The Many Masks of Louisa May Alcott’s Gothic Heroines

Lisa Poggi

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The Many Masks of Louisa May Alcott’s Gothic Heroines

by

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THE MANY MASKS OF LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S
GOTHIC HEROINES

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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by
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Montclair, NJ
2008
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Many of the female characters in the Gothic thrillers of Louisa May Alcott wear masks or are or portrayed as "actresses" who conceal their passion with the appearance of being the typical domestic woman. This idea is most clearly presented in "Behind a Mask" and "Pauline's Passion and Punishment." In these thrillers, hidden passion causes problems in each heroine's life, either because her strong will is an unacceptable female characteristic and she will therefore be shunned in some way by society or by those dear to her; or, expressing her passion will result in disaster of some kind. This representation is twofold, in that the heroines are literally actresses in some sense, but they also figuratively act how society expects them to, as many women of the nineteenth century were apt to do. Alcott's social commentary in these thrillers seems to show her discontent with the expectations placed on women. Louisa May Alcott herself had to "wear a mask," so to speak, when she published these thrillers; she published them either anonymously or pseudonymously, for it would have tarnished her reputation as an author of both domestic tales and children's stories if it were known that she had written thrillers as well.

In her life, she was an atypical woman for her time; she tried to be self-reliant, seeking independence by finding ways to earn an income to support herself and her family. Many of the ways she earned that income, however, were by means of the typical female employments, such as sewing, going to service, and writing. Difficult as it was to break free from a woman's role, Alcott did in many ways. Much like her Gothic heroines, she struggled to find balance between her desire to be independent, her passion, and her need to survive as a woman in nineteenth-century society. Her career as an
author, and more specifically, a female author, depended on her finding and maintaining this balance. She would likely have lost some readers of her domestic tales if it were widely known that she was also the author of these “racy” thrillers.

Also of interest is the alteration of some of the typical Gothic themes in Alcott’s thrillers. Although her “blood and thunder” tales basically follow the Gothic “formula,” there are elements that are slightly shifted, which reveal the female author’s touch. One example of an ironic twist on a typical Gothic theme in Alcott’s thrillers involves marriage between different classes. In “Behind a Mask,” the heroine/villainess, Jean Muir, claims to be of noble blood to gain the sympathies and affections of the men of the wealthy Coventry family. Truly an actress, she tricks her way in to marrying into the family in order to gain power, wealth, and a noble title. Ironically, however, through this marriage, Jean Muir remains powerless and becomes trapped in the domestic role she had played for so long; she is doomed to continue her “act” as Lady Coventry. So, although Jean Muir (as well Alcott’s other heroines/villainesses) has done wrong, her situation evokes pity at the end of the story, as we see that for all her efforts, she does not ultimately win and must remain in the domestic sphere.

Although Alcott was ashamed that she had written these thrillers just because they paid well, it seems that through these stories she was able to present stronger, more passionate women, women that perhaps mirrored her own hidden desires. And even if these women did not always win in the end, they at least took the initiative to become something more; to be more than passive, submissive women.
I. Domesticity: Mask or Inescapable Reality

Louisa May Alcott, well-known as the “Children’s Friend,” also had a darker side, a side that she concealed behind the mask of her pseudonym, A. M. Barnard. This hidden side was the author of “blood and thunder” tales that contained passionate and willful heroines who tried to persevere in a patriarchal world, a world not so different from that in which Alcott herself had had to struggle to survive. Nineteenth-century America was a world in which the Cult of True Womanhood dictated how a woman needed to act. Self-sacrifice and self-control were necessary characteristics in terms of patriarchal authority. According to Charles Strickland, “A woman must be prepared to suffer, and to suffer in silence, for it was not her place to challenge the authority of her husband, imperfect though he may be” (10). The heroines that Alcott described in her thrillers would not have been role models for women of their day. Growing up, Alcott was herself rebellious at times, having a temperament like her mother’s, and was often reproached by her father, Bronson Alcott, for her “passionate” displays. A commonly referenced quote on Louisa and her mother comes from Bronson Alcott’s Journals. He says of his daughter and wife: “Two Devils, as yet, I am not quite divine enough to vanquish—the mother fiend and her daughter” (as quoted by Elbert 174). Alcott had to fight hard to quell her passion, but she worked to gain self-control, as was her duty as a woman. It was only on the stage, acting out the plays that she had often written for herself and her sisters to perform, that Alcott could express freely her passionate side. This idea of the woman as an actress can be seen repeatedly in Alcott’s work, especially in her thrillers.
Alcott began publishing her sensation stories when she discovered that they paid well and that she could help support her family with her earnings. Elbert notes that “[b]oth parents increasingly accepted Alcott as ‘the son’ of the household, committed to providing both comfort and prestige for the family” (Elbert 178). Although Louisa May Alcott was the main breadwinner of her family, taking on a male role in this way, she earned her income through the various, though limited, means of employment available to nineteenth-century women. Aside from writing, some of her jobs included sewing, nursing, being a companion, and going “out to service.” Although Louisa’s role as family provider was somewhat atypical, it was acceptable. Writing was considered acceptable and convenient [for many women] because it could be done within the confines of the ‘woman’s sphere,’ during the time women were not engaged in domestic tasks...[In fact,] since the beginning of the nineteenth century, women had been writing stories and novels for women and children and childrearing advice manuals for parents. (Marsella 92)

Additionally, it is interesting to note that, generally, mainly due to innovations in printing,

between 1830 and 1850 more than a thousand works of fiction by American born authors were published in the United States...more than five times as many as in the preceding sixty years. Most of this fiction was by women and for women and most was concerned with domestic themes—courtship, marriage, religion, home management, child-rearing, and education. (Strickland 4)

In all this literature, one would find that a moral lesson was somehow to have been taught by the end.
Ironically, for Alcott, her writing, considered an acceptable woman’s occupation, became her outlet for the fire and passion that she had been taught to subdue. Besides her children’s stories and domestic tales, Alcott wrote “blood and thunder tales” that were published in “penny dreadfuls” either anonymously or behind the mask of her androgynous pseudonym, A.M. Barnard. [It is not known exactly how Alcott created this name, but Madeleine Stern suggests that A.M. could have been derived from her mother’s initials (Abigail May) and that Barnard could have been from a family friend, and well-respected educator, Henry Barnard (Introduction xxi)].

Elaine Showalter points out that Alcott would “always associate her own most pleasurable writing with witchcraft,” and that “women’s writing, in the title of one of her adolescent plays, was the ‘witch’s curse,’ a passionate legacy that could be both magical and dangerous” (46). This description rings true when it is realized that Alcott had been submitting Gothic thrillers to Boston literary magazines because they paid well, and she and her family needed the money. The idea that she could support her family by writing these stories was magical; yet the risk that she might be discovered as the true author of such tales was dangerous. It must be kept quiet that the “Children’s Friend” was the same writer of adult stories of passion, revenge, opium addiction, and suicide.

It was almost an entire century later, in 1943, that Leona Rostenberg discovered Alcott’s thrillers, and in 1975 and 1976, Madeleine Stern had nine of them published in two volumes. Since that time, many of Alcott’s most critically read works were revisited through a new lens. Her mask had been removed, revealing “a new Louisa who had abandoned the repose and propriety of Concord to seek another world peopled with villains, vengeful women, blood, and violence” (Stem 85), and it was becoming evident
that perhaps Alcott's sentiment in her domestic and children's works was a mask as well; a mask that disguised her own views on domesticity and womanhood as well as her disapproval of patriarchal society and the "wounds" it inflicted upon women. Alcott exposed her "inner demon" in her thrillers: "Under the cover of anonymity, she declared her independence of sentimental traditions, creating in the process women more like herself" (Strickland 67), though it was a "self" that she kept hidden most of the time.

Alcott wore a mask of respectability but clearly articulated a desire...to reject the very tradition which ultimately constrained her. The rebellious desire embedded in her sensation stories marks a tension between Alcott's resistance to and concurrent internalization of her culture's gender imperatives. (McCullough 59)

This tension is evident in Alcott's heroines as well, as they simultaneously embody passion and sentiment—although the sentiment seems a mask used to manipulate, ultimately the heroines must subscribe to their domestic roles if they wish to survive. This reflects Alcott's own struggle in that although she wrote sensation stories, she needed to do so under a false name, and ultimately she gave up writing these blood and thunder tales after the publication and great success of Little Women, a sentimental novel that seemed to clearly support domesticity and the woman's sphere. So, in the end, having discovered "the formula for financial and critical success" (MacDonald 84-5), Alcott fell back on sentiment and domesticity, not because she completely believed in the ideology, but because that was what sold well and economically sustained her and her family.

The discovered thrillers had originally been published in the 1860s, either pseudonymously or anonymously, in a few literary magazines: her first one, in Frank
Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, and others in the Boston “penny dreadful,” The Flag of Our Union. Four of these sensation stories were “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment,” her first published thriller, which won a one hundred dollar prize in 1863; it was printed in two installments on January 3 and 10; “V.V. or Plots and Counterplots,” which appeared in four installments during February 1865, “A Marble Woman, or The Mysterious Model,” which also appeared in four installments a few months later from May 20 to June 10, 1865, and “Behind a Mask, or A Woman’s Power,” August 11, 1866, after her return from a year spent in Europe, “a trip she was able to make only by serving as a ‘companion’ to the invalid daughter of a rich man” (Fetterley 2).

Until the publication of Little Women, Alcott wrote a number of other thrillers as well. As briefly mentioned, the common theme of these Gothic stories dealt with a woman’s passion and the resulting troubles. However, one must question the typical happy endings of some of them. It seems that Alcott was doing one of two things, or perhaps both. She was certainly “manipulating the market place,” as Teresa Goddu explains, because although readers wanted to be thrilled, society required a happy ending such as the culminating marriage. Alcott needed to give the reading public what they wanted if she expected to sell her work. She had to “cater to a reading public whose values she pretended to share or adopt under duress” (Keyser 56). But perhaps at the same time, Alcott was critiquing the typical ideal, knowing that marriage was not always happy, as she herself preferred to remain single and “paddle [her] own canoe” (Alcott Journals 99). Alcott had “taken a public stand in favor of the single life for women. Shortly before undertaking the novel [Little Women], she had published an article
[entitled “Happy Women”] which was a patent effort to persuade young women that the single life could be a happy one” (Strickland 77).

Just as Alcott had to “act” a part in her life, her Gothic heroines put on acts to get what they want in her thrillers. “Behind a Mask,” for example, “articulates a radical critique of the cultural constructs of ‘femininity’ and ‘little womanhood,’ exposing them as roles women must play, masks they must put on, in order to survive” (Fetterley 2). Jean Muir in “Behind a Mask” uses her acting skills to win the heart and title of Sir John Coventry, securing her future as Lady Coventry; Virginie in “V.V.” is an actress who plots to win a rich husband after her first husband is killed; Cecil in “A Marble Woman” represses her passion and acts a dual role in order to continue living with her guardian/husband, Basil Yorke; and Pauline in “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” must get revenge on her ex-lover by pretending to love her new rich husband in order to evoke jealousy. Ironically, in the end, these women do not seem to truly succeed: with the exception of Pauline, who loses everything save the ex-lover she sought revenge against, Alcott’s heroines either die or become trapped in the sentimental roles that they have created for themselves. Similarly, toward the end of her career, Alcott relied on the domestic novel to provide for her survival, although she admitted in a private conversation with a friend that she believed her “natural ambition [to be] for the lurid style” (Alcott as quoted by Halttunen 242). She was able to indulge in that lurid style only from behind a mask, while it was the socially acceptable themed stories—the sentimental stories—that were her well-known successes. Alcott’s “movement from gothic tales in the late 1860s to sentimental stories...was less a discovery of her ‘true’ art than a smart marketing choice” (Goddu 118).
II. Gothic Themes Altered by a Woman’s Touch

For many nineteenth-century American women readers and writers, the Gothic suggested independence, adventure, narrative boldness, and self-reliance. It allowed writers otherwise subject to narrative restrictions of gentility and patriotism to find covert outlets for their sexuality and to imagine exotic or European settings for transgressive plots. (Showalter 130)

Indepen

dence, adventure, narrative boldness, and self-reliance are traits that Louisa May Alcott strove for both in her literary career and in her life in general. Gothic thrillers were indeed her outlet as a woman in a society governed by patriarchy. In her sensation stories, Alcott could both write and speak freely from behind the mask of A.M. Barnard and through the voices of her heroines/villainesses whose struggles were symbolic of her own. Most of Alcott’s thrillers take place in foreign settings; remote locations where revenge and passion might reign freely so far from the safety of the American reader’s home. More important, however, is the more specific setting of these stories: that of the home itself. As opposed to the old abbey, monastery, or castle of the earlier Gothic novel, in the nineteenth century, the domestic sphere became the place where the real danger lurked. According to Botting, some Gothic villains were “strange figures [that] threaten[ed] the home…” (123). This would include characters such as Jean Muir, who initially intrudes on the Coventry family’s domestic sphere, the place where they are most vulnerable because they assume it to be the safest, but then, ironically becomes trapped there as the rightful punishment for her crime.

The nineteenth-century home was supposed to be a place of refuge, a shelter from the immorality and danger of the outside world. Foote asserts, however, that the home
was more “a testing ground for the pressures of the outside world” where women experienced “emotions like anger, resentment or envy” than a safe haven (Foote 65). In Alcott’s thrillers, the home is presented as the place of entrapment, secluding its occupants, more specifically its female occupants, from the outside world, and in essence, keeping them dependent on the men within the domestic realm, making them slaves to the home. Of the sensation stories to be discussed, “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” is the one exception. It takes place in a hotel resort, the “public sphere” as opposed to the “domestic sphere.” This may be part of the reason that Pauline is portrayed as receiving a more severe punishment than Alcott’s other heroines. Unlike the others, she does not submit to the Cult of True Womanhood in the end; she lacks the self-control of Jean Muir, and therefore she is not socially acceptable and must face the consequences. Pauline’s lack of self-control, her submission to her passion, deems her immoral, and she must be punished for her sins in the end, or Alcott’s story would have been considered just as unacceptable as its heroine’s “unwomanly” behavior.

Alcott utilized the main themes of the Gothic, but added her own woman’s touch, which reveals her attitude toward the roles of women in society. According to Stephen Bernstein, in the Gothic, “narrative equilibrium” can only be achieved through the “closure of marriage and a [return to] conventional social normalcy” (154). In Alcott’s aforementioned thrillers, the goal of each heroine is marriage. If she does not succeed, her alternative is death. The women are seeking control in these stories, and, for Virginie Valens, in “V.V. or Plots and Counterplots,” rather than admit defeat and pay the consequences of returning to being controlled by patriarchal power, she must win back control in the final act of suicide. The women who do reach the sought after goal of
marriage are, ironically, trapped in that “social normalcy” that they had attempted to subvert, but they now use it to their advantage. They manipulate the system to make the most out the roles they are forced to play. So, Alcott twists the idea of the closure of marriage because the marriages can be viewed as farcical. Her “theatrical Gothic heroines...contemptuously regard marriage as a means to fulfill their ambitions for money or revenge” (Halttunen 241). Marriage for them is the continuation of an act—an act that women in general had to perform if they wished to be accepted in nineteenth-century society. According to Halttunen, Alcott held the “conviction that the true Victorian woman was, above all, a skilled actress, who schooled her emotions, curbed her rebelliousness, and learned to play the role assigned her within her family” (245). The heroines that can accomplish this, although trapped in the domestic role indefinitely, achieve the goal of marriage and stability.

Another major concern of the Gothic is the setting right of wrongs from the past, typically labeled “the sins of the father.” In Alcott’s “A Marble Woman,” it is clearly stated that the heroine, Cecil, pays for the sins of her mother. It can be hypothesized that all women in one way or another pay the price of the pasts of their mothers. Nineteenth-century women were expected to be martyrs, and they taught their daughters to behave in the same way. This was the way to be accepted in society and to be models of true womanhood in order to secure a husband, the “normal” means of survival in the nineteenth century. So again, Alcott alters a typical element of the Gothic formula to reveal her disapproval of the expectations of patriarchal society. Additionally, when Alcott’s heroines seek to avenge the wounds directly inflicted upon them in their pasts, they are punishing men for the sins of patriarchy itself against all women.
In some of her thrillers, Alcott also plays with the typical moral ending of the Gothic story. As Fred Botting explains:

The terrors and horrors of transgression in Gothic writing become a powerful means to reassure the values of society, virtue, and propriety: transgression, by crossing the social and aesthetic limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits. Gothic novels frequently adopt this cautionary strategy, warning of dangers of social and moral transgression by presenting them in their darkest and most threatening form. The tortuous tales of vice, corruption and depravity are sensational examples of what happens when the rules of social behavior are neglected. (7)

With the moral end, readers see that transgression is punished and they learn to avoid wrongdoing. Although Alcott’s heroines seemingly do receive some sort of punishment, such as Virginie killing herself or Jean Muir becoming trapped in her domestic role and being despised by the entire Coventry family save Sir John, one must question whether Alcott’s intent actually was to “restore limits” or to “reassure the values of [patriarchal] society.” At the end of her Gothic thrillers, it is not always clear who deserves punishment and who deserves pity. Although her heroines have done wrong, have been deceitful and manipulating, the reader pities them at the end, realizing that they have been victims of the patriarchal system, and that perhaps their crimes were somewhat justified. Even Pauline, who does deserve her punishment for creating a plot that ended in the death of two innocent people, can be somewhat pitied as well, because it was her initial victimization that led her to follow her passion until she could no longer control it. The men that Alcott’s heroines manipulate and deceive play dual roles as well then; they are
victims at the same time that they are perpetrators. So, even though her thrillers seem to follow the general Gothic formula and themes, Alcott slightly alters them to expose, with a closer look, her feminist ideas and attitudes.
III. Alcott's Female Actresses and Male Spectators

Laura Mulvey's theory about "visual pleasure" can be applied to Alcott's thrillers where the female "actresses" perform for the male "spectators." Mulvey explains that in a patriarchal society, even if society is "unconscious" of the fact that it is patriarchal, woman (in film as well as in narrative prose)

stands...as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning. (15)

The woman "actress" that reappears in many of Alcott's thrillers represents the subversion of this idea. It is accurate to assume that these women are looked at as a fulfillment of a societal expectation; they do not make meaning generally, but are given meaning by the men in the stories. However, in Alcott's thrillers, this idea is turned upside down because the actresses are aware of the male spectator, and they use this knowledge to their advantage to manipulate the men in order to "secure for themselves financial independence and personal power. [Alcott's] villainous actresses and ex-actresses...use their dramatic skills to fulfill their selfish ambitions in flagrant defiance of the cult of domesticity" (Halttunen 240). While they pretend to uphold the virtues of true womanhood, these women use their awareness of men's expectations to manipulate their responses to get what they want from them.

According to Mulvey, women are caught in the patriarchal order. The challenge is "how to fight the unconscious structured like a language...while still caught within the language of patriarchy" (15). The women in Alcott's sensation stories cannot escape this
situation, so they instead manipulate it to use it, if not to their advantage, at least for their survival.

As mentioned earlier, the theater and acting were part of Alcott's life. She was both writer and performer of plays. According to Stern, "[t]hroughout her life, Louisa carried the theater with her wherever she went" (Introduction xiii). In addition to domestic dramas, the tableau vivant was a common pastime in the nineteenth-century home. The tableau is symbolic of the self-control that women would need to practice in normal everyday life. Chapman describes these "living pictures" as "denot[ing] figures posed, silent, and immobile in imitation of well-known works of art or dramatic scenes from history and literature" (24). She goes on to explain that "the performers and producers of tableau vivants were predominantly female" and that this was consistent in fictional tales, such as Alcott's, and in tableau manuals, which contained guidelines for popularly performed tableaux vivants in the nineteenth century. For an audience of mainly male spectators, the females typically performed the parts of heroines that were later killed, usually by beheading, as punishment for their "unfeminine" behavior (Chapman 31).

Unlike the typical immobility and poise exemplified in tableaux, however, Alcott's melodramatic plays, in which she often "assume[ed] masculine roles...villains...to plot against the saintly heroines played by her sisters" (Halttunen 238), allowed her to express herself more freely. Interestingly, Bronson Alcott, also a "male spectator" approved and encouraged Louisa's family performances, which not only "provided Louisa with a legitimate outlet for passionate self-expression," but also "protected Bronson's vision of domestic harmony" (Halttunen 238). On the stage, her
behavior was tolerated and accepted, perhaps because, here, her self-expression was controlled; but normally, Alcott’s behavior might have been considered unladylike or inappropriate.

This is also true of some of Alcott’s heroines. Jean Muir in “Behind a Mask,” for example, plays the role of domesticity in her everyday life to achieve her goal, to manipulate the male spectator. Throughout the story, Jean is very obviously and repeatedly described in so many words as a “witch,” and as “bewitching” the men of the house with her “charms,” or putting them under her “spell.” They are mesmerized by her nurturing, sentimental performance; she is the embodiment of “true womanhood,” yet it is all an act that these men observe and believe to be real. They watch her as if she is on stage. And when she is literally on the stage, performing in a tableau, Jean portrays Judith, a “politically and sexually powerful woman who beheads her male opponent and escapes unpunished,” rather than the typical tableau heroine that would have received punishment for her crimes of unwomanly behavior (Chapman 27). Just as Alcott’s melodramatic performances “subverted” her father’s idea of domestic drama (Halttunen 238), her representation of Jean’s portrayal of Judith “inverts the values implicit in many tableau vivant manuals by representing not only women who are dependent on men but also women who openly and successfully exercise power” (Chapman 45). It is there on the stage, when the male spectators assume that she is merely acting, that Jean, similar to Alcott herself, reveals the most accurate depiction of her true character; passionate and vengeful. Halttunen asserts that “Jean Muir’s power lies in her ability to hide her illicit passions and ambitions ‘behind a mask’” (241). Alcott’s power lies in a similar place:
she too assumed a “mask of propriety” (Halttunen 242) in her life in order to be accepted as both a nineteenth-century woman/daughter and a woman writer.

Just as Jean calculates her every move for its intended effect on the Coventrys, Pauline, with Manuel, her naïve young husband (for he, too, is a male spectator who is entranced by her), creates romantic scenes for her ex-lover to view in order to show him what might have been had he not betrayed her. Pauline’s plot turns Gilbert into a voyeur when she realizes that he has been spying on her whenever he can get a glimpse of her on her balcony. She manipulates this situation to torture him by purposely exposing herself and her affection toward Manuel while she knows he is watching her. Gilbert’s “scopophilia” (“pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object” [Mulvey 25]) also results in pain for him, for his jealousy is too hard to bear. This situation, like those involving Jean Muir, mirrors Mulvey’s description of how the cinema creates the “illusion of voyeuristic separation” (Mulvey 17). Gilbert in “Pauline’s Passion” and the Coventry men in “Behind a Mask” only experience the “illusion of looking in on a private world” of the women in these stories (Mulvey 17). It is the very intention of the women that they be watched and observed in this manner. According to Fetterley, “Jean knows that in a world inherently suspicious of women the most successful impressions are those made when the observer thinks the observed is not aware of being seen, for this fosters the illusion that one is seeing the woman as she really is” (Mulvey 6). By pretending that they are unaware of their spectators, Jean and Pauline appear to be acting naturally, but in reality they are playing their roles to achieve a purpose, to have the men believe something about them and their lives. Jean Muir wants the Coventry men to believe she is the “capital little woman” (Alcott 19) so that she can secure one of them as
her husband, while Pauline wants Gilbert to believe that her life with her wealthy, young husband is marital bliss in order to make him jealous and punish him for his mistreatment of her.

This manipulation of the “male gaze” serves to teach men a lesson and to prove, as both Jean and Pauline do, “what fools men are” (Alcott 101). Clearly, Alcott’s own manipulation of the marketplace, as Goddu coins the phrase, mirrors the subversion of the idea of the male spectator. Alcott hides behind the mask of her pseudonym as she writes her Gothic thrillers, but these stories reveal her true self, just as her childhood performances of melodramas reflected the passionate side that her father would have disapproved of if he had realized the truth that they presented.
IV. Domesticity Saves as it Destroys:

“Behind a Mask or A Woman’s Power”

Perhaps the Gothic heroine that best represents Alcott herself, Jean Muir, in “Behind a Mask,” pretends to be the model of domestic woman in order to manipulate the men of the noble Coventry family into falling in love with her, so she can win wealth and a title so that she can support herself. Although much more deceptive, Jean Muir’s goal is similar to Alcott’s goal: to support herself as a woman in a patriarchal world. Jean’s only avenue to success is marriage for money, which she can only achieve through deception because she is too old and of the wrong class to marry a nobleman legitimately. Chapman adds that “Jean is considered unmarriageable because of her age, class, experience, and reputation, [so] the only way she can guarantee her economic future is by pretending to be young and virginal, and dragging a man to the altar before he has time to discover the facts” (45), which is what she does with Sir John Coventry, the family patriarch.

Throughout the story, Jean Muir is engaged in an act that she hopes will enchant the eligible men of the Coventry family. She is objectified in one way because the men watch her as if she is performing for them, but, since she purposely puts herself in this position—she is in fact performing for them—she uses her position and her skill to manipulate them. The idea of “woman as image and male as bearer of the look” (Mulvey 19) comes into play in the following way: It is as if Jean is aware of the fact that men look at her as if she is an object, and by presenting herself as men would expect her or hope for her to be, an embodiment of “true womanhood,” she can predict their reactions and manipulate them accordingly to get what she wants. So where Mulvey describes the
male as being “active” and the woman “passive,” Jean Muir subverts this formula because of her awareness of it. She becomes the active woman pretending to be passive, purposely setting herself up to be objectified in order to use the patriarchal system to suit her purposes. She uses what she knows men expect of women, and she embodies that ideal in order to secure a place in the patriarchal, aristocratic system. As Chapman puts it, “Alcott’s female protagonist returns the gaze—on stage and off—through controlling the power of theatricality” (27). Without a husband and a title, Jean Muir is nothing but a lower-class, actress, but she manipulates the system to become a part of it. It is this very system that has kept her down, a system that she despises, that she must infiltrate herself into in order to survive. Since she cannot escape it, she must use it to her advantage.

Jean’s act begins from the moment she arrives at the Coventry household. She appears to be a sad, quiet, young woman, and when questioned, she reveals that she is nineteen, Scotch, and without a “relation in the world” (5). This initial act evokes pity from all but Gerald, the elder brother who has “an inveterate aversion to the whole tribe,” meaning governesses (Alcott 3). Jean realizes that “playing the victim can allow a woman to control those who victimize within the...social systems that do not allow women to exercise power openly” (Chapman 45). At times, Jean also performs an act within her act, such as when she plays the piano for the family and “charmed them all by the magic of this spell” (6). She is aware of fact that she is being closely observed, and she performs as she is expected to. Alcott’s choice of language throughout the story reveals her intent of portraying Jean Muir as an “enchantress” or “witch” of sorts. The idea of woman’s role being an act is also referred to repeatedly, such as Gerald’s comment to his cousin after Jean faints: “Scene first, very well done”; and Jean’s
response: “Thanks. The last scene shall be still better” (7). Also, through the dramatic irony in the very first chapter, when it revealed to the reader that Jean is in actuality a thirty-year-old divorced actress, it is clear that she will utilize her skills to plot her revenge on the patriarchal system that has put her and kept her in the position she is in. Alcott also makes it clear, through Gerald’s comments, and later through Sir John’s reaction when he realizes that Jean is only the governess, that there are issues of class discrimination at play.

Jean Muir appears the embodiment of “True Womanhood,” though her performance of domestic tasks is just that: a performance, and a very convincing one at that. From the moment she enters the Coventry household (her stage), Jean is “careful to cast herself in the mold of victim” (Fetterley 8). She is the meek and mild governess without a “relation in the world.” Her poverty and utter aloneness evoke pity from the Coventry family, and they welcome her to their home on a trial basis, though her performance of the domestic tasks asked of her that very night seem to secure her place at once. She plays the piano and sings for the family, and she prepares the tea, for she “understands the art of making people comfortable in this way” (Alcott 8). It is also interesting to note Alcott’s language in describing Jean as she prepares the tea: “She performed her little task with a skill and grace that made it pleasant to watch her” (8). Jean is well aware that she is being carefully observed, and she “performs” accordingly for her audience. As the story progresses, it is evident that, although Jean resents domesticity, she will continue to perform the necessary tasks to ensure her goal of marriage. She, like other nineteenth-century women, “…made the home so cheerful that that men would not want to go elsewhere, nursed her husband and children, completed
needlework, cultivated flowers, read judiciously (from morally acceptable works), cooked, and carried out the necessary household tasks” (Marsella 129) as part of her act.

Within her first night with the Coventrys, Jean has impressed the family and proved her worth as a sentimental woman. It is only later that night, in the privacy of her own room, that Jean removes her disguise:

She unbound and removed the abundant braids from her head, wiped the pink from her face, took out several pearly teeth, and slipping off her dress appeared herself indeed, a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least. The metamorphosis was wonderful, but the disguise was more in the expression she assumed than in any art of costume or false adornment. (Alcott 12)

It is more her girlish, sentimental manner that disguises her “natural expression, weary, hard, bitter,” than the actual costume (12). She creates a persona and stays in character whenever she knows she is being observed.

All but the arrogant Gerald and the haughty and jealous Lucia are won over by Miss Muir’s charms. But Gerald is interested, and that is enough for her. She will play upon his curiosity, by ignoring him, until she has subtly attained power over him, just as on the second day as governess, she symbolically tames Edward’s horse by ignoring him until he comes to her of his own accord because she had piqued his curiosity, saying to herself, “I’ll conquer you, my fine brute” (15). As her actions foreshadow how she will manipulate Gerald, they work on Edward in the present, as he has been “watch[ing]” the “scene” from behind a wall (15). When Edward recounts the story to Gerald, he replies, “Not a bad move on her part...to discover your chief weakness and attack it so soon.
First tame the horse, and then the master” (19). At this point, Gerald is unaware that Jean is plotting to make the same “move” on him.

Prior to taming the horse, Jean had been wandering around the ancient hall Sir John lived “in solitary splendor” (13). She is admiring the prospect of what she may attain if she succeeds in her plan. When she notices Sir John approaching, she knows she will be watched, and so her act begins: “Suddenly her whole air changed, she pushed back her hat, clasped her hands loosely before her, and seemed absorbed in girlish admiration of the fair scene...” (13). As expected, when Sir John sees her, he “paused to examine her.” “With a charming air of maidenly timidity and artlessness,” Jean pretends that she does not realize to whom she is speaking, so that she may freely praise and flatter Sir John. According to Fetterley, “Jean’s behavior is designed to feed on men’s sense of superiority and thus expose their essential stupidity” (9). Her plan works; Sir John “found it pleasant to hear himself commended by this unknown girl” (14). Soon enough, Jean acts surprised and abashed to realize that she is speaking directly to Sir John himself. When she reveals that she is Bella’s governess, she notices immediately a slight change in Sir John’s manner. “Few would have perceived it, but Miss Muir felt it at once, and bit her lips with an angry feeling at her heart” (15), but she continues her act, happy with her progress so far.

By the end of her second day, Jean Muir has used her art to flatter or interest each member on the Coventry family in some way. She has sent a bouquet of flowers to Mrs. Coventry, impressed Edward by taming his horse, flattered Lucia by comparing her to her mother’s portrait, praised Sir John, and interested Gerald by stopping her entertaining stories upon his entrance. At this point, it is only Gerald who remains doubtful of Miss
Muir; he seems to know her game, although he is basing this on his stereotypical notions of governesses. Even Lucia denies her first instincts against the governess at this point because Jean had played upon her weakness—her vanity. Miss Muir seems to observe others and play upon their weaknesses, just as she seems to be constantly aware of when she is being observed so that she can act accordingly to achieve the desired reaction from those she tries to manipulate. She “must manage to get everyone obsessed with her while appearing neither to desire nor attract attention” (Fetterley 7).

There are many other instances where Jean Muir manipulates the male gaze to move closer to her goal of wealth and status through marriage. She is able to do this, ironically, by abandoning sentiment internally, while she exudes sentiment externally to be the model woman. Her abandonment of sentiment does not mean she has abandoned her emotions entirely; she has a passionate side, she feels anger and seeks revenge, but she hides these feelings while remaining calm, controlled, and reserved, like a “true woman” should behave. Fetterley explains that

[to be the “little woman,” one must possess acute consciousness, consummate acting ability, psychological strength, self-control and a capacity for hard work. Yet the role of little woman demands that the person playing it appear to be totally un-self-conscious and even unconscious, completely “natural,” weak, timorous, out of control, and passive. (Fetterley 7)

Jean uses her acting skills to impersonate the desirable “little woman” so that she can manipulate men to gain wealth and class status. Jean despises the hierarchy of the aristocratic system because it does not have a place for her. She is an outsider trying to get in, the Gothic “other” infiltrating into society. It is her lack of sentiment that allows
her to move forward because, if she had room for pity in her heart, she could not succeed in deceiving a family that for the most part welcomed her and treated her fairly. But those few acts of discrimination affect Jean greatly. She cannot forgive Gerald’s indolence in not sending a carriage for her on the night of her arrival, or the slight change in countenance when Sir John realized that she was merely the governess. It is only later in the story when Jean lets drop that she is the daughter of Lady Howard, a noblewoman “who ran away with a poor Scotch minister” (47), that she gains the regard and sympathy of both Sir John and Gerald. They cannot fully respect a governess, but the secret of her “fallen aristocracy” allows them to give her that respect. According to Fetterley,

While liking to think of themselves as sympathetic, the Coventrys in truth want their victims carefully packaged—they must be nineteen, not thirty, attractive not ugly, humble not proud, innocent not informed, helpless not determined. (9)

This is especially true for Gerald, “for, like all wellborn Englishmen, he valued rank and gentle blood even more than he cared to own” (48). After her “confession,” she is looked upon as more of an equal, and it is this bit of deception that secures her position in the Coventry household: she has now won the affections of all in the house save Lucia, whose woman’s intuition, and her jealousy, will not allow her to trust Miss Muir.

Curiously, Sir John comments that “she has had a hard life of it, this poor girl, but she has a brave spirit, and will make her way anywhere” (48). He completely trusts her and does not even think that she could be dishonest and conniving. He is accurate in his description of Jean Muir: she has had a hard life. However, Sir John does not realize that the system that he praises has oppressed her and molded her in the life of deception that she leads. And since she cannot escape it, she will “make her way” in it, using it as best
as she can for her own personal gain. She is the enemy of all that he believes in. He feels sympathy for her pretended situation, but wouldn’t care as much at knowing the truth, for even if he felt pity, he would not feel as obligated to comfort and protect her if she were not of noble blood.

All the while, Gerald had been watching Miss Muir from afar, as he was forced to do, as she would stop her performances upon his entrance; but now that Gerald believes that Jean is of nobility, he becomes more tender toward her and watches her with a more compassionate eye. He is more willing to feel sympathy for her, and she plays upon this sympathy, by turning him against his friend Sydney, who Jean claims has threatened her because she did not return his love, and by creating a wedge between him and Lucia by making Lucia jealous, which is unappealing to Gerald.

Jean’s nurturing, domestic act comes into full play, however, when in a fit of jealousy, Edward stabs Gerald, and Jean acts the part of nurse for Gerald. Once Gerald is recovering in his room, it is only Jean that can soothe him, as she “understands wounds better than anyone else in the house” (Alcott 38). When she enters the room, Gerald first notices her change in appearance, a costume change meant to assist her in her performance:

For the first time she had left off her plain black dress. All in white, with no ornament but her fair hair, and a fragrant posy of violets in her belt, she looked a different woman from the meek, nunlike creature one usually saw about the house. Her face was as altered as her dress, for now a soft color glowed in her cheeks, her eyes smiled shyly, and her lips no longer wore the firm look of one who forcibly repressed every emotion. (Alcott 38-9)
Her aspect is now that of a girlish figure, brightening the room for the invalid Gerald. This alteration of character further attracts Gerald, but it is Jean’s actions that make her even more appealing to him. Alcott compares him to a child, which makes Jean the nurturing mother. As she prepares the room to make him more comfortable, “she moved...in a quiet way which made it a pleasure to watch her” (39). As always, Jean intends to have this effect on her spectator. Next, she sings sweetly to lull him to sleep, but although her singing “soothed the listener like a spell” (40), he does not sleep because he is “regarding her with a curious mixture of pleasure, interest, and admiration” (40). In this scene, Jean “commands total sway over [Gerald] by means of a monstrous perversion of the sentimental concept of woman’s influence” (Halttunen 241); she sees that her plan is working, so she continues. She tries to control the male gaze, telling Gerald, “‘Shut your eyes, Mr. Coventry’...with a reproving shake of the head, and an odd little smile” (Alcott 40). He obeys, but not for long because he cannot “resist an occasional covert glance from under his lashes” (40). When Jean catches him, she calls him “disobedient” and stops her song. She does not give up in her fight to control his gaze, and she succeeds soon after by putting him to sleep and, therefore, ending the gaze. She takes his hand in both of hers and sits “behind the curtain and remained as mute and motionless as a statue,” reminiscent of a tableau heroine beside her hero, until he falls asleep (40).

When he awakes the next morning, “his fair-haired enchantress” is gone (40). After this tempting performance, Jean refuses to continue to nurse him, blaming Lucia for not allowing her to do so. Her refusal serves a dual purpose; it makes Gerald desire her more because of her absence, and it further divides Gerald from Lucia, the one family member who does not trust Miss Muir.
On the stage, on a night of tableaux vivants, Jean can reveal her true self at the same time that she keeps it hidden. “When she lets her mask slip, it is always with a purpose and the self revealed when the mask is dropped is simply another mask” (Fetterley 13). While portraying Judith in the first tableau, her real emotions are shown, but all believe it to be merely fine acting. “Hatred, the deepest and bitterest, was written on her sternly beautiful face, courage glowed in her glance, power spoke in the nervous grip of the slender hand that held the weapon, and the indomitable woman was expressed” (51). Through her portrayal of Judith, Jean Muir’s power is exposed. In the nineteenth century, the typical tableaux vivants, according to Chapman, would often present women who shared both a “common project—to defy patriarchal authority” and a “common fate: decapitation,” and what is celebrated in these women “is not their self-confidence or bravery but their passive submission to death” (32). Judith, on the other hand, was a woman who defied patriarchal power but escaped unpunished for her crime. Significantly, rather that exemplifying male power, Jean Muir’s portrayal of Judith represents a woman’s power over men, as does the role that she plays each and every day in the Coventry household. Additionally, this tableau “implies that [Jean’s] ruthlessness is justified” (Keyser xvii); she symbolically defends all women who have been “wounded” by men.

As Gerald watches this bewitching scene, he feels “as if he caught a glimpse of the truth...[but] the curtain dropped before he had half analyzed the significance of that strange face” (51). Again, this is all part of Jean’s act within an act. She intends to mystify Gerald, and further pique his curiosity about her. Where, typically, “the tableau vivant aesthetic itself forces the active, articulate woman to a place of silence and
immobility (Chapman 33), this is not so for Jean, for, as she controls the curtain, she controls the male gaze, and she will not let Gerald see too much. Although she appears to be the passive object of Gerald’s gaze, it is she who is in control of him. “Jean shows how an object of the gaze can manipulate and return the gaze; by knowingly constructing herself as spectacle she is able to control the male gaze of her employers” (Chapman 39). She is truly a master of her art.

Since Jean is aware that Gerald is beginning to fall in love with her, she plots to have him cast as her lover in one of the tableaux. When Bella brings Gerald backstage to get into costume, Jean, feigning annoyance at his presence, prepares him for the scene. While onstage, as Jean, “playing a Puritan maid, embraces Gerald, her Cavalier lover, to protect him from the Roundheads” (Keyser 52),

Coventry experienced a new sensation. Many women had smiled on him, but he had remained heart-whole, cool, and careless, quite unconscious of the power which a woman possesses and knows how to use, for the weal or woe of man.

(Alcott 53)

Jean is well aware of this power that she possesses, and she uses it to her advantage. Her power over Gerald contradicts Chapman’s description of the typical male role in tableaux:

Men, if they appear in tableaux vivants at all, often appear at the borders as dreamers, observers, and voyeurs of framed inner scenes of women, suggesting that the male look controls the spectacle of woman framed by its gaze. Whether they are represented on the stage as observers or in the parlor as guests, men are tableaux vivants’ implied audience (Chapman 30).
Although Gerald is observing Jean in her performance, even while he is on stage with her, her awareness of this puts her in control of his gaze, and she succeeds in the desired effect upon him, for by the end of the scene,

she felt his hands tremble, saw the color flash into his cheek, knew that she had touched him at last, and when she rose it was with a sense of triumph which she found it hard to conceal. Others thought if fine acting: Coventry tried to believe so; but Lucia set her teeth, and...left her place to hurry behind the scenes, bent on putting an end to such dangerous play. (Alcott 53)

Miss Muir’s acting on stage reveals the truth, while her everyday performance, her supposed reality, is the act. Gerald has fallen under her spell, “the power of [Jean’s] tender eyes [having] thrilled [him] with a strange delight” (53), and he denies his first instincts about her because he has become blinded by love.

Lucia, however, is the only one who still mistrusts Jean, but her accusations will fall on dead ears, since Jean has manipulated the situation so that Lucia simply seems jealous. It is only Lucia who realizes that the true “play” takes place “behind the scenes” after the curtain has closed. Lucia’s concerns are discounted, however, because she is a woman. She trusts her instincts, but Gerald will not listen to her. Lucia can do nothing more but submit.

After the play, Gerald looks for Miss Muir and finds her in the drawing room. She is still dressed in the gown from the tableau, and Gerald can’t help but think that “one would know she was wellborn to see her now. Poor girl, what a burden a life of dependence must be to a spirit like hers!” (55). Interestingly, this statement could be considered true of most nineteenth-century women. Jean looks perplexed, and suggests
that she needs advice but has no right to ask it, again playing upon the male sense of
superiority by making herself appear passive and vulnerable, while he is active and
dominant; "Jean is quite careful to reinforce male mythologies about female nature"
(Fetterley 10). Gerald ironically comments, "Everyone has a right to ask help,
especially the weak of the strong" (55). At this point he is not aware of the power that
Jean possesses over him; nor is he aware of his own weakness that is causing him to fall
into her trap, for her "spell was still upon him" (57).

The next day, Miss Muir's act continues, as she
sat in the recess of a deep window, in a low lounging chair, working at an
embroidery frame with a graceful industry pleasant to see. Of late she had worn
colors...and the pale muslin which flowed in soft waves about her was very
becoming to her fair skin and golden hair. The close braids were gone, and loose
curls dropped here and there...Ned's great hound lay nearby, the sunshine
flickered on her through the leaves, and as she sat smiling to herself, while the
dexterous hands shaped a leaf and flower, she made a charming picture of all that
is womanly and winning; a picture which few men's eyes would not have liked to
rest upon. (71)

This perfect picture is better than any tableau because Gerald believes it to be reality. At
this moment, while he intently gazes upon her, Jean is the portrait of "true womanhood,"
the embodiment of domesticity, the passive, objectified woman. This is all that she
intends to portray in her act. She knows that this will be appealing to Gerald and casts a
spell over him by pretending to be what she knows he wants her to be. Gerald does not
yet understand her power, and he tries to "discover the spell which so strongly attracted
him in spite of himself’ (71). This act also serves the purpose of angering Lucia who witnesses not only Miss Muir’s act, but Gerald’s reaction to it. Jean continues to make the most of this opportunity by showing off her skill.

Jean said nothing, but silently appealed to eye and ear by the pretty picture she made of herself, the snatches of song that she softly sang, as if forgetting that she was not alone, and a shy glance now and then, half wistful, half merry, which was more alluring than graceful figure or sweet voice. (71)

This performance leads Lucia to eventually leave the room. But within minutes, Jean notices that she and Gerald are being watched by the suspicious Mrs. Dean, Lucia’s maid who is very protective of her mistress. After the discovery that Lucia’s maid has been spying on them, Gerald breaks off his engagement to Lucia, in favor of Jean. Jean knows that she now has complete power over Gerald, but she tries to do even better: she wants to marry Sir John himself.

Winning Sir John is a harder task for Jean, but her cunning mind finds a way to achieve the goal. Through her acting, she attempts to make him understand her feelings for him and her intentions, but it is not working; he is not picking up on her subtle hints. She questions herself: “Has all my skill deserted me when I need it most? How can I make him understand, yet not overstep the bounds of maiden modesty?” (80). If she does not plan her act just right, it might fail completely, and at this point, having discovered that Edward has spoken to Sydney and knows the secret of her dark past, she has determined that if she fails at her endeavor, she will not go back to her old life, “but end it all at once” (77). Beguiling Sir John into marriage is her “last chance” at attaining the life she has long desired.
As it turns out, Jean’s skill has not deserted her, and her performance wins Sir John in the end. While he is in the study, she notices a miniature of Sir John hanging on the wall. She notices that he keeps “casting covert glances at the girlish figure he had left behind him” (80). She pretends to be unconscious of this, however, so that her act will seem genuine, again manipulating the male gaze.

Jean gazed on as if forgetful of everything but the picture, and suddenly, as if obeying an irresistible impulse, she took it down, looked long and fondly at it, then, shaking her curls about her face, as if to hide the act, pressed it to her lips and seemed to weep over it in an uncontrollable paroxysm of tender grief. (80-1)

As planned, Sir John sees this performance and realizes after questioning her that she loves and wants to marry him. She convinces him that the marriage must be done quickly and she promises that she will be “true as steel...and make [his] life as happy as it deserves to be” (83). This promise binds her to the sentimental life that she despises, but she has achieved her goal, and must do what is necessary to maintain it even if that means becoming part of the domestic realm that she so despised. In this realm legitimately through marriage, Jean has reached safety. Even after Edward reveals her treachery, it is too late because she has become Lady Coventry, and Sir John will not hear anything against her.

Although it seems that Jean must make penance for her wrongdoings at the end of the story, she has succeeded in her plan. Alcott creates an ambiguous ending in that Jean has both gained and lost her “freedom,” and in the fact that although Jean has deceived the Coventrys, they are not completely beyond reproach either. It remains unclear as to who are the victims and who are the villains. When Edward reads the letters Jean has
written to her confidant, Hortense, they not only expose Jean, but they "convict the Coventrys themselves. [They] convey the untarnished truth about every member of the ...family, and what begins as a revelation of Jean's character becomes an indictment of their own" (Keyser 56). The Coventry family represents the system which oppressed Jean Muir to begin with, putting her in the desperate position to need to deceive and manipulate them in order to survive in a cruel world, and so the "unmasking of Jean Muir serves to...expose the ugly features of patriarchy" (Keyser 47). Sir John and Gerald are the patriarchs of the family, who represent power and oppression. Even though Gerald eventually falls in love with her and Sir John marries her, neither of them would have done so if they had known the truth about Jean's upbringing. They are deserving of some punishment as well, even though Jean is the "villainess" in the story. Jean's situation evokes pity, however, and by the end, it seems that justice has been served. Actually, Jean's deception helps each of the family members in some way, and this adds to Jean's dual role of villainess and heroine. Budd Boetticher describes the heroine's influence as follows:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance. (as quoted by Mulvey 19)

So, it does not matter that Miss Muir's character was a fabrication; what counts is that she inspired the male characters to action, to better themselves in some way. In a sense, although the Coventrys are upset that they have been so deceived, they have benefited by Jean's presence in their household. Edward should be thankful, because if he had not
fallen in love with Jean, Gerald might not have sent him away to make a man of himself; he might have still been trapped within the confines of the home. Because of Miss Muir’s influence, Gerald finally has the energy to act like a true heir, whereas before he was lazy and unmotivated. Lucia learns the lesson, although it is a hard one to bear, to be more humble. And Sir John will now be happily married, for Jean will continue to “faithfully perform” her sentimental role if she wishes to keep her part (Alcott 83).

Similar to her portrayal of Judith in the tableau vivant, Jean’s “last scene” (Alcott 104) reveals her as a “star” performer in that she succeeds in her deception of the Coventrys and wins a title and a fortune, securing her future as planned. But ironically, as Chapman points out in her discussion of the tableau vivant, “[w]omen are the stars of these performances, but as stars, are imprisoned in prescribed feminine behaviors…” (Chapman 30). Jean shares this fate, as, although she has succeeded in her domestic act, she must now continue it. Although, Jean is “imprisoned” in the domestic sphere, she “understand[s] that [this] role can work to [her] advantage: [her] place in the domestic sphere is a position of power rather than weakness” (Marsella 130). Jean does not have to fear for her survival any longer; she has successfully manipulated the patriarchal system to her benefit. Remaining in the domestic sphere is just the price she has to pay for her success, just as Alcott herself later becomes “locked in the domestic genre” (Halttunen 246) to ensure her own.
V. Uncontrolled Passion Leads to Destruction:

“Pauline’s Passion and Punishment”

In the opening of “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment,” Pauline, like Jean Muir, is presented as wounded and angry. But unlike Jean, who is confident of her power from the start, Pauline, for a moment, doubts the power that she had believed her beauty provided her, as she has just discovered that her lover has betrayed her and has married another woman. As the story progresses, however, it becomes clear that Pauline still possesses that power, and she uses it to her advantage. From the initial description, it is clear that Pauline is not a woman who will allow herself to be wronged without consequence.

Passion burned in the deep eyes, changing their violet to black...pride sat on the forehead, with its dark brows...and in the spirited carriage of the head appeared the freedom of an intellect ripened under colder skies, the energy of a nature that could wring strength from suffering, and dare to act where feeblener souls would only dare desire. (Alcott 109)

Pauline is strong-willed and passionate, as well as intelligent. These traits prove to be her assets, as well as her shortcomings.

Within the first few pages, it becomes evident that Manuel is meant to be Pauline’s opposite, her “feminine” counterpart and accomplice. Where Pauline is strong, Manuel is submissive, obeying Pauline’s will in his unwavering lover for her. Alcott creates a complex intertwining of gender roles in the story, so that at the end, Pauline’s punishment is deserved because her treatment of Manuel mirrors Gilbert’s treatment of her. Although the reader sympathizes with Pauline for the “wound” that Gilbert has inflicted upon her by deceiving her and marrying another woman for her money, as the
plot progresses, and Pauline continues, blinded by her passionate will for revenge, to misuse and mistreat the enamored, sensitive Manuel, the reader begins to pity him more than Pauline. Pauline’s “ultimate crime,” like Jean Muir’s, according to Fetterley, is that she does not “break down and go under” (12). Instead, when Gilbert wounds her, she, in essence, becomes “a man herself...treat[ing] men like women,” This is a crime which cannot go unpunished; her “unwomanly” behavior, like that of the heroines in the tableaux vivants previously discussed, must have harsh consequences.

Pauline’s plan is to marry Manuel, although she claims to love him only as a sister would, in order to play a part to make her ex-lover, Gilbert, pay for what he has done to her. She uses Manuel for his fortune, takes advantage of his undying love for her, and together, they enact Pauline’s plot of revenge against Gilbert. Manuel and Babie are innocent victims caught in the middle of a woman’s passion. Although Manuel repeatedly attempts to convince Pauline to give up and move on, she will not be satisfied until she ruins Gilbert and makes him feel the pain that she has felt. This determination to punish Gilbert results in Pauline’s own punishment as well. When Manuel and Babie die at the end, Pauline has lost all she has loved; she has tricked and ruined Gilbert, as she had hoped and planned, but it cost her her husband, and now she is left only with the man she despises most.

To enact her revenge, Pauline orchestrates a few scenes for Gilbert to witness in order to make him experience the wounds that he has inflicted on her. Similar to Jean Muir in “Behind a Mask,” Pauline understands and manipulates the male gaze to use it to her advantage. Her plan from the start is to perform, with Manuel, a play that will torture and ruin its intended spectator, Gilbert Redmond. At the same time that she plans this
revenge on Gilbert, however, she unintentionally, blinded by her vengeance, uses Manuel. She knows that he loves her, and uses this to her advantage, promising to try to love him if he helps her. Manuel gratefully agrees. “Take all I have—fortune, name, and my poor self; use us as you will, we are proud and happy to be spent for you! No service will be too hard, no trial too long if in the end you learn to love me…” (Alcott 115). This response leaves Pauline satisfied and triumphant, but she falters just for a moment: Knowing that “the first step was won...[a] regretful pang smote her, but the dark mood which had taken possession of her stifled the generous warnings of her better self and drove her on” (Alcott 113). She is ruled by her passion to get revenge on Gilbert, and she cannot allow her compassion for Manuel to get in the way. Up until she was wounded by Gilbert, Pauline had been more willing to be the typical nineteenth-century wife. But now that she has set her mind to seek revenge, she can no longer be the self-sacrificing, compassionate, “tender woman of a year ago” (Alcott 146)—she must put her need for revenge above all other needs, including those of her husband, Manuel, who later suffers for this change in her character. Like Jean Muir, Pauline must deny sentiment if she is to achieve her goal. Both heroines “willfully set aside the ideal of sentimental marriage in order to lead aggressive, selfish lives from ‘behind a mask’...that disguises a rebellion against the cult of true womanhood” (Halttunen 241-2). Pauline’s marriage to Gilbert would have been for love, but since he deceived her, she must make herself an actress, overcoming any remnants of her sentimental feelings, and marry Manuel to use her new life with him as a torture tool against the man who so wounded her.

Pauline does warn Manuel about what he is getting into, but she can predict his response for she knows of his love for her, and she does not doubt that he will submit in
spite of foreseen danger. As she points out the many possible problems he might have to face, as predicted, he still agrees to help her, for his love for her is that strong. After listening to Pauline, Manuel ardently promises: “I swear to obey you in all things; make me what you will, for soul and body I am wholly yours henceforth” (116). These words indicate a gender role reversal that will continue throughout the plot. Pauline has control, while Manuel will do as she wishes of him. Perhaps because he is still just a boy, or because he is a foreigner (southern and passionate by nature), he can willingly submit to a woman, but here is an instance where money does not equal power. Manuel is “the possessor of one princely fortune, [and] the sole heir to another” (115), but is powerless in his love for Pauline, whereas Pauline is penniless, possessing nothing but her womanhood, which is her power. And as the plot unfolds, Pauline will literally make Manuel “what she wills,” for she makes him into an actor, as she is herself, in order to get revenge for her wounded heart and pride.

In the beginning of the second chapter, the real act begins. When Manuel appears at her door, “she met a glance that changed the sad dreamer into an excited actor, for it told her that the object of her search [Gilbert] was found” (117). She tells Manuel, “[O]ur three weeks’ search has ended, and the real interest of the plot begins. I have played the lover for your sake, now play the man of the world for mine” (118). It is time for Manuel to play his part in the drama. Pauline, not truly loving Manuel the way a wife should, has been performing one part already, but now her plot of revenge, in which she will perform another act for Gilbert, will begin to unfold. Manuel is worried, but, at Pauline’s reassurance and promise of reward, he soon “forgot his misgivings and played his part with boyish spirit” (118). After making sure that she looks as beautiful as
possible for all those who will see her, especially Gilbert, Pauline advises Manuel further before they go down to find Gilbert and his new wife:

You too must look your best and bravest now, and remember you must enact the man tonight. Before Gilbert wear your stateliest aspect, your tenderest to me, and your courtliest to his wife. You possess dramatic skill. Use it for my sake, and come for your reward when this night’s work is done. (119)

Pauline plans to use her beauty, and newly acquired status, which will be more apparent through Manuel’s performance, to taunt Gilbert. Like Jean Muir, Pauline is quite aware of the power she has over both Gilbert and Manuel; she realizes the power that she possesses in her beauty, and knows that Gilbert will not be able to resist her, and that Manuel will not fail to assist her by doing whatever she wishes. Pauline asserts that she “know[s] [Gilbert’s] nature, and can stir him to his heart’s core with a look, revenge [herself] with a word, and read the secrets of his life with a skill he cannot fathom” (118). Although she has been wounded, she finds solace in knowing that she still retains the power only womanhood can allow her; a man could not plot revenge as she has. When Manuel reads the letter from Gilbert, he “mutters through his teeth, ‘Traitor! Shall I kill him?’” (110); but Pauline replies, “There are fates more terrible than death; weapons more keen than poniards, more noiseless than pistols. Women use such, and work out a subtler vengeance than men can conceive” (110). These “weapons” that women use succeed in exposing, like in “Behind a Mask,” “[w]hat fools men are” (Alcott 101), but, as Pauline essentially becomes a man herself, she later, ironically, faces the same fate that she plots for Gilbert. Pauline hopes to cause Gilbert as much suffering as possible through her act of revenge; to kill him would end his suffering too soon.
As Pauline and Manuel walk toward the hotel ballroom with the intent of discovering Gilbert, they are noticed by everyone that they pass by. People comment on their regality, and while Manuel is both flattered and insulted, Pauline notices nothing, as she is so focused on her purpose. As they approach the dining area, someone in the crowd speaks of Gilbert, saying to "some silent listener":

You know he marries for money, and was outwitted in the bargain; for his wife's fortune not only proves to be much less than he was led to believe, but is so tied up that he is entirely dependent upon her, and the bachelor debts he sold himself to liquidate still harass him, with a wife's reproaches to augment the affliction. To be ruled by a spoiled child's whims is a fit punishment for a man whom neither pride nor principle could curb before… (119-20)

This, Pauline did hear. Clearly, others can see that Gilbert is already unhappy in his decision to marry Babie for her money, and Gilbert had already admitted as much in his letter to Pauline, writing that he hopes she can "assure [her] peace with the knowledge that [his] is destroyed forever, and leave [his] punishment to remorse and time" (Alcott 110), but Pauline is not satisfied. Although Gilbert has already been emasculated by his position of dependence on Babie, a position that is typically that of the woman in the household, Pauline does not feel that this is punishment enough; she must provoke and torture him further to get her revenge. The knowledge of his current dissatisfaction does not "assure her peace"; the only assurance she can find is through a calculated plot to further emasculate him and to inflict upon him the wounds that women more often experience. She tells Manuel, in regard to the letter, playing upon Gilbert's own words: "Leave Gilbert to remorse—and me" (Alcott 110).
Ironically, Pauline is in almost the same position as Gilbert: they are both of the lower class; have both married, not for love, but for money; and Pauline, although she does love Manuel in a sisterly way, does not feel love for him as she once did for Gilbert. Both Pauline and Gilbert are using their spouses for their own purposes, and are not completely happy in their choices. The moments that Pauline appears happy with Manuel are either when she is performing for Gilbert to make him jealous, or when she is rewarding Manuel for performing his part well.

When Pauline and Gilbert are left alone, while Manuel dances with Babie, being chivalrous and charming as instructed by Pauline, Gilbert says “impetuously, ‘Pauline, take off your mask as I do mine—we are alone now, we may see each other as we are’” (123). Gilbert assumes that she is a slave to marriage just as he is, and that she must be as unhappy and dissatisfied in her position as he is in his. Pauline denies that she wears a mask, however, and she seems to have convinced herself of this as well. For although she has in one sense made herself a slave to Manuel by marrying him and giving up her “liberty” (Alcott 116), she points out that her “fetters” are “as loose as they are light” (123); in fact, Manuel is more a slave to her, than she is to him. She tells Gilbert: “If I am a slave, I never know it” (124). But it is not to her husband that she has made herself a slave; without even realizing it, she has become a slave to her own passion, and it is this passion that merits her punishment in the end. She cannot rest or be happy in her life or marriage until Gilbert is ruined. Her own will for revenge makes her a slave; it consumes her life and becomes her driving force, which, in the end, destroys her.

As mentioned earlier, nineteenth-century Gothic stories often ended with the villain paying for his or her wrongdoings. In “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment,” both
Pauline and Gilbert must atone for their sins. Although the reader sympathizes with Pauline’s situation at the start of the story, after a while, it is obvious that she is taking her plot of revenge too far. Gilbert has punished himself by marrying for money rather than love. When he sees Pauline again, he admits that he still loves her and he begs for her forgiveness. Pauline, of course, will not grant it, being determined to make him suffer as much as possible.

Her next act on that first night of finding Gilbert is to show her skill on the dance floor. This act serves both as a reward to Manuel for his performance so far: she whispers to him “You enact your role to the life, and shall enjoy a foretaste of your reward at once” (Alcott 127); and as part of her plot against Gilbert: she “glanced over her shoulder from the threshold of the dancing hall, for her slightest act, look, and word had their part to play in that night’s drama” (127). As intended, Pauline’s performance with Manuel transforms Gilbert—he is enchanted and can’t take his eyes off the couple, wondering with regret what could have been. Babie had never seen “such eagerness in his countenance, such energy in his manner as he pressed through the crowd” to find a spot to watch the dancers (Alcott 127). Before long, Babie realizes that her husband’s eye rested on a single pair, kindling as they approached, keenly scanning every gesture as they floated by, following them with untiring vigilance...while his breath quickened...and every sense seemed to own the intoxication of the scene...her wonder deepened, her scrutiny grew keener, for she knew no common interest held her husband there fascinated, flushed, and excited as if his heart beat responsive to the rhythmic rise and fall of that booted foot and satin slipper.

(Alcott 128)
Through this performance, Pauline, like Jean Muir, manipulates the male gaze; and Gilbert’s reaction mirrors Gerald Coventry’s while Jean soothes him at his bedside and when she embraces him in the tableau. Gilbert has confessed that he loves her still, and her denial of his love and the spectacle she creates of her feigned love for Manuel will add to his suffering. Pauline knows exactly what effect her actions will have on Gilbert, and she performs her part accordingly.

When the music stops and the dance is over, breaking the “spell” that had been cast on Gilbert, Babie questions her husband about his acquaintance with Pauline and Manuel. He admits to Babie that he once loved Pauline “and still remember[s] it” (129), and, knowing the power that Pauline has over him, he implores Babie to leave at once to avoid the potential problems he foresees. But, Babie, instead of removing herself and her husband from danger, decides to exert her own power over him, telling him:

[Y]ou shall stay and feel a little of the pain I feel when I look into your heart and find I have no place there. It is this which has stood between us and made all my efforts in vain. I see it now and despise you for the falsehood you have shown me, vowing you loved no one but me until I married you, then letting me so soon discover that I was only an encumbrance to your enjoyment of the fortune I possessed. You treat me like a child, but I suffer like a woman, and you shall share my suffering, because you might have spared me, and you did not...

(Alcott 129-30)

Alcott shows the power that women possess, but the final lesson, like those so common in her sentimental tales, may be to suppress that passion, or at least balance it with typically feminine behavior, or it may lead to destruction. Babie’s decision to show her
power over Gilbert ultimately leads to her own death, and it is Pauline’s power that initiates the events that lead to the unintentional deaths at the end of the story. However, it is Gilbert’s treatment of both women that causes their quests for power over him, so perhaps Alcott intends to show that patriarchal mistreatment of women is at the core of women’s rebellions; patriarchy is ultimately to blame for the passionate responses of women and the resulting destruction. When Babie refuses to leave the resort, Gilbert reluctantly gives in, knowing that he is defeated, and says, “Be it so, but remember I have warned you” (130). There are many ignored warnings throughout the story, for passion and power heed no warning. Both Pauline and Babie try to exert their power however they can. Pauline has power over both men because of their love for her, but Babie has power over Gilbert because he is financially dependent on her, and the fact that he does not love her forces her to take advantage of this means of power. She “loved to use her power to exact obedience where she had failed to win affection, often ruling imperiously when a tender word would have made her happy to submit” (Alcott 129). Unlike Pauline, who knows how to get what she wants from Manuel by giving him the affection he longs for, Gilbert chooses to engage in a power struggle with Babie. Manuel’s and Babie’s need for affection again reveals Manuel’s “feminine” nature. Pauline’s dominance in her relationship with Manuel makes her more “masculine” in comparison.

By the end of that first night, it is evident that Pauline and Gilbert will henceforth engage in a battle of wills, a power struggle that the narrator describes as “a tournament where the keen tongue is the lance, passion the fiery steed, and the hardest heart the winner of the prize, which seldom fails to prove a barren honor, ending in remorse”
With this male war imagery, Alcott foreshadows the devastating fates that will befall all involved due to uncontrolled passion.

As the plot moves forward, Pauline continues to set up scenes for which Gilbert will be her audience. Her entire existence in front of Gilbert is meant to be a show for him, to make him realize what he has lost, but there are specific times that Pauline plays upon the "male gaze." After their initial meeting of Gilbert and Babie, Pauline and Manuel remain locked away in their hotel room for "several days" (132). Manuel wonders at this pause in the plan, so Pauline explains what has kept her in their room and on its balcony:

This week has seemed one of indolent delight to you. To me it has been one of constant vigilance and labor, for scarcely a look, act, or word of mine has been without effect. At first I secluded myself that Gilbert might contrast our life with his and, believing us all and all to one another, find impotent regret his daily portion. Three days ago accident placed an unexpected weapon in my hand...

(Alcott 134)

That weapon is that whenever Pauline had been on the balcony, Gilbert had been spying on her from behind the curtains across the way, as she proves to Manuel who witnesses the curtains move when Pauline makes herself visible. She continues to explain to the irate Manuel:

Now do you comprehend why I remained in these rooms with the curtains seldom drawn? Why I swung the hammock here and let you sing and read to me while I played with your hair or leaned upon your shoulder? Why I have been all
devotion and made this balcony a little stage for the performance of our version of
the honeymoon for one spectator? (135)

This confession reveals that Manuel has been just as oblivious to Pauline’s act as Gilbert.
Although she has been making his life “a heaven upon earth” (134), Pauline is deceiving
Manuel, at the same time that she is taunting Gilbert. Her affection toward Manuel is
part of her act, and she admits this to Manuel. But just as Babie, who is “one of those
spaniel-like creatures who love the hand that strikes them and fawn upon the foot that
spurns them” (137), later returns to Gilbert after he uses physical violence toward her,
Manuel stays with Pauline and endures more suffering in order to receive her affection,
whether feigned or genuine.

When Manuel’s anger urges him to find and expose Gilbert for his voyeurism,
Pauline stops him with words similar to those earlier in the story:

There must be no violence! You promised obedience and I exact it. Do you think
detection to a man so lost to honor would wound as deeply as the sights which
make his daily watch a torment? Or that a blow would be as hard to bear as the
knowledge that his own act has placed you where you are and made him what he
is? (135)

Pauline “exacts obedience” from Manuel and will not reward him with affection if he
does not obey, just as Jean Muir, at Gerald’s bedside, ends her pleasant singing when he
disobeys her request for him to shut his eyes and sleep. Pauline’s words and their result
reveal her power over both of the men. Again, she makes it clear that she wants Gilbert
to suffer more than violence would allow, and she commands Manuel’s assistance even
though he would rather end the conflict with violence once and for all. But Pauline will
continue to torment Gilbert though performance instead. Rather than instant pain that would soon end, Pauline instructs Manuel to play his part in setting Gilbert up to lose money to him gambling. Just as the small amount of power that Babie does have lies in her control of Gilbert’s financial situation, so does part of Pauline’s; she manipulates Gilbert’s financial dependency by arranging for him to incur a large gambling debt that she knows he will not be able to repay without revealing his mistakes to his wife. This part of Pauline’s plot further emasculates Gilbert by adding to his financial woes and making him even more dependent on his wife, keeping him imprisoned in a female role. Pauline’s act of vengeance scars his pride, as his act of deception wounded hers. Although Manuel’s “high spirit chafed at the task assigned him,” he complies because of Pauline’s ability to “play upon that mysterious instrument, the human heart, [knowing] when to stimulate and when to soothe” (Alcott 135-6).

When Pauline further explains her plan to Manuel, the plan of allowing Gilbert to believe that she returns his love so she can crush his dreams in the end, he “saw and stood aghast at the baleful spirit which had enslaved this woman, crushing all generous impulses, withering all gentle charities, and making her the saddest spectacle this world can show” (Alcott 137). Wondering at her character, he asks her if she is “possessed of a devil,” and she admits that she is: “Once I ruled it, now it rules me, and there is no turning back” (Alcott 137-8), she says. Pauline realizes that she is no longer in control, she no longer has a choice; she must reach her goal no matter the cost. She gives Manuel the option to retract his vows and leave her, to “live unvexed by the stormy nature time alone can tame” (138), all the while knowing that he will not leave her because his love for her gives her power over him. Standing before him, holding out the wedding ring,
she is reminiscent of an actress in a tableau vivant, similar to Jean Muir's portrayal of Judith, with similar feelings as well:

Never had she looked more beautiful as she stood there, an image of will, daring, defiant, and indomitable, with eyes darkened by intensity of emotion, voice half sad, half stern, and outstretched hand on which the wedding ring no longer shone. She felt her power, yet was wary enough to assure it by one bold appeal to the strongest element of her husband's character: passions, not principles, were the allies she desired, and before the answer came she knew that she had gained them at the cost of innocence and self-respect. (Alcott 138)

If Pauline had not been deserving of punishment before, it is at this point that she secures her fate. Not only has she manipulated Gilbert, but she has taken away Manuel's innocence by exposing him to her vengeful nature and by manipulating him to perform acts that shame and degrade him, crushing his self-respect. He longs to avenge her by his own means, for he feels that "the masculine method of retaliation, in which strength replaces subtlety and speedier vengeance brings speedier satisfaction" is more respectable than Pauline's drawn-out plan of torture (Alcott 136). Pauline's total abandonment of sentiment—her "unwomanly" behavior—assures that she will be punished in the end (114). Unlike Jean Muir, who also lacked sentiment, but played the role well enough to be forgiven, evoking, in essence, the same effects in her daily life as if she were truly the "little woman," Pauline takes her plot of revenge too far. As stated earlier, "Jean Muir's power lies in her ability to hide her illicit passions and ambitions 'behind a mask'" (Halttunen 241); whereas Jean Muir fulfills her promise to be Sir John's devoted wife and continue to play the part of the domestic woman, as this is her only means of survival;
Pauline, while she at times makes Manuel’s life a “heaven on earth,” also reveals her deceptive plot to him, which reveals the fallacy of that performance as well. Since Manuel is partially aware of her act and must, at her request, also play a part in it, he cannot be completely happy with her, knowing that she is deceiving him too. While Sir John remains oblivious to Jean’s deception and may continue to believe that she is pure and innocent, Manuel is exposed to Pauline’s true character, and this will mar her perfection in his eyes. Pauline has all she could ask for in her husband Manuel, but since she is still compelled to act out her revenge on Gilbert, she cannot be happy with him. Pauline’s admission that she no longer rules her passion, but is ruled by it, reveals her lack of self-control, a virtue that Jean possesses which allows her to be successful, where Pauline ultimately fails.

As Manuel is repeatedly wounded by Pauline, he becomes more like her in that he resorts to and begins to take pleasure in seeking power over Gilbert, finding that he has none over her. “An expression like a dark reflection of her own settled on his face; a year of youth seemed to drop away” as he “resolutely accepted her hard conditions, and gave all to love” (Alcott 138). Where Pauline makes no sacrifices for his happiness, he sacrifices all for hers. As the feminine counterpart to her masculine nature, he is completely under her control.

Pauline’s instructions to Manuel include that he be kind to Babie, in order to “help her, and teach Gilbert the value of what he now despises” (Alcott 137), a lesson that Pauline should learn in regard to her own husband as well. Pauline has “no fear of losing [Manuel’s] heart” in the process, but it is later clear that she should have. Babie falls in love with Manuel as a result of his compassionate nature and his kindness toward
her, and his original sympathy for her changes to real affection. Pauline’s plot begins to
turn against her when Manuel’s true, generous nature returns in the presence of someone
who appreciates him and loves him the way he deserves to be loved. Seeing this, she
“owned within herself that she had evoked spirits which she could not rule” (Alcott 145).
Babie is the “true woman though it all” (143), and is therefore, since they are both
“feminine” characters,” a better mate for Manuel, who is devoted and sincere. Although
Pauline is slightly worried about this, “her purpose drove her on, and in it she found a
charm more perilously potent than before…” (145-6); she will not recognize her fear of
the possibility that she might lose Manuel, for any sentimental feelings will stand in the
way of her vengeful purpose. Interestingly, she also finds excitement in the danger that
might befall her.

These possible dangers too soon become reality when the foursome decide to go
to the mountains where the “growing friendship of [Manuel and Babie] left their mates
alone” (146). While Gilbert and Pauline have no choice but to pass the time together,
Gilbert notices that Pauline’s “manner softened toward him…leaving the tender woman
of a year ago” (146). This assumed change in Pauline makes Gilbert hopeful once more
that he may win back her love. As the day progresses, he becomes more confident, and
attempts to make his feelings known, hoping that they will be returned. At one point, on
the mountain, “Pauline forgot that she was not alone, till turning, she suddenly became
aware that while she scanned the face of nature her companion had been scanning hers”
(147). For once Pauline is unaware of Gilbert’s gaze, but he still remains her spectator,
even when she does not intend it. He misreads her look as one that must reflect her
feelings for him. Although, at this moment, Pauline has stepped out of her role, this
misinterpretation of her genuine reaction to the beauty of nature is what finally convinces Gilbert that he has a chance to win her back. Pauline’s appearance, though not intended to be a part of her act to manipulate Gilbert, has the same effect of enchanting him. She has played her role so well, that even when she is not acting, her audience of one, still watching her, is taken in. This moment of freedom from her chosen role is reminiscent of Jean Muir’s situation, that, as an actress, even when she is not acting, she is never “truly herself.” Just as it is difficult to really know Jean Muir, one cannot know when Pauline is acting or when she is sincere. “So systematic is the confusion between mask and self that the concept of identity becomes meaningless” (Fetterley 13). Pauline has made her life an act, just as Jean had done, and the act and reality become so intertwined that they are one and the same. As Pauline realizes that she is on the precipice of success, she is “ready for it, with every sense alert, every power under full control, every feature obedient to the art which had become a second nature” (147). In anticipation, she continues the act:

Gilbert had seized her hand, and she did not draw it back; the sudden advent of the instant which must end her work sent an unwonted color to her cheek, and she did avert it; the exultation which flashed into her eyes made it unsafe to meet his own, and they drooped before him as if in shame or fear, her whole face woke and brightened with the excitement that stirred her blood. She did not seek to conceal it, but let him cheat himself with the belief that love touched it with such light and warmth... (Alcott 147-8)

Pauline’s blush and lowering of her eyes is a “feminine” disguise of her “masculine,” true feelings. Pauline does this to hide her “exultation” when Gilbert admits his love for her
because it marks her victory: she has won, revealing her power over him. Pauline’s act here is similar to that of Jean Muir when she helps Gerald to his room after his brother has wounded him. When Gerald thanks her, “the color came up beautifully in her pale cheeks as she pressed the hand and without a word vanished from the room” (Alcott 36). Later, as she and Gerald prepare for the tableau in which he plays her lover, Jean “shrank a little as his hand touched her; she blushed deeply, and her eyes fell before his” (Alcott 53). Both Jean and Pauline use typical female, submissive, body language to elicit a certain response from the men they beguile. In these scenes, they seem to present themselves as performers in a typical tableau vivant, with “their eyes...perpetually ‘modestly cast down’ and ‘face[s]...bent downward as if blushing’ to signify their chastity” (Chapman 31). They pretend to “have no gaze themselves” (Chapman 31) in order to manipulate the male gaze. Pauline cannot completely hide her feeling of exultation, so she plays it off in a way that will continue her act for a bit longer; she wants Gilbert to misread her reaction to further deceive him into believing she returns his love.

Feeling confident that Pauline still loves him, he professes that she has made him want to change, to be a better man who is worthy of her. He tells her that with her “presence for [his] inspiration, [he] feel[s] that [he] can retrieve [his] faultful past, and with time become God’s noblest work—an honest man” (Alcott 148). Pauline’s “influence” over Gilbert is similar to Jean’s over Gerald, when he becomes more of a man and master because of Jean’s supposed virtue, and also because of her condescension, which hurts his pride and pushes him to change. Gerald says of Jean: “She would make a man of me. She puts strength and courage into me as no one else
Boetticher’s description of the heroine’s influence is again relevant here: “the love or fear she inspires in the hero...makes him act the way he does (as quoted by Mulvey 19). But for Gilbert, his desire to change does no good, for Pauline has hardened her heart against him, and his confession only adds to her feelings of triumph in having successfully deceived him.

After “prolong[ing] the bittersweet delight at seeing this humiliation of both soul and body” (Alcott 149), Pauline, knowing she has won, crushes Gilbert’s hopes by declaring that she loves her husband, Manuel. She then recounts her entire plot to him from the very beginning, no “fact remain[ing] unrecorded, no subtle act unveiled, no hint of her bright future unspared to deepen the gloom of his” (Alcott 150). Gilbert’s despair at this soon turns to “the blind recklessness that comes to those whose passions are their masters” (150). When Manuel enters the scene to avenge his wife, Gilbert ends up striking him and causing both Manuel and Babie to fall from the cliff and plunge to their deaths. Only Pauline and Gilbert remain, and staring at each other in dumb silence, they appear to be performers in a more typical tableau vivant where the heroine does receive punishment for her “unfeminine” behavior.

“Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” presents an ongoing power struggle between man and woman, where neither really wins in the end. Both Pauline and Gilbert get what they want, but at far too great a cost. Pauline’s description of the fate worse than death that she plans for Gilbert foreshadows her very own fate, which she leads herself to; her punishment for her vengeance is worse than death. Although she succeeds in punishing Gilbert, for he too suffers, her own fate negates the satisfaction of her success. When Manuel and Babie die at the end, Pauline has lost all she has loved; she has tricked and
ruined Gilbert, as she had hoped and planned, but it cost her her husband, and now she is left only with the man she despises most. Not only her lack of sentiment, but her lack of self-control determines her fate. These character flaws were unacceptable in a nineteenth-century woman, so Pauline must be punished. At her hands, both Manuel’s and Babie’s innocence and youth were destroyed. At the moment of their deaths, “that moment of impotent horror, remorse, and woe, Pauline’s long punishment began” (Alcott 152). In the end, Gilbert and Pauline deserve each other, for not only are they both ruled by their passion, but they are of the lower class and have both taken advantage of innocent people who loved them to suit their own purposes. With this moral ending, it seems that Alcott warns women to subdue their passion and remain in control of their emotions to avoid the possibly deadly consequences. This could be considered a typical ending to a Gothic tale, but perhaps there is more to this ending. When Manuel first accepts his role in Pauline’s plan, the role of her husband, he is exuberant and exclaims, “What have I ever done to earn a fate like this?” (115). He is overjoyed at his assumed fate, but this is an ominous statement, for getting involved with Pauline leads to a sadder fate than he anticipates. Interestingly, what Manuel has done to deserve his fate is to display typically feminine characteristics. Manuel and Babie, the “true women” characters in the story, suffer both in their marriages and in death at the hands of the “male” characters. It seems that Alcott is subverting the idealism of “true womanhood” by destroying the characters that possess those virtues. Their weakness and submissiveness lead to their demise. Similar to the ending of “Behind a Mask,” Alcott again leaves an ambiguous ending where it is difficult to see which characters are truly punished; since all of the main characters are punished in some way, it seems that rather
that completely ignoring one's passionate side, Alcott suggests that there should be a balance between passion and complete submissiveness in order to evade catastrophe.
Conclusion

“In this essentially conservative genre [Gothic]...the heroine is compelled to resume a quiescent, socially acceptable role to be destroyed” (Kahane 342), and both options can be considered a punishment. Jean Muir, at the end of “Behind a Mask,” although she has succeeded in marrying the family patriarch, Sir John, and has consequently acquired the title, Lady Coventry, has also become trapped in the socially acceptable, sentimental role that she had hitherto performed “in bitter jest” (Keyser 57); while Pauline, who became a slave to her passion, unable to disguise it with a mask of sentiment as Jean could, did not conform, and was “destroyed” in the end, not only losing her husband but ultimately losing a battle of wills against Gilbert.

Whereas Jean, like Alcott, “learned to use family theater to curb her frantic demands for personal freedom” (Halttunen 234), Pauline’s role, although affectionate toward Manuel at times, is not really sentimental. Jean must embody domesticity in order to convince the Coventry family of her worth as a woman, but Pauline is already loved by both Gilbert and Manuel, so her role entails keeping them both attracted to her to seek revenge upon one, while she uses the other to help her do so. Jean’s performance is flawless: she remains in character at all times, while Pauline reveals her evil plot both to Manuel so that he can help her execute it, and at the end, to Gilbert to further wound him when she thinks she has finally conquered him. Jean, too, is “unmasked” at the end, but she has already made it to safety by marrying Sir John, since, according to “the Coventry’s own conventions...a lady is above reproach” (Elbert 182), but Pauline reveals too much too soon and loses to Gilbert in the end.
Although Jean Muir “hates sentiment” (Alcott 99), she does truly possess at least one “womanly” virtue: self-control. It is her self-control that allows her to succeed in her plot, while Pauline is doomed to failure. Pauline’s passion rules her, and by the end she has lost control. Perhaps Jean retains more self-control because her act takes place in the domestic sphere, while Pauline’s performance is enacted in the public sphere of the hotel, away from the family setting. For, as was Alcott’s own experience, “within the domestic drama the inner demon might be controlled, even if it could not be exorcized” (Halttunen 245), but outside the home, it was more likely that a person could become a slave to his/her passion. Domestic drama served to “train the performers themselves in perfect physical and emotional self-control” (Halttunen 267), and unfortunately, Pauline did not receive this training.

Just as Jean Muir’s end is reminiscent of the women of the tableau vivant, so too is Pauline’s. If Jean represents the star performer who becomes imprisoned in feminine behavior, then Pauline is the typical heroine portrayed in all her magnificence before her punishment for “unfeminine” behavior, “especially the usurpation of the male gaze” (Chapman 31), which was Pauline’s offense. Jean manipulates and “returns” the gaze as well, but Pauline does so openly before reaching safety, while Jean waits until she is safely married. It is also evident that Jean “intends to use her magic to join, not destroy, the family” (Goddu 124), while Pauline’s behavior is purely destructive. Both heroines’ punishments parallel their deceptive performances: Where Jean’s deception is subtle, so is her punishment, for it seems that she has retaliated against patriarchy; while Pauline’s more obvious manipulation and abuse results in a seemingly more obvious punishment in the death of her husband at her hands.
Notes

1 The Alcott texts quoted are “Behind a Mask” and “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” unless otherwise noted.

2 Within both “Behind a Mask” and “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” class becomes an important issue. Jean Muir realizes that as a lower class woman, a divorced actress of thirty, she is unmarriageable. She knows that in order to secure her future she must use deception, so she convinces the wealthy Coventrys that she is of noble blood. It is very clear to her that they begin to treat her differently once they believe her to be more than merely a governess. Jean Muir’s contempt for the patriarchal upper class seems reasonable considering how she has been oppressed by it over the years. This system has imprisoned her, and her only means of escape isn’t really an escape at all—she must become a part of it by marrying Sir John Coventry, the family patriarch, and work from within it in the confines of the home. Pauline and Gilbert are also of the lower class, and they too marry for money. Pauline uses Manuel’s money to create an image of prosperity and true happiness so that she can taunt Gilbert; while Gilbert marries Babie strictly because of his financial situation. It seems that the females marry for money in order to right past wrongs or to avenge the wounds they have received at the hands of men; but Gilbert, as a male, marries for money for selfish reasons. Gilbert’s decision to marry Babie for money rather than Pauline for love, actually leads him to be put in a similar position to that most nineteenth-century women: the dependent woman trapped in the domestic sphere. Unlike Pauline and Jean, Gilbert, as a male, had other options, but chose to take advantage of a woman for her money rather than survive by his own means. Patriarchy and class status left no other choice for Jean and Pauline; to survive they had
to manipulate the system that oppressed them. Though it seems that representatives of patriarchal power deserve to be punished for the oppression of the lower class, it is interesting that Alcott’s wealthy characters, the Coventrys and Manuel and Babie, are not cruel or oppressive. It seems that Alcott understands both side of the situation, as is clear in the ambiguous endings of both stories, where all parties deserve both punishment and sympathy.
Works Consulted


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