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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

Literary Bodies and Literacy Journeys: Imagination and Erotics in
Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing

submitted by

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2024

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Introduction

“Women have minds and souls as well as hearts, ambition and talent as well as beauty, and I’m sick of being told that love is all a woman is fit for.”

- Jo March¹

What is the recipe for a rich literary life?

In the mid-nineteenth century in Lowell, Massachusetts, the recipe was simple: a town of young women, working in mills, within a nation of ever-increasing rates of literacy. The *Lowell Offering*, a newspaper first published in 1840 and continuing until 1845, was created and written by female factory workers living in the town. As compensated labor became increasingly available to unmarried young women, mill towns like Lowell drew these populations from their homes and the authority of their parents into a new kind of freedom, or a new kind of control. While these women were often working long hours, within their limited ability for leisure, they found time to read and write.

These mill girls lived a highly literary existence, their work on the border, as critics have determined, between “too literary to be working class,” and “not elevated enough to be literary.”² Nevertheless, these women continued to write and read, and the Lowell factories were required to create “regulations (frequently violated) governing when and where reading was permissible” and “many workers were even fired for ‘reading in the mill.’”³ The proper conditions for the creation of this literary society of working women, a utopian kind of vision, was dependant upon a population of young women, who had been brought up during the rise of literacy as

¹Gerwig, Greta. Script of *Little Women*. Culver City, California, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2019, 100.

² Sylvia J. Cook. *Working Women, Literary Ladies: The Industrial Revolution and Female Aspiration*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2007, 42.

³ Cook, *Working Women, Literary Ladies*, 59.

commonplace during the early to mid nineteenth century.⁴ These women were now separated from much of the domestic labor that they had done while in their own homes, and instead were able to use their time away from their physical labor to engage in literary labors. The Lowell women understood that their writing was intricately connected with their working bodies, and that because writing is a “sedentary recreation,” it can be accomplished even when the body is fatigued from hard work.⁵

In her exploration of working-class women in America, Sylvia Cook highlights that the *Offering* enabled women, to “insert their voices into the intellectual and artistic debates of the day, to demonstrate that the ‘hands’ had minds, and that those minds were vigorously involved in thinking about the identities that others were so ready to impose on them.”⁶ This empowerment grew from the expansion of literacy across America during the mid-nineteenth century, creating community among women, who had the ability to explore and experiment with writing in collaboration with one another. The *Offering* sets the tone for what women’s literary culture became later in the century, as not only an outlet of expression, but as a way to assert selfhood, that women had *minds*. The creation of the *Offering* was one of the ways that these women were able to participate in literary culture, but detailed within the stories in the magazine were images of these girls writing home and joining American public’s the flurry of letter writing—for these women who had most likely left home for the first time in their lives, letters were a crucial agent in upholding familial relationships and connection.

In addition to the literary magazine, letter writing occupied a space within both the public and private spheres that are so often defined in analyses of women’s culture in the nineteenth

⁴ For a more thorough understanding of the depth and breadth of literacy in nineteenth-century American culture, see Ronald J. Zboray, *A fictive people: Antebellum economic development and the American reading public*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

⁵ Qtd. in Cook, *Working Women, Literary Ladies*, 59.

⁶ Cook, *Working Women, Literary Ladies*, 44.

century. The letter was crafted within the home, for movement outside of one's own private sphere, but also to be read within one's private confines. Letter writing existed in a transient, ever-changing space—in the gaps between these spheres as well as in the places they overlapped. Manuals on writing proper letters established structure, including spatial dimensions on the page and formatting, and what language was used within them, especially when written to different kinds of people. This gave a certain sense of uniformity to letter writing practices, which inherently leaves room for the subversion of these strict confines, or breaking rules in a variety of small ways. While letter writing was done for a private audience, the contents of letters were often read by those not intended—family members, friends, and even postal workers with a curiosity streak. For the women working in the mills in Lowell, their worlds of public and private were as precarious as the letter; operating within both of these spaces, these women's words were read by those outside of their small community. Cook also attributes the growth in the literary production of the Lowell women to transcendentalist attitudes that had permeated New England culture, encouraging a “cultivation of self” and a “creative spirit.”⁷ Thus the writing that they did was both “solemn and playful,” exploring a new space of literary autonomy.⁸ The Lowell women attempted to navigate two separate spheres, their labor allowing them access to more public and literary lives.

How are women's bodies intricately connected to their writing?

After the Revolutionary War, out of a desire to cement a definition of American national identity, epistolary novels that explicitly discussed what it meant to be American were wildly popular. British women's novels that relied heavily on letters sent between friends and lovers led to the rise of American epistolary novels and novels that used letters as major plot devices. One

⁷ Cook, *Working Women, Literary Ladies*, 39.

⁸ Cook, *Working Women, Literary Ladies*, 40.

of the first American novels, *The Coquette* by Hannah Webster Foster, utilizes this form, as a novel written in the epistolary fashion and by a woman for female readership. Similarly, Susanna Rowson's 1791 novel *Charlotte Temple* begins in Britain, but has been lauded as a novel that is distinctly American, as its main character moves, or more aptly is taken, to America. In the novel, all major plot points occur through the vehicle of letters. These two novels are considered to be cornerstones of American women's fiction, each using letters and writing as primary modes to drive the plot. Novels containing representations of letters, as well as being devices created for public consumption, bridged this gap of public and private writing in several ways.

For both Foster's protagonist, Eliza, and Rowson's Charlotte, women are intricately connected to their letters, in ways almost impossible to escape. Even when they attempt to make choices of their own, the men in their lives control their movement and, later, directly cause their deaths, by preventing the movement of their letters prevent them from doing so. Kacy Tillman explores both of these novels through the lens of "paper bodies," where she highlights how the letter acted as a "contested space where women writers and their readers vied for control over the female body," and stressed that a woman's careful construction of character was just as valuable as her careful construction of epistolary performance.⁹ Because Charlotte and Eliza are both unable to regulate their letter writing, their bodies are subsequently manipulated. Eliza corresponds with Sanford against the advice of her friends and mother, leading to her bodily seduction. Charlotte is initially seduced and subsequently captured after receiving and responding to a letter, and throughout the novel her letters are policed and kept from being delivered, effectively isolating her from all that she knows. Tillman argues that "letters play an important role in the drama of many eighteenth-century novels precisely because these works are

⁹ Tillman, Kacy. "Paper Bodies: Letters and Letter Writing in the Early American Novel." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2016, 124.

often concerned with the regulation of the female body.”¹⁰ Ultimately, both Eliza and Charlotte die in childbirth, providing a warning to female readers of the ways that incorrectly policing one’s letters can only have one outcome—illegitimate pregnancy and death.

I invoke these novels at the opening of my project to not only establish the overarching epistolary and highly literary culture of the early nineteenth century, but also to track the ways that literature and writing shifted throughout the course of this “long” century. While women’s novels began in a way that preached ruin and despair when women were unable to conform to convention, writing gradually became less limiting for women, both in terms of what they could write and, simply, who they could be. Fifty years later, the writing of Lowell women was still intricately connected to their bodies, with writing occurring while laboring, and in the small moments they could claim as their own. Although a short-lived one, the *Offering* was the product of a specific moment in American literary history. Lowell’s female laborer population existed as a microcosmic space that allowed for the creation of a literary culture.¹¹

Across the United States, the postal service’s ability to bridge distance made the entire nation a network of constant literary exchange. Newspapers published poems and subsequent parodies of poems in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and across other major cities, ensuring that all Americans had exposure to similar work. The expansion of literacy allowed for Americans to feel connected in a rhizomatic network, all parties impacting one another, and small communities of exchange occurring within it.

¹⁰ Tillman, “Paper Bodies,” 128.

¹¹ Whaleships were a similar microcosmic space relatively unique to the nineteenth century where writing could flourish within the dimensions of labor and a feedback loop of literary education. Whalemens could “experiment with their own social roles” while at sea, free from the confines of society, and much of these “theatrics” occurred through the vehicle of writing. The ship newspaper reported mainly on happenings upon the ship and between its characters. Those on whaleships were operating within this “othered” space, separate from mainstream literary culture, and yet, they found a way to exist and thrive within it. Mary Isbell “Recognition and Anonymity: Shipboard Theatricals and Newspapers Aboard USS *Macedonian*” in *Shipboard Literary Cultures: Reading, Writing, and Performing at Sea*, 86.

In the middle of the century, novels written by women increasingly positioned writing at their center; because women wrote about what they knew, they wrote about writing. Alcott was among the likes of Catherine Maria Segewick, A. D. T. Whitney, Catherine Lee Hentz—female authors who wrote about their writing. One critic discussing this grouping of women defines their apparent motivation in writing as “stripped of all their aggressive content, until the woman writer seems practically anesthetized.”¹² In Catherine Lee Hentz’s *Ernest Linwood; or the Inner Life of an Author*, her main character rejects the very notion that what she is doing is writing: “Book! Am I writing a book? No, indeed! This is only a record of my heart’s life, written at random and carelessly thrown aside.”¹³ This denial that she is writing, paired with the reality that she is still indeed an author as the title asserts, is representative of the disparate conventions for female authors. Fanny Fern, pseudonym of Sara Payson Willis, wrote the 1855 novel, *Ruth Hall*, wherein a widowed mother becomes a writer to support her children. Nathaniel Hawthorne, an infamous character in the field of nineteenth century American women writers, said about Fanny Fern, “the woman writes as if the Devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading.”¹⁴ This assertion of the value of women’s writing, and the exterior space from which their writing appears to emerge, while clearly misguided, is coming from what many female authors defined for themselves— maybe from this imposition of this idea, and maybe from an inability to describe how their “spark” to write materializes. Catherine Maria Segewick, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Susan Warner, all describe their own compulsion to write as coming from God, as if her own self was not an ample enough place for writing to come from. This understanding of where one’s writing comes from often manifests

¹² Ann D. Wood, “The ‘Scribbling Women’ and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote.” *American Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (1971): 3–24.

¹³ Ernest Linwood, (Boston: J. P. Jewett and Company, 1856), p. 69.

¹⁴ Caroline Ticknor, *Hawthorne and His Publisher* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1913), pp. 141-43.

itself in anxiety and embarrassment about defining oneself as an author. In Fern's novel, Ruth is once asked by her daughter, "when I get to be a woman shall I write books, mamma?" to which she responds, "God forbid...no happy woman ever writes."¹⁵ Her assertion that identifying as writer is antithetical to her identity as a woman plays on these anxieties of womanhood, that writing as a source of income does not fulfill the notion of ideal womanhood. Still, the desire to write was alive outside the bounds of necessity for plenty of other authors. As I will explore throughout this project, female writers found other ways to describe this desire, this need, to write, when it extended beyond mere economic or communicative need.

I began this project with the hope of exploring nineteenth century American literary culture, and the ways that women's physical bodies were intrinsically and irrevocably intertwined with their literary ones. In the two bodies of literature that I explore, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and the correspondence of Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus, writing is at the forefront of their narratives. For the characters and authors within these texts, writing is a source of both limitation and empowerment within their lives. It is within these women's writing that I saw the clearest representations of women whose lives, learning, and movement were inextricably tied to writing, whether that be letters, newspapers, or book manuscripts. Just as small factory towns and eighteenth-century networks of women created microcosmic spaces that allowed literary formation to thrive, so do the spaces that I highlight in the following texts. In *Little Women*, I explore the March girls' early play-worlds and Jo's "room of her own" that cultivate their characters through the vehicle of writing. In Addie and Rebecca's letters, I explore a loving relationship between two Black women, and how the space of the letter itself, allows for growth and learning to occur.

¹⁵ Fanny Fern [Sara Payson Willis], *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of Present Time*, New York: Mason Brothers, 1855.

Much of my methodology throughout these chapters and my understanding of historical texts in their totality originates from Pamela VanHaitsma’s work with the Primus papers, and her rhetorical analyses of the text. She cites “gossip” as a way of interpreting historical texts, especially ones that resist the telling of all that could be known about them—like in the cases of letters or manuscripts that were heavily influenced or altered by others. For her, gossip is speculative, it cannot be trusted, and yet it is vital to women’s survival by virtue of its subversive potential. A major challenge with tackling collected bodies of letters—or bodies of people via their letters—means that details are left out, either purposely or because the knowledge was implicit to those it was addressed to. As a historian, gossiping “around and beyond the evidence,” means that while one might not touch on the intricacies of those particular women’s lives, they might be able to make logical leaps that could apply more broadly to women or other groups, which reveal layers of possibilities for stories that might otherwise be shrouded in the unknown.¹⁶ Patricia Spacks, author of *Gossip*, discusses the differences in understanding letters as texts over other works, such as autobiographies, as they exercise “less continuous control over the construction of a life myth...Even letters carefully edited by their authors expose those authors in successive fragments, glimpse after glimpse, encouraging the reader’s fantasy that real revelation may take place.”¹⁷ Imagination and gossip fill in the gaps in understanding and knowledge to create a coherent narrative out of Addie’s letters.

The critical audiences of these two bodies of work were of vastly different scopes. *Little Women* has captivated audiences since its release—the story has been adapted into film and television twice within the past ten years, with star-studded casts. American girls debate who they most relate to—are you a Meg, Jo, Beth, or Amy?—and the scholarly reception from the

¹⁶ Pamela VanHaitsma, “Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology for Queer and Feminist Historiography,” *Rhetoric Review* 35, no. 2 (2016).

¹⁷ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip*, United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012, 69.

past century is no different. Joining this conversation of scholars that includes some of the most prominent nineteenth-century Americanists relied on finding space for the conversations the novel could have with other works of writing, including Alcott's other works, and Addie and Rebecca's correspondence. *Little Women* speaks to other texts due to its unique position as a foundational American novel. Through its immense catalog of scholarship, we might gossip about other texts through the vehicle of this fictive text. Likewise, viewing Alcott's most famous novel through the lens of letters sent between friends and lovers, allows for the ability to wrest significance from a text so imbued with generations of meaning making.

The telling of history includes the shaping of stories, whose stories to tell, and how to frame them. When undertaking a kind of historical storytelling, the lens through which one views and understands allows for the careful selection of material, such that time and attention might be given accordingly. The spark of desire that occurs when finding a lens, a way into a historical and academic conversation, does not realize the breadth and depth of possibility that selecting pieces of history can do. At its core, what is most compelling about nineteenth century writing is its breathtaking volume. Nathaniel Hawthorne's now-clichéd "scribbling women" took to the pen as if their lives depended on it—which of course, they often did. Yet, economical stability and ability to communicate could not be the primary reason why, all over America, writing increased at an exponential rate. There was a different kind of compulsion to write that I found escaped these classic understandings of why writing was occurring at such a rate within groups who so recently had access to widespread literacy. I define this drive throughout my project in many ways—the erotic, the vortex, desire, excitement, mania—and yet throughout, there seems to be some force that compels these women to write, even when it drives them to sickness, sadness, and exhaustion, or explores what cannot possibly be. What VanHaitisma describes as a

“provocative force,” the erotic is part of the vibrant literary culture of the nineteenth century. This excitement originates from subverting convention and from being afforded just enough space and time to engage in literary culture that allows these spaces to expand, both in the mind and in physical capacities.

These microcosms that I have explored thus far set the stage for a literary culture that emerged in the nineteenth century. The answer to the question of a “right recipe” for a rich literary environment includes access to literacy through education, a community of uplift, desire for exploration of self, an understanding of the value of writing, and moments within a working woman’s life that could be co-opted to practice literary growth. For the women I explore throughout this project, writing often begins due to economic necessity, and for some, it remains there—“no happy woman ever writes”—and yet for others, it becomes something more, an internal desire and compulsion to keep scribbling in every free moment.

Chapter One

A Vortex of One's Own: Writing in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

In December of 1861, several months after the American Civil War began, Louisa May Alcott joined a growing number of women at the front lines as a nurse. She spent a short six weeks at the Union Hospital in Georgetown, but due to the poor ventilation, sanitation, and general labor conditions she fell ill, requiring her to return home. Of her illness she says, “I was never ill before this time, and never well afterward.”¹⁸ The time she spent at the hospital was generative for the young woman in terms of her literary pursuits; she sent home many letters to her family about her experiences. These became the foundations of *Hospital Sketches*, a collection of short stories detailing her time caring for the soldiers, or, as she refers to them throughout the stories, “her boys.”¹⁹ These stories were necessary for America at a moment when stories about the frontlines of the war were focused on battle; women at home could see within her stories intimate and truthful recollections of the last words and final days of young men just like their husbands, brothers, and sons. In one of these sketches, Alcott tells the story of caring for a young man, John, who lies close to death. Wounded severely in battle, he slowly lives out his last days in immense pain. During her time with him, she offers to write a letter to be sent home to his family. Nurse Periwinkle, the name Alcott gave to her self-reflective character, “wrote the letter which he dictated, finding it better than any I had sent.”²⁰

In this pivotal moment within the man's life, as she takes down his final written word, John's selfhood is projected onto Alcott. Her body is taken over in order to pen this letter, and thus, she becomes an active participant within this material document that stands for his own body. Before she writes his letter, she also explains to her reader her gendered positioning within

¹⁸ Louisa May Alcott, *Hospital Sketches*, (Boston: James Redpath, 1863), 43-46.

¹⁹ Ednah Cheney, *Life, Letters, and Journals: Louisa May Alcott* (Cambridge University Press, 1889), 146.

²⁰ Alcott, *Hospital Sketches*, 61.

the hospital where she was “the poor substitute for mother, wife, or sister;” she is at once acting as woman, and as an extension of this man’s hand, body, and mind.²¹ In the creation of *Sketches*, she writes about penning the letter, and gives her self-reflective character the name Nurse P, creating several degrees of separation between the content of the letter and Alcott’s own selfhood. Nurse P is hyper-feminized in direct contrast to the hyper-masculinity of the war, and also in contrast to Alcott’s own understanding of gender and self. In several spaces of her writing throughout her life, including within her letters and journals, and later in the semi-autobiographical character of Jo March, Alcott makes many claims about her relationship with her female body and her writing. In a letter to her friend, she admits “I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man’s soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman’s body.”²² Robert Lee David understands this “half-persuaded state” as Alcott’s ability to “move between different roles, to try on and to discard different costumes, never mistaking any one costume for a final role, the final, precise shape of a self.”²³ In the moment where she writes this letter on behalf of a dying soldier, she moves fluidly between gendered roles, entering into a separate space from her own body in order to write his final words. However, her relationship to her writing, body, and self-reflective characters is complicated and becomes more so over the course of her life and career.

After she has sent the letter, Nurse Periwinkle waits at John’s bedside as he finally succumbs to his injuries. Almost immediately after his death, Periwinkle receives word that a response to his letter had come the night before. The cruel irony in the fact that the letter had indeed been delivered in time for John to read it, but had instead been left for Periwinkle to

²¹ Alcott, *Hospital Sketches*, 58.

²² Interview with Louise Chandler Moulton, in *Our Famous Women* (Hartford, Conn., 1884), 49; quoted and discussed in Showalter, *Alternative Alcott*, x.

²³ Robert Leigh Davis, “‘On Both Sides of the Line’: The Liminality of Civil War Nursing,” In *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine*, 1st ed., (University of California Press, 1997), 57.

become its recipient, is indicative of a larger takeover of self. It is almost as if John does indeed receive the letter as Periwinkle receives it. John is forever memorialized in this story and in the reception of this letter, his story has an ending beyond his death. It is Periwinkle's hand that pens the letter, it is her hand that receives it, and it is she that writes his final words. In this, there is a clear confusion of selfhood, an expansion of Alcott's written work that is not entirely hers.

When's John's response arrives, Alcott treats the letter as a carrier of meaning and personhood, saying: "he still had it; for...[I] laid the letter in his hand...even in his solitary place in the 'Government Lot,' he would not be without some token of the love which makes life beautiful and outlives death."²⁴ She sees the intense meaning that exists in the materiality of the letter, even more than in its actual contents; the sealed words symbolize emotion and connection, as an extension of the man's body that has died. During Alcott's moment in literary history, many of her fellow writers understood the growth of the American postal service as being responsible for the establishment of a national character, of bringing together people and ideas. Some view this notion as overly sentimental and question whether Alcott is satirizing this idea or simply recognizing its presence in her writing. Nevertheless, this relationship of letters to bodies is evident across her works, from *Hospital Sketches* to *Little Women* to short stories about dolls who go on an adventure through the mail—*The Doll's Journey*.²⁵ The delicate and intentional placement of the letter into the hands of a lifeless soldier reveals Alcott's recognition of letters and selves as inherently interconnected.

Alcott's relationship to her semi-autobiographical characters becomes further complicated in the novel that serves as a reflection of her own life, *Little Women*, and the

²⁴ Alcott, *Hospital Sketches*, 64-65.

²⁵ Judie Newman, "Louisa May Alcott's Family Post Box," In *The Edinburgh Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Letters and Letter-Writing*, edited by Judie Newman, Celeste-Marie Bernier, and Matthew Pethers, (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 651.

character of Jo. Through *Little Women*, Alcott allows female authorship and literacy to be both tools and spaces for women to become part of an increasingly literary nation—one that was now available to them as a result of the nation’s war. John Matteson adds that by recreating the masculine narrative structure “in a realistic, female dominated setting, Alcott makes a claim on behalf of the domestic sphere, arguing that the character formation that takes place within parlors and kitchens is every bit as important as the soul-making that takes place during [a] masculine Odyssey.”²⁶ Or as Greta Gerwig, director of the 2019 film adaptation puts it, “I’ve always thought there’s just as much epicness in the kitchen as there are on battlefields.”²⁷ Through her use of authorship and literacy in its many forms—reading and writing letters, producing newspapers, reading novels, using a play post office—Alcott emphasizes the inherent need for writing within women’s lives and bodies, one that begins during the period of childhood. Thus is the nature of writing within *Little Women*, its existence not tangential to the historical moment, but what Alcott consciously argues.

Little Women is a novel written in two parts, the first providing the foundations of character for the four March sisters, and the second following the girls into adulthood, and their marriages and death. When asked by her publisher to write a “girl’s book,” Alcott did not expect the first installment of the novel to succeed.²⁸ After her previous novel, *Moods*, she exclaimed that her “next book shall have no *ideas* in it,” and that she would write just for the critics (*LLJ*, 166).. She drew upon her own life and childhood, the main characters all having real life counterparts, while the experiences themselves were “often changed as to time and place” (*LLJ*,

²⁶ John Matteson, *Eden’s Outcasts*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 341.

²⁷ Abbey White, “Greta Gerwig on How Her *Little Women* Adaptation Became ‘A Movie About Making Movies,’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 23, 2019.

²⁸ Ednah Cheney, *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters, and Journals*, Cambridge University Press, 1889. Following, if quoting directly from Alcott, I will use (*LLJ*, #) as a citation. If quoting editor Ednah Cheney, I will cite in a footnote.

193). Alcott wrote quickly, working day and night, and the first half of the novel was finished in less than two months. At the time, she was writing to survive, to earn enough to support her family. However, the novel was massively successful, particularly with the demographic of young women. Upon its publication, “the excitement of the children was intense; they claimed the author as their own property, and felt as if she were interpreting their very lives and thoughts” (*LLJ*, 193). The novel’s reception reflects a clear shift from the turn of the nineteenth century to this post-war, highly literate era. The mere fact that the readership of the novel was so high, and so distinctly young and female, points to this burgeoning literacy among the American population. Alcott was chronicling the lives and feelings of young middle-class American girls in a medium that they could understand and access.

Alcott differentiates each girl by their desires, personality, age, and manner of speech. An individual consists of the meshing together of discourses and types of language, which could appear as the language of newspapers, of professions, of religion, of literature. Language within *Little Women* is “shot through with intentions and accents;” every word on the page can be traced to some kind of dialogue, or many distinct kinds; Jo’s constant uttering of “Capital!” as an expression of approval rather than a celebration of wealth is a nod to her reading and internalization of Dickens in her speech and writing, nods to whom are also seen within the girls’ homemade newspaper.²⁹ These literary women must exist in dialogue with one another and with various kinds of literature to grow in their literacy. Thus, in a novel replete with acts of writing, there is not a single instance within the novel of writing being purely intended for self-fulfillment or enjoyment—the chapter entitles “Jo’s Journal” is in reality a series of letters home. All acts of

²⁹ Bakhtin, Mikhail. ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.

writing are dialogic in nature: read by others or created in the interest of being read, sent, sold, or used as bearers of news.

Turning to consider Alcott's "personal" writing in relationship to the effects of dialogic interaction, the words she writes always expect an audience; her journals and letters were published posthumously yet within them are responses from her future self, acting as a quasi-editor of her own thoughts and words. While also being indicative of a larger culture of privacy, or lack thereof, Louisa's father Bronson did not believe in privacy of writing and, "showed his own diaries and letters to family and friends, circulated family letters well beyond their intended recipients, and showed no compunction in copying or censoring the journals and letters of his wife and daughters."³⁰ As she became ill and close to death, in presumption of this publishing, she "destroyed many things which she did not wish to have come under the public eye."³¹ Alcott's knowledge of this lack of privacy led to her self-editing, which allowed her a semblance of control over the afterlife of her literary body. Shirley Samuels points out the "mirroring and mimetic" relationship throughout nineteenth-century novels in which women are writing about women writing.³² In *Little Women*, writing employs a variety of media—letters, manuscripts, poetry, telegrams, newspaper articles, and short stories—all of which advance the plot of the novel and help to make writers' lives more vibrant.

Jo's own writings move away from her ownership and can easily be edited and misunderstood by publishers and readers. A woman's "literary body"—throughout my analysis referring to all forms of writing and reading that a woman undertakes—is an extension of her physical body, a tangible object that operates in a separate space from her person, and as a

³⁰ Newman, *Family Post Box*, 646.

³¹ Cheney, *Life, Letters and Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, 366.

³² For a more thorough overview of the range of women's novels that contain "women writing about women writing" see Shirley Samuels, *Reading the American Novel 1780–1865*, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2012), 127-130.

vehicle for possible alteration of her character. Once writing has been modified, simplified, or sensationalized, the physical body and self of the woman mirrors such a change. In *Little Women*, letters are read by others, reveal the goings-on of the March women's lives, and admit feelings of the heart. Manuscripts are destroyed, sent to publishers, and furiously scribbled in the middle of the night. Books are read, gifted, collected, and cried over. A woman's entire literary body was a way for her to express selfhood, and childhood is the place in which these literary pursuits begin.

One of the first instances where the writing of the March girls is showcased within the novel is in "The P.C. and P.O." Here, we are introduced to the PC, the Pickwick Club, a name taken from a Dickens' novel. Through this club, the four sisters have frequent literary meetings, take the names of male authors and characters, and publish a newspaper for the family containing poems, short stories, family announcements, and jokes. For example: "Why is the P. C. like the Tower of Babel? It is full of unruly members," and the "Weekly Report: Meg—Good. Jo—Bad. Beth—Very Good. Amy—Middling."³³ Each girl's self-published article in the snapshot publication achieves the narrative goal of bolstering their pre-established character traits, laid out so clearly and distinctly by Alcott throughout the first several chapters: Meg writes a love story, Beth the story of a squash's life, Amy an apology for not writing, and Jo, much of the rest of the paper. Moments like these instances of writing-as-play—or more aptly, "play-writing"—reflect larger ideas about the burgeoning role of play in the lives of American children. "Play-writing" acts as a mirror to the ways the March girls will exist in a literary world not only as girls, but as they grow into young women; these structures of play serve to mirror and create their future selves.

³³ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, Penguin Random House, 2nd ed, 2019, 110. Hereafter, I will use (*LW*, #) to cite the text.

The second moment of “play-writing” is the “P.O.,” or the family post office. After Jo and Laurie beg for his admittance into a previously “girls only” Pickwick Club, as a token of his appreciation for admittance, he offers them a post office that will sit between their two houses such that letters, objects, and any other items may be exchanged. This literary exchange is an example of children’s play preparing them for the literary world which they live within and will grow up into. Upon the introduction of the post office, we are given a small glimpse at the role that this literary hub will come to play within the lives of these children:

“The P. O. was a capital little institution, and flourished wonderfully, for nearly as many queer things passed through it as through the real post office. Tragedies and cravats, poetry and pickles, garden seeds and long letters, music and gingerbread, rubbers, invitations, scoldings, and puppies” (*LW*, 112).

Shortly, those who use the play-post office must transition to using its real-life counterpart to communicate during periods of separation, but during their childhood, it is only necessary to pretend to mail letters and objects. The understanding that the children have of the importance of the newspaper and the post office is one of the first moments within the novel that we see the March girls begin to shape and control the ways that their written words will reflect their bodies and characters.

Louisa’s father, Bronson Alcott, noted that, “letter-writing enrolled the citizen in the state, however little his own role,” and thus within the Alcott household, letter writing was an almost daily activity.³⁴ The Alcotts had their own family post box, which Judie Newman highlights in order to present the Alcott family as a prime example of the evolution of letters as central within a nineteenth-century national culture. The nature of a family post office allowed for a breakdown of the rules required for the national postal service, which required strict adherence to

³⁴ Newman, “Family Post Box,” 642.

convention. Thus, what we see within the children's post office within the novel is a space of play and exploration: pickles can be exchanged with the same significance as letters.

This creation of a post box and the publishing of a newspaper are not isolated moments in American adolescent history. Paula Petrik catalogues the existence of self-published newspapers by teenagers, both in the home and on a larger, even national, scale. Referring to the institution as the "Toy Printing Press," she discusses the way that during the nineteenth-century, middle-class young women and men used newspapers as practice for adulthood, but also as means to create and workshop their own opinions, ideas, and characters. Just as adult authors in newspapers reprinted and parodied works of other authors, young authors "often copied, or more precisely, plagiarized plots and characters created by their favorite authors."³⁵ In this way, children were demonstrating their early understanding of the creation of newspapers and writing—often by mimicking and collaborating with others. The internalization of language, of models for characters and storytelling, are further examples of dialogic writing. Children write and learn through play and copying—exactly the function of the P.C. and the P.O. within the March girls' play-worlds. What Newman also points out is the distinction between the light-hearted nature of the exchanges in the play post office and the gravity afforded to the communication that occurs throughout the rest of the novel. Newspapers like this were widespread—Americans created newspapers and magazines from women in mill towns to men on whaleships to young boys in rural New Hampshire.³⁶ Works of writing crafted within these small worlds allowed for self expression and experimentation, especially for young women growing up into a literary world for whom the domestic space is most familiar and accessible.

³⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of the history of the "Toy Printing Press" see Paula Petrik, *Small Worlds: Children & Adolescents in America, 1850-1950*, (University Press of Kansas, 1992), 127.

³⁶ For a discussion on the domestic publication of a group of brothers in New Hampshire, see Karen, Sanchez, "Chit Chat: Juvenile Journalism, Gentility, Gender, and Genocide." *Hidden Literacies*, ed. Christopher Hager and Hilary E. Wyss.

After the March family receives a telegram asking Marmee to come to attend to her husband's illness while he is away at war, several scenes are told through the form of letters sent to their mother in the hospital. A letter was received by the household almost every day, yet the moment that we see is important, in the words of the narrator, because it contains "characteristic notes from the party" (*LW*, 175). These letters illustrate each girls' writing, giving clear insight into the kinds of literary performance that they are currently undertaking. The personalities and emotions of the girls echo within their words; Meg's letter is well-written and motherly, while young Amy stumbles over grammar and discusses her grievances about her clothes. In the family post office, the letters and items that were exchanged were done so with little regard to convention, but the same does not hold true for these letters, which achieve, or attempt to achieve, the conventions of the day that letter-writing manuals and customs dictated. More than ever before in the nation's history, young women were able to communicate on a national scale; the removal of fathers, brothers, and sons from the home made the imagined space of American women larger, as did the increasingly economical postal service. In this case we see not only the patriarch absent, but Marmee's removal denotes the loss of their more central figure, the one upon whom they have based much of their character formation. While Mr. March has introduced the lessons that he wishes for each of the girls to learn, it is Marmee who teaches each girl how she might implement those lessons into her lives. Thus, while unable to demonstrate to their mother the lessons that they are devotedly implementing into their daily lives within the domestic space, they must instead create a literary self which will act in place of the body. The letter is a salient space to begin understanding how the girls structure their writing as extensions of self.

This is key because that is what this period allowed for—after the girls have participated in literary culture within the home, they are given the ability to exist outside of it. This is in direct contrast to the ways that Eliza or Charlotte’s bodies-as-letters were permitted to leave the home, only to enter another one. Women acting as nurses and caregivers in the Civil War, as Alcott did, allowed the woman’s private self to enter hospitals and front lines with greater ease. Letters that children wrote during the late nineteenth century “gave the children a voice, but a voice often ventriloquized through the parent.”³⁷ Each girl parrots the language and lessons she has learned from her mother. However, the language present in their letters differs profoundly; each girl utilizes different dialogues in conversation with one another. This was previously apparent in each girl’s contributions to the *Pickwick Portfolio*—each one performed language in a particular way to distinguish her character; because the girls have distinctive traits and different values that Alcott assigns to each one, they present as wildly different in their use of language.

Meg’s letter begins with an acknowledgment of her mother’s last letter and the happiness that one felt while reading. This, and other areas in the letter—her breakdown of the goings-on of each member of the family, her pleasantries at the conclusion of the letter, and her perfect grammar and spelling—are indicative of the kinds of discourse of proper letter-writing practices that instructive manuals recommended for writing a letter to a friend or family member. The second kind of language present here is motherly and distinctly domestic, foreshadowing Meg’s future as the first to marry and have children and echoing her early maternal role. Throughout Meg’s story there is always an underlying desire to be “proper”; Meg’s literary performance both mirrors and anticipates her physical self, as someone whose ultimate calling is marriage and

³⁷ Newman, “Family Post Box,” 646.

motherhood, while still making clear some of her desire to be part of sophisticated society, as well as predicting her future with Mr. Brooke.

Beth's letter is characteristic of her entire being: making herself small on the page as she is in life. The echoing of self is nowhere more apparent than within Beth's literary self. Her letter is just a few lines long and begins, "There is only room for me to send my love...Amy wants the rest of the page, so I must stop." Her language is domestic and kind, letting her mother know that she has not forgotten to do her chores. Barbara Sicherman contends that Beth "dies because she can find no other way of growing up; her mysterious illness may be read as a failure of imagination."³⁸ She both mirrors her small existence and foreshadows her own ending that will then offer space over to Amy's story. She does not write large, or much, and thus, cannot continue on. Beth's diminishing of herself is a feature of her character just as it is of Meg's to dream of nice things. Amy's letter is an attempt of a young child to replicate the style and actions of adults. She begins by letting her mother know, in the correct fashion, that everyone in the family is well. Throughout her letter, her spelling and grammar are horrid, mostly due to her attempt to use "proper" sounding words that she is incapable of spelling: "I do my lessons always and never corroborate the girls—Meg says I mean contradick so I put in both words and you can take the properest" (*LW*, 178). This language is clearly an attempt to recreate the spoken words around her that she deems fancy and grown-up, which includes speaking French with her limited knowledge of the language. She asks for encouragement and validation in her writing: "Can't she? Didn't I make that interrigation point nice?" (*LW*, 178) This is the language of a young girl who is still getting a grasp on her grammar and language, giving readers the opportunity to watch character-building occur in real time.

³⁸ Sicherman, Barbara. "Reading *Little Women*," in *Well-Read Lives*, (Chapel Hill: The University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 25.

Within Jo's letter, several distinct dialogues are colliding to mirror Jo's self and her influences. Jo begins her letter with an image of receiving Marmee's previous letter: "I rushed up garret when the letter came and tried to thank God for being so good to us" (*LW*, 176). This manner of describing a letter's reception is common throughout letters of the time, but Jo's use of it here exemplifies her rushed and true-to-life forms of writing. Even the description of the paper itself, which was "scribbled on a big sheet of thin foreign paper, ornamented with blots and all manner of flourishes and curly-tailed letters," highlights the way that Alcott develops Jo's character to be very much like her own manner of furious scribbling (*LW*, 176). This description and example of language that Jo uses here is Alcott's way of differentiating Jo from the other girls, who, while Amy's contains several grammatical mistakes, all attempt to write proper and correct forms of letters. Instead of giving reports on the family or on others, Jo gives a rambling story of her quarrel with Laurie, emphasizing her difference from the other girls.

This difference is highlighted over and over by Alcott throughout the novel. She separates Jo as a tomboy, as independent, as a writer, all into a greater age than the other girls are allowed to retain their own flaws. Returning to the previously mentioned postulation that Jo becomes her father through her marriage, it is within this letter where we can see early evidence of her assumption of this role. Earlier in the story, Jo refers to herself as the "man of the family now Papa is away," even when Meg tries to assert her position as eldest (*LW*, 11). In her letter, Jo says of her sister's actions: "You'd laugh to see Meg head the table and try to be motherish. She gets prettier every day, and I'm in love with her sometimes" (*LW*, 176). By distinguishing Meg as mother, she places herself in opposition as father. These roles of mother and father that the girls take on while their own parental figures are absent from the home echoes the learned dialogue of True Womanhood, the term used most frequently to describe the ideals for women in

nineteenth century women's media.³⁹ Jo, by acting as father and not mother—although a trait that appears to be subdued as she enters married life later on—is subverting those ideals in small ways through her language, play, and self-definition.

After Amy is momentarily endangered while Jo remains angry at her for a previous wrongdoing, Marmee teaches Jo how to control her anger. Her letter uses the language she learned, to not “let the sun set” on her angry thoughts, thus following her mother's wishes. Jo is growing in her ability to reflect on her actions through the “little book” that she reads, *Pilgrim's Progress* (*LW*, 176). She is working through her emotions within her writing, thus regulating her body, preventing future anger at Amy. Later, after Jo has written Laurie that she will never love him, and begs him “to be happy with somebody else but always keep a little corner of his heart for his loving sister Jo,” ending the possibility of a future between them via her written letter. When Laurie receives this letter, he “gathered up all Jo's letters, smoothed, folded, and put them neatly into a small drawer of the desk, stood a minute...locked the drawer, and went out...feeling as if there had been a funeral” (*LW*, 432). In the hiding away of Jo's letters, her body is forever separated from Laurie's. In Gerwig's interpretation of the novel, she alters Jo's emotional reckoning, but her struggle still occurs within the letter: Jo writes a letter confessing her love, places it in their childhood P.O., and, upon learning of Laurie and Amy's engagement, rips up the letter.⁴⁰ Although not contained within Alcott's original text, both moments of coping with tumultuous emotions occur within her writing, using the lessons that Marmee taught her.

To conclude her letter, Jo ends with the inclusion of a “pome,” showing once again her constant desire to be writing. To reduce its gravity, she refers to it as one of her “silly little

³⁹ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966).

⁴⁰ Gerwig, Greta. Script of *Little Women*. Culver City, California, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2019, 101-105.

things” (*LW*, 176). This is not the first time we see Jo trivialize her own writing, and it will not be the last; Jo continues to view much of her writing as superficial throughout her childhood into her adult and authorial life. Later, this writing of trivial poems is how Bhaer comes back to her, allowing her to achieve an ending fit for a literary heroine—and Alcott’s publisher.

These letters act as a practice space for future literary endeavors, just as the post office and newspaper were an early way of interacting with writing and the exchange of words through play. Here, their literary performances leave the domestic space, yet still function within it because the letter is sent to their parents. Development of self occurs at the same time and in conjunction with literary development, and it is clear in this series of letters the different places that the girls occupy within their own journeys. In Alcott’s attempt to make each character distinct, she gives them each desires, which echo in their literary and physical selves. This presents a later issue, as each girl, when her faults are ironed out, becomes effectively identical to the others, for “what was to keep them from collapsing into sameness once these flaws were under control?”⁴¹ Although this journey will end for all of the girls in either marriage or death, their epistolary performances characterize and foreshadow their stories, while giving readers a glimpse into their current moment of development.

Jo’s writerly journey throughout the novel is the overarching narrative around which all of the other sub-plots revolve. Jo begins writing from an early age and continues throughout her teenage and early adulthood years. Her ability to provide an income for her family, the solace that she finds through Beth’s sickness, and her decision to move to New York are all influenced by this internal desire to write. From an early age, Jo’s character is centered around her writing, reading, and other literary endeavors. Early in the novel, when Jo writes the Christmas play for

⁴¹ Matteson, *Eden’s Outcasts*, 338.

her sisters to perform, Beth says to Jo, “I don’t see how you can write and act such splendid things, Jo. You’re a regular Shakespeare!” (*LW*, 12). Jo knows early on that she possesses a kind of elevated genius, imploring her to keep writing, even when she knows she is capable of more.

What is equally true about *Little Women* and about Jo’s writing itself is the continuous dialogue that exists between author and readers. Readers of the novel “had an unusual say in constructing its plot,” as scholars have recognized within Alcott’s own records of her writing.⁴² She famously wrote, “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman’s life. I *won’t* marry Jo to Laurie to please any one” (*LLJ*, 201). This line at first seems to refuse the insertion of the reader into the text, yet when considering Jo’s eventual ending, and her marriage to Bhaer, Alcott does deliver a conclusion for her heroine she knew her readers would appreciate more than the ending of Jo’s real-life counterpart—herself, a literary spinster (*LLJ*, 201).

Within the story, Jo’s first ‘literary labors,’ occur when she leaves her home to work at a school in New York and begins writing for Mr. Dashwood, the publisher at a newspaper who agrees to print her stories. Her first published work undergoes deep and expansive editing. The agency and story-telling that Jo finds most important are removed:

So crumpled and underscored were its pages and paragraphs, but feeling as a tender parent might on being asked to cut off her baby’s legs in order that it might fit into a new cradle, she looked at the marked passages and was surprised to find that all the moral reflections—which she had carefully put in as ballast for much romance—had been stricken out (*LW*, 355).

For Jo, her writing in its entirety is as precious as a child would be to a mother. Although Jo does not make a claim about her own body here, she clearly sees the editing of her work as a violation of a body—which echoes earlier notions of her connection to her written works. When she is young, Jo’s first manuscript is burned. Although its goal being to teach her moral lessons and

⁴² Sicherman, *Well-Read Lives*, 20.

feminine emotional regulation, in its destruction, we understand Jo's relationship to her writing: "Jo's book was the pride of her heart, and was regarded by her family as a literary sprout of great promise. It was only half a dozen little fairy tales, but Jo had worked over them patiently, putting her whole heart into her work, hoping to make something good enough to print" (*LW*, 81). Jo's manuscript is important to her because it is how her family identifies her "literary promise," and because she had put her "whole heart" into it. Later, as Jo learns about herself and her writing, this connection between body, self, and her scribblings will be more fully realized.

In *Little Women*, and later the sequel *Jo's Boys*, readers are given scenes of reception that echo the critique and 'fan mail' that Alcott received. This feedback is a way in which Alcott and Jo are legitimized as authors. Although they may not be writing the stories they desire, they are receiving this public designation of authors in society. Jo's critics are often her family, who have a lot to say about her manuscript:

Her father liked the metaphysical streak which had unconsciously got into it, so that was allowed to remain though she had her doubts about it. Her mother thought that there was a trifle too much description. Out, therefore it came...Meg admired the tragedy, so Jo piled up the agony to suit her, while Amy objected to the fun, and, with the best intentions in life, Jo quenched the spritly scenes which relieved the somber character of the story. Then, to complicate the ruin, she cut it down one third, and confidingly sent the poor little romance, like a picked robin, out into the big, busy world to try its fate (*LW*, 278).

Jo underwent thorough editing in order to make her writing more palatable to her publisher, who says to "Leave out the explanations, make it brief and dramatic, and let the characters tell the story." Not only was Jo unable to write to the extent of her perceived "genius," she specifically tailored her writing to fit the desires of her favorite audience, and those who she wrote to support financially, her family.

This excerpt of her family slowly picking apart the intricacies and depth of her writing mirrors the changes that her own character, and the girls' story itself, undergoes. The change

from childhood to adulthood that has already occurred for the March girls has been a piling up of agony, a quenching of “spritly scenes,” and, as Jo is an autobiographical character of Alcott whose story ends, cut down a third in order to be sent out into the world. In Greta Gerwig’s interpretation of the novel, she makes explicit that the story Jo is writing is indeed *Little Women*, making easily digestible to viewers the overarching theme that Jo is required to change her story in order to please her readership, which readers of Alcott’s journals will understand.

For Jo, much of her writing, both of letters and of her eventual manuscript occurs within the attic, also the space where the creation of the girls’ play-worlds are created. This garret in the private space of her childhood home allows her to remove herself from society, while also being a place to produce writing to be read by others. Within the house is a place in which “the girls are trained to make public the supposedly private realms.”⁴³ When Jo is young, the garret is violated, her manuscript stolen and burned, forever altering her childhood self that was contained within those lost pages. However, later in life, Jo once again returns to the garret to write her novel, a process during which her family poses the question, “Does genius burn, Jo?” (*LW*, 272). She enters this space, where she may write, where her body is private, yet her words are developed for the public. This writerly affliction mirrors Alcott’s own writing process. Of Jo, she writes:

Every few weeks she would shut herself up in her room, put on her scribbling suit, and “fall into a **vortex**”, as she expressed it, writing away at her novel with all her heart and soul, for till that was finished she could find no peace (*LW*, 272).

And of herself:

January 1865: I can't do much, as I have no time to get into a real good **vortex**. It unfits me for work, worries Ma to see me look pale, eat nothing, and ply by night. These extinguishers keep genius from burning as I could wish (*LLJ*, 169).

April 1868: Very poorly. Feel quite used up...but the family seem so panic-stricken and helpless when I break down, that I try to keep the mill going...Roberts wants a new book, but am afraid to get into a **vortex** lest I fall ill (*LLJ*, 202).

⁴³ David Watters, “‘A Power in the House’: *Little Women* and the Architecture of Individual Expression,” In *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination*, ed. by Alberghene and Clark (1999), 200.

July 1872: Fired up the engine, and plunged into a **vortex**, with many doubts about getting out. Can't work slowly; the thing possesses me, and I must obey till it's done (*LLJ*, 267).

January 1879: Got two books well started, but had too many interruptions to do much, and dared not get into a **vortex** for fear of a break-down (*LLJ*, 317).

Again and again, we see Alcott describe her ability to write as almost a requirement: once she begins, once she enters the vortex, she may not leave it even if she makes herself ill while doing so. Jo's writing never reaches this point; she begins to leave behind her ailment of writing, of genius, as she approaches married life. A friend of Louisa throughout her life and author of *The Alcotts as I Knew Them*, Clara Gowing, says of Louisa, "the desire to write one book at leisure and uninterrupted was never gratified for when leisure came, ill health prevented her from writing more than an hour or two at a time."⁴⁴ Recalling the earlier discussion of *Hospital Sketches*, Elizabeth Young equates this sacrifice of female authorship to injury from battle and political duty.⁴⁵ This likens the scars that soldiers return from war with to a scarring of self through the self-destructive "vortex" which Alcott often enters into to write her stories. In one letter to a friend, Alcott expresses her fear about entering into such a space to complete her writing: "[I] dared not get into a vortex for fear of a break-down" (*LLJ*, 317). By penning the soldier's letter, Alcott fashions a kaleidoscope of self, layering bodies and creating a confusion of autonomy with the intrusion of another's consciousness into one's own. This was the "wound of one's own" that Alcott was afflicted with, her ongoing illnesses that stemmed from her time as a Civil War nurse.⁴⁶ But her physical illness was not only what prevented her from writing at leisure, it is doubly her knowledge of her 'genius' that limits this ability to write for writing's sake.

⁴⁴ Clara Gowing, *The Alcotts as I Knew Them*, (C.M. Clark Publishing Company, 1909), 29.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Young, "A Wound of One's Own: Louisa May Alcott's Civil War Fiction," *American Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (1996), 455.

⁴⁶ Young, "A Wound of One's Own," 455.

Alcott, through the space of the garret, gives Jo her own space, a room of her own where she could write. In giving her a room of her own she also gives her a way to conceptualize and digest this label of “genius.” Samuels discusses this tension that exists between writing for income and economic obligation and writing that is “engaged with the literary standards of high culture.”⁴⁷ What allows Jo to remain sensible, realistic, and removed from the critical feedback that she receives for her stories is indeed the knowledge that she was not meeting these literary standards. In Barbara Welter’s “Cult of True Womanhood,” she describes the prevailing narrative that would have been present within the minds of young middle-class American women during the mid-nineteenth century. One of these authors, Helen Irving, writes about the “Literary Woman” that, “if the necessities of her position require these duties at her hands, she will perform them nonetheless cheerfully, though she knows herself capable of higher things.” Another author says similarly, “As for genius, make it a domestic plant. Let its roots strike deep in your house.”⁴⁸ This notion allows Jo to cope, move on from her literary labors, and fulfill her domestic duty. The knowledge that while she is capable of higher things, and of engaging in high literary culture (as Alcott does in her later works), this is the domestic duty that she has resigned herself to. To a twenty-first century woman, that slight consolation might be maddening. For a woman who is undertaking her own Pilgrim’s Progress—a literary and physical journey that has been impressed upon her in both words and familial instruction—her combined knowledge of repressed genius and her ability to follow through on the domestic duty to marry and have children, is what differentiates Jo from her real-life counterpart.

Returning shortly back to the beginning, I want to nod to the curious opening scene of the novel in order to give further context to Jo’s literary journey. In a novel that is so rich with the

⁴⁷ Shirley Samuels, *Reading the American Novel 1780 – 1865*, (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2012), 120.

⁴⁸ Welter, *Cult of True Womanhood*, 166.

writings of Jo and her sisters, the first piece of writing that readers are privy to is not an instance of women writing. In the picturesque opening scene, Marmee and the March girls read aloud a letter from Mr. March, who is serving in the Union army. Seemingly, the center of this scene is Father, through his letter, but what readers see is its reception, rather than its composition. Thus, at the center of the scene are the women themselves, arranged around Marmee's chair by the fire: "Beth at her feet, Meg and Amy perched on either arm of the chair, and Jo leaning on the back, where no one would see any sign of emotion if the letter should happen to be touching" (*LW*, 14). These positions define the girls and their personalities throughout the novel: Beth staying, and dying, close to home, Meg and Amy each married to their respective husbands, and Jo, of course, taking on this "boyish" air, denying her emotion, but feeling it all the same.

Judith Fetterley, in one of the first critiques of the novel by a leading feminist scholar, claims that in *Little Women* Alcott uses the war symbolically—as opposed to *Hospital Sketches*' visceral and physical representation of the war—as a mirror to the internal battle that Jo fights, with her writing, her economic duty to her family, and her difficulty grappling with romantic love. In response to those who are disappointed with Alcott's addition of Prof. Bhaer as a partner for Jo, Karen Sands-O'Connor argues that Jo and Laurie could never have married, "not because Alcott was a feminist as many critics suggest but because she was a romantic."⁴⁹ Alcott understood the rules of genre at the time: a hero would never marry a heroine who had not yet taken the time to correct her misgivings. Fetterley explains that, "unfortunately, perhaps, for Jo and Laurie, little women can only love up, not across or down; they must marry their father, not their brothers or sons."⁵⁰ According to this idea, Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer is marriage not to her equal but to her father, finally achieving the goal of becoming Marmee, the model woman

⁴⁹ Karen Sands-O'Connor, "Why Jo Didn't Marry Laurie: Louisa May Alcott and The Heir of Redclyffe," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2001), 31.

⁵⁰ Fetterley, "Alcott's Civil War," 39.

who is able to tame her temper and quell her anger to thrive within her domestic role. Fetterley's simplistic explanation of Jo's ending suggests a consideration of Jo's father and, in turn, of Alcott's father.

Bronson Alcott, Louisa's father, was hardly any role model for the girls in their young life, with failed attempts at schools, inventive learning, and even a short moment where he brought the family to live in a quixotic utopian community. Yet, the very first scene within the novel begins with a Civil War letter, sent from a father to his doting little women at home. In her explanation of what was based within real life and what is made up, Alcott says only about her father, "Mr. March did not go to the war, but Jo did" (*LLJ*, 193). It was not Bronson but Louisa who sent letters home, which later became *Hospital Sketches*. The positioning of the girls at the beginning of the novel as younger than their real selves prohibits Jo from being at war, yet the letters home can be read as hers all the same. Professor Bhaer is Jo's teacher, just as her literary father is an instructor of morals through his letters. If the girls must marry their fathers, we might instead interpret Jo's marriage to Bhaer as marriage to herself. Jo's role in the family is indeed subversive, this is not only true through the avenue of her writing but revealed through the evidence of her and Alcott's complete body of literature.

Jo's literary endeavors not only allowed her family economic support, but finally resulted in bringing a husband to her via her published poem, aptly titled "In the Garret." Bhaer says: "I found it by chance. I knew it by the names and the initials, and in it there was one little verse that seemed to call me" (*LW*, 474). The end of Jo's story allows her a pseudo-literary ending, "bookishness has brought Jo and her Professor together: they read Hans Christian Andersen; he gives her a volume of Shakespeare; they attend a literary dinner."⁵¹ This poem Jo even calls "bad

⁵¹ Clark, "A Portrait of the Artist", 91.

poetry,” yet it allows her to finally achieve her required ending as a woman in a novel—marriage. Although just pages before, she has accepted her position as “literary spinster,” it is finally her words that give her the ending required of a woman. Reading Jo’s marriage to Prof. Bhaer as marriage to herself, her own literary body, allows Jo to be truly subversive, to have a literary ending—which a little woman, or the heroine of a novel, simply cannot be.

In Jo’s literary journey, her bodily interconnection with her writing both fuels and relies on her internal desire to write and her knowledge that she is a writer. From a young age, she is provided with a rich environment of support, constructive criticism, and the freedom to engage in playful literary pursuits. In Amy’s burning of Jo’s first novel, Jo learns not only of the centrality of writing to her personhood, but also how she must regulate and control her emotions via her writing. The editing and revision of her writing is similarly heart wrenching, yet she has learned through her moral lessons how to cope with the destruction of her literary body. Above all, she retains an intrinsic desire to write that comes from within. Although some argue that the girls “collapse into sameness” when they move past their flaws, Jo retains her internal desire. By allowing Jo to secure a husband through her writing, Alcott ensures that Jo’s genius and desire to write remains central her life, character, and literary body.

Chapter Two

A Pleasing Task: Writing as Erotic in Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus’ Correspondence

Charity Jackson, living in New York in 1862, sits down to write a letter to a woman she has never corresponded with—Rebecca Primus, a twenty-five year old currently living in Hartford. She writes to express her deep worry for Addie Brown, a girl of twenty who works and lives in her home, and who, as of late, has been depressed and “so sad and melencahly she look

as if she lost all her friends.”⁵² Charity, or Aunt Chatty, is mentioned many times throughout Addie’s letters while living in New York, as she is Addie’s employer, but also a close friend. This is the only time within the collection where we get to hear her distinctive voice. Chatty says, “Dear Rebecca I wish that you were here to see Addie,” imploring Rebecca to visit, as Chatty knows that when the two are together, Addie is consoled and full of happiness. Contained within this letter is a mention of Addie’s relationship with her current suitor, Mr. Lee: “she rec two letters from Mr. Lee and I never seen anyone so overjoyed as she was.” From this implication, it would seem that Mr. Lee’s letters are the cure to Addie’s unhappiness, and yet, Chatty is speaking directly to Rebecca, wishing “you had of been a witch and been at the window.” During this moment in American epistolary history, women who wrote letters to one another often spoke in subtext. The next line of her letter is where we can discern some more intimate knowledge of the situation at hand. Chatty writes: “you say you do not know what love is Addie does I can assure.” Why does she begin addressing Rebecca and speaking about love? What conversations were Aunt Chatty and Addie having, and what words of Rebecca’s is she responding to?

There are suggestions and subtext within this external letter that allow for moments of gossiping around and contain even more insight than we might receive from Addie’s letters themselves. For a moment, let us attempt to ascertain the contents of Rebecca’s letters leading up to Aunt Chatty’s. From the words, “you say you do not know what love is,” we might imagine that in response to Addie’s loving words, Rebecca says that she does not even understand love. This could mean that between the two women, Addie is more readily able to say how much she loves Rebecca. Addie might be excited by the reception of letters from her suitor, yet generally sad and melancholy: a visit or letter from Rebecca would be welcome and help to ease Addie’s

⁵²Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Beloved Sisters, Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1999, 63. New York, Mar. 1862

sadness. Chatty has at least some knowledge of the bond that the two women share, possibly due to Addie's habit of speaking about the content of Rebecca's letters; she might have even read Rebecca's letter herself. Aunt Chatty, so aptly christened, certainly deems Addie's declining mental state precarious enough to write to Rebecca, concerns which could be considered as gossip themselves. Did Rebecca balk at Chatty's description of Addie receiving the letters from Mr. Lee and the great emotion that she expressed? Did she experience discomfort at the contents of her letter being shared? Beginning in 1859 and spanning to near the end of her life in 1868, a reading of Addie's letters to Rebecca will reveal the ways that one's written word can both inform and conceal a woman's real and physical body.

In a letter written soon after Aunt Chatty's, Addie herself addresses this moment, revealing another layer to his letter's existence. In reality, it was Addie who penned the words about herself for Aunt Chatty, and she responds to Rebecca's mention of the letter: "it gave me a great deal of pleasure you spoke of Aunt Chat writing to you Dear Rebecca dont you think its a great pity she neather read or write so she got me to pen those lines to you."⁵³ Here, Addie's understanding of the value of literacy is clear, she pities the woman's inability to write a letter, and reveals that she wrote the letter with her own hand. Finally, she addresses Aunt Chatty's description of Addie's depression: "she spoke of me looking sad. Dear Rebecca I did not know my feeling was such that they would be observed in my [contenance] I do feel very sad sometimes." This denotes a clear separation in how others understand Addie and her external emotions, and how Addie understands herself.

The knowledge that it was Addie who wrote Aunt Chatty's words is reminiscent of the way that Nurse Periwinkle, the self-reflective character of Louisa May Alcott, penned a letter for

⁵³ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 67. New York Mar. [?] 1862

the dying soldier in her care. However, in this case, Addie must write about herself and act as scribe for an illiterate woman. Her positioning in this moment transforms to one of service, juxtaposed by the concern that her employer feels for her and Aunt Chatty's desire for Addie to feel comforted by Rebecca's presence. Unlike Alcott, whose writing about the employment of her hand in the service of another creates a sense of confusion of self, this moment instead evokes pity from Addie; this is a moment of intimacy within the private sphere with a close friend rather than a stranger. While Alcott's soldier might have been literate and had knowledge of letter writing etiquette, Aunt Chatty's illiteracy suggests that Addie must translate her words to fit the convention of a letter and of written literary structure, to the best of her knowledge. Some of "Aunt Chatty's" language even mimics Addie language in other letters—various misspellings, varied construction of sentences "you had of been a witch," and irregular punctuation. While this moment is seemingly insignificant within the rich, romantic, and literary letters that Addie writes throughout the correspondence, this small moment denotes her own understanding of the value of literacy in upholding her relationship with Rebecca, as well as her understanding of the separation between her written construction of self and the reality of others' perception of her.

Farah Jasmine Griffin originally transcribed and annotated the letters from Rebecca Primus to her family and from Addie to Rebecca in a 1999 volume titled *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*. Griffin centered her project around unearthing histories of Black women that often went undiscovered and unwritten, moving past the silences of "ordinary" Black women. However, these letters, and especially the letters that Addie pens to Rebecca, are anything but ordinary. As Rebecca's grandfather was the first free Black man to live in Hartford, Primus' were relatively wealthy. The women likely first met when Addie was employed by the Primuses, who

often employed women within the home. The collection of Addie's letters that reside in the Connecticut Historical Society spans 1859 to 1868, although it is clear that the two women were friends before the preserved correspondence began. Excluded from census data due to both her status as a poor Black woman and her constant movement throughout her adult life, the collection of letters written to Rebecca remains the only record of Addie's existence.

Barbara Beeching explains that the reason she began to write about Hartford and its Black middle class was largely due to Addie's distinctive voice. Beeching is enthralled by Addie's language, due to her loving adorations of Rebecca and her discussion of life in Hartford, politics, books she read, and various gossip from friends and family. The wonder, or as another scholar calls it, "magic," of Addie's letters is most prominent when we observe the fervor and passion in her writing about Rebecca, as well as the ways that her writing and excitement shift and change throughout the time of the correspondence.⁵⁴ These letters add not only to the picture of Black middle-class Hartford, but to the growing population of Black women who were literate, lived rich lives, and had complex and loving relationships with one another.

Chapter one focused on nineteenth-century women's writing that had knowledge of an audience—Alcott's writings, even her private journals, were always written for others to read. What is different when working with an edited and published collection of letters is that the knowledge of the audience extends only to the addressee of the letter. Although during the nineteenth century letter writers operated with the knowledge that letters could be read over shoulders and in transit, Addie does not write for a public audience, or a white audience, as other Black authors were required to at the time. As Griffin notes in an interview, Addie "is not as concerned about censoring her letters for a racially mixed audience. Therefore she discusses

⁵⁴ Hansen, Karen, 'No Kisses Is Like Youres': An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-Nineteenth Century. *Gender & History* 7, (1995): 154.

black people in the full range of their humanity—their strengths and weaknesses—and she does so with a degree of dignity and humor that we have rarely seen in print.”⁵⁵ However, when Rebecca writes to her family, as Griffin explains, she is writing for an audience, as her mother would often read her letters at their church, and thus, Rebecca’s letters to her family contain little about her own personal life and emotions. Rebecca’s letters to Addie have not been preserved, but we may assume they were written with a narrower audience in mind. As I explored through Aunt Chatty’s letter, Rebecca might have expected those around Addie to have some knowledge of what she was writing, but they were primarily for Addie’s eyes alone.

Linda Grasso acknowledges in her work that, by editing and organizing the letters into a coherent ‘story,’ Griffin creates a kind of epistolary fiction that mirrors novels of the time. In its silences, Griffin fills in historical context and inserts her own brief moments of analysis. Grasso notes that there is an exchange between those present within the story: “Griffin reads and imagines the letter writers, the letter writers read and imagine each other; and we, the external readers, read and imagine everyone who speaks in the text.”⁵⁶ This waterfall of readers and writers suggests both internal and external creation of meaning, through Griffin’s additions and Addie and Rebecca’s words. Whenever scholars work in archives, this dimension of imagination is how one must go about speaking with figures from the past and creating meaning within the present, which Grasso defines as “cross-century communing.”⁵⁷ Other scholars have defined this practice of engaging with historical women as “critical imagination” or “reading it crooked and telling it slant,” which is largely what was accomplished through the introduction of this

⁵⁵ Charles H. Rowell and Farah Jasmine Griffin. “An Interview with Farah Jasmine Griffin.” *Callaloo* 22, no. 4 (1999): 874.

⁵⁶Linda Grasso, “Edited Letter Collections as Epistolary Fictions: Imagining African American Women’s History in *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends*,” In *Letters and Cultural Transformations in the United States, 1760-1860*, edited by Sharon M.Harris, United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013, 252.

⁵⁷ Grasso, “Edited Letter Collections as Epistolary Fictions,” 254.

chapter.⁵⁸ By conceptualizing this text as not merely the writings of two women, but as a kind of epistolary fiction, my work relies on both Addie and Rebecca writing and the moments of context and connection that are found within Griffin's additions.

The letter allowed for women's words to travel distances and give a reality or illusion of agency to the woman writing. Addie, being a poor Black woman did not often have freedom of movement, yet her paper body could travel to Rebecca and sometimes even allowed for the two to meet in person, by requesting that Rebecca come visit or that Addie might come visit her. There is a notion of empowerment through her writing and receiving of Primus' letters, allowing for increased agency. Throughout the correspondence, she begins to write about political issues, race, and discuss the books she is reading—experimenting with different expressions of literacy. While her letters were for Rebecca alone, we are now able to make postulations about her physical body because of the words she writes in her paper one—a body which she speaks of often and in detail. Through a consideration of Addie's literary body as inextricably tied to her physical body, I highlight and explore the way that Addie's letters to Rebecca are indicative of a larger literary culture. In this moment, writing was not only necessary to survive and make meaning, but the very act of writing itself can be considered as an erotic and generative practice when it is sensationalized through the pushing of convention and exploration of selfhood.

Within the epistolary genre, there exists not just the letter we read but the “innumerable moments” that accompany it.⁵⁹ If we picture a young Addie Brown sitting down at the end of her

⁵⁸ Royster, Jacqueline Jones, and Gesa E. Kirsch. *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2012. *Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms*.; Brenda Glascott, “Revising Letters and Reclaiming Space: The Case for Expanding the Search for Nineteenth-Century Women's Letter-Writing Rhetoric into Imaginative Literature.” *College English* 78, no. 2 (2015); Glenn, Cheryl. "Remapping Rhetorical Territory." *Rhetoric Review* 13.2 (1995).

⁵⁹Altman, Janet Gurkin. *Epistolarity. Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982, 117.

work day, which could have lasted from sunrise and well into the night, she is considering not only what she should write, but how she might go about writing it. A letter contains the moments that are described within it—Addie gives long descriptions of the day's goings-on, the gossip, her opinions on various matters—and often, there is even real-time commentary of what is occurring in the room around her. The letter is then stamped, mailed, and (hopefully) received by its addressee. That letter is then read, reread, and sometimes copied over so as to keep record of its existence—in some cases, the copying of letters is first done by the sender, although unfortunately for historians, not in Rebecca's case. Letters were far more mobile than bodies, and thus, they could be moved around and kept close, as Rebecca's often were by Addie.

To supplement these absences is the function both of Griffin's insertion into the epistolary fiction she creates, and of readers who imagine these moments as they read a letter. Rebecca's own letters to Addie can be inferred and guessed at through the mentions, responses, and illusions within the letters; we can imagine Addie poring over Rebecca's letters to ensure that she understands and responds to every moment within them, and Rebecca reading Addie's with the same kind of fervor. Addie's letters shift in structure throughout the correspondence, as does her grasp of language and social convention, yet the moment in which she sits to write the letter is almost always present within her writing—her presence in the moment is palpable.

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Addie Brown moves to Hartford, Connecticut, before 1859, when her letters to Rebecca begin. Lacking all familial connections, she becomes close with the Primuses, a relatively wealthy and well-known Black family. In the first letters that are included in the collection, Addie and Rebecca are both in Hartford, but Addie moves to Waterford, Connecticut in 1859. In the next few years, she returns to Hartford, and also lives in various cities and homes in New York, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania in what Beeching

describes as “gypsy-like existence.”⁶⁰ Beeching explains her need for connection to the Primuses in relationship to this constant movement: “she had in a sense orphaned herself and consequently walked an economic tightrope from one job to the next...between 1859 and 1868 she worked for fourteen employers that we know of and lived at eight different addresses.”⁶¹ Although she moved frequently, her movement was determined by her position as a poor, Black, and unskilled woman. This helps to explain her continuous correspondence, and to an extent, her longing for Rebecca; if one is cut off from all connections, they will grasp at any semblance of home and safety. Indeed, her earliest letters most clearly exemplify this desire for Rebecca and for closeness, with effusive language and loving sentiments. Beginning in 1859, Addie writes to Rebecca when she is close, and when she is far away, so that sometimes she is writing immediately after seeing Rebecca, or after long periods of their separation. Primus taught at a private school within her home from 1853 to 1865, when she moved to Maryland through a Freedman’s Bureau program to educate newly freed enslaved people in the South. Although the origins of Addie’s literacy education are unknown and likely limited, it can be assumed that her learning occurred wholly or partially through Rebecca’s instruction. Her rhetorical instruction thus occurred within her epistolary exchange, improving over the course of their correspondence. This student-teacher dynamic places another layer upon their correspondence, deepening the relationship between literacy and desire.

The correspondence begins in 1859, but there exist only a few letters until the end of 1860. In 1861, Addie is living with the Jacksons in New York City, where she is keeping house and caring for their children. Although this time marks the beginning of the Civil War, Addie’s

⁶⁰Barbara J. Beeching, *Hopes and Expectations : The Origins of the Black Middle Class in Hartford*, State University of New York Press, 2017, 138.

⁶¹ Beeching, *Hopes and Expectations*, 145.

letters are more concerned with her own emotions and longing. During this moment in American history, men and women were able to write to one another for the sheer pleasure of writing to their lovers, especially as letters became exponentially less expensive to mail. While love letters between couples who were courting, engaged, or married had more specific rules and conventions, there was a well understood sentiment across those who wrote letters that “in the intimacy of friendship...a letter could be ‘unconstrained by forms’...Correspondents employed a conversational language, tone, and rhythm as well as more literary tropes, metaphors, and romantic figures of speech.”⁶² Letters between friends fell within a gray area of neither love letters nor formal letters. Addie and Rebecca’s letters exist under this secondary space of letters that could be at once informal, as they were, seemingly, two friends, yet still emphasized the openness that was central to love letters; a “high value was placed on sincere, open, heart-felt expression.”⁶³ Another generally understood idea, regardless of access to these letter-writing manuals, was that “reading or writing a love letter evoked powerful feelings of communion...very much like having a face-to-face conversation.”⁶⁴ This “communion” echoes Addie’s expressions of closeness to Rebecca when she is writing to her, reading, and rereading her letters. Although we cannot know how prevalent letter writing manuals would have been in Addie’s life, these well-known sentiments would have been recognizable to those who received any kind of education on how to write letters—which Addie clearly did based on her command of the basic conventions of letter writing in dating, epistolary address, etc.⁶⁵

⁶²Lystra, Karen. *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1992, 19.

⁶³ Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, 19.

⁶⁴ Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, 21.

⁶⁵ Pamela VanHaitsma, “Queering ‘the Language of the Heart’: Romantic Letters, Genre Instruction, and Rhetorical Practice,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2014).

Addie's early letters begin with a description of the moment in which she is writing. This is a common practice, both in the nineteenth century and today, yet Addie's tend to be a bit more dramatic and poignant. Addie often begins her letters with the emotions that she is experiencing as she sits down to write, which set the tone for each letter. The picture that she paints is most commonly one of deep desire. I have included several examples to demonstrate the magic of Addie's salutations:

"I thought I would rest myself from sewing by writing a few lines to the one that I truly love and only one."⁶⁶

"I seat myself with the pleasing task in writing a few lines to the object of my thoughts."⁶⁷

"I have again peruse you sweat and affec loving e [pistle] it seem to me every nerve vibrate in me I could not express the feeling."⁶⁸

"I have a few moments to spare so I thought I would pen a few thoughts to the object of my affections."⁶⁹

Spanning over a year, Addie's emotionally vulnerable state is clear within these moments that usually occur, as Addie probably understood as customary, at the beginning or the end of a letter. This understanding also denotes something that she has likely learned from Rebecca's epistolary salutations. Her language is descriptive not only in the physical sense—we understand where Addie sits and what state she might be in—but also in that we understand the moment of generation while she begins her epistle. In letters that are mostly emotional, rather than focused on general goings-on or gossip, she appears excited just to be indulging in the experience of writing a letter. We do not only have the ability to hear her inner thoughts, but to watch her exhilaration at the very idea of writing. This excitement borders on erotic, and indeed, it is often as she begins that she lays out the fantasies and desires she is imagining or remembering regarding Rebecca. VanHaitisma discusses the erotic explicitly, defining it as a "provocative

⁶⁶ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 38. May 30 1861.

⁶⁷ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 51. Dec 8 1861.

⁶⁸ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 60. Feb 23 1862.

⁶⁹ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 62. Mar 5 1862.

force, energizing the development of literate and rhetorical capacities for the pursuit of social and political change.”⁷⁰ Literacy allowed Addie and Rebecca to discuss the position of Black Americans during the 1860s, and yet I argue that the power of the space of their letters allowed for even more. Karen Hansen notes that the palpability of her excitement creates “a magic to her letters, a rhythm to her speech, a forthrightness about her feelings, and a drama to her emotional turmoil that immediately captivates the reader.”⁷¹ This literary understanding of her letters paints Addie as not only a communicator, but a true writer; Addie’s writing draws her reader in, making it easy to imagine herself drawn into this “pleasing task.” The relationship between Addie’s physical and paper body that we see here meant that she was able to experience a kind of joy that might have been otherwise foreign to her. For Addie, this connection, joy, and erotic desire originates at the moment of a letter’s conception.

Not only do we notice within Addie’s letters the moments in which she sits down to read Rebecca’s letters and write her own, but what can clearly be seen is the valuation of Rebecca’s letters within her life. The reception of letters often dictates how she imagines her own physical body and how it may emotionally and physically move through the world. Addie writes in a May 1861 letter, “Dear Rebecca I have been so very busy today...I received a letter from the one that I idolize the letter took away the bulk of my work did not appear so irksome to me,” stressing that the letter, as a stand-in for Rebecca herself, had the ability to take away the pain of her work. A line that Addie writes in the same month is similarly illustrative of this moment within Addie’s letters: “your most recent Affec letter to me was like pieces of meat to hungre wolfe I will not tell how often I pursue the contents of it this eve,” and another line, “Rebecca I want to tell you

⁷⁰ Pamela VanHaitisma, “Romantic Correspondence as Queer Extracurriculum: The Self-Education for Racial Uplift of Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2017, 53-54.

⁷¹ Hansen, “No Kisses Is Like Youres,” 154.

one thing that is this if I went with out eating for two or three days and then a person was to bring me something to eat and a letter from you and they say that I was only to have one or the other I would take the letter that would be enough food for me.”⁷² Her reception of Rebecca’s letter is connected to her physical body, and her conflation of reading to the experience of quelling her hunger, is demonstrative of the ability Addie has to possess and claim letters as physically nourishing to her. Addie’s heightened sense of the value of literacy and the material letter is made clear through her forthright understanding of the value of Rebecca’s letters to her own bodily existence.

Addie’s most emotionally charged moments occur while she is imagining and musing about what might happen if the two were together, what they may do in the future, and the like. She says, “All this day I almost felt like shedding tear I will my Dear inform you a few of my thoughts do you ever think that we will live together anymore or live within two or three miles of each other is it possible that we are not able to clasp each other in our arm but once a year.”⁷³ She at once lets Rebecca know how emotionally vulnerable she is in the moment when she is writing, and imagines the future that they might have together, while she knows that such a future is impossible. She describes the way that her body feels as she imagines Rebecca: “I was very sick I think a part of it was cause of my anxiety about yours I thought you was sick in fact I had all kind of imaginary thoughts at present I feel quite well both in body and mind...I often wish that I could take a birds eye view at you.”⁷⁴ As she is writing, as she is in this space of happiness and exultation, she is “well in both body and mind,” unlike the other moments of the day when she is sick with anxiety, dreaming of what Rebecca might be doing.

⁷² Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 35. May 24 1861.

⁷³ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 46. Sept 25 1861.

⁷⁴ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 51. Dec, 1861.

Addie often treats the letters that she receives as a surrogate for Rebecca's physical body, keeping her letters close, feeling great happiness at their arrival and sadness at their loss. At one revealing moment on October 20th 1862, Addie says, "My Beloved Sister I have again peruse the note I rec on the 15th I am sorry that I have got to destroy it."⁷⁵ Griffin posits that Addie's burning of Rebecca's letters is a possible reason that we have not yet discovered, and might never discover, Rebecca's half of the correspondence. In an undated letter presumably, according to Griffin, between October and December of 1862, Addie tells Rebecca: "Dear Sister I have your letter open before me I carry each letter in my pocket untill I rec another and peruse between 12 & 1 each day."⁷⁶ This moment tells us not only of her reading habits, but leads us to assume that Addie keeps Rebecca's letters very close to her person, and might destroy the letter upon the reception of the next. This destruction of letters echoes the practices of other couples, who in an attempt to navigate the public and private spheres of the nineteenth century, often went to lengths in order to separate their public facing life from their private—especially in a world in which letters were often read by those other than the addressee. Karen Lystra discusses the burning of letters by male-female couples during this period, in connection to a similar kind of "anthropomorphization" of letters. She uses various letters as examples of lovers speaking to letters as if they were the embodiment of their partner, needing to retreat to private spaces to read letters, or refusing to burn letters as they "looked like sending you away from me to part with them."⁷⁷

VanHaitsma expands on letter writing as an historically queer space, among others, which has been used as "extracurricular rhetorical education." The queer experience involves a place in

⁷⁵ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 71. October 20th 1862.

⁷⁶ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 91. [n.d.] 1862.

⁷⁷ Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, 24.

which to learn about counterculture in a heteronormative world.⁷⁸ For much of their lives, writing was where communication occurred, and it became at once a space of love and one of learning. Addie not only mimicked Rebecca's language and grew in her literacy, but also learned and amended how to express her love in ways that were acceptable.

Another piece of this "queer extracurriculum" lies in the differences between how Addie acts on paper when writing to Rebecca and how she behaves to those around her. In the letter immediately following Aunt Chatty's 1862 letter, which is the only outside perspective of Addie we have access to, Addie seems to refute or mask some of the emotions she displayed to Chatty. After telling Rebecca that she received two letters from Mr. Lee, Addie asserts "Dearest Rebecca I never shall love any person as I do you."⁷⁹ As other scholars have claimed, Addie separates her relationships with men from her feelings for Rebecca. Immediately when she feels excited for another's letters, she feels the need to assert her love for Rebecca, holding it in higher esteem.⁸⁰ She discusses men in this way often, and is usually unable to tell Rebecca of her other relationships without declaring her unending love for her. In a letter the following week she says: "I hope you seen Mr. Lee. Dear Sister I like him much better than I did he has truly been kind to me but he never be to me as you are its been by you and you alone since."⁸¹ She is both asserting her love for Rebecca and asking for her opinion of the man.

Some of Addie's imagining also includes the way she imagines how they might be together were there not the pressures of society upon them. In her discussion of letters between two queer women in the nineteenth, a teacher and student, Kathryn Kent explores the ways that

⁷⁸ VanHaitisma, "Romantic Correspondence as Queer Extracurriculum," 184.

⁷⁹ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 63. New York, Mar. 1862.

⁸⁰ See, Beeching, *Hopes and Expectations*; Pamela VanHaitisma, "An Archival Framework for Affirming Black Women's Bisexual Rhetorics in the Primus Collections," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 51(1), 27–41.

⁸¹ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 72. Hartford, Dec 9, 1862.

silences, and even moreso, *noted* silences function within the writings of queer people. She explains that throughout these letters, “writing functions in these letters as both the means of erotic expression and the border beyond which words no longer suffice.”⁸² The erotic lies in the imagined, in what remains unsaid in writing. In this way, their correspondence differs greatly from their ability to be with each other freely while together physically. Addie says, “I wish I could express my feeling to you excuse me for this note,” which denotes either an inability to write the words, or an embarrassment at her writing. Based on her previous letters, it is likely the former.⁸³ She also alludes to Rebecca’s inability to speak freely in her letters; “I hope you will not forget to tell me your dream you had are you going to preserve it until we meet,” meaning that Rebecca has likely mentioned a dream but was unable to reveal the contents.⁸⁴ Addie often tells Rebecca of explicit dreams of the two interacting, yet Rebecca is unable to tell Addie of hers, denoting her likely discomfort in expressing herself via the written form. The other possibility for Rebecca’s anxiety could be the separation between the pair’s socioeconomic classes. As Rebecca’s family is wealthy, and she is a well-respected figure in society, she has less of an ability to engage in writing that could endanger her social position.

Addie frequently references what they would do the next time they were together, and hypothetical scenarios of their being able to live together or be married: “What beautiful moonlight evenings we are having I sometimes sit by the winder and wonder what you are doing whether you are thinking of me there.”⁸⁵ These moments are, as I have previously referenced, occurring in the moment in which the letter is committed to pen—they exist outside of all reality except the writer’s imagination and the subsequent reader’s notion of what the writer was

⁸² Kathryn R. Kent, *Making Girls into Women : American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity*, Duke University Press, 2003, 168.

⁸³ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 68. Mar [?] 1862.

⁸⁴ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 146. Nov. 28 1866.

⁸⁵ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 42. July 22 1861.

picturing. One clear moment of possible rejection or misunderstanding is when Addie writes Rebecca, almost angrily, with a declaration of her feelings. Unlike other letters, especially her later letters, this August 1861 letter does not carry any kind of news or other normal goings-on; it is primarily a love letter. She begins: “My Dear Friend, Im now goin to comply to your request you would like to know my feelings toward you when I come here it seems strange that you should ask such a question did you think that I did not love you as much as I profess or what was it?”⁸⁶ After many more lines of loving professions, she says, “I do truly wish from the bottom of my heart that you could to talk free with me in everything.” Even more is unsaid, and left to the imagination while reading.

Romantic letters within heterosexual relationships, as Maggie Kalenak explores, also had a “habit of cautious censorship” in the case of especially emotional writing or shocking news, such as pregnancy scares or failed relationships.⁸⁷ These letters, of course, were not always destroyed, but remain so that scholars might draw conclusions from what nineteenth century letter writers saw fit to leave hidden. In this way, Rebecca and Addie do adhere to convention, or at least remain safe from discovery or suspicion, all while participating in this prominent, heterosexual culture of romantic letter writing—one that differed slightly from letters between friends. Addie is not always as discreet as Rebecca might have liked, and she still uses terms of endearment. These omissions, silences, and lost letters are represented in the casual mentions to secrets, ones that we as scholars must imagine and gossip around ourselves.

Beginning around the close of the Civil War, Griffin notes a change in Addie’s writing, characterized by maturity and growth. VanHaitsma has identified the ways that learning for

⁸⁶ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 44. Aug 31 1861.

⁸⁷ Maggie Kalenak, “‘Consider yourself kissed’: Intimacy, Engagement, and Material Culture in Nineteenth-Century Middle-Class English Love Letters,” *Journal of Victorian Culture*, vol 28, issue 2, April 2023, 260.

Addie occurred both within her writing and in her practices of altering her language and content of her letters. Just as young children learn through play and imagination, she learns how Rebecca reacts and responds to her professions of love, or admissions of love for others, or other imaginative moments. For young adults like Addie who were otherwise unable to engage in this kind of literary play, or at least, does not have writing that we would have access to, epistolary writing became the only available space for this act; a woman is not exempt from the ability to imagine and play once she reaches adulthood. As I spoke about in chapter one, children's newspapers and family post offices acted as spaces of rehearsal and practice for young children to practice existing in the literary world that they would soon enter into. These children rehearsed adult ideas in their writing so that later, they might go into the world and have adult relationships and write real letters that would connect them across distances and oceans. This is not unlike the rehearsal and learning that Addie does within her writing, and just as Alcott must have Jo marry a man at the end of her story even though she spoke and wrote often of wanting to be an old spinster, Addie does not get to entertain the desires she writes about in her letters. Jo learns this when she first begins publishing her work in the newspaper—long swaths of her writing are crossed out, the characters do not get to repent for their sins, the women must be married—and thus her own life follows. What these women are learning is how to create pockets of joy within the bounds of what was acceptable, and expanding and stretching boundaries to fit within them.

Because the only record of Addie Brown's writing is these letters to Rebecca, it is impossible to know if she began writing letters or kept a diary before, or if her correspondence with Rebecca continued after these letters ended. Thus, we cannot know what the process of learning to write looked like for Addie, but we may understand these letters to be a space of learning genre and rhetoric. VanHaitsma uses her analysis of nineteenth century letter-writing

manuals in relation to Brown's, to analyze their writing. In these letter writing manuals she found an overwhelming volume of heteronormative language and instruction in the creation of a romantic letter: "gender was marked so as to render opposite-sex relations unremarkable, and opposite-sex relations were treated as normative, as natural, right, and even inevitable."⁸⁸ She identifies the ways that these manuals were utilized in order to subvert the very ideas that they wished to teach; one could follow the common conventions for writing to a woman as a man even if they were a woman themselves.

Although Rebecca has asked Addie to call her "sister," in 1862, Addie expresses in April 1866, "you have been to me more than any living soul has been or ever will be you have been more to me than a friend or Sister,"⁸⁹ as well as an earlier instance of Addie wishing "What a pleasure it would be to me to address you My Husband."⁹⁰ VanHaitsma further looks at the "exercise of restraint" as a method through which to analyze their command of genre convention, citing letter writing manuals that explain to show restraint in replying to letters—a rule which Primus and Brown clearly do not abide by. While they follow some proper conventions, they break and bend others, like Brown's detailing of her romantic and erotic exploits with both men and women, as well as bending the rules of writing romantic letters, which according to manuals was for the ultimate goal of achieving a marriage.⁹¹

Throughout her adult life, the amount that Addie is paid fluctuates; she is told there is no more work where she lives, and she moves on to the next job and city. In 1866, she moves back to Hartford and works within the home of a Greek Language and Literature professor at Trinity College. Addie confronts this professor so that she might be paid more, and wrote to Rebecca

⁸⁸ VanHaitsma, "Queering 'the Language of the Heart,'" 10.

⁸⁹ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 121. April 10, 1866.

⁹⁰ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 87. Nov 16 1865.

⁹¹ VanHaitsma, "Queering 'The Language of the Heart,'" 20.

that she had “been working for nothing comparatively speaking now I have come to a decision that people shall pay me for my work I don’t care colored or White.”⁹² In this way, she is able to work through her anger and assertions of selfhood and agency through her letter to Rebecca. Beeching discusses Addie’s movement between employment over time, and how she understood the value of her own work, as well as her position as a Black woman. Addie wrote in detail about the pain that her body endured; in one letter she explains “when it time for me to go to bed my limbs ache like the tooth ache I think I shall leave the second week April.”⁹³ Beeching says of Addie’s ability to leave her places of work be they too arduous that it “showed courage or perhaps recklessness,” and her ability to act on that discomfort and anger evolved throughout her correspondence with Rebecca.⁹⁴ Addie’s knowledge of the value of her work connected to her own body, and her ability to vocalize that comprehension, is something that seems to occur naturally in the space of her writing.

While Addie was in Hartford in 1865 and visiting the Primus house, they were discussing a letter that had been sent for Addie from Maryland where Rebecca is teaching. This is an occasion where we get to see the interaction of Addie receiving a letter in front of people, including her current romantic interest, Mr. Jones:

Mr. Jones came up and wanted to [know] if it was a gentleman letter . . . [Mrs. Primus] said I thought as much of you if you was a gentleman she also said if either one of us was a gent we would marry. I was quite surprise at the remark Mr. Jones & I had quite a little argument. He says when I found some one to love I will throw you over my shoulder. I told [him] I have unshaken confidence in your love. I do sincerely believe him never.⁹⁵

As we have seen Addie sometimes discuss her relationships with men in letters differently than she might have acted in reality, we must take this interaction to be important because of the way

⁹² Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 113. Feb 25, 1866.

⁹³ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 116. Mar 25, 1866.

⁹⁴ Beeching, *Hopes and Expectations*, 148.

⁹⁵ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 107. Jan 21, 1866.

Addie frames the interaction while writing. Before she discusses the above interaction she gives a long description of how she argued with Bell, the other Primus daughter, over the letter from Rebecca. Mr. Jones asks if it was a “gentleman letter” because of all the fuss that surrounds its reception. She focuses on the fact that she was at first “surprised at the remark” from Mrs. Primus that “if either one of us was a gent we would marry.” Addie has previously used this very language to speak to Rebecca—“if you was a man what would things come to.” Yet here, at the implication that there is a romantic relationship between the two, she becomes angry. Beeching discusses this moment through the implication of what it meant for the men around Addie, and that they may have seen the friendship as “an outlet for affection and experimentation with sex.”⁹⁶ Addie’s anger and “unshaken confidence” in Rebecca’s love seems to place the relationship she has with Rebecca over marriage, and that even “when I have found some one to love,” she will not discard Rebecca. This moment of receiving a letter in front of the Primus family and in front of men is presented by Addie in such a way that makes clear to Rebecca where her priorities lie. If we return to the moments that make up a letter, we must remember that Addie’s processing of events occurs most often through her writing about them—this moment has occurred and afterwards, she chooses to write to Rebecca to ensure that she understands what it looks like for the physical extension of Rebecca’s hand to enter a room while she is apart from it. As she processes the moment in writing, she cannot help but tell her how much she loves her.

In the rest of the lengthy letter, Addie asks Rebecca about another woman, “Will you tell me who is Emily?” and simultaneously asks her if she likes Mr. Tines, for she is planning on marrying him. At the end of the letter, she says she “dreamt of you two night one night I was

⁹⁶ Beeching, *Hopes and Expectations*, 143.

standing and seeing you caress another lady and not me how bad I did feel.”⁹⁷ These moments, of inquisition regarding Rebecca’s interactions with other women, asking for her approval of men, and getting upset at the idea that she might forget Rebecca later on after she marries, all coalesce to explain Addie’s understanding of their relationship.

As she progresses in her writing, and possibly more significantly, after Rebecca is away from her for extended periods of time in Maryland, her letters become more concerned with her life in Hartford, what she is reading, her relationships with other people, and sometimes her opinions on political or racial matters. Sometimes, Addie will even note that she has ceased what she is doing just to indulge in the writing of a letter: “I have been reading in the Bible...I stop reading I have been in a deep reviver about you and wondering if it was raining in Hartford or not,” and “I have been penning a few lines to Mr. Lee I just feel like doing the same to you so I made his letter very brief.”⁹⁸ Notably, she shortens a letter to her suitor to begin a letter to Rebecca, physically embodying the valuation of her priorities.

In later letters, beginning in 1866 and continuing, Addie’s professions of love become further removed from one another, and small snippets of the kind of effusions that she used to write only slip out occasionally, or exist between the lines. Often, these loving reminders are hidden by wonderings, “Where are you today? Are you any nearer home then when you was when you wrote my last letter?”⁹⁹ And, “I have been quite happy since I received your last Thursday letter...I only wish I could be there.”¹⁰⁰ In a letter in July 1867, Addie says, in an uncharacteristic fashion for that moment in time, “I feel rather tired and I feel as I like to be

⁹⁷ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 107. Jan 21, 1866.

⁹⁸ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 46. July 14 1861.

⁹⁹ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 212. July 7 1867.

¹⁰⁰ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 211. June 31, 1867.

[e]mbrace[d] in your loving arms once more. Perhaps I would get rested.”¹⁰¹ These moments are unlike her earlier letters, where she describes the excitement and erotic nature of her laying with Rebecca. Here, it reads as a more jaded woman, who longs for her youth. In the next letter, Addie similarly reminisces about when she and Rebecca were together: “Then we stroll along the river edge. O we had a lovely time at the same time you was the object of my thoughts. How I did wish that I was in your company”¹⁰² This moment feels more tender in its simplicity of remembrance of a past that Addie longs for but can never return to.

Another similar moment occurs at the beginning of a March 31st, 1867 letter. Addie writes about the birds that are singing as she wakes up. She “reflect back several years ago you remember how we used to take Sunday A.M. walks...what a pleasure it afford one to think of these happy moments. I shall not go out this a.m. I shall devote it to you.”¹⁰³ She then goes on to detail the most recent and upcoming events in her life and with the characters in their lives. Even as she writes of the events of her life, she cannot help but dive into her thoughts of Rebecca, which she remembers and considers as she writes these moments on paper. In writing this letter, she is devoting the morning to Rebecca in her remembrance of their walks and in her decision to pen a letter.

Although I have focused primarily on Addie’s writing, Rebecca’s letters, the majority of which are sent to her family, contain an endearing moment where she, too, is able to experiment with play within her writing. We are privy to two of Rebecca’s early writings—in one, she writes a poem about the loss of time and in the other “A History of My Poodle Dog.”¹⁰⁴ Written during her youth, they are the first glimpse of Rebecca’s writing, and begin to show her inquisitive and

¹⁰¹ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 213. July 18, 1867.

¹⁰² Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 214. July 25, 1867.

¹⁰³ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 189. Mar 31, 1867.

¹⁰⁴ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 16. June 20, 1856.

reflective nature, which Addie learns from reading her future writing. The kinds of play that were present within the writings of the March girls are reflected within these moments, and in another playful and satirical letter that Rebecca writes in 1866, addressed to her cat, Jim.

Rebecca's writing is usually descriptive of the events occurring around her and writes for the audience of her family and the congregation to whom her mother reads her letters. This letter, in contrast, is an example of her more playful nature, and offers a window into the way she might write for Addie. Her letter to her cat Jim begins the way that Addie's often do, "becoming tired of the latter employment, I thought I would take up my pen instead and write you a few lines in ans. to your letter which it gave me so much pleasure."¹⁰⁵ She speaks to the cat as if he is human, complimenting him—"they all think you are a very wonderful creature but will not believe you are so superior to others of your race—but I tell them that you are," "I suspect you really do look finely now my noble fellow, for I imagine you are very fat." She then tells him she misses him and hopes to see him soon, and reminds him that "you must strive to live and keep fat good until I return home again." The satirical nature of this letter separates it from Rebecca's other letters, it is personal, without revealing intimate details. She is performing a kind of childish play, a return to her childhood writing about her pets.

The detail of this letter which makes it stand out among all others is its last line. After she has finished wishing the cat well, she says: "P.S. Addie must be more particular in applying epithets to you."¹⁰⁶ While reading, I realized the implication that this postscript had upon scholarship of Addie's and Rebecca's letters. This letter to the anthropomorphized cat is in reality a letter to Addie, a continuation of a seemingly playful correspondence. Although they have not been preserved, Addie has clearly written letters to Rebecca where she acts as Jim, the

¹⁰⁵ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 153. Dec. 11 1866.

¹⁰⁶ Griffin, *Beloved Sisters*, 154. Dec. 11 1866.

cat. This letter is a window into the ways that Rebecca could have written to Addie, as distinctly more playful and even flirtatious. In this way, pretending to be a beloved cat, and thus being able to express care, love, and happiness in a more public way (as the letter was most likely read by the rest of the Primus family), reveals Rebecca's feelings and the nature of her writing.

Not only is Rebecca adding a note to Addie, she is also advising her to be careful in her writing. Addie continues to learn from Rebecca's teaching, learning how to make space for their fun, playful love in a world that would not otherwise allow them to do so. In her learning from Rebecca, loving language, effusive salutations, and desire to write, Addie carves out room to exist along with and informed by the woman she loves—on the space of the page.

Addie's health diminishes and in her final letters, which cease on February 5th, 1868, she takes to opening them by describing her feelings of sickness, which have made it difficult for her to write. There is one letter within the *Primus Papers* collection addressed to Addie. Griffin notes that there is an unsigned and undated letter is presumably from her eventual husband, Mr. Tines, to her while he was away. We must assume that Rebecca and Addie lived near enough, as written in Rebecca's handwriting on the back of the letter are the words: "Addie died at home, January 11, 1870."¹⁰⁷ It is only within these words that her death is recorded in any capacity. Rebecca, in her writing of this short line, memorializes Addie, just as Alcott penned the last written words of her soldier; Rebecca, in in writing, remains with Addie until the end. In this letter's existence, Griffin sees hope in the ability for Rebecca's letters, if they remain intact, to be yet discovered, combed over, and brought to the forefront of archival discussion, thus further affirming the pair's subversive and poignant presence within the literary canon.

¹⁰⁷ Griffin, *Loving Sisters*, 276.

Conclusion

If all the trees in all the woods were men;
 And each and every blade of grass a pen;
 If every leaf on every shrub and tree
 Turned to a sheet of foolscap; every sea
 Were changed to ink, and all earth's living tribes
 Had nothing else to do but act as scribes,
 And for ten thousand ages, day and night,
 The human race should write, and write, and write,
 Till all the pens and paper were used up,
 And the huge inkstand was an empty cup,
 Still would the scribblers clustered round its brink
 Call for more pens, more paper, and more ink.

-Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., "Cacoethes Scribendi", 1890¹⁰⁸

Cacoethes scribendi—or the mania that overtakes oneself while writing, the “itch” to write—originates from the Roman poet Juvenal’s description of the so-called “disease,” and was used by a few nineteenth century authors to describe the explosion of written texts, and the desire to write. Cacoethes, meaning literally a bad habit, when referring to writing, was described in the early eighteenth century as being “as Epidemical as the Small-Pox.”¹⁰⁹ Catherine Maria Sedgwick, in 1830, wrote a short story that satirizes both the vast quantity of women publishing their writing and this apparent “urge” as a bad habit that can be cured through a woman’s marriage. Or, instead of a woman’s fervor for writing, Mary Kelley quips, “did she mean scribbling?”¹¹⁰ As I alluded to in my introduction, Sedgwick, according to Fetterly, “regarded her literary endeavors as a pale substitute for what she believed should be the calling of a true woman,” and thus her writing emphasizes this anxiety.¹¹¹ This notion of writing as a bad habit that must be cured through marriage, limited Sedgwick’s ability to express the reality of this urge to

¹⁰⁸ Holmes, Oliver Wendell, "Cacoethes scribendi" (1946). *Harris Broadides*. Brown Digital Repository. Brown University Library.

¹⁰⁹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “cacoethes (n.),” September 2023.

¹¹⁰ Kelley, *Private Women, Public Stage*, 211.

¹¹¹ Qtd in Kelley, *Private Women, Public Stage*, 211

write. She emphasizes the satirical nature of women's writing in order to dispel her anxieties about her own female authorship.

Through my exploration of the term, I found that male author Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote the above poem, "Cacoethes Scribendi." Holmes claims that "all the trees" are men, and continues this comparison to insert "man's" desire to write as inherent within nature, but also as a force of destruction within it. Even if mankind wrote until all of the world's resources were used up, "Still would the scribblers clustered round its brink/Call for more pens, more paper, and more ink." Instead of describing the desire to write as passionate, uplifting, or any of the ways that writing is most often described, it is here portrayed as monstrous and all-consuming.

In Fanny Fern's "A Chapter on Literary Women," she stages the following conversation between a man and woman. The man says, "I don't want a literary women...these literary women live on public admiration,—glory in seeing themselves in print...literary women are a sort of nondescript monsters; nothing feminine about them. They are as ambitious as Lucifer; elise, why do they write?"¹¹² Fern is perhaps responding to Hawthorne, who accused writing women as possessed by the devil. The woman responds, "Because they can't help it...Why does a bird carol? There is that in such a soul that will not be pent up...that must find voice and expression; a heaven-kindled spark, that is unquenchable; an earnest, souring spirit, whose wings cannot be earth-clipped." Yet, the woman concedes that, while there exist vain female authors, there are also those who "deserve the holy names of wife and mother because God has granted to them the power." As Mary Kelley emphasizes in her work on nineteenth-century female authors, this concession that the woman makes is the balance that women must walk—"the name was

¹¹² Fanny Fern. *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Port-folio*. New York: Derby and Miller, 1853, 149.

literary domestic.”¹¹³ In Sedgwick’s work, the “disease” of women writing is not only internal, it spreads to all other women in proximity, infecting them with this desire.

As the woman in Fern’s story begins to emote, however, on the pivotal importance of writing in women’s lives, she reveals a new kind definition for this desire that I have identified within the writing of Jo, Addie, Rebecca, and the other March girls. This woman understands writing to be as deep-rooted within the hearts of women as a song is within a bird; to write is to fly, unencumbered by the world. This spirit that she describes is inherently playful, and just as birds must learn to fly, so too must children learn to exist within a literary world.

Myself, I become infected with my own desire to write, over and over, as I find entrance points into literary conversations—when I position myself to extend the conversations that female authors began hundreds of years. Since first learning about the rate at which women began scribbling in nineteenth century, I too wanted a kind of record of my own existence and ideas. During my sophomore year, I began a journal, containing both the literary and the scribbles. I loved filling up a page with writing, fulfilling this same joy that echoed within women’s writing across American history. While watching Greta Gerwig’s masterpiece of a *Little Women* adaptation, I could visualize Jo, sitting up in her garret, inside of this vortex that seemed to take over her body and mind. Instead of destruction and consumerism, this desire to write is generative, it allows for exploration of the self in relation to the body.

In a recent conversation I had with scholar Pamela VanHaitsma, she spoke of her current work regarding Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus. She is exploring ways that Rebecca and Addie’s relationship might have continued had Addie’s life not ended shortly after moving away from the northeast. By engaging in this gossip, she extends the pair’s paper lives, imagining what could have happened if their correspondence continued. As other more privileged female white

¹¹³ Kelley, *Private Women, Public Stage*, 212.

couples during the nineteenth and early twentieth century were able to do, Addie's wishes of living together and referring to Rebecca as "husband," are finally realized through VanHaitsma's fictional reimaginings of their story.¹¹⁴

For nineteenth-century American women, there was a way in which microcosmic spaces created the correct environment for a rich literary life. As we saw within the stories of Jo, Addie, Rebecca, and a host of other female writers, the ability to create spaces, subvert convention, and claim autonomy within writing allowed for their internal literary lives to flourish in both the public and private spheres. Although many had the correct conditions, such as the other March sisters, there is another piece of this puzzle that is necessary in order to create these "scribbling women." That component is mania, it is intrinsic need, it is the "itch." It is Alcott's vortex, it is Addie's erotic desire, it is the pleasure felt from disobeying your publisher and creating a story that "has *ideas* in it." It is the delight in an uplifting relationship, and it is the joy of filling a page, or seventy, with writing you are proud of.

¹¹⁴ Author's conversation with Pamela VanHaitsma, April 4, 2024.

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