

# “Proper for a lady’s brush”: The Visual Arts in the Work of Louisa May Alcott

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Visual artists and their art abound in the fiction of Louisa May Alcott. Spanning both her novels and short stories, her domestic fiction and her lesser known gothic and feminist fictions, art serves as a frequently-recurring motif that allows Alcott to explore ideas about femininity, domesticity, self-sacrifice, mortality, independence, and morality. Many of Alcott’s characters are working artists; many of her stories, including “Psyche’s Art,” “The Sunny Side” (from *An Old-Fashioned Girl*), the unpublished fragment *Diana and Persis*, and her best-known work, *Little Women*, portray artists at work in the creation of specific objects of art. Though Alcott’s artist figures have been written about extensively,<sup>1</sup> much less has been said about the art itself. Even the “Art (Theme)” entry in *The Louisa May Alcott Encyclopedia* deals primarily with the creators of said art, and barely touches upon the individual objects themselves (Eiselein and Phillips 23-24). While Alcott’s portrayals of artists can vary widely,<sup>2</sup> her narrative tone towards visual art objects remains much more consistent throughout her body of work. The sensibility displayed across Alcott’s fiction values art primarily for its usefulness in moral applications. Art in service of a moral purpose is met with praise; however, an art object that cannot be mobilized in the building or articulating of a system of ethics – be it domestic, feminist, or religious – is narratively derided or mocked.

In addition to her characters’ fictional art creations, Alcott populated her works with specific mentions of real visual art objects, ranging from ancient Greek works to contemporary pieces. In doing so, Alcott places her fiction within an ongoing conversation about the purpose of art. Her insistence upon the moral application of art is notably related to that of English art critic John Ruskin, whose writings on art were extremely influential in the mid-19th century and would not

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Elizabeth Keyser, *Whispers in the Dark: The Fiction of Louisa May Alcott*; Beverly Lyon Clark, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Little Woman”; Ann B. Murphy, “The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in *Little Women*”; Veronica Bassil, “The Artist at Home: The Domestication of Louisa May Alcott”; Natania Rosenfeld, “Artists and Daughters in Louisa May Alcott’s *Diana and Persis*.” This list is by no means exhaustive.

<sup>2</sup> While the female artists in “Sunny Side” are paragons of a utopian feminism, Cecilia in “A Marble Woman or, The Mysterious Model,” suffers from a “self-destructive addiction” (Eiselein and Phillips, 195) and weakness in the face of the controlling Basil Yorke. Within the pages of *Little Women* alone, artistic sister Amy March is depicted in a variety of both positive and negative lights.

have been unknown to Alcott.<sup>3</sup> In a series of lectures delivered in 1870, Ruskin outlines his vision of the “three principal directions of purpose” which the “great arts” have: “first, that of enforcing the religion of men; secondly, that of perfecting their ethical state; thirdly, that of doing them material service” (Ruskin 82). The attitude towards art in Alcott’s fiction touches but briefly on the first purpose, and is entirely skeptical of the third, but agrees wholeheartedly with the second. Ruskin himself took extra care to explain this point. “I do not doubt but that you are surprised at my saying the arts can in their second function only be directed to the perfecting of ethical state, it being our usual impression that they are often destructive of morality. But it is impossible to direct fine art to an immoral end, except by giving it characters unconnected with its fineness, or by addressing it to persons who cannot perceive it to be fine” (Ruskin 82-83). Ruskin seeks to allay fears about art that would corrupt its viewers, and Alcott’s fiction displays a way of thinking about art very much in line with Ruskin’s. Praiseworthy art in Alcott’s stories performs some kind of moral function. Art that does not perform such a moral function is not viewed as immoral but rather silly, useless, and deserving of scorn. This paper will closely explore a small selection of the art objects which appear in a few of Alcott’s stories – primarily those created by Alcott’s fictional women, but also real world art objects created by well-known, mostly male, artists – in order to articulate Alcott’s narrative insistence on the moral utility of art.

“The Sunny Side,” a chapter of the children’s book *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870), brings together several of Alcott’s themes surrounding art and artists, including female friendship, art in service of the domestic, and a cheerful simplicity, in a notably utopian depiction of a small community of women. In the chapter, cousins Fanny and Polly visit the house of Polly’s friends Becky and Bess, artists who, as Polly describes, “live together, and take care of one another in true Damon and Pythias style. This studio is their home,—they work, eat, sleep, and live here, going halves in everything. They are all alone in the world, but as happy and independent as birds” (*Alternative Alcott* 228-229). Polly’s idealized description of them prizes their art and their domestic cooperation equally. Their studio is not just studio but also home. It is not enough that they are successful artists; rather, they are successful specifically because they have combined art and domesticity.

The four girls contrast each other significantly, creating oppositional pairs, a narrative technique that Alcott returns to again and again in her fiction. Fanny is a worldly city girl, in contrast to Polly’s more innocent country background, and with this comes the suggestion of class difference between the two; Becky, the sculptor, is “tall, with a strong face,” while Bess, the engraver, is “a frail-looking girl” (229). Furthering the motif, Polly calls she and Fanny “us lazy ones” who will “look on and admire” while Becky and Bess continue creating their art (229). However, Becky moves quickly to incorporate Polly into her art: ““You are just what I want, Polly. Pull up your sleeve, and give me an arm while you sit; the muscles here aren’t right, and you’ve got just what I want,” said Becky, slapping the round arm of the statue, at which Fan was gazing with awe” (229). The statue is the art object at the center of both the girls’ and the

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<sup>3</sup> As will be mentioned below, Ruskin wrote about his admiration of the work of Alcott’s artist sister, Abigail May (Alcott) Nieriker; in addition, Alcott mentions Ruskin by name in “Psyche’s Art.”

story's attention, and it is a symbol both of feminine power and feminine morality. Becky asks Fanny to describe what it means to her, and within moments, both of the supposedly "lazy" girls are caught up in the moral project of the art object itself.

Fanny does not know "whether it is meant for a saint or a muse, a goddess or a fate," a list that runs the gamut of classical and religious possibilities for a work of art (229-230). "But to me," she continues, "it is only a beautiful woman, bigger, lovelier, and more imposing than any woman I ever saw" (230). Becky, Bess, and Polly's reactions make it clear that this has been a test for Polly; while Becky smiles and Bess nods, Polly claps her hands and congratulates Fanny: "Well done, Fan! I didn't think you'd get the idea so well, but you have, and I'm proud of your insight" (230). Having passed the test of interpreting the art object, Fanny has proven that she can be included fully in the group. Polly explains further, "Now I'll tell you, for Becky will let me, since you have paid her the compliment of understanding her work. Some time ago we got into a famous talk about what women should be, and Becky said she'd show us her idea of the coming woman" (230). The statue thus proves doubly useful in the instruction of a particularly feminist conception of morality: not only is it utilized as a test to judge a viewer's existing sympathy to feminist ideology, it then also serves as a further point of instruction for those who pass its initial test. By illustrating the "coming woman," the sculpture presents the women with a clear model to which to aspire, or to train their daughters to aspire.

The woman depicted in the statue, as Polly describes her, combines aspects of women that have previously been seen as mutually exclusive or impossible. She is both "bigger, lovelier, and more imposing than any we see nowadays" but "at the same time, she is a true woman" (230). The "true woman," associated with the Victorian cult of domesticity, "might be chiefly characterized by her separation from the public sphere in selfless devotion to home and family" (Eiselein and Phillips 229). However, the "true woman" also made it possible for the emergence of the politically active "new woman": "Indeed, female involvement in the world outside the home received some of its sanction from the moral superiority and virtue associated with True Womanhood" (Eiselein and Phillips 229). By combining an imposing physical presence with the inherent morality of the "true woman," Alcott avoids any possible accusations of radical (immoral) feminism. The statue is truly a balance of true and new.<sup>4</sup> In addition, "the mouth is both firm and tender, as if it could say strong, wise things, as well as teach children and kiss babies" (230). Again, just as in Polly's description of Becky and Bess's studio-home, it is the combination of multiple aspects that makes the statue, and its idea of womanhood, worthy of praise. The ideal woman, the statue argues, must combine strength with domesticity, wisdom with maternity. However, Polly explains, the statue isn't quite done yet. The women "couldn't decide what to put in the hands as the most appropriate symbol" (230). Polly asks for suggestions, and the statue becomes another test for the women. Their varying answers show what they prize most highly and where the faults in their thinking may lie. Thus Fanny suggests a "sceptre" for a queen, but Becky critiques the idea as a problematic understanding of power,

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<sup>4</sup> Though the term "New Woman" wouldn't be coined as a phrase to describe feminists until 1894, the ideas she represented were already in circulation as Alcott was writing in 1870.

saying “we have had enough of that; women have been called queens a long time, but the kingdom given them isn’t worth ruling” (230). Polly suggests “a man’s hand to help her along,” but Becky again declines, articulating instead a vision not of gender cooperation but of gender combination: “No; my woman is to stand alone, and help herself ... Strength and beauty must go together. Don’t you think these broad shoulders can bear burdens without breaking down, these hands work well, these eyes see clearly, and these lips do something besides simper and gossip?” (230). Bess chimes in to suggest a child, yet another suggestion that Becky declines. Newly arrived writer Kate cries “Give her a ballot-box,” but Becky replies that it should go with the other symbols, “needle, pen, palette, and broom,” at her feet (231). The conversation turns before a fitting suggestion can be found.

Though this collective act of brainstorming never resolves into a decision regarding the statue, it has had value for the women involved. In the chapter’s last reference to the work of art, Alcott writes, “For a minute, the five young women sat silent, looking up at the beautiful, strong figure before them, each longing to see it done, and each unconscious that she was helping, by her individual effort and experience, to bring the day when their noblest ideal of womanhood should be embodied in flesh and blood, not clay” (234). The statue has proven its usefulness in multiple deployments: as feminist litmus test, rite of initiation, generator of ideas and discussion, and aspirational ideal.

If “The Sunny Side” earnestly presents a utopian vision of a community of women artists, Alcott’s earlier short story “Psyche’s Art” (1868) approaches the idea with sarcasm instead. It opens with a description of “one of those fashionable epidemics which occasionally attack our youthful population” (*Alternative Alcott* 207). The “young women of the community,” “victims” of “Art fever,” are described as experimenting with all manner of art forms to the detriment of themselves and others: among other things, they “besieged potteries for clay, drove Italian plaster-workers out of their wits with unexecutable orders, got neuralgia and rheumatism sketching perched on fences... and rendered their walls hideous with bad likenesses of all their friends” (207). In contrast to the feminist roundtable session of “The Sunny Side,” the women under attack in “Psyche’s Art” become closed off from larger society and domestically unproductive. “Their conversation ceased to be intelligible to the uninitiated, and they prattled prettily ...” (207). Their dress shows “artistic disorder” and it becomes “impossible to keep them safe at home,” both of which are met with the narrator’s disapprobation (208).

Out of this art panic emerges the figure of Psyche Dean, the story’s heroine, who will learn in its course to “yield up [her] energies to the demands of domesticity” (Bassil 188). Psyche presents one of the more conflicted artist figures depicted by Alcott, especially in contrast to Becky in “The Sunny Side.” Elizabeth Keyser characterizes “the lesson” of Psyche as teaching women “to subordinate their needs for artistic expression to the needs of their families and to use their artistic talents for the benefit not only of their own families but of the family as an institution” (“Portrait(s)” 602). In these readings of the story, however, the narrative insistence upon a moral application of art is still present; indeed, it is inherent in the narrative insistence on the conscription of art in the service of the domestic.

Though the story singles Psyche out from the crowd of “harmless maniacs” (*Alternative Alcott* 208) playing at their new art obsession, her work is not necessarily treated seriously. It is, in fact, initially mentioned only by way of an encounter with an attractive male artist. In a classic romance story set-up, Psyche drops her portfolio and the artist, Paul, picks it up for her (209). The girls to whom she relates this story jump on the romantic possibilities, revealing at the same time their habit of nicknaming other attractive male artists after famous figures such as Michael Angelo, Rembrandt, Raphael, and Rubens (210). Though the narrative tone has shifted from its initial sarcasm into realism, the women depicted are still being mocked for engaging with art and artists in an overtly romantic and gossipy way. When Psyche tries to change the topic by inquiring of the other girls what her bust of Venus needs, they can offer her no advice, being only selfishly caught up in their own work (210-211). Psyche’s bust is “a clever thing... But something was wanting; Psyche felt that, and could have taken her Venus by the dimpled shoulders, and given her a hearty shake, if that would have put strength and spirit into the lifeless face” (210). In striking contrast to the “coming woman” of “The Sunny Side,” Psyche’s clay work is both more traditionally feminine (Venus is the goddess of love) and lacking “strength and spirit.” “Petulant” and “dejected” by her bust, Psyche leaves the studio and stumbles upon Paul. Her brief encounter with his work, a “majestic figure” of Adam (212), and with his idea of “doing one’s duty” as a way to “feed heart, soul, and imagination” (214), causes her to return to the studio and smash her Venus. Her petulance, dejection, and feelings of artistic inadequacy have literalized the desire to shake her statue, which becomes the locus of a violent demonstration of her frustration. The narrative, as well as Psyche herself, spares no sentimentality for the destroyed bust. After literally overthrowing her previous (romantic, weak) manner of artistic expression, Psyche bids the gossipy girls goodbye, vowing to “work at home hereafter” (215).

Combining household duty with art proves to be difficult, and “poor Psyche [finds] duties and desires desperately antagonistic” (*Alternative Alcott* 215). The story details a “sample” day (215), in which Psyche experiences the ways art and domesticity do not mesh. She attempts to learn anatomy by turning her own arm into object of study, but is interrupted and mocked by her family (216). Distracted, Psyche turns instead to “the story of Claude Lorraine,” again engaging with classical artists by focusing on the romantic aspect, and not their work itself (217). As the day progresses, she gets in two more periods of dedicated work, but is interrupted each time by the need to care for her family (217). Finally, she asks her little sister, May, to sit and model an arm for her; May complies, but is too weak to hold herself still. Realizing that she has been “a sinful, selfish girl” in keeping May there, she abandons her art to play with the sick child (218).

Here the narrative skips ahead, relating May’s death. Afterwards, the studio is abandoned until “her brothers [beg] Psyche to open it and make a bust of the child” (220). Though worried that she has lost her ability to sculpt, Psyche makes the attempt, and finds that “she could work as she had never done before” (220). Elizabeth Keyser writes that this “suggests how the traditional experiences of women can enrich their art” (“Portrait(s)” 603). However, reading this piece in context with Alcott’s other art stories, I argue that it is the sudden moral application of

the art – as a near-religious tribute to the innocent dead – which awards Psyche her increased artistic ability. As the narrative explains, “She thought the newly found power lay in her longing to see the little face again; for it grew like magic under her loving hands, while every tender memory, sweet thought, and devout hope she had ever cherished, seemed to lend their aid” (*Alternative Alcott* 220). In contrast to Psyche’s earlier works, which focused on romantic love or her ability for its own sake, May’s memorial piece fulfills the family’s explicit need to remember the child. Veronica Bassil has noted similar, though she approaches the idea from the perspective of the artist and not the art itself. “When artists dedicate their art to the good of others, they suddenly find their subject” (Bassil 194). Psyche finds not only her subject but also her latent talent and a meaningful purpose. Her art serves as a memorial to the dead, a moral application that Alcott will explore again with the character of Amy March in her 1868 novel, *Little Women*.

Amy, the artistic youngest sister in Alcott’s most famous work, is frequently mocked or derided by the narrator of *Little Women*. As Ann B. Murphy has suggested, Amy is “the least likable and most narcissistic and ambitious of the four” sisters (570), and among its other narrative treatments, “the trivialization of Amy in objectifying narcissism” stands out as something “troubling” about the text (564). While the novel treats all of the sisters in some uncomfortable ways, I argue that Amy’s treatment has much to do with her resemblance to Psyche Dean – that is, her focus on her art for its own sake. It is only when Amy begins to mobilize her art in the furtherance of morality that the book begins to treat her better.

Amy gives an early hint that she possesses the power to utilize art in the ‘correct’ way, although, in keeping with her narcissism, her efforts are directly entirely inward. During Beth’s illness, Amy is sent to live at Aunt March’s, and there befriends the French Catholic maid, Esther. In the midst of Amy’s obsession with where her aunt’s “pretty things” will go when she dies, Esther contrives to aid Amy in finding “true comfort,” by setting up a chapel for her (*Little Women* 154). She outfits a closet with a table, footstool, and “over it a picture, taken from one of the shut-up rooms” (154). Esther thinks the painting “of no great value,” completely unaware that “it was, however, a very valuable copy of one of the famous pictures of the world” (154). Amy uses the chapel diligently. She loves the painting and the ability to design her own space: “Amy’s beauty-loving eyes were never tired of looking up at the sweet face of the divine mother... On the table she laid her little Testament and hymn-book, kept a vase always full of the best flowers Laurie brought her, and came everyday ...” (154). Amy combines religious contemplation with a love of beauty and, it is implied, expensive artistic masterpieces. It is out of this effort that the idea of her will is born (155); Amy’s time in her art chapel teaches her, at least superficially, the ability to give up her valued material possessions. Beverly Lyon Clark has read this scene as one step in the process of Amy’s maturation: at the end of book one, Amy has learned “to channel her creativity into religion, to model her life after *Pilgrim’s Progress*, to meditate in front of a picture of the Madonna instead of drawing one herself. What creativity she does allow herself is a tribute to domestic bliss: she sketches the engaged Meg and Mr. Brooke” (Clark 83). Her religious and artistic achievements are parallel, and both are also inherently linked to the domestic sphere. Extending Clark’s reading, I would argue that Amy not only

learns to control herself but then to enact that control over Laurie by the end of the second book, as she utilizes her sketches in a mission of moral correction (322),<sup>5</sup> and perhaps over death itself, as she works to immortalize her daughter not after death (as Psyche did) but before it (379). But before Amy can achieve her relatively happy ending, she must practice to perfect her art.

Amy spends the bulk of *Little Women* trying not only to accomplish this, but also to turn herself into an art object. The two missions are thoroughly implicated with one another, and, as with Psyche, are not narratively viewed as worthwhile. Her father, returning from the Civil War, expresses both approval and lingering judgment when he observes, “I conclude that she [Amy] has... decided to try and mould her character as carefully as she moulds her little clay figures. I am glad of this; for though I should be very proud of a graceful statue made by her, I shall be infinitely prouder of a lovable daughter, with a talent for making life beautiful to herself and others” (*Little Women* 177). Mr. March prizes domestic skill and the indefinable quality of being “lovable” over Amy’s art, and the narrative does the same. Amy is praised by the narrator for her work decorating Meg and John’s home (193); but she is accused of narcissism again when she makes herself, and not “life,” beautiful (196). Despite her father’s judgment, Amy valiantly carries on practicing her art, both in traditional mediums and on her own person. The two converge most poignantly in the chapter detailing Amy’s “artistic attempts” (203). “Mistaking enthusiasm for inspiration,” Amy, like the girls in “Psyche’s Art,” attempts “every branch of art with youthful audacity” (203). As Ann B. Murphy notes, “Amy’s artistic efforts are consistently described as comical or insignificant, their only permanent memorial being a suggestively oedipal gouged foot. Her work is either trivial (mudpies) or dangerous (burning, cutting, immobilizing)” (572). In fact, both *Little Women* and “Psyche’s Art” use the term “mudpies” to devalue their female artists’ work in clay (*Little Women* 129; *Alternative Alcott* 216), and both likewise use sculpture as a metaphor to insist upon the male preference for moral self-improvement (“moulding character”; *Little Women* 177; *Alternative Alcott* 214). But it is in Amy’s gouged foot that the narrative most clearly punishes her for her narcissistic artistry. Having no other models, Amy “undertook to cast her own pretty foot,” but the plaster sets to quickly, trapping her foot (*Little Women* 204). Though digging her out is both difficult and dangerous, the story and Jo make a joke of the occurrence: “Jo was so overcome with laughter while she excavated, that her knife went too far, cut the poor foot, and left a lasting memorial of one artistic attempt, at least” (204). Jo cannot take the situation seriously and therefore ends up physically hurting Amy, while the narrator cruelly suggests that Amy’s scar will be more permanent than her art.

Amy’s work is not the only art mocked by *Little Women*. Describing Amy’s attempts to copy masterpieces, a regular form of art study at the time, the narrator pillories artists including Rembrandt and Turner. “Oily brown shadows of faces, with a lurid streak in the wrong place, meant Rembrandt... Turner appeared in tempests of blue thunder, orange lightning, brown rain, and purple clouds, with a tomato-colored splash in the middle, which might be the sun or a buoy,

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<sup>5</sup> For more on Amy’s moral control over Laurie, see Ken Parille, “‘Wake up, and be a man’: Little Women, Laurie, and the Ethic of Submission.” *Children’s Literature* 29: 34-51.

a sailor's shirt or a King's robe, as the spectator pleased" (203-204). Though certainly critiquing Amy's ability, the descriptions also deflate the classic paintings themselves. Significantly, this passage is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that Alcott makes fun of English landscape painter J.M.W. Turner. In "Psyche's Art," the young women "flushed themselves with scarlet, that no landscape which they adorned should be without some touch of Turner's favorite tint" (Alternative Alcott 208), thereby conflating a love of Turner with an inability to judge aesthetics for oneself. In Alcott's 1873 novel *Work: A Story of Experience*, the flighty Mrs. Stuart, "having just returned from Italy, affected the artistic": "Madame was intent on a water-color copy of Turner's 'Rain, Wind, and Hail,' that pleasing work which was sold upsidedown and no one found it out" (Alternative Alcott 250-251). Though "Rain, Wind, and Hail" is an apocryphal work, the title references one of Turner's best known paintings, *Rain, Steam and Speed - The Great Western Railway*, a hazy, barely-specific evocation of a steam engine traveling through a mere suggestion of a landscape.<sup>6</sup> Turner's art in *Work* is a byword for false appreciation by those for whom art is an affectation; however, it is telling of Alcott's attitude toward Turner that Mrs. Stuart is not the only one duped by the upside-down painting. The implication here is that Turner's work is so devoid of realism that no one can tell its correct orientation – that, as with Amy's copy, the work can be wrongly interpreted "as the spectator pleased." His art is, the joke argues, inherently devoid of meaning.

Amy is famously modeled on Alcott's younger sister Abigail May (Alcott) Nieriker, who was known in her own work primarily as May Alcott. May was a somewhat successful artist in her own right. According to *Artists of the nineteenth century and their works: A handbook containing two thousand and fifty biographical sketches*, published in 1879, May "made oil and water-color copies of very many of the paintings of Turner, which are highly prized in England, and are given to the pupils of the South Kensington schools to work from" (7). A Paris letter to *Boston Paper* quoted claims that "Ruskin admired her copies of Turner, in London, and they command a ready sale in America, where she took, some time ago, the best collection of copies of Turner's various works ever seen in that country" (8). In contrast to Alcott's repeated mocking of Turner's work, May wrote in her book, *Studying Art Abroad: and how to do it cheaply*, that copying Turner "often [proves] more profitable to a student of water-colors than any lessons from a living master at a guinea an hour" (23).<sup>7</sup> While a detailed analysis of Alcott's relationship with May and her art is beyond the scope of this paper, some hint might be given by Judy Bullington: "For [May], study and travel abroad functioned as a source of empowerment as an individualist rather than the enactment of a social ideal" (178).<sup>8</sup> May did not, it seems, approach

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<sup>6</sup> Turner, J.M.W. *Rain, Steam and Speed - The Great Western Railway. Before 1844*. National Gallery, London. *ARTstor*. Web. 17 April 2011.

<sup>7</sup> For more on May Alcott's book, see Debra A. Corcoran, "Another Dimension of Women's Education: May Alcott's Guide to Studying Art Abroad." *American Educational History Journal* 31.2 (2004): 144-148.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the subject of May's relationship to Alcott's writing is treated compellingly in Bullington's article, "Inscriptions of Identity: May Alcott as Artist, Woman, and Myth."

art through its moral functions, at least not in the way, for example, that the women in “The Sunny Side” do.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, then, this lack of moral purpose explains Alcott’s attitude toward May’s work, and by extension, Turner. Furthermore, it is worth noting that though Alcott’s fiction devalues May’s work by way of Turner, *Little Women* itself features a “devaluation of writing” (Clark 90), which was, of course, Alcott’s own life’s work.

May Alcott also served as the model for the painter Persis in an unpublished Alcott fragment, compiled and published by Sarah Elbert in 1978 under the title *Diana and Persis*. Begun a decade after *Little Women*, and ultimately abandoned around the time of May’s death in 1879, *Diana and Persis* complicates Alcott’s long-standing ideas about female art and domesticity. Because the fragment was never finished, and publication history has proven that it may not have been written in order,<sup>10</sup> the ultimate message of *Diana and Persis* is frankly impossible to glean. However, as Elaine Showalter has argued, it may represent Alcott’s shifting ideas about “a generation of women artists who... are not stifled by ideals of feminine self-sacrifice” (*Alternative Alcott* xxxix). Regardless, the story does take up several artistic ideas central to this essay: art as repository for interpretation, art as independence, the combination of art and domesticity, and art as a memorial, among others. The story largely eschews direct narrative commentary, but instead plays out its ideas about art through the plot structure itself.

It opens with a meeting of Diana, the strong and independent sculptor, and Persis, called Percy, the beautiful and romantic painter. Percy announces that she has turned down another marriage proposal and has decided to go abroad to study art (*Alternative Alcott* 384-385). Diana sees this as a way to “escape the temptations” of marriage that plague her, while Percy says she is “tired... of waiting for inspiration; I cannot find it here so I am going to look for it” (385). Percy further believes that her “eye for color is a gift that blinds [her] as well as others to [her] bad drawing” (386); her trip abroad will serve as a kind of tortuous schooling meant to both punish and educate her (388). As in “The Sunny Side,” the women are drawn immediately as binary opposites. Romantic Percy believes, “If I had a marble heart like you [Diana], I should be much happier” (387). Diana, however, responds, “You would lose your greatest charm which is your tender and sympathetic nature. You could not paint as you do without it, for warmth and color are your delight as clay and stone are mine, and we are both suited to our work” (387). The contrast between them is heightened by immediate references to their specific creations. Percy rests a new painting against “the august knees of a Pallas” in Diana’s studio (387). “Only an unframed canvas, high and narrow, with a mere suggestions of a grassy field below, all above was a sky meeting from silvery morning mist through sunny blue to the palest gold, and midway between, a bird soaring and singing as if Heaven’s gate was the goal of its desire” (387). The

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<sup>9</sup> May did, however, have her own ideas about female artists who were and weren’t worthy of approbation. She had no patience for the “gay tourist, doing Europe according to a guidebook, with perhaps a few lessons here and there, taken only for the name of having been the pupil of some distinguished master” (Nieriker 7). She instead directs her book to a female artist who is “a thoroughly earnest worker” (7-8).

<sup>10</sup> See Elaine Showalter’s introduction to *Alternative Alcott*, xxxviii.

bird image notably recalls the description of Becky and Bess in “The Sunny Side,” “as happy and independent as birds.” The narrative is quick to praise the piece as “a simple thing, but exquisitely painted,” but Percy isn’t sure she likes it herself. “I have a superstitious sort of feeling about it because it was born of a mood,” she says (387). Here, as in her earlier statement about her eye for color, she is distrustful of her own work. Furthermore, the painting acts as a catalyst for multiple interpretations, but unlike the sculpture in “The Sunny Side,” Percy is unsure whose advice to take. She explains to Diana, “Grandmamma said it tired her to think the poor lark had no place to rest in, because no bird that flies is without a nest of some sort, and sings the sweeter for it” (388). Diana replies, “Pretty sentiment, but the picture is better without it. Anyone can paint a nest but few a sky like that and make us feel in looking at the lark, ‘Bird thou never wert’” (388).<sup>11</sup> Percy, and her painting, are constantly reinterpreted by those around her, leaving Percy herself unsure of her talent and her priorities. She is tempted to forsake her art for love (386). In Diana’s studio she stares “thoughtfully at a dusty engraving of the Cotter’s *Saturday Night* tucked behind the Minerva as of little worth” (388), an illustration of Robert Burns’s poem about Scottish domestic life clearly valued less by Diana than her sculpture of the Roman version of Athena, virgin goddess. The juxtaposition makes clear Diana’s strictly-defined choice of art over love, just as Percy’s silent staring expresses her sublimated longing for the opposite. In contrast to Percy, who is tempted by love, “Diana hid herself in her little studio, consecrating even her beauty to her art, and being her own model” (392). Though the narrative does not outright mock or injure Diana as *Little Women* did Amy, it still requires that she make a sacrifice of her beauty, as though she could not be beautiful both in art and in life. Diana suffers for her extreme and unwavering conviction, while Percy suffers for her indecisiveness.

Meanwhile, Percy’s experience in Paris both does and does not mirror the young women in “Psyche’s Art”: “one cannot take hold of painting superficially when everybody is intent on doing his or her very best,” she writes, and yet, “you cannot wonder that the fever rages here and I am rapidly falling a victim to it” (398). Art, though not superficial, is still a fever and Percy its victim. Women, indeed, are frequently victims to art in some way or another in Diana and Persis. Miss Cassal’s work suffers because “the men are jealous of her,” and “her ‘Joel’ was refused at the last Salon merely because of its boldness and power” (400).<sup>12</sup> Percy herself gets into the Salon only with a “stupid little affair” (405), a still life based on a May Alcott painting accepted to the Salon (see Clement and Hutton 8; Bullington 178), which Percy puts into “a cheap frame” and sends along “as the most stupendous joke of the season” (*Alternative Alcott* 406).<sup>13</sup> Though she is capable of “vigorous” work, like her unflinchingly moral sketch of an African man drawn

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<sup>11</sup> Diana quotes from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem, “To A Skylark.” Percy’s nickname, as well as her painting, are references to Shelley, an English Romantic poet.

<sup>12</sup> Miss Cassal is modeled on American painter Mary Cassatt. See Keyser, *Whispers*, 149.

<sup>13</sup> Alcott, May. *Still Life*. 1877. Orchard House, Concord, MA. Reprinted in: Judy Bullington. “Inscriptions of Identity: May Alcott as Artist, Woman, and Myth.” *Prospects* 27 (2002). 179. Print. An online version of *Still Life* can be viewed on the Orchard House website.

< <http://www.louisamayalcott.org/shop/images/may-stilllife.jpg> >

while delivering “an anti-slavery lecture which would have delighted Grandma” (403), only her domestic art is valued by the establishment. As Elizabeth Keyser has noted, “Percy’s condescending attitude toward still life, including her own, together with M’s approval and the example he would make of her, suggest how women artists are encouraged to work and praised for their success in ‘minor’ genres and forms even as they learn to devalue them” (*Whispers* 151). In addition to this devaluing, Percy is also turned into an art object which is then displayed at the Salon. Joking about her one nice dress, Percy writes to Diana, “Anna declares she will paint my portrait in it on the famous yellow sofa which comes into play continually. The effect will be Turneresque, and when it is done I’ll send it to you labeled ‘The Fighting Seinereraise,’ or a ‘Symphony in Red and Yellow,’ à la Whistler” (402). Percy deflates any worth in the painting by mockingly comparing it to Turner’s *The Fighting Temeraire Tugged to her Last Berth to be Broken Up, 1838*, or one of J.M. Whistler’s *Symphony* paintings. Though the portrait is a laugh to her, and she ends the letter meaning “to prove that some women do love art better than dress” (402), Percy is proud when the painting makes it into Salon. Keyser further writes, “At the moment of her greatest triumph, when she has supposedly escaped the ‘fine lady’ role, she is happy to be enshrined as an icon of genteel womanhood. Thus Anna’s portrait not only comments ironically on Percy’s painting – an exemplar of the modest, ladylike art that she has been persuaded, against her previous judgment, to practice – but anticipates her metamorphosis from an artist of ‘pots and pans’ into a wife who must scrub them” (*Whispers* 153). Though the narrative makes no direct comment upon the application, moral or otherwise, of the art objects – indeed, the second chapter is presented entirely in the form of letters from Percy, many cribbed directly from letters sent home by May Alcott (Bullington 190) – the story nevertheless depicts a devaluing of art without purpose, by negative example of the male-dominated art establishment. While Percy’s anti-slavery work is “vigorous” and moral, it is not deemed proper to become a work for the Salon. In real life, May’s second Salon-displayed work was indeed a portrait with an anti-slavery message, though of an African American female (Bullington 178-179).<sup>14</sup> Percy, however, is afforded no such moral success. And, in the next chapter, as Keyser wrote above, she has transformed from budding artist into wife; apart from planning, but never beginning, a portrait of her husband (420) and working briefly with Diana on piece casting Percy’s daughter as Cupid (421), she leaves her neglected studio to acquire dust. As with Psyche Dean, “sculpture and sewing, calls and crayons, Ruskin and receipt-books, didn’t work well together” (*Alternative Alcott* 215).

The ambiguity of Percy’s ending is reinforced by the final chapter of the book, in which Diana, perhaps softened by her time in Percy’s domestic sphere, meets a male artist, Stafford, and his son, Nino, and seems on her way to joining their family. As Diana waits for his possible arrival in her studio, she “[pines] to learn his opinion of her statue, for if *he* praised it she would

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<sup>14</sup> Alcott, May. *Negresse*. 1879. Orchard House, Concord, MA. Reprinted in: Judy Bullington. “Inscriptions of Identity: May Alcott as Artist, Woman, and Myth.” *Prospects* 27 (2002). 180. Print. An online version of *Negresse* can be viewed on the Orchard House website.

< <http://www.louisamayalcott.org/shop/images/may-negresse.jpg> >

be satisfied. *She* knew its faults, she also knew its power, and felt that few women had dared, or if daring had succeeded in doing such bold work as this” (*Alternative Alcott* 436, original emphasis). Diana, though sure of her art, needs the approval of a male artist – an approval that may not mean much anyway, considering that the Salon refused Miss Cassal’s work for the same power and boldness. When Stafford does arrive, he finds two contrasting pieces of art, and praises Diana for both: “It pleases me to find that the hand which grappled so bravely with the difficulties of that Saul can also put such tender truth into a baby’s face” (441). However, both works stand unfinished until Stafford offers his help. His studio will complete Saul in marble for Diana (439), and with his own hands, he makes changes to the bust of his son (440-441). The strong-willed female sculptor has allowed her work to be taken over by a male artist; “having won [his recognition], she could permit the softer side of her character to assert itself” (436). In the end, Diana’s morally useful art – her biblical Saul and her domestic paean to childhood – are only as good as the masculine judgment passed on them.

The story, indeed, condones both Diana and Percy’s “female Cupid” (Rosenfeld 15) and Diana and Stafford’s Puck, two examples of art in service of the moral/domestic, variations on Amy’s statue of her child and Psyche’s of her sister. But it also seems to argue, depressingly, that all art is – indeed must be – resolved into domesticity. The female artists in the Alcott stories discussed above are narratively praised and accepted only after they’ve learned to apply their art in the service of morality. And yet, the disturbing ambiguity made apparent by the lack of resolution in *Diana and Persis* perhaps gestures to a larger system of combining narrative approval and punishment for female artists. After all, among the characters analyzed in this essay, Psyche loses her sister, Amy gains a husband but may lose her baby, and Becky, Bess, Fanny, Polly, and Kate can dream of the coming woman but cannot yet reap her benefits. Even Percy and Diana seem to be forced to sublimate their artistic desires to their husbands. Alcott’s narratives, which prize the moral application of art, nevertheless prove painfully cynical about the experiences of their female creators.

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