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“There is Power in a Woman’s Wit and Will” : Womanly, Wit, Will, and Wiles in Gothic Works of Louisa May Alcott

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Abstract

Central to the Female Gothic is a woman searching for her identity in the confinements of society. Utilizing Louisa May Alcott's Gothic works, I will examine the extent to which the formation of an identity is subjected to internalized forces of normalcy. In "A Whisper in the Dark" (1863), "V.V.; Plots and Counterplots" (1865), and "Behind a Mask, or a Woman's Power" (1866), Alcott explores themes of feminine identity, power, and sexuality. Alcott both subverts and adheres to gender roles to reveal their falsehood. Furthermore, Alcott exposes the effect of the patriarchal order on both men and women by destabilizing the feminine and masculine gender binary. Throughout the texts, the heroines wear a mask to adhere to nineteenth-century feminine ideals because the oppressive patriarchal structures motivate their subterfuge; however, there is a split between the outer appearance of adherence to nineteenth-century expectations and the inner psychology of the heroine.

The heroine's use of manipulation through performance and language demonstrate a prevailing desire for agency. In the end, Alcott does not condemn her heroines for being manipulative; instead, she implicates the societal structures that cause the heroine to don a mask for survival. Due to the limited possibilities for women, Alcott's gothic heroines appear more sympathetic as a result of their oppressive situations. By examining Alcott's works with a feminist lens, specifically utilizing Judith Butler and Hélène Cixous, I will analyze how Alcott's deconstruction of the gender binary through her gothic heroines reveals the paradox of performative aspects of gender, which must remain within the confines of the patriarchal structure in order for the woman to gain agency.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

“There is Power in a Woman’s Wit and Will”

Womanly, Wit, Will, and Wiles in the Gothic Works of Louisa May Alcott

by

Alexandra Ortea

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

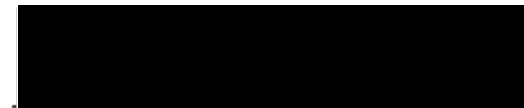
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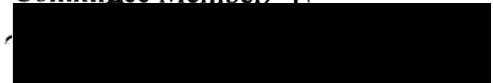
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“THERE IS POWER IN A WOMAN’S WIT AND WILL”
WOMANLY, WIT, WILL, AND WILES IN GOTHIC WORKS OF LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts

by
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Introduction

Constructing an identity within the confinements of society is challenging, but to what extent is the formation of an identity subjected to internalized forces of normalcy? Central to the female gothic, and more widely to the works of female authors of the nineteenth century, is the exploration of how a female's identity is subjected to the influences of patriarchal culture. In "The Female Gothic," Juliann E. Fleenor identifies gothic conventions utilized by female authors that depict the effect of patriarchal demands on the heroine: the split personality of the heroine, appearance versus reality of the heroine's situation, and spatial imagery that is expressive of her inner psychology (15). In "A Whisper in the Dark" (1863), "V.V.; Plots and Counterplots" (1865), and "Behind a Mask, or a Woman's Power" (1866), Alcott does not depict horror through the heroine's power to manipulate others; instead, these tales reveal the horrific gender and class structures that motivate the heroine's rebellion.

Due to the limited roles available for women, the heroines in Alcott's works appear more sympathetic as a result of their oppressive situations; their use of manipulation through performance demonstrates a prevailing desire for agency. Alcott deconstructs the gender binary and its connection to power. In "Behind a Mask," Jean Muir's chances of financial stability are nonexistent since she is a thirty-year-old divorced actress. However, disguised as a nineteen-year-old governess, Jean is ultimately able to achieve her goal of marrying a wealthy Coventry. Similarly, Virginie Varens in "V.V." orchestrates elaborate plots in order to secure a good name and fortune; although she is unsuccessful in her marriage plot, she still escapes the oppressive patriarchy by her own hand. On the other hand, Sybil in "A Whisper in the Dark" is the youngest heroine and due to an outspoken and rebellious nature, she is imprisoned in an insane asylum by her uncle. Overall, subverted gender roles allow the female protagonist to have a "victory" at the

end of the text, but her “win” is framed within the boundaries of the patriarchal order. The victory, then, can be seen as a critique of the confines of society, emphasizing problems implicit within the patriarchal structure. The performative aspect of language becomes internalized by social conventions; they can be subverted, but they are still internalized from social constructs. Thus, the performativity of language and gesture serves to adhere to social conventions; however, even when the performative serves to undermine the gender dichotomy, the underlying mechanisms of the performative are crafted from internalized gender ideals.

Womanly Wit, Wills, & Wiles

Building from Freud’s concept of the unconscious, Judith Butler considers the disconnect between a performed idealization of gender, which is produced and influenced by internalized societal forces, and the unconscious that fails to recognize the intangibility of identity. Butler questions the extent to which an impersonation is performed by an autonomous subject:

First, what is meant by understanding gender as an impersonation? Does this mean that one puts on a mask or persona, that there is a ‘one’ who precedes that ‘putting on,’ who is something other than its gender from the start? Or does this miming, this impersonating precede and form the ‘one,’ operating as its formative precondition rather than its dispensable artifice? (“Critically Queer” 615)

The paradox highlighted by Butler is whether an autonomous being exists outside of gender constraints or whether heteronormative expectations create the illusion of the autonomous being who chooses to act within the constraints. In “Behind a Mask,” Jean Muir challenges Butler’s concept of the lack of “internal core” where identity is solely a “fabrication manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs” (“Bodily Inscriptions” 110). Through an awareness of the

performativity of gender,¹ Jean Muir is able to manipulate the family. Therefore, Jean demonstrates an autonomous core behind the mask.

Even though Jean demonstrates agency, she still embodies sentimental notions of feminine passivity and domesticity in order to charm the Coventry family. Through “exaggeratedly parodic (‘masked’) performances of female virtue and charm,” Jean infiltrates the unsuspecting Coventry family (Elliot 299). Jean Muir arrives at the Coventry estate as a “pale-faced girl in her plain black dress, with no ornament but a little silver cross at her throat” (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 363). By embodying expected feminine virtues,² Mrs. Coventry is “quite won by the modest, domestic graces of the new governess” and also refers to Jean as “prudent and proper” (Alcott 365, 366). Despite remaining passive on the surface, hints of Jean’s “true” self are revealed when “the lines of the mouth betrayed strength” (Alcott 363). Once she is alone and away from the gaze of the Coventry family, she begins her unmasking to reveal her grotesque appearance: “Still sitting on the floor she unbound and removed the long abundant braids from her head, wiped the pink from her face, took out several pearly teeth, and slipping off her dress appeared herself, indeed, a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least” (Alcott 367). During her private moments, Jean reveals the discord between the performance and her true self, demonstrating the “fatigue, despair, and rage which this performance and her economic situation cause her” (Elliot 299).

According to Butler, ascribed characteristics of femininity produce a divide between the psyche and appearance: “the distinction between the ‘inside’ truth of femininity, considered as psychic disposition or ego-core, and the ‘outside’ truth, considered as appearance or presentation, produces a contradictory formation of gender in which no fixed ‘truth’ can be established” (“Critically Queer” 617). In “V.V.,” Virginie’s split self is demonstrated in the

scene where she interacts with her son: “There was no acting here, for genuine mother love transformed Mrs. Vane from her usual inexplicable self into a simple woman, whose heart was bound up with the little creature whom she loved with the passionate fondness of an otherwise cold and superficial nature” (Alcott, “V.V.” 109). The discord between the split of outer performance and inner psychology demonstrates the guise of identity. In other words, Jean’s disguise as governess and Virginie’s as Mrs. Vane reveal a split between their true self and one constructed to “fit” into nineteenth-century expectations of women in order to obtain a goal. Through acting, Jean Muir is able to control her fate and not surrender to her class rank: “. . . but this girl, having beauty, wit, and a bold spirit, took her fate into her own hands, and became an actress” (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 427). Isabell Klaiber explains that Jean’s “knowledge of how she herself is perceived and categorized by others according to established gender stereotypes, and her keen insight in others’ dispositions or interests” gives her power (217). Klaiber’s analysis can be extended to apply to Virginie as well: Virginie is also an actress who uses her feminine wiles to seduce and trick men. Overall, the performative aspect of gender is regulated by society, especially by class rank; however, Jean and Virginie use their knowledge of societal expectations to manipulate others.

Significantly, Alcott subverts the male gaze by giving the female gaze power. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey identifies women as inhabiting an “exhibitionist role” in which the female becomes the sex object where the male can project his sexual desires (837).³ However, Alcott reverses Mulvey’s theory by giving her heroines the power to observe the males as well. In “Recollections of Louisa May Alcott” (1982) Maria S. Porter, a lifelong friend of Alcott, describes Alcott’s keen judgment of character: “Miss Alcott had the keenest insight into character. She was rarely mistaken in her judgment of people. She was intolerant of

all shams, and despised pretentious persons" (68). Alcott's own keen observation is reflected in her gothic heroines. When Muir is first introduced, she is not only an object of the gaze, but she has the power to view the family as well: "For an instant no one stirred, the governess had time to see and be seen before a word was uttered. All looked at her, and she cast on the household group a keen glance that impressed them curiously; then her eyes fell, and bowing slightly she walked in" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 362). Jean's observations give her a sense of power over the family, but she masks this power behind submission. Thus, Jean quickly turns from the object of the gaze to unlocking the power of observation, effectively reducing the men to "passive spectators" (Elbert 131). Elizabeth Schewe identifies Muir's power as stemming from her body: "Muir's powers are always located in the body—whether it is her gaze . . . her hand . . . or her torso (as in the tableaux)" (584). However, Schewe overlooks the power of Jean's voice: "She colored beautifully, hesitated, then spoke out in a clear, steady voice which was her greatest charm" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 381). Jean's observations inform her manipulation of language. For Alcott's heroines, keen observation is the underlying mechanism of successful subterfuge.

Virginie also utilizes notions of femininity to manipulate others. When Virginie is first introduced as a Parisian dancer, she continues to be an object of the gaze even after leaving the stage. Allan watches her performance and waits for her exit: "Suddenly, framed in the dark doorway, upon which the young man's eyes were fixed, appeared an apparition well worth waiting for" (Alcott, "V.V." 82). Since Virginie is aware that she is the object of Allan's fixated gaze, she utilizes touch to influence him into marrying her: "She finished the sentence with a caress more eloquent than any words" (Alcott 83). Similarly to Jean Muir, Virginie's power stems from her body. Virginie, then, reverses the male gaze by employing the power of her eyes to manipulate Allan: "The most disloyal lover could not have withstood the pleading look, the

gesture of appeal which accompanied her words..." (Alcott 85). Following her interaction with Allan, he proposes to her and marries her that same night. Furthermore, when Virginie transforms into Mrs. Vane, years after Allan's death, she again utilizes the power of her eyes to cause Diana to pity her: "in her eyes was a look of mingled pain, grief, and despair . . . Diana, made generous by the assurance of her own happiness, for the first time felt a touch of pity for the woman whom she had been both envious and jealous" (Alcott 97). By creating sympathy, Virginie is able to turn Diana against Douglas. Overall, the power of observation helps the heroine to manipulate her victims.

Whereas Jean Muir and Virginie use spectacle to their advantage, Sybil becomes a spectacle in "A Whisper in the Dark." At the beginning of the text, Sybil states, "[I] scanned my companion covertly [but] his countenance was hard to read" (Alcott, "A Whisper in the Dark" 32). On the other hand, Jean Muir instantly deciphers the family after meeting them: "Next day I began my task, and having caught a hint of the character of each, tried my power over them" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 425). Sybil has the potential to become a keen observer like Virginie and Jean; however, her observations are trampled by the men who oppress her. Sybil is submissive to the gaze of others: "Hannah, Dr. Karnac, my uncle, and a gentleman whom I knew to be his lawyer entered, and surveyed me as if I were a spectacle" (Alcott, "A Whisper in the Dark" 53). Moreover, Sybil cannot overpower the physician, symbolic of the rational authoritative male figure: "Dr. Karnac's eye had a magnetic power over me . . . I could not resist it, and paused fixed and fascinated by that repellant yet potent glance" (Alcott 53). She is subjugated by the gaze of the men as opposed to wielding power over them by her own gaze: "[my uncle] was observing me with a scrutiny as keen as my own had been" (Alcott 33). Also, she describes Guy's eyes to be "quite as keen as his father's" (Alcott 36). Surrounded by

powerful men who reduce Sybil to an object of desire, Sybil fails to destabilize the male gaze because she does not possess Jean's "fatal powers of reading character" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 397).

Moreover, the power of Alcott's gothic heroine lies in her ability to incite conflict within the household; through acting, the heroine influences the actions of others. In "V.V.," Virginie's goal is to cause a rift between Diana and Douglas. During the horseback outing, Douglas bends down to fix Mrs. Vane's shoe while Diana "observes the scene in the avenue with ill-concealed anxiety" (Alcott, "V.V." 102). Then, Mrs. Vane tells Douglas to shun her, cleverly disguising her intentions of any ill-will towards Diana. Her subtlety helps her gain power over Douglas, who no longer has controlled reactions in her presence: "An involuntary sigh escaped him; Mrs. Vane brightened instantly. . . Douglas ungloved and offered her his hand, with an impulsive gesture" (Alcott 103-104). Mrs. Vane's expertly sets the scene, with Diana as the audience, to reveal a budding relationship between herself and Douglas. She also removes any suspicions of her motives, which causes Douglas to desire her more. Similarly, Jean Muir is engaged in a power play with Lucia to test their influence over Gerald. Jean utilizes the same tactic as Virginie: pretend to avoid the man while simultaneously causing an attraction to develop. Jean is also successful in her conquest: "When she had tormented Lucia and tempted Coventry long enough, she quietly asserted her supremacy in a way which astonished her rival" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 407). Jean's motive for creating rivalry differs from Virginie: Virginie must eliminate Diana as competition because the Earl is her only hope for a title and financial security whereas Jean Muir wants to teach Gerald and Lucia a lesson.

Unlike Jean and Virginie, Sybil is not influencing others because she lacks the ability to manipulate language for her own purpose. Sybil's uncle is the one who possesses the power of

language: "Her uncle's duplicity is reflected in his use of ambiguous language, his encouragement of false interpretations" (Carpenter 32). On the other hand, in "Behind a Mask," Jean Muir capitalizes on ambiguity by leaving her thoughts and actions open to interpretation; her language, accompanied by bodily gestures, is deliberate. Thus, the men create conflict as a result of their assumptions: "Neither of the young men could have explained why that hurried glance affected them as it did, but each felt conscious of a willful desire to oppose the other" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 382). Out of the three heroines, Jean Muir is the most successful at inciting conflict because she wins over the entire family:

She amused, interested, and won Edward with her wit and womanly sympathy. She made Lucia respect and envy her for her accomplishments, and piqued indolent Gerald by her persistent avoidance of him, while Sir John was charmed with her respectful deference and the graceful little attentions she paid him in a frank and artless way. (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 376)

However, Jean's success is not "artless" because she calculates her every move. Drawing on Judith Fetterley's argument,⁴ Klaiber adds, "the Victorian woman's supposedly 'natural' and 'spontaneous virtuousness appears less a woman's essential identity than her reputation which primarily depends on male affirmation, on which she has to rely on for her social position" (219). In the three texts, the tension between the men signifies their view of women as property to be fought over.

In "A Whisper in the Dark", Sybil also attempts to use jealousy to acquire control over her uncle and cousin once she learns the stipulations of the arranged marriage. She plots to turn the men against each other to obtain control: "for jealousy seemed the most effectual means to bring my wayward cousin to subjection" (Alcott, "A Whisper in the Dark" 42). However, she is

naïve and unaware of how to use her feminine wiles, but she is desperate for agency. Due to Sybil's inexperience, her plan backfires once her uncle asks her to marry him: "my seeming refusal of Guy had induced his father to believe that I loved him, to make a last attempt to keep the prize by offering himself. . ." (Alcott 57-58). As a result, Guy assumes Sybil has chosen his father over him: "Ah, I see; the play goes on, but the actors change parts" (Alcott 45). Ironically, all the characters in the text are "acting" a part to meet an end goal.

In a larger sense, Jean Muir and Virginie are able to exploit gender expectations in a world full of actors. Karen Halttunen explains how the writers of etiquette manuals in the nineteenth century "acknowledge the larger value of polite social forms as masks and disguises for unpleasant personal qualities" (157). Masking one's self in order to adhere to societal expectations becomes socially acknowledged and accepted for "respectable men and women" (Halttunen 167). Although masks are not an overarching theme in "A Whisper in the Dark," when Sybil hears Guy's initial arrival, she is ready to "assume propriety at a minute's notice" (Alcott, "A Whisper in the Dark" 35). Sybil is disguising her rebellious nature by feigning modesty in order to make a favorable first impression on Guy. More prominently, Alcott makes a social commentary in "V.V." on the usefulness of veils and masks. Mrs. Vane rationalizes, "There you are wrong, for our faces are such traitors, that unless we have learned the art of self-control, it is not best for us to scorn such harmless aids as fans, screens, and veils. Emotions are not well-bred, and their demonstrations are often as embarrassing to others as to ourselves" (Alcott, "V.V." 89). Virginie's comments are subversive because while she mentions socially accepted masks, her mask of Mrs. Vane is donned to achieve a mercenary purpose.

Ironically, masks hide threatening intentions, but outward appearance, mistakenly, becomes indicative of rank and virtue. Halttunen describes the conflation of character with

appearance: “But now in the 1850s, the art of dress was the art of projecting a particular personal style, and this new concept of style was increasingly confused with character itself” (159). In “V.V.,” Virginie’s acting is erroneously categorized as her true nature. For instance, when Mrs. Vane ties the lock of Virginie’s hair with a little ribbon from her dress, the narrator states, “If it was a bit of acting, it was marvelously well done, and all believed it to be a genuine touch of nature” (Alcott, “V.V.” 90). Furthermore, Lady Lennox also comments, “But one can see at a glance that she is of high birth—high enough to suit even a Douglas” (Alcott 90). Virginie’s mannerisms are interpreted as belonging to a higher social class because she is a skilled actress.

Similarly, Jean Muir’s fabricated story makes Sir John and Gerald believe that she is the daughter of Lady Grace Howard. Before the “discovery” of Jean’s past is made, as the chapter is aptly titled, Sir Coventry suspects Jean is too “accomplished and well-bred” for someone of her status (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 375). Thus, Sir Coventry does not suspect that Jean Muir’s past might be fabricated. Moreover, at the conclusion of the last tableau, Gerald observes Jean in her drawing room still dressed as Queen Bess, and he conflates the fictional character with reality:

Something in her attitude and face struck him . . . the rich dress became her wonderfully, and an air of luxurious indolence changed the meek governess into a charming woman.

She leaned on the velvet cushions as if she were used to such support; she played with the jewels which had crowned her as carelessly as if she were born to wear them . . . One would know she was wellborn to see her now. (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 396)

Since Gerald is now infatuated with Jean Muir, he is no longer skeptical of her past. Jean Muir even aptly comments, “the romance of the part you played, all blind you to the reality. For a moment I cease to be a servant, and for a moment you treat me as an equal” (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 396). Through acting, Jean Muir romances Gerald and elevates her social status.

Likewise, when Jean confesses to Coventry that she tried to kill herself to escape Sydney, Coventry enjoys being cast in a romance: “Still feeling as if he had suddenly stepped into a romance, yet finding a keen pleasure in the part assigned him” (Alcott 399). Romantic notions do not accurately depict reality, yet the characters cannot decipher between truth and fiction. Alcott’s use of theater “challenges notions of the separateness of private and public, of female and male social spheres and the ideological systems that the separate spheres entail” (Ackerman 166). Notably, the entire Coventry family’s superiority to the lower class is revealed to be an act: “Instead, Alcott simultaneously unmask[s] the Coventry family, demonstrating that all virtue and social class is performative and that external markers fail to correspond to internal substance” (Schewe 579). Even Gerald admits, “indolent indifference is but the mask under which I conceal my real self” (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 397). Keeping in mind nineteenth-century etiquette manuals, as described by Halttunen, and changing attitudes towards appearance and character, it becomes apparent that Virginie and Jean are not outliers for being actors, but are complicit in the act of the higher class.

Moreover, Jean and Virginie are simultaneously actors within a world of acceptable acts and they are also the “stage directors” of the plot who “manipulate the other characters into doing what [they] desire” (Schewe 583). Jean Muir makes the brothers complicit in her plot: “Muir seduces Gerald . . . by drawing him into various romantic conventions that force him to play the part she assigns him . . . By placing the brothers in the position of competition for her hand, Muir creates within them the emotions requisite to the role” (Schewe 583). However, only Jean is aware of the performance; although her players are complicit, they do not acknowledge their actions as part of an act. Similarly, Virginie causes Douglas to participate in an act. When Mrs. Vane ignores Douglas, unlike any woman he has encountered before, he starts his own plot

to win her attention. The major notices Douglas' act: "The major stifled an irrepressible laugh at this unexpected rebuff, and took a malicious pleasure in watching his friend's eye kindle, his attitude become more stately as he talked on" (Alcott, "V.V." 92). Notably, in "V.V." the majority of characters are involved in a performance of their own doing. Douglas has a secret past causing him to "conceal his real self" because he has stolen the identity of his deceased cousin (Alcott 93). Then, Douglas formulates a plot to unravel the mysteries of Mrs. Vane/Virginie. On the other hand, Diana also wants to decipher the obscure relationship between Mrs. Vane and Douglas, but she lacks Virginie's skill. Diana confesses, "I too can plot, and watch, and wait. I can read faces, fathom actions, and play a part, though my heart breaks in doing it" (Alcott 105). In contrast to "Behind a Mask," the actors of "V.V." are more self-aware of the performance because they are creating plots and counterplots for their own purposes. Klaiber mentions the need for an audience to validate the performance, but the heroine also requires the audience to act on her accord (219). Overall, Jean Muir and Virginie gain the upper hand by maintaining agency throughout their acts.

Specific to "Behind a Mask" are the tableaux where Jean Muir's real and performed self is blurred. The *tableaux vivants* became a popular and "respectable" form of middle-class entertainment in 1855 effectively turning the domestic sphere into a stage (Halttunen 175).⁵ Additionally, the play-within-a-play storyline utilized in the tableaux highlighted the performativity of middle-class gentility (Halttunen 184). In the first tableau from "Behind a Mask," Jean portrays Judith's beheading of Holofernes after he has raped her; during the nineteenth century, Judith "becomes an icon of the vengeful and castrating woman" (Showalter xxx). When Jean is presented on stage, her expression of "hatred, the deepest and bitterest, was written on her beautiful face" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 393). Coincidentally, the actor playing

Holofernes also resembles Sydney, and someone remarks, “Doesn’t she look as if she really hated him?” (Alcott 393). In entertainment guides, performers were instructed to “learn 'a kind of code of expressions, or laws for the better regulation of frowns, smiles, and gestures'" (Halttunen 178). However, Jean Muir’s expression is not an act: “It was not all art: the intense detestation mingled with a savage joy that the object of her hatred was in her power was too perfect to be feigned; and having the key to a part of her story, Coventry felt as if he had caught a glimpse of the truth” (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 393). Monika Elbert points to this scene as the revelation of Jean Muir’s “true self” (134). As opposed to Jean’s unmasking in the privacy of her room, this scene reveals Jean’s true self to an audience under the guise of an act.

In *tableaux vivants*, the public and private spheres as well as class boundaries become blended since actors are also audience members (Schewe 584).⁶ For the second tableau, George leaves the audience to portray a fugitive with his lover, played by Jean. However, in this scene performance becomes reality because Gerald falls under Jean’s love spell:

...for the first time in his life he felt the indescribable spell of womanhood and looked the ardent lover to perfection. Just as his face assumed this new and most becoming aspect, the curtain dropped, and clamorous encores recalled him to the fact that Miss Muir was trying to escape from his hold. (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 395)

It is in this scene where Jean has finally succeeded in luring Gerald into her plot, and Jean again reveals her true feelings: “she rose with a sense of triumph which she found it hard to conceal” (Alcott 395). Lucia notices the effect Jean has on Gerald, and although some members of the audience “thought it was fine acting,” Lucia “left her place to hurry behind the scenes, bent on putting an end to such dangerous play” (395). The word “play” here has layered meaning: Lucia observes Jean captivating Gerald through the play, and she realizes the playing of the characters

in the scene has seeped into reality. Alcott shrewdly inserts the play-within-play as a larger commentary of the falsehood of the genteel performance. All three scenes directly reflect the plot of “Behind a Mask” while simultaneously shifting the roles between actor and audience. Not only do these scenes highlight Jean’s power, but they also reveal the duplicity of the upper class.

Destabilization of the Feminine/Masculine Demarcation

The lines between performance and authenticity are not the only binaries that are subverted; Alcott also reverses the gender binary.⁷ Alcott’s male characters are passive and do not exemplify nineteenth-century masculine ideals. In “Sorties,” H el ene Cixous summarizes the gender binary into the dichotomies of activity/passivity (360). Men are defined through activity and action: “Energy is more attractive than beauty in a man” (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 374). As Klaiber explains,

Gerald’s lethargy does not fit in with notions of men’s ‘natural’ activism and exposes the ideal of energetic manhood, as least in his special case, as a cultural construct. When he finally becomes active and accepts his responsibilities as master of the house, he does not, in fact, follow his natural inclinations as a man but rather his romantic notions of ‘manly’ conduct and his snobbish family pride, which he sees threatened by Edward’s ‘imprudence’ to fall in love with a governess. In fact, his core motive is his wish to sustain the ‘honor’ of being considered ‘manly.’ (220)

Gerald is consistently described as lethargic until he begins to fall under Jean’s spell. Jean Muir is the motivating factor for Gerald “to attend to things as a master should” (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 406). Thus, his “romantic notions of manly conduct,” as Klaiber mentions, stem from the romantic love he now feels for Jean Muir.⁸ Even though Ned is consistently described as “energetic,” he does not have a position in the household since he is the younger brother. He

must be submissive to Gerald, the master of the house. Additionally, Ned is forced to leave the house after falling in love with Jean. Therefore, Jean destabilizes the domestic sphere by acting within the house to attain financial security and the men are “feminized” by their lack of action (Elliot 22). Cixous argues that each opposition dismantles itself within the oppositional relationship (360). Through Jean’s subversion of gender roles, she is also paradoxically complying with the ideals of masculine and feminine spheres; she remains in the domestic sphere, while the men fulfill their role outside of the home.

Likewise, in “A Whisper in the Dark,” Sybil motivates Guy to leave the domestic sphere when he believes Sybil will marry his father. Guy is motherless and he tells Sybil that he needs a woman to help him become a better man: “I know if she had lived I should not be what I am . . . and with you I hope to grow a better man” (Alcott, “A Whisper in the Dark” 39). After his perceived rejection from Sybil, Guy becomes a man through his pain: “through the hard discipline of poverty and honest labor, [Guy] was becoming a manlier man” (Alcott 58). Comparatively, Ned in “Behind a Mask” also undergoes suffering in order to become manlier: “trouble had made a man of him” (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 96). Through Jean Muir, who spurs the men to action but also hides a more sinister purpose, Alcott subverts the “doctrine of womanly influence, which promulgated the idea of female moral superiority” (Korycka 75). Overall, Alcott’s manipulation of gender stereotypes reveals their falsehood as a social construct.

Furthermore, the gothic “marriage narrative,” as defined by Stephen Bernstein, is subverted by passive men. In “A Whisper in the Dark,” Guy is under his father’s control: “Guy, though by nature as wild as a hawk, has learned to come at my call as meekly as a dove” (Alcott 33). Moreover, Guy’s father is pressuring his son to marry Sybil for her inheritance. When Guy is discussing the marriage agreement, he has a submissive tone: “You know I never liked the

bargain, for it's nothing else; yet I can reconcile myself to being sold, if it relieves you and gives us both a home" (Alcott, "A Whisper in the Dark" 41). Guy's concerns echo Sybil's critique of marriage because they both feel entrapped. The idea that men are also trapped in marriage is again revisited in "Behind a Mask" when Gerald does not want to marry Lucia. Gerald is being pressured by his family to marry Lucia in order to maintain their social rank. Jean states, "Oh Gerald, you know Mamma has set her heart upon it, that Papa desired it, and poor Lucia loves you so much" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 388). Gerald responds, "It won't make me happy, and I take the liberty of thinking that this is of some importance. I am not bound in any way, and don't intend to be till I am ready" (Alcott 388). Both Guy and Gerald have been betrothed from an early age without consenting to their fates. Typically, females are pressured into marriage for financial security, but Gerald and Guy are also subjected to the confines of marriage for socioeconomic status.

Significantly, it is important to note that both female and male characters are trapped within patriarchal demands because they are both subjected to performative notions of gender. Klaiber emphasizes the arbitrariness of gender roles:

[Jean Muir's] manipulative role-play performatively exposes the repertoire of Victorian gender roles as a cultural and conventional construction. Seemingly 'genuine' and 'natural' womanhood and manhood function only as inessential, arbitrary, and unreliable codes of behavior for both men and women, whose one-dimensional stereotypes are predominately defined by men. (216)

As a result, the men and the heroines are both shown to be sympathetic characters. As Cixous notes, gender critiques apply to both genders since it is a binary (363). Gender is a feminine/masculine binary acting opposite of each other; there cannot be one gender without the

other one in order to maintain the hierarchal relationship (Cixous 363). Muir embodies femininity in a perverse manner whereas the men do not conform to the masculine ideal of taking action: "Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond" (Butler, "Critically Queer" 616). The subverted gender roles reveal an unbalanced power struggle; furthermore, the passive men indicate that in order for women to have a voice, men need to be more passive. Maria S. Porter, a friend of Alcott, recalls Alcott wanting women to redefine a "woman's sphere" as opposed to "benighted men who now try to do it" (69). Madeleine B. Stern connects Alcott's gothic heroines to Alcott's own feminist fury: "[Through] her pseudonym of A. M. Bernard, she could vent her fury in sexual power struggles that reversed the roles of male masters and female slaves" ("The Feminist Alcott" viii). In other words, while wearing the mask of "A. M. Bernard," Alcott could depict her anger; likewise, the heroines' mask makes them a powerful force in the tales. However, the heroine's power still stems from her performance of conventional gender roles: "Muir's actions appear masculine because masculinity is synonymous with social power... But her power, as the novella's paradoxical subtitle reminds us, is 'A Woman's Power'" (Elliot 305). Gender expectations, which are regulated by society, diminish the agency to act on one's own accord.

In contrast, the men in "V.V." are not passive; instead, Alcott subverts the marriage narrative in a different way. According to Bernstein, the gothic narrative ends with a marriage that reveals a secret, but "V.V." begins with a marriage and murder that creates a secret to be unraveled. When Victor murders Allan, it is revealed that Virginie had already married him, effectively making her "wife and widow" on the same night (Alcott, "V.V." 86). In the beginning, Virginie is also seventeen years old like Sybil in "A Whisper in the Dark." This

correlation suggests that age plays a factor in the heroine's ability to mastermind her own plot because Virginie is unable to escape with Allan. The typical gothic plot has a submissive female and a threatening male-figure at the center of the story; on the contrary, female gothic writers in the late nineteenth century depicted "the female will to power, through the use of her body, as far more devastating" than male's sexual desire (Elbert 129). Victor's actions spur the plot of the story: Douglas takes the identity of his deceased cousin and begins a revenge plot against Virginie. Meanwhile, Virginie is working to escape Victor's oppressive grasp by disguising herself as Mrs. Vane and trying to marry Douglas. Even when Virginie becomes the Mrs. Vane, she is still subjected to Victor's control whereas Jean Muir is a free agent who can act on her own accord. A typical gothic tale with a classic marriage ending would have concluded with Virginie's marriage to Earl, but Virginie is not an ordinary heroine.

On the other hand, "V.V." does end on another gothic convention: the revelation of a secret. In the end, Douglas unravels all of Virginie's plots. Jeanne F. Bedell argues that Alcott subverts the Cinderella story: "Neatly reversing the central symbol of 'Cinderella,' [Alcott] turns the 'satin slipper of fairylike proportions' into the clue that leads to Virginie's destruction" (11). Unlike Jean, Virginie does not secure the rank and fortune she desires because it is brutally snatched away moments after her marriage to Allan. Despite Victor's role in Virginie's plots, only Virginie is villainized for using her sexuality to obtain financial status. Alcott's reversal of the marriage narrative serves to highlight Virginie's entrapment and her lack of choice:

The Cinderella allusions highlight the discrepancy between V.V.'s life and traditional patterns of behavior and reward. Alcott allows her no alternative choices and makes no overt social commentary . . . but her revelations about Virginie's illegitimacy and her use

of bondage symbolism allow the reader to speculate about the social pressures which shaped V.V.'s goals and turned her to criminal activity. (Bedell 11)

Alcott's alteration of gothic conventions works to show the pressure of patriarchal restraints on females who lack a place or position in society.

Performing Within Patriarchal Bounds

Although the gothic heroine exhibits a level of agency through acting, the confinement of gender roles reveals the implicit power relations of the patriarchal hierarchy. Women must hide their true desires and mold themselves to act within the constraints of patriarchal society.

However, acting allows women to achieve a sense of power as the full title of "Behind a Mask, or a Woman's Power" suggests: "The mask separates itself from authentic feeling as a weapon of domestic empowerment which will permit Muir to cross the class, economic, and gender barriers which threaten her physical survival" (Elliot 300-301). Jean asserts, "I will not fail again if there is power in a woman's wit and will!" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 367). Nevertheless, how much of Jean's act is forced upon her by an internalized gender ideal? Butler clarifies, "[Performativity] consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense, cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'" ("Critically Queer" 618). In other words, Jean's speech acts and gestures are ascribed from patriarchal society, as described by Butler: "This is less an 'act', singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power" ("Critically Queer" 611). Butler's theory reveals the internalized mechanisms of power apparent in Jean's conscious decision to "act," but Jean is also forced into the "act" by restrictive patriarchal culture.

By remaining in her ascribed role, Jean is able to make the men fall in love with her. Ironically, Gerald asks, "Do you consider me the master here?" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 389).

Jean, who is manipulating him, then responds, “‘Yes,’ and to the word she gave a sweet, submissive intonation which made it expressive of the respect, regard, and confidence which men find pleasantest when women feel and show it” (Alcott 389). Despite the restrictive code of conduct for females, Jean Muir utilizes gendered conventions to win over Gerald albeit his previous suspicions and distrust. By appearing powerless with “a sweet, submissive intonation” she subverts the “chain of binding conventions” that force her into submission; in other words, she uses the “binding conventions” to her advantage (Butler, “Critically Queer” 611). Her submissive tone is purposeful because the “subordination of the feminine to the masculine” is part of the hierarchal order (Cixous 361). Jean Muir’s uttered words to the Coventry family contrasted with her inner feelings, revealed in her letters, show a disconnect between what women “feel” and what they “show.” Under Fleenor’s definition of the Female Gothic, dichotomy plays a central role: “The Gothic is a form created by dichotomies and the subsequent tensions caused by the dialectic between patriarchal society, the woman’s role, and the contradictions and limitations inherent in both” (15-16). Paradoxically, Jean’s performativity is both binding and liberating.

Moreover, women cannot overstep patriarchal bounds without facing negative consequences; thus, acting and masks take center stage in Alcott’s gothic tales. In an interview with La Salle Corbell Pickett, Alcott reveals the effect of gendered expectations:

How should I dare to interfere with the proper gayness of old Concord? . . . To have had Mr. Emerson for an intellectual god all one’s life is to be invested with a chain armor of propriety . . . And what would my own father think of me . . . No, my dear, I shall always be a wretched victim to the respectable traditions of Concord. (108)

Similarly to Alcott donning the mask of anonymity and pseudonym, her heroines' schemes are hidden behind a mask for fear of backlash. In "Behind a Mask," Jean Muir experiences the "*limits of agency*" because she must remain within the constraints of patriarchal society and the "*enabling conditions*" determine how she must act (Butler, "Critically Queer" 613). Jean Muir's plans to marry Sydney, her previous employer, fail when she is too forward, as revealed in her letter: "Rash and wild as he is, he is still a gentleman, and when an incautious word of hers roused his suspicions, he refused to make her his wife" (Alcott, "A Behind a Mask" 424). From this mistake, Jean learns to act within patriarchal constraints when trying to seduce John Coventry: "Has all my skill deserted me when I need it most? How can I make him understand, yet not overstep the bounds of maiden modesty?" (Alcott 413). When Jean Muir becomes too blunt in her language, her plans for marriage falter; however, when Jean remains passive and carefully constructs her language, she is able to seduce Sir John Coventry.

Significantly, suppressing one's true intentions is a comment on how women cannot be themselves; they are always entrapped within a patriarchal system. Even when Jean is unmasked, she comments, "Come the curtain is down, so I may be myself for a few hours, if actresses ever are themselves" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 367). Although Jean is in a private moment, the infiltration of gender expectations mediates her every move: "So systemic is the confusion between mask and self that the concept of identity becomes meaningless" (Fetterley 13). Alcott emphasizes an implied issue within normative ideals that cause women to lose their identity. For women, it is encouraged to suppress one's identity in favor of domestic duty: "Nevertheless, [Alcott's mother] had also internalized nineteenth-century views of female self-sacrifice, and she taught her daughters to repress their anger in the name of duty, as she had struggled with her hot temper" (Showalter xi-xii). Furthermore, Alcott experienced "her father's censorship of female

self-consciousness” (Showalter xv). It is not surprising that Alcott writes about acting becoming a reality on and off the stage. In "Recollections of My Childhood" (1888), Alcott describes acting with her sisters: "But we were now beginning to play our parts on a real stage, and to know something of the pathetic side of life with its hard facts, irksome duties, many temptations and the daily sacrifice of self" (38). For women, the sacrifice of self in favor of duty was expected in the nineteenth century. Ultimately, Alcott is not warning about rebelling against the patriarchy; instead, she reveals the oppressive powers that lead to subterfuge.⁹

Moreover, in "A Whisper in the Dark," Alcott creates a cautionary tale of "the severe consequences that await women who rebel" (Korycka 65). Whereas Jean Muir and Virginie have learned the "art of self-control and the repression of emotions," Sybil is unable to conceal her rebellious nature (Korycka 66). Women must suppress their rage in order to conform to nineteenth-century expectations.¹⁰ However, Sybil is admittedly outspoken, "I was a frank, fearless creature, quick to feel, speak, and act" (Alcott, "A Whisper in the Dark" 32). Her overt interrogation of patriarchy oversteps boundaries: "I'm too young to lose my liberty just yet; besides, such compacts are unjust, unwise. What right had my father make me in my cradle? . . . No! I will not be bargained away like a piece of merchandise, but love and marry when I please!" (Alcott 43). Although it is progressive for her to critique marriage, she is no longer "acting" in accordance with gender roles. Her questioning highlights an important flaw in the system that does not allow her to have agency. Patriarchal oppression eliminates Sybil's liberty, and it eradicates her identity (Korycka 71). Moreover, she has an excess of emotion, becoming a "passionate girl" instead of a woman with agency: "I have no doubt I looked like one demented, for I was desperately angry, pale and trembling with excitement . . . I laughed hysterically a moment, then broke into a passion of regretful tears" (Alcott, "A Whisper in the Dark" 46). Sybil

experiences the most severe punishment because she cannot conceal her emotions: “Sybil’s insanity consists largely of self-assertiveness and honest display of emotion; that is, she is thought mad because she does *not* dissimulate” (Bedell 12). In contrast, Jean and Virginie are both older actresses trapped in an inferior class position; Sybil is significantly younger and wealthier. As a result, Sybil has not yet learned the art of subterfuge because she did not have the necessity to learn. As Elbert notes, class stratification causes women to become actresses in order to ascend to a higher position (130). To have agency women must not reveal their true intentions and emotions; instead, they must undermine the patriarchy subliminally.

Throughout the story, Sybil is subjected to the decisions of male authority; Korycka traces Sybil’s downfall to “a chain of decisions made by a group of men” (72). Sybil is pitted against her uncle in “a contest of wills, a matter of who will dominate and who submit” (Carpenter 34). Although Sybil believes that she has an “assumption of authority,” she does not have a real voice over the men, namely the uncle and Dr. Karnac (Alcott, “A Whisper in the Dark” 47).¹¹ Her unconcealed emotions and interference with her uncle’s plan lead to her confinement in an asylum. Female agency is frightening to men because they do not want women having too much power. As a result, Sybil turns eighteen in confinement because her overt sexuality must be contained. Her untamed sexuality climaxes when she rides the horse with Guy. She experiences sexual freedom “so careless of bonnetless head and cambric gown” and “felt a thrill of delight in sweeping down the slope with that mettlesome creature” (Alcott, “A Whisper in the Dark” 37, 39). Her “unruly hair” signifies her desires to remain untamed, despite her uncle’s desire to “tame” her (Alcott 35). Hair becomes linked with promiscuity: “And the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation implied by its display . . . the hair is an index of vigorous sexuality, even of wantonness” (Gitter 938). Consequently, when Sybil is in

confinement, her hair is shaved in order to take away her sexuality and power: “I discovered that my hair, my beautiful, abundant hair was gone! . . . This outrage was more than I could bear, and the first tears that I shed fell for my lost charm” (Alcott, “A Whisper in the Dark” 49). Korycka describes Sybil’s head being shaved as a “figurative rape” since Sybil is forcibly punished for her sexuality (71). Aside from her sexuality, Sybil’s explicit questioning of the patriarchy leads to punishment. Ultimately, Alcott reveals how a successful gothic heroine, such as Jean Muir, suppresses her true emotions to undermine patriarchal control implicitly.

Korycka applies Elizabeth G. Gitter’s “The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination” to “A Whisper in the Dark,” but the symbolism of hair can be extended to include “V. V.” and “Behind a Mask.” Virginie’s hair works dually as a disguise, and as a revealing factor of her identity. When Virginie transforms into Mrs. Vane, she utilizes her hair to disguise herself: “By arranging her hair in a particular style, in other words, she might take on any character she wanted” (Halttunen 160). Virginie also employs her hair to garner sympathy: “A banished princess might have so looked, so spoken, as gathering up the glittering mass in her white hands, she let it fall again, with an air of gentle pride” (Alcott, “V.V.” 93). Gitter explains that as a “victimized princess—the gold on her head was her aureole, her crown, the outward sign of her inner blessedness and innocence” (943). During Virginie’s first entrance, her hair is described as “long blond tresses that crowned her spirited little head” (Alcott, “V.V.” 82). Furthermore, Virginie is described as a “princess,” “siren,” and “sleeping beauty” (Alcott 93, 126, 133). On the other hand, Jean Muir is described as a “fair-haired enchantress” and a Scottish witch (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 387, 378, 417). The ambiguity surrounding how the heroine is perceived embodies the heroine’s morally ambiguous role in the text.

Similarly to Virginie, Jean Muir utilizes hair to create a disguise by turning her “scanty locks” into “long abundant braids” (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 367, 425). Notably, Jean’s hair is consistently illuminated by sunshine: “sunshine glinting on her yellow hair, delicate face, and downcast eyes” (Alcott 368); “light falling on her fair hair and delicate profile (Alcott 375); “sunshine glittered on her hair” (Alcott 391). Her radiant hair is highlighted by sunshine when Jean utilizes her beauty to romance the men and feigns submission to them. Disguised as a governess, Jean’s hair conceals her sinister intentions. For instance, she asks Gerald to help her escape Sydney, a story she fabricated to mask the truth: “Though her voice ended in a sigh, and all her hair fell down about her face, hiding it in a shining veil” (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 399). Then, when Jean wants to quickly captivate Sir John, she uses a miniature portrait of him while her hair masks her disingenuousness: “shaking her curls about her face, as if to hide the act, pressed it to her lips, and seemed to weep over it” (Alcott 399). In “V.V.,” Diana makes a correlation between hair and masks: “That, doubtless, it the reason why you half conceal your face behind a cloud of curls. It certainly is a most effectual mask” (Alcott, “V.V.” 89). Overall, the heroines’ hair conceals her subterfuge by functioning as a disguise.

On the other hand, the hair also has the ability to reveal the heroine’s identity. In “V.V.,” Douglas holds the key to identifying Mrs. Vane as Virginie; as a result, Mrs. Vane is horrified when she sees Virginie’s lock of golden hair. Her horror is expressed in her countenance: “her color faded perceptibly, her eyes grew troubled, and when Harry leaned toward her to compare the long tress with her own, she shrank back with a shudder” (Alcott, “V.V.” 94). After the initial shock, Mrs. Vane instantly regains her composure and declares, “The hair of the dancer is lighter than mine, you see; for this is pure gold, and mine is fast deepening to brown” (Alcott 94). Gitter equates the value of hair to gold: “Hair was powerful, and the ubiquitous Victorian lock of hair,

encased in a locket or ring . . . [becomes] intrinsically valuable, as precious as gold” (942-43). The lock of hair is valuable since it can unmask Mrs. Vane as Virginie. On the other hand, Virginie’s power lies in the web she weaves since she is the orchestrator of the plot: “If a woman is a spinner, and if some of the threads she spins are her own tresses, the web she produces may prove to be a dangerous snare. But it is also her art . . . analogous to the narrative thread, the story line, the strands of the plot” (Gitter 938). Once Douglas confronts Mrs. Vane/Virginie, he unravels her plan: “for through Lady Lennox you heard of me, learned that I was the next heir to the title, and began at once to weave the web in which I was to be caught” (Alcott, “V.V.” 139). However, Douglas uncovers Mrs. Vane’s secret after Diana’s death: “The Victorian interest in the ambiguity of hair symbolism is also apparent in the numerous novels in which the hero learns—too late—that a deadly siren is hiding behind the benign mask of Penelope” (Gitter 940-41). Once Virginie’s plots are uncovered her hair “could no longer hide her from his piercing glance” (Alcott, “V.V.” 140). Even when Virginie is caught in her own web, she escapes the snares of patriarchy.

Subjection to the Status Quo

Despite the semblance of a return to the status quo at the conclusion of Alcott’s gothic tales, the continuation of the patriarchy is undermined by the heroine: “whatever the degree of their success, they courageously challenged the status quo” (Stern, “The Feminist Alcott” xxii-xxiii). In “V.V.” the threatening female is eradicated, but by her own hand; thus, Virginie’s suicide demonstrates her agency due to limited options. Once she is caught, her alternatives are severely limited: be exiled or escape through death. From the onset, Virginie is physically marked as Victor’s property; she is objectified and subjected to his will. Teresa A. Goddu acknowledges Virginie’s submission to Victor: “As a spectacle she is discovered by the male

gaze to be property; the identifying mark under her bracelet/fetter is less a lover's knot than the sign of Virginie's enslavement to Victor" (127-28). Victor is a "threatening figure" compared to the devil, and his first action is to shout a "command" at Virginie:

Supple, sinewy, and slight was the threatening figure, which they saw; dark and defiant the face, with fierce black eyes, frowning brows, and the gleam of set teeth between lips parted by a muttered malediction. Lovely as the other apparition had been, this was far more striking, for it seemed full of the strong grace and beauty of the fallen angel whom it represented. (Alcott, "V.V." 85)

Victor threatens to frame Virginie for murder should she refuse to comply with his demands. As a result, she is forced to submit to his will after he kills her chance for financial stability.

Although Virginie is described as "mercenary, vain, and hollow-hearted," her ultimate goal of financial stability and an honorable name is not any different than Jean Muir's objective (Alcott, "V.V." 84). Overall, Virginie embodies the dualistic image of Arachne, discussed by Gitter: "victim and predator, trapped and trapper" (939).

In the end, it is Douglas who condemns Virginie, and he completely eradicates her voice by telling her story for her; as Bedell notes, only the male voice is heard (11). In his retelling of events, Victor is a tragic figure, a victim of the evil Virginie:

You suffered the sharpest poverty, but Victor respected your helplessness, forgave your treachery, supplied your wants as far as possible, and when all other means failed, left you there, while he went to earn bread for you and your boy . . . While Victor was away, you wearied of waiting, you longed for the old life of gaiety and excitement, and hoping to free yourself from him, you stole away, and for a year were lost to him . . . He had

traced you with the instinct of a faithful dog, though his heart was nearly broken by your cruel desertion. (Alcott, "V.V." 138-39)

Virginie is demonized while the men remain unpunished even though both Douglas and Victor acted similarly to Virginie: Douglas utilized a disguise and Victor also had mercenary interests. Goddu exposes how Virginie's voice is silenced: "Under the Earl's revisionary tale-telling, Victor is turned from Virginie's evil master into her faithful servant; painted as the passive victim, Victor is forgiven for his role in making Virginie a mercenary creature" (Goddu 128). Nevertheless, Virginie demonstrates her agency by choosing death. She maintains "a disdainful smile curved her lips," exclaims, "I have escaped!" and has a "glance of exultation" (Alcott, "V.V." 142-43). Although Virginie does not secure her goal of marriage, she does escape the patriarchy through her own will: "if they cannot outwit the male spectators, they finally stage the outcomes of their own drama" (Elbert 140). Through death by her own hand, Virginie is able to maintain her voice even when Douglas attempted to silence her and retell her story.

Major Alcott critics, namely Stern and Goddu, view Jean Muir as more sympathetic and successful than Virginie. Some critics, such as Gail K. Smith¹² and Martha Saxton¹³ even vilify Virginie. However, these critics overlook how Alcott also garners sympathy for Virginie, and they completely eradicate Virginie's story before becoming Mrs. Vane.¹⁴ Alcott's journal entry of 1862 illustrates how her gothic heroines are created as sympathetic characters: "my sinners always have a good spot somewhere" (qtd. in Stern, "Behind a Mask" xix). Jean Muir's position as governess and her failed past as a divorced actress result in the reader's sympathy for Jean: "By demonstrating that even upper-class people use deception to get what they want and by also demonstrating Muir's poverty and dependence, Alcott forces the reader to sympathize with Jean Muir in this domestic class conflict" (Schewe 587). Similarly, in "V.V." there is a social class

divide: the orphaned seventeen-year-old Parisian dancer is imprisoned by a promised marriage to her cousin, but she hopes to marry the Earl and secure a stable future. Goddu argues Virginie is "more dangerous" than Jean because Virginie "threatens to destroy, not uphold, the sentimental economy" and she will continue to be a "theatrical woman" (126). On the other hand, Bedell discusses both "V.V." and "Behind the Mask" in order to highlight Alcott's view of stratification: "In both cases, Alcott, while not necessarily approving the desire, certainly reveals the need for deception if a woman without family background is to improve her social position" (11). Therefore, subterfuge is necessary to secure economic safety. Furthermore, Goddu's interpretation overlooks Virginie's role as a mother, which is central to the cult of true womanhood. Virginie's mercenary interests no longer serve only her selfish needs since she wants to provide her fatherless child with a financial future and honorable name. Thus, Alcott presents Virginie as a sympathetic character by revealing the implications of the class conflict.

As for Virginie's role in Diana's murder, which critics utilize to condemn Virginie, the extent of her blame remains ambiguous. Virginie's manipulation of Diana is more explicit than Jean Muir's plot to turn Gerald against Lucia; however, Lucia could have alternatively faced Diana's fate, if it were not for Lucia's vanity. Since Virginie was failing to win the Earl's love, she utilized Diana to create distance between them. Ultimately, Virginie's love for Douglas leads to her downfall: "That made me blind, when I should have been more keen-sighted than ever; that kept me here to be deceived, betrayed, and that should save me now" (Alcott, "V.V." 141). Whereas Jean is able to remain "rational and detached," Virginie's plot fails when she falls in love: "Love, the most important virtue and source of happiness in the domestic tales, is dangerous in the thrillers; it is the heroines' major weakness" (Bedell 10). Jean Muir arguably

fares better than the other heroines, but both texts reveal the pitfalls of a patriarchal society that entraps women behind a role or mask.¹⁵

Comparatively, “A Whisper in the Dark” and “Behind a Mask” conclude with a return to the status quo through marriage. As a gothic convention, marriage maintains the social hierarchy: “Marriage is integral to this series, condemned if it violates the separation of the classes, approved if it consolidates property and endorses romantic love” (Bernstein 161). Sybil’s marriage to Guy may be viewed as a triumph for romantic love, whereas Jean Muir’s subversion of the class system is horrific for the Coventry family. Sybil, a damsel in distress, escapes from a house of horrors and is rescued by the hero, Guy. However, Korycka argues that Guy is not a knight in shining armor: “It also seems that Louisa May Alcott uses Sybil and Guy to mock sentimental notions regarding courtship and marriage” (73). Sadly, Sybil forfeits her liberty when she marries Guy because her marriage will be another form of oppression: “Sybil’s submission to masculine domination is completed by her marriage to Guy, who replaces his father and transmits his father’s voice of authority in recounting his father’s version of ‘the facts’” (Carpenter 36). Sybil’s forgiveness of her uncle also reveals the innate “cultural suppression” of women’s experience: since Sybil’s freedom is denied, “her only viable option is the internalization of the restrictions imposed by male authority” in order to avoid further punishment (Korycka 77). Internalized codes of conduct are also mentioned by Butler because the subject does not have the autonomy to act outside of the bounds of cultural expectations.

At the end of “A Whisper in the Dark,” the spectral mother’s voice reveals the constant struggle to repress feminine anger and rebellion in a patriarchal world of extreme punishments (Korycka 78). Sybil returns to the semblance of normalcy, but her victory is fraught with emotional trauma: “Home received me, kind Madame welcomed me, Guy married me, and I was

happy; but over all these years, serenely prosperous, still hangs over me the shadow of the past, still rises the dead image of my mother, still echoes that spectral whisper in the dark” (Alcott, “A Whisper in the Dark” 58). The spectral mother’s whisper serves as a warning “of the potential for punishment if [Sybil] loses her self-control” (Carpenter 37). For Sybil, horror stems from the possibility of becoming like her mother entrapped in the asylum, to become “passive and perhaps the unwilling victim of one’s own body” (Fleener 16). Alcott utilizes gothic conventions to interrogate the extent of the protagonist’s victory in a male-controlled society.

In contrast, Jean Muir exploits the class and gender structures that entrap her. Jean Muir begins the story from a marginalized position as a governess. Her role as a governess, between social classes, reveals “the fraudulence of the social order” (Schewe 589). By infiltrating the family, and becoming Lady Coventry, Jean achieves her goal to elevate her socioeconomic status. Jean cannot destroy the class system because she also depends on the same system that has marginalized her: “one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency” (Butler, “Subjection” 83). As Lady Coventry, her marriage to John Coventry works as a binding heterosexual marriage contract (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 429). Butler defines a binding contract through the power of language: “Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power” (“Critically Queer” 611). Before it is revealed that Sir John has married Jean, the family tries to show him the incriminating letters. However, Sir John burns the letters before reading them, and he states, “Poor Jean Muir you might harm, but Lady Coventry is beyond your reach” (Alcott, “Behind a Mask” 428). Once Jean becomes Lady Coventry, the family can no longer retaliate against her because they would destroy their own reputation.

Moreover, Jean's manipulation of John Coventry addresses Butler's questions regarding a performative that works to undermine the heterosexual marriage ceremony. Butler inquires, "But from where and when does such a performative draw its force, and what happens to the performative when its purpose is precisely to undo the presumptive force of the heterosexual ceremonial?" ("Critically Queer" 611). Using Muir's acting as evidence, the performative draws its force from socially constructed gender ideals. Through her acting, Jean becomes paradoxically entrapped in the patriarchal system while also subverting the notions it is built upon: "The ending of the tale, however, contains Jean's threat when it reveals not that the little woman hides a market monster, but that the veiled lady is imprisoned in the role of sentimental woman" (Goddu 124). The ending is horrific since Jean cannot escape the confines of gendered expectations, but her subversion of the class system is dually horrific for the Coventry family.¹⁶ Marriages between different classes is seen as problematic, especially in the gothic (Bernstein 159). However, Jean's entrapment in a marriage is symbolic of women's limited options: "Muir's behavior in the 1860s, far from reprehensible, represents the orchestrated, codified version of women's conduct which had supplanted transparency of sincere feeling and virtue and which could be deployed in public to their benefit" (Elliot 308). Considering that women in the nineteenth century were already forced to play a role in society, Jean has fared quite well. Like a typical gothic ending, there is a return to the status quo, but the ending highlights the implicit problem: the structure of the system is perpetually flawed.

Conclusion

Overall, the performativity of Alcott's gothic heroines works to undermine the patriarchal structure while also highlighting the fundamental apparatuses that entrap the heroines. Notably, Alcott utilizes conventional gothic themes to destabilize the demarcation between feminine and

masculine roles while simultaneously demonstrating the effect of the patriarchy on both genders. Moreover, the passive male characters indicate that in order for women to have a voice, men must become less domineering. Jean Muir, Sybil, and Virginie demonstrate their agency through their wit and womanly charms; however, they also show how the “performative” aspect of gender must stay within the confines of prescribed gender roles in order to obtain agency. Femininity is shown to be a social construct, but the social class hierarchy is the framework for femininity. Thus, gender falls under the guise of an individually formed identity, but in actuality it is the coherence of the individual to a social ideal that is socially constructed.

The complexity of the protagonist’s plight as well as the problematic resolution at the end of the texts suggest an implicit problem within the societal structure: women are unable to gain autonomy without utilizing a “mask” and adhering to patriarchal demands. “A Whisper in the Dark,” “V.V.,” and “Behind a Mask” show varying degrees of the heroine’s success in her quest for agency. Sybil remains trapped in a heterosexual marriage that eliminates her freedom, and Virginie commits suicide to avoid her fate. Meanwhile, Jean’s shocking victory of becoming Lady Coventry reveals how she can subvert the system, but ultimately remains trapped within it. According to Fleenor, the purpose of the Female Gothic is either to “serve as social reinforcement or as a statement of rebellion” (17). In Alcott’s case, the stories utilize a horrific return to social order to implicate society. Throughout the texts, Alcott is radical in her questioning of patriarchal structures, notably gender roles, and their ramifications.

Notes

¹ Klaiber utilizes Butler's concept of the performativity of gender identity and "subjection" to explain Jean Muir's combination of two female stereotypes (the "true woman" and the *femme fatale*) in which the subject is paradoxically constituted by the act of performativity (215).

² "Meek, modest, faithful, and invariably sweet-tempered" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 376).

³ See Mulvey 837-38.

⁴ See Fetterley 13.

⁵ Ackerman identifies two strategies Alcott utilizes to reveal the "relationship between theatricality and domestic life" (163). Alcott turns a domestic space into a theater and depicts the "private life of a professional actress" (Ackerman 163).

⁶ Ackerman also notes, Alcott's use of theater "challenges notions of the separateness of private and public, of female and male social spheres and the ideological systems that the separate spheres entail" (166).

⁷ Alcott possibly subverts gender roles because Alcott played a dual role in her household. Raised in extreme poverty, Alcott had to take "on the roles of the surrogate son and the family breadwinner, as well as that of the dutiful daughter" (Showalter xi).

⁸ Elbert concludes that Alcott's "males are more romantic and the females more pragmatic" because the female body becomes a sexual commodity on stage or in the marketplace (140).

⁹ "Alcott implies, theatre of some kind is an inescapable aspect of experience" (Ackerman 183).

¹⁰ Korycka connects Sybil's resistance to repress her rebellious nature and sexuality to Alcott's failure of becoming the gentle and meek daughter her father always wanted (66).

¹¹ Significantly, Sybil asserts her autonomy over her own body: "I am the best judge of my own health, and you are not bettering it by contradiction and unnecessary fuss. This is my house, and

you will oblige me by leaving it, Dr. Karnac; this is my room, and I insist on being left in peace immediately" (Alcott, "A Whisper in the Dark" 15). Sybil's desire for privacy in her own room draws on Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own." However, since Sybil directly confronts patriarchal figures, she subsequently wakes up in the asylum because the men want her silenced.

¹² See Smith, Gail K. "Who Was That Masked Woman? Gender and Form in Louisa May Alcott's Confidence Stories." *American Women Short Story Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Julie Brown, Psychology Press, 2000, pp. 45-59.

¹³ See Saxton, Martha. "The Secret Imaginings of Louisa May Alcott." *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, edited by Madeleine B. Stern, G.K. Hall, 1984, pp. 256-60.

¹⁴ Unlike other critics, Bedell sheds a sympathetic light on Virginie by focusing on Virginie's imprisonment to Victor (11).

¹⁵ Jean's first attempted marriage plot to Sydney fails, so she cannot afford to fail again. If she does fail, suicide would be her only option just like Virginie. Jean states, "It shall be, if wit and will can do it, for it is my last chance. If this fails, I'll not go back to my old life, but end all at once" (Alcott, "Behind a Mask" 411). Without an honorable name that provides financial security, suicide becomes the only option. The heroine's motivation to use deception and manipulation to marry into the family is juxtaposed against the limited options available to her.

¹⁶ "Jean Muir's position in the Coventry household is categorized by two basic conditions: first, her cynical detachment and, second, her profound dependence" (Ackerman 171).

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