suffering are observed by a ‘stronger nature than his own’. Contending with a paradoxical sense of ‘impotent resistance’, Max recognises his subjugation to an unshaped, unintelligible ‘disturbing influence’ that can only be articulated through an elliptical absence, indicated by the hyphen and the confession ‘I know not what’. Like the gothic spaces of the Puritan colony, then, the artist becomes haunted by an unspeakable other that aptly takes ‘possession’ of his consciousness: ‘without any physical or mental cause that I could discover, every nerve seemed jangled out of tune, my temples beat, my breath came short, and the air seemed feverishly close’ (*Eyes*, p. 60).

While this rhetoric mimics Cotton Mather’s description of the victims of witchcraft, Alcott’s readers would have recognised Max’s ‘impotent resistance’ and fevered discomfort as a reaction to the mesmerist’s influential and disquieting gaze. Mesmerism was originally developed as form of healing in Europe in the late eighteenth century by Franz Anton Mesmer, amongst others. It was brought to in the United States in 1836 by Charles Poyen where it operated as both medical practice and entertainment.<sup>285</sup> Working on an assumption that the patient was governed by bodily

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<sup>285</sup> For more on the development of European Mesmerism, see Daniel Pick, *Svengali’s Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 44-67, and for more on

tides, practitioners of mesmerism would pass their hands over the body to redistribute these fluids and thereby achieve a state of healthy equilibrium. While magnetism remained a popular treatment for physical ailments – Margaret Fuller, particularly, found the pain caused by her curved spine easier to manage after magnetic treatment<sup>286</sup> – it was the mystical, mesmeric trance that captured the public imagination on both sides of the Atlantic. Magnetism caused the patient to enter a ‘somnambulistic’ state. Not awake, but alert and communicative, the mesmerized individual existed in a heightened sense of awareness and was, therefore, increasingly sensitive to the influence of the practitioner. Entertainment events, such as those reported in *The Times* above, exhibited the effects of the somnambulistic trance, particularly the ability of the mesmeriser to manipulate his subject’s body and mind.

Alcott’s depiction of the magnetic trance demonstrates, therefore, not just her knowledge of contemporary medical phenomenon – she had personally received mesmeric treatment in 1863 – but also her familiarity with mesmerism as a sensational literary trope. Authors on both sides of the Atlantic, notably Wilkie Collins in *The Moonstone* (1868), Edgar Allan Poe in ‘The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar’ (1845) and Hawthorne in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), used the trope of ‘modern magic’ to explore and expose the boundaries between the scientific and the mystical, and between

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the history of the movement within the United States, particularly the relationship between mesmerism and spiritualism, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-century America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>286</sup> For more on the relationship between Fuller and Mesmerism see, Deborah Manson, “‘The Trance of the Ecstatica’: Margaret Fuller, Animal Magnetism, and the Transcendent Female Body”, *Literature and Medicine*, 25:2 (2006), 298-324. For Fuller, magnetism became a holistic treatment that both cured her physical pain and developed a sense of spiritual well-being. This balance between mind and body underwrote Fuller’s progressive representation of women in her seminal *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). This developed individual, who was able to combine feminine spirituality with a healthy constitution, would be able to ‘transcend the limitations of domesticity’ (p. 317). For more on the impact of Fuller’s work upon *A Pair of Eyes* see, Christopher A. Fahy, ‘Dark Mirrorings: The Influence of Fuller on Alcott’s “Pair of Eyes”’, *Emerson Society Quarterly*, Volume 45, No. 2 (1999), pp. 131-159. Fahy argues that Fuller’s theory of the female character as ‘Muse’ – spiritual, magnetic and inspirational – and ‘Minerva’ – intellect and analysis – are evident in Alcott’s representation of Agatha. The latter, however, indicates that this ‘marriage’ between the two aspects of woman is not sustainable (pp. 143-145).

the individual and the communal consciousness.<sup>287</sup>

As mesmerism was, to use Susan Poznar's words, 'a particularly plastic plot device and metaphor for the exertion of the individual will over one's own or another's mind and body', it provided a structure through which gender relations, particularly notions of 'ownership', could be explored.<sup>288</sup> Traditionally practiced on a female subject by a male practitioner, mesmerism subjected the will of the former to the dictates of the latter, thereby metaphorically replicating the nineteenth-century property laws that dispossessed women.<sup>289</sup> In *The Blithedale Romance*, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne exposes the sinister battle for ownership of Priscilla between the mesmerist Westervelt and the grave Hollingworth.<sup>290</sup>

However, for authors such as Alcott, the trope of mesmerism also provided a structure through which issues such as female sexuality and autonomy could be foregrounded. In Alcott's sensation fiction this is achieved through the reversal of the gender dynamics within the mesmeric process, and the introduction of a female magnetist. As Theresa Strouth Gaul has persuasively argued, Jean Muir, the protagonist of Alcott's *Behind a Mask; Or, a Woman's Power* (1866) operates as a mesmerist. Bewitching those around her, particularly the patriarchal figures within the Coventry family by a single look or a touch, Jean is able to manipulate the same social codes that would condemn her as a penniless divorced former actress to facilitate her successful union with the wealthy Sir John.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> There is a wealth of material on depictions of mesmerism within British and U.S. nineteenth-century fiction. See particularly: Catherine Wynne and Martin Willis, eds., *Victorian Literary Mesmerism* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2006); Maria M. Tartar, *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Diana Barsham, *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (London: Virago, 1992).

<sup>288</sup> Susan Poznar, 'Whose Body? The "Willing" or "Unwilling" Mesmerized Woman in Late Victorian Fiction', *Women's Writing*, 15:3 (2008), 412-435 (p. 414).

<sup>289</sup> For more on the relationship between mesmerism and property rights in Britain see, Poznar, p. 415, and Ellen Weiner, 'Considering Possession', p. 105.

<sup>290</sup> As Daniel Pick explains, theatrical manipulation as conducted by Westervelt in his theatrical performances was connected to 'hypnotic sexual conquest' (*Svengali's Web*, p. 98).

<sup>291</sup> Theresa Strouth Gaul, 'Trance-formations: Mesmerism and "A Woman's Power" in Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask*', *Women's Studies*, 32 (2003), 835-851 (pp. 835, 837 & 848).

*A Pair of Eyes* is, therefore, by no means unique in its exploration of modern magic – within Alcott’s oeuvre or otherwise – nor is it uncommon in its representation of a female mesmerist. However, Alcott’s largely neglected text is original in its dual exploration of gender relations through the magnetic gaze *and* the artistic process. Agatha Eure uses her mesmeric skills to challenge Max’s artistic autonomy by assuming control of his vision. Affected by the former’s magnetic gaze, the latter can only stare at her with ‘utter disregard of common courtesy’ (*Eyes*, p. 61), noting that ‘my eyes seemed beyond my control’ (*Eyes*, p. 67). Max’s search for a ‘pair of eyes’ precipitates the loss of vision and, thereby his representational and interpretative skills. Finding the eyes he requires in Agatha’s ‘two dark wells that seemed so tranquil yet so fathomless’, he is, however, unable adequately to represent these enigmatic orbs, complaining, ‘in the act of trying to fix [her] shape, colour and expression in my memory, I lost them all’ (*Eyes*, p. 61). The mesmerist renders the artist impotent by usurping his representational prerogative. As the subject of Agatha’s mesmeric art, Max can only mimetically reproduce her intentions rather than ‘fix’ her image to canvas or memory. Max’s friend’s astonished remark, ‘[a]re you possessed tonight?’ (*Eyes*, p. 67), neatly emphasises the artist’s dispossession within the mesmeric relationship.

However, while Agatha’s gaze subjects Max to impotence it also, ironically, (re)animates his artistic skills. While magnetic techniques created a bond between the mesmerist and their subject that replicated the power relations between Cotton Mather’s witch and her afflicted victim, the gaze also offered a greater clarity of vision, as Daniel Pick explains: ‘[i]n addition to the material amelioration which might be achieved in so many physical ailments, it was claimed that mesmerism offered, in a more general sense, to bring an invisible world to light. Indeed, the capacity for “internal visualisation” was advertised as a function of the mesmeric state’.<sup>292</sup> Like witchcraft

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<sup>292</sup> Pick, *Svengali’s Web*, pp. 49-50.

within a gothic text, the mesmerist's gaze provokes spectres of alterity from hitherto 'invisible world[s]'. This process of revelation enabled the mesmerised subject to experience spiritual enlightenment through a developed 'internal visualisation' and a heightened awareness of his/her surroundings. As a result of their developed sensitivities, women were seen as particularly vulnerable to this spiritual awakening and therefore capable of sustained emotional insight.

Alcott, however, manipulates the dynamics of the mesmeric relationship. By entering into an exchange with Agatha, Max is made to confront the haunted subjectivity of the 'vacant, yet not unmeaning' (*Eyes*, p. 59) stare he has been seeking. He begins to recognise that the 'tranquil' but 'fathomless' (*Eyes*, p. 61) eyes of his model are an external visualisation of internal suffering. Agatha's 'vacancy' and 'tranquillity' are assumed, disguising the restlessness of a former professional artist. Affected by a debilitating, albeit spasmodic, blindness, she has to abandon her work and instead, 'desire for others what I can never hope for myself, and try to find pleasure in their success, unembittered by regrets for my own defeat' (*Eyes*, p. 59). The function of Agatha's blindness within a text replete with metaphors concerning eyes and sight is to make visible the limitations of female artistic production within a masculinised aesthetic and social order.

Her 'modern magic', however, challenges this marginalisation. Positing a feminised artistic method based upon the revelatory mesmeric gaze, Alcott destabilises the masculinised aesthetic order Max represents. Agatha's 'art', in other words, brings literal and ideological 'invisible worlds' into view. While this is caused by out-of-body confrontations between the mesmerist and her subject, it is also facilitated through the literal displacement of the male body into the domestic sphere. Stipulating that she can only invoke the look Max seeks within her own home – despite her escapades in the public space of the theatre – Agatha is able to assume control of Max's art, not least by



arranging his painting equipment with consummate skill. With the room restored ‘to the aspect it wore three years ago’, Agatha finds ‘real satisfaction’ (*Eyes*, p. 69) in re-codifying the feminised domestic interior as a useful workspace for artistic production.

Agatha’s domestic and mesmeric arts therefore combine to produce Max’s finest work, enabling the impotent artist to mimetically reproduce the ‘pair of eyes’ that haunt him. The induced mesmeric trance, rather than prevent artistic production, stimulates creativity and developed visualisation: ‘[e]very sense seemed unwontedly acute, and hand and eye obeyed me with a docility they seldom showed [...] I reproduced [her look] with a speed and a skill that filled me with delight’ (*Eyes*, p. 69). This fluency is matched by a newly awakened profusion of emotion in the artist for the suffering of another: ‘the thought of all she had lost woke such sympathy and pity in my frosty heart, that I involuntarily pressed the hand that could never wield a brush again’ (*Eyes*, p. 69). Agatha, the practitioner of modern witchcraft, thereby achieves conciliation between male and female models of art. The resulting product is able to attain public recognition within a masculinised aesthetic system and operate as a pictorial representation of acute, highly-developed feeling that provokes empathetic responses. Less a ‘blank screen’ onto which negations are projected, Agatha the witch is, therefore, able to negotiate a role as co-producer of her own image.

### **‘I am a witch [...] Beware of me in time’**

This co-operative model of artistic exchange, however, proves to be short-lived. While effecting an accommodating mode of aesthetic production, Agatha’s arts are also utilised to subvert, or usurp, nineteenth-century gender codes based upon the binary of dominance and submission. Alcott depicts her protagonist, therefore, as a typical sensational heroine who assumes the mask of passive femininity to disguise a more

selfish vendetta – not least to restore her role as artist.<sup>293</sup> Max’s astute friend Louis recognises this artful duplicity within Agatha: ‘She has the wit to see that a woman’s mission is to be charming, and when she has sufficient motive for the exertion she fulfils that mission most successfully’ (*Eyes*, p. 65).

Such a characterisation aligns the protagonist in *A Pair of Eyes* with Jean Muir in *Behind a Mask*. The latter’s witchery lies both in her mesmeric skills and her ability to tell stories, or present images that conform to an idealised model of femininity.

Positioning herself within a perfect domestic tableau, Jean manipulates the male gaze:

Miss Muir sat in the recess of a deep window, in a low lounging chair, working on an embroidery frame with a graceful industry pleasant to see [...] [S]he sat smiling to herself, while the dextrous hands shaped leaf and flower, she made a charming picture of all that is womanly and winning; a picture few men’s eyes would not have liked to rest upon.<sup>294</sup>

Like Agatha, Jean is able to draw men’s eyes towards her inviting them to consume the ‘charming picture of all that is womanly and winning’. Gerald Coventry, in his superficial fascination with the ‘dextrous hands’ working with ‘graceful industry’ on a piece of embroidery, reacts to women in a similar manner to Max Erdman; both men lose their pair of eyes to a skilfully constructed image of femininity and, significantly, both men aestheticise women’s work. While Jean’s sewing is overtly sensualised, Agatha’s inability to continue her artistic vocation is re-codified visually, making the suffering protagonist a more valuable model. Alcott’s critique is focused upon the disparity between the active female subject and the passive mask she has to perpetuate to conform to a masculinised aesthetic order.

Both Agatha and Jean’s witchcraft, then, involves the manipulation of these pervasive gender codes, possessing, or transforming, a masculinised narrative into a story of female autonomy. This is made evident in an unusually frank exchange between

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<sup>293</sup> Other narratives which utilise this generic trope are Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1860) as well as Alcott’s own ‘Pauline’s Passion and Punishment’ (1863).

<sup>294</sup> Alcott, *Behind A Mask*, p. 407.

Jean Muir and Gerald Coventry. The latter admits:

“You make a slave of me already. How do you do it? I never obeyed a woman before. Jean, I think you are a witch. Scotland is the home of weird, uncanny creatures, who take lovely shapes for the bedevilment of poor weak souls. Are you one of those fair deceivers?”

“You are complimentary,” laughed the girl. “*I am a witch*, and one day my disguise will drop away and you will see me as I am, old, ugly, bad and lost. *Beware of me in time*. I’ve warned you”

Coventry had paused as she spoke, and eyes her with an unquiet look, conscious of some fascination which conquered yet brought no happiness. A feverish yet pleasurable excitement *possessed* him. [my emphasis]<sup>295</sup>

Assuming control of a discourse that positions women as witches who playfully ensnare men with their ‘lovely shapes’, Gerald nonchalantly enquires whether Jean is ‘one of those fair deceivers?’ While his choice of rhetoric affirms the dominant/submissive paradigm, suggesting that she has ‘made a slave of’ him, he is also quick to aestheticise this threat. Jean is positioned as a ‘weird, uncanny’ creature, not through any skill of her own, but because she physically attracts him. Just as Lois could not understand the accusation of witchcraft brought against her, Gerald cannot, therefore, comprehend Jean’s confession that she is a witch: ‘old, ugly, bad and lost’.

For the latter, as for Lois, however, witchcraft operates as a transformative strategy, an artistic method that brings the hidden, or the invisible, into view. Confessing through her imperative statement ‘beware of me’, Jean warns Gerald that she has manipulated and ‘possessed’ the male gaze. By resisting her role as passive recipient of male interest, Jean challenges the social and gendered hierarchies this gaze affirms. In becoming Lady Coventry, she transforms from a governess occupying a liminal position between family member and servant, to a peeress that can ‘*try her power*’ [my emphasis] over the household.<sup>296</sup> In a neat twist on the witch’s trial motif, it

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<sup>295</sup> *Behind A Mask*, p. 417.

<sup>296</sup> *Behind a Mask*, p. 425.

is Jean the witch who is able to expose and condemn each family member as ‘proud’, ‘patronising’ and ‘cold.’<sup>297</sup> The aestheticising gaze is reflected back upon its male practitioners, destabilising the artistic order and gender codes it confers. Alcott’s re-writing of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* as witchcraft narrative can, therefore, also be read as a damning indictment against a rigid English class system that dispossesses and marginalises the disenfranchised. While Jean is able to negotiate a successful ending through her transformative witchcraft, Alcott concurrently exposes and critiques the uneven class and gendered relations – predicated upon the ideology of dominance and submission – that her protagonist necessarily disrupts.

### A ‘Secret Slavery’

*A Pair of Eyes* similarly foregrounds these inequities. However, Alcott’s earlier narrative, rather than enact the explicit subversion of normative social codes by a bewitching female protagonist, stages a battle between the sexes for both interpretive supremacy and ownership of the physical body. Written during the Civil War, *A Pair of Eyes* utilizes the pervasive and aggressive rhetoric of slavery and the metaphor of fraternal conflict to articulate the relationship between Max and Agatha. With words such as ‘tyrant’ (*Eyes*, p. 72), ‘liberty’ (*Eyes*, p. 72, 73), ‘freedom’ (*Eyes*, p. 72, 74), ‘conquered’ (*Eyes*, p. 73, 81), ‘victim’ (*Eyes*, p. 76), ‘prisoner’ (*Eyes*, p. 72), ‘rebellion’ (*Eyes*, p. 74), ‘subjugated’ (*Eyes*, p. 76), ‘slave’ (*Eyes*, p. 76, 77) and ‘submission’ (*Eyes*, p. 79) repeatedly applied to the state of both characters, Alcott exposes the destructive potential of these (gendered) dichotomies. While modern magic produces (an albeit) temporary state of co-operation between Max and Agatha, it also affirms the uneven power dynamics that support these hierarchical structures. This overtly self-reflexive text questions the applicability of an aesthetic model that can only replicate the

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid, p. 425.

subject/object dynamic.

Max and Agatha's relationship functions as a confrontation between male and female artistic strategies. It is no surprise, then, that shortly after their marriage the latter becomes jealous of her husband's art and tries to 'wean him from it' (*Eyes*, p. 71). Like Jean Muir, Agatha uses a combination of her theatrical talents and her mesmeric skills to construct an image of domesticity that will attract the male gaze. Max describes how:

Agatha took me prisoner [...], and pointed to the cosy nest she had prepared for me. The room was bright and still; the lamp shone clear; the fire glowed; warm-hued curtains muffled the war of gust and sleet without; books, music and a wide-armed seat and a woman's wistful face invited me in; but none of these things could satisfy me just then. (*Eyes*, p. 71)

While Gerald is complicit in his own bewitchment, Max's choice of language betrays rebellion. He is brought into the ostensibly inviting domestic space as a 'prisoner'; consequently he interprets the 'cosy nest' his wife artfully prepares for him as a site in which he must submit to her petty 'tyrann[ies]' (*Eyes*, p. 71). Choosing to leave the home and meet a visiting German artist, Max confronts the 'war of gust and sleet without', symbolically dismissing the model of artistic co-operation between the genders that cemented his success and embracing aesthetic, as well as meteorological, conflict.

In this mood, neither understanding his wife's sufferings nor her uncanny skills, he patronisingly challenges her to '[u]se what arts you will, make your love irresistible, soften my hard nature, convert me into your shadow, subdue me till I come at your call like a pet dog' (*Eyes*, p. 72). By encouraging Agatha to transform his independent body into a 'subdue[d] [...] shadow', Max instigates his own 'secret slavery' (*Eyes*, p. 76):

As [the] weeks passed I slowly became conscious that some new power had taken possession of me, swaying my whole nature to its will; a power alien yet sovereign. Fitfully it worked, coming upon me when least desired, enforcing its commands regardless of time, place or mood; mysterious yet irresistible in strength, this mental tyrant led me at all hours, in all stages of anxiety, repugnance and rebellion, from all pleasures or employments,

straight to Agatha [...] [A] spell seemed to have benumbed imagination and robbed both brain and hand of power to conceive and skill to execute. (*Eyes*, p. 74)

Agatha's magnetism is likened to colonial conquest: a 'power alien yet sovereign' that takes possession of his 'whole nature', including both his mental and physical proportions. Max's subjected state is also explicitly feminised. He characterises his present state of anxiety as an 'acute fit of what women call nervousness' (*Eyes*, p. 73), yet he is unable to resist the 'irresistible' draw back to the domestic space, leaving all public 'pleasures and employment' in the process. He is made to experience the 'unavailing sacrifices, long suffering patience and deepening despair' (*Eyes*, p. 76), as well as the lack of productive vocation that afflict his wife. While Agatha hopes that her 'silent magic might draw [Max] near enough to see, under this cold exterior, the woman's nature waiting there' (*Eyes*, p. 76), her mesmerism does not so much provoke empathetic responses in her husband as fuel the battle for *the* pair of eyes that can definitively confer meaning, and thereby ownership.

With neither protagonist 'know[ing] the beauty of self-conquest and the power of submission' (*Eyes*, p. 79) both attempt to assume the role of master interpreter. Furious after finding the true cause of his suffering, and indignant that he has been made 'a victim of this occult magic' (p.76), Max mobilises the tools that enslaved him to force his wife into submission. The conflict between these two practitioners of modern magic, aptly takes the form of a 'trial':

Presently the well-known premonition came with its sudden thrill through blood and nerves, and the revengeful strength never felt before. I gathered up my energies for the trial, as I waited some more urgent summons. None came, but in its place a sense of power flashed over me, a swift exultation dilated within me [...] for fixing my thought on Agatha, I gave myself up to the dominant spirit that possessed me [...] I willed to see her [...] I saw the well-known room, I saw my wife lying in a deep chair, wan and wasted as if with suffering of soul and body, I saw her grope with outstretched hands [...] and through the veil that seemed to wrap my senses I heard my own voice, strange and broken, whispering: "God forgive me, she is blind!"

(*Eyes*, p. 79)

Agatha's trial for witchcraft manifests as the re-assertion of Max's 'pair of eyes'. The former is once again positioned as the model to be consumed by the 'dominant spirit' of the successful artist. Ironically, however, Max's visual skills are restored to him to allow him to see his wife's blindness and her 'wan, wasted' and symbolically impotent body. While the trial of Lois within Gaskell's text exposed the witch's inability to articulate herself within a masculinised legal setting, Alcott's witch can no longer see a way to manipulate or challenge her husband's aesthetic design. On the other hand, her husband can finally, however, visualise and understand the look of despair in her haunted eyes.

Alcott's critique, therefore, focuses on the inflexible binaries that define nineteenth-century gender codes, modes of artistic production and the slave and master relationship. While 'modern magic' is able temporarily to disrupt these categories of identity, enabling Agatha to participate in the artistic process, it also foregrounds the silent suffering and the struggle of the blind female artist, symbolically unseen and unacknowledged but for her mesmeric arts. Agatha's witchcraft is depicted as a necessary subversion. However, by merely reversing gendered and aesthetic power dynamics, rather than enabling a co-operative model of artistic interaction, mesmerism perpetuates the harmful binary oppositions that enforce a 'secret slavery'. Competing within such hegemonic discourses, Agatha's arts are inevitably used against her, condemning her, like Lois the witch, to an untimely death.

**It's a dreadful picture, isn't it? But I can't help looking at it**

*The Mill on the Floss* (1860) was published a year after *Lois*, and a year before *A Pair of Eyes* was composed. In her novel George Eliot also uses the witchcraft narrative to highlight the disparity between female intellectual activity and the available methods

through which this intelligent subjectivity can be expressed, or put to use.<sup>298</sup> In Eliot's text the witch narrative allows protagonist Maggie Tulliver to express her interpretive skills, but also to explore their futility within a society in which 'a woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble'.<sup>299</sup> Asked by her father's friend to interpret an image from Daniel Defoe's *The Political History of the Devil* (1728), Maggie states:

'I'll tell you what that means. It's a dreadful picture isn't it? But I can't help looking at it. That old woman in the water's a witch, -- they've put her in to find out whether she's a witch or no; and if she swims she's a witch, and if she's drowned -- and killed, you know --she's innocent, and not a witch, but only a poor silly old woman. But what good would it do her then, you know, when she was drowned?'<sup>300</sup>

Eliot draws an implicit parallel between the futile trial of the innocent, 'poor silly old woman' and Maggie's misplaced intellect; neither can be acknowledged, nor obtain justice through any existing social structure. The figure of witch, therefore, becomes a complex but pertinent symbol of feminine intellectual potential and also of the limitations of that subjectivity.

Emphasising, like Maggie Tulliver, the paradoxical position the witch is made to occupy, both Gaskell and Alcott's respective texts also highlight the possibility of a witchcraft narrative that facilitates female self-expression, but that also controls and even condemns that articulation.<sup>301</sup> Witchcraft, therefore, operates as a metafictional

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<sup>298</sup> It is highly probable that Eliot read *Lois the Witch* on its publication in 1859. In June of that year Gaskell had initiated a correspondence with the yet anonymous author, admitting that she had been suspected of writing *Adam Bede*, and thereby paid the 'greatest compliment [...] I ever had'. She playfully confesses to Eliot that 'although to my friends I am known under the name of Mrs Gaskell, to you I confess that I *am* the writer of *Adam Bede*, and remain very respectfully and gratefully/ Yours, Gilbert Eliot' [sic] (*Letters*, p. 559). On discovering Eliot's identity, Gaskell wrote to Evans declaring 'I must, once more, tell you how earnestly, fully and humbly I admire [*Adam Bede* and *Scenes from Clerical Life*] I never read anything so complete, so beautiful in fiction, in my whole life before.' *Letters* 449, p. 592. Eliot reciprocated by admitting the influence of texts such as *Mary Barton* early in her literary career. The fact that both authors chose to utilise the witchcraft narrative, albeit in very different ways, within a two year period, is not, perhaps, accidental.

<sup>299</sup> George Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, p. 52.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid*, p. 55

<sup>301</sup> This is a common theme in many of Gaskell's texts, particularly *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* which, as discussed in Chapter Two, re-frames Brontë's authorial endeavours to contest unfavourable depictions of the masculinised female author. Ironically, Gaskell brought problems upon herself through this publication. She was sued for libel by Lady Scott in March 1857 and threatened with a law suit by the supporters of W. Carus Wilson, founder of Cowan Bridge, the Lowood of *Jane Eyre*,



tool that maps and manipulates the boundaries of artistic and literary production.

Gaskell's innovative re-writing of the history of Salem through the paradigm of the witch-as-storyteller, then, can be read as a commentary upon authorship within the nineteenth century. Like her witch protagonist, she uses her story to collapse the boundaries between: Britain and the United States; male and female; the domestic and the foreigner; the natural and the supernatural; and the accused and the accusers. In the process, she encourages a re-assessment of both an established history and the witch as a category of 'monstrous' female identity.

Gaskell's gothic narrative, therefore, draws attention to the social denominators that identify and condemn the witch as a monstrous body. In other words, *Lois the Witch* imagines how women's storytelling can bridge the national, gendered, hierarchical and temporal boundaries that create it, thereby articulating alternative perspectives – such as Nattee's – and provoking new interpretations that question the witch's monstrous creation. It is significant, perhaps, that in his *Salem Witchcraft* (1868) – a later version of his *Lectures* – Upham developed his characterisation of the character of Tituba to include 'the wild and strange superstitions prevalent among [her] native tribes, materials which [...] heightened the infatuation of the times.'<sup>302</sup>

While Gaskell, however, focuses upon the transformative potential of the witchcraft narrative, particularly to affect belated sympathetic responses, Alcott dismisses this narrative model. Mesmerism for the latter does not provoke any symbolic, or indeed literal, healing for the U.S. author. Instead, she advocates the need for a new narrative structure that can support and recognise female artistic vocation and explore the hidden worlds within and without the masculine social order. *A Pair of Eyes*, then, pleads for a pair of 'I's that can encompass, and respect the other.'<sup>303</sup> The

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later that year. Gaskell spent the summer of 1857 re-writing the text, omitting all libellous material.

<sup>302</sup> Charles W. Upham, *Salem Witchcraft* [1868] (New York: Dover, 2000), p. 318.

<sup>303</sup> Alcott's short story 'A Marble Woman' (1865) also explores the relationship between male and female

pervasive transatlantic witchcraft narrative provides a structure whereby both Alcott and her British contemporary can re-assess the processes that constitute gendered, national and artistic identity formation. The 'monstrous' witch is, therefore, re-possessed as an exploratory tool and an excessive body of meaning.

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models of art, as well as the theme of imprisonment within the domestic sphere. Through respectful communication, protagonists Cecil and Basil are, however, unlike Agatha and Max eventually able to successfully accommodate and understand each other's emotional and artistic needs.

## Conclusion: Making Connections

2010 is the bicentenary of Elizabeth Gaskell's birth. In order to commemorate the event, the John Rylands University Library, Manchester, have exhibited a collection of the author's letters (to both family members, and to acquaintances on both sides of the Atlantic); personal documents (including a passport); her collection of autographs that included Nathaniel Hawthorne's; and recent, Japanese translations of her works.<sup>304</sup> Together, these artefacts demonstrate what curator Fran Baker calls Gaskell's 'Connected Life', the experiences of an author who 'stood at the centre of a wide and diverse social network'.<sup>305</sup> Baker visually constructs the layers of connections which influenced Gaskell's authorial output, illustrating the author's involvement in family life, Unitarian communities, as well as literary circles. The exhibition, moreover, emphasises the continued appeal of her works, drawing audiences from across the world – particularly in Japan – and creating new, twenty-first century literary communities.

I refer to this exhibition as it neatly illustrates many of the central issues raised in my thesis, while it also draws attention to many of the theoretical and critical limitations my work has addressed. My research has also traced the 'connected life' of Elizabeth Gaskell, exploring the connections which tie the nineteenth-century author to her local, familial setting and the transnational influences which informed her literary works. However, while Baker places the British author at the *centre* of a social network, my comparative transatlantic approach positioned both her and her texts as representative of a *series* of transatlantic literary exchanges in which Louisa May Alcott plays a similarly significant role. By juxtaposing the work of Gaskell and Alcott, and situating them within a reciprocal paradigm of exchange, I extend Baker's metaphor and thereby the

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<sup>304</sup> <<http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/specialcollections/exhibitions/>> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> September 2010]

<sup>305</sup> Baker admitted that she was inspired by Gaskell biographer Jenny Uglow's metaphor -- 'overlapping circles' – to describe the familial, religious and transatlantic relationships she forged. See Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, p. 309.

framework in which both authors have been traditionally interpreted. By focusing less upon notions of fixity – how Gaskell was at the centre of a concurrently localised and extensive network – and more upon the processes of exchange, movement and reception of both texts and ideas – this thesis has demonstrated the significance of Gaskell and Alcott’s domestic fiction in the evolving discourses of national and gendered literary identities as they were debated throughout the nineteenth century.

In doing so, it has been my intention to both contribute to, and extend, three current critical trends. Firstly, I engage with the increasing body of work that locates Gaskell and Alcott’s work within transnational paradigms – such as Baker’s exhibition – and thereby considers the implications of their domestic works within spaces beyond the home and nation. Secondly, I rely upon recent studies on transatlantic relations, which invite comparative readings by bringing the local, national and transnational into juxtaposition. Lastly, I address literary criticism on both U.S and British domestic literary traditions, which has generally been divided on national grounds.

By situating Gaskell and Alcott’s work in a comparative framework, exploring the circulation of their texts, and how their domestic narratives were constituted through transatlantic exchanges, I have extended the interpretive framework in which both authors’ narratives are traditionally located. They are, I have argued, representative members of a transatlantic community, who were affected by, and had a significant impact upon, the British-U.S. literary marketplace. Moreover, by introducing the work of both authors into a transnational framework, I have demonstrated how their narratives – through specific four tropes, the home, the worker, the nurse and the witch – contributed to wider debates concerning female professionalisation, the work of the female author and national literary identity. These, I show, are profoundly connected. Through my methodology, I have, therefore, brought British and U.S. domestic traditions into dialogue, demonstrating that the logic of domesticity in its ability to

articulate both the specific and the extensive invites a study of *transatlantic* domestic fiction.

In this thesis, then, I make two claims regarding the transatlantic literary marketplace as it operated in the nineteenth century: firstly, that it was predicated upon reciprocal exchanges between Britain and the United States – rather than one-way traffic – and secondly, that domestic fiction operated as a pervasive, accessible medium through which these interchanges took place. In other words, by tracing how both authors' texts contribute to, and circulate within, a literary community, I have illustrated the exchanges that took place between Britain and the U.S. and, thereby, shown how domestic fiction epitomised and enabled these cross-cultural interchanges.

By situating Gaskell and Alcott's fictions within a transatlantic paradigm, I have considered the significance of their domestic narratives within formations of, and debates concerning, national literary identity. I began this study by citing the example of the former's edition of *Mabel Vaughan*, demonstrating how a mobile domestic rhetoric structures a metaphorical transatlantic familial community in which both Vaughan and her editor are able to enter into discourses about what constitutes a U.S., British, or transatlantic text. As I explored in Chapter Two, this process is also in evidence in *Little Women*. Explicitly engaging with traditions which are conferred via a localised transcendental community, a national literary scene and through transatlantic exchanges, Alcott critically explores the position of her domestic text within an expansive literary marketplace. Through this self-reflexive exploration, she negotiates a uniquely U.S. domestic aesthetic that is predicated upon transcendental ideologies *and* established via a dialogue with British literary sources. In a similar way to Sarah Orne Jewett in her re-imagining of *Cranford* in her novel *Deephaven*, Alcott demonstrates the ways in which women writers could adapt sources from across Atlantic to contribute to, and question, the formation of an U.S. literary identity. Moreover, Elizabeth Gaskell's re-writing of

the history of Salem via Charles W. Upham's *Lectures* and John Neal's *Rachel Dyer* in order to comment upon the literary and political climate within Britain, shows that debates concerning national (literary) identity were not confined to the United States.

Furthermore, by focusing on how the pervasive logic of domesticity, transmitted within transatlantic domestic narratives, places emphasis upon the construction of literal (national) borders and ideological boundaries, I have also drawn attention to the way in which both Gaskell and Alcott explore constructions of gendered (literary) identity. The former, I have argued, uses the mobile tropes of the nurse, the witch and home to draw attention to the marginalised voices within hegemonic narrative structures. Working within such established literary traditions, including the narrative of the fallen woman, historical witchcraft narratives and domestic fiction that explores constructions of home, Gaskell emphasises how a prevalent nineteenth-century domestic ideology both extended and curtailed the sphere of female influence and women's work. Characters such as Ruth, Lois and Deborah Jenkyns are appropriated as critical tools that detail the limitations and possibilities within the narrative that contains them. As her conversation with Florence Nightingale in *North and South* exemplifies, Gaskell asserts the significance of a mobile domestic narrative that can extend the sphere of female influence and the scope of women's (authorial) work, while also exposing the paradoxes at the centre of nineteenth-century gender ideology.

While Gaskell's domestic narratives work within established literary paradigms, Louisa May Alcott's fiction explicitly manipulates the British-U.S traditions she inherited to imagine a solution to the ideological problem of women's work, including the labour of the author. The latter's nursing narratives, *Hospital Sketches* and *Work*, imagine how the domestic space can be extended through the nurse's healing activities, to heal not just individual bodies damaged by war, but a fragmented national body. The domestic narrative, in other words, becomes no less than the medium through which the

nation is healed and the work of the nurse-author is affirmed. Through her witchcraft narrative, *A Pair of Eyes*, however, Alcott explores the limits of female labour within a male-dominated artistic marketplace. Dismissing this inherited narrative framework as an efficacious model of female identity, she posits an alternative artistic method in which male and female models corroborate to create a domestic, yet critically acclaimed, aesthetic product. *Little Women*, the result of a series of negotiations with gendered, national and transnational models of literary identity, represents the ultimate affirmation of this aesthetic.

By juxtaposing Gaskell and Alcott's specific representations of four common domestic tropes, then, I have not only demonstrated the extent to which both authors were engaged with a transatlantic community through which they explored the processes of identity formation, but also how their texts circulated within a transatlantic marketplace. In order to further trace the significance of the 'transatlantic domestic narrative' upon the construction of national and gendered identities, I have identified two possible areas for future study. While the reception of domestic texts by British authors – such as Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot as well as Gaskell – within the United States has been the subject of much critical work, the corresponding journeys of texts by U.S. women writers across the Atlantic has received comparatively little attention.<sup>306</sup> By tracing the reception of texts like *Mabel Vaughan* within British reading circles, it would be possible to explore the extent to which U.S. domestic narratives written by women influenced literary constructions of nationalised and gendered spaces.

A second extension to this project would integrate black women writers into a transatlantic dynamic which was predicated upon white Anglo-Saxon relations.

Introducing writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Phillis Wheatley and Mary Seacole into such

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<sup>306</sup> Christine Doyle, *Transatlantic Translations*; Monika Mueller, *George Eliot U.S.*; and Thomas Recchio, *Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford*, are just a small sample of the criticism on the impact of British writers within the U.S. Sarah Meer's, *Uncle Tom Mania* is a notable exception to this trend, exploring the reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* within Britain.

a framework, it would be possible to explore the ways in which black women and their texts contribute to, and even define, transatlantic relations, particularly as abolitionism became a central tenet of British-U.S. dialogues. Moreover, while much work has been focused on black, male figures – such as Frederick Douglass – and transatlantic interaction, little attention has been paid to the role of women within these exchanges.<sup>307</sup> Further research on this issue would address this inequality.

In this study, however, I address a gap within the vast body of critical work on transatlanticism concerning the relations between Britain and the U.S during the nineteenth century. While many of these studies focus upon the circulation of works by, and correspondences between, male authors, I illustrate another dynamic within nineteenth-century transatlantic interactions.<sup>308</sup> Mapping the exchanges between female authors on both sides of the Atlantic as they occurred via the accessible logic of domesticity, I have demonstrated how women's fiction helped, firstly, to consolidate and establish national literary identity, and, secondly, to contribute to transatlantic debates concerning representations of the female author. By exploring how Gaskell and Alcott are representative figures within a transnational literary marketplace, I have introduced the works of both authors into a dynamic which emphasises how their works contributed to the creation of a transatlantic community. The mobile and accessible domestic narrative, I have illustrated, operates as an efficacious medium for the transmission of national and gendered discourses within a culture of transatlantic exchange.

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<sup>307</sup> For more on Frederick Douglass and transatlantic relations, see Paul Giles *Virtual Americas*, pp. 22-47, and Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophobia*, pp. 192-195.

<sup>308</sup> For a small sample of these, see: Richard Gravil, *Romantic Dialogues*; Paul Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections and Virtual Americas*; Lawrence Buell, *American Literary Emergence*; Robert Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross*.



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