

“My boys are more care every year”: Louisa May Alcott’s Notions of Disciplined Masculinity

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Popular late nineteenth-century author of women’s and juvenile fiction, Louisa May Alcott had a soft spot for boys. “I was born with a boys [sic] nature & always had more sympathy for & interest in them than in girls,” she confessed in her journal (*Journals* 79). Although she wrote for a female readership and addressed issues of marriage, women’s rights, and women’s careers, she also developed powerful male characters—boys, young men, fathers, grandfathers, and male patrons—in her fiction. Her novel of début, *Little Women* (1868) and its sequel, *Good Wives* (1869) tell the story of the four March sisters who, steered through a lively girlhood by their wise and devoted mother, develop into remarkable young women. The popular and critical success of the books prompted Alcott to continue the story of the March family with two more sequels, *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo’s Boys* (1886), also novels of education and development concentrating, this time, on boys. The central character of the series is Jo March, Alcott’s autobiographically inspired heroine who, having been a tomboy herself, understands boys and is able to manage them successfully. In the concluding chapter of *Good Wives* Jo, married to the middle-aged German professor Friedrich Bhaer, plans to start a school for poor boys at Plumfield, an estate she just inherited from a spinster aunt. *Little Men* tells the story of a year at this unique utopian educational institution run by the selfless and competent couple. *Jo’s Boys* follows the students’ passage into young adulthood until they arrive in the safe haven of marriage and start careers that match their talents and aspirations.

The school at Plumfield accommodates and educates the sons and daughters of the March sisters, a couple of local boys, and also two

orphan boys that the members of the extended family stumbled upon. At once family home, school, and charitable institution, Plumfield is Alcott's powerful metaphor of a utopian national space in which representatives of different social, age, gender, and racial groups live and work together with the purpose of creating the blueprint of an ideal community. This community is far from being static and stable. Rather, it is one in process where the relations between the groups are continuously negotiated. As the children grow up and step out into the world of adults, their accomplishments as individuals and members of a community add up to an image of a better society. Louisa May Alcott's family history predestined her to intellectual, if not practical, involvement with education and utopian experiments. Her father, the prominent Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott initiated several educational endeavors, the most famous being the Temple School experiment he conducted together with Elizabeth Peabody in 1834. Another of his projects, that of "Fruitlands" in 1843, was to establish an agrarian utopian community in Harvard, Massachusetts. Both Temple School and Fruitlands failed in less than a year. Her father's powerful reformist ideas as well as failures, in his experiments and as a parent (Strickland 140), prompted Louisa to open-mindedly resume some of Bronson's intellectual engagements. She was interested in educational reform, supported the women's movement, was critical of social definitions of gender roles, and sought to re-evaluate the distribution of gender power in the family. As the titles of two novels in the March family saga—*Little Women* and *Little Men*—suggest, her interest lay less in the intrinsic qualities of childhood than in the emergence of gender roles and social dynamics as a result of early education in the family and at school.

By focusing especially on the portrayal of male characters, in this paper I will explore how *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* address the dynamics of gender relations in the home and in the public sphere. Since the publication of *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, Alcott's views concerning gender roles and gender economy underwent considerable change. My suggestion is that the shift is towards a more conservative attitude, a defense of Victorian views concerning the woman as moral compass and civilizing agent in the lives of men. In the Gilded Age a new, adverse process in men's social behavior was under way, one that sought to evade the constraints of women's domesticating influence. The incidents taking place, day by day, in Jo and Friedrich Bhaer's "small world" (*LM* 298) offer an opportunity for Alcott to address both the cohesive and the

disruptive forces that shaped gender relations in America during the Gilded Age. She sought to affirm some of the transformations in family dynamics, such as the growing importance of the mother's moral guidance of, and the father's increasing emotional bonding with, their sons. There were developments in the cultural dynamics of masculinity in post-Civil War America that Alcott found less desirable, even threatening. Suspicious of emerging scenes of male homosocial bonding, the city and the Frontier, she resented the ruthless competitiveness of economic life in urban centers and dreaded the unleashing of violence and immorality in the West. In agreement with widely held nineteenth-century views about women's inherent moral superiority, Alcott argues that only women are capable of uplifting and saving men from the temptations of the mundane and from the destructive power of their own dangerous impulses. Yet there are, she also suggests, male impulses and acts that are irredeemable and impossible to integrate into the national psyche.

1. Sentimental fatherhood and the domestic ideal

In Plumfield, gender and labor roles correspond to those of the regular, middle-class Victorian home. Professor Bhaer, or "Father" Bhaer, as the children call him, presides over the household as father and mentor. "Mother" Bhaer, Jo, a mother of two small boys, acts as a surrogate mother to twelve other children. She looks after them in their free time, mends their clothes, and offers moral guidance whenever they need it. In both the nuclear family and the school, the division of labor between the father and the mother is the exact replica of Victorian society: the man is in charge of the needs of the intellect, the woman tends to the necessities of the body and the soul. Physical labor, also divided between the genders, falls to the lower classes. A "stout German woman" (*LM* 12), Nursey Hummel bathes the children and takes care of them when sick. The farm is managed by Silas, the gentle giant and Civil War veteran, and the kitchen is in the care of Asia, the elderly black cook. There is, however, a relevant detail that distinguishes Plumfield from a conventional household in Gilded-Age America, one related to how Alcott defines the role and duty of the father in the family.

In *Little Men*, the portrayal of father figures goes against established mid-nineteenth century conventions of masculinity. Without contesting the division of middle-class society into two separate spheres, the

masculine and the feminine, Alcott insists that men assume responsibilities in the domestic one. The requirements she sets for the husband and father almost coincide with those of the mother. Such an image of the nurturing father runs counter to a general trend in both ante- and postbellum American fiction. Fathers are underrepresented in the nineteenth-century American novel, except maybe to display their hopeless inadequacy (Armignol-Carrera 211). In the fiction of Hawthorne, Melville, and Mark Twain, for example, they are portrayed as tyrannical, inadequate, absent, or debased. *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* hold up an entirely new type of male parent, one that combines masculine traits with feminine ones and meets the requirements Alcott sets for the nurturing parent. She does not contest the position of the man as head of the family and agent in the national economy. But she also points out that men can be successful influences and role models for their sons only if they understand and value women, moreover, if they share with them character traits that are necessary for good parenting. The model fathers in *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* exhibit the qualities of domesticity and piety, fundamental virtues which, according to Barbara Welter, characterized the middle-class woman in Victorian America (44). To these, Alcott adds sensitivity and empathy, also considered, in her time, to be essentially feminine qualities. The visible fathers in this utopian community, those who embody Alcott's standard of normative masculinity, are the husbands of the three March sisters. These are the paragons of good parenting: young Mr. Laurence and John Brooke as the fathers of their own children, and Professor Bhaer as a loving father substitute to the boys who live and study in Plumfield. Together, they account for those requisites that Alcott considers necessary for the perfect parent who brings up the new generation of worthy citizens. Other fathers—those of the students, for example—, are dead, absent, or make their brief appearance only to serve as counterexamples.

To be sure, the quintessence of the desirable male parent that Alcott envisages for her fictional utopia is Father Bhaer. The middle-aged Professor's intellectual stature, rationality and firmness underscore his masculinity. His sentimentality and piety, however, pertain to a set of qualities that were considered, in the nineteenth century, to be feminine. Fearing that no such male type is plausible among New England men, Alcott places her character into a wholly different cultural and mind set, the German. The figure of the Professor is, on the one hand, Alcott's tribute to the intellectual roots of English and American Romanticism. On

the other hand, he represents a desirable alternative to American male reticence and primness: "Thank Gott, we Germans believe in sentiment, and keep ourselves young mit it," Professor Bhaer confesses when he proposes to Jo (*GW* 295). Or, he is not ashamed to show his affection when his sons need it: he "opened his arm and embraced his boys like a true German, not ashamed to express by gesture or by word the fatherly emotions an American would have compressed in a slap on the shoulder and a brief 'All right'" (*JB* 113-14). The portrayal of Franz Hoffmann, the Professor's nephew reinforces both the national type and Alcott's ideal of male domesticity: he is "a regular German, [...] domestic, amiable, and musical" (*LM* 15). To counterbalance such feminine traits Alcott anchors the masculinity of her German characters in physical solidity: Franz is big and tall (*LM* 15, 75), and his younger brother Emil has "the blood of the old Vikings" in his veins (*LM* 15), and Professor Bhaer is "rather stout, with [...] a bushy beard, [...] and a splendid big voice" (*GW* 124). Also, the boys in his school are ready to share with "Father Bhaer" little confidences, "hopes and plans" as "man to man" (*LM* 32).

Professor Bhaer fully inhabits his role as a father and masculine gender model. He is an intellectual and an educator who supports his family by teaching. But his workplace is his home, and his profession is a kind of extended parenthood, circumstances that do not exactly situate him in the masculine sphere. But Alcott does not entirely ignore in her novel two essential theaters of manly self-assertion, the capitalist market and politics. There are other relevant father figures connected to Plumfield: Meg and Amy's husbands, John Brooke and Ted Laurence. The careers of these men offer a glimpse into the world outside the utopian Plumfield, although one that is very limited and carefully censored by Alcott. The career of John Brooke was not an outstanding one by Gilded Age standards. He was a man "of strict principles" leading a "busy, quiet, humble life" (*LM* 260). Alcott is not specific about the details of John's occupation: we only know that was an honest and conscientious accountant. He "served" wealthy men "faithfully," and kept a little store for "the poor old women, whom he cherished [...] in memory of his dear mother" (*LM* 258). The reader is introduced to John Brooke's many virtues after his unexpected, premature death that does not serve any specific purpose in the plot unless to give Professor Bhaer an opportunity to set him as an example for the boys, contending that "simple, genuine goodness is the best capital to found the business of this life upon. It lasts when fame and money fail, and it is the only riches we

can take out of this world with us" (*LM* 260). The good and honest man's death stirs "a new manliness" in the teenage Franz (*LM* 253), and Demi, John's ten-year-old son bravely "entered into its inheritance" (*LM* 263).

While John Brooke represents, in Alcott's utopian model, the honest middle-class businessman who educates the boys by example, Mr. Laurence stands for the wealthy patron who contributes to the creation of virtue by more tangible means. His financial generosity contributes to the sustenance of the school and some of the individual educational projects, and his political influence oils the machinery of the young men's careers. Like Professor Bhaer, Mr. Laurence combines masculine and feminine traits and virtues. Brought up by his grandfather and nurtured by the loving care of the women in the March family, he has practical wisdom, compassion, good humor, and artistic sensibility. However, the most flamboyant character of Alcott's novel series is also the least substantial as a male role model, a boy rather than an adult. Everybody calls him by his childhood nickname, Mr. "Laurie," and Jo regularly refers to him as "my boy." His role in the school is restricted to performing pleasant services for Jo and the children and paying for the poor students' tuition. Even his helpfulness is sometimes articulated in the form of a joke: "I shouldn't mind investing in a few prairies and cowboys myself" (*JB* 53), he cuts in when Dan Kent, one of the Plumfield students, mentions his plan to start farming in the West. Mr. Laurie is credited with all the responsibilities of the man of wealth, but apparently stays out of the arena where this wealth is produced, the capitalist market.

In fact, Alcott portrays all three father figures—Professor Bhaer, John Brooke, and Mr. Laurie—as characters unaffected by the standards that defined the self-made man, a model of manhood that, throughout the nineteenth century, "deriv[ed] identity entirely from a man's activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status, by geographic and social mobility" (Kimmel 13). In *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* fatherhood—as well as the authority that accompanies it—does not depend on a man's performance in the public sphere, but rather on the way he fulfills his commitments in the domestic one. However, Alcott's emphatic suggestion that domestic masculinity should be the norm is anachronistic and nostalgic. By the end of the 1860s, significant transformations in the social and economic structure of Gilded-Age America eroded the domestic ideal. The new industrial economy and the development of the national markets lured an increasing number of men into the urban work force. The self-made man and its most frequent

middle-class version, the independent businessman was supplanted by the salaried, nonpropertied white-collar worker (Rotundo 248). The competition for and the constraints of the workplace diverted men's attention from their homes. In the same time, the decreasing number of children in the typical middle-class family released mothers from many of their domestic obligations. By the time the ideology of domesticity gained ground, Margaret Marsh contends, the nation changed (41-42). Also, in the last third of the nineteenth century men started to embrace rather different notions about masculine behavior, and turned towards more "manly," and less "feminized" attitudes and activities. Alcott's investment in a set of values of diminishing social relevance reflects her deep anxiety about the loss of female control over the lives of men.

2. Scenes of homosocial bonding

In antebellum United States the westward expansion and the California Gold Rush pushed men from the increasingly crowded and urbanized east towards new territories and experiences, and into each other's company. The Civil War—in the parlance of the time, the conflict between brothers—mobilized men across the country, and created a cultural discourse that addressed the strife in gendered terms. In the Gilded Age the development of industrial capitalism attracted men to the cities and distanced them further from their homes, producing arenas of homosocial relationships in which men competed for resources and re-negotiated their masculine identities. "If manhood could be proved," Michael Kimmel contends, "it had to be proved in the eyes of other men" (19). Male homosocial bonding had long been a fact in American society, and women—Alcott among them—felt equivocally about it. To begin with, the exclusiveness of the masculine sphere was a threat to the harmony of the home. Men could not be trusted to get along without the moral guidance of women. Competitiveness in the in the emerging urban workplaces could run out of control and endanger men's physical and moral integrity. Homosocial scenes and activities could also mean the infiltration of lower-class influence into sheltered middle-class homes. Nevertheless, Alcott did not downplay the relevance of peer influence as a factor in the education of boys, nor did she rule out its positive potential. In Plumfield homosocial relations are accepted, even encouraged within

certain limits, but these are set in accordance with the moral standards championed by women.

As Anthony Rotundo points out, boys in the nineteenth century inhabited “a distinct world with its own rituals and its own symbols and values” which often disrupted the order of the home and provoked the indignation of adults, male or female (31–32). Some of the droll and seemingly innocent incidents in *Little Men* serve as warnings that a company of boys left without adult guidance can do serious mischief, interfere with the girls’ docile activities, and create havoc in the household. Rashly imitating a bullfight, the boys upset Buttercup, the cow (*LM* 79). Under the pretext that “[b]oys always tease their sisters” (*LM* 115), they ruin the tea party that the girls, Daisy and Nan were at great pains to organize. Male competitiveness leads to physical violence, especially when lower-class models of behavior encroach on the stable middle-class environment. Dan, a vagrant boy the Bhaers receive into the school, provokes a fight in the barn which results in more than one bleeding nose. The episode causes Mr. Bhaer to lose his temper and contend that he keeps “a school for boys, not for wild beasts.” Dan, the “firebrand” defends his behavior by stating that boys do not wish to be “mollycoddles” (*LM* 77). The younger ones admire Dan’s strength and skill, and wish to imitate the bad boy’s “manly ways” (*LM* 76, 83). The major objective of the Plumfield school is to tame the violent impulses of the male children by channeling their energies into safe and useful activities and, even more importantly, by the motherly affection of Jo and the gentle influence of the three girls associated with the school, Daisy, Nan, and Beth.

Female efforts to socialize boys and young men are much compromised in the moment when these enter the male sphere, the world outside the home, and pursue further studies or find their vocations. Alcott warns her readers about the dangers young men will face in the homosocial arena of the city. From the case of Dan we have already learnt that lower-class male children are exposed to harmful influences early: as a boy, Dan “now and then had a chance to imitate the low men who surrounded him” (*LM* 83) and acquired habits that were difficult to overwrite. In *Jo’s Boys* Alcott dwells at length over the dangers of unwisely selected male company. After leaving Plumfield, George Cole and Dolly Pettingill sow their wild oats at Harvard College, studying little and drinking in abundance. Nat Blake, the gifted musician pursues his studies in Leipzig, but yields to the temptation of showing off and

entertaining friends. He spends extravagantly in the company of well-to-do young men until he almost ruins himself and disappoints his benefactors at Plumfield. Female influence can, however, set right what male company ruined. Jo gives the two erring Harvard students a good and effective chiding. Also, the mental images of "Mother Bhaer" and his beloved Daisy steer Nat back on the right path. Finally, with the practical help of two benevolent elderly "Freuleins" he manages to support himself and finishes his studies honorably. But the idea that the city with its male homosocial environment is essentially harmful persists throughout *Jo's Boys*. Only two Plumfield boys choose careers that tie them to the urban sphere, and those pertain to the world of culture, not business: Nat is a musician, and Demi works in an editor's office with the prospect of becoming a partner. Others who stay in the city, stay unmarried, and enter business fail to get on: Dolly is a "society man" until he goes bankrupt, and George becomes an alderman and eats himself into apoplexy (*JB* 284). Although Alcott acknowledges that the city is the place which young adult men depend on for their skills, refinement and livelihood, she maintains that the road to happiness is one that leads away from its temptations. She regards farming as the preferable means of economic subsistence as it strengthens the moral character and fosters the virtues of good citizenship. However, in the Gilded Age, a time when American cities were quickly transforming into vibrant environments of production, commerce and finances, such a view was rather out of touch with the realities of the times.

The setting of Plumfield is a farm in rural New England, a bucolic site situated at safe distance from the corrupting influence of the city. Farm work scaled to the capabilities of young boys supplements classroom study, and provides ample training in housekeeping, planting, and reaping good harvests. Nature was regarded as a restorative agency by the Transcendentalists, and Alcott's mind set is dependent on this tradition. If boys have to leave the protected environment of the home, school and farm, the Bhaers prefer to see them in the forests of South America, the sheep farms in Australia, and on the American Frontier. "I'd rather send my boys off to see the world in that way than leave them alone in the city full of temptations," Mrs. Bhaer voices her recurring concern (*JB* 11). However, the Frontier had an ambivalent place in Alcott's imagination. On the one hand, she regarded it as a site of freedom and worthy physical strife where a boy can rise to manhood and acquire useful skills in the process. On the other hand, though, she was

uneasy about the vastness and lawlessness of the western regions. The Gold Rush of the 1850s and the following decades saw a steady flow of men on the Frontier, and Alcott was aware that the homosocial environment of the West had its dangers. Of the Plumfield boys it is Dan, the restless “firebrand” who chooses to start farming in Montana, then mining silver in California. His bad luck spells out Alcott’s deep distrust of certain forms of male companionship. Accidentally mixing with dubious men in “a low place,” Dan is provoked into a fistfight and he knocks his opponent dead (*JB* 162). Although the reason for the fight was an honorable one—Dan was protecting a younger man from being done out of his money—he has to serve a year in prison. After he is set free he wonders in the far regions of the West, still under the effect of the prison experience. He finally redeems himself by risking his own life to save miners trapped in the shaft of a California silver mine. However, he never recovers in his soul, and his life is but “the pale shadow of what, for another, might have been a happy possibility” (*JB* 274). Thus, Alcott warns that the lawlessness of the Frontier, as well as “low” male company can unleash in a young man undesired impulses that threaten his integrity. Only by a generous acts of self-sacrifice, the ultimate act of heroic masculinity, can he atone for the crime he commits.

3. The redemptive power of the woman

If boys and men are prone to go astray when left to themselves, it is women’s duty to help them achieve fulfillment as men, persons, and citizens. “It takes three or four women to get each man into, through, and out of the world,” remarks Jo Bhaer as she draws the balance of family economy: “You are costly creatures, boys; and it is well that mothers, sisters, wives and daughters love their duty and do it so well, or you would perish off the face of the earth” (*JB* 13). In addition to taking care of, educating—and sometimes taming—young boys and teenagers, women provide men with lifelong assistance and wise management. The notion that the presence of women in men’s lives was essential for their moral welfare was widely accepted in mid- and late nineteenth century America. Catherine Beecher, for example, contended that “the formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother forms the character of the future man [...], let the women of a country be made virtuous and intelligent and the

men will certainly be the same” (37). Alcott argues for uninterrupted female guidance throughout a man’s whole life by way of the coeducation of the young, happy marriage, and true spousal companionship till old age. She makes these suggestions without populating her novels with bland, cardboard illustrations of her ideas about education, vocation and matrimony. Most of her male characters have their complexities. If they succumb to failings they are given the chance to overcome them with determination, and always with the assistance of a woman. A wise and caring wife lends even a weak man solidity and substantiality. For example, without Daisy to strengthen and reinforce his good traits, Nat would be all but lost: “there was a danger of his being one of the amiable and aimless men who fail for want of the right pilot to steer them safely through the world” (*JB* 24). Alcott acknowledges that making an honest living, maybe an outstanding career, is a man’s ultimate purpose in life. Yet she also suggests that whether he can make good use of his abilities depends on the woman, the faithful companion who, with her superior sense of duty and resilience, stands by the man and helps him along the way.

Whatever their abilities and careers, Jo wants her boys to be honest men. In the ethos of Plumfield, work has moral significance. Children are allowed to work and earn a penny by regularly performing small tasks, like collecting the eggs from the henhouse and carrying firewood. Excessive attachment to material gain, however, is regarded as character flaws. Little Jack Ford’s sharpness in pecuniary matters, his “keenness and love of money” (*LM* 19) is treated as a moral affliction. The noblest form of work is the one that a man dedicates to the women in the family. After the death of his father, ten-year-old Demi’s attempts to do odd jobs for small sums of money are heartily encouraged. His enthusiasm for work is given momentum by his desire to serve his mother and sisters. Although but “a little lad” (*LM* 264), Demi grows “manlier” after the death of his father and feels responsible for the welfare of his mother and of “the womenchildren who were left in his care” (*LM* 262, 263). As young men, most Plumfield alumni find their true vocations when they fall seriously in love and consider marriage. They give up hastily made career choices that hold out the promise of adventure but do not offer the security and steadiness a family man needs. When he makes up his mind to propose to Alice, Demi changes his mind about becoming a journalist, an unstable and financially risky profession, and finds work in an editor’s office. The only reason Tom Bangs studied medicine was to conquer Nan:

not only a hopeless plan but also an insubstantial motivation for choosing a career. When he finally finds true love in Dora, Tom gives up his medical studies and enters business. Immediately he gains stature as a man, settles down, and lives the life of a well-established businessman. It is only Dolly and George, the Harvard students, who prolong their adolescence by postponing serious considerations. Alcott would not relinquish the grudge she bears for the Ivy League college, a stronghold of American patriarchy.

There are, however, serious limitations as to what aspects of male attitudes and life prospects Alcott is willing to integrate in her utopia. Of all the boy characters perhaps Dan, the “firebrand” gets the most of her attention and the least of her authorial generosity in the plot of *Jo’s Boys*. Earlier, in *Little Men*, Dan was portrayed as a sharp, lively adolescent, but also an unruly one who was hard to control. He appears to be a creature of the wilderness rather than of civilization. He is repeatedly referred to as an “untamed creature,” “colt,” “wild hawk,” and “berserker” (*LM* 81, 219, 221, 223). Jo finally finds the soft spot in Dan’s soul and tames him by love and kindness. And yet, Dan stays an alien among New England boys and girls. He stands out not only by his adventurous nature, but also by his mien, “the alert look of one whose senses were all alive; rough in manner, full of energy, quick with word and blow, eyes full of the old fire, always watchful as if used to keep guard, and a general air of vigor and freshness.” Jo often wonders whether he has “Indian blood in him” (*JB* 48). In Dan’s figure Alcott captures a vogue emerging among American men in the post-Civil war period, an attitude that Anthony Rotundo coins as “primitive masculinity,” and defines as the self-conscious identification with Indians and the imitation of the customs of “savage” peoples as distinguishing marks of manhood (228-29). Alcott does not hesitate to acknowledge the appeal of such romantic and—considering Dan’s supposed Indian origin—racialized manliness. For example Nan, the most independent-minded girl at Plumfield, sees Dan as “the handsomest of all the boys” and has high regard for his “strong and independent” character (*JB* 80). Nevertheless, the moral perspective of *Jo’s Boys* cannot accommodate those aspects of male sexuality that evade middle-class notions of propriety. Even if Nan and the other girls admire Dan’s exotic manliness—they call him “the Spaniard”—, Jo is startled when she catches sight of the young man “eyeing [the girls] as an eagle might a flock of doves” (*JB* 68). This is, however, just a momentary impression on Jo’s part, and Alcott never explicitly returns to the issue of

Dan's assertive sexuality in the novel. Rather, she manipulates the plot in such a way that the untamed, racialized young man is ruled out as a potential match to any of the eligible middle-class girls at Plumfield. By having killed a man, and also by his inability to conform to the discipline of marriage and a profession, Dan does not fit into the social fabric of the ideal community the author has in mind.

Alcott, however, takes good care that the redemptive influence which women bear on men does not fade, lest men should lose their moral anchor. The salvation of Dan depends on Jo's unconditional motherly love and on his secret attachment to Bess, the daughter of Amy and Mr. Laurie. Dan's love for Bess must remain platonic, "a sort of dream of all that's sweet and good" (*JB* 272), a spiritual force one that uplifts the unruly young man. Although he remains forlorn and solitary, Dan finally finds a worthy purpose in life and returns to the Frontier. He joins the Montana Indians, lives among them "bravely and usefully" until he is shot in battle, defending his friends. Alcott regarded the Frontier, as most of her Anglo-American contemporaries did, as a safety valve. She relegates to a safe distance and postpones, indefinitely, the integration of those male attitudes, activities and desires that she thought were destabilizing the social order and Victorian standards of gender relations.

Concluding remarks

If middle-class American boys and young teenagers developed from little nuisances into reliable heads of family, respectable members of their community, and worthy citizens, the credit went, according to Louisa May Alcott, to their mothers and other female family members. Bringing up children and socializing males through piety and gentle influence was, in Victorian America, largely the responsibility of mothers. In *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* mothers, sisters and wives succeeded in their vocations admirably. Why then would Jo, "Mother Bhaer," admit a bit wearily: "My sons are more care every year"? Jo feels the distance increase between herself and the young men who were once in her care. The former students, now young adults, visit frequently, but Jo senses that they "seem to drift farther away from me each time they go. They *will* grow up, and I can only hold them by one little thread, which will snap at any time" (*JB* 58, emphasis in the original). Jo's concern bespeaks the anxiety of the middle-class, reformist, feminist New England woman author. While she tried hard to offer blueprints how to nurture, educate, and socialize boys

with the prospect of training virtuous citizens, Alcott could not help observing those drawbacks in male standards of behavior that kept American men from inhabiting such a utopia: lack discipline, the lure of material gain, inclination to physical violence, and assertive sexuality. *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* summarize Alcott's earnest suggestions regarding standards and principles of masculine behavior that would sustain a social environment more favorable to women.

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