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The Illusion of Influence: Gender and Class Conflict in Three Gothic Works by Louisa May Alcott

by

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A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Arts

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College of Humanities and Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

In “The Illusion of Influence: Gender and Class Conflict in Three Gothic Works by Louisa May Alcott,” the works *A Modern Mephistopheles, A Long, Fatal Love Chase*, and *Behind a Mask* are analyzed as representative works of Alcott’s gothic fiction in terms of how they reflect the changes that were taking place in mid-nineteenth century America, as society developed from a sentimental culture to one that was theatrical. In Chapter One, I focus on the ways in which Alcott’s gothic heroines embody a blend of sentimentality and theatricality and how each looses or gains influence over others as a result of her embrace or rejection of these opposite cultures. I will also attempt to explain how the fate of each of her heroines underscores Alcott’s opinion about the desperate state of women in nineteenth century America. In Chapter Two, I study how Alcott repeatedly used the archetypal con-artist, the literary embodiment of nineteenth-century fears about changing cultural mores, via her reappropriation of the *Faust* tale, in order to tell the stories of heroines who are victimized by the patriarchy and, despite their attempts to gain power over their own fates, are ultimately unable to do so. I hope to shed light on whether Alcott was able to gain power over her own fate, as her heroines tried to do, and illustrate Louisa May Alcott’s eerily astute grasp of the significance of the changes taking place within her own culture, particularly as they related to the status of women in the mid-nineteenth century, who she feared would remain forever without influence over their own fates.
THE ILLUSION OF INFLUENCE:
GENDER AND CLASS CONFLICT IN THREE GOTHIC WORKS BY LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

A THESIS

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

by

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Montclair, NJ
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“I think my natural ambition is for the lurid style. I indulge in gorgeous fancies and wish that I dared inscribe them upon my pages and set them before the public...And what would my own good father think of me...if I set folks to doing the things that I have a longing to see my people do? No, my dear, I shall always be a wretched victim to the respectable traditions of Concord.”

—Louisa May Alcott,

quote by LaSalle Corbel Pickett in *Across My Path: Memories of People I Have Known*

One need not have read LaSalle Corbel Pickett’s narrative of her friendship with Louisa May Alcott to recognize that much of Alcott’s life must have been a struggle between her “gorgeous fancies” and the “respectable traditions of Concord.” Within Louisa May Alcott’s literary corpus are works spanning a wide range of genres, most of which are representative of two popular types of writing in mid-nineteenth century America: the sentimental and the gothic. Louisa May Alcott’s “literary double life,” as well as her bridging of these two genres has been studied before. What has not previously been studied, however, is Alcott’s apparent strategy for melding them for her own purposes and her blend of genres, which was in part to establish a critique of the changing society in which she lived. What follows is an analysis of the ways Louisa May Alcott blended sentimentality into her gothic fiction, through her casting of sentimental women as her gothic heroines and her repurposing of the Faust tale, in order to critique the class and gender system that was in place during the mid-nineteenth century in America. By studying three representative gothic works—*A Modern Mephistopheles, A Long, Fatal Love Chase*, and *Behind a Mask*—all of which were published under dramatically different circumstances, alongside Louisa May Alcott’s letters, secondary historical studies, and previous
scholarship, I intend to shed light on what elements of her culture Alcott was subverting with her
gothic texts.

Some time after the publication of the two volumes of *Little Women* in 1868 and 1869, Alcott told LaSalle Corbel Pickett that, despite what Pickett may have considered to be her “true style of writing,” the texts scholars now refer to as sentimental, Alcott felt that she was only truly herself when writing in the “lurid style” scholars now call the gothic, but was unable to do so, as such writing would bring shame upon respectable Concord (Pickett 107). However, when the famous author of sentimental girls’ books was given the opportunity to contribute a novel to the “No Name”-series of books published anonymously by the Roberts Brothers in 1877, she chose to take advantage of the anonymity of the series by embracing her gothic impulses with the novel *A Modern Mephistopheles*. Later, on discovering that this gothic work of lies and manipulation was penned by the same hand that was responsible for the sentimental celebration of domesticity that is *Little Women*, Pickett noted that “Miss Alcott’s friends were not only surprised but incredulous,” and she recalled Alcott’s previously stated preference for the gothic with a new sense of understanding (Pickett 106). It is interesting that LaSalle Corbel Pickett, an author herself, was so shocked by her discovery of Alcott’s ability to write in such different genres that she felt the need to record Louisa May Alcott’s thoughts on the subject years later in her own memoirs. Certainly, Pickett must have felt that others would share her surprise about the matter, and that Alcott’s comments about her affinity for the “lurid style” were worth sharing with the public. Pickett and her contemporaries, unlike scholars today, did not see a connection between the sentimental novels her society celebrated and the gothic ones they read somewhat more secretively. Evaluating literary works only in terms of their morality, these two genres were
considered opposites: sentimental literature was moral and gothic literature was immoral. Alcott, by writing across these seemingly opposite genres, presented a puzzle.

Pickett was not alone in wondering how is was possible that one women could write both “pure and gentle” stories of “innocent young lives and the events that would inevitably befall bright girls and boys with the thoughts and feelings befitting a quiet loving home circle” and the lurid tale of monomaniacal manipulators that is *A Modern Mephistopheles* (Pickett 107). If one thing is for certain, it is that neither Pickett, nor any scholar since, has been able to satisfactorily answer that question; neither has anyone been able to satisfactorily determine Alcott’s purposes in writing in both genres. What is more, when Alcott’s myriad other gothic texts, written anonymously in the beginning of her career and thus lost to scholars for a time under their pseudonyms, were rediscovered during the 1940s, the conundrum of Louisa May Alcott’s literary double life became even more significant and perplexing.

Many scholars have grappled with the contradictions of Alcott’s literary corpus, trying to resolve her sentimental novels with her gothic ones, but this struggle to make sense of it seems futile indeed when one considers that Alcott herself recognized the incongruity of the two genres and wrestled between them, unsure of which she preferred. Although the introductory quote is commonly used to illustrate Alcott’s preference for the gothic, the “blood and thunder tales” she refers to in her letters, one can find evidence to support a preference for sentimental tales, what she calls the “moral pap for the young” in her letters, as well (Sanderson 41). In 1868, for instance, Alcott wrote a letter to Mary E. Channing Higginson in which she stated, “I am glad my ‘Little Women’ please you, for the book was very hastily written to order & I had many doubts about the success of my first attempt at a girl’s book…I should very gladly write this sort of story altogether, but, unfortunately it does n’t[ *sic*] pay as well as rubbish, a mercenary
consideration which has weight with persons who write not from the inspiration of genius but of necessity” (Myerson 118). It seems, in 1868, just weeks after the publication of the first volume of *Little Women*, Alcott would have preferred to write sentimental tales, rather than the gothic stories she called “rubbish,” but her need to pay the bills outweighed her preferences. Ten years later in 1878, though, Alcott was most definitely aware of the perhaps surprising profitability of the sentimental novels she once claimed to long to write. Yet despite their unexpected profitability, she seems to have changed her tune about which type of novel she preferred.

Writing to Miss Churchill, an aspiring young author seeking advice from a role model, Alcott bluntly explained, “'Little Women' was written when I was ill, & to prove that I could not write books for girls. The publisher thought it flat, so did I, & neither hoped much for or from it. We found our mistake, & since then, though I do not enjoy writing ‘moral tales’ for the young, I do it because it pays well” (Myerson 232). Here we see that the moral sentimental tales she claimed to prefer in 1868 are the very tales that she claims to dislike writing a decade later. Perhaps, this change in preference can be explained by her different audiences: Miss Channing was a family friend—perhaps one of those Concord folk whose respectable traditions Alcott needed to maintain—whereas Miss Churchill was a stranger of a younger generation to whom Alcott might speak without fear of social disapproval. Perhaps also, one might explain Alcott’s later frustration with writing sentimental novels by applying the very feelings of frustration attributed to writing the “rubbish” in 1868: ten years into her successful career as the children’s friend, Alcott was simply sick of writing “to order,” rather than out of inspiration.

A common theme running through all the letters, whether they are in support of sentiment or gothic, is that Louisa May Alcott’s primary concern was not what she was writing, but how much money she was making by doing so. Again and again in her journals, Alcott portrays her
preoccupation with financial matters, writing on New Year’s Day in 1868, just months before the publication of *Little Women*, which would change her financial status for good, “Things look promising for the new year. Ford paid $20 for the little tales and wants two every month. Gazette $25 for the ‘Bells.’ Loring $100 for the two Proverb stories...So my plan will work well & I shall make my $1000 this year in spite of sickness & worry” (Myerson 113). Here Alcott portrays one of the greatest underlying motives for her writing: her intense desire to financially support her family, who, headed by her transcendentalist father, lived penniless and near starvation for much of Louisa’s childhood. Interestingly, though, it seems that as Alcott established herself as a successful author and relied less on the monetary income gained from her writing, she was able to enjoy more freedom as to what she published and found herself naturally draw back towards her gothic beginnings. When given the opportunity to write from inspiration rather than for pure economic gain, as was the case with her “No Name”-series contribution *A Modern Mephistopheles*, it seems Alcott preferred to write in the gothic genre, in which she was free to voice her concerns about a gender and class system that trapped women such as herself through a veil of fantastically frightening figures.

Alcott was certainly not alone in her concerns about gender and class. Although we know that her positions on such matters were not representative of popular opinion or practice at the time, she did represent a growing number of American women who were unhappy with the way their gender and class limited them. As an unmarried woman, Alcott was responsible for supporting herself financially, but was very much limited in her career options. She tried her hand at teaching and serving as a personal companion, but both positions were simply intolerable to her. In fact, she left her terms of employment early in both cases, but because her opportunities were so limited and her financial state was so grave, she was forced to return again
and again to teaching, despite the fact that it did not suit her (Matteson 265). Although she suffered financially due to her status as an unmarried woman, in 1868, Alcott wrote an article entitled “Happy Women” for the New York Ledger, in which she argued that “an ill-considered marriage ‘is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called a ‘Mrs.’ instead of ‘Miss.’” (Matteson 330). She went on to encourage women to “remain single and devote themselves to whatever higher calling their tastes and talents decreed” (Matteson 330). This, of course, is what she did as she pursued her career as an author, yet she was acutely aware of the fact that such freedom to choose one’s own path was simply not available to all of her female contemporaries. Because there were so few jobs available to women, most had no choice but to accept the “barren honor of being called Mrs.” whether or not they heard a “higher calling,” as it was simply the only “job” available to them. Alcott was obviously frustrated by and fearful of the continuation of such a system, and those emotions are explored in her gothic works.

Indeed, Alcott’s financial concerns were so great that they are the primary fear expressed in her gothic stories, all of which focus on poor female characters who attempt to gain influence in a world in which women had little to no power. Although Alcott herself was not representative of all women in the mid-nineteenth century, her overwhelming financial concerns underscore the fact that the women of the nineteenth century were in general financially vulnerable and thus reliant on men to help support them. However, Alcott’s America was changing and, as it did, it allowed for new economic possibilities that were both intriguing and threatening to Americans, particularly to women.

As America’s population moved to the cities from the countryside in the mid-nineteenth century, thousands of young men and women who once seemed destined to work their family’s land were presented with the possibility of economic growth and class change. There were at the
time “unprecedented numbers of young men [who] were leaving their rural homes and families to seek work in the booming cities of industrializing America” (*Confidence Men* 1). However, the anonymity of the urban American, combined with the sudden ability to alter one’s class status, brought on intense fears for Americans of all classes. Young men and women of the lower classes, who were ignorant of the ways of city life, feared the perceived immorality of their new urban surroundings. Upper class Americans feared being displaced by newly urbanite members of the lower class, who they feared might be inspired by the changing times to try to alter their class status and imitate gentility. It is this struggle between the previously established class system – in which everyone had a place—and the burgeoning new class system—in which middle-class Americans had more opportunities to create their fortunes—that brought on the fears largely embodied in Alcott’s gothic.

As elements of American culture, such as the class system, began to change, many Americans clung more desperately to the codes/practices of sentimentality, which was the prevailing cultural mode in the first half of the nineteenth century, that they felt they could control, in order to soothe their fears of a changing world. Although sentimentality could be reappropriated by authors like Harriet Beecher Stowe, for the purposes of political agitprop, the average middle class American was able to look towards the rules of sentimental culture for comfort, as it demanded that all people be completely sincere in their interactions with others at all times, “donning ‘sincere’ dress, adhering to ‘sincere’ forms of courtesy, and practicing ‘sincere’ bereavement” (*Confidence Men* xvii). Historian Karen Halttunen studies the fears associated with the changing class system in terms of the cultural shift from sentimentality to theatricality in depth in *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in American Literature*.
America, 1830-1870. In this historical study, Halttunen examines the conduct manuals and fashion magazines of mid-nineteenth century, in order to trace the progression from sentimentality to theatricality that was sweeping through America at the time. As Halttunen notes, because “popular advice manuals offered social aspirants a ‘sincerity’ system, composed of hundreds of rules for polite conduct in proper parlor society,” the very system that was set up to maintain the status quo allowed “the social ambitious” to “demonstrate that they were not mere confidence men and painted women ‘passing’ as genteel, but were true ladies and gentlemen deserving of the higher social place to which they aspired” (xvi-xvii). Thus, “by 1868…the middle class…need[ed] to deploy its tools of self-definition against another threatening adjacency—the emerging leisure class world of the post-bellum years” (Foote 67). In this new class system in which anyone might follow the rules of sincerity without truly being sincere, simply in order to imitate upper-class manners, there was no assurance that others could be trusted.

This pervasive mistrust of others stemmed, of course, from the unfamiliar ways in which American culture seemed to be differentiating itself from established European culture during the mid-nineteenth century. Suddenly, Americans found themselves in “a new world of strangers” (Confidence Men 34), who might be tempted “by the absence of privileged classes” to “elevate themselves, in matters of appearance, to the levels of others, from whom, in Europe, they would be perfectly willing to keep a respectful distance” (Confidence Men 37). Because the American class system was differentiating itself from the European one in these ways, and, relatedly, the overall culture was shifting from sentimental to theatrical, upper-class Americans were generally fearful of these changes that they had not encountered before. As Halttunnen explains it, sentimental culture was theatrical only in the sense that the prescribed sentimental system of
expressing oneself was over-the-top. Key to this understanding of sentimental culture is the fact that these over-the-top sentimental displays of feeling were only acceptable when they were expressions of sincere feeling and genuine cultural status. The culture of theatricality which began to infiltrate America in the mid-nineteenth century was not defined by its over-the-top displays of emotion, as such were already an accepted part of sentimental culture, but instead by its acting emotions that were not necessarily sincere. People were still performing the same emotions as they previously did, but now, fashion magazines and conduct manuals alike acknowledged, they might not really mean them.

Strangers, passing as sincere and mixing with the upper classes that, in Europe, they would not have dared to approach, were viewed by adherents to sentimental culture as hypocrites. Of course, any kind of hypocrisy was threatening in a sentimental culture that prized sincerity above all else, but hypocrisy whose motivation was to corrupt others was the ultimate fear for the sentimental American, who believed that immorality could spread from one person to another. This concept of hypocrisy as a disease that could be spread was particularly threatening due to “the mysterious force called influence” that was widely feared in the mid-nineteenth century (Confidence Men 4). Although influence was sometimes “a force for good...spoken of as a moral gravitation, a personal electricity, a cosmic vibration,” it was also considered at times to be a “force for evil...compared to a poison, a disease, a source of contamination and corruption” (Confidence Men 4). Compared to the “popular pseudoscience of mesmerism,” influence could be used as a tool for good in the hands of a sincere person, but was most definitely a tool for evil in the hands of a hypocrite (Confidence Men 4).
Interestingly, at the same time that the fears of insincere influence pervaded the nation, another "theory of influence" was gaining acceptance among middle-class Americans (Douglass 45). This time, it was the theory of feminine influence. Sarah J. Hale, editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, was just one of the "promulgators of the doctrine of 'influence'" which "habitually obscured women's biological and economic function" by "defining femininity always in terms of its effects" (Douglass 45-46). This theory focused only on the positive effects a woman could have on her family, but in doing so, essentially dehumanized her at the same time. The theory of feminine influence left us with, as Douglass has argued,

> no idea of what this woman, or womanly ideal, is, except as something to be perceived and reacted to; she has no body and no personality...she is of value because she is able to work a kind of religious transformation in man; she represents nothing finally but a state of susceptibility to very imprecisely conceived spiritual values. (46)

Obviously, the originators of the theory of feminine influence believed in the positive moral sway that a woman could have over her family, yet one must consider the very likely possibility that those who subscribed to the theory of feminine influence were also aware of that less-desirable form of influence mentioned earlier. Imagine the fear that would be induced in mid-nineteenth century Americans who found themselves confronted with the possibility that these forms of influence might converge, resulting in a woman whose moral sway was in the wrong direction.

It is this fear of the immoral sway of hypocrites that paralyzed the sentimental adherents of the nation, as they witnessed their sincere culture shift towards threatening
theatricality, and that Alcott was preoccupied with in *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877), *A Long, Fatal Love Chase* (1868), and *Behind a Mask* (1868). Alcott was not only conflicted about these changes, but also, as we previously saw through her letters, vacillated between whether she should write in the sentimental genre that was well-established and respected or the more theatrical gothic mode that allowed her greater freedom to express her concerns about class and gender. Here, we are to read Alcott’s sentimental fiction as aligning with the sentimental culture that was well-established at the beginning of the nineteenth-century and Alcott’s gothic fiction as aligning with the theatrical culture that threatened sentimental ideas, by allowing for upward class mobility and changes to gender roles.

Alcott’s works studied here, *A Modern Mephistopheles, A Long, Fatal Love Chase*, and *Behind a Mask*, are most definitely gothic, although they utilize elements of sentimentality in order to portray Alcott’s changing culture. They take place in the gothic settings of “ruined mansions, dark forests, storms, and desolate landscapes” (“Gothic” 125). Although there is never an instance of outright supernatural activity in any of these three novels, Alcott’s non-use of the supernatural was indicative of her time. Many neo-gothic authors in the later nineteenth century were focusing on “uncanny effects rather than sublime terrors,” in which the real took on fantastic elements, thus “destabiliz[ing] the boundaries between psyche and reality, opening up an intermediate zone in which the differences between fantasy and actuality were no longer secure” (Botting 11-12). It seems that, reality, slightly altered, was much more terrifying to the reading public than the overtly supernatural. What, then, marks Alcott’s tales as gothic is the fact that they are tales of excess and transgression.
Fred Botting names these as two of the key elements of all Gothic works, opening the study with the claim, “Gothic signifies a writing of excess” (1). Moving forward, Botting explains excess’s function as a way for the author to present ideas about her own society that she might not be free to represent in a more realistic setting. The plots in these three works alone include such common Gothic markers as polygamists, evil priests, monomaniacs, monstrous doubles, drugs, gambling, stormy seas, lonely castles, and interclass marriages. All of these, of course, existed in nineteenth-century America, but by mixing several together in the same tale, Alcott was able to create a “different, more exciting world,” that, though threatening in some ways, offered her heroines “not only frightening violence, but also adventurous freedom” (Botting 7). Even Alcott’s writing style—her extreme alliteration, her repetition of adjectives, and her use of cliffhangers at the end of chapters—is an overtly excessive means by which to wind her tales of passion, betrayal, and manipulation.

Passion, betrayal, and manipulation are prime examples of what Botting labels as transgression, or a crossing of “social and aesthetic limits, serv[ing] to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits” (Botting 7). By crossing the limits of what is socially or morally acceptable, Gothic works are able to imagine a world without social and moral rules, reject that world, and reinforce the mores they seemingly questioned. This, of course, is precisely the “historically specified ideological task” that most Gothic texts serve (Bernstein 153). Historically speaking, Americans certainly had many reasons to reinforce the status quo in the mid-nineteenth century, as it seemed to be threatened at every turn. There were, for example, the issues of slavery, women’s rights, urbanization, industrialization, dwindling social class distinctions, and unsettling scientific discoveries (not to mention the Civil War).
Greater than anything else though, was the pervasive fear of the changing class system that was previously mentioned. After all, if one did not know one’s place in society relative to others, it called into question the very concept of individual identity. Each of these factors loomed over the new nation, threatening to bring it tumbling down and to destroy everything Americans trusted. Thus we see why an author such as Louisa May Alcott might be interested in the gothic for reasons besides the easy money. By presenting transgressions of the dominant sentimental culture that she would not otherwise be able to study, in an excessive and fantastical manner, Alcott, with her gothic works, was able to examine the issues of gender and class brought about in her changing society.

Taking the easily recognizable tropes of the gothic genre—stormy landscapes, crumbling mansions, secret sins, and monomaniacal madmen—and appropriating them for her own purposes, Alcott, in *A Modern Mephistopheles, A Long, Fatal Love Chase,* and *Behind a Mask,* tells and retells her own take on Goethe’s *Faust,* in which an ominous being presents the hero of the story with an escape from undesirable circumstances, but only at a price. What is remarkable about Alcott’s repurposing of this tale is certainly not her knowledge of it, or even the fact that she used it again and again. Instead, what is fascinating is the development of her Mephistophelean character—Alcott’s gothic monster—from an immoral, crazed man obsessed with controlling those around him, to an immoral, calculating woman seeking stability in an unjust class system. While both the male Mephistophelean characters and the female Mephistophelean character take on the role of hypocritical confidence artist, manipulating those around them, the male and female characters are led to do so by very different motives. Thus, Alcott seems to ask us: who is the monster, who is the victim, and can they be the same?
Alcott does more than simply ask us to differentiate between good and evil, though. While blurring the line between monster and victim, she is also blurring the line between the two genres they represent: gothic and sentimental, respectively. Alcott’s ability to write in these two genres has been of interest since her own lifetime, when LaSalle Corbel Pickett took note of it in her memoirs, but rarely has Alcott been seen as blending the genres. In fact, as Sanderson has noted, in the works of the pioneer of Alcott scholarship, Madeleine Stern, and in that of nearly every critic since “there is a general agreement that Louisa May Alcott wrote kinds of fiction—sensational and moral—and that these two types reflect the author’s subversive and conformist selves” (41). Certainly it is true that Alcott’s best-known works, the “moral pap for the young” that she famously complained of in her journals, embody the sentimental virtues of her time, reinforcing domestic qualities such as “industry, sobriety, frugality, and simplicity” (Confidence Men 9). It is also true that Alcott’s early, mostly pseudonymous, works were sensational in nature, featuring dashing heroines in dangerous circumstances. In “Louisa Alcott’s Feminist Letters,” these heroines are discussed as being “not only proud and passionate but filled with feminist anger” (Stern 144). I am arguing, however, that the division between these two types of fiction in Alcott’s body of work has been overstated: in each of these works there is a presence of the sentimental that should not be ignored. Throughout Alcott’s sensational works, there are strong moral influences, typically embodied by her heroines, whose sincere words and actions prove them to be adherents to and proponents of sentimental culture. For example, Alcott’s heroine in A Modern Mephistopheles, Gladys, is such a sentimental character that Louisa’s sister Anna called her “the best and sweetest character [she] ever wrote (Myerson 222). Each Gothic heroine in Alcott’s three sensational novels, A Modern Mephistopheles, A Long, Fatal Love
Chase, and Behind a Mask, contains both sentimental and gothic traits. Thus, the much-propounded theory of Alcott’s duality, while convenient, does not hold fully true.

A few critics, such as Teresa Goddu and Elizabeth Lennox Keyser have noted this before, responding to the claims made by Stern, Sanderson, and the like, by examining the ways in which Alcott is able to blend sentimental tropes with gothic ones. Goddu studies Alcott’s blend of sentimental fiction and gothic fiction in Gothic America, when she claims that Alcott’s “sentimental writings...do not occupy a separate sphere from her gothic tales; instead they participate in a shared market economy” (Goddu 119). Yet, when Goddu remarks that, with her domestic fiction, “Alcott invests in the performance of the sentiment,” she overlooks the extent to which Alcott’s gothic heroines also perform sentiment (Goddu 117). When Keyser studies Alcott’s blend of genres, she focuses on how “Alcott’s domestic [sentimental] fiction allows for a critique of conventional values largely through the features it shares with her sensation [gothic] fiction” (Keyser xv). I would argue that the reverse is also true, that by working sentimental women into her gothic stories, Alcott is able to critique the state of women in sentimental society, questioning whether the culture they adhered to was protecting them or imprisoning them.

Louisa May Alcott had an astute understanding of the changes taking place in mid-nineteenth century America, as the middle class shifted from one dominated by sentimentality to one dominated by theatricality, and she used her gothic heroines to embody the varying levels of acceptance of those changes. However, there is another element of her portrayal of sentimentality and theatricality that has yet to be studied: her gothic preoccupation with the fears this shift inspired among her contemporaries. Just as Alcott embodied the development from a sentimental culture to a theatrical one via heroines in A Modern Mephistopheles, A Long, Fatal
Love Chase, and Behind a Mask, she embodied the fear of the hypocrite inspired by these changes through the development of her gothic monster. Moreover, by reflecting the shift of her own culture through her characterization of these victims and monsters and her synthesis of the genres, Alcott was able to critique the gender and class system of the very culture she was supposedly trying only to entertain.

Alcott focuses much of her energy on the dynamic between her gothic monster and victim, but, beyond her use of these representative characters, there are certainly qualities that Alcott’s gothic works share with sentimental fiction as well. Marianne Noble’s study of sentimental literature as sadomasochistic convincingly connects the two seemingly opposite genres by arguing that “a core of perverse, gothic pleasures lies at the heart of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction” (163). Furthermore, “the paradigmatic fictional character” of sentimental literature is the same as Alcott’s gothic heroine: a “young girl who is actually or effectively orphaned and so left to create herself” (Kete 549). Despite these similarities, however, Alcott’s motives for writing her gothic fiction were clearly different from her motives in writing the sentimental girls’ books she was paid so well for. Rather than “construct a shared or common sensibility that hides the traces of its invention under the cloak of tradition” as she did in her sentimental works, in A Modern Mephistopheles, A Long, Fatal Love Chase, and Behind a Mask, Alcott used gothic tropes to tantalize and terrify her audience and express concerns about the changes to common sensibility and traditions that were taking place in her own society (Kete 545).

Alcott chose to examine her fears about the gender and class system in place in Victorian America, yet because her opinions on such matters were so radically different from popular
opinion, she was forced to do so in the most subversive way possible. This need for subversion did not stem from a need to protect herself (after all, nearly all of her gothic works were published pseudonymously during her lifetime), but was instead the result of a desire to be published. Despite her disapproval of the gender and class system in which she lived, she was still subject to it. If her tales were too overtly critical, they would not be printed and she would not be paid. Thus, Alcott relied heavily on gothic tropes that would cloud her subversive critique in a distracting fog of excess and transgression, yet still allow her to convey her points.

In the chapters that follow, I will study the ways in which A Modern Mephistopheles, A Long, Fatal Love Chase, and Behind a Mask, reflect the changes that were taking place in mid-nineteenth century America, as society developed from a sentimental culture to one that was theatrical. In Chapter One, I will focus on the ways in which Alcott’s gothic heroines embody a blend of sentimentality and theatricality and how each looses or gains influence over others as a result of her embrace or rejection of these opposite cultures. I will also attempt to explain how the fate of each of her heroines underscores Alcott’s opinion about the desperate state of women in nineteenth century America. In Chapter Two, I will study how Alcott repeatedly used the archetypal con-artist, the literary embodiment of nineteenth-century fears about changing cultural mores, via her reappropriation of the Faust tale, in order to tell the stories of heroines who are victimized by the patriarchy and, despite their attempts to gain power over their own fates, are ultimately unable to do so. Rather than simply focus, as so many critics have done before, on the parallel of the “masks” of Alcott’s Mephistophelean characters and her own pseudonymous publications, I intend in this paper to study the significance of using a mask in itself in the mid-nineteenth century in America. Whether literal or
figurative, to the upper class of antebellum America, there was no concept more threatening than that of hidden identity, for, by hiding one’s true identity, one might be able to subvert the class and gender systems that were in place, gaining what Americans at the time believed to be undeserved power and influence over others. Thus, Alcott’s use of a pseudonymous mask as an author is not indicative only of a desire to hide her identity, but a desire to gain power and influence that she could not have had without her mask. I hope to shed light on whether Alcott was able to gain power over her own fate, as her heroines tried to do, and illustrate Louisa May Alcott’s eerily astute grasp of the significance of the changes taking place within her own culture, particularly as they related to the status of women in the mid-nineteenth century, who she feared would remain forever the “wretched victim[s] to the respectable traditions of” America.
Chapter One: The Synthesis of Sentimentality and Sensationalism

Alcott’s gothic heroines in *A Modern Mephistopheles, A Long, Fatal Love Chase*, and *Behind a Mask* are a truly fascinating study of the different theories of influence that were adhered to in mid-nineteenth century America. As they embodied a blend of sentimentality and theatricality, they were motivated by different purposes. Their sentimental upbringings taught them to be true to themselves in all that they did, whereas their new understanding of their culture as being theatrical allowed them to abandon their prescribed societal roles—even if only for a moment. Because they are motivated by different, and, in fact, contradictory societal phenomena, Alcott’s heroines also used a complex blend of the different forms of influence derived from those cultural phenomena in order to influence others for varying purposes. Whereas “the sentimental woman exercises influence through her vulnerability,” helping others “through sincere affections,” it seems the sensational woman embraces theatricality in order to influence the outcome of her own life, rather than preoccupy herself entirely with influencing the lives of others (“The Domestic Drama” 421). Sometimes influencing those around them for good, sometimes for evil, sometimes through sentimental vulnerability, and sometimes through sensational theatricality, each of Alcott’s heroines blends these sentimental and sensational forms of influence and, by doing so, experiments with the changes that were taking place in her culture.

Although all three of the works being studied here were written in the 1860s and 1870s, when theatricality was generally recognized as an acceptable form of entertainment and was even beginning to pervade such social rituals as funerals, Alcott was still aware of the hesitance that many Americans felt about hypocrites who might try
to influence others in a negative way. Thus, we see in *A Modern Mephistopheles, A Long, Fatal Love Chase*, and *Behind a Mask* three characters whose varying levels of acceptance of theatricality either empower them or leave them powerless over themselves and others.

In *A Modern Mephistopheles*, Alcott presents us with a portrait of sentimentality in Gladys, or "Little Gladys," as she is introduced to the reader in the second chapter of the novel. Gladys is "a slender creature in a quaint white gown...there was something wonderfully virginal and fresh about the maidenly figure with its deep, soft eyes, pale hair, and features clearly cut as a fine cameo" (20-21). Alcott immediately infantilizes Gladys, repeatedly using words such as "child," "innocent," "maidenly," and "virginal" to describe her. However, these adjectives were little needed by Alcott’s mid-nineteenth century readers, who would have recognized Gladys’s "quaint white gown" as an obvious sign of her sincerity (and consequent innocence), as the simple clothing signified her adherence to sentimental social norms. Furthermore, her "clearly cut" features also signify Gladys as sincere, as she has an outward appearance that is easy to read and is hiding nothing. Interestingly, with this introduction Gladys is presented from the start not only as a child, but also as an object of the male gaze. She is saying nothing, doing nothing. Described only by her outward appearance, she seems to exist only as a thing for Felix to look at and enjoy.

As the novel progresses, Gladys naturally must *do* something, yet it is immediately clear that all of her actions are motivated by sentimental feelings. In fact, in the first scene in which she acts, she is so sincere that she outright acknowledges her own inability to hide her true emotions. Felix tells Gladys the story of their respective patrons,
Jasper Helwyze and Olivia Surry, and how Olivia betrayed Helwyze. Gladys’s reaction—
“it is terrible to know that such bitterness and grief lie hidden in the hearts about me”— is
significant in that it does not remark on the terrible nature of Olivia’s betrayal, but in the
terrible nature of hiding the emotions that have come about as a result of that betrayal (*A
Modern Mephistopheles* 31-32). Moments later, when Olivia approaches, Gladys says, “It
is she; hide me till I learn to look as if I did not know!” (*A Modern Mephistopheles* 34).
With this request, we can see that Gladys does not presently know how to be anything but
sincere, but recognizes that she must learn to hide her true emotions if she is to
successfully interact with others.

Gladys’s state as a supremely sentimental woman is reinforced through her
characteristic industry, frugality, simplicity, and temperance. Gladys was left “nearly
penniless” by the death of her “selfish tyrant” of a father, and although she has been
taken on as a companion by the upper class Olivia, she refuses to simply accept charity
and a consequent life of idleness (40). When offered a job by Helwyze, she replies, “I
will work; I love it; ease steals away my strength, and pleasure seems to dazzle me,”
which characterizes her as the ideal industrious woman who revels in her domestic work
(70). Later, when she marries Felix and has access to the life of luxury that her husband
enjoys, she continues to prize frugality and simplicity over material wealth, first by
having her room decorated with “no splendor,” but instead the “simple treasures which
she best loved” (102-103). Significantly, Gladys’s rooms are not without treasures at all,
but are instead filled with treasures designated as “simple”. These objects fulfill all of the
requirements of the concept of sentimental consumption as outlined by Lori Merish in her
study of sentimental culture. Merish, unlike Haltunnen, who simplifies sentimental
materialism to the point that one might believe it did not exist at all, argues that the presence of “everyday and even broken objects that display one’s lapses in vigilance” encourages a “deepening of sympathy though the revelation of mutual vulnerability and imperfection” (150). Because Gladys’s simple possessions are well-loved and well-used, she lives as a sentimental woman. Gladys later comments, “When one has known poverty and the sad shifts which make it seem mean, as well as hard, perhaps one does not unduly value these things…but I do find them very tempting” (A Modern Mephistopheles 115). Tempting or not, Gladys does not succumb to the luxuries of her surroundings, even abstaining from drink, as she “finds her grapes and water as delicious as [others] do [their] olives and old wine” (A Modern Mephistopheles 114).

Gladys’s sentimental characteristics, while prized by Alcott’s society, would have also designated her as an easy target for a confidence man, such as Helwyze. Thus, Helwyze believes that he can easily influence Gladys and, as a result, have power over both her and Felix if the two marry. It is Helwyze who arranges that Felix marry Gladys, claiming “it will add another charm to the relation if I control [Felix] though the medium of another” (44). However, despite Gladys’s lovely nature, Felix does not want to marry her. Felix makes it clear that Gladys’s sentimental sincerity is admirable, but unattractive, when he claims, “though I reverence her as an angel, I do not love her as a woman. How can I look into her innocent, confiding face, and tell her, -- she who is all truth,-- that I love as she does?” (81). Like it or not, though, Felix marries Gladys, as he is not all truth, and must appease Helwyze’s every whim if he is to have his lies remain hidden.

Felix, Helwyze, and Olivia, who are now all established as liars, make Gladys’s sentimental womanhood appear even more saintly. However, she is most obviously a
pinnacle of sentimental womanhood when juxtaposed with Olivia, whose past betrayal and current hidden feelings characterize her as anything but sincere. Olivia is characterized by her looks as Gladys was, but, where Gladys is an innocent, clear-faced girl dressed in virginal white, Olivia is

a woman in the midsummer of her life, brilliant, strong, and stately; clad in something dusky and diaphanous, unrelieved by any color, except the pale gold of laburnum clusters, that dropped from deepest bosom and darkest hair. Pride sat on the forehead, with its straight black brows, passion slept in the Southern eyes, lustrous and languid by turns, and will curved the closely folded lips of vivid red (35).

Olivia’s physical description aligns much more closely with the typical gothic heroine than Gladys’s does, despite the fact that Gladys is clearly the heroine of the novel. This is just one more example of Alcott infusing sentimentality into her otherwise gothic story through her characterization of Gladys. Olivia’s physical description, like Gladys’s, would immediately characterize her for Alcott’s contemporaries, leading them to recognize her as a painted woman, “a woman of fashion who poisoned polite society with deception and betrayal by dressing extravagantly and practicing empty forms of false etiquette” (*Confidence Men* xv). As a painted woman, Olivia is the embodiment of sentimental fears of hypocrisy and the opposite of sincere Gladys, who influences others only through her Christian goodness.

Gladys’s influence typifies feminine influence which was described by Sarah J. Hale, as it inspires those around her to be better. In one scene, Helwyze sets out to control Gladys through a form of influence best compared to mesmerism, as he turns “the full
brilliance of his fine eyes on hers,” fixing a “penetrative glance” on her and putting a “close grasp” on her hands, in order to “meddle” with her (A Modern Mephistopheles 71). However, it seems the tables turn when “during the instant the two surveyed each other...while the girl’s color faded, a light red tinged the man’s pale cheek, her eye grew clear and cold as his softened, and the small hand seemed to hold the larger by the mere contact of its passive fingers” (A Modern Mephistopheles 71-72). Here, Gladys proves that she does indeed have influence over those around her, which, as her “passive” fingers imply, stems solely from her sentimental sincerity.

However, Gladys’s feminine influence proves to be limited, as none of the liars in her life actually change their ways or stop their attempts at manipulating others. Helwyze himself, despite her earlier positive influence over him, continues to try to manipulate her, offering her costumes, valuable trinkets, and even questioning her Christian faith, all of which directly conflict with her sentimental values of sincerity, frugality, and religious devotion. Gladys normally finds herself safe from Helwyze’s influence, “for she felt as if he was about to meddle with her holy of holies; without stopping to reason, she resisted the attempt, sure that he would harm, not help, her,” and she thus keeps her guard up around him. However, she eventually falls prey to Helwyze when he drugs her with “hasheesh” and she agrees to do something she might otherwise never have approved of (133).

Going against her sentimental nature as a result of her intoxication, Gladys agrees to take part in a tableaux vivant, a popular theatrical parlor game that required the participants to dress in elaborate costumes and hold poses that depicted scenes of everyday life, as well as famous literature and mythology. The “explosive popularity of
theatrical parlor games in the 1850s and 1860s,” such as “acting charades, acting proverbs, burlesques and farces, *tableaux vivants* or living pictures, charades in tableaux and shadow pantomimes” was one of the clearest signals that there was “a new middle-class interest in the use of the parlor as a stage” and theatricality was becoming more accepted (*Confidence Men* 174, 175). This, of course, was in extreme contradiction with sentimental culture, which found the idea of disguising one’s true identity, even for the purpose of theatrical entertainment, abhorrent because of its social, economic, and even religious implications. Like the Puritans, who “attacked the theatre for its presumption in challenging God’s power to create character,” sentimental Americans of the nineteenth century felt that “to indulge a taste for playgoing mean[ł] nothing more or less than the loss of that most valuable treasure, the immortal soul” (Bigsby 2, 7). This, of course, is exactly what Gladys feared as Helwyze tried to “meddle with her holy of holies,” yet under the influence of the hasheesh, she does not resist all temptation and puts her soul at risk by taking on roles other than the one prescribed to her by God.

Gladys speaks of both acting out of insincerity and playacting when she tells Olivia, “I never acted in my life, but I will try,” adding significantly, “I think I should like it for I feel as if I could do anything to-night” (185-186). Although Gladys is indeed acting out of character by agreeing to participate in the *tableaux vivant*, her assessment that she will enjoy it is not likely a judgment induced by her inebriated state, but instead an acknowledgment that she would enjoy acting in any circumstances if her sentimental nature did not hold her back.

In the pivotal scene, Gladys and Olivia perform a series of *tableaux vivants* for Felix and Helwyze, and, defying the expectations of the men, Gladys does what they
claim she “could not” and “will never try” and takes on roles so outside of her normal self that they make Felix view her in an entirely new light (*A Modern Mephistopheles* 190). Starting the evening “clad in a quaint costume of tarnished gray and silver damask,” she later changes into “a great mantle of some Indian fabric” that leaves her “shoulders and arms show[ing] rosy white under the veil of hair which swept to her knee” (*A Modern Mephistopheles* 188-189, 191). Seeing her like this, Helwyze notes to Felix that his “angel will prove herself a woman, after all,” and Felix replies, “the woman suits me better than the angel” (*A Modern Mephistopheles* 193).

The *tableaux vivant* leaves a lasting impression on Felix, who now is “more conscious than ever before that this young wife was a possession to be proud of, since, when she chose, she could eclipse even Olivia” (*A Modern Mephistopheles* 211). Although she certainly did not plan to do so, by participating in the theatrical parlor game and taking on roles outside of her own, Gladys is at last able to secure her husband’s love and gain a greater influence over him than she had before. Gladys’s influence, though initially earned through theatrical means, was still sentimental in nature, due to how she used it. Gladys may have needed to become someone else for a moment in order to gain influence over her husband and the others around them, yet once that influence was earned, she did not use it against them, or even simply to her own advantage, but still acted selflessly. Thus, because Gladys acted out of sentimental desires, inspiring those around her to better themselves, she remains true to her sentimental characterization even after her brief fall into theatricality. After her evening of theatrics, “although [she was] there as a plaything ‘little Gladys,’ without apparent effort, had subjugated haughty Olivia, wayward Felix, ruthless Helwyze; and none rebelled against her. She ruled them
by the irresistible influence of a lovely womanhood, which made her daily life a sweeter poem than any they could write" (A Modern Mephistopheles 221).

Gladys’s life improves after she gains influence over those around her, but only because she benefits from their living better lives. Gladys’s rule does not involve the wielding of power in the sense that others are catering to her or working for her, but instead she simply influences them be more sincere in their own words and actions. Unfortunately, she cannot erase their past mistakes. When Gladys discovers her husband’s past indiscretion, involving the ultimate hypocrisy of pretending to be something he was not, her sentimental heart cannot take the shock and she dies as a result. Thus, we can see that the influence Gladys gained through her brief embrace of theatricality was enough to make her daily life better, but was not enough to keep her alive.

Interestingly, Gladys’s death, while brought on by the shock of her husband’s hypocrisy, is the direct result of complications brought on by premature labor. One must consider the implications here, as Gladys’s pregnancy, unmentioned previous to the untimely birth of her child, indicated that she did indeed become more of a woman than an angel, not only in her husband’s eyes, but in his actions as well. Are we to infer, then, that the sex act was the root cause of Gladys’s destruction, as it indicates a fall from the holiness she seemed to yearn for? This seems unlikely, as surely it was a Christian woman’s duty, once married, to bring Christian children into the world. It seems, instead, that Gladys’s sexuality is her downfall, not because of the mere fact of the act itself, but because it took place as a result of hypocrisy, first, because she was not truly herself
while under the influence of hashish, and second because she engaged in the act with a husband who she loved and trusted under false pretenses.

Gladys’s husband may have caused her death, but he is the direct benefactor of her feminine influence, which allows her “to work a kind of religious transformation in man” (Douglass 46). Certainly, this is never truer then when after her death, her influence leads Felix to vow, “I must make myself worthy to follow and find her. I have promised; and, God helping me, I will keep that promise” (286). Felix may have claimed to want a woman, but it seems only an angel could influence him to really change for the better, for, in all likelihood, Gladys could not have influenced her husband to commit to such a vow while she was alive.

Committing to vows is just the problem another of Alcott’s couples has in *A Long, Fatal Love Chase*. In this novel we are introduced to Rosamond Vivien, who, like Gladys, embodies many sentimental virtues, but, unlike Gladys, embraces theatricality on her own and seeks to influence her own fate rather than influence the morals of others.

Like Gladys, Rosamond is a poor young woman who suffers at the hands of an uncaring man-- in this case, her grandfather. However, unlike Gladys, she is not introduced to the reader by a description of her looks, but instead by an exclamation of rebellion against the man who mistreats her, as she declares, “I tell you I cannot bear it! I shall do something desperate if this life is not changed soon. It gets worse and worse and I often feel as if I’d sell my soul to Satan for a year of freedom” (*A Long, Fatal Love Chase* 1). This, of course, makes quite a strong first impression on the reader, immediately portraying Rosamond as someone who is, at least at times, more theatrical than sincere. After all, very rarely do people who offer to sell their souls to the devil
mean it, and the assumption that this statement is hyperbole is later confirmed when Rosamond’s strong Christian faith is asserted with her statement, “everything is possible with God” (Love Chase 89). Later on, she proves herself to be generally sincere in her words, but her dramatic opening declaration lets the reader know from the start that Rosamond is capable of theatricality.

Rosamond’s physical appearance also proves to be a blend of the sentimental and the theatrical. Rosamond is initially described as wearing the simple clothing worn by adherents to sentimental culture. “Making herself as pretty as her scanty wardrobe allowed,” Rosamond visits Phillip Tempest’s boat wearing a “simple gown, and the little old hat with no ornament but a garland of red autumn leaves” (Love Chase 25). However, unlike Gladys, who is satisfied with her simple clothing and prefers to maintain her simple style even when she has the opportunity to do otherwise, Rosamond proves herself to be tempted by fashion early on, stating that she is preoccupied with her “old straw hat” while looking in the mirror (Love Chase 26).

Thus, it is no surprise that when Rosamond marries Phillip Tempest and gains access to his enormous wealth, she quickly becomes a fashionable woman. Introducing Rosamond to the reader for the first time as Mrs. Phillip Tempest, Alcott writes,

The simple frock was replaced by costly silks that swept rustling about her, the loose curls were gathered with a golden comb, the slender brown hands were snow white now and shone with rarer jewels than the diamond ring; the scarf that trailed behind her was of the richest cashmere, and the lace which ornamented her whole dress was worth a small fortune in itself. An exquisite taste was shown in her costume, and the careless grace with
which she wore it proved how slight a hold the feminine passion for finery had taken upon her. *(Love Chase 59)*

Perhaps the hold fashion has on Rosamond is not very strong, but she has indulged in finery that sentimental culture would have frowned upon. Furthermore, although Alcott makes the point of saying Rosamond is “graceful by nature” and that “art had little to do for her,” she also adds that Rosamond “had acquired the polish which society alone can give” *(Love Chase 59)*.

While it might seem that Rosamond’s new ways of presenting herself are indicative only of her lack of frugality, to Alcott’s mid-nineteenth century readers, it meant a great deal more than just that. Sentimental dress required one to clothe oneself simply, as physical appearance was indicative of character. In fact, “the woman who dressed with simplicity and candor was believed to improve the moral condition of all who entered her sphere” and thus, there was “one prescribed mode of dress” that was considered “favorable to Christian improvement” *(Confidence Men 158)*. However, by the 1850s, this concept of dress as an indicator of sincerity was being questioned and *Godey’s Lady’s Book* was encouraging women to abandon the formerly prescribed modes of dress in favor of one that “conceal[s] imperfections where they exist” *(Confidence Men 159)*. While this may seem a simple logical progression of fashion, when one considers how important it was for sentimental women to be sincere it is quite shocking that they were only a few years later being encouraged to camouflage their flaws in order to literally and figuratively put their best faces forward.

Even after women like Sarah J. Hale, who originally promoted the concept of sentimental dress through her position as editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, evolved so that
they no longer "endorse[d] the equation of fashion and character," they still "exploited the knowledge that dress signifies in conjunction with other codes—names, manners, and speech among them—to constitute identity...In fine, they understood dress to be costume that could enhance perception of character" (Tonkovitch 73). Because dress was considered "the index of conscience; the evidence of our emotional nature...[revealing] the inner life of heart and soul in a people and the tendencies of individual character," changing the way one dressed was a definitive statement changing one’s character (Tonkovitch 74-75). Like Hale, Rosamond would have considered “dress as costume, a costume that signified character, to be sure, but whose significations could be manipulated by its users and, like the poke bonnet’s lining, emphasize its wearer’s most desirable traits” (Tonkovitch 75-76).

Significantly, Alcott mentions not only Rosamond’s changed dress, but her changed hair as well, for perhaps even more telling than the changes to sentimental dress occurring in the mid-nineteenth century were the changes in sentimental hairstyles. In 1855, *Godey's* once again encouraged women to conceal their flaws, when it reminded them that, “The most important decisions concerning the arrangement of the hair...was where to locate the bulk of the hair when it was swept up on top of the head, and smart women made this decision through the science of phrenology” (*Confidence Men* 160). By using her hair to cover the true shape of her skull, a woman was able to “take on any character she wanted” (*Confidence Men* 160). Alcott was aware of these possibilities, as we know that she herself underwent a phrenological exam while living in New York City. Furthermore, since she “copied out in her own hand” the results of this exam into a book on phrenology, we can deduce that she was at the very least intrigued by the
possibility of that one’s head could betray her character (Stern 241). With this, we see the true implications of Alcott’s descriptions of Rosamond’s new, fashionable choices. Her clothing, chosen to highlight her best attributes, indicates her desire to present herself to society in a certain light, and “the golden comb” that sweeps up her “loose curls” (replacing that old straw hat), indicates a quite literal desire to alter her character.

By marrying Tempest and, thus, changing her class status from a poor, helpless young woman to a privileged wife of the social elite, Rosamond is performing a class other than the one she has grown up in, unlike Gladys, who despite marrying and having access to new wealth, maintains her sentimental aversion to fine objects. This alone is a form of theatricality, as acting out gentility was a form of theatre, the “primary stage” for which was “the town mansion or plantation house, where the rituals of dining, conversing, and dancing separated the truly refined from the pretenders” (McConachie 124). Dining, conversing, and dancing are nearly all Rosamond does, as, unlike Gladys, she does not express a desire to work once she is married and consequently financially secure.

Rosamond, seeming to have left her sentimental self behind almost entirely, also accepts theatre as a legitimate form of entertainment, jumping at the chance to see Adelaide Ristori, a famous actress, perform Medea while in Nice. However, unlike a truly theatrical woman, when she and Tempest are seated in “the most conspicuous [box] in the house,” she shies away from the attention her beauty stirs up (Love Chase 111). Here, we see that while theatricality has certainly had an influence on Rosamond, she has not been entirely seduced by it and maintains her sentimental modesty. She also portrays her sentimental innocence at the theatre when, while viewing Medea, a play concerning a
woman who must avenge her husband’s betrayal, she thinks nothing of her own husband’s possible betrayal as he flees her side to follow what was “clearly defined against the open door, the shadow of a woman” (*Love Chase* 126). Thus, Rosamond’s embrace of refined objects and fashion, as opposed to Gladys’s commitment to well-worn sentimental objects and simple sentimental fashions, does not make her entirely theatrical. Instead, Rosamond remains to some extent a sentimental woman, “frank and artless as ever,” despite having been “tamed and taught” by society to some extent (*Love Chase* 59).

Significantly, this blend of sentimentality and theatricality makes itself most apparent when Rosamond’s values are questioned. Discovering that Tempest, who she believed had legitimately married her, was in fact married to another woman, her reaction is both sentimental and theatrical. Rosamond’s initial reaction is that of a sentimental woman: inaction, as she cannot handle the idea that the man she believed to be her husband was insincere in his wedding vows. After overhearing Tempest arguing with his true wife, Rosamond is paralyzed with grief. When Alcott tells us “white and cold and still, [Rosamond] lay among the broken roses, the saddest wreck of all,” she might as well be describing a corpse (*Love Chase* 129). However, unlike Gladys, who is literally killed when faced with his husband’s hypocrisy, Rosamond eventually rises from her place among the roses and takes action. Here we see that perhaps the elements of theatricality and fiery spirit in Rosamond’s character help her. She understands that, to some extent, her character is a performance, so rather than give up entirely when she realizes that she has been living is a lie due to her husband’s hypocrisy, she is able to
simply perform strength and bravery and begin a new life that is founded on no one but herself.

Unlike Gladys, whose sentimental influence was aimed at helping others, Rosamond’s primary concern was whether or not she was staying true to her sentimental values, not whether those around her were doing so. Early on in the novel when Tempest questions whether she would believe that he could be saved if she knew what his sins were, Rosamond tells him, “I do not give you up. I pity you, and love can work miracles, so I shall still hope and work” (Love Chase 89). Hope and work as she may, though, when Rosamond discovers the severity of Tempest’s past sins, she does not stay around to try to influence him with her feminine goodness. Instead, she flees, more concerned about influencing her own fate and maintaining her own morality than reviving Tempest’s.

In order to escape Tempest and maintain her sentimental values, Rosamond must escape her life. As she chooses to fight the sentimental urge that Gladys followed when she died in order to avoid hypocrisy, Rosamond must embrace theatricality and escape her life through taking on roles other than her own. Thus, Rosamond is faced with the seemingly hypocritical state of needing to embrace theatricality in order to maintain her sentimental sincerity to her own values. Interestingly, Rosamond’s blend of sentimentality and theatricality aligns closely with David Grimsted’s definition of melodrama, which he claims “grew up in the sentimental and Gothic schools of fiction evoking the tender and the horrifying in human existence” and “combined and sharpened these traditions” (241). Moving from place to place as she is pursued by Tempest,
Rosamond embraces melodrama by living as a nun, a seamstress, and even a boy, despite the fact that she is not Catholic, cannot sew, and she is clearly a grown woman.

Despite her utilization of both sentimentality and theatricality, which earlier helps her stay true to her morals while surviving what could have been a fatal betrayal, her wavering between these two societal phenomena leaves her without influence, even over herself. Had she been committed entirely to sentimentality, as Gladys was, Rosamond likely would have died as a result of her husband’s betrayal, as Gladys did, but in death be martyred as a saint. Had she been able to commit fully to theatricality, Rosamond may have been able to be successful in her portrayal of one of her false roles and lived safely undiscovered for the rest of her life. Rosamond does not influence others through her saint-like sacrifice, nor does she save her own life through her successful portrayal of a role other than her own. Because Rosamond did not choose a side, maintaining both sentimental and theatrical attributes until her end, her death is a true failure in terms of her influence. While Gladys was unable to influence her own fate, she at least was praised as an angel in her death, due to the influence she gained over others by it. Rosamond cannot even claim this passive feminine influence as she meets her end, and, in dying, she clearly proves that she had little influence over her own fate.

It is the matter of influencing her own fate that primarily occupies Jean Muir, the heroine of *Behind a Mask*. With Jean Muir, Alcott has developed a character that has completely embraced theatricality in order to influence her own fate. What is truly fascinating though, is that Jean, a former actress, uses her acting skills in order play the part of a sentimental woman, knowing that in such a role she will be able to influence others through her vulnerability. Unlike Gladys, who embodies sentimentality and only
mistakenly benefits from theatricality, and Rosamond, who embodies sentimentality and theatricality, but benefits from neither, Jean uses her understanding of sentimental feminine influence in order to influence her own fate through theatrical means.

Jean Muir is introduced to the reader as a young governess, arriving to educate the daughter of the Coventrys, a wealthy, titled family. Unlike Gladys, who is introduced as an object of the male gaze, and Rosamond, who is introduced in a fit of theatrical rage, Jean Muir’s entrance is described as such, “’Miss Muir,’ announced a servant, and a little black-robed figure stood in the doorway. For an instant no one stirred, and the governess had time to see and be seen before a word was uttered” (Behind a Mask 5). Although Muir, as a “little black-robed figure,” would normally be expected to be, like Gladys, a mere object of the gaze of others, Alcott specified that Muir was not only seen by the family, but was able to see them as well, before speaking or acting. In this moment, Muir is surely sizing them up, just as they are sizing her up. By presenting Muir in such a way from the very moment of her entrance, Alcott hints at what she will later confirm: Jean Muir is not a passive sentimental woman, but an active, theatrical femme fatale.

Muir, seeing as well as being seen, chooses how best to present herself to the Coventry family as a result of what she observes among them. Aware of the fact that she will be able to influence others through vulnerability, she portrays herself as the sentimental vulnerable woman. On her first night in the Coventry household, she wears a “plain black dress with no ornament but a little silver cross,” proving through her sincere dress that she is able to be trusted (Behind a Mask 6). Like Gladys, Jean is initially described as having “sharply cut, irregular, but very expressive features,” which, since they are well defined and expressive, must be taken to indicate that her sentimental
sincerity is easy to read (*Behind a Mask* 6). She also faints as she plays the piano for the family, appearing "white and rigid as if struck with death," reinforcing her meek and vulnerable nature and thus influencing the family through their pity for her (*Behind a Mask* 7). However, by the end of chapter one, Alcott reveals that Muir’s sentimental looks and actions are all a carefully calculated act, as she removes her costume and reveals her true identity as a painted woman to the reader.

Jean Muir’s introduction to the family is just the first in many calculated steps she takes in order to gain influence over the Coventrys. After her initial fainting spell, she continues to put herself in vulnerable positions throughout the novel, further cementing her sentimental influence over the brothers. For example, feigning to have been startled by Gerald as he lay on the ground in a passive, feminized position, Jean “started and slipped on the last step,” twisting her ankle (*Behind a Mask* 22). As Jean already observed when she fainted, though, a physical ailment is not enough to inspire sufficient sympathy in the unfeeling Gerald. Thus, she plans this time that he should be the one to cause the injury and that, when forced into masculine action in order to offer help to his victim, she should refuse his help. Manipulating him into wanting to help her, by first rejecting his help and then later “submitt[ing] quietly” to his insistence, she subtly forces him to feel concern for her and simultaneously awakens his masculinity by inspiring “unwonted exertion” in physically helping her (*Behind a Mask* 23).

Beyond simply inspiring pity though her vulnerability, Muir also systematically preys upon each member of the family by considering what each of them would like the most from her and then performing that service. Taming a wild horse for the younger son Edward, flattering the elder Sir John, making nosegays for Lady Coventry, and playing
hard-to-get with the Gerald, heir to the fortune, Muir gives each member of the family what he or she wants, establishing herself as a selfless, sincere woman and earning their trust. Worthy of note is the fact that many of these actions particularly align with the concept of sentimentality, as they place her in the sentimental sphere of natural objects and beings. Picking flowers for nosegays rather than tending a garden for food, and taming a horse meant for sport rather than one needed for transportation, are particularly sentimental activities when one considers that “pet-keeping and the tending of household plants were practices that became popular in the eighteenth century, particularly among the middle-class, and were centrally implicated in the emergence of a sentimental and ‘non-utilitarian attitude’ toward the natural world” (Merish 151). Thus, Jean’s actions dealing with plants and animals do not simply characterize her as helpful and nurturing; they also establish her as a member of the middle class and reinforce her sentimental womanhood.

Perhaps Jean’s most admirable scene in her portrayal of sentimentality, and certainly her most fascinating, is her performance of a sentimental woman participating in a tableaux vivant. Having already established herself as selfless and vulnerable, Jean need not worry that others will consider her choice to act in the tableaux scandalous, especially since, as a servant, she had little choice in whether or not she participated if the Coventrys asked her to do so. Thus, knowing her dramatic skills are strong, Jean takes advantage of the theatrical game in order to seduce the young Coventry heir, Gerald, even while catching the attention of the other men present, including the present head of the family, Sir John. Like Gladys, who through her portrayal of a role other than her own, proved to her husband that she could be more woman than angel, Jean Muir uses the
*tableaux vivant* as an opportunity to display her sexual self without sullying her reputation.

Jean’s participation in the parlor game has the exact effect desired. Taking on a variety of roles, Jean first becomes Judith beheading Holofernes while “robed with barbaric splendor,” then a dying girl with her lover, and last a queen in “royal robes” (*Behind a Mask* 50, 55). Literally changing from costume to costume results in Jean figuratively “chang[ing] from a meek governess into a charming woman” before Gerald’s very eyes (*Behind a Mask* 55). After her theatrical performance, Jean immediately returns to her sentimental role, playing the victim once again with Gerald, as she claims to be the target of unwonted attention from a former male employer. Casting herself as such, she begs, “do not think my unwomanly! Remember how alone I am, how young, and how much I rely on your sincerity, your sympathy!” (*Behind a Mask* 57-58). Jean lays a complicated trap indeed when, just after seducing the audience with a display of her sensuality, she victimizes herself once again, this time vilifying another man so that Gerald might play the hero. In doing so, she gains influence over him, as well as Sir John and the other men in the audience, by proving herself to be the epitome of male desire: a true sentimental woman who is also capable of sensuality.

Jean has captured the interest of each of the Coventry men with her complex portrayal of a sentimental woman with theatrical gifts and consequently gains influence over all of them. Of course, she does so not out of a sentimental desire to make their lives better, but in order to ingratiate herself with the family so that she can marry into it and, in turn, earn a place of financial security. Without a marriage into a titled family, Muir is unable to ensure a state of financial stability for herself. Understanding the vulnerable
status of women in her class, Jean Muir uses her theatricality to influence others so that she might ultimately shape her own fate.

Although Jean is successful in her pursuit of the title Lady Coventry, it is not clear in the end whether she truly gains the security she desired when she vows early on in the novel, “I’ll not fail again if there is power in a woman’s wit and will!” (11). Certainly, Muir’s example suggests that with wit and will a woman who is prepared to forgo a sentimental attachment to sincerity can indeed alter her own class status. However, what remains to be seen is whether or not, once she has gained that status, she has earned the power she so desired.
Chapter Two: Mephistopheles and the Maiden,
or The Maid as Mephistopheles?

It is clear that when Alcott created gothic stories whose heroines embodied a blend of sentimentality and theatricality, she was commenting on the changes that were taking place in her society. Yet in studying the heroines of *A Modern Mephistopheles*, *A Long, Fatal Love Chase*, and *Behind a Mask* alone, one does not gain a full understanding of what Alcott’s gothic was concerned with. It is necessary to consider how the change in mid-nineteenth century America from a sentimental culture to a theatrical culture was threatening to Alcott’s readers and how Alcott’s heroines in these novels, three women attempting to gain influence over their lives in some capacity, are ultimately victims of that change.

As discussed in Chapter One, the shift from a sentimental culture to a theatrical culture was threatening to Alcott’s society largely in terms of economics, as the rising working class threatened to displace the middle and upper classes, who previously had been unchallenged in America and Europe. This fear of the unworthy lower class person taking an undeserved spot in the upper class was embodied by the confidence man. Alcott knew this, but rather than simply spin tales of outright confidence men and women, she chose to reappropriate a gothic tale already well known to her audience, thus veiling her tale of a very real threat with a fantastical tale that would capture her readers’ attention.

Alcott relied on Goethe’s *Faust* heavily when writing her Gothic works. Goethe was “an important facet of 19th-century American culture” and an idol of Alcott’s from the age of 15 ("Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von" 123). *Faust*, of course, tells the story of a young scholar who, frustrated with his inability to gain infinite knowledge, considers
suicide, only to be met by a devil named Mephistopheles, who offers to serve Faust in life if Faust will serve him. Faust agrees, selling his soul to the devil, though he ultimately escapes from the contract in Part II.

The appeal of this story was great for Alcott. Not only did she personally enjoy it and know that her readers would understand allusions to it due to its immense popularity, but she also recognized in it the hint of another tale that was quickly becoming part of middle-class culture at the time: that of the confidence man and the painted woman, “who prowled the streets of American cities in search of innocent victims to deceive, dupe, and destroy” (xiv). In “the vast literature of advice on personal conduct” aimed at men, as well as in women’s “advice books, fashion magazines, and etiquette manuals” published at the time, young people were warned continuously about the dangers of befriending or emulating these two characters. The confidence man, as represented by conduct literature, was a character who, “whether rake or pimp, gambler or thief,” was skilled in the “art” of deceiving “others through false appearances” (Confidence Men and Painted Women 2).

The confidence man and the painted woman, whether guilty of pimping or dressing extravagantly, were considered equal threats to society because they were both guilty of manipulating “facial expression, manner, and personal appearance in a calculated effort to lure the guileless into granting them confidence” (Confidence Men and Painted Women xv).

This portrayal of false appearances was particularly terrifying to mid-nineteenth century white Americans of the upper class, who feared hypocrites above all others, as they alone might be willing to flout the European-inspired class system that was in place in early America by emulating upper class manners, in order to improve their own social
standings. If anyone was able to imitate sincerity, they wondered, how could they ever
trust anyone? Worse yet, if anyone could imitate upper-class manners, how could they
ever distinguish one class of people from another? Elizabeth Schewe studies this concept
in her article entitled “Domestic Conspiracy: Class Conflict and Performance in Louisa
May Alcott’s Behind a Mask.” When Schewe explains that the main character of Behind
a Mask “is able to perform virtuous womanhood and upper class femininity, she reveals
that virtue and class distinction are not natural but learned performances that may hide,
rather than reveal, personal and family history,” she may as well be speaking of
confidence men and painted women in general, as it was just this subversion of class that
made these figures so terrifying to the conservative, upper-class American at the time
(579).

Another important element of the confidence man story is the fact that his victim
is almost always a young person, naïve to the ways of the world, who just left home for
the first time. The confidence man takes advantage of his victim’s inexperience and preys
on his desire for companionship and knowledge in order to get what he wants (usually
money). Here, we can draw a direct parallel between the relationship of the confidence
men/painted women to their victims and that of Mephistopheles to Faust. In both cases, a
young, innocent victim is tricked into trusting the older, false-faced foe due to his
naïveté.

Because Alcott’s audience was well acquainted with both the Faust story and that
of the confidence man and painted woman, she was able to safely appropriate those
stories for her own subversive purposes. Both A Modern Mephistopheles and A Long,
Fatal Love Chase openly reference the Faust story. In fact, in both novels the antagonist
is directly compared to Mephistopheles. In *A Modern Mephistopheles*, the title certainly alludes to the story, but Alcott goes so far as to name the antagonist “Helwyze,” while also having him introduce himself as “the devil!” and literally call himself Mephistopheles throughout the novel (*A Modern Mephistopheles* 8). Furthermore, other characters from *A Modern Mephistopheles* are also directly compared to their Faustian counterparts. Olivia, Helwyze’s former mistress, compares Felix, the novel’s protagonist, to Faust, and Gladys to Margaret, who in Goethe’s *Faust* is Faust’s savior. Helwyze, in response, calls Olivia Martha, who in the Faust story, is Margaret’s neighbor. These comparisons all hold true as the novel opens with Canaris—“friendless, penniless, and hopeless at age nineteen”—attempting suicide after a publisher rejects his book (11). Helwyze appears mysteriously and offers him the opportunity to earn “friends, money, and the right to hope again,” if he is willing to work for him for only a month (11-12). Canaris, young and desperate, like the victims of any confidence man, accepts the offer gladly, only to regret it later. Alcott modeled this story so closely after *Faust* that even the epitaph of the novel is a quote from the second part of Goethe’s play.

In *A Long, Fatal Love Chase*, the allusions are less frequent, but blatant when they do appear. Here the antagonist (this time, the somewhat more subtly named “Phillip Tempest”) directly compares himself to Mephistopheles as early as the second page of the novel, in response to the heroine, Rosamond, claiming that she is so lonely that she would welcome any visitor. Later in the novel, he is compared once more to Mephistopheles by another character. Here, though, it is the Gothic heroine, Rosamond, who plays a female Faust character. *A Long, Fatal Love Chase* begins with Rosamond despairing over the sad state of her life. She lives with her grandfather, who does not love
or take care of her, in the only castle on an otherwise deserted island. When her grandfather responds to her lamentation by telling her to leave, she replies, “You say ‘Go,’ but where can I go, a girl, young, penniless, and alone?” (A Long, Fatal Love Chase 2). Interestingly, Rosamond’s helpless state is described in the exact same way that Canaris’s is in A Modern Mephistopheles, with one addition. Not only is Rosamond young, poor, and without friends, but she also suffers from being “a girl.” As she questions Tempest about her job opportunities off the island she has always called home, they have the following exchange:

“...what can I do to earn my bread in peace and freedom, when I can bear this dreadful life no longer?”

“Turn governess and drudge your youth away as most indignant gentlewomen do,” was the brief reply.

“I don’t know enough and am too young, I think.”

“Be an actress, that’s a free life enough.”

“I’ve no talent and no money to start with if I had.”

“You can switch your health and spirits into ‘bands and gussets and seams’ as a needlewoman. How does that suit?”

“Not at all, I hate sewing and know very little about it.”

“Then marry some rich old man who will let you have your own way in everything and die by the time you are tired of it.” (A Long, Fatal Love Chase 37-38) We see here that Alcott was driving home the fact that as a young woman with no apparent education or skills, Rosamond has little choice but to stay with her grandfather,
despite the fact that he has given her freedom. Although technically free, Rosamond remains enslaved by her gender. It is at this point in the narrative that Tempest reveals to Rosamond that he has a plan to free her, but he “must prove its practicability before [he] propose[s] it” (*A Long, Fatal Love Chase* 39). Tempest’s offer is not as immediate as Helwyze’s or Mephistopheles’s, but he does eventually present Rosamond with exactly what she is looking for—a way off the island and into an adventurous life.

In both *A Modern Mephistopheles* and *A Long, Fatal Love Chase*, the male Mephistophelean character fits the characterization of the confidence man perfectly, as each is a man “of wealth and fashion” who claims “to take a deep interest in the youth, and to be anxious to promote his [or her] welfare” (*Confidence Men and Painted Women* 5). Both Helwyze and Tempest take advantage of the youth of their victims in order to serve their own purposes. Helwyze’s initial motivation for “helping” Felix is unclear, although Elizabeth Lennox Keyser suggests that, “in buying Felix, [Helwyze] is attempting to buy the youth, health, and manly vigor that he [Helwyze] lacks” (126). Whatever his initial motivation, it soon becomes clear that Helwyze simply enjoys manipulating others for his own amusement. Taking a liking to Gladys, he forces Canaris to marry her against his will. Despite the fact that he soon grows to love her himself, Helwyze seems to derive a perverse pleasure out of the fact that he can force Canaris to do his bidding. Tempest, on the other hand, seems to have genuine feelings for Rosamond. However, he makes his lack of consideration for her needs abundantly clear when he kidnaps her “like a pirate,” sailing her away on his boat and telling her that he won her as the result of gambling against her grandfather (*A Long, Fatal Love Chase* 57). Tempest quickly acquiesces to Rosamond’s plea to marry her in order to make her an honest
woman, but we later find out that he is already married and has thus led unwitting Rosamond into polygamy. Tempest misleads her in this way, despite the fact that he saw her initial reaction of “amazement, terror, shame and grief” when she thought she would be forced to live in sin with him (A Long, Fatal Love Chase 56). Whether or not he claims to love her, he acts without conscience when dealing with her, thinking only of his own needs.

Similarly, Helwyze discusses his intentions for Felix and Gladys, stating, “to study the mysterious mechanisms of human nature is a most absorbing pastime” (A Modern Mephistopheles 46). Explaining his ability to treat human beings like “the dumb creatures surgeons torture, that they may watch a living nerve” (A Modern Mephistopheles 47), Helwyze claims, “While my brain is spared me I can survive the ossification of all the heart I ever had, since, at best, it is an unruly member. Almost as inconvenient as a conscience; that, thank fortune, I never had” (A Modern Mephistopheles 46). Tempest, too, characterizes himself by comparing himself to his father, who was “simply a man with no conscience” and adding, “Do you know, Rose, that I sometimes think I have none?” (Love Chase 86-87). Alcott’s gothic monster, it seems, is not a supernatural being, but a person who acts without conscience when dealing with others. These hidden motives, of course, relate directly to the cultural shift from sentimental to theatrical, as they relate directly to the fear of mid-nineteenth century Americans who believed that to act without sincerity was so act without a conscience. Here we see that Alcott’s Mephistophelean monster is defined in part by his lack of conscience in dealing with his young victims.
The victims themselves, however, cannot be so easily defined. In *A Modern Mephistopheles*, for instance, Canaris starts out as the unwitting victim of Helwyze, but remains the victim only due to his own cowardice. Agreeing to serve as Helwyze’s companion for another year after his initial month of service is completed, he is then duped into submitting Helwyze’s poetry as his own for publication, supplementing the few pieces he wrote himself. When the reviews come out and they praise the poetry written by Helwyze, while ignoring his own work, Canaris does not confess his plagiarism and, thus, must continue to serve Helwyze indefinitely out of fear of discovery. If he were simply willing to abandon the fame that he did not rightfully earn, he would be free of Helwyze’s influence and able to strike out on his own in pursuit of a new life. Eventually, Canaris does so, but it is only after he is forced to confess his guilt to his innocent wife Gladys. Gladys is so overcome with the shock of his plagiarism that she goes into premature labor and dies as a result. At this point, Canaris cares not for fame and abandons Helwyze, seeking out “any honest work [he] can find” (*A Modern Mephistopheles* 285). Thus we see that in *A Modern Mephistopheles*, although Canaris plays Faust to Helwyze’s Mephistopheles, Canaris has the opportunity to start over at the end of the novel, while Gladys, Helwyze’s secondary victim, succumbs to death. These varying degrees of repercussion are interesting to consider in terms of Alcott’s take on gender roles. Did she mean to imply, as it seems, that while men would live through an assault on their morals, women could not? It certainly seems so when, in *A Long, Fatal Love Chase*, Alcott presents us with a female Faust.

Rosamond makes for a much more principled Faust than Canaris does, despite the fact that her gender makes being so extremely difficult. Upon discovering that she has
been led astray by Tempest, she immediately thinks, “Not of the terrible affliction which had befallen her, the blight upon her life, or the death of confidence and love,” but instead thinks “how to act, and her strong will ruled the weak body” (A Long, Fatal Love Chase 130). Unwilling to spend even one more night under the roof of an immoral confidence man, Rosamond flees Tempest’s property immediately, despite the fact that, as a friendless and penniless young woman, she has no one to turn to and nowhere to go. What follows is the “love chase” of the title, as Rosamond must take on one role after another, and travel from one country to another, in order to avoid her pursuer. Taking advantage of some of the very few roles available to her, she works as a seamstress, despite her earlier claim that she knows “very little about it,” and lives in a convent, despite the fact that she is a Protestant. It is clear that Rosamond does not think twice about the sacrifices of comfort and security that she is making in order to escape a life of immorality, when she replies to the suggestion she cross-dress with a passionate, “I’ll cut my hair and do it!” (A Long, Fatal Love Chase 163). Perhaps Rosamond’s willingness to shed her hair, a clear signifier of her femininity, is linked to her understanding that to be without a career or a landed title, being pursued by a wealthy man, was an extremely vulnerable position for a woman.

However, a yet more vulnerable position to be in is that of a poor woman under the control of two men, who also happens to be expecting a child. This, of course, is the state Gladys finds herself in at the end of A Modern Mephistopheles. Gladys’s miscarriage and subsequent death could not be a starker statement by Alcott about the powerlessness of women at the time. Although the other characters revere Gladys as a
martyr at the end of the novel, certainly Alcott hoped her female readership would see the “barren honor” of martyring oneself for a selfish husband’s lie.

As the title suggests, Rosamond’s love chase ultimately proves fatal as well. At the end of the novel, despite her best efforts to escape Tempest and live a moral life, she dies at his hands when he mistakes a boat she is on for that of another man. His monomaniacal pursuit to control her proves fatal and it is only once dead that she is “safe and free at last” (*A Long, Fatal Love Chase* 344). Rosamond’s death in a watery, yonic grave is certainly another bleak end for a woman whose society gave her no power over her own status as a citizen. In fact, *A Long, Fatal Love Chase* ends with the Tempest “gather[ing] the dead woman in his arms” and declaring “Mine first—mine last—mine even in the grave!”, as he commits suicide (*A Long Fatal Love Chase* 346).

Tempest must assert his power over Rosamond even in death, just as Canaris and Helwyze are consumed with guilt over Gladys’s death. However, unlike Canaris, who believes he must try to lead a moral life in order to redeem himself enough to perhaps meet Gladys in heaven, it seems that Tempest believes that he and Rosamond will have the same fate after death. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that Gladys, although the victim of Canaris’s sin, did not actually sin herself. Rosamond, however, has indeed partaken in polygamy, whether or not she was aware of it at the time. Thus, Rosamond likely believes herself that she will have to pay for her husbands’ wrongdoings even in death. This reinforces just how little influence Rosamond had over others and even her own fate, as she is not worshipped as a martyr after death, but is instead still pursued.

Both Helwyze and Tempest are obvious Gothic monsters in their immoral manipulations of those around them for their own pleasure. Each grants his Faustian
counterpart a wish in order to gain his or her confidence, and thereby dupes the young person into living a sinful life. Against these Mephistophelean characters, it seems that the victims of the novels do not stand a chance. However, in *Behind a Mask, or, A Woman's Power*, differentiating between Mephistopheles and the victim becomes more difficult. Here Alcott introduces a female Mephistopheles in the painted woman Jean Muir, a “haggard, worn, and moody” ex-actress of “thirty at least,” who arrives at the Coventry household just as the novel opens (*Behind a Mask* 12). Pretending to be the governess the family sent for, she puts her acting skills to good use, playing the part of a meek and modest eighteen-year old Scottish girl. Unlike the male Mephistophelean characters, Muir dares not suggest that she is a devil, nor does she compare herself in any way to Mephistopheles. She does, though, immediately work towards gaining the confidence of the family by fainting while performing at the piano for them. As previously discussed, Muir’s choice to do so at once casts her as a “true” sentimental woman and wins the hearts of the family members, who pity her seeming vulnerability.

With this choice, Alcott immediately establishes that Muir understands how to manipulate those around her, effectively portraying her as a painted woman. At the end of the first chapter, Alcott has Muir “unbound and remove the long abundant braids from her head, [wipe] the pink from her face, [take] out several pearly teeth, and [slip] off her dress,” adding that though these accessories are clearly aiding Muir in her manipulation of the family, “the disguise was more in the expression she assumed than in any art of costume or false adornment” (*Behind a Mask* 12). With this, Alcott’s audience would immediately have understood Muir’s character as that of the archetypal painted woman,
out to deceive others with her looks and actions and corrupting moral society in the process.

What Alcott’s audience was unlikely to understand though, was that with these actions Muir was proving true Butler’s concept of gender as performative, which states if the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time...then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style (Butler 901).

Muir is an experienced woman of thirty, but because she knows what actions define a young, inexperienced woman in her culture, she is able to simply repeat those actions when necessary to portray herself as such. Muir is also capable of acting the part of a man at times, as Gail Smith has observed, though she always does so behind closed doors. Here, Smith studies the ways in which Alcott’s “confidence women cross gender boundaries, acting in traditionally masculine ways and forcing men into ‘feminized’ roles of subservience, ignorance, passivity, and powerlessness” (51). Muir, of course, always acts appropriately according to her surroundings, so that in front of the Coventry clan no hint of the “traditionally masculine” behavior she is capable of is ever glimpsed. In fact, even the members of the family who do not wholeheartedly believe her act, Gerald and Lucia, never suspect the true extremity of her duplicity. Accordingly, when Muir is at last unmasked as a confidence woman in the final chapter through the discovery of her personal letters, it is Lucia who exclaims, “[Muir] never wrote that! It is impossible. A
woman could not do it” (Behind a Mask 98). Even when faced with proof, Lucia is unwilling to accept that a woman could have such power over others.

Lucia’s unwillingness to accept Jean’s unladylike actions as real is a product of her upbringing in a society whose “pervasive fear of a woman’s power as disruptive, self-creating demon” conflicted with “the Victorian ideal of the dutiful, family-bound woman [that] was generated in part by” it (“The Domestic Drama of Louisa May Alcott” 252). Alcott further illustrated the societal fear of this eponymous “Woman’s Power” by assigning Muir the only supernatural power present in any of the three works in which a Mephistopheles character exists. While Helwyze and Tempest are simply obsessively manipulative, Muir exercises the power of mesmerism over those she controls, “a piercing gaze, the ability to provoke physical sensations, and a mysterious power to conform other’s wills to her own” (Strouth Gaul 835). Both Helwyze and Tempest have influence over their Faustian counterparts, but that influence stems from their powerful status as wealthy males. Muir, though capable of participating in masculine activities in secrecy, certainly cannot openly exercise power over others in that way. Thus, Alcott grants her female Mephistopheles the pseudo-supernatural power of mesmerism.

Mesmerism “was overwhelmingly practiced by male mesmerists on female patients,” relying in part for its effectiveness “upon the ‘active, dominating male’ who practiced upon a compliant female” (Strouth Gaul 839). Thus, by assigning Muir the power of mesmerism, Alcott is empowering her female Mephistopheles with some of the masculine power that she is otherwise lacking. Interestingly, Helwyze, in a scene in which he tries to manipulate Gladys, is forced to resort to drugging her in order to gain the influence that Muir enjoys via mesmerism. Alcott writes,
Then Helwyze did an evil thing,—a thing very few men could or would have done. He deliberately violated the sanctity of the human soul, robbing it alike of its most secret and most precious thoughts. Hasheesh had lulled the senses which guarded the treasure; now the magnetism of a potent will force the reluctant lips to give up the key” (*A Modern Mephistopheles* 204-205).

Helwyze, it is worth noting, must rely on the “magnetism of a potent,” while Jean’s own feminine magnetism allows her influence over others. Helwyze’s evil in drugging Gladys does not even pay off, as he does not get the answer he desires out of her. Muir, on the other hand, is able to get exactly what she wants from Gerald, using “the power which a woman possessed and known how to use, for weal or woe of man” in order to make him “for the first time in his life” feel “the indescribable spell of womanhood” (*Behind a Mask* 53).

The mesmeric episodes in *A Modern Mephistopheles* and *Behind a Mask* are also noteworthy due to the status issues that were linked to mesmerism in the nineteenth century. Allison Winter notes, “because there were often pronounced class and gender differences between mesmerist and subject, the collative relations that developed in the experiments seemed to offer testimony about relative status” (4). If, like Gladys, the intended subject of mesmerism was able to resist the mesmerist’s influence, it proved her “moral and intellectual superiority” over him (Winter 1). Conversely, if, like Gerald, one fell victim to the influence of a mesmerist, then one was considered morally and intellectually inferior. By granting Jean mesmeric influence over Gerald, Alcott was
making her his moral and intellectual superior and implying that she is worthy of
becoming his equal in class status as well.

Exactly why Muir is choosing to exercise her influence over Gerald and the rest
of his family is worth studying. Unlike Helwyze and Tempest who have clear Faustian
counterparts who they mislead and manipulate for their own pleasures, Muir’s Faustian
counterpart seems to be herself. In Goethe’s *Faust, A Modern Mephistopheles*, and *A
Long, Fatal Love Chase*, the Mephistophelean character dupes his Faust into making
some kind of deal that seems appealing at the time, but turns out to be a con. In *Behind a
Mask*, though, Muir strikes no such deal with the Coventry family. Instead, it seems to be
Jean herself who longs for something she will later regret.

Muir’s goal, as she manipulates the Coventry family, is to seduce one of the men
into marrying her, so that she might finally enjoy the security that her gender and class
did not previously allow her. She achieves this goal in the end, but perhaps not in the way
she originally imagined. Rather than marry Gerald, the Coventry heir, or even his
younger brother, both of whom fall in love with her during the course of the novel, she
finds herself married to Sir John, the older uncle and current head of the family. While
Muir will certainly enjoy a great deal of financial security as a result of her union with
this man, it is unlikely that she will be able to have children with him and, thus, will in no
way make herself a permanent fixture in the titled family. Furthermore, as she is now a
wife, she finds herself in a role significantly less free than that she previously occupied.
Very much aware of her duties as wife, she says to the family, “I will solemnly promise
to devote my life to his happiness” (*Behind a Mask* 104). Muir’s fate, while certainly not
as stark as Gladys's or Rosamond's, is sealed, as she is now trapped in a loveless
marriage to an impotent man in a family that does not trust her.

Perhaps the most damning element of Jean's predicament is the family that does
not trust her. Having married into the Coventrys, Jean is now at their disposal and now
that they have discovered her duplicity, they view her with nothing short of fear.

"Clasp[ing] her daughter in her arms," Lady Coventry declares herself "mortally afraid of
this creature," attempting to physically protect Bella, as if afraid "Jean Muir would burst
in to annihilate the whole family" (Behind a Mask 102). Indeed, annihilation of her
family is exactly what Lady Coventry is afraid of. As a painted woman, Jean is a source
of that negative moral influence, which people in the mid-nineteenth century believed
could spread like a disease. Lady Coventry is fearful that, having unwittingly exposed her
daughter to a hypocritical sinner, Bella may spontaneously turn into one herself.

Despite being the wife of the current head of the household, according to the law
of *femme couvert*, which was generally accepted in the nineteenth century, "By marriage,
the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of
the women is suspended during the marriage" (Wayne 17). Furthermore, when Sir John
dies, leaving Jean unmarried and much older and less attractive to other mates, her
situation would likely grow worse, since she would not be the heir to the English family's
estate and the rest of the family, believing her to be a source of contagious immorality, is
unlikely to help her financially.

Jean Muir's best laid plans, it seems, leave her more powerless than before, as her
legal existence now depends on her old, impotent husband and a family who fears her.

Here, Jean's story changes. No longer the Gothic monster who manipulates others
without conscience, she is now a wife for whom “the chains of socioeconomic status have been broken, only to be replaced by the chains of marriage” (Massé 7). With this, *Behind a Mask* turns from an American gothic reappropriation of *Faust* to a story of the marital gothic.\(^{ii}\)

Alcott’s choice to trap even her most seemingly powerful female character into a powerless situation at the end of *Behind a Mask* was certainly a deliberate one. Even when imbued with the abilities to act outside of her gender and mesmerize others, Jean Muir falls victim to the class and gender system in mid-nineteenth century America. Muir may have been capable of taking on the role of Mephistopheles, but, in the end, she is only a maid.

Alcott knew all too well that, try as they might, women like Muir could never gain complete financial autonomy. Trying to take her own advice from the *New York Ledger* by devoting herself to the “higher calling” of writing, Alcott still could not truly follow her own inspiration. After a brief reunion with the gothic via the “No Name”-series, Alcott was forced back into writing sentimental novels to order, churning out two sequels to *Little Women*, as well as several other sentimental stories. Concluding *Jo’s Boys*, the last novel in the *Little Women* series and her final novel, Alcott wrote

> It is a strong temptation to the weary historian to close the present tale with an earthquake which should engulf Plumfield and its environs so deeply in the bowels of the earth that no youthful Schliemann could ever find a vestige of it...And now, having endeavored to suit everyone by many weddings, few deaths, and as much prosperity as the eternal fitness
Of things will permit, let the music stop, the lights die out, and the curtain fall forever on the March family. (qtd. in “The Domestic Drama” 249)

With this attempt at humor, we see just how frustrated Alcott was with writing for her audience. Expressing her desire to kill off the whole race of Marches so that she might never have to write about them again (a very gothic desire, indeed!), Alcott then acknowledges that following such a whim would devastate her sentimental readers, who could only be satisfied by marriages and prosperity.

Try as she might to gain financial security, Alcott knew that she could not be sure of her finances unless she gave her readers what they wanted. Like Jean Muir, Alcott’s financial state was dependent on the whims of others, no matter how long and hard she worked to gain security. As Alcott’s own life, as well as her works A Modern Mephistopheles, A Long, Fatal Love Chase, and Behind a Mask make clear, whether they were under the control of monomaniacal madmen, upper class husbands, or simply the reading public, women in the nineteenth century had to answer to others in order to earn any form of financial security.


Although this quote is not directly from Alcott through her journals or letters, but rather attributed to her, many respected scholars have used it to guide their interpretations of Alcott's motives for writing. For example, Madeline Stern uses it in her introduction to *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott*, and Tesesa A. Goddu uses it in Chapter 5 of *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*.

In *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*, Michelle Massé coins the term “marital gothic,” which tells the stories of “women who want to believe they will be honored and loved as the language of courtships and marriages avows” (27), but who are disappointed by the reality of marriage, and are trapped in their married state, as their new economic status leaves them with “no apparent capital” of their own (25) and thus no way to escape from their new, undesirable circumstances. Although *Behind a Mask* does not tell the story of the marital gothic, but instead tells the story of the pursuit of marriage, our knowledge of the marital gothic informs us that though Jean’s financial state is altered, she personally has no more control over her own economic state now than she did before.