

CONSUMERISM AND  
AMERICAN GIRLS'  
LITERATURE, 1860–1940

PETER STONELEY

*Queen's University, Belfast*



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## *The fate of modesty*

Girls' fiction came to prominence in the newly invigorated, post-War publishing market, most obviously as a compromise between "preachy" children's fiction and the often sensational domestic novel. Girls' fiction was less heavily didactic than pre-War children's stories, but it did seek to moderate the sentimental and melodramatic "excess" of the domestic narrative: it offered lively but stable and small-scaled narrative trajectories that would be suitable for young, impressionable readers. The leading exemplar of this first generation of girls' fiction, Louisa May Alcott, was typical. In her the realist disapproval of sensational excess was combined with a moralized disapproval of personal immodesty. But her moralized realism was at odds with the consumerizing, gilded age culture within which it emerged. A writer such as Alcott was placed in a false position in that her success, and that of the consumerist economy, were both fuelled by a desire for more. Writers might set themselves against what they perceived as selfish and immodest impulses towards gratification, but their sales depended on the resilience of these same impulses. This first stage of girls' fiction seems to bear out Walter Benn Michaels's analysis of realism more generally, in that realism is both opposed to and complicit with the unlikely and immoral gains of an expanding, speculative economy. The intense pleasures of sensational and material excess must be present as a possibility, even in the realist novel; but the logic and the morality of realism dictates that pleasure be segmented into acceptably modest moments. A complete and overwhelming pleasure is repeatedly deferred in favour of small gains, as the reader-consumer is both rewarded and led on. For all its implicit modesty, realism is ultimately bound up with an acquisitive model of subjectivity, and can no more tolerate stasis than can a capitalist economy.<sup>1</sup>

Alcott is the perfect means for us to explore this complex intersection of genre, pleasure, and capitalism, because we have full access not only to her work but – through journals, letters and ledgers – to her handling of her role as a successful woman writer. The irony is that in spite of her own diffidence,

Alcott achieved enormous renown in a culture that turned increasingly on publicity and display. Similarly, the sudden wealth that she won from her writing would bring into question her insistence on a realist type of narrative in which such stunning things did not happen. These issues were encapsulated in an incident of 1875, in which Alcott, firmly established as the leading writer for girls, became involved in a public debate over money. Her novel, *Eight Cousins*, had been appearing in installments in the *St. Nicholas* magazine, and she took this as an opportunity to criticize popular “sensation” fiction for boys. As one of her fictional mothers complains, the motto of such fiction is not “Be honest, and you will be happy,” but “Be smart, and you will be rich.” The same mother also objects to the slang, the unpleasant locales, and to the focus on “heroes of the barroom and gutter.” When an enthusiastic boy-reader points out that it would be unnatural for a boot-black or a newsboy to use good grammar and no swear-words, she replies:

But my sons are neither boot-blacks nor newsboys, and I object to hearing them use such words as “screamer,” “bully,” and “buster.” In fact, I fail to see the advantage of writing books about such people unless it is done in a very different way. I cannot think they will help to refine the ragamuffins, if they read them, and I’m sure they can do no good to the better class of boys, who through these books are introduced to the police courts, counterfeiter’s dens, gambling houses, drinking saloons, and all sorts of low life.

The mother goes on to complain that the hero of this type of fiction is not permitted to gain his living “in a natural way, by hard work and years of patient effort, but is suddenly adopted by a millionaire whose pocketbook he has returned.” Alcott identifies her chief target when the mother refers to “these *optical* delusions.” With this reference, she marks out William T. Adams, who had achieved great success under the pen-name of “Oliver Optic.”<sup>22</sup>

As a scholar of children’s book-reviewing has noted, Alcott’s criticism “unleashed a storm.” Adams struck back in his own *Oliver Optic’s Magazine*. Aside from claiming that Alcott had misrepresented his work, he made a stunning personal comment:

Ah, Louise, you are very smart, and you have become rich. Your success mocks that of the juvenile heroes you despise. Even the author of “Dick Dauntless” and “Sam Soaker,” whoever he may be, would not dare to write up a heroine who rose so rapidly from poverty and obscurity to riches and fame as you did; but in view of the wholesale perversion of the truth we have pointed out, we must ask you to adopt the motto you recommend for others – “Be honest and you will be happy,” instead of the one you seem to have chosen: “Be smart and you will be rich.”<sup>23</sup>

Adams's defence would have been even more powerful had he known – or had he chosen to reveal – that Alcott herself had written a series of sensation fictions, largely out of a desire to make money. Alcott and Adams alike were making very good profits from the increase in the market for sensation fiction and especially children's fiction. Prior to the Civil War, children had tended to read "adult" fiction, such as Dickens, Bunyan, and the gothic romances. Children's fiction had been largely didactic, and undifferentiated between stories for girls and stories for boys. Within the newly extended and specialized market, Alcott occupied middle ground. Her work was not as relentlessly moralistic and shoddy as the Sunday School books, but nor was it as low and worldly as Optic and others. Alcott was thought to have introduced new elements of realism and humour into children's fiction, alongside male counterparts such as Mark Twain and Thomas Bailey Aldrich. She was thought to be successful because her stories were genuine, humane, and truly to be enjoyed by girls, and even on occasion by boys.

What does one make, then, of Adams's attack, and of the social innuendo it deals in? Aside from attempting to shame Alcott by exposing her earlier "poverty and obscurity," his priority is to reveal the contradictions of her position. She resented the lack of realism, with the sudden fortunes gained at the hands of benevolent millionaires. Yet she also resented the excess of realism, with the reporting of the slangy speech of the streets. Through her character, Alcott voices the opinion that fiction should seek to improve "ragamuffins," rather than representing the facts of their lives or offering a fantastical escape from those facts. Money, good fortune, it would seem, should be under the governance of a traditional middle-class morality of steady work, thrift, and correctness of behaviour. The author, in this sense, becomes a sort of cultural "gatekeeper," ensuring that access to privilege is achieved on condition of subservience to a somewhat dated *status quo*. But as Adams points out, Alcott herself had been placed under no such constraints. In his view, her rise was sudden and fortuitous, not to say sensational. He implies that Alcott is trying to impose an undemocratic hierarchy, in which only the "deserving" may succeed. Adams would prefer it if Alcott would celebrate the heterogeneity of modern American life, instead of pressing for exclusivity and for the established forms of moralized gentility.

Adams was not alone in his criticism of Alcott's management of her authorial persona. Much as she was loved and revered as the author of *Little Women*, a bad atmosphere hovered over her celebrity. She was reluctant to respond to the adoration of her admirers, and resented the increasing number of day-trippers who journeyed from Boston to Concord in the

hope of catching a glimpse of her. She had even dared to satirize the public's reverence for her own person in a fictional episode in which a slavish admirer pilfers from Jo's home. And Alcott, rather than living up to the motherly good nature of Marmee or Jo, was very blunt about not being "giving" to her public. When Louise Chandler Moulton was writing a sketch of her for *Our Famous Women* (1885), Alcott wrote:

Dont forget to mention that L. M. A. doesn't like lion hunters, doesn't send autographs, photographs & autobiographical sketches to the hundreds of boys & girls who ask [for] them . . .<sup>4</sup>

The truth was that Alcott was both giving and not giving. She donated money to various causes, and especially to those concerned with the rights, health, and opportunities of women. In a more immediately personal context, she brought up her niece, and funded her family throughout her career. Yet she remained unhappy about the culture of display that she saw developing around her, and she found herself awkwardly placed in relation to consumerist publicity. From a background of making and doing, she became caught up in the world of the aspirational purchase. I want now to place Alcott within the context of her social background, and then trace her career, both in terms of her writing, and in terms of her negotiation of her success. Time and again, she confronts the question of fashionable appearance, of what money does for girls and young women, and what it ought to do for them. Alcott analyzes the fate of modesty in an urbanizing and increasingly consumerist world. This in turn produces a fiction for girls that is more widely concerned with the relation of wealth to social stability.

In her journal for 1 September 1843, the ten-year-old Alcott recorded that she had risen at five, taken a bath ("I love cold water") and spent the rest of the day in lessons, chores, and exercise. She also mentions being read a story called "The Judicious Father," which she then summarizes:

How a rich girl told a poor girl not to look over the fence at the flowers, and was cross to her because she was unhappy. The father heard her do it, and made the girls change clothes. The poor one was glad to do it, and he told her to keep them. But the rich one was very sad; for she had to wear the old ones a week, and after that she was good to shabby girls. I liked it very much, and I shall be kind to poor people.<sup>5</sup>

This story matches neatly with Anne Scott MacLeod's characterization of children's fiction of the period, which she describes as "clumsy literature, conceptually impoverished and preachy."<sup>6</sup> Alcott, though, was more subject than most to a moralized discourse on fashion and pride. She was at that point living in a community that had a dress code. The family was



at Fruitlands, the experimental farm established by Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane. The Fruitlands ethos incorporated a belief in the wearing of simple, practical clothes, which had been manufactured in ways that did not exploit others. To Bronson and Lane, this meant not wearing cotton as it was a product of slavery, and not wearing silk as the silk worm was cruelly destroyed in the production of silk.<sup>7</sup> Alcott was also exposed to a discourse on the morality of fashion in the form of her parents' literary endeavours. Both Bronson and Abba sought to publish texts which offered a commentary on self-display. Bronson compiled an anthology of emblematic texts to be called "Pictures of Thought," intended "principally to aid the Young in Self-Inspection & Self-Culture," many of which evince a concern with the need to see beyond an attractive surface.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Alcott's mother sought to warn the modern age against the lures of vanity. She produced a new edition of John Owen's *The Fashionable World Displayed*, which she hoped would "be the humble means of restraining folly, or checking extravagance."<sup>9</sup> A further and more light-hearted example of the Alcott parents' interest in wealth, display and morality is to be found in a satirical poem, *Nothing to Wear: An Episode of City Life*, which was owned and cherished by Abba Alcott, by her daughter Abby, and by subsequent family members. The poem recounts the adventures of Miss Flora M'Flimsey of Madison Square, who, in spite of three exhaustive shopping expeditions to Paris, is still left with "nothing to wear."<sup>10</sup> This poem would eventually find its way into *Little Women*: in Chapter XI, the vain Amy is likened to Flora, as she too declares that she has "nothing to wear."

Here and elsewhere, fashion is the sign of new money and secularizing culture. Taken together, they indicate a lack of moral feeling and social responsibility. Like neighbours and contemporaries such as Emerson and Thoreau, the Alcotts were deeply concerned with the ethics of dress. They were troubled by the idea that fashion was a means of enforcing and celebrating social inequity – of "flaunting it." This also relates to much earlier writers and moralists, and to established and emergent methods of production: slavery, the weary dressmaker, the factory system. The Alcotts look back to a simpler age, when materialist and showy attitudes were thought not to be so much in evidence. As a recent historian has observed, "[a]mbivalence about luxury is a national tradition," and such mixed feelings may be traced to the Bible, which tells us of divine splendour alongside warnings against devilish extravagance.<sup>11</sup> But there is a more immediate biographical factor at work in the Alcotts' distrust of new money, and its expression in fashion. Abba herself had connections to old money. She was the daughter of Colonel Joseph May, the niece of Dorothy Quincy

Hancock, and a descendant on her mother's side of Judge Samuel Sewall. Her background incorporated some of the most notable legal and business figures of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But in marrying the improvident Bronson, her financial and class status had been brought into question. As Lydia Maria Child observed and subsequent historians have agreed, class distinctions became more pronounced in the course of the nineteenth century, and the crucial determining factor was the distinction between non-manual and manual labor. As "middling sorts" ascended to a relatively new white collar gentility, the baseline of class status required not working with the hands. Only fully aware of the risk she had taken after it was too late, Abba Alcott expressed her desperation to her father in telling terms: "Would you have me take in washing?"<sup>12</sup>

The Alcotts' social humiliation had consequences for all members of the family. For Louisa May, it resulted in a kind of social disappearance. She wrote in her journal for December 1860 that she had been asked to a "John Brown meeting, but had no 'good gown,' so didn't go" (p. 101). Even in radical reform circles, Alcott's poverty made her feel a loss of social mobility. She also records her disturbance at seeing other, more expensively dressed women in Boston: "In the street I try not to covet fine things" (p. 61). But the most sustained and complex register of this class endangerment is to be found in her fiction. It is here that the intersections of money, gender, display, and class manifest themselves most fully.

Reviewers often saw Alcott's fiction as fit for children because, in style and content, it lacked dressiness or over-sophistication. *Little Women* (1868) was "a simple, natural picture of home life," with "talk" that was "natural and child-like." Her work was "made up of such plain material."<sup>13</sup> To put it another way, *Little Women* does not disguise its puritanical strain. The novel contains many explicit references to *Pilgrim's Progress*, and is structured around this precursor. But it is not directly religious or spiritual in its bent. Its moral values are more frequently conflated with those of class than with those of Christianity. Whilst it is true that the girls are encouraged to be "little women" because it is Christian to be modest, gentle, and self-sacrificing, their discretion and their modesty are also their only remaining guarantees of their middle-class status. The narrative makes specific claims on the girls' behalf to a social position which is in danger of being lost. We are permitted to overhear a conversation in a fine drawing-room, during which the Marches are described as "one of our first families, but reverses of fortune, you know."<sup>14</sup> The novel constantly rescues the social standing of the characters, and by implication, of their real-life counterparts. In compensation for his increasingly fragile claims to middle-class

respectability, Bronson's fictional alter ego is given high military rank: Mr. March is a colonel. The patronage of Mr. Lawrence is another means of making frequent allusion to the March family's grander past. Rather than judging on current appearances, Mr. Lawrence respects the status implied by their background and behaviour. And however far they may have fallen, the family is never confused with the lower classes. There is always a broad conceptual gulf between the Marches and their servant, Hannah Mullet, or the poor immigrants to whom the family extends its benevolence. Indeed, the introduction of the destitute, anomalously "foreign" Hummel family makes explicit the ethnicized dimension of class values at this time: the middle class is not made up of recent arrivals, but of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The rescuing of the Hummel family assures the Marches of their residual powers, and it initiates the process of assimilation, of recreating the Hummels in the March image. At this stage, however, the Hummels remain "dangerous," in that it is from them that Beth catches scarlet fever. Alcott explores the drama of poverty from the point of view of an educated, non-laboring, white middle class. But in the process, she uses her fiction to redelineate the social boundaries that her real family was in danger of blurring. Notwithstanding the fact that, in her poverty, Alcott herself had had to work as a servant and as a seamstress, in the fiction she reinstates a sense of social superiority. She insists on the same identification she made when, as a ten-year-old, she heard the story of the rich girl and the poor girl: "I shall be kind to poor people."

Alcott uses *Little Women* to investigate class in explicit relation to femininity and display. The precise nature of Marmee's claims to being a lady are stated with her introduction to the narrative:

"Glad to find you so merry, my girls," said a cheery voice at the door, and actors and audience turned to welcome a tall, motherly lady, with a "can-I-help-you" look about her which was truly delightful. She was not elegantly dressed, but a noble-looking woman, and the girls thought the grey cloak and unfashionable bonnet covered the most splendid mother in the world. (p. 8)

Alcott is very much on the attack here, with her characterization of someone who is both a "lady" and "unfashionable," who is "tall" and "noble," but who seeks to help rather than to command. Marmee is presented as someone who is liable to confuse modern, superficial perceptions of class. This politics of display versus helpful industry is equally present in the March girls' sewing. They are encouraged to sew for reasons beyond the merely practical. Sewing serves to inculcate a genteel feminine virtue, in

that it is a quiet accomplishment, far removed from the brutish pleasures of “romping.” It is no accident that the most virtuous sister, Beth, is also the most accomplished needlewoman. Through her, Alcott offers a moralized vaunting of old-fashioned womanly skills. But as we saw with Marmee, Alcott’s approval of neatness of dress does not preclude a strong mistrust of fashion. Sewing as a subservient, familial activity is set against a more worldly femininity in the chapter in which “Meg Goes to Vanity Fair.” Meg allows herself to be dressed up and ornamented for the Moffats’ *soirée*: Belle Moffat and Hortense, the French maid, turn her into “a fine lady” (p. 81) and “a fashion-plate” (p. 86). In Alcott’s fiction, one thing always leads to another, and soon Meg is drinking champagne, flirting, chattering, and giggling. She becomes, as one man describes her, “a doll.” But once the effects of the champagne have worn off, Meg will reproach herself, and her good sense will prevail once more. This mistrust of fashionable pleasures is also conflated, in a semi-humorous way, with dangerously speculative business practices. Amy buys into the fashion of exchanging pickled limes at school, even to the point of taking advantage of “credit” in order to enhance her status and her enjoyments. Of course, this showy, entrepreneurial behavior will lead Amy into her “Valley of Humiliation.” She is forced to throw her entire investment of limes out of the school window, where they are gathered up by the “little Irish children” who, like the Hummels, subsist opportunistically at the text’s margins.

If Meg’s and Amy’s narratives align Alcott firmly with a reformist post-Puritan culture, other parts of the novel suggest a different reading. When the relatively well-off Mrs. Gardiner invites Meg and Jo to a New Year’s Eve ball, they rush around with humorous desperation, trying to gather together enough of the right clothes to make themselves presentable. With repairs and borrowing, they just about manage. The serious point that lies behind the humour here is that although Alcott disapproves of the vain and foolish shows of *arrivistes*, she also recognizes that to lack the right clothes is to lose social presence altogether. The suggestion is that it is not enough to have genteel manners. To be unable to dress appropriately is to be disqualified from polite society. In her idealistic moments, Alcott harks back to a morally and behaviorally determined social hierarchy, in which fashionable display was a liability as much as anything. But even if such a society had ever existed, *Little Women* testifies to an increasing pressure to live up to more showy forms and codes. Alcott was uncertainly located in this ferment. She had affiliations with the grand old mercantile class of Boston, but these had been weakened, and her immediate family had not participated in the rise to prosperity of the “middling sorts.” Her fictional

response was to question the egotistical pleasures of new money, while the same narratives are haunted by fears of being left behind.

Alcott remained divided, however, on the defining issue of fashion. This was because her disapproval of the shows of the world was counterbalanced by a Romantic love of exotic, aggrandized personae. In her fiction, she managed these tensions by finding safe, semi-private ways to celebrate display. This is most obvious in the way that the sisters love to dress up for their various theatricals. Within an earnest and moralized ethos, there is also a pleasure in sumptuary splendour. This also introduces a valuable performative element to her characters' lives. In their writing and their dramatic productions, the March sisters create a series of alternative imaginative spaces. Their playfulness deals in an untrammelled possibility that is at odds with the rigid codes that they must follow in their daily lives. The often tempestuous, performative aspect remains present even after the girls have given up their plays. Although Jo may try to carry out the bidding of various more sensible elders – Marmee, Father, Professor Bhaer – the reader knows that Jo is still a character who may do anything, who has an exciting talent for improvisation and reinvention. This potential for alternative creativity within apparently stifling systems is vital to *Little Women* and, indeed, to the entire canon of girls' fiction. The theatrical element of *Little Women* also conforms to the emergent fictional recognition of adolescence, in that it reveals the girls' social incoherence, their unformed and essayistic selves which contain radical possibilities. It is also telling that the girls' performances incorporate a suggestion of the gothic, and especially of violent ruptures of established social relations. Their stories and dramas stage coercive passions, attempted abductions, and shadowy figures, with "The Masked Marriage. A Tale of Venice" and a play with "Dons," witches, arsenic, and fainting fits. While it would be easy to overstate the importance of these literary performances to the novel, their presence confirms the sense of the adolescent girl's insurrectionary potential. In their plays and stories, the girls indicate a reluctance to accept the constraints of the symbolic order, a reluctance which will then manifest itself in subsequent crises.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the liberatory potential of performance is circumvented, in that Jo tries to conform – she tries to perform correctness. But how complete is this resolve on the part of author and character? Certainly the novel maintains some level of ambivalence with regard to the possibility of a transformed and pleased self, and this is clear in the different fates of the sisters. Alcott extolls the earnest virtues of domestic economy in the story of Meg. Having married the impecunious John, Meg must learn to tailor her desires to her budget. But Alcott and her readers may also travel to Europe

with another sister. Through Amy, we are permitted the modern, monied pleasure of a continental excursion, and may vicariously enjoy the experience of being courted by a rich and handsome suitor on the lake at Vevey. For all that true worth is to be discerned behind appearances, the novel also grants a romance that consists of wealth, leisure, and “Paris finery.” There is, after all, to be “dressing up” and pleasure without repercussions. As Richard Brodhead has so persuasively suggested, “at the same time that it is erecting an ethic of poor but honest virtue against the temptations of affluence, *Little Women* opens an unobtrusive commerce between old-style virtuous domesticity and a new-style lavishness.”<sup>16</sup> But finally it is old money that brings the world to rights: the new-style lavishness is made possible by the long-established Lawrence fortune, and when Jo’s virtue is finally rewarded, it is with her inheritance of Plumfield from her Aunt March.

Although one could use a number of Alcott’s novels and stories to develop the intersections between money, gendered display, and class, I want to focus on *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870). I do this because the novel has received very little critical attention, because it deals with the issues of display and class stratification insistently and explicitly, and because it represents a neat structural reversal of its celebrated predecessor, *Little Women*.<sup>17</sup> Its reversal of *Little Women* lies in the fact that, whereas Meg is placed momentarily in Vanity Fair before a return to the comfortable and moralized locale of home, *An Old-Fashioned Girl* is set almost entirely in Boston, as the heroine, Polly Milton, must make her way among various social and economic dangers. This in itself shows that, whatever her views on the relative virtues of town and country, the metropolis of Boston was coming to occupy an increasingly important place in Alcott’s life and work. And in exploring a country-city dynamic, this novel brings into view the regionalized divisions that were such an important feature of post-War adult fiction.

*An Old-Fashioned Girl* has a simple, dichotomous structure, in that it brings together two different types of girl. Polly is presented as natural, sensible and charming. The novel opens with her visit to Boston to stay with her cousin, Fanny Shaw. Although the girls are the same age, Polly’s “countrified” Concordian background puts her at odds with Fanny. She wears a “simple blue merino frock, stout boots, and short hair,” and is still a girl. Her citified cousin has more advanced notions, both in terms of manner and of dress:

“You are fourteen, and *we* consider ourselves young ladies at that age,” continued Fanny, surveying with complacency the pile of hair on the top of her head, with a fringe of fuzz around her forehead and a wavy lock streaming down her back;

likewise, her scarlet and black suit, with its big sash, little *pannier*, bright buttons, points, rosettes – and heaven knows what. There was a locket on her neck, earrings tinkling in her ears, watch and chain at her belt, and several rings on a pair of hands that would have been improved by soap and water.<sup>18</sup>

Alcott is directing her critical attention at the “Girl of the Period” here. Indeed, elsewhere in the novel she refers specifically to this legendary figure. The “Girl of the Period” was an English version of Flora M’Flimsey, designed by Eliza Lynn Linton to typify the sense that young women were increasingly overdressed and frivolous. The points of comparison between Linton’s “Girl” and Fanny Shaw and her upper-class friends are clear. Linton suggested that the “Girl” had adopted the extravagant dress of the prostitute, and that in doing so, she too had turned herself into a commodity. Fanny and her friends have secret trysts with fast young men, and seek to marry on mercenary terms. Like Linton’s “Girl,” Fanny is defined by the immodesty of her appearance. She too is “a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face, as the first articles of her personal religion; whose sole idea of life is plenty of fun and luxury; and whose dress is the object of such thoughts and intellect as she possesses.”<sup>19</sup>

Fanny and Polly provide a contrast between old and new. Polly belongs to an unchanging rural class. The daughter of a poor country minister, she does not belong to the mercantile elite, but at the same time she is removed from the prosaic connotations of trade and manual labor. Her surname of Milton suggests both her reformist background and her cultural expertise. The contrast between Polly and Fanny conforms to the model of the static, dominant caste of a declining rural society encountering a more mobile and self-enriching urban bourgeoisie. This contrast is developed in the course of the novel, as Polly is placed beside a variety of other female characters, and as Alcott sets out to explore the roles and possibilities for the women of the age. Fanny’s mother, Mrs. Shaw, corresponds to the popular fictional type of the fashionable and ailing mother. When her youngest daughter runs towards her, she pushes her away because the daughter’s hands are dirty and will mark her clothes. Polly is on hand to make the silent observation that “the velvet cloak didn’t cover a right motherly heart, that the fretful face under the nodding purple plumes was not a tender motherly face.” Polly then remembers her own mother, “whose dress was never too fine for little wet cheeks to lie against or loving little arms to press” (p. 114). Mrs. Shaw and her daughter Fanny are caught up in exhibiting new wealth and aping European aristocratic notions. But Alcott suggests that if one pushes back a generation, one will discover true worth. To go back in time

is much the same as returning from the city to the country, for Grandma Shaw represents all the stalwart American Revolutionary virtues that are still alive in Polly. As Grandma Shaw comments:

In my day, children of fourteen and fifteen didn't dress in the height of fashion, go to parties, as nearly like those of grown people as it's possible to make them, lead idle, giddy, unhealthy lives, and get *blasé* at twenty. We were little folks till eighteen or so, worked and studied, dressed and played like children, honored our parents, and our days were much longer in the land than now, it seems to me. (p. 12)

She remembers how "we all learned to make bread, and cook, and wore little chintz gowns, and were as gay and hearty as kittens."<sup>20</sup> She compares the benefit of this model of childhood with that of her daughter-in-law, remarking of her siblings that "[a]ll lived to be grandmothers and fathers, and I'm the last - seventy, next birthday, my dear, and not worn out yet, though daughter Shaw is an invalid at forty" (p. 13). "Daughter Shaw" is more vain and self-indulgent than ill, and her weakness is symptomatic of the moral failures of modernity: she is an "in-valid" woman indeed.<sup>21</sup> Grandma Shaw has lived upstairs, neglected by the new generation, until Polly arrives and tries to establish a relationship with her. Grandma Shaw disregards Polly's lack of fashionable clothes, and recognizes her as a true gentlewomanly type, telling her: "you have lived in the country, and haven't learned that modesty has gone out of fashion" (p. 16). But Polly's presence renews the other children's interest in the old accomplishments of cooking and sewing, and they learn to appreciate their grandmother's stories of the old days. Grandma Shaw tells of the old Beacon Hill families of Hancock, Joy, Quincy and May. Of course, Alcott has given Grandma Shaw precisely her own mother's relations. In a moment which has an undisguised biographical resonance, the narrative privileges the modesty of the past, even as it makes an assertion of class status.

Eventually, after Grandma's death, the Shaw family loses its fortune, and must move back into Grandma's house. Alcott uses Grandma's property to surround the characters with a reassuring sense of their background: "The old-fashioned things... now seemed almost like a gift from Grandma, doubly precious in these troublous times" (p. 285).<sup>22</sup> Polly helps the family to manage under reduced circumstances, and all become more humane and independent as a result. Polly marries the previously unreliable Tom Shaw, while the newly chastened Fanny marries a gentleman of the old school. Although Alcott chooses to "save" Fanny and give her a promising future, the novel is much more strident in what it has to say about girlhood and modernity than is *Little Women*. In the earlier novel, Jo March suffers



adolescent torments, in spite of her country life and her judicious parents. In *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, on the other hand, Polly remains an untroubled and obedient child, even as she becomes an adult. She has no dramatic or otherwise “gothic” impulses, and she manages to by-pass the tumults that afflict other girl-characters. Fanny is the adolescent in *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, and through the Polly–Fanny dichotomy, Alcott seems to imply that the troubled and incoherent phase of growing up was produced by a modern, metropolitan upbringing. Also, although the regionalist dimension is apparent, there is none of the rich ambivalence that we associate with good regionalist fiction (and that we will find in other girls’ fiction). Far from fulfilling the emotionally complex “memorial function” of regionalist writing, Alcott’s “region” has a flatly moralized significance, and she engineers her narrative so that, rather than achieving an interesting interplay between past and present, the past returns with a vengeance.

Although *An Old-Fashioned Girl* demonstrates Alcott’s affiliation with older models of class and virtue, it would be wrong to suppose that she wishes entirely to ignore the facts of modernity, or that she is completely opposed to the possibilities of the modern. She includes New Woman characters, and the themes of fashion and feminism come together in the story of Jenny, the impoverished seamstress. Jenny attempts suicide rather than starve or become a prostitute. Polly learns of her life, and resolves to talk to a party of rich girls about their duty to such struggling women. The rich young women have come together to make garments for charity, but their skills are so poor that they put sleeves on upside-down, and make jackets inside-out. When the conversation turns to poor seamstresses, a paranoia over fashion and status comes to the fore. As one young woman says of the servant class: “If they spent their wages properly, I shouldn’t mind so much, but they think they must be as fine as anybody and dress so well that it is hard to tell the mistress from the maid.” Another adds: “Servants ought to be made to dress like servants, as they do abroad, then we should have no more trouble” (p. 199). Alcott uses Jenny to extend the social range of her fiction, and to alert the reader to the difficulties encountered by women in a society that places such severe restrictions on women and work. But Alcott also reveals here the great uncertainty that underlies the increasing emphasis on display as a system of class definition. For if class is what one wears as much as how one thinks and acts, then the lower classes will find it only too easy to mimic their “betters.” The problem with gilded age sophistication, then, is not simply that it is immoral, but that it is insecure. Alcott believes in a sympathetic and moral middle class, doubtless because she was thoughtful and compassionate. But she was also an “old-fashioned

girl” in her time, and she uses the novel to clarify her sense of her own class pretensions. In pressing the claims of her Beacon Hill background over those of fashionable self-display, she was retrieving what had been lost. This reactionary gesture is ultimately rather troubling. Alcott was attempting to consolidate the basis of class definition, suggesting that it should be as obvious and immovable as Grandma Shaw’s old, heavy furniture. We might have inferred this from the story of Jenny, the distressed seamstress. Although Alcott exhibits through Jenny a concern with working women’s lives, she has created a very safely “deserving” figure. As Christine Stansell has observed of such stock characters, they were “the kind of working-class woman, housebound, deferential and meek, that genteel people liked.” The factory girl, on the other hand, was better off, anti-domestic, and generally “more venturesome and disturbing.”<sup>23</sup> Alcott’s work seems an uncertain and incomplete effort to address shifts in class-definition. Even as she seeks a radical redress of social inequity, she longs to reunite with the well-modulated conservatism of Beacon Hill.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, Alcott’s moral investment in realism was always subservient to her own more personal fears of class endangerment, and to the reactionary tendencies that those fears stimulated.

Surveying Alcott’s work, fashion is seen to become increasingly important as a marker of social power, but one that commodifies girls and women. Alcott argues that dress should not be important, and seeks to retrench the forms of class definition that she believes obtained before the rise of the culture of display. Given the poverty and ignominy of so much of her own life, at times she resembles no one so much as Verena Tarrant’s mother in that novel full of Alcottian echoes, James’s *The Bostonians*: “What she clung to was ‘society,’ and a position in the world which a secret whisper told her she had never had and a more audible voice told her she was in danger of losing.”<sup>25</sup> Alcott’s characters’ redemption lies in their well-mannered adjustment to reversal of fortune, although she betrays herself somewhat with her characters who “marry well.” Alcott did not marry, but she lived long enough and became sufficiently successful to “buy into” the newly consumerized middle class. All her young adult life, she managed with gifts and handed-down, re-made clothes. After her great success with *Little Women*, she was to be diffident about fame, resenting intrusion, but enjoying the delights that had been denied her by youthful poverty. In her middle age she left the old-fashioned girl behind, and began to enjoy some of the pleasures of the “Girl of the Period.” She continued to sew throughout her life, but she also began to spend considerable amounts on her wardrobe. She never became a compulsive clothes-buyer, and she certainly never came

close to exceeding her income. She remained financially conservative, and even as a wealthy woman, would keep a record of bills in cents as well as dollars. But she did acquiesce in a culture in which status was signified by expensive self-presentation. She spent more on clothes in a year than her cook earned in a year.<sup>26</sup> She also began to make big lump-sum payments for elaborate, professionally made dresses.<sup>27</sup> She used her wealth to display her wealth, to “dress the part” of an extremely successful writer. But she was also caught up in a more pervasive shift. Fashion became so accessible, so universally inclusive, that the base-level of sartorial respectability went up. She, along with every one else, had to do more to stay in the same position. But display may also have had another meaning for Alcott. It was confirmation that she had finally achieved all the things she had longed for when a girl. Modish display may have been “vain,” but it was also proof of her professional success, an expression of her self-made security.<sup>28</sup>

Alcott's various decisions in relation to her life and work exhibit a keen disapproval of gilded age forms and practices. She could never accept her own accommodation to the order of conspicuous consumption. She tried to disguise her unmistakable desire for money as a family obligation – to pay off her father's debts, to save for her nephews and niece. In the face of this increasingly delusory sense of economic need, she did make decisions as to what she would and would not do for money. However, this in turn might be related to non-pecuniary forms of status. For instance, she continued to write “moral pap for the young,” but discontinued her cheap sensation fiction. Brodhead puts the question that, in an age in which divisions in literary taste corresponded increasingly to divisions of class, “what is Alcott's rejection of story-paper writing but a repudiation of a form she fears will declass her?” (p. 104). In her negotiation of the related categories of fashion, class, and authority, she disapproves of the showy vulgarity of cheap romance in the same way that she disapproves of extravagant dress. Her moderating impulse defines her as more securely-rooted in the middle class than would a display of “nouveau luxe.” Her retreat from fame could be interpreted in a similar way. As we noted, she became notorious for her reluctance to appear before her public, scorning to show herself to the day-trippers who peered up at the windows of Orchard House. By the late nineteenth century, such demonstrations of middle-class modesty were irretrievably compromised by financial considerations. One thinks again of James, and his notion that, in the age of display, “the highest luxury of all, the supremely expensive thing, is constituted privacy.”<sup>29</sup> Alcott's refusal to display herself to the common public might once have been seen as virtuous feminine reclusiveness. But in the context of her later life,

it could be construed as “the highest luxury,” as a prideful assertion of independent means. As her argument with “Oliver Optic” suggested, there was the perception that she was “classing off.” In her various and somewhat ambiguous negotiations of fashion and fiction, she enables us to trace the fate of modesty. It is differently prized as its context evolves. It begins as the discreet expression of genteel womanhood, and ends as the premium choice of the consumer.