

Jo's March (March 2002)

According to object-relations theorists, even after leaving the maternal matrix and achieving autonomy, the desire to revisit home and merge with the mother never leaves us. The mother and her home ever-promises “the immediate and effortless gratification of one’s desires” (Koenigsberg 35). However, after childhood, home has ambivalent and conflicting associations because it is also associated with the “loss of one’s power, the loss of one’s capacity to grow and develop. The idealized drama of oneness is, in actuality, a manifestation of a dependent, infantile attachment [. . .] which oppresses the self as it reaches toward its own powers” (38). The desire to revisit her own past, to recall memories of her own closeness to her mother and also shore up her independence from her, likely motivated Alcott to create *Little Women*, for the text is a revisitation to the long gestational period with the mother in the home and recapitulates a strategy that enabled a “little woman”—Jo Marsh—to individuate and become an adult. As females begin life with an initial estimation of the mother as someone similar to them, Jo individuates from her mother through successive internalizations of alien—of male—“objects,” which culminate with her imagining herself as distinct and separate from her.

At the end of the chapter “Jo meets Apollyon,” we find Jo asking her mother to help “contain her,” to prevent her “from flying out” (Alcott 81). Jo pleads for her mother’s help so she can become as close a replica of her (i.e., her mother) as possible. This is at least a plausible and even a likely reading of Jo’s saying, “If I’m ever half as good as you, I shall be satisfied” (80). But aware that a child can come to see her mother as an obstacle to his/her individuation, we know to pay particular attention to what her mother says to prompt this reply. Mrs. March says to Jo that “the love, respect, and confidence of my children [is] [. . .] the sweetest reward [she] [. . .] could receive for [her] [. . .] efforts to be the woman [she] [. . .] *would have them copy*” (80; emphasis added). Attending to the word “copy,” and appreciative of the child’s fears that too close an attachment to the mother means a kind of “death of self,” we are more inclined to take what Jo says *literally*: that is, we understand Jo to mean here she would be satisfied to have her mother influence half, *and only half*, of her identity. The

other half, her “bosom enemy” (80), the one her mother fears and hopes to contain, she’ll use to become enough the heavyweight that she could remain grounded and yet still prove too much to handle.

A too strong and too complete an attachment to the mother figure is represented in *Little Women* by Jo’s sister, Beth. Beth, unlike Jo, who has this “temper” (80), is a perfectly “good girl.” Alcott describes Beth as one of a cohort who are “shy and quiet,” “who sit [. . .] in corners till needed,” and who “live [. . .] for others so cheerfully” (39) they almost go unnoticed. Beth, as a homebody, as someone content to remain at home, “too bashful to go to school” (38), is the text’s best representation of death of the self. Beth’s easy acceptance of “blessings already possessed” (44), opposes Jo’s tendency to “do something very splendid” (38), and best exemplifies Mrs. March’s moral doctrine. It is no accident, then, that Alcott writes Beth’s death into the text, for to exist as Beth does, perpetually doistered, fearful, and accepting of her lot, is to not really be living. She has a persona—but a static one. She is a girl, but hardly even a little woman. Her character, as with her fate—despite the text’s praise for the many Beths in the world—is presented as something to be avoided at all costs. However, as Beth “unconsciously exercised more influence than anyone [else] in the family” (41), we know that Jo desperately has need of influences *outside* the family if she is to resist becoming, like Beth, too strongly identified with her mother’s home.

As at the end of *Little Women* Jo has her own school, with its boys, as well as her own brood of “a family of six or seven boys spring[ing] up like mushrooms” (484), she is dearly associated with fecundity, not with death. This is an appropriate representation of her because she successfully manages what Beth never attempts, and what the other March girls manage less completely: she distinguishes and detaches herself from her mother. This ending, with Jo as “matriarch” of Plumfield, with its “wilderness of boys” (484) (“poor boys as well as rich” [484]), which is also “just the place for boys (the house is big [many-roomed]” [482]), is prefigured in her interaction with her mother at the beginning of the book.

The book’s first chapter, “Playing Pilgrims,” shows the March girls encircling their mother in her chair by the fire, attending to her reading of their father’s letter. This is the scene featured on many covers of *Little Women*, and may be the image that comes to her mind when Katherine Fullerton Gerould complains that “[t]here is [all] too much love-making” (500) in the book. The tendency may be, however, to emphasize the inner world of the March women in this scene and forget to attend to the outside

world embodied in the father's letter to them. That is, we may tend to focus on the feminine aspects at the expense of the masculine, which would be a mistake, because this scene felicitously captures how Jo understands her childhood, and it is from denaturing *both* the masculine and feminine spheres in this scene that inspiration for the rest of the plot can be found.

According to the psychoanalyst Stanley Greenspan, "children can classify their emotions and emotionally relevant relationships far earlier than they can physical objects. For example, they know members of their families from those who are not members, classifying the family as a unit" (35). The family, though, as the child has spent most of his/her time interacting with and focused on the mother, is embodied in her, and thus the first conception of "other," the first alien or outsider, is one normally understood as part of the domestic circle—the father. This chapter presents us with the qualities the March girls initially, and thus also strongly, associate with "motherhood," or femininity, as well as the qualities they associate with either "fatherhood," or masculinity. The mother represents symbiosis—the close attachment to Mrs. March by the fire. The father represents individuation (he writes from a long distance away), risky self-exertion (he is "at war," and is associated with "marches" [Alcott 8]), and self-discipline (he mentions his love for them "only at the end" [8] of the letter). Further, the text not only tells us what her father explicitly writes to his daughters about, but through what it keeps mum, the girls also learn to associate the father with "dangers faced" and "homesickness conquered" (8). (We note, too, that the March girls' father commands their mother's attention [later in the text he is explicitly characterized as someone Mrs. March "obeys" (80)].) Jo understands, then, that the road to individuation, to her own "Celestial City," is to become as much like her father as she can manage. She will attempt, therefore, to inculcate a copy of her father inside herself—i.e., she will internalize sources of his real maleness so she can gradually replace her temporary and inferior way of distinguishing herself from her mother: donning herself in a tom-boy persona.

True, these girls are not infants; they presumably have a past understanding of their father as someone living within the home. But as I believe the rest of the text shows that the initial impression we receive of the March mother and father is the template for Jo's individuation, and as the text makes the beginning of *Little Women* also the beginning of each of the March girl's subsequent "Pilgrim's Progress," my argument is that it is best to understand this initial impression of the father as the one Alcott carries with her as she develops the journeys of the girls'.

With a reference to a “true Celestial City” (10), the first chapter ends with Mrs. March offering advice Jo chooses to misinterpret. Mrs. March says, “[n]ow my little pilgrims, suppose you begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far on you can get before father comes home” (10). Mrs. March often speaks of each of her children’s Pilgrim’s Progress as if it is a journey they must undertake alone, but the second chapter, “Merry Christmas,” has her accompanying them (in earnest) on an encounter with the outside world. It is in opposition to this, to her mother’s own path, with its dearly limited and delimited association with the world outside the home, that Jo undertakes to see how far on she *can* in fact get.

Mrs. March takes the children on a “maternal inquiry” (7) to tend to a poor starving German family. Mrs. March’s interaction with the outside world—the only instance of it we are offered a substantive look at (outside of her interaction with her daughters in their own homes, that is)—is associated, then, with back streets (taken so as to remain unseen), poverty (“a poor, bare, miserable room” [15] for a house), a mother and her girls (i.e., no boys or men), as well as a giving away of their Christmas dinner (15). Mrs. March’s dictum that it is better “to enjoy the blessings already possessed, and [to] try to deserve them, lest they should be taken away entirely [. . .] instead of increased” (44), is subverted in the text because her own attempt to deserve blessings leads precisely to a *decrease*, a *taking away* of their precious Christmas dinner. Jo is given early on in the text a representative example of what the real ends of this “old woman’s advice” (44) are. This contradiction between Mrs. March’s moral lessons and their results—between her fiction and reality—is actually quite a gift: it helps Jo imagine a way of relating to the outside world which distinguishes her from her mother. And so, at the end of chapter two, we find Jo wanting to know more about the grandson of Mr. Laurence—their next-door neighbor, with the “big house” (21). This is Laurie, the boy who helped procure for the March family a very nice Christmas dinner after all.

Before exploring how Laurie is the first of a succession of males that Jo encounters, defeats, and grows from, with the aid once again of Stanley Greenspan I will briefly emphasize the significance for children of their initial associations of quantities of time (such as “soon” and “a long time”), distance (such as “next-door” and “faraway”), and size (such as “small” and “big”), with both the mother and the father and their respective environments. According to Greenspan, “[w]hether positive or negative, nearly all of children’s early affects involve the persons on whom they depend on so completely for their very survival. [. . .] As [children] [. . .] grow

and further explore their world, emotions help them comprehend even what appear to be physical and mathematical relationships [i.e., time and distance]” (19). He continues: “Mathematicians and physicists may manipulate abstruse symbols representing space, time, and quantity, but they first understood these entities as [. . .] children” (20). Greenspan would have us attend very closely to children’s early experience of variations in time, distance, and size, especially as they relate to children’s experience with their parents and their homes, as they will serve as the foundation for experiencing the world as they grow up. For our purposes, he helps us imagine *how* Jo conceives *what* is required to see herself as an adult.

In the letter to his family, Jo’s father acknowledges that for a child “a year seems very long to wait before [he] [. . .] see[s] them” (Alcott 8). Jo therefore has as an early feeling associated with things she wants (i.e., the return of her father): obtaining them involves an extension of time that *feels* overlong. Further, the anticipation of “a nice long letter” (8) from father and his strange world of “camp life, marches, and military news” (8), likely makes her father’s world seem as distant as an imaginary Celestial City (or, rather, a City of Destruction) would be to the March girls. Even within their own home, in which they replicate a journey from a City of Destruction to a Celestial City, they must “travel through the house from the cellar [. . .] up, up, to the house-top” (9). Jo’s early psyche, then, is set to understand the distance from where she is—firmly within the maternal matrix—to where she wants to be—securely established outside of it—as requiring a succession of stages, each greater than the other (“up, up”), which takes time to unfold and involves movement to faraway places.

Laurie represents the first step of Jo’s journey of individuation. He is but a boy, he lives just next door, and he is readily understood—appreciatively, yet still diminishingly—by her mother “as looking like a young gentleman” (22). So Mrs. March, thinking him harmless and “lik[ing] his manners” (22), encourages her girls to go visit him. However, Laurie, though not seen as a threat by Mrs. March, is still identified by “one of the girls” as being remote (he is “shut up when he isn’t riding or walking” [21]): he turned down an invite by the March girls to a party, and seemed little interested in speaking to them (21). At least to the March girls, Laurie, though a boy, still represents an other from the outside they have been unable to assimilate within their familiar world—he is somewhat frightening to them. Jo recognizes Laurie as possessing some of this male otherness (his remoteness, his restraint), and therefore aims to distinguish herself from her timid siblings (and the maternal home) by bridging the gap that currently exists between them. That is, she aims to transform

Laurie, the-stranger-on-the-other-side-of-the-fence, into Laurie, the-friendly-next-door-neighbor.

Jo is already the only March sister who has managed to even talk to him. She says they “talked capitally,” but only “over the fence” (21). Not having engaged with him face to face, Laurie still represents a challenge, even to brave Jo. In fact, when they do meet face to face, the encounter at first surprises her, and it takes a short while before she feels “at her ease” (27). Jo is described as “stor[ing] [. . .] up” (28) what Laurie says, and of taking in how he looks so she can best “describe him to the girls, for they had no brothers, very few male cousins, and [thus] boys were almost unknown creatures to them” (29). The result of Jo, in effect, ingesting him, so as to better describe him to her sisters, is that her sisters get some sense of Laurie’s strange maleness *from her*. Within Jo’s being, then, she comes to possess some of his masculinity. And as her intake of maleness involves risking a conversation with a male stranger, it also has about it a sense of realness vastly different from and superior to her self-constructed tomboy and theatrical masks. Further, Jo’s dispensing of this masculineness into the March home recalls the Marsh girls’ eager anticipation of their father’s letter, with her, in this instance, playing the part of the letter. That is, while only the carrier, the vehicle for the message—and therefore not yet the source of the male voice—she is no longer simply just one of the girls receiving it second-hand through her mother (’s voice).

Making claim to Laurie is more than child’s play, as there is more to him than his simply being a rather well-mannered little gentleman. Rather, as Laurie “thrashe[s]” (28) boys, and as he has been to faraway places, such as Switzerland and Paris, and aims to live just as faraway (“in Italy [. . .] to enjoy [himself] [. . .] in [his] [. . .] own way” [29]), Laurie has about him some of the associations Jo has of her father’s civil war environment (its soldiers, and—even though Laurie lives just next door—its distance from home). He also seems to have, because he is a male, the latent ability to traverse long distances—the same ability Jo is denied, not simply because she is a girl, but because of what being a girl comes to be associated with inside the March family home. We might expect, then, that if Jo comes to possess some of Laurie’s power—his male essence, if you will—two things would likely follow: 1) we would expect Jo to be then capable of attempting even bolder encounters with older, more formidable men; and 2) we would expect a depiction of Laurie as if he were depleted of his masculine energy, *and* as if it were the result of Jo’s own doing, at some subsequent point in the text. And both of these developments do in fact occur, as they come to

know each other as friends.

Though Mrs. March is quite comfortable with Laurie, she is not so much so with his grandfather, Mr. Laurence. Mrs. March preaches to her girls that they be content with what they have—which dearly means the plain and unassuming—while Mr. Laurence is the rich neighbor with the big house. She describes him, further, as an “odd old gentleman” (21). Moreover, though Mrs. March encouraged her girls to give away their dinner, she is well pleased with Mr. Laurence’s gift to the March family of a plentiful Christmas dinner. The text draws attention to how the girls react upon caught first sight of it. We are told “they stared first at the table and then at their mother, who looked as if she enjoyed it immensely” (21). *They notice that*, despite their mother saying the dinner remained because she “could not refuse” (21) it, she finds herself, despite herself, grateful and pleased before it. The feast is described as being as unfamiliar to the March household as boys are, with “anything so fine as this [. . .] unheard of since the departed days of plenty” (20). Mr. Laurence, then, is someone embodying a large extension of time (with his old age), faraway distances in time (reminding them, with his provision of a Christmas dinner, of their past), and a position of power over Mrs. March: he represents a stronger sense of maleness, a closer representation to Jo of her own father, and is therefore the logical next figure for her to overcome on her own preferred pilgrim’s progress.

Laurie is himself overcome by Jo when she attempts something he seems scared of: a confrontation with Mr. Laurence, while Mr. Laurence is on rampage. Before Jo’s own confrontation with Mr. Laurence, when Jo, in reference to meeting Mr. Laurence, declares she is “not afraid of anything,” we are told that Laurie “privately thought she would have good reason to be a trifle afraid of the old gentleman, if she met him in some of his moods” (51). Jo admits to herself that she is “a little bit afraid of him” (52); and, as with Jo’s initial face-to-face encounter with Laurie, when she finally meets his grandfather, she *is* caught off-guard. Looking at a portrait of Mr. Laurence, and attempting to convince herself, as she had before with Laurie, that there are grounds for expecting their encounter to be a pleasant one, she comments, “He isn’t as handsome as *my* Mr. Laurence, but I like him” (52). Mr. Laurence overhears her and challenges her by asking, “So you’re not afraid of me, hey?” (53). The text shows her alarmed at first, but also as eventually finding herself more at ease (with him) (53). Jo has successfully met Mr. Laurence and begun to make of him, a friend: shortly after just having met him, Mr. Laurence tells her to “go on being neighbourly” (53).

The gap between Jo and her sisters has grown larger. Mr. Laurence, after all, is the

master of the Laurence household, known previously to the March girls as the one who “keeps his grandson shut up when he isn’t riding or walking his tutor, and makes him study dreadful hard” (21). Jo not only is in possession of a greater story to tell her sisters (“she imagined herself telling the story at home” [54]), she is also directly responsible, by bridging the gap between the two families, for the March family going “visiting in a body [,] [with each finding] [. . .] something very attractive in the big house on the other side of the hedge” (55), and indirectly responsible for Mr. Laurence’s gift of his grand piano to Beth. Laurie was partially responsible for the provisioning of the Christmas dinner, and Jo, as if drawing upon his essence but making more of it, becomes associated with a greater gift to the March household than even that. Jo the messenger is becoming Jo the provider.

Jo will soon attempt the encounter that Laurie fears—to confront his father “in one of his moods,” and the text characterizes Laurie as slowly being drained of his masculinity. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser notes that “Laurie’s induction in the female circle, ‘The Busy Bee Society,’ has apparently feminized him” (52), with “Jo even teach[ing] him to knit” (52). And it is of course Jo who introduces Laurie into the March’s feminine world. Laurie is described as “play[ing the part of] lord of the manor” (59), just as Jo once played the part of Roderigo. While Laurie “is always playing truant, and running over to [play with] the Marches” (59), Jo is increasingly associated with Mr. Laurence. She is described as “brows[ing] over the new library voraciously and [as] convuls[ing] the old gentleman with her criticisms” (59). Laurie, under the influence of Beth, resolves to sacrifice his ambitions. He says, “I’ll let my castle go, and stay with the dear old gentleman while he needs me” (146). Jo, on the other hand, as if in possession of Laurie’s now lost fighting spirit—and as if the direct result of her absorption of Mr. Laurence’s “tremendous will” (53) while under his influence—is ready to confront Mr. Laurence while in one “of his moods” (53).

This important encounter follows Laurie’s telling Jo of how he was “shaken” (211) by his grandfather, and of the reason for the abuse. The text, in showing how she manipulates this information from him, draws attention to Jo’s power over him. Jo “knew how to manage him” (211); and Jo, unlike Laurie, whose plan is to “slip off” (212), garners the courage to confront this very angry Mr. Laurence. It is an unnerving encounter for her. Mr. Laurence is described as “look[ing] so alarming, and [speaking] [. . .] so sharply, that Jo would have gladly run away if she could [but] he stood at the foot, a lion in the path, so she had to stay and brave it out” (214). He yells, “You hussy, how dare you talk in that way?” (215). He threatens again to

“thrash [Laurie] with [his] [. . .] own hands” (214); but though “[t]he threat sounded awful [,] [it] [. . .] did not alarm Jo” (214). Jo knows now that she not only has the ability to “shield him [Laurie]” (214) but to successfully “attack” Mr. Laurence. Jo, in fact, wins the day (216), through blunt truth: she tells him that Laurie will run away if he doesn’t ease up. After her encounter, Laurie, amazed, exclaims, “[w]hat a good fellow you are, Jo!,” and asks, “[d]id you get blown up?” (216).

Jo has managed what Laurie could not, and her stature as a “fellow,” her increasing association with and integration of maleness, is becoming more and more real. This encounter, so close to the end of the first part of *Little Women*, serves as its *dimax*. As we shall explore, Mr. Laurence is increasingly depicted as both kind and harmless, as if all his will and ferocity were drained in his loss to Jo. Jo, on the other hand, has finally “got [. . .] by the lions” (57) in the path to her “Palace Beautiful” (57). At the end of part one, we witness Jo’s, from having realized a goal presaged much earlier in the text, having grown a great deal in the absence of her father.

Not long into part two we encounter Jo, even within her own home, capable of a powerful isolation, of “falling into a vortex” (265) while writing. She is described here in much the same way Laurie and Mr. Laurence were while still alien to the March family. Specifically, the way her family reacts to her mimics, with their meekness and with their interest, the way Jo chose to initiate her *dimactic* encounter with Mr. Laurence. Indeed, her family is described “during these periods [. . .] [as] ke[eping] their distance, merely popping in their heads, and when her cap “was drawn low upon the forehead,” they “dare[d not] address [her]” (265). The narrative tone is mock-serious, but is better understood as at least half-serious: Jo’s writing is no joke—it is soon to become a source of substantial provisioning for the March family.

Soon Jo “electrifies” (268) her family with the presentation of the check she received for being a prizewinner. Owing to her possession of a skill associated with manly genius, she is becoming a major contributor to the family income—i.e., she is already a kind of father for the March family. At this point in the novel, however, the father has returned, and he informs her she has further yet to travel. He tells her to “[a]im at the highest” (268). Jo, though, through her successful management and inculcation of those nearest her, has already grown significantly, and soon sets out to complete her individuation from the maternal home: she sets forth to obtain for herself someone who closely resembles her own father.

Opposite to the sort of transformation, this growth in prowess, we see in Jo, Mr. Laurence is increasingly depicted as a kind old man. Mr. Laurence, having lost his

ferocity, now seems feeble and harmless. He is depicted at the beginning of part two as “shrugg[ing] and smil[ing]” (253), and as having to “settle [. . .] himself in his easy-chair to rest, after the excitement of the morning” (253). He has become the antiquated old man associated with days of old (implicit in his early association with Samuel Johnson’s “The Rambler”), while Jo is now ready to embrace the new world (also implicit in her being associated with Dickens and his “Pickwick Papers”). Her next journey will be the last one she will need to undertake. New York is for her the apex of her journey; it is the Celestial city wherein she meets Mr. Bhaer.

Jo has traveled far on her journey toward independence; the text tells us that the result of her labors—her prize-winning story—“had seemed to open a way which might, after long travelling, and much up-hill work lead to this delightful *chateau en Espagne*” (345). And, as the narrator wonders “whether [it was the result of] the study of Shakespeare, or the natural instinct of a woman for what was honest, brave and strong,” Jo goes beyond creating imaginary heroes (perhaps an accurate characterization of Jo’s retrospective estimation of both Laurie and Mr. Laurence) to “discovering a live hero” (350). The text is now referring to Jo as a woman, not as a *little* woman. And her intellect is no longer playfully—that is, essentially disingenuously—identified as “genius.”

Instead, Jo’s intelligence is given right due, as it draws her to Bhaer’s own striking intellect. Bhaer tends to young children in this, for him, foreign locale: he employs himself as a teacher while in New York. Though he seems “homely” (351) in America, he was an “honored Professor in Berlin” (351), “esteemed for learning and integrity in his native city” (351). Here is a man, then, who is away from home, who is deemed a heroic-figure in his homeland, but who assumes in America a more modest role as a teacher of young children, and who approximates her father’s own age at the time of his writing his letter to his girls: he is made to seem just like the March-family father as he was portrayed at the beginning of the text. Their father, we remember, was initially described as someone “too old to be draughted” (8), and as one who, though treated by his wife and children as almost divine while at home, chose to serve as a chaplain, tending to the needs of young men on civil war battlefields.

As was the case with Laurie and Mr. Laurence, the text draws attention to a gap between Jo and Bhaer she must find a way to bridge. With Laurie, the gap was his apparent refusal to either talk to or associate with the March girls; with Mr. Laurence, it was his formidable temper; and with Bhaer—as he represents her future

husband—it is his age. Jo tells her mother that since “[Bhaer’s] most forty [. . .] [.] it’s no harm” (334). She makes their age difference a reason to become more familiar with him. Any of the other March girls would see Bhaer’s age and his unmarried status sufficient to declare him a potential source of danger, and thus someone to be kept at a distance. But as we saw with Laurie and Mr. Laurence, Jo is one to make friends out of strangers. She does this by taking what she knows of them and managing this knowledge so it serves to legitimize and spur on their acquaintance. The only difference here is that Bhaer becomes her lover, not her friend; and this outcome is foretold in Jo’s initial description of him to her mother.

Jo is turning twenty-five and believes she has nothing to show for it. The narrator corrects her, saying, “Jo was mistaken in that, there was a good deal to show” (440). Jo believes she will be a spinster; but this too is an indication, not of the bleakness of her upcoming future but rather that she is now ready to realize her goal. She had internalized early on (from her study of her father) that a goal is reached just after feeling overlong, perhaps never to occur. At this point in the novel, Jo has in several aspects mimicked her father as he seemed to her in the letter he sent. He was far away; she has gone to live in New York. He was associated with battlefields; she braves an encounter with Mr. Dashwood at the “Weekly Volcano” office—and this office, which publishes nothing “but thrilling tales” (349), also reminds us of her father’s “camp life, marches, and military news” (8). Of course, her father “said little of the dangers faced, and the hardships endured” (8), but his reticence then, for fear of unnerving his family, surely worked to firm up any sense they would have of him as being involved in dangerous but still wondrous war environments. For her purposes, her age is not helpful in helping her determine her appropriateness for someone like Bhaer. The key determinant is how well she resembles, how well she approximates, the sense of her father she carries before her.

When Jo brings Bhaer home, she introduces him with “a face and tone of such irrepressible pride and pleasure [. . .] that she might well have blown a trumpet and opened the door with a flourish” (451)—that is, *very appropriately*, as Jo, with Bhaer at her side, is close to her long-sought triumph. Mrs March believes Bhaer is certainly a “good” man, but her husband sees him as more—that he is “wise” (454). Superficially, this is not meant to be a struggle between them but more concurrence—but it is actually, for the text had previously articulated the dash for us, indicating that “if greatness is what a wise man has defined it to be [. . .] then [Jo’s] friend [. . .] Bhaer was not good, but great” (353). Mr. March ascribes him as the highest sort of

man, as a man like himself, actually—and therefore as someone Mrs. March is almost instructed to interact with in a worshipful, obedient manner, and come to think of as no less than her husband's equal. While Laurie was sporting, but a boy; while Mr. Laurence formidable, but an old man; Bhaer is not only “good, but great” (353). He is a “kindred spirit” (451) to Mr. March: he fully embodies the early sense Jo has of her father.

Jo's acquisition of father-Marsh-seeming Mr. Bhaer enables her to seem, not so much her mother's daughter, someone sprouted *from her*, but instead, a rival *from the outside*—and one competent enough to challenge and even displace her. But to effectively mount this transgression, this challenge (Mrs. March, we remember, is depicted as controlling the children's access to their father, i.e., she reads her father's letter to them), required a journey. Bhaer is the man she needed to possess all along to fully individuate from her mother, but which, to be felt as a liberating acquisition, as if finally having reached the Celestial City, required a long drawn-out journey, broken into several stages. Soon she absorbs even Bhaer within herself, as he merges into the Plumfield estate Jo inherits. And as with all others in her path, while Jo shows signs of an increase in her status and power from her intake, Bhaer shows signs of having lost much of his own to her. In Bhaer's case, he deflates: at first his pronounced cosmopolitan identity and great intellect were emphasized (he was a professor from Berlin), but later he is rounded out by his possessing Germanic pride and his loving folk songs—as becoming in his own sort of soft way, country and common.

To many readers and scholars, the key regression in status at the end the novel is that incurred upon *Jo*, not to anyone else. In marrying Bhaer, she shifts away from being a successful writer in New York, backs away from her life's greatest accomplishment. However, Ann Murphy is one who believes Jo's marriage to Bhaer represents a kind of triumphant subversive challenge to the world. She says, “[i]n marrying Professor Bhaer, and hence committing herself to her work rather than to romantic love, Jo creates anew possibilities for herself as a member of a community and as a profession in her own right. [. . .] Jo March achieves full professional existence—[though] at the apparent cost of literary expression [. . .]—through her marriage to her father-professor” (569).

Murphy also believes that Jo's marriage is a triumph over her (Jo's) own mother. *That* she triumphs is dear when we compare Jo's fate to Meg's. Meg represents the “journey” “empowered” by selflessness; Jo represents selfish full individuation from

her mother. Meg's passivity leads to a marriage which takes her out of the family home but which leaves her a marginal figure who "disappears completely from sight in the text," living "in a home so minuscule it is hard to imagine adult human beings living in it" (571). Jo, on the other hand, through sheer boldness and her continuous association with and possession of properties opposite her mother's, best manages to "individuat[e] fully [. . .] while enmeshed in Marmee's loving, coercive socializing, maternal bonds" (575). Jo, unlike Meg, is most visible at the end of the text, both dramatically, in creating the story lines (with her presiding over a boy's school) for the next series of books, and spatially, in inhabiting the grandest mansion. From her continuous association with boys and men, with the affluent and the large, and with her engagement with the masculine world outside her home, she has distinguished herself from her mother's world of girls, poverty, and back-alleyway visits to one-roomed homes. Further, Jo has superseded her mother: Jo, at novel's end, becomes the matriarch young children will have to contend with and attempt to individuate from.

Murphy summarizes *Little Women's* attractiveness to generations of young women readers as owing to it "not merely [offering] a quest for ethical development [. . .] but a narrative of subjectivity that must accommodate both the active seduction of maternal oneness and the compelling desire for separation" (575). She sees *Little Women*, therefore, because it addresses a problem that is not historically isolated but rather fixed out of the fact of our being human, as of timeless relevance. She draws critical inspiration from such notable Freudians as Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein, who attend to the "pre-Oedipal phase at the process of psychosexual differentiation" (Showalter 258) and know to focus on the role of the mother "as the primary [. . .] fulcrum of the private and public" for the March children. Inspired by different theorists, I hope to have offered a reading of *Little Women* inspired by a similar vein of thought, but one not as yet as richly mined. Specifically, I hope to have shown how *Little Women* brings to the fore a strong impression of two different worlds—the private home, associated with the mother, and the public world, associated with the father—and how this initial, powerful impression of the distinctiveness and separateness of these two worlds (especially in their felt spatial and temporal aspects) supplies means on out of the maternal fold. In my view, Jo does so through an enlargement of her sense of self, thereby establishing herself as her own "Mother Bhaer" (485). This may have been Alcott's own story, or it may have remained her dream. Either way, the sheer fact of so many successive generations of

appreciative readers, makes clear that it was not hers alone.

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