

ALCOTT AND THE TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO GOOD, VERY BAD PUBLIC SPHERE:  
IDENTITY, PRIVACY AND PUBLICATION  
IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S  
*LITTLE WOMEN*

by

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ABSTRACT

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An aspect of Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* that has not been examined is the tension between the public and private spheres within the text. Since the text is semi-autobiographical in nature, issues of public and private occur throughout *Little Women* where the March family, initially represented within an enclosure of domesticity, move into the public sphere around them. This movement alters the prevailing public discourse before ushering in a second movement: the drawing members of the public sphere into domesticity, adding new influences into the home. By analyzing settings of the novel and the personal journals of the author, complex issues of privacy, agency, and community emerge within *Little Women* that not only contribute to the separate spheres debate, but also reveal Alcott's place within the literary canon.

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

The novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott has long been beloved by readers; yet, like the works of the majority of female authors in nineteenth-century America, serious criticism about the text did not appear until recently. An intriguing aspect of the novel that has not been fully examined is the tension between the public and private spheres within the text. Scholars of Alcott's personal writings know that her desire to financially support her family was at constant odds with her desire for personal privacy. However, the publication of *Little Women* capitalizes upon the exposure of the private family life to the public domain. Also evident in Alcott's journals is the power of the domestic sphere. The private sphere unfolds before the reader's eyes, creating an environment in which public and private issues come to the forefront. While critics have explored the concept of domesticity in *Little Women* in great detail, the notion of interplay between the private sphere of the family and the public life outside the walls of the home has yet to receive the attention it deserves.

My thesis focuses primarily on the issues of public and private illustrated throughout *Little Women* as the March family, who are initially represented within an enclosure of domestic privacy, move outward into the public sphere as the novel progresses. After passing the threshold between public and private, their influence upon the world around them becomes a fascinating commentary on the impact that deeply ingrained domestic values can have on a public peopled with both affluent neighbors and poverty-stricken immigrant families. As the March way of life enters the public domain, it alters the prevailing discourse by inspiring neighborly charity and a community feeling before ushering in a second movement: the March family draws members of the public sphere into their domesticity, thus adding new influences to the home. Through this interchange of ideas and influence, complex questions of privacy,

community, and agency emerge within *Little Women* that not only contribute to the separate spheres debate, but also offer a new perspective on the literary canon. I seek to reconfigure the notion of separate spheres, focusing upon the tension between public and private spheres and how *Little Women* creates a unique opportunity to discuss issues of privacy.

At the time it was written, *Little Women* became a popular success, sparking a children's series that has consistently been in print. The view of the novel as a simple children's tale is one of many reasons that Alcott's critics dismissed it as a sentimental story and ignored its potential entry into the larger literary canon. However, with the rise of feminist criticism, scholars have read Alcott's works with a fresh eye. The feminist view highlights Alcott's representation of the inner strength and abilities of a woman in a male dominated society, not only within the domestic sphere, but also in professional realms such as medicine and publishing. However, the feminist reading has tended to place emphasis on Jo March as the modern woman, particularly as the mannerisms, idioms, and tastes of the heroine initially reflect tomboyish tendencies rather than a feminine mold. As the series continues, however, Jo transforms into Mother Bhaer, eventually accepting the role prescribed to her by society rather than continuing the rebellion of her youth, thus complicating the view of Jo as a feminist crusader. Other critics take these same masculine characteristics and brand *Little Women* as a gender-bending diatribe centering on the notion of a woman as a soldier of the hearth. Jo herself longs for war, wanting to sacrifice and serve her country rather than to sit idly. However, she comes to accept her domestic role, finding nobility in the ways that women can serve and support others through the example of her mother's self-sacrifice. Thus, this emphasis on a more masculine March tends to ignore the strength of feminine characters in *Little Women* that in no way evince a manly persona, such as Beth, Meg, and Amy. Yet a close analysis of the actions and achievements of Jo's more feminine sisters promises to reveal the power of the domestic sphere and its far flung influence upon the outside world. In this way, Alcott creates both traditional and nontraditional models of femininity. As the role of women within the text

broadens, the definitions of the spheres themselves shift away from the idea of gendered, separate spheres. No longer can the private sphere limit women within its confines when the feminine influence leaves the enclosure to elicit a response in the public domain.

If Louisa May Alcott had read Jürgen Habermas, how would she have responded to his theory of public and private spheres? My interpretation of public and private spheres utilizes both the separation and interplay between these spheres as a method of analysis. For instance, I examine Alcott's personal journal or diary within my thesis because the publication of private writings such as journals has blurred the line between what is personal and what is publicly portrayed. Within Alcott's journal, the author clings to the refrain of the importance of writing to provide for the family. Throughout her journals the struggle between remaining true to herself as a writer and the outside pressures of family finances, public opinion, and publishing demands reveal a connection between the creation of stories based on real life and the selling of those novelized memories to the public. Yet even the mode of communication embodied in Alcott's diaries, which one might assume is a wholly private medium, shows evidence of parental review and also personal revision. When an adult, Alcott wryly comments on her childhood writings in the margins of the text. It is this intervention and the way in which diaries exemplify the movement between public and private that makes journal writing indispensable to my discussion, proving that there is a fluid movement across and between the two spheres.

In this thesis, I initially focus on theory, outlining the arguments regarding the separate spheres and concentrating on theorists that engage in a discursive relationship with Jürgen Habermas. After outlining this scholarship, I apply the lens of public and private to the personal journals of Louisa May Alcott, examining entries where public persona and private reality collide. In these entries, issues such as parental overview of the journal itself, the possibility of publication, and the desire to protect the Alcott family provide new insight into the complex nature of public and private within the diary genre. After a discussion of public and private spheres and their implications in Louisa May Alcott's journal writing, I focus my study on the



representation of public and private throughout *Little Women*, specifically by tracing how the private life of the March family, as described in the initial chapter, moves outward and affects the public sphere. I identify a second movement in the novel when the public is drawn into the private domain, which occurs when strangers become part of the familial relationship through bonds of love and marriage. This interchange obscures the notion of what is private and how it is informed by the outside world. Thus, my reading of *Little Women* seeks to challenge the conventions of public and private as explained by Habermas, and to participate in a reconceptualization of these spheres that reconsiders the place and power of women in literature.

## CHAPTER 2

### PRELIMINARY REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP

The scope of criticism surrounding the theory of public and private spheres is extensive, but this section will address only a few of the most influential theorists on the subject in order to present an overview of the theory before turning to the work of Louisa May Alcott. The writings of Jürgen Habermas form the foundation to any discussion of public and private. His seminal text *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, published in 1962 and translated into English in 1989, describes the evolution of a new sphere in the eighteenth century that became the midway point between private life, centered around the hearth, and public life, peopled by the authorities of the land. Habermas postulates that in coffeehouses, salons, and pubs, citizens began to share their opinions and ideals, forming a casual alliance that soon evolved into a third sphere: the little, or petit, public. Such discussion became the basis for an upheaval of the established governmental power structure. Private citizens, bolstered by the new brotherhood of the democratic public sphere, clamored for individual ideas and beliefs to be heard. This historical moment provides the basis for the Habermasian model and describes how the public sphere evolved (Habermas 30).

In addition, the advent of the postal service and increased communication within society circulated news and information in the form of gossip, letters, and print media (Habermas 16-17). These three avenues of circulation thrived in an environment where men were curious about the world around them. Gossip itself flourished as people began to meet outside the privacy of the home in public venues where talking and exchanging news was a titillating form of entertainment. At this time the rise of print culture created an opportunity for information to be shared to the general public. However, it took a while for the publishing world to create an organized distribution system. Once this distribution became common, ideas could be shared

with a larger audience than the pub atmosphere could provide. In this way, the private matters of the home circulate within the populace, bringing a certain amount of privacy into the public realm. According to Habermas, as media circulated among the public, new ideas were formed and discussed that challenged the prevalent thought and power structures of the time, thereby creating a discursive paradigm through which the common citizen gained agency within the public sphere and dialogued with the governmental authorities directly. The governmental powers and monarchs no longer possessed the sole agency in the land, and a democratic voice rose and began to usurp their authority. The ruling classes once denigrated this public, stating they were incapable of passing judgment because of their limited understanding of a situation (Habermas 25). That public now based the right to enter the sphere on an individual's status as a private citizen who held authority within the domestic sphere, giving evidence to his capability to aid in the governmental process. The supposition arose that by managing domestic affairs a citizen has a knowledge base from which to draw when faced with communal issues (45-47).

What is so controversial about the model that Habermas postulates is its idyllic nature. He paints history with broad strokes, speaking of "the public" as a fixed, democratic, and representative mass peopled by property owners who come together for both their own good and that of society. Any groups that do not neatly fit into the ideal model became a "bracketed" rather than fully accepted member of this burgeoning sphere. Every citizen who entered into this newly formed sphere supposedly left differences such as class and social status at the door, thereby ensuring that all were equal under the accepted norms of the group. However, rather than ignoring the differences of those who entered the sphere, the brackets in effect barred admittance, keeping individuals of differing status outside of the debate. Habermas acknowledges this when he states "only men were admitted to the coffee-house society" (33), yet later asserts that the public sphere is inclusive in principle (37). Contradictions like this one have caused many scholars to create their own altered versions of the public sphere.

According to Habermas, as the public formed outside of the domestic sphere, the private sphere “designated the exclusion from the sphere of the state apparatus” (11). As voices rose in the civic realms of society, privacy moved inward in a manner illustrated in the home itself. Bedrooms grew in size as the public parlor shrank, which was a testament to the new sense of privacy held by private persons. This “process of privatization” (45) transformed the home into an even more intimate sphere. Yet, Habermas’s theories do not directly define “private,” which is problematic in public/private spheres discussion. Does the private sphere remain in the private realm of the home or does it move inward into a more individual conception of privacy? Habermas prefers the domestic sphere idea, always connecting the individual first to the position held within the intimate sphere and then the entry that position gives him or her into the public sphere. This explicit connection between autonomy in one arena (the private sphere) and autonomy in a new arena (the public sphere) gives credence to the theory of public sphere formation, while explaining the basis that individuals used to have a voice in their community.

Perhaps one reason for this link between the private individual’s agency and the rise of the public sphere is that to directly address the individual would mean highlighting those fringe elements not allowed into the sphere. Habermas leaves room for dualities within his theory because the property owner is both private in his authority in the home and public in his entry into the market economy. He further states that the public exemplifies “a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness” (29). This statement expresses how a private individual evolves from merely having power within a domestic space to utilizing that authority to develop a secondary, public persona with which to enter the community. This concept would be a revelation in an era when the only individuals who mattered in the public view sat on a throne. Consequently, the citizen articulates his/her point of view, and individuation becomes more clearly defined when seen in contrast to other private individuals within the public realm. As citizens come to understand

their point of view in relation to others, they are better equipped to assert their agency. It is clear that Habermas sought not only to explain the evolution of a private head of a household into a participant in community affairs, but also to state the basis by which that individual does so.

Several theorists have written in response to Habermasian theory. Public sphere criticism has been prolific, making up the majority of the writing on the concept of public and private. While the scope of this scholarship is broad, I have chosen three critics on which to focus, each of whom articulate an important and influential response to Habermas. The first, Michael Warner, who gained notoriety for both his contribution to queer theory and his qualification of Habermas's theory of public and private, favors the concept of multiple publics within the generalized public Habermas envisions, rejecting the idyllic homogeneity of the bourgeois public sphere. By discussing each group that gathers together based on mutual interest as a "counterpublic" created in opposition not merely to the ruling authority, but also to the public sphere that Habermas describes, Warner gives voice to the bracketed population who are compartmentalized in Habermas's original model. Nancy Fraser also opposes the notion of bracketing within the public sphere, noting with great irony that a model that considers itself democratic yet does not recognize the contribution of any group unless they fit the definition of a property owning white man is hardly ideal. She allows that such a public might one day be possible, but offers an ameliorated version in the nexus between genesis and utopia. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon provides a paradigm for understanding the fluidity between the private and public sphere that acknowledges the interplay of each in the realm of the other. Bringing women's issues to the forefront of the discussion, Dillon illustrates the circular movement of each sphere, allowing the private sphere a more active role in the public/private paradigm than Habermas's linear movement does. A closer look at the major works of these critics will give a fuller understanding of the modern response to a Habermasian public sphere model.

Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* sees the public sphere as not merely one faceless mass of the middle class, but as a series of subpublics formed in opposition to the public sphere. As one of the founding voices of queer theory, Warner seeks to emphasize the groups within the public sphere that are a mere footnote in Habermas's writing, thereby creating a definition of public and private that is both oppositional and fluid. He contends that while being a private citizen alone is enough to gain entry into the public sphere, "Some publics are more public than others" (45). Groups that develop based on sexuality, race, and gender become marginalized and evolve into reactionary subpublics in response to the prevailing ideology, such as the homosexual movement in which a person must keep his or her sexuality hidden in order to become part of public discourse. Complicating this notion even further is Warner's idea, similar to Habermas's, that private citizens bring privacy into the public sphere merely by entering through the market economy or the political system, for they bring their opinions and experiences with them. This assertion emphasizes the blurred lines between public and private. Warner views the Habermasian public sphere as a republican idea that separates itself from private alliances for the good of the public, emphasizing the group over the individual. This selflessness, while laudable, cannot be reconciled with those who are marginalized even within the subgroupings that emerge within the public sphere. If one subgroup of the public is hurt, then the entire collective suffers if they are all in it together. While the concept of majority rule is practical, the idea that individuals are barred from entry or become casualties to the political system is contrary to the spirit of representation. This conceptualization clashes with the more democratic model offered by theorists who emphasize individual agency within the public sphere over a group coming together for the greater good.

As these "counterpublics" form within the public sphere, a struggle emerges which helps define not only the counterpublic but also aids in the formulation of a public sphere model. The idea of counterpublics or multiple publics does not preclude the idea of a public sphere. Without an overarching public sphere, a counterpublic has nothing with which to dialogue.

When addressing “a” public, a rhetorician can mold a message to the hearers, which evolve from a faceless crowd to a targeted audience to reach. However, without a public to recognize a counterpublic, it could not exist (37). These subpublic utterances address not only the public but allow for a wider audience who might hear the claims and be influenced by them. Warner asserts, “[T]he imaginary being of the public must be projected from an already existing discourse” (107). These publics realize they are subordinate to the overarching notion of the public, yet recognition by that larger group helps establish the identity of the counterpublic. Warner’s rethinking of public spheres asserts that each counterpublic should be viewed as a unit, allowing for more specialized study. This idea of multiple voices within public discourse creates a platform whereby a woman’s voice, which would be a part of a bracketed group, may be heard amidst the tumult of masculine rhetoric.

Like Warner, feminist critic Nancy Fraser believes the concept of multiple publics has merit. While she acknowledges the value of the Habermasian model in “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” she sees much room for revision, especially in his lack of discussion of the place of women in the public sphere. She objects to the widely held reference to the public sphere as anything outside the domestic arena and instead views the public as distinct from the State and the home, allowing it a certain autonomy in the discussion that shields it from becoming conjoined with the state, economy, and public discourse. She asserts that “the bourgeois or liberal model of the public sphere is no longer feasible” (58) and presents an alternate reality that pays homage to Habermas while addressing cultural shifts that have occurred since the rise of the bourgeoisie.

What is contentious about Fraser’s viewpoint is her obvious distaste for the Habermasian idea of bracketing the marginalized, unseen members of society rather than giving them full access to the public sphere, which merely acknowledges their existence without allowing them entry. She sees the irony of a public sphere predicated on the idea of representation that is “deployed as a strategy of distinction” (60). Where are the women, the

poor, and the multicultural members of this sphere? She questions, “[I]s the idea of the public sphere an instrument of domination or a utopian ideal?” (62). In answer to this query, she submits an alternative. She believes the claim of equality in the bourgeois public sphere never ultimately occurred; rather the marginalized were bracketed into silence. As a result, the multitude of utterances within the public sphere does not receive equal consideration. If everyone remained in one overarching public sphere, there would be no mediums through which the counterpublics created in opposition to the norm could express themselves. Fraser defends the formation of these publics while allowing for the possibility of the ideal public sphere. Her research creates a useful bridge between the theorized sphere and the historical realities that modern writers envision. Fraser’s essay creates a context through which to consider how some writings influence the public sphere and the private realms of a reading public.

In *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere* Elizabeth Maddock Dillon differs from most feminist writers by asserting, “While feminist theorists will argue that Habermas’s public sphere constitutively excludes women, I will argue that Habermas actually proposes two different models of the public sphere, one of which locates woman as far more central as does the other” (26). She unearths a movement between the spheres that allows a better understanding of how the private sphere impacts the public through more than just the entry of a new player into the economic market. Where Habermas develops a structure that is linear in movement, as men ideally progress from the private to the petit public to the authoritative public, Dillon prefers a circular motion, where the spheres are ever-evolving, spiraling in and out of each in a less defined relationship. Her model also confronts the notion of separate spheres, which asserts that the domestic sphere is the realm of the woman while men inhabit the public sphere. Dillon disagrees with this simplification of a complex relationship, favoring a more fluid interchange between the spheres in which both sexes inhabit each sphere while impacting the other. While the adaptation of her configuration



to the idea of public and private casts the relationship between the spheres in a new light, it may be more realistic as the spheres can be seen in a symbiotic connection.

Dillon is also noteworthy for her focus on what she terms the literary public sphere. This reconstruction of Habermas offers a means for the critic to analyze literature through the lens of the movement between public and private. Dillon focuses on the contribution of women in literature, no longer relegating them to a second-class status as contemporaneous writers and critics often did. According to Dillon's model, private writings were another way in which women's ideals could become part of the national consciousness. Rather than merely accepting Warner's view of republican abstraction in the Habermasian model or a liberal view that celebrates individuation, Dillon states, "I would argue that the literary public sphere always operates in both directions simultaneously" (39). In this way, there is no fixed delineation of the spheres based on gendered identity where the woman belongs in the private sphere and the public realm remains man's province. Rather, the relationship is more fluid, and each sphere intersects the other, making generalizations difficult to maintain.

Referencing a quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne that it is inappropriate for women writers to expose themselves through print, Dillon contends "print produces privacy—makes it visible, comprehensible, meaningful, and locates it within a narrative—as much as it produces the public nature of the literal subject" (25). Ironically, as a person reveals interiority before others, delineation occurs between the private nature of what has been shared and the public consciousness with which it is in conversation. It is just this complex interrelation of concealment and revelation that makes the study of private writings such a vicarious experience. The connection between literature and privacy is very useful for any discussion of women's writing, which was often limited to the private, domestic sphere. Dillon asserts that the print public sphere creates privacy and subjectivity within the individual who discovers his/her own understanding of self. Through the recognition of oneself by others, subjectivity develops that has a debt to the entry of private individuals into the public sphere far greater than the

current scholarship on the public sphere addresses. Dillon postulates not only that subjectivity in the literary public sphere helps to create privacy but also that the political public sphere bases membership on property ownership while the literary public sphere's subjectivity is based on "desire and identification" (35). Such a view underscores the timeliness of the publication of psychological and sentimental novels for an audience that seeks to understand interiority as they read from the enclosure of their homes. Dillon's nearly equal treatment of the public and private spheres in her writings sets her apart from other critics on the subject and helps to inspire more writing on the subject of privacy.

While much emphasis has been placed on the public sphere, scholarship on the private sphere remains scanty at best. Recent publications from critics like Patricia Meyer Spacks add to the rather limited criticism of the private sphere. In *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self*, Spacks discusses the differing definitions of privacy by tracing the evolution of the term and notes that Habermas's initial silence on the subject set the stage for a critical assumption that the private sphere is a simple reality rather than a concept that needs careful analysis. It is the private sphere that provides a basis for entry into the public sphere, but Habermas stops short of truly exploring the private sphere with the depth with which he discusses the public. Spacks bases her discussion of privacy, which she equates with the idea of privateness, on the idea that "the straightforward if vague definition of privacy as the right to be let alone works remarkably well in most instances" (24). It is this need for separation, not just the concept of interiority but also physical separation, which intrigues her. While Habermas privileges the idea of a domestic public sphere, she asserts that privacy is either the intimate sphere within the family or the privacy of an individual in that sphere who needs to cloister him or herself from the familial dynamic. This distinction makes Spacks's theory indispensable in my discussion of the private sphere.

By tracing the ways in which writers create avenues for characters to assert their right to remain in solitude, Spacks challenges not only the dearth of discussion on the topic, but also

highlights the complex relationship between a person's need to be let alone and the inevitability of public life. She bases her study on eighteenth-century texts that arise during an era when the family unit and societal issues held supremacy over the needs and desires of the individual, echoing Warner's interest in social constructs that privilege the group over the individual. Society views individuals desiring privacy with suspicion, casting aspersions on the hypocrisy of a life not fully revealed at every moment, and such comments have a great power to destroy a reputation or thwart a personal goal. In her treatment of the written word, Spacks confronts the possibility of writing as performance, noting the natural self-editing that might occur lest someone untrustworthy pick up a journal or read too deeply into a novel. By directly confronting issues of privacy as the focus of her study rather than merely as a stepping-stone to arriving at the public sphere, her theory breaks many of the formulated public/private debates.

Another critic who focuses on the private sphere is Stacey Margolis. In *The Public Life of Privacy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, she makes the claim that "counterintuitive accounts of privacy" (3) occur when accounts of a private life are considered fully articulated only if they fit within the accepted societal norms at the moment the writing takes place. Any account that challenges the modes of society would be considered questionable, or lacking in truth, because society judges truth based solely on their social mores. Anything that was not in line with those beliefs becomes summarily dismissed as untrue or unimportant. She asserts that these writings "articulate subjects that can only be understood—can only understand themselves—through the production of public effects" (3). Her theory and its application boldly confront accepted understandings of American literary standards, which convey a lack of interiority in the characters created by authors who are nonetheless celebrated for the intimate nature of their novels. Like Spacks, Margolis believes that private, individual interests are secondary to public concerns, but her theory is refreshing because it reveals the hypocrisy hidden beneath an interiority that does nothing but support the accepted norms. Simply stated, she believes "the freedom of private life is simply a testament to the effectiveness of modern

forms of social discipline, in which subjects need not be punished because they have been trained to control themselves” (13). If interiority reflects the value systems of society, it is a conditioned form of self-preservation of the psyche rather than some form of inner truth. Exposure of such personal information would have a drastic affect on the public perception of the private person, especially during a time period where monitoring of oneself and others was practically the national pastime. The emphasis Margolis places on this outward movement of the private into the public sphere privileges the private as a seat of power and creates a unique opportunity to analyze the movement between the spheres and the effects of each on the other. This approach to literary theory creates a new thread of discussion in this ever-evolving body of criticism.

From the wealth of writing on the subject of the public and private spheres, a few points are striking. First, the major emphasis of the public/private debate has been placed on the public sphere, from the Habermasian model in which the public sphere appeared when the individual left the private sphere to challenge the ruling authority, to Michael Warner’s conception of multiple counterpublics that arose in answer to the homogeneity of the public sphere, to Nancy Fraser and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s emphasis on the interplay between the public and private spheres and what it meant to women in the public sphere. Private sphere criticism has developed from a byproduct of public sphere criticism to a force of its own, with critics like Patricia Meyer Spacks and Stacey Margolis emerging to both redefine privacy and cast a new light on established criticism of the private sphere and interiority. It is precisely this reinterpretation of the private sphere that is the focus of this thesis. By looking at the journals and semi-autobiographical texts of Louisa May Alcott, and particularly at the interplay between and within the public and private spheres, my analysis seeks to participate in a new method of literary analysis that views the relationships between these two spheres as revealing the essential content within the texts.

### CHAPTER 3

#### ALCOTT'S JOURNALS

The publication of private writings such as journals blurs the line between what is personal and what is publicly portrayed. The moniker “private” is often paired with the terms “diary” or “journal” precisely because they are considered private places to set down personal anecdotes and attitudes. However, the publication of such personal writings indicates that the private nature of the text itself is under question. Habermas supports this assertion when he states, “Only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed, did everything become visible to all” (4). The opportunity to study Louisa May Alcott’s personal journals, which detail her life from 1843 to 1888, allows us to trace her attitudes towards her environment while also allowing a comparison between the author’s thoughts and the public persona illustrated both in her own remarks and those of her biographers. Within Alcott’s journal, there is evidence of a subversive desire to allow her own identity to weave into the pages of her stories as an assertion of personal agency. Ironically, in this way Alcott reveals many things about herself in her novels that remain hidden in her journals.

Throughout her entries the struggle between remaining true to herself as a writer and the outside pressures of family finances, public opinion, and publishing demands reveal a connection between the creation of stories based on real life and the selling of those novelized memories to the public. Yet even the mode of communication embodied in Alcott’s diaries, which one might assume is a wholly private medium, shows evidence of parental review and also personal revision. When she was a child, Alcott’s parents often read and even annotated her journal, highlighting how easily a private record can become part of the public sphere even without the advent of publishing. When an adult, Alcott herself wryly comments on her childhood writings in the margins of the text, which impacts issues of public and private still

further. It is this intervention and the way in which diaries exemplify the interplay between public and private that makes journal writing important to my discussion, proving that there is a fluid movement across and between the two spheres.

When researching the topic of privacy, much of the scholarship centers on an abstract concept. Patricia Meyer Spacks, for instance, asserts the importance of the concept of privacy, especially in the novel, and deserves a brief overview. She delineates the idea of privacy from the private sphere, focusing on the concept of privacy as interiority and separateness. As previously noted, she sees privacy as the right to be left alone rather than being a part of a domestic space. It is this definition of privacy that connects directly to journaling as a genre (Spacks 24). What other form of writing is as solitary and interior as this personal writing? The genre lends itself to separateness and disclosure, even if only for the basis of self-reflection. Another interesting aspect of her theory centers on the concept of self-concealment, in which an exchange of letters can become an exercise in masking one's true intent (12-13). If one sees a journal as a conversation, either with oneself or with any person who might pick it up and thumb through its pages, then the idea of posturing within the text is conceivable. Yet, is such concealment possible if the individual is voluntarily revealing things about him/herself? Rather than seeing this self-editing as an inward violation, this posturing would rather mask the inner thoughts and purposes of the writer for anyone who might read the work. This duality could be seen as a form of agency through which the writer shares the truth in her own terms (Spacks 13).

Not all scholarship on private writing is concerned with abstract issues of identity. Much analysis centers on very concrete materials. Many critics have analyzed letters from different time periods for both historical significance and literary worth, and epistolary novels have also become a popular topic of discussion. However, the scholarship on journals and diaries remains scant, which is why for my analysis of the Alcott journals I rely heavily on the introductions to the two most popular printings of the journals. The introduction of the original

1889 publication of Alcott's journals gives rich, then-and-there accounts that aid in situating this work among other contemporary works and offers a great deal of additional information on the Alcott family. The more recent 1989 introduction by Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeline B. Stern offers a more objective, critical view of the work as a whole, and their editing style of the original text promotes more candor than the work of a hundred years earlier.

In their first printing, Louisa May Alcott's journals were much altered from the original manuscript. After Alcott's death in 1888 at the age of 55, it was discovered in a notation that she had asked that her journals be destroyed, stating, "These journals are kept only for my own reference, and I particularly desire that if I die before I destroy them that they may all be burned unread or copied by any one" (Myerson 103). Fortunately for literary scholars and historians, no one chose to fulfill that final request, which in itself might have been a trope to emphasize Alcott's desire for privacy. A one-time close companion of Bronson Alcott named Ednah Dow Cheney, herself a published author, edited a combination of different genres in a work entitled *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals* in 1889, which was the primary source to which critics referred for the next hundred years. While Cheney utilized Alcott's manuscripts of each journal entry, the end product is significantly altered in comparison to the originals housed in Harvard's Houghton Library. Cheney explained her desire to present Alcott as someone who "has given us the opportunity of knowing her without disguise; and it is thus that I shall try to portray her, showing what influences acted upon her through life, and how faithfully and fully she performed whatever duties circumstances laid upon her" (Cheney iv). She redacted portions of the journal, primarily those that either detail transactions between the author and her editors or express intimate details about her family. She also neglected to print complete sections of the journals, especially those that contain more of the acerbic commentary by the author, thus preserving Alcott's public image even within her private writing. Cheney admitted that an entry describing a "'little romance' that 'couldn't be' was excised along with references to

financial matters, publishers' payments and any comments regarded by the editor as trivial" (33). Hence, the editor of this first edition seems to mold the author in a wholly favorable light.

Recent editors of Alcott's journals postulate reasons Cheney made these editorial choices in their introduction to *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, published in 1989. One external motivation was Cheney's desire to preserve the public persona Alcott had earned as a well-loved friend of children. Another issue was the exclusion of any characterization of the Alcott family or the author herself that might conflict with the March family image. Alcott's writings, both in journal and novelistic form, are often read as sentimentalizing her family struggles; hence, Cheney framed her selections in a manner consistent with the author's own self-editing. Details such as Bronson Alcott's ineffectual and nominal efforts at earning money, Abba Alcott's acerbic comments, and Louisa May Alcott's feelings of anger and resentment at being forced to put aside her own wishes in order to acquiesce to a father she did not fully understand would be in direct opposition to the persona that had carefully been crafted by publishers and the Alcott family.

Even before Cheney viewed the journals, Alcott had destroyed letters and portions of her journals to ensure privacy, so some of the editorial work had already been done. Cheney also faced the prevailing editorial practices of the 1800s that leaned towards protecting the privacy of the author through omission. The Alcotts themselves, especially the last living sister, Anna Alcott, were also a possible factor, as they were aware of the imminent publication of the journals and would be affected by their contents. As Daniel Shealy asserts in the introduction of *Alcott in Her Own Time*, "[t]he family knew too that Louisa wanted to remain as private as possible" (xvi). The family had many comments and suggestions that they shared with Cheney, often curtailing her personal vision for the work. Editors Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy, in contrast, transcribed the author's words as she wrote them in the 1989 publication of Alcott's journals, adding portions that had been marked out and filling out names that had formerly been abbreviated; "they have been restored as she wrote them, unexcised and unfragmented. After



a century of 'diluted' journals, they stand as close to the original version as is possible" (Myerson 38). The death of Louisa May Alcott was not so recent as to cause any direct conflict with the public vision of the private diarist, and there is an honesty and authenticity to the manner in which the journals are represented in their entirety, which is why I have chosen this more complete version of the journals as my primary text.

Based on such two such contrary editing theories, it may seem that the editors can easily be blamed for compromising the integrity of Alcott's journals. However, Alcott herself is complicit in the posturing evident in her own writing. It is the editors' belief that although the journal was not completely private, a "lack of privacy did not inhibit Louisa's analysis of self. On the contrary, it probably spurred her on, for she was already becoming a writer in search of an audience" (Myerson 5). It is my contention, however, that this early review of her work by her parents and the idea of a wider potential audience caused Louisa May Alcott to self-edit her writing, perhaps anticipating that her wish that her journals be destroyed would not be heeded. To express every thought in her mind and urge of her heart in a written record would have been very dangerous, for the elder Alcotts believed in full disclosure, and privacy was a rare luxury. So, knowing that at any time her parents could read her journal likely caused Alcott to retreat, even in this ostensibly private space. The possibility, after she gained notoriety as an author, that others would see and even publish her journals, also likely influenced the version of events she recorded. In this way, Alcott could protect herself and her family from scrutiny. Hence, the account written by Alcott should not be taken as unmitigated truth, but a carefully crafted adaptation of what occurred. This concept parallels the idea that "Louisa Alcott reconstructed herself and her world in these journals" (Myerson 4), using the journals not only as a basis for self-reflection, but also as a means to present herself and her family to a world that might not accept them as the inspiration for such a beloved family as the Marches.

This concern for how others see her family is an example of Dillon's assertion that "to understand, shape, and value ourselves, we imagine ourselves as seen through the eyes of the

other" (32), revealing that outward perception directly influenced how Alcott viewed herself. For example, while there are several passages that share Alcott's thoughts, many show a restraint lacking in some of her letter writing, where she openly criticizes her publishers and her public. It is counterintuitive that a writer would be more forthcoming in letters, which could be shared with others, than in a presumably private medium such as a journal, unless the writing within that journal is more persona than personal. The first indication of this presentation of self for another's view occurs in the parental writings in the margins of Alcott's childhood diaries, proving that even from her earliest years Alcott writes her thoughts down for others. Other evidence of this restraint is in the editing that Alcott did during her years of rereading her earlier writings. Through marking out, erasing, and even ripping out portions of journals, original meanings become obscured or recontextualized. These changes helped to preserve the public persona that Alcott crafted for her family when she was a child and later for her audience. This editorial practice might also mirror what Spacks calls "psychological privacy" which "entails self-protection of a sort not immediately visible to others" (7). Not only did these changes aid in the protection of Alcott's identity but also helps her retain control of her story and allow her to tell it in her own way. Perhaps Alcott was a more conservative editor than either Cheney or the Alcott family.

The absence of sensitive material was relatively small because Alcott wrote little in her early years that would need omission, probably because Alcott's journals were read in her early life by her parents, and her mother, in particular, would leave her notes in the margin. Hence, from the very beginning of her writing, Alcott had a familial audience who saw journaling as a mode of mentorship and a place for self-reflection. Many of the comments later added by Alcott herself were expository; for example, family difficulties described in the 1850 entries were later contextualized as the author explains that the family had gone through health issues. This practice implies that she contemplated her journals eventually being published and wished to cast her family in a favorable light. Perhaps Alcott also foresaw that many years later others

might view her work as well and subconsciously wrote for that audience veiled within a vast futurity.

Louisa May Alcott was not the only journal writer in the family. Both her father and mother, Bronson and Abba Alcott, wrote journals throughout their lives and passed on the passion to each of their daughters. Part of the family's teaching methodology included reviewing journals, commenting on the child's progress both through writing in the journals themselves and classroom discussion in the course of lessons. Abba Alcott's comments appear throughout the childhood journals of her daughters, and in Alcott's journal many encouraging and corrective passages can be found as she endeavors to master her impulsive nature. The first note from mother to daughter occurs after Louisa's eleventh birthday. After a few cursory comments on penmanship, Abba commends her daughter on her self-expression as a guide to self-knowledge, reminding her "that a diary should be an epitome of your life. May it be a record of pure thought and good actions, then you will indeed be the precious child of your loving mother" (Alcott 47). This entry is emblematic of the type of pressure exerted upon Alcott as she is in the midst of gaining a sense of self and autonomy. There is praise for behavior that aligns with the teachings of Bronson and Abba Alcott and encourages complete openness and candor from Alcott, a refrain evident in other writings of the period.

In this model, the child effectively does her own parenting. Alcott's writing illustrates how this idea of self-regulation guides many of her actions in adulthood. By enacting this mental exercise on the page, Alcott's journal confirms the influence of her upbringing and the social mores of the time. However, Abba qualifies the freedom that this expression could entail by stating that in order to be a beloved, noble, and worthy daughter, the revelations should express only purity and goodness. The implications of such an addendum are vast. In reading this statement, Louisa understood the pattern her journal should take. Any admission of weakness or show of avarice should be minimal, if mentioned at all, and be followed quickly with a desire to do better and nullify the agency that allows for such willfulness. This rhetorical

strategy minimizes any negative impact of personal revelations by Alcott, while also improving her. For example, at the age of thirteen Louisa desires to be good, lamenting, "I've made so many resolutions, and written sad notes, and cried over my sins, and it does n't seem to do any good" (59). This penitence consistently quashes behavior that might displease her audience, thereby solidifying Alcott as the perfect transcendental daughter.

Even in the first draft of each journal entry, Alcott is very intentional about what information she shares and how she shares it, often paring down her accounts of events to an almost journalistic, clipped report. For instance, Alcott found the world to be very overwhelming after one sister's death and another's betrothal, and "underwent a suicidal crisis, which she reported post facto in a breezy letter home but either subsequently erased from her journal or never confided at all" (Myerson 17). In reference to this moment, Alcott merely states in her journal, "My fit of despair was soon over, for it seemed so cowardly to run away before the battle was over I could n't [sic] do it" (Alcott *Journals* 90), before valiantly stating she would work while there was a need for it, thereby underscoring the transcendentalist bent of her upbringing. Yet, in a letter to her family, she revealed more than in the journal, admitting that she contemplated jumping from a bridge (Myerson 17). Again, it seems counterintuitive that she would confide such details in a letter yet omit them from a presumably private record such as a journal.

There is rich textual evidence that indicates a tension between public and private throughout the journals, but the entries in which Alcott discusses herself as a public figure provide an interesting opportunity to analyze the rhetoric she utilizes to express the difference between her public persona and her private interiority. Alcott edited her journals later in life and refers to times in which she "[w]rote up old journals" (Alcott *Journals* 274). One possible reason for this perusal of her lifelong journals was that because of her rising popularity, the family circle was not the only audience that might become privy to Alcott's journals. As notoriety followed first the publication of Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* in 1863 and fame later through *Little Women* in

1868, Alcott realized that her journals might be seen as valuable after her death. Soon Alcott began rereading her own work, revising and adding notes in the margin to contextualize previous entries. The most recent editors of her journals reviewed these revisions, footnoting information formerly changed or redacted. In 1885, after burning many of her letters, she writes of starting to “think it might be well to keep some record of my life if it will help others to read it when I’m gone. People seem to think our lives interesting & peculiar” (Alcott *Journals* 262). This admission seems to contrast the rest of the text dedicated to a desire for privacy, although the reference to being “peculiar” echoes the oft-expressed feeling that no one truly understood the Alcotts, which could perhaps change through the publication of Alcott’s journals.

The revelation of private matters through the assumed privacy of a journal implies a level of candor where the first person account of a diarist is believable and therefore should not have to endure the scrutiny applied to other published works. While many of Alcott’s changes were merely syntactical, other choices support the idea that she practiced apologetics in explaining her family to the world and also for the exigent circumstances and familial pressures surrounding her own choices. An example of this methodology occurs when, after a long entry in which Alcott laments the difficult times at home financially and how she is so burdened and far from God that she “can’t fly up to find Him” (62), she annotates that the family had small-pox resulting from their benevolence to an immigrant family and how terribly ill her parents were during “a curious time of exile, danger, and trouble” (62). Through this explanation, Alcott averts a negative connotation that her parents were unable to provide for their daughters, allowing outside forces and the subsequent consequences of their philanthropic pursuits to take the blame for the family crisis rather than a lack of foresight. These accounts became the basis for the family units in her juvenile literature. It is clear that the author “spun her tales especially from her own character, from the image of herself *projected* in her journals” (Myerson 20, emphasis mine). Thus, the entries can be viewed not as truth but as a crafted version of that truth, the culmination of which occurs in the pages of sentimentalized writing. Hence, this very

private author framed family through her literature, the fodder provided by her journal becoming transcendental reality when immortalized in print, and the audience accepted it as a truthful, firsthand account.

In addition to such meta-textual issues, public/private intersections are evident within Alcott's journals when one analyzes the content itself. Some of the most revelatory portions center on publishing and shed light on the process by which a text created in a private space becomes part of the literary public sphere. In one instance, the poem "Thoreau's Flute," written in tribute to Alcott's close friend Henry David Thoreau, illustrates how a poem written in a private moment of personal grief easily becomes a part of the public discourse through publication. The entry outlines the process of publication in clipped, report-like language, giving a quick history of the publication of Alcott's best known poem, as she recounts, "Had a fresh feather in my cap for Mrs Hawthorne [sic] showed Fields 'Thoreau's Flute,' & he desired it for the Atlantic. Of course I didn't say No. It was printed, copied, praised & glorified – also *paid for*, & being a mercenary creature I liked the \$10 nearly as well as the honor of being 'a new star' & 'a literary celebrity'" (119). The term "mercenary" here is particularly provocative, reminding the reader that writing is not merely a mode of expression but a profession that can be cutthroat and based on monetary considerations, emphasizing the more stereotypically masculine nature of working within the public sphere. Use of terms such as "new star" and "literary celebrity" categorizes each as social constructs, or a type of persona, pointing to the duality of a public face verses a private reality. This posturing mirrors the editorial practices that Alcott employs to omit and add at the writer's discretion. In addition, the private, personal message that eulogizes a beloved friend becomes a public memorial to the man, one that other voices can join with and "copy" to express similar feelings. Yet it is interesting that this passage appears in a private journal rather than correspondence, the explanatory nature of the text pointing to a viewer outside the text who watches what is written within. There is an implied audience to the text, one that would understand the occasion for the publication and express interest in the purpose

behind it. Even in this simple comment on a poem, this journal appears to be less about personal reflection and more about public perception.

The rhetoric of other entries also expresses fluidity in the barrier between public and private, where what is created in private becomes part of the public domain not only to benefit the author but also as an expression of her femininity. In this way those reading Alcott's journal can see her feminine side, a quality much desired in the writers of children's literature. An example of this idea occurs when Alcott speaks of the familial happiness of her sister Anna Pratt and her children, commenting on the contrast between the two sisters. When watching her sister and nephew, Alcott remarks, "I sell *my* children, and though they feed me, they don't love me as hers do" (163, emphasis hers). These children she refers to are her stories, written in a private space and sent out into the public sphere in order to return money and acclaim for the author. This contrast between Alcott and her sister initially casts Alcott's method of procreation through writing in an unflattering light in comparison to the more traditional role of a woman as mother exemplified by Anna; Alcott personifies her stories as offspring, viewed for what they bring to the mother figure and what these stories can and cannot provide. Also, a common wish of a parent is that their offspring will return to care for the family as her stories provide for her needs, so even this return of the story-as-child to the parent constructs a maternal relationship. This statement associates Alcott's literary creativity with her sister's childbearing, connecting one type of creation with the other. Rather than focusing merely on the capability of writing to gain women admittance into the public sphere, Alcott's entry expresses the means in which the creation of stories can demonstrate her femininity. Many feminists consider publication by female authors as a form of reproduction, viewing these works as children that are representative of woman's interiority and selfhood. An audience reading such an entry would be privy to Alcott's expressive language in her commentary about her writing and how a spinster without children can still be considered motherly, aiding in feminizing the persona she creates throughout the journal. Another illustration of this motif occurs when

Alcott later chafes at the formulaic nature of such writing and the confines of the genre which garnered her acclaim for her stories, stating that she is “tired of providing moral pap for the young” (204). Since a pap is the breast by which an infant is fed, this statement is a reference to the very image of a maternal act, repeating the image of the child as text. So, in turn she is feeding the public sphere with tales filled with good morals, just as a good parent would do to raise her child. A second connotation constructs “pap” as something simplified for a young mind, a characteristic for which Alcott’s works is well known. However, one might ask why it is important that Alcott expresses these thoughts in her private journal. Through these images, she not only explains a feminine nature within the writing process, but also intimates that there is more to her interiority than even her novels suggest. This posturing supports the notion that she not only expected her journals to be read, but she utilized entries such as this to mold herself both as feminine and as capable of being a feminine influence through her children’s tales.

After studying Louisa May Alcott’s private journals, a few things become clear that benefit an analysis of Alcott’s writing, especially her seminal novel, *Little Women*. First, her journal served not only as a diary of her thoughts, but also as a place where she jotted down anecdotes that could later become a substantive, fictional story. Secondly, she had an agenda in her writing, wanting to affect the world and influence youth, even if the desire came partly from an equal desire for financial gain. So, the autonomy gained through financial success became coupled with a sense of personal agency as Alcott affected the world through her words. Thirdly, she understood the power of private matters and utilized that knowledge to create characters and literature that makes others reconsider their own interiority. It is this emphasis and appreciation of privacy in Alcott’s personal life that informs *Little Women*, creating more equality between public and private. As the story opens on a private, domestic sphere, Alcott lays a foundation for the rest of her novel and the ensuing series. Just as in her own journals she sought to create a sentimental picture of the Alcotts, so does this blatantly



autobiographical novel remake the Alcotts into an image acceptable to society through the portrait of the Marches. As the March girls leave the nest to enter into the public sphere, changing it, and bringing representatives from that world into the family sphere, the private sphere is no longer secondary in the public/private debate. The private sphere becomes privileged over the public sphere, and the heroines of the tale illustrate that influence does not flow one way but extends outward from and moves inward to the domestic.

## CHAPTER 4

### *LITTLE WOMEN*

Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* creates a unique opportunity to discuss issues of privacy, especially since Alcott draws largely from real life experiences, which produces a deeper sense of revelation in the text. As Elizabeth Vincent, a nineteenth-century critic, states, "Of course the Marches *were* real people. Except for the trussing up of episodes and the simplification of character which passes for Miss Alcott's art, she has merely reported her own family....It is not the people in the book who are unreal, but the people who lived" (555-6). Contemporary critics, like Anne Hollander, qualify this assertion, stating, "[T]his novel, like many great childhood books, must serve as a pattern and a model, a mold for goals and aspirations rather than an accurate mirror of known experience" (28). It is important to keep this duality of fiction based on real events and the sentimental, abstract nature of the overall story in our minds as we analyze *Little Women*. The complexity of the issues presented by this text gives validity to the claim that it deserves serious consideration as a part of the literary canon.

When *Little Women* first gained popularity, Alcott's critics dismissed it as a sentimental story and ignored its potential entry in the larger literary canon; yet if one agrees with Catharine Stimpson that a basic tenet for those texts worthy of entering the canon (or, in her terms, "paracanon") is being beloved, *Little Women* certainly qualifies (585). The novel format itself becomes emblematic of the tension between the spheres, since there is a need to appeal to a wide reading audience, primarily made up of women, who can be seen to constitute a subpublic of the literary public sphere. *Little Women* takes the analysis of separate spheres into a new arena where there is far more interplay between the private sphere, the assumed realm of women, and the male dominated public sphere. The publication of *Little Women* capitalizes upon the exposure of the private family life to the public domain, the influence of women on the

realm outside the home, and the response of men within that sphere. This occurs through the private ideals that disseminate into the public as the private moves outward. Glenn Hendler states that “‘sentiment’ primarily connotes private, interior, individual emotions. ‘Public sentiment’ is thus something of an oxymoron” (*Public* 2). Thus, the novelized, sentimental story inherently privileges the private over the public. The private sphere unfolds before the reader’s eyes, creating an environment in which public and private issues come to the forefront and the response of the public sometimes seems like an afterthought. The novel is about more than domesticity and the focus on that aspect of the novel overshadows the way in which the public sphere interacts with private throughout the text.

Before performing a close reading of *Little Women*, it is important to review the prevailing discourse about the author. At the time it was written, *Little Women* became a popular success, sparking a children’s series that has consistently been in print. It filled an important niche in literature since writers “usually take up their characters at the age of twenty-one, or somewhere in the twenties, and there have also been many excellent books written for children; but to describe the transition period between fifteen and twenty there had not yet been anything adequate” (Stearns 85). The novel was a commercial success, adding to the irony that “Alcott, the product of an unconventional upbringing, whose eccentric transcendentalist father self-consciously tested his child-rearing theories on his daughters, took them to live in a commune, and failed as a breadwinner, should write what many contemporaries considered the definitive story of American family life” (Sicherman 634). *Little Women* fulfilled the basic requirement of literature of the time period, since it appears to be written for a higher moral purpose, or society would be wary of it (Donovan 146). However, the ending of the novel challenges the moments where it appears the girls will break into the public sphere because the reciprocal relationship that occurs between the spheres inevitably ends in domesticity once more.

This portion of my thesis focuses primarily on the issues of public and private illustrated throughout *Little Women*. I assert that *Little Women* represents the ability of the intimate, private sphere to impact the public sphere, which in turn impacts the private sphere. There is a discursive nature to the relationship, mirroring what Habermas saw as one sphere helping to define the other (2). This is what critic Seyla Benhabib refers to when someone chooses “to insert oneself into webs of interlocution; it is to know how to answer when one is addressed; in turn, it is learning how to address others” (344). However, while there are moments of burgeoning subversion as female characters attempt to carve out a place for themselves in the public sphere, Alcott ultimately brings them back into the private setting. Her determination to marry off the March girls ameliorates their journey into the public, only to return them to the grim reality that a woman’s place is within her sphere. I analyze various settings throughout the text where the interplay between public and private becomes evident. By allowing her characters autonomy and agency with which to affect the world around them, Alcott presents feminine youth as worthy to become a part of the public sphere. The fact that they do so through dialogue with the public sphere supports Robert Asen’s assertion that “people also may develop opinions only after discussing issues with others, or they may change previously held views, or they may reorder their priorities” (349). Not only does the outward movement change the public sphere, but each girl solidifies her own identity through interaction with the outside world. However, while they do progress further than Mrs. March into the public sphere, they cannot completely break from the domestic.

There is a second movement in *Little Women* that follows this initial motion and through which members of the public sphere move inward, becoming part of and shaping the private sphere. In the following pages, I focus on Jo and Amy, two of the March girls, their unique avenues into the public sphere, how the interaction between the spheres affects both the home and the outer world, and the impact they have on the men that they draw into the domestic sphere. The novel begins with each sister in the traditional, cultural space for a woman of the

time period. This very separateness gave birth to the concept of separate spheres, but as Thomas Foster asserts, literature of this time period often “reimagined domesticity in order to reject its positioning within the binary framework of the ideology of separate spheres” (2). This paradigm relegates the private to a second-class state even as it limits the power of women in comparison to male autonomy. Foster challenges the division of public/private itself, believing the boundary between the two never truly separates the spheres and that they maintain a constant discursive relationship. He presents “the public/private distinction as the basis for creating an alternative feminine culture, built on values excluded from the capitalist marketplace” (7). I agree with Foster on this point and see the novel *Little Women* as an excellent example of a domestic fostering of a feminine culture that is subversive to the social order, created in opposition to the prevailing discourse, but which flows out into the public sphere to challenge it. In *Little Women*, the private sphere itself is a seat of power, impacting the world around it.

In the opening chapter of *Little Women*, Alcott presents a very effective tableau of domesticity. The girls sit by the fire as “four sisters, who sat knitting away in the twilight, while the December snow fell quietly without, and the fire crackled cheerfully within” (Alcott 13). As Jo moves Marmee’s slippers nearer to the fire, she begins thinking of Marmee’s daily sacrifices for her family. In a scene reminiscent of the self-denial motif in Alcott’s journals, each girl sacrifices the dollar that she planned to spend on herself to purchase handkerchiefs, slippers, gloves, and cologne for Marmee. The absent father gives an abstract, patriarchal blessing of the event when in his letter home he challenges them to be good “little women,” reminding them not only of the need to become good members of society, but to be good *female* members of that society, which is a very different position than that held by a man. Instead of giving the girls the present they desired, Marmee gifts each a copy of Paul Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a tale of young Christian in search of ways to better himself and attain heaven through overcoming his bosom demons and becoming more selfless. As Anne Hollander rightly proposes, “The novel is

not just Jo's story; it is the tale of four Pilgrim's Progresses" (29). Many of the fundamental principles that have been instilled within the girls by their family express themselves in simple actions like these and create a basis for the outward movement in the middle of the novel. Mr. March reminds them of their role as women while Marmee emphasizes their role as pilgrims, and the duality of the message gives the girls license to move outward into the public sphere, but not so far that they forget their position as women and the regulations that position entails.

While most critics evaluate the domestic space of *Little Women*, the pilgrimage that crosses the threshold from the private sphere into the public domain is the driving force within the novel. "Playing Pilgrims," the title of Chapter One, is intriguing because the March girls do begin a pilgrimage similar to the one outlined in the copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* placed under each girl's pillow on Christmas Eve. Ironically, Marmee offers this encouragement towards actively seeking to better one's moral fiber through an invasion of privacy, slipping into the girls' rooms at night and leaving a talisman against any self-assertion not in line with their upbringing. Alcott bases this pilgrimage on Christian's journey over obstacles in order to find heaven in *Pilgrim's Progress*, a metaphor that would align with her transcendentalist tendencies. While each journey initially seems an encouragement towards self-exploration and agency, in reality it becomes blessed only if the girls follow the prescribed behavioral manual handed them by their father and mother. This development of agency within prescribed limitations is indicative not only of the social milieu of the nineteenth century, but also illustrates the very profound effect of the transcendentalist upbringing of both the author and the characters, which dictates the terms of any identity search on which the girls embark. Critic Ann Murphy wryly notes that *Little Women* "preaches domestic containment and Bunyanesque self-denial while it explores the infinity of inward female space and suggests unending rage against the cultural limitations imposed on development" (565). On the one hand, Marmee encourages each girl to better herself in private by reading and being faithful to the lessons taught by their parents, frustrating critics who view this as a limited female role. The secondary result of this call to pilgrimage

serves to instill in each girl the idea that she is capable of personal growth and deserving of making her way in the world, which initially appears subversive but never comes to fruition. This equation of her daughters to the young man in *Pilgrim's Progress* searching for heaven creates a platform from which they make their way in the world, moving from the safety of the home into the unknown beyond its walls. Yet unlike Christian, who finds the Celestial City, the March girls reverse their journey and return to the private sphere as Alcott guides each toward marriage rather than a more independent role within the public sphere.

One of the methods of entering the public sphere occurs through creating a base of power in the private before moving into the public sphere, a process illustrated by the character Jo March, the best-known character in all Alcott literature. When Marmee leaves her a copy of *Pilgrims Progress* under her pillow, Jo views the ideas of pilgrimage as a grand adventure and desires to begin immediately. It is her desire to write that helps her gain the confidence to enter the public sphere. While Jo is a powerful influence within the enclosure of her home, her public voice in social circumstances becomes constantly devalued because she is blunt and uncouth in her honest, straightforward comments (Murphy 581). Because of this awkwardness, Jo turns inward at first, writing her stories in a safe private space before pursuing self-expression in the world outside. Her dearest dream is to become a famous writer and provide comforts for her family, astonishing everyone with her brilliance through storytelling. She firmly believes in her own abilities and waits for the proper time to have her stories published. She writes dramatic plays for the girls to act out, fairy stories, romances, and more sensational literature throughout her evolution to gain her personal voice. When her creative genius starts to burn, which happens from time to time throughout the story, she encloses herself in the garret, a truly domestic space from the worn couch where she curls up to write to the old tin kitchen that houses her writings. "Jo's pilgrimage of moral development takes place almost wholly in interior spaces—both literal and symbolic" (568). Jo's writing is a clear act of personal agency. The vortex, as the family calls her writing fits, provides an escape from the constant surveillance and

commentary of her parents and sisters and allows her to write as she chooses. This separateness is the type of privacy Spacks calls “freedom *from*—from watchers, judges, gossips, sensation-seekers—it also connotes freedom *to*: to explore possibilities without fear of external censure” (14). This space offers an opportunity for developing individuality and personal creativity as a mode of self-expression, and that freedom within the private enclosure and the safety of her inner sanctum strengthens Jo before she attempts to share her writing with the world. In the garret she finds strength and courage that helps her later to become assertive in the public sphere.

The setting of the garret itself is indicative of Alcott’s use of domestic emblems and spaces to create a seat of power for the March family. In the chapter “Literary Lessons,” Alcott focuses on Jo’s literary habits and the way they prepare her to share her talent with the literary public sphere. She loves these times so much that “she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, unconscious of want, care, or bad weather, while she sat safe and happy in an imaginary world” (211). These moments become an outlet as Jo matures, a way to purge herself of the rebellious nature and frustration with the limits of women in nineteenth-century society that simmers beneath her submission to parental authority. This separation from the family is the best example in the text of what Nancy Fraser would call the difference between individual privacy and domestic privacy (73). It is in this solitary place that Jo expresses her inmost thoughts, dreaming of splendor and fame until she finally takes her manuscript from the old tin kitchen and tiptoes down the stairs to visit the publishers. The private space becomes a place to weave dreams, while the public sphere connotes a space of harsh reality. Jo leaves the private sphere, the realm of femininity, and enters a masculine domain that lacks the familiar domesticity of the March home. A second description much later in the novel of a typical publishing office illustrates the contrast between these two spheres. While working as a governess in New York, Jo visits the offices of *The Weekly Volcano* and “bravely climbed two pairs of dark and dirty stairs to find herself in a disorderly room, a cloud of



cigar smoke, and the presence of three gentlemen sitting with their heels rather higher than their hats, which articles of dress none of them took the trouble to remove on her appearance” (273). In the garret, domestic articles and familiar surroundings envelop Jo in strength, but this public space is far from comforting. This busy, bustling, filthy area connotes a lack of concern with etiquette, which is reflected by the unwillingness of the men to remove their hats in a presence of a lady. This suspends the niceties of the private sphere where manners and etiquette are valued. This is clearly no place for a woman. Jo enters the sphere, and the publisher eventually accepts her stories. However, his alteration of her tales removes much of her personal style and the end result lacks Jo’s voice and personality. While this editing is disappointing, it is hardly abnormal for any novice in the publishing world. What is a redeeming instance in Jo’s pilgrimage occurs in this moment as well. She is successful in trespassing on a male dominated sphere. She submits her stories and receives payment, as any other aspiring writer would. Also, the novel does not castigate her for her entry; rather, it applauds her, allowing her to express her flush of pleasure at her success when she sees her name in print.

While Jo enters the literary public sphere, she does not at first garner the recognition she desires. In order to gain success, Jo first returns to her domesticity and allows femininity to enter into her writing, for she becomes popular with the public only after her literature returns to a more acceptable style for a woman. She goes into a deeper interiority to find a voice more in line with her upbringing, forsaking sensational writing for more wholesome fare based on her family’s domestic experience. Thus, Alcott reiterates the return to the woman’s role as the definition of success, even going so far as to have Mr. March be the one to send to the publisher the writing that garners Jo the most acclaim, as if his patriarchal blessing is necessary in order for it to be accepted into the public sphere. Yet, Jo’s stories leave the nest, speaking to the public sphere through publication. This venue gives her an opportunity to exert her agency and message, both deeply rooted in domestic values. When a favorable response pours in, she conveys her shock that her words should have an impact on the world, but her father simply

explains, "There is truth in it, Jo—that's the secret; humor and pathos make it alive, and you have found your style at last. You wrote with no thought of fame or money, and put your heart into it, my daughter; you have had the bitter, now comes the sweet; do the best, and grow as happy as we are in your success" (340). Mr. March's words emphasize that the only way that Jo can enter the public sphere is to write in a way reflecting the proper role of her gender and her upbringing. Dillon discusses what society requires of an individual in order to become part of a public sphere. She postulates that the development of subjectivity and autonomy within the home validates the individual's right to express him/herself in the public sphere. Through writing her stories Jo illustrates what Dillon would call "a recursive loop between privacy and publicity in which the intimate sphere 'prequalifies' certain subjects for participation in the political public sphere" (35). Thus, experience within the private sphere that helps to develop agency and a sense of self prepares a person to enter in the public sphere. In the case of Jo March, her maturation through tragedy helps her to speak a language through her writing that "went straight to the hearts of those who read it" (Alcott *Little Women* 340), and expresses the private that is relevant to the public. This mirrors the notion that the novel inspires a truly private act of reading. Through the publishing of her stories, Jo gains legitimacy and authority as a writer to the young. Alcott utilizes this success not only as an opportunity to express the need for patriarchal blessing for literary success but also as an avenue to bring a suitor to the March home when Professor Bhaer reads Jo's poem about her sisters and takes the lonely, despairing tone of the lines as a sign that she is now open to love in her life. Like the rest of her sisters, with the exception of Beth who dies before she can marry, Jo returns to the scripted role of a woman and eventually marries. Thus, Jo's movement outward reverses upon itself as she does not become a free spirited single woman of means but a married woman who sets aside her writing for the duties of the home.

Within the novel there is also a movement beyond peeking into a window to being viewed on all sides by the public sphere. Amy, the youngest of the March clan, begins to fight

her own battles as a young woman, but does so within the accepted norms of feminine behavior, seeking to utilize the power of femininity she develops within the domestic sphere. She is not uncouth like her sister, Jo, and knows from an early age that, while she initially leaves the domestic sphere to study art as an avenue into the public sphere, her ultimate goal is to enter society and marry well. As Elizabeth Keyser asserts, "The most worldly of the sisters, [Amy] is also the most eager to venture out into the world or, something the others never try to do, bridge the gap between world and home" (616). For example, Amy enters into a very public space in a charitable fair set up by one of the society matrons. Jealousy behind the scenes leads Mrs. Chester to deny Amy the privilege of the art table, a space symbolic of Amy's artistic talent and desire to assert herself through it. The rejection is emblematic of society's feelings about Amy's attempt to assert her abilities within a public space for, while drawing and paintings are considered genteel accomplishments, becoming a well-known artist is not a normal occupation for a young woman. Instead of occupying the best position at the fair, Amy "looked wistfully across, longing to be there, where she felt at home and happy, instead of in a corner with nothing to do" (Alcott 240). While Amy still shares a space in the public sphere, society relegates her to a confined area, denying her the fullness of equal standing in the social register. This lack of inclusiveness reminds her that even within the public sphere she must occupy a subpublic peopled with the silly, young girls helping her with the flower table. However, Amy's ability to hold back her own desire for revenge because of her desire to be a good "little woman" and the lessons her parents taught her has a good effect on the Chesters, the family who organize the fair and ask Amy to change tables, who make certain that Amy's work sells quickly and helps a good cause. This response from the public sphere is dramatic and direct, proving that selfish Amy has overcome her pettiness and become a credit to her upbringing. She illustrates through this moment of initiation that she is capable of sharing private values in a public space through utilizing the acceptable avenues for women of the time period, even if that role is a limited one.

When the private individual moves outward and gains a position within the public sphere through a marriage, the boundary between the spheres becomes even more complex. As it becomes more and more apparent as she studies in Europe that she will never be a true artist in her own right, Amy focuses on her other ambition in life: to make a brilliant match, as if those are the only two possible avenues presented to her by the public sphere. She admits to Laurie, a wealthy neighbor who becomes an adopted brother to the girls throughout the book and proselytized into the March domestic sphere, that she is interested in Fred Vaughn because he is "rich, a gentleman, and has delightful manners" (318). Laurie astutely notes that "queens of society can't get on without money, so you mean to make a good match and start out in that way? Quite and proper as the world goes, but it sounds odd from the lips of one of your mother's girls" (318). This critique, given to another March girl, would cause her to turn completely from that path and begin to live out a life of poverty, but Amy is resolute in her desire to make a good match. Yet the value set she utilizes is not from the private sphere but rather the social mores of the time. Through her womanly wiles, Amy gets not Fred Vaughn but the much bigger prize of Laurie himself for he not only fulfills a desirable position within the public sphere because of his social and economic status, but he is also a man of whom her family approves. Throughout the text, Alcott allows Amy to have whatever she desires, from trips to Europe to Jo's best friend as a husband. Because of her willingness to utilize agency through the means acceptable to a woman in society, Amy does not garner the punishment of Jo, whose conformity to her feminine role is contradictory to her goal of making her way in the world and gain independence. With the wealth the match affords her, Amy is able to bless those around her who have the genius her own artistic attempts lack, and thus she becomes a part of that society that once shunned her. While she does enter the public sphere through her marriage, she does so only under the auspices of her husband's patriarchal authority within that sphere. Rather than altering the typical plot motif and gaining entry on her own merits, Amy does little to enlarge a woman's parameters within the public sphere. Alcott reins the girls in by

the final chapters so that they always return to the domestic space rather than breaking from the family in order to make their way like true pilgrims. A sense of inevitability creeps into the text that returns the daughters into the prescribed roles of women as mother and wife.

The line Habermas utilizes to the separate public and private spheres appears rigid and unwavering. However, the boundary illustrated in *Little Women* is anything but unmovable. As Jo and Amy move outward, each embarks with a different purpose on her pilgrimage, although both have the same result: a matrimonial fate. For Jo, writing is an opportunity to gain money and fame as a notable author, and while she does propagate a moral message through her works and achieves notoriety, she never completely breaks from the private sphere. Only when she succumbs to the patriarchal dictates of appropriate writing for a woman does she find success, but one that still does not allow her full and equal access into the realm of men. Amy, likewise, leaves the private sphere to explore her talent, but ultimately renounces it and pursues her desire for a wealthy husband. She quickly relinquishes her artistic aspirations and finds a husband who fulfills both familial and societal expectations. This relationship allows Amy to enter into the public sphere but only in a limited way.

A second movement follows this outward motion of private persons moving into the public sphere: members of the public sphere move into the private sphere of the March family. Interestingly, the men in the novel participate in the domestic sphere far more than in the public sphere, a place rarely addressed aside from a generic comment about what type of work they do or where they go when they leave the home. Yet, as Jo and Amy leave on their pilgrimage, each asserts her agency in that public realm and becomes a viable marriage candidate for members of the public sphere. As the girls leave home, men are the only targets of their domestic power and there is little or no attempt to bring another female into the domestic enclosure. The suitor does not ask Mr. March for his daughter's hand in the traditional manner but takes the initiative within the public sphere, returning his bride to the domestic space only after he has placed his patriarchal claim upon her. Thus the response of the public sphere

enters into the private sphere by guiding the pilgrim backwards, reversing the pilgrimage. This return to the private sphere becomes indicative of the power of the private to attract the public and the insistence of the public to enter the private space on its own terms. The men who enter the March family lose none of their masculinity in the process, while the women who allow them to find their journey of self-exploration in relation to the world around them coming abruptly to an end. The interaction between women and men provides the most powerful illustrations of public/private movement within the novel.

As the daughters move outward into society, those around them take notice. Two men, in particular, move from the realm of the public into the domesticity of the private sphere: Laurie and Mr. Bhaer. As the family welcomes these men into their midst, the influence of the public sphere impacts the private sphere, completing the circular path outlined by Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, and the spheres revolve in and out of each other in a far more complex relationship than that outlined by Habermas. Anne Dalke states, “[T]he book does not fall apart when Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy leave the family. It reaches a climax when Father, John, Friedrich, and Laurie join their ranks....The sons, husbands, and fathers of Alcott’s fiction are reeducated by the women they love” (557). It is this concept of feminine influence on the public sphere and the reintroduction of these altered men that illustrates how *Little Women* transcends the idea of a mere celebration of domesticity, instead challenging the very nature of the boundary between the spheres. While most literature of the time period presents the man as the instigator of relationships, the outward movement of the girls brings them to the notice of men around them. In most sentimentalized nineteenth-century novels this would end with the girls pregnant or dead as an indictment of their desire to leave their proper feminine role. Alcott, however, rewards the attempt by the girls to enter into public discourse by marrying them off and returning them to the private sphere, so the marriage motif is not entirely punitive. The men of the story lay patriarchal claim to the women they desire through marriage proposals, and Alcott’s glimmer of hope for these women to escape the inevitability of a marital state ends with

an attempt to reconstruct the barriers between public and private. This plot choice underscores Alcott's message that the world was not yet ready for women to break free completely from the domestic space.

Laurie, a neighbor of the March family, exemplifies this concept of viewing the girls as they move both inside and outside the domestic sphere. He has recently returned from schooling abroad and excites the interests of the March clan, especially Jo who actively courts his friendship. As Sarah Elbert asserts, "The question of whether men can be integrated into domestic life on democratic terms first appears in the relationship between young Laurie and the March sisters" (202). The developing friendship certainly creates an arena in which many questions about a man's place in the domestic circle become evident. The female populated March home, where harmony reigns, has its antithesis in the male dominated Lawrence home because "Laurie's world is an isolated male enclave composed of his grandfather and his tutor, John Brooke" (Parille 36). One of the most complex moments in *Little Women* between Laurie and Jo exemplifies the fluid nature of the public/private barrier and deserves a close reading. The setting of the chapter entitled "Being Neighborly" illustrates that the boundaries of each enclosure are not completely solid. There are avenues for perception and travel between them. For example, Jo declares her intention to leave home for she did not want to "doze by the fire" (Alcott 43) but longs for adventures. As she leaves home, the physical description becomes fraught with meaning, starting with the garden and hedge that separates her home from Laurie's. This visual divide is indicative of the socio-economic status that divides the homes for while the March home is "an old brown house, looking rather bare and shabby, robbed of the vines that in summer covered its walls," the Lawrence home is "a stately stone mansion, plainly betokening every sort of comfort and luxury from the big coach-house and well-kept grounds to the conservatory, and the glimpses of lovely things one caught between the rich curtains" (Alcott 44). Just like the reader's previous peek into Jo's garret, Alcott offers a view of the richness visible between opulent window dressings. Yet even the walls of the mansion appear

forbidding, the hardness and coldness of the stone contrasting with the more traditional walls of the March home. The reader's glimpse inside foreshadows Jo's interest in peeping, when she looks at the windows to see "a curly back head leaning on a thin hand, at the upper window" (44). The trajectory of her gaze limits her view into the home, but she gains the chance to watch someone who does not know she sees him. This peeping reverses the normal gendered positions of the woman within the domestic dwelling and the man outside its threshold. As she tosses up a snowball, Laurie looks out and calls to her, inviting her over. She moves from viewing into the private space through the window to entering the space across the threshold. This entry illustrates a foil to our expectation of public and private, where the domestic space connotes womanhood and entry is a masculine action. Upon entrance to Laurie's rooms, however, Jo mitigates the impact of this reversal through her natural tendency towards the domestic as she straightens up the room for "it only needs to have the hearth brushed, so, --and the things stood straight on the mantle-piece, so, --and the books put here, and the bottles there, and your sofa turned from the light, and the pillows plumped a bit. Now, then, you're fixed" (45). With these actions Jo asserts her womanly authority to create a comfortable atmosphere and instantly feels more at home to be herself, allowing her to exert her agency within a domesticated space. Jo's agency is deeply rooted in these emblems of domesticity, and because they remind her of the seat of her power within the private sphere, she draws a member of the public sphere into her private world.

The rotating movement between the spheres also becomes evident for, while Jo has watched Laurie, he has been peeping through windows himself. Through this all-important meeting, it becomes clear to Jo that Laurie longs to become a part of the March domestic circle. As Laurie sits back, he talks to his guest, asking questions that show clearly that he has been watching her family. He admits,

"Why, you see, I often hear you calling to one another, and when I'm alone up here, I can't help looking over at your house, you always seem to be having such good times.



I beg your pardon for being so rude, but sometimes you forget to put down the curtain at the window where the flowers are; and when the lamps are lighted, it's like looking at a picture to see the fire, and you all round the table with your mother; her face is right opposite, and it looks so sweet behind the flowers, I can't help watching it" (46).

This little speech describes an image that echoes the reader's first peek at the girls gathered in the domestic space during Christmas. To Laurie, the March family exemplifies everything that domesticity should be, and he places them upon a pedestal as something pure to be revered rather than something real to be understood. Laurie peeks in and longs to enter, while Jo's purpose of entering is to pull Laurie into her domestic sphere, thereby changing the course of a member of the public sphere. Jo quickly responds to Laurie's comments, declaring, "We'll never draw that curtain any more, and I give you leave to look as much as you like. I just wish, though, instead of peeping, you'd come over and see us. Mother is so splendid, she'd do you heaps of good..." (46). Jo exerts her feminine agency through hospitality and a desire to influence a member of the public sphere through domestic values. The gaze of the public into the private is not enough. She desires a direct response from outside the private sphere so that the two may engage in dialogue.

While this initial scene is a reversal of the concept of gendered spheres, the return of the public into the private sphere is far more indicative of traditional patriarchal norms. As the years go by, being neighborly is no longer enough for Laurie. He does eventually gain entry into the family as more than a friendly neighbor or adoptive brother. A romance springs up between Laurie and Amy while they are abroad, which culminates in a poignant wedding proposal in a setting that serves as both a public and private space, a complication indicative of the nature of the marriage of a private woman to a man with a prominent place in society. In such an instance, she gains a status in the public sphere, but one limited to a subpublic of married society ladies, which does not create subversion within the sphere. In a picturesque European setting, Laurie and Amy set off from shore in a rowboat. As they float off into the

calm waters, the rowboat setting itself is a mixture of the intimate and the public, for they are not completely alone on the water. The public views them on every side, much like Amy's experience at the fair. However, there is an implicit privacy in sitting near each other in a small space under a beautiful sky, where no one can hear their words or halt their affectionate gestures. As Amy comments at how well they row together, Laurie proposes quietly, "So well that I wish we might always pull in the same boat. Will you, Amy?" (336), and Amy meekly accepts. This proposal is an assertive act on Laurie's part for he not only proposes but also marries Amy without the knowledge or blessing of her family. However, Laurie's reentry into the private sphere hinges on the marriage. The fusion of these two lovers creates an avenue into the private sphere that reestablishes patriarchal preeminence in the sphere, and Laurie can be both the master of the domestic domain and still enter into the public sphere as a businessman. Amy returns to the domestic space, laying aside her artistic attempts to be a good wife, mother, and lady of society. This marriage is her reward for moving outward. She gets a good and wealthy man to marry her, fulfilling both the expectations of family and society. However, there is a larger implication that this is really all she gains, and the journey from one domestic space to another appears to miss an opportunity to truly let a woman break through the lack of inclusivity within the public sphere.

The final entry into the March family comes from the marriage of a very unlikely candidate. After the publication of part one of *Little Women*, readers clamored for Jo and Laurie to wed. Alcott, however, would not bend to the will of the masses, commenting, "All my little girl-friends are madly in love with Laurie & insist on a sequel, so I've written one which will make you laugh, especially the pairing off part. But I didn't know how to settle my family any other way & I wanted to disappoint the ~~little dears~~ young gossips who vowed that Laurie & Jo *should* marry. Authors take dreadful liberties" (Phillips "Correspondence" 420). This comment is indicative of a personal attitude of the author that impacts the storyline. Jo, the best hope for true subversion of accepted gender norms, becomes sacrificed because of an authorial dictate.

Her romance seems to be with someone who is cut from the same transcendental cloth as her mother and father, and through him the public sphere relegates Jo back to her status as a member of the domestic sphere.

Through the courtship of Jo and her professor, there is a systematic return from the pilgrimage back to the enclosure of the domestic space. Jo meets Professor Bhaer on part of her outward pilgrimage from the home while she works as a nanny in a boardinghouse, a very public space where every person views and receives the gaze of others in return. The two attend a literary symposium, which is a convergence of the public to discuss ideas. In this moment Alcott surrounds Jo with a cacophony of unfamiliar experiences, with ideologies of every kind expressed all around her. This onslaught finds her at a loss, but Bhaer slips into a natural male role of authority in this expedition into the public sphere. Listening to the celebrated lecturers speak against the domestic values on which her domestic training is based, Jo finds herself confused, knowing that she is hearing faulty logic, but unable to discern what it is. Jo cannot express herself and finds the limits of her role in the public sphere. Bhaer, on the other hand, sees the simple and pure religion that is central to his beliefs being attacked. Though he is not confrontational by nature, that night he defends his value system, and “[s]omehow, as he talked, the world got right again to Jo; the old beliefs that had lasted so long, seemed better than the new” (Alcott 278). This world Alcott speaks of refers to the ancient divide between the two spheres, broken up between the two sexes. Because of his effective rhetoric, Bhaer earned her respect that evening, and his influence over her grew stronger. Rather than developing her own thoughts so that she might express herself the next time she enters the public sphere, she docilely allows Bhaer to return her to the feminine role. She never again shows initiative in the public sphere. In fact, she becomes paralyzed by it. Through utilizing his authority in the public sphere, suddenly it is no longer Jo as a pilgrim plotting a course to the Celestial City. Instead, Professor Bhaer asserts his patriarchal authority over Jo

at a pivotal moment in her public sphere experience. Alcott reverses the trajectory now and all roads lead back to the enclosure for Jo.

The return to the private progresses in stages, each move violating not only Jo's privacy but eventually her interiority as well. Bhaer's influence over Jo does not stop at merely taking away her tools within the public sphere. After coming across a page from a newspaper that prints sensational stories similar to those written by Jo in order to provide for her family, Bhaer criticizes its contents, stating, "I wish these papers did not come in the house; they are not for children to see, nor young people to read. It is not well: and I haf [sic] no patience with those who make this harm" (279). Jo feels shame at his words, and when she begins to blush, he realizes that she is one of the writers of whom he speaks. Bhaer, a member of the public sphere, views Jo in this public space and convinces her to halt her writing, which is her agency within the literary public sphere. She soon retreats, first through burning her work, then through physically returning to the private sphere. This moment of submission is a turning point for Jo. Critics Angela Estes and Kathleen Lant believe that "Jo's last self-assertive act is the burning of her writings, the destroying of her own self—her self-reliant, self-expressive, and self-authenticating being" (580). No longer is her writing her sole intellectual property. There is no safe enclosure for Jo, and her pilgrimage falls apart. Soon she is running back to her home, shutting herself up in domesticity. Jo's foray into the world and desire for autonomy come full circle as she encounters a man who returns her to the conventions of a March-like domesticity, and she finds herself powerless to deny him.

This journey of reversed pilgrimage culminates in the marriage proposal where Bhaer, like Laurie, demonstrates a patriarchal control over his bride. What sets Bhaer apart from Laurie is the profound influence he has on Jo, becoming a mentor and authority figure in a more powerful way than Laurie is to Amy. Bhaer challenges Jo to give up anything he deems unwholesome, even though her family has accepted her decision to write and enter into social realms. It is Bhaer who "saves Jo from herself," reminding her of the young lady her family

would want her to be. So an outsider tames this rather unique member of the March clan. The domestic sphere becomes the patriarchal province of this new member, for "Mr. Bhaer sat looking about him with the air of a traveler who knocks at a strange door, and, when it opens, finds himself at home" (351). Searching for Bhaer one afternoon, Jo finds herself in the public marketplace where men gather to buy and sell wares and becomes nonplussed when a dilapidated umbrella covers her as she shops. She is far from home, from an enclosure of safety, and her only covering is an incomplete one provided by Bhaer. In this place of exposure, she is left without a basis for domestic power and her acceptance of his proposal is almost a foregone conclusion. The public sphere demands that she should marry, while the private sphere influences her choice of husband.

The inward progression of the pilgrimage does not end merely with a marriage proposal. Alcott makes an example of Jo, who desires to express true autonomy in the public sphere only to retreat into the private. While Amy desires marriage and position and ultimately gets what she wants, Jo, who secludes herself far more than any other member of her family, loses her privacy to her newfound love. She acquiesces without a fight, not fully realizing what she is giving up. When Bhaer proposes to Jo under the umbrella in the rain, he shows her the lines of one of her published poems that let him know she had suffered much and might accept his love. As she reads the verses and tears them to bits, he says, "I will haf [sic] a fresh one when I read all the brown book in which she keeps her little secrets" (372). This proposed perusal of Jo's journal as a matter of course for a husband and wife expresses the concept of privacy as ephemeral. The assumption that even the presumed privacy of a woman's journal should be opened to her husband is the death knell of Jo's autonomy. Even her thoughts are not her own. This moment connects clearly to Alcott's journal, which was never a true reflection of her interiority because of the practice of parental review. While we do not know Jo's journaling habits, the expectation of parental monitoring in the text suggests that some parental review of her work is possible, but we never truly know. What is clear is the expectation that

once a woman marries, her husband is privy to even her innermost thoughts. For Jo, who revels in her garret, this loss is like a death. In marrying this father figure, Jo perpetuates the model set up before her in the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. March. Jo's mother has a feisty nature that a look from her husband tames, and the narrator proclaims the quiet Mr. March as the real force in the family. So, as much as Jo declares that she will never marry, never become the feminine domestic ideal, she not only puts away her writing but also marries the very man who encouraged her to give it up. The hopes for a true Alcott subversion of the prevailing roles of man and woman in their respective spheres ends in a marriage that returns to the March family sphere. As Jo poignantly states, "I may be strong-minded, but no one can say I'm out of my sphere now" (372). This quote is a clear statement of Alcott's determination to return her little women to the home through the inevitability of marriage. At the end of the chapter, Jo lets her lover in, opening the door to her private sphere and allowing him to take her in as his own. Hence, she relents and accepts woman's place while Bhaer himself does not change, the pilgrimage ending in matrimony and patriarchal authority.

The boundary between public and private shifts and reconfigures itself throughout literature as it does throughout life. In *Little Women* the outward motion of the March girls as pilgrims illustrates the thrust of the private into the public domain, and Jo and Amy meet that sphere with varying degrees of success. The settings in which the interactions between public and private take place also contribute to the fluidity of the spheres, where doorways and windows provide avenues for interaction, creating a dialogue. In tracing the journeys of Jo and Amy March, a pattern of attempted assertiveness within the public sphere, followed by a masculine assertion of authority, occurs throughout the text. For example, Jo's literary prowess evolves from an expression of interiority in an enclosed space to published sensational literature to provide for the March family to an outlet for her loss and longing packaged neatly with a moral premise. She enters the literary public sphere, yet she never truly leaves the domestic sphere behind, returning to it when the family needs her or when she desires to hide from

society. Her sister Amy also enters the public domain, first as an aspiring artist and later as a marriage candidate for wealthy suitors. On the other hand, since Amy's ultimate desire is to make a good match, when she marries, there is a sense that Alcott rewards her for her utilization of accepted gender norms in order to gain what she desires. Yet Amy adds very little to the scope of a woman's influence within the public sphere, instead becoming a symbol of the fusion of public and private through a society wedding. The end result of both pilgrimages, however, constitutes a return into the domestic sphere. While Jo and Amy gain the reward of good husbands, Alcott eschews the opportunity for true subversion of the separate spheres through her determination to enact marriages for the surviving March girls. Neither Jo nor Amy ultimately challenges the notion of a woman's role within the public sphere for they do not completely extricate themselves from the private domain. Instead, they return to it again and again. However, Alcott does not let them return alone. A second movement occurs in the return of the public into the private through the reintroduction of patriarchal authority into the domestic space. Laurie and Professor Bhaer, the men who become part of the March domestic sphere, desire to become part of the sphere but do not give up their autonomy in order to gain entry. Laurie finds an avenue into the family he has viewed for years, always accepted within the ranks but not an official part of the sphere. Through marrying Amy, Laurie maintains his position as a member of the public sphere while entering the private, truly having the best of both worlds. Bhaer, on the other hand, not only gains Jo's hand in marriage, but also asserts his right to her interiority from dictating the type of writing she creates to reading her personal journal. As a result, Bhaer, the unlikely suitor, wields the most influence within the novel, taming Jo's character and reinforcing the messages of the March family so that they find an echo of their value set within the public sphere. These constantly intersecting examples of public and private spheres moves beyond the simplified definitions of Habermas, instead favoring a spherical model such as Dillon offers where both spheres weave in and out of the

other. This use of public and private theory in the analysis of a nineteenth-century novel illustrates the wealth of analysis yet to be explored in other literary works of the same era.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

When Habermas originally constructed his theory of public and private spheres, no one could foresee the widespread implications of such a notion. His belief that private persons gathered together to create a bourgeois public sphere in order to express publicly their personal values and beliefs created a foundation from which a number of theories have arisen. Critics from many disciplines answered his analysis with theoretical constructs of their own, utilizing the subtleties of the debate to address burgeoning theoretical concerns such as feminism and queer theory. With the recent interest in examining what denotes a public or private writing, especially when considering journals and novels based on real life experiences, a plethora of new applications for this theory have emerged.

In this thesis, I illustrate the usefulness of the overall concept of public and private spheres when approaching both personal journals and semi-autobiographical novels, focusing on the works of Louisa May Alcott. While this study only begins the discussion necessary for an analysis as complex as this, it is clear that the Habermasian model in itself is insufficient to express the movement across the boundary between the spheres. His linear model moves in one direction while there is clearly interaction from both sides of the divide. To aid in this investigation, I incorporate the work of critics such as Stacey Margolis, Patricia Spacks, Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon in a close reading of Alcott's words, discovering a tension between the private actions of private people as they move through the public domain. The first work I discuss is Alcott's journal. In these entries the dichotomy between a medium that is presumably a private record and the posturing evident both in the text itself and in the subsequent revisions by author and editors creates a literary moment where privacy itself is debatable. A private work is clearly a public record after publication, but is it

private before that? When Alcott wrote these words so many years ago, there is already evidence of a cognizance that they would later be read and discussed, supporting the idea that Alcott refrained from unleashing her full interiority on the page. Her own desire for privacy often battled with a desire to present her family in the most positive way possible, and through adding explanations and deleting details that would put the Alcotts in a negative light, she practices apologetics and presents both herself and her family as sympathetic characters in her own real life drama. By reshaping her own history in this way, she controls the information, sharing only what she wants and framing it in such a way as to lessen any negative impact on her family. When critics analyze journals and novels within the context of the public/private debate, the texts reveal a depth that had hitherto been concealed. The designation of a journal as a wholly private form is then in question, an issue that the thesis seeks to bring to critical attention.

In analyzing *Little Women* as a work of literature, my initial desire to see the work as subversive shifted into an acknowledgement that Alcott's determination to marry off the March girls limits the impact that might have had on the public sphere. While they are a moral influence, serving as an example to the world around them and encouraging others to do good works, they do not drastically alter a woman's role public sphere. There are moments that promise much, but are ameliorated by a return to the private sphere. While their journeys serve as a great textual foundation upon which to evaluate the tensions between the spheres, Jo and Amy March hardly break from the gendered norm. However, Alcott does reward their assertiveness, allowing them to showcase their various talents and enter into good marriages rather than end up pregnant or suicidal, as was the norm for many sentimental novels whose female protagonists demonstrated assertiveness in society. The marriage motif does succeed in bringing members of the public sphere into the domestic space, which might not have occurred without the pilgrimage of these young women, although by doing so, patriarchal authority within the private sphere becomes firmly re-established. The settings themselves, however, create rich textual moments to unpack, as the physical spaces, entryways,

boundaries, and windows symbolize the ephemeral nature of the divide between public and private, where looking into the private sphere becomes almost an accepted norm. These openings provide an opportunity for the spheres to be at play, circling in and out of each other in a constant motion. This interplay between the spheres reveals a dialogue between the accepted notions of public and private and the assumed gender roles of each that moves beyond the Habermasian notion of the private moving out into the public sphere directly, without addressing how the public sphere answers the private. There are many implications for other novelistic forms. Imagine studying the public/private boundaries in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* during the exposure of Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester Prynne and Pearl on the scaffold or analyzing blogs for their public and private messages and the inherent performance that implies. As technology grows, privacy is a growing concern in society and the question of what constitutes a private work will continue to play an important role in everything from law to literature.

These questions about public and private spheres, the nature of interiority, the designation of journals as private-yet-public, and the complications of fiction based on real life support the recent surge in the application of critical theory to the works of Louisa May Alcott. Once relegated to a position as a mere children's author, the complexities of the separate spheres, publicity and domesticity within novels such as *Little Women* legitimizes the call for a more critical approach to her work. This ever-growing field of study of one of the most beloved authors in American literature gives credence to those critics who believe that she deserves to become part of the main literary canon. Through this thesis, another aspect of Alcott's literature becomes central. In her choice of settings, from the era of her work to the spaces her characters inhabit, Alcott reveals tensions between the concepts of public and private, creating numerous literary moments when the deeper conflicts move to the foreground and a more complex analysis is possible. These nuances transcend the general belief that her tales are merely moral stories to convince young people to eat their vegetables and be charitable to one

another. While there might not be a scandalous subversion of gender norms within the text, the idea that a simple story can express a politicized truth about public and private illustrates why Alcott deserves consideration as a central part of the literary canon.

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