

“Who are your heroes?”

Thomas Carlyle and Louisa May Alcott

CLAYTON CARLYLE TARR

Clothes gave us individuality, distinctions, social polity; Clothes have made Men of us; they are threatening to make Clothes-screens of us.

—Carlyle, Sartor Resartus

“[G]ood clothes alone don’t make a gentleman here. We require a good deal more.”

—Alcott, Jo’s Boys

IN 1857, TWENTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD LOUISA MAY ALCOTT MUSED: “Wonder if I shall ever be famous enough for people to care to read my story and struggles” (*Journals* 85). *Little Women* (1868), a semi-autobiographical novel of family, labor, and love, won her the fame she desired.¹ Well over a century after it became a cultural sensation, *Little Women* remains influential, adored, and essential. The many texts that followed have gone on to inspire generations of readers—young and old, male and female, amateur and critic. Although Alcott was from an early age surrounded by the pioneers of American Transcendentalism, she nonetheless constructed her own powerful voice—one whose faithful realism often opposed the idealistic, and potentially dangerous, philosophies of her father, Amos Bronson Alcott. Indeed, while Ralph Waldo Emerson was Alcott’s childhood literary paragon and lifelong

¹ Alcott was early on enamoured with fame, as reflected in her youthful estimation of the immensely popular singer, Jenny Lind (1820–87): “She must be a happy girl. I should like to be famous as she is” (*Journals* 51). The popularity of *Little Women* is delineated by Beverly Lyon Clark; see ch. 5.

supporter—"the god of my idolatry," she records in 1860 (*Journals* 99)—his influence is difficult to trace in *Little Women*.² Instead, it is Carlyle's voice that rings loudest. Not only does Alcott negotiate her own hero-worship of Carlyle by constructing a Carlyle-figure to tailor the narrative, but she also engages *Sartor Resartus* (1836) as the narrative framework and moral compass for Jo's path to maturity and happiness.³

Carlyle played a crucial role in Alcott's literary development. Emerson gave her Goethe's works, which more than likely were Carlyle's translations, and she mentions having Carlyle in her library, among Shakespeare, Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and George Sand.⁴ In an 1852 journal entry, Carlyle's *French Revolution* (1837), *Miscellanies* (1838), and *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841) make up the first three of Alcott's "List of books I like" (*Journals* 67). A decade later, Alcott writes in her journal, "enjoyed Carlyle's French Revolution very much. His earth-quaky style suits me" (105). It is not surprising that Carlyle became a fixture in Alcott's novels. In one of her first published works, "A Modern Cinderella" (1860), Alcott describes Di's reading: "Carlyle appeared like scarlet-fever, and raged violently for a time; for, being anything but a 'passive bucket,' Di became prophetic with Mahomet, belligerent with Cromwell, and made the French Revolution a veritable Reign of Terror" (28). Clearly, Di, like Alcott, had been reading both *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* and *The French Revolution*. And the quotation also indicates that Alcott had read Carlyle's *Life of John Sterling* (1851). "To sit as a passive bucket and be pumped into," Carlyle writes, "whether you consent or not, can in the long-run be exhilarating to no creature" (*Works* 11: 55). The references to Carlyle and his works span Alcott's entire career: in her first moderate success in the literary marketplace, *Hospital Sketches* (1863), Tribulation Periwinkle converses with a fellow

² Alcott quotes Juliet's words to Romeo; she later recalls that she sought to be a "second Bettine, making my father's friend [Emerson] my Goethe" ("Recollections" 36).

³ Carlyle's influence on American Transcendentalism is well-documented; see Barbara L. Packer's "Carlyle and the Beginnings of American Transcendentalism" and Rodger L. Tarr's introduction to *Sartor Resartus*.

⁴ Alcott recalls: "[Emerson's] kind hand opened to me the riches of Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe and Carlyle, and I gratefully recall the sweet patience with which he led me round the book-lined room" ("Reminiscences" 90).

train passenger on topics of “the war, the weather, music, Carlyle, skating, genius, hoops, and the immortality of the soul” (16); in *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877)—a re-imagining of Goethe’s *Faust*—she refers to “Carlyle’s rough wisdom” (122); and in “Poppies and Wheat,” part of her last work, *A Garland for Girls* (1888), Jenny “longed to be living through the French Revolution with Carlyle,” rather than “shopping” and “talking to dressmakers” (86).⁵

In spite of the myriad references to Carlyle available in her corpus, it is not surprising that critics continue to regard Emerson as Alcott’s chief mentor. After all, she writes, “I count it the greatest honor and happiness of my life to have known Mr. Emerson” (“Reminiscences” 89). Yet she never refers to him as a heroic influence. Instead, Emerson is her idol, a profound presence throughout her life. Alcott placed Emerson on a throne early on and never wavered. Some months after Dickens’s death, she wrote to her sister, Anna: “I shall miss my own Charley, but he was not the idol he once was” (qtd. in Shealey 158). She even reminisces in 1885 that Goethe was the “chief idol” of her childhood (*Journals* 60). Idols and heroes are not, however, one and the same. Idols rise to god-like status through a kind of passive and pre-ordained appointment. Heroes, on the other hand, are necessarily active performers, who, Carlyle argues, “have shaped themselves in the world’s history,” and have been defined by “what work they did” (*Heroes* 3). In *Little Women*, when Jo is forced to entertain two visiting British children, she asks, “Who are your heroes?” (128). One replies that his heroes are his grandfather and, seemingly channeling Carlyle, Napoleon. But Jo never gets the question returned. When Jo later attends a dinner party held by local literati, she is disgusted by their mannerisms and conversations: “Turning as from a fallen idol, she made other discoveries which rapidly dispelled her romantic illusions” (338). Her idols ruined, Jo must find her hero. As Carlyle argues in *Sartor Resartus*: “Hero-worship exists, has existed, and will for ever exist, universally among Mankind” (190). Alcott made Carlyle her hero.

In 1865, before she began composing *Little Women*, Alcott toured Europe with her sister, May. She was both transfixed and appalled at London: one day she boasts, “I felt as if I’d got into

⁵ In Alcott’s short story, “Buzz,” which appears in *Aunt Jo’s Scrap-Bag* (1875), the narrator befriends a fly, which she explains likes “Goethe and Schiller, Emerson and Browning, as well as I did. Carlyle didn’t suit him” (79).

a novel while going about in the places I'd read so much of" (*Journals* 141); and then the next, channeling the "two nations" of Carlyle's *Past and Present*, she laments having seen "English society, or rather one class of it" (151). That summer, Alcott attended a Dickens reading, but mentions in 1868 that it was a disappointment. In February 1865, she attended a "lecture on Carlyle" given by Henry James, Sr., which, Ellen Emerson wrote to her father, was a "long comparison between you and Mr. Carlyle" (146n). During her stay in London in spring 1866, Alcott writes, "I'd rather see Dickens, Browning & Carlyle than her Majesty & the nine royal children in a row" (*Selected* 112). Although Alcott did visit "all manner of haunts of famous men and women" (*Journals* 152), she never called at Cheyne Row. Perhaps her father's unsuccessful meeting with Carlyle some twenty years earlier made a visit impossible, or at the very least too uncomfortable to consider.⁶

One of the many subjects on which Carlyle and Bronson Alcott could not agree was the virtue of work. Because Bronson's theory of work, as Madeline B. Stern notes, "manifested itself orally rather than manually, it proved monetarily unproductive" (*Journals* 16). Bronson lamented of Carlyle, "Work! Work! is with him both motto and creed; but tis all toil of the brain" (85). Alcott upbraided her father's economic and paternal failings in her short semi-autobiographical satire, "Transcendental Wild Oats" (1873), in which Abel Lamb wishes his community, Fruitlands, to be "turned into a Happy Valley" (46); but his refusal to perform manual labor nearly leads the family to starvation. In fact, Timon Lion (whom Alcott modeled on Charles Lane, the English co-founder of Fruitlands) defines his ideal state as "being, not doing" (35), an almost exact description of what Carlyle considered Bronson's greatest shortcoming. In her tireless work ethic, Louisa May Alcott certainly had more in common with Carlyle than with her father.

⁶ Captivated by Carlyle's philosophies, Bronson Alcott had traveled to London in 1842 armed with a letter of introduction from Emerson. In a letter to his brother John, 23 November 1842, Carlyle referred to the vegetarian Alcott as "Potatoe-Quixote" (*CL* 15: 202). Louisa May would write in 1882, that her father and Carlyle "never could meet or understand one another, & it was vain to try" (*Selected* 260).

Carlyle stamps his treatise on the great virtue of work with the most vigor in *Past and Present* (1843), in which he contends that “an endless significance lies in work” (195). Alcott would borrow this phrase for the epigraph to her novel, *Work* (1873), in which Thomas Power, modeled after the Transcendentalist minister Theodore Parker, gives the protagonist, Christie, a copy of *Heroes and Hero Worship*. That Power is a tireless worker in the novel (coupled with his first name) might suggest Alcott had Carlyle in mind when she created the character. After all, Parker was a devotee of Carlyle who spoke imitative gems such as “Whoso escapes a duty, avoids a gain” (97). For Carlyle, work is not only a moral obligation, but also the path to divine truth. In *Sartor Resartus*, Teufelsdröckh works himself out of a system of negations (which Carlyle terms the Everlasting No) through strenuous activity. Teufelsdröckh’s “Valley closes in abruptly” (117) after he is spurned by his first love, Blumine. Reaching the pole of the Everlasting No, where he experiences an “Annihilation of Self” (142), Teufelsdröckh finds the means within himself to launch his defiant spiritual journey through the Center of Indifference to the Everlasting Yea. He experiences a “nameless Unrest,” which “urged me forward; to which the outward motion was some momentary lying solace” (120). His path to spiritual enlightenment is realized through activity. To Carlyle, “*The end of Man is an Action, and not a Thought*” (120). In *Little Women*, Jo similarly wishes to escape: “I want something new; I feel restless, and anxious to be seeing, doing, and learning more than I am” (317). Unlike Christie in *Work*, however, Alcott and Jo learn to relieve their restlessness at home with a pen.

Applying Carlyle’s maxim in *Sartor Resartus* to “*Do the Duty which lies nearest thee*” (148), Alcott set to work.⁷ Under pressure to complete the manuscript of *Little Women*, her family always teetering on the brink of ruin after her father’s emotional and financial abandonment, Alcott feverishly composed the first part of the novel in a matter of weeks, and then followed with

⁷ No Alcott work is as concerned with duty as *Rose in Bloom* (1876). To name only a few references: Alec observes, “we do our duty better by the boys,” and Mac answers, “you have done your duty faithfully” (10); Phebe implores, “help me do my duty” (146); Rose is “thinking of the duty” (183); Steve “delivered long orations upon one’s duty to society” (156); and Aunt Plenty decides to “do my duty” (152).

the second part in less than three months. In 1870, May Alcott described her sister's sacrifices during this period: "I don't think she realized how great her success is and how [much] comfort she has given us all by this one effort" (qtd. in Shealy 144). Like Jo, Alcott would "fall into a vortex" (256), writing to pay debts, and doing "anything to help the family" ("Recollections" 37). So assiduous was Alcott that she learned to write with her left hand to ease the cramps in her right hand and thus double her output (Showalter ix). Explaining the composition of *Moods* (1865), Alcott writes, "Genius burned so fiercely that for four weeks I wrote all day and planned nearly all night, being quite possessed by my work" (*Journals* 99). Later she recalls that she "wrote like a thinking machine in full operation" (132). This literary labor was not without its sacrifices, however, as Alcott experienced great physical fatigue and often lost feeling in both her hands. Still, the emotional toll was perhaps worse, as Jo expresses in the novel: "An old maid, that's what I'm to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps, when, like poor [Samuel] Johnson, I'm old and can't enjoy it, solitary, and can't share it, independent, and don't need it" (424). In spite of these hardships, Alcott pressed on, vindicating her father's conception of her in his sonnet "L.M.A," as "Duty's Faithful Child" (14).

To avoid distraction, Alcott set up a work area in the attic space of her Concord home. Similar to her author, Jo can be found "very busy in the garret . . . absorbed in her work" (145). Jo's garret allows her sanctuary from the domestic distractions below: "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" (256). Hammatt Billings's 1869 illustration depicts Jo at her garret desk, dressed in her writing garb, paper scattered about the ground (see opp.).⁸ After Jo leaves to be a governess, Mrs. Kirke gives her a "funny little sky-parlor" with a "sunny window" (320). Jo's room with a view recalls both Carlyle's sound-proof attic at Cheyne Row and Teufelsdröckh's Wahngasse "watch-tower":

⁸ See also *CL* 32: frontispiece (viewable on the table of contents page for volume 32 in the *CLO*) for an image of Carlyle writing in his garret study.

It was the attic floor of the highest house in the Wahngasse; and might truly be called the pinnacle of Weissnichtwo, for it rose sheer up above the contiguous roofs, themselves rising from elevated ground. . . . So that it was in fact the speculum or watch-tower of Teufelsdröckh; wherefrom, sitting at ease he might see the whole life-circulation of that considerable City; the streets and lanes of which, with all their doing and driving . . . were for the most part visible there. (*Sartor* 16)

Teufelsdröckh's study is "full of books and tattered papers, and miscellaneous shreds of all conceivable substances, 'united in a common element of dust'" (18). Professor Bhaer's room in *Little Women* similarly is "'a den,' to be sure. Books and papers, everywhere" (327). Whereas Carlyle's study was intended to give him quiet from external noises such as those made by his neighbors' "Demon-Fowls" (*Reminiscences* 151), Alcott's garret released her from social obligations. "Hate to visit people who only ask me to help amuse others," she records in February 1862, "and often longed for a crust in a garret with freedom and a pen" (*Her Life* 130).



Hammatt Billings, "Jo in a Vortex"
Little Women (Boston, 1869), opp. 44

The likelihood that Carlyle and Alcott never met is important to understanding Alcott's design of Professor Bhaer. For Bhaer is not the real Carlyle, but rather the Carlyle whom Alcott created from the powerful voice of her hero's texts in combination with his fictional hero, Teufelsdröckh.⁹ In 1888, Ernest Rhys suggests that Teufelsdröckh is "nothing if he is not Carlyle in disguise, the projection of the Scotchman's individuality upon a half-humorous, half-philosophical German background" (qtd. in Chesterton 40). Christine Doyle has traced Alcott's lifelong valorization of Germans, going so far as to suggest that its "pervasive presence ultimately makes much more explicable the match between Jo March and Friedrich Bhaer" (50). However, Doyle fails to mention Teufelsdröckh, the German figure who means the most to Alcott's construction of Bhaer, both philosophically and physically.

As with Teufelsdröckh, one of the "learned, indefatigable, deep-thinking" Germans (4), who has "thick locks . . . so long and lank, overlapping roof-wise the gravest face we ever in this world saw" and "shaggy brows" (13), Bhaer is a "regular German—rather stout, with brown hair tumbled all over his head, a bushy beard, good nose, the kindest eyes I ever saw, and a splendid big voice that does one's ears good" (322). (William Holman Hunt described Carlyle's hair as "shaggy" [353], and Bronson Alcott wrote of the "rich mellowness" of Carlyle's voice [*Letters* 78].) Teufelsdröckh dresses in "loose, ill-brushed, threadbare habiliments" (13), and Jo notes of Bhaer that "two buttons were off his coat and there was a patch on one shoe" (322). As Emerson said of the "plentiful stream" of Carlyle's words (Norton 147), Teufelsdröckh speaks in a "whole series and river of the most memorable utterances" (15). Similarly, "in his native city," Bhaer "had been a man much honored and esteemed for learning and integrity" (338). Both are of an indistinct middle age, and both see a "good deal more than people fancied" (341).

Friedrich Bhaer is, however, no more Teufelsdröckh than Carlyle. There seems little doubt that Alcott saw several

⁹ Madeline B. Stern argues that Alcott created Bhaer from "traits she mined from her memories of Reinhold Solger and Dr. [William] Rimmer. Professor Bhaer bore striking resemblances also to August Bopp" (179), but Alcott—uncharacteristically—made no comments on potential real-life candidate(s) for Bhaer's model.

artistic renderings of Carlyle throughout her life. Emerson showed Bronson Alcott a daguerreotype he had received of Carlyle in 1846.¹⁰ And in 1850, Bronson records that William Lloyd Garrison pointed to a portrait of Carlyle during one of their Parliament meetings, and expressed a wish that it to be turned “to the wall” (*Notes* 110). But no representation is more important than the photograph displayed prominently at the Alcott family’s Orchard House. In 1882, an anonymous writer described Bronson Alcott’s room:

The most notable picture is a photograph of Carlyle. It is what is called a “Cameron photograph.” An English woman of rank takes these photographs of distinguished men just for her own amusement. The camera is set out of focus, the heads nearly life-size, and the general effect is singular—interesting, if nothing else. All you can see against a black background is the indistinct outlines of a shaggy white head and beard and sharp features. With all deference to Mr. Carlyle, we must say that he looks like an old beggar. (“Mr. Alcott” 29–30)

Julia Margaret Cameron’s 1867 photographs reveal Carlyle’s powerful persona and quiet intensity, while simultaneously highlighting his suppressed vulnerability and austere reserve.¹¹ Alcott was familiar with the photograph, and it almost certainly influenced her description of Bhaer. The illustrations of Bhaer commissioned for *Little Women* tend to confirm her assertion that “I take many heroes and heroines from real life—much truer than any one can imagine” (*Selected* 296).

Alcott’s convictions about the relationship between real life and fictive heroes, of course, increased her anxieties about the illustrations for the first edition of *Little Women*. Her younger sister May (1840–79) was charged to produce the illustrations for the first part of the novel. Alcott dismissed them as a failure. Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers, the publisher who had

¹⁰ See *CL* 20: frontispiece (available in the *CLO* on the table of contents page for volume 20). Emerson was delighted with the daguerreotype of his friend: “it is life to life,” he wrote to Carlyle on 31 May 1846 (Slater 400). He also entered a long description of it in his journal; see 196–97.

¹¹ The Cameron images are widely available online; see, for example <<http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=65353>>.

urged Alcott to write a book for girls, hired Hammatt Billings (1818–74) to illustrate the second part. Alcott panned his first attempts, especially his depiction of Amy and Laurie. Billings redid this important illustration to meet Alcott’s demands. However, she never mentions having taken issue with Billings’s depiction of Bhaer, no doubt because he had captured the likeness she had envisioned when she created the character.



Hammatt Billings, “The Professor and Tina”
Little Women (Boston, 1869), *opp.* 142

In later editions, the illustrations remained a central concern for Alcott. Frank Merrill (b. 1848) produced over 200 illustrations for an 1880 edition of *Little Women* that Alcott very much admired. One reviewer called them “so clever and effective that they suffice to tell the story almost as engagingly as the text itself” (qtd. in Clark 89). In these images Bhaer appears very much like Carlyle: bearded and powerful, sympathetic and intense, lively and instructive.



Frank Merrill,
Professor Bhaer and Tina, and Professor Bhaer
Little Women (Cambridge, 1880), 406

If direct comparisons of the images in the early editions with Carlyle seem conjectural, the connections in the novel itself are not. Alcott writes, “Friedrich Bhaer was not only good, but great” (340). And later, Bhaer performs “Mignon’s Song” for the Marches, which is Goethe’s “Kennst du das land,” a favorite of Carlyle’s and a song featured in Carlyle’s widely reprinted translation of *Wilhelm Meister* (1824).¹² It is, however, *Sartor Resartus* that plays the most important role in Alcott’s corpus. In her 1882 revision of *Moods*, which she returned to after regaining the rights from the bankrupt publisher, A. K. Loring, Alcott adds a section in which Sylvia compares her circle of relations to texts, explaining, “I fancy faces are the illustrations to the books which people are” (240). Warwick then petitions Sylvia to compare him to a book. Their dialogue is worth quoting in full:

¹² In the 1882 edition of *Moods*, Sylvia returns a volume of *Wilhelm Meister* she borrowed from Moor, who inquires why she chose it. “I heard some people talking about ‘Mignon,’” she replies, “and I wanted to know who she was” (228). Later, Moor refers to Sylvia as a “modern Mignon” (244).

“You remind me of Sartor Resartus, which I once heard called a fine mixture of truth, satire, wisdom, and oddity”

Warwick looked as if he had got another prick, but laughed his deep laugh, exclaiming in surprise,—

“Bless the child! how came she to read that book?”

“Oh, I found it and liked it, for, though I could not understand all of it, I felt stirred and strengthened by the strong words and large thoughts. Don’t you like it?” asked Sylvia, taking a girlish pleasure in his astonishment.

“It is one of my favorite books, and the man who wrote it one of my most honored masters.”

“Did you ever see him?” asked the girl eagerly.

He had, and went on to tell her in brief, expressive phrases much that delighted and comforted her, for she was a hero-worshipper and loved to find new gods to love up to and to love. (241)

Sylvia is an avid reader of Carlyle and finds in him a hero to worship. But as with Alcott, Sylvia knew Carlyle only through his words and the descriptions of others who had the privilege to be in his company. Sylvia demonstrates her intellect to Warwick through her reading of Carlyle; some years earlier, however, Alcott punishes her most autobiographical character for her literary ignorance.

When Jo meets with Mr. Dashwood in the second part of *Little Women*, in hopes of selling him her sensation novel, Alcott’s narrator explains: Jo “had never read Sartor Resartus, but she had a womanly instinct that clothes possess an influence more powerful over many than the worth of character or the magic of manners. So she dressed herself in her best” (332). As with *Sartor Resartus*, *Little Women* is in many respects a reflection on the philosophy of clothes. The first half of the novel is nearly dominated by Meg’s mistakes with clothes: “that autumn the serpent got into Meg’s paradise, and tempted her, like many a modern Eve, not with apples, but with dress” (270). Embarrassed at a party for wearing shabby clothes—to the other attendees, one of the “greatest calamities under heaven” (86)—her friends locate a new dress and accessories, making her feel “as if her fun had really begun at last, for the

mirror had plainly told her that she was ‘a little beauty’” (88). But Meg afterwards realizes the sacrifice that the new clothes made: “I’m not Meg tonight, I’m ‘a doll’ who does all sorts of crazy things. Tomorrow I shall put away my ‘fuss and feathers’ and be desperately good again” (92). What makes Meg a “little beauty” does not make her a little woman. Meg continues to be lured by clothes even after her marriage to Mr. Brooke. She spends exorbitantly on a new shawl, but realizing her mistake, sells it to her wealthy friend, and exchanges it for a coat for Brooke: the “great-coat was put on in the morning by a very happy husband, and taken off a night by a most devoted little wife” (274). Thus Meg becomes tailor to her husband and is no longer tailored by the conventions of society, a lesson she must learn to become, in the second part of the novel, a “good wife.”

Jo is never much of a dresser, at least under the conventions urged upon her by Meg. But that is no matter. For Carlyle writes that there are both “Tailors and Tailored” (44); Jo is often the former, and thus “something of a creator or Divinity” (219). She becomes “absorbed in dressmaking, for she was mantua-maker general to the family, and took especial credit to herself because she could use a needle as well as a pen” (277). She is later shocked that Bhaer’s clothes are threadbare, and although she knows that “German gentlemen embroider” (so Bhaer is a tailor, too), she takes to mending his socks and sewing his buttons back on: “to think of the poor man having to mend his own clothes” (325). Thus, their relationship is far more symbiotic and satisfying than readers have given credit.

Like Carlyle, Bhaer has been censured as a model of patriarchy. Roberta Seelinger Trites argues, “Jo marries Professor Bhaer more out of desperate loneliness than anything else” (154), and then accuses Bhaer of breaking up Jo’s family: “If readers feel betrayed by the ending of *Little Women*, it is because Jo betrays the homosocial female community she has proven is the only community worth sharing” (155). Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant go as far as to call Jo’s path to maturity a “murder,” arguing that “Alcott systematically strips Jo of all vestiges of self until she is indeed ‘Bhaer,’ or bare—ready to be clothed and defined by someone else, her husband” (104, 117). Alcott’s own remarks on the marriage, however, indicate that she could not construct it as she wished. “[P]ublishers wont let

authors finish up as they like,” she writes on 20 March 1869, “but insist on having people married off in a wholesale manner which much afflicts me” (*Selected* 125). To meet the demands of her publisher and the “many enthusiastic young ladies,” Alcott decided on a “funny match,” which she knew would create controversy: “I expect vials of wrath to be poured out upon my head,” she asserts with Carlylean gumption, “but rather enjoy the prospect” (125). At worst, Alcott made a comic pairing; at best, a perfect match.¹³ Bhaer is certainly Jo’s hero, just as Carlyle is Alcott’s. But this hero-worship is neither one-sided, nor is it yet another nineteenth-century example of patriarchal hegemony; it only suggests that both Alcott and Jo are reluctant to stand under the spotlight of heroism, not that they fail to be heroes themselves. In 1864, Alcott received a letter from a “Mrs Gildersleeve asking for my photograph & a sketch of my life for a book called ‘Heroic Women’ which she was getting up. Respectfully refused” (*Journals* 129). After *Little Women* became a sensation both in America and overseas, Alcott refers to the legions of “Jo worshippers” (158), perhaps finally finding comfort through the positive reactions of her countless readers.

On a more complex level, Jo and Bhaer’s relationship is based on tailoring: Jo’s stitch-work is a metaphor for Bhaer’s own spiritual cleansing. After all, when he realizes his love for Jo, Bhaer appears “dressed in a spandy-new suit of black, which made him look more like a gentleman than ever” (435). Sartor Resartus, a tailor retailed. Bhaer is before but a poor wanderer, a kind soul trapped in a confusion of paper and tattered clothes. Jo gives him an outlet for his mind. Carlyle describes love as “a discerning of the Infinite in the Finite, of the Idea made Real” (*Sartor* 108). Bhaer had his ideas and his philosophies on education, but only Jo’s love, and indeed her inheritance, can provide Bhaer with the tangible products to co-run a successful school. Each helps the other find truth, but it is Jo’s struggle that gets top-billing, perhaps only because she is the star around which all other characters orbit.

¹³ On 6 January 1869, Alcott wrote to Alfred Whitman: “All my little girl-friends are madly in love with Laurie & insist on a sequel, so I’ve written one which will make you laugh, especially the pairing off part. But I didn’t know how to settle my family any other way & I wanted to disappoint the young gossips who vowed that Laurie & Jo should marry” (*Selected* 120).

Because Jo has not read her Carlyle, she is easily lured “into the frothy sea of sensational literature” (335), urged on by fellow attendees at a lecture on the Pyramids. Her critical reaction to the dubious subject matter echoes Carlyle, who writes in *Sartor Resartus*, “The secret of Man’s Being is still like the Sphinx’s secret” (42). He would return to this subject in *Past and Present*, arguing that the Sphinx is like nature; beautiful and abundantly giving, it will ultimately and without remorse consume the superficial: “he who dwells in the temporary Semblances and does not penetrate into the eternal Substance will *not* answer the Sphinx-riddle of Today, or of any Day” (16). The Sphinx-riddle is for Carlyle like Teufelsdröckh’s clothes-theory, yet another veil that beguiles arrogant rationalists from seeing the truth that lies behind. When Jo attends the lecture on the Pyramids, she muses “at the choice of such a subject for such an audience, but took it for granted that some great social evil would be remedied or some great want supplied by unfolding the glories of the Pharaohs to an audience whose thoughts were busy with the price of coal and flour, and whose lives were spent in trying to solve harder riddles than that of the Sphinx” (257). Her prejudice against Egyptian subject matter suggests an obligation to represent real life as a writer. However, Jo is quickly drawn away from writing from experience to more lucrative novels of sensation.

In 1867, Alcott’s *A Modern Mephistopheles* was rejected by publishers for its lurid nature, and her earlier novel, *Moods* (1864), received harsh criticism for its subject matter. Her sarcastic response to the reviews of the latter is instructive: “My next book shall have no *ideas* in it, only facts, and the people shall be as ordinary as possible; then critics will say it is all right” (qtd. in Showalter xxi). That book of “only facts” became *Little Women*, and her hero helped Alcott make this generic change. Carlyle champions books as the key to answering nature’s riddles: “Literature, so far as it is Literature, is an ‘apocalypse of Nature,’ a revealing of the ‘open secret’” (*Heroes* 141).

Jo is here, in Elaine Showalter’s words, “rescued by Professor Bhaer” (xxxii). He encourages her “to study simple, true, and lovely characters” (337). She follows his advice, like Alcott, through (auto)biography. In *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle sees biography as the “most universally profitable, universally pleasant of all things,” and he especially promotes those

of “distinguished individuals” (58). But biography not only presents truth, it allows writers to see within themselves:

A certain inarticulate Self-consciousness dwells dimly in us; which only our Works can render articulate and decisively discernible. Our Works are the mirror wherein the spirit first sees its natural lineaments. Hence, too, the folly of that impossible Precept, *Know thyself*; till it be translated into this partially possible one, *Know what thou canst work at*. (123).

Alcott’s spiritual catharsis comes through work, the labor of personal biography. This revelation applies to Jo also, for it is only when she begins to write about herself, to work with the subjects she knows, that she can find happiness. But to know Professor Bhaer requires Jo to see him outside of their domestic comforts, to witness him challenged by the unbelieving zealots who, in Carlyle’s words in *Sartor Resartus*, promote “[t]hat progress of Science, which is to destroy Wonder” (52). For without wonder (anticipating Emerson’s “transparent eyeball”), there is only a “Pair of Spectacles behind which there is no Eye” (53). Bhaer reawakens Jo’s wonder. Through his “mental or moral spectacles,” Jo can see through the metaphoric “Clothes-screens” and thus access nature’s truths.

Limited to the constraints of domestic discourse with Bhaer at Mrs. Kirke’s, Jo has to this point experienced only the passive aspects of the man: German teacher and father-figure. Only after he is ignited with fiery indignation over the discourse of some “Speculative Philosophy” does Jo truly start to comprehend Bhaer’s outlook and to see him in a new light:

It dawned upon her gradually that the world was being picked to pieces, and put together on new and, according to the talkers, on infinitely better principles than before, that religion was in a fair way to be reasoned into nothingness, and intellect was to be the only God. Jo knew nothing about philosophy or metaphysics of any sort, but a curious excitement, half pleasurable, half painful, came over her as she listened with a sense of being turned adrift into time and space, like a young balloon out on a holiday. (339)

Glancing around the room to catch Bhaer’s reaction, Jo sees him “looking at her with the grimmest expression she had

ever seen him wear,” and then he “blazed up with honest indignation, and defended religion with all the eloquence of truth” (339). Similarly, Carlyle writes of scientific rationalism in *Sartor Resartus*: “Man’s whole life and environment have been laid open and elucidated; scarcely a fragment or fibre of his Soul, Body, and Possessions, but has been probed, dissected, distilled, desiccated, and scientifically decomposed” (3–4). As Bhaer speaks, the “world got right again to Jo; the old beliefs that had lasted so long, seemed better than the new. God was not a blind force, and immortality was not a pretty fable, but a blessed fact. She felt as if she had solid ground under her feet again” (340).

Although Alcott listed Carlyle as one of her “favorite authors” as late as 1886, concluding, “I read no modern fiction. It seems poor stuff when one can have the best of the old writers” (*Selected* 296), her hero-worship became complicated in her later years. On 14 January 1885, she writes, “Read in eve. Carlyle last vol.” (*Journals* 249). Alcott probably was reading the third volume of James Anthony Froude’s controversial biography. She was not impressed. Referring to the recent biography of George Eliot by her husband J. W. Cross, Alcott records, “Mr. Cross has been a wise man, and leaves us all our love and respect instead of spoiling them as Froude did for Carlyle” (*Her Life* 364). Perhaps the cold reception Carlyle’s *Reminiscences* received in 1881 prompted Alcott to write a more flattering account of her idol in “Reminiscences of Ralph Waldo Emerson” (1882). Froude’s dubious hypotheses and sensational conjectures seem to have slightly damaged Alcott’s opinion of her hero. Alcott’s shift presents a perfect example of G. B. Tennyson’s account of Carlyle’s “periods” from Popular to Reactionary. Although Alcott certainly was never a “Denouncer” (Tennyson 37), she was apparently disappointed. In a 20 October 1886 letter, she concludes, “Carlyle is stormy, but very genuine, & I used to like him best. Now R.W.E. is my minister & friend” (302). The hero falls; the idol endures. Alcott had shifted her literary reverence from a literary figure whom she conceived imaginatively to a person whom she knew personally.

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