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The Makings of a Mom: the Maternal Voice of Louisa May Alcott

For all of the literary gifts she bestowed into the hands of children and adolescents, Louisa May Alcott (LMA) is known as “the Children’s friend.” She seemed to understand the mind and desires of children far better than most adults, so much so that she was able to write “moral pap for the young” disguised as tales children would simply read for pleasure. But there is much more to Louisa than juvenile stories of growth. She wrote many stories and several novels for adults, and in them she is able to capture that same honesty and forthrightness of character that made her children’s books so popular. It is because of this honesty that we approach not only LMA’s works, but also her life, to examine how it was that she seemingly understood not only children and adult personalities so well, but that she understood the relationship that often forged the gap between these two generations, that of mother.

But how could a spinster understand motherhood? This seems a contradiction in terms, like much of Louisa’s life. Louisa never married, but instead devoted her life to taking care of her mother, father, and sisters, along with their families. It is through these relationships that she drew much of her understanding of human nature, and the role of mother is no different. By examining her relationship with her own mother, the relationships displayed in her letters and journals, and finally, the spinsters who become surrogate mothers in her fiction, we will begin to hear Louisa’s maternal voice.

The dedication to *Work* reads, “To MY MOTHER, whose life has been a long labor of love, this book is gratefully inscribed by HER DAUGHTER.” Louisa had a special relationship with her mother that began very early in her life (Elbert 33). She was much like her in demeanor and appearance. Like the Marmee that was Jo’s mother in *Little Women*, Abigail May Alcott worked hard and long to provide for her daughters’ well-being. She wrote encouraging notes to help reinforce lessons, was often the sole bread-winner, and her daughters were quite obviously the most important part of her life: in response to a request to join a political organization, Abba responded, “I cannot smile or engage very much in anything apart from my children while they are so young” (Saxton 79). Louisa learned what it was to be a mother simply by being a daughter. She saw her mother’s care and concern, and also the worry that Louisa came to know as part and parcel of the responsibilities of motherhood. She not only observed her mother very closely, but felt the reassuring, tender hand that uplifted and protected time and again. Reading *Little Women* allows us to see how well she knew her mother’s sacrifices and character and the position she understood the mother figure to take. From this experience on the receiving end of a mother’s affection and self-sacrifice, Louisa’s ideas of motherhood are rooted.

Although Louisa never had an opportunity to be a biological mother, she found many children of her own to care for throughout her life. Most obviously, her sister May left her daughter Lulu to Louisa’s care when she died just a few days after the birth. Another sister, Anna, was asked to share her son John with Louisa when Louisa needed someone with whom to leave her copyrights. John was legally adopted by Louisa so as to carry out his aunt’s wishes. John’s brother, Frederick also provided Louisa with an outlet for her maternal abilities (even

though she said that she needed to play Pa after John Sr. died [Myerson 158]). Two other young men, Ladislav Wisniewski and Alfred Whitman, the prototypes for Laurie, become adopted sons in their own right. Reading her journals and letters, one comes across feelings and thoughts traditionally reserved for a mother, but freely given to those whom she chooses to love, nurture, and much of the time, worry over. And even in her maternity, we see two sides of Alcott, the public and the private, those thoughts she chooses to share with others (her letters) and those she bares only to herself (her journals).

Early on in Alcott's life, she met a young man in Concord who was "proud and cold and shy to other people, sad and serious sometimes, when his good heart and tender conscience showed him his shortcomings, but so grateful for sympathy and a kind word" (Saxton 222). Alfred Whitman was her "special boy" and offered her the opportunity to establish a unique but safe "maternal relation with him, duplicating the kind she shared with her mother" (222). He became dependent on her as she was his only confidante, and in this, Alcott was able to glory and feel secure (222). In the many letters she wrote to "her Dolphus," she extends advice and praises his character, encouraging him to great things, like any mother would:

I'm old in years but as much of a girl as ever about some things, and one of them is a strong liking for people who do not think much of themselves. Such people being rare birds now a days ought to be made much of and thought lots of by other people—So don't think I'm demented if I "much" you and call you "my boy" for I have a very sincere love and respect for you my dear Alf, not as a boy only but for many excellent and noble qualities which will make you a good and happy man I hope—So don't be

desponding or blue for it don't pay and though I can't always follow my own preaching I believe it all the more and hate to see any one afflicted in a like manner. (Myerson 37)

She corresponds with Alfred through much of his life, and as he grows up, we see her experiencing what most mothers do—the sensation of not being needed: “It seems so funny to think of ‘Alf’ as a teacher that my mind refuses to do it and I exult in the cap and coat that keep you ‘Alf’ still for I hate to have my boys grow up and expect a ‘Mr’ and a handshake, instead of a ‘Bellus’ or ‘Dolphus’ and a maternal grab” (Myerson 51). In her letters, she gives advice about true success, experiencing religion, and being true to one's self and is constantly asking him to not “forget your old Sophy” (77). She quite often not only calls him “my boy”, but also “my son” (93).

Another one of “her boys” was Ladislav Wisniewski, a Polish refugee whom she met in Vevey. They corresponded for some years and he eventually came to live in America. While in Vevey, they spent much time together, and due to Louisa's motherly affection and attention for him, he called her a Polish diminutive meaning “little mamma” (Saxton 287). While some have speculated that there was a romance between them, Saxton argues that Louisa played duenna to the romance budding between Anna Minot Weld and Laddie (287). Later, Louisa records in her journal that she was “unwell and worried about and forlorn for Laddie.” It seems he was in a “despairing state of mind,” and she could not “advise” the right thing to do (288). Alcott once again she is echoing the sounds a worried mother makes. However, much like with Alfred, Louisa is saddened by this boy growing up, getting married, and having “little two daughters” (Myerson 178).

Her nephews, Frederick and John Pratt, also get much attention showered upon them. When John died, Louisa became “her” Anna’s helpmate in raising the boys. She helped them secure positions through her contacts in the publishing business, writing letters on their behalves. Like Alfred and Ladislav, she calls them “her boys” (Myerson 284). She legally adopted John to secure that her copyrights would remain within the family. She immediately begins signing her letters to both him and Fred “Bless you my son, yr Mum” or simply, “Mother” (Myerson 315-17). She also offers advice to them much reminiscent of a mother ending sibling rivalry, “And my dearest boys, pray continue to be near each other, and live in harmony and good brotherhood,” (317).

Finally, in Lulu, Louisa found the child that she could truly call her own. Because May died when Lulu was only seven weeks old, she never knew her own mother. While Louisa always made sure Lulu knew of her biological mother, it was Louisa that Lulu knew as “Marmar.” In her journals, Louisa records the day Lulu first came to her, “I held out my arms to Lulu only being able to say her name. She looked at me for a moment, then came to me saying ‘Marmar’ in a wistful way and nestling close as if she found her own people and home at last as she had, thank Heaven!” (Saxton 357). Lulu was Louisa’s constant pleasure. A few days later, a gratified Louisa recounts, “She always comes to me, and seems to have decided that I am really ‘Marmar.’ My heart is full of pride and joy and the touch of the dear little hands seems to take away the bitterness of grief” (Saxton 358). After this honeymoon period wore off, Louisa learned first-hand that with the joys of motherhood, come worries and responsibilities. It seems Lulu had numerous health problems that concerned the ever health-conscious Louisa. Also, the nurses she

tried to hire were “incapable or proud . . . vulgar or rough, so my poor baby has a hard time with active mind and body” (Saxton 368). Louisa also was learning the difficulty of disciplining a child:

January 1884–New Year’s Day is made memorable by my solemnly spanking my child.

Miss C. And others assure me it is the only way to cure her willfulness. I doubt it; but

knowing that mothers are usually too tender and blind, I correct my dear in the

old-fashioned way. She proudly says, “Do it, do it!” and when it is done is heartbroken at

the idea of Aunt Wee-wee’s giving her pain. Her bewilderment was pathetic, and the

effect, as I expected, a failure. Love is better, but also endless patience. (Cheney 257)

Louisa made sure that Lulu had all that she and her sisters never had, bestowing toys, clothing,

and trips at regular intervals (Cheney 256-260). In reading her journals, one also sees the Louisa

that was always sacrificing for others, especially this new found daughter: “Long to go away with

her and do as I like. Shall never lead my own life” (Cheney 256). She refers to Lulu in many

letters as her daughter, describing what they have done and will do together (Myerson

245,248,250). Much like Marmee did for Louisa growing up, Louisa guides Lulu into a moral

being through stories and encouragement, “My Dearest Dada–I send you a “tory” to amuse you

after Miss Hubbard goes. You will see the joke with your sharp little eye, and I hope you will

remember the moral in your wise little mind” (Myerson 304). Louisa also takes pride when “her

Lulu” learns to be quiet and to place other’s accomplishments before her own (Myerson 326).

Lulu seems to signify a safe haven in which Louisa can indulge her desires to be needed and

loved. There is no risk of rejection, and even if she grows up like “her boys” did, she will still be

LMA's daughter. Although we lose sight of Lulu later in her life, we know that she played a significant role in Louisa's life, and allowed LMA to truly have a child of her own.

In retrospect, it seems that the opportunity that Lulu presented was a reward for a lifetime of playing mother to "her boys" and writing about motherly spinsters in her fiction. Early on in her career, Alcott recognized the role a spinster could play in a needy young person's life. In *Hospital Sketches*, Louisa's alternate ego, Tribulation Periwinkle, is a spinster who works in the Union Hotel Hospital during the Civil War. As a nurse she feeds, cleans, bandages, administers medicine, and becomes the "mother or wife" that many men miss. Nurse Periwinkle comments that the most flattering expression of affection the patients at the hospital gave her "was the sight of those rows of faces, all strange to me a little while ago, now lighting up, with smiles of welcome, as I came among them, enjoying that moment heartily, with a womanly pride in their regard, a motherly affection for them all (*Hospital Sketches* 41). And when the patients die or heal and leave, Trib says she feels, "like Rachel mourning for her children, when I saw the empty beds" and missed the familiar faces (90). Her care and compassion throughout this story is the model picture of a nurturing and loving mother. Alcott understood how to write about these things because Tribulation Periwinkle was a fictitious version of herself. Like much of Alcott's fiction, she drew *Hospital Sketches* from her own life. In fact, *Sketches* was linked together from the letters she wrote home during her time at the Union Hotel Hospital.

In her letters and journals, we read more of her relationship with the men she risked her life to care for. Interesting enough, she chooses to see them much the way she saw "her boys"—as little children in need of her help. Saxton argues that "in nursing she was expressing her own

fierce humanity in a courageous alternative to marriage and motherhood” (268). While she may not have been a biological mother to the men, she certainly felt their pain as the doctors performed their grueling but necessary procedures always “wishing that the doctors would be ‘more gentle with my big babies’” (Elbert 154). She often refers to her favorite patient, the Virginia blacksmith John Sulie, as a “little child” (Sketches 52) or “little boy” (53). Alcott’s “alternative to motherhood” enabled her to use those gifts and talents which traditionally belong to a mother in a setting where it was safe to do so. While out of the scope of this paper, it seems prudent to mention that this safety Alcott, or “Trib”, finds both here in the hospital and in her relationship with her grown “boys” is perhaps her way of dealing with an asexual maternity. She can be a mother without being a lover. This early experience in the Union Hotel Hospital and the piece of fiction that came from it helped develop the motherly care and concern that would grace many of her characters.

One of these future characters is Faith Dane, yet another spinster who plays mother to three lost “children”. Alcott’s first adult novel, *Moods*, is the story of young Sylvia Yule’s maturation from a girl of moods and passions to a woman of duty and principle. Adam Warwick and Geoffrey Moore are two suitors who do both harm and help in initiating and spurring on Sylvia’s transformation. Faith plays the role of mother to them all, guiding them in their thoughts and deeds, but most poignantly, she becomes the mother Sylvia has never known: “It seems quite natural to turn to you as if I had a claim upon you. Let me have, and if you can, love me a little, because I have not mother, and need one very much.” To which Faith replies, “My child, you shall not need one any more” (*Moods* 178). Alcott aligns Sylvia with Faith so as to spare her the

pain of a life without a confidante. A few pages later, the reader comes upon a scene that only someone who understood the love and compassion a mother gives could have written:

she was gathered close while Faith confessed how hard her task had been by letting tears fall fast upon the head which seemed to have found its proper resting-place, as if despite her courage and her wisdom the woman's heart was half broken with its pity. Better than any words was the motherly embrace, the silent shower, the blessed balm of sympathy which soothed the wounds it could not heal. Leaning against each other the two hearts talked together in the silence, feeling the beauty of the tie kind Nature weaves between the hearts that should be knit. Faith often turned her lips to Sylvia's forehead, brushed back her hair with a lingering touch, and drew her nearer as if it was very pleasant to see and feel the little creature in her arms. (*Moods* 183)

This picture perfect scene is reminiscent of the ones she would later create in *Little Women*, with Marmee as the consoler and the girls, including her own Jo, as the ones being consoled. She took these words and pictures from real life. We come to realize that Alcott did understand what being a mother is about. Elbert argues that "Sylvia and Faith represent two sides of woman, and that of Alcott. Sylvia has passionate impulses that may only be romantic fancies; she also leans toward hero worship. Faith is another part; fervent abolitionist and self-reliant daughter of a contentious home, she chooses direct experience with life" (Elbert 134). So in fact, Faith is Alcott in a subverted form. She is the woman whose voice, "has a motherly tone in it, her eyes a helpful look" (*Moods* 144). Here we find the epitome of Alcott's maternal voice. It was Alcott's words, even those of a spinster, that were able to so comfort Sylvia.

In Alcott's fiction, journals and letters, we hear the direct maternal voice of a woman who, regardless of biological ties, was a mother to many in the truest sense of the word. Throughout her life she played and wrote about surrogate mothers who influenced the life of those who were younger and needy. Looking through her letters, it seems that even outside of these very close and personal relationships, scores of young people looked to Louisa May Alcott, or the "Jo" that many knew her as, for advice. And she was only too proud and happy to help whenever needed. Whether she was giving advice to young writers like John Preston True (Myerson 231), or advice to four sisters, much like the March girls she created (the Lukens sisters), or sharing wisdom with a young friend, such as Florence Phillips, she echoed an understanding of life that rings true today. "Wish to 'believe' and that will help. Everyone has to come to the faith in his own way, some early some late, some easily, some with much tribulation. Joy teaches this one, sorrow that, and some only catch a glimpse of the comfort near the end of life. But it is there, and to those who knock it shall surely be opened" (Myerson 302). It is in words like these that Alcott's readers of the late twentieth century find comfort and a mother who teaches on paper what Louisa very seldom had the opportunity to teach in person.

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