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Louisa May Alcott's *femmes fatales*: A Critique of Patriarchal Hypocrisy in Sentimental American Society

When the antebellum America witnessed the birth of Louisa May Alcott in 1832, its literary scene was populated by several writers of advice manuals who – in accordance with the sentimental credo of honesty – called for sincere behavior and transparent conduct in all spheres of life. It might have seemed that, if the postulates of those authors were to be fulfilled, Alcott would happily live in the world of truth and moral lucidity. Yet, neither her life nor the condition of the society she was cast into proved blissful enough for the sentimental writers to rest satisfied. Quite the reverse: once elevated to the rank of enforced standard, the romantic ideal of sincerity proved to be more of a fashionable disguise for immoral demeanor than a reliable determinant of chaste character. In result, Alcott had to try her literary hand amidst the world of deceit, and even the Spartan upbringing exercised by her transcendentalist father did not shield her from the atrocities of Victorian America as it was supposed to. Having first suffered humiliation as a servant and tasted the bitter cup of Civil War experience, Alcott finally resolved to defy by her life and work the deceptive America she was observing all around her.

Still, in order to be noticed among men and women of letters, Louisa May Alcott had to play by the rules of the society she undertook to criticize. Accordingly, she published stories that described and ridiculed the hypocrisy of contemporary middle class, but did so only anonymously or under the penname of A. M. Barnard. She was well aware that those stories were considered immoral by most Americans of her time; ironically enough, however, they helped Alcott pay the bills incurred by her family.¹ This meant that, in spite of the contempt they earned among Alcott's contemporaries, they sold well and were widely read. The financial aspect of Alcott's sensation stories thus ridicules Victorian double standards and calls into question the morality of those who stealthily devour Alcott's thrillers overnight but openly criticize them in daylight. More importantly, the stories themselves tell of cunning "confidence women" that inhabit Alcott's world and turn the patriarchal American culture upside down, disclosing its inherent hypocrisy. As a specific variation of con (wo)men, who threaten the morality and stability of the

¹ Even when she became famous after publishing *Hospital Sketches*, Alcott herself observed: "I can't afford to starve on praise, when sensation stories are written in half the time and keep the family cosey" (Delamar 73).

nineteenth-century American society, those *femmes fatales* menace both self-assured male patriarchs and women of fashion who rest tranquilly on Victorian (im)moral duplicity.² These dangerous women are very often victorious in posing a threat to the societal order in which they find themselves; as such, however, they serve less as examples to follow than as foils highlighting the false premises on which the Victorian order has been constructed.

One of the most successful of Alcott's belligerent heroines is Jean Muir of "Behind a Mask; or, a Woman's Power" (BM), published in 1866 in *The Flag of Our Union*, a weekly periodical concerned with "violent narratives peopled with convicts and opium addicts" (Strickland 93). Jean Muir comes to the Coventry estate as a servant of young Bella, who instantly takes to her guardian. The Coventry circle is an apotheosis of the sentimental "family of fashion" defined by Charles Strickland as "patriarchal in politics," a family in which

men are plunged into cutthroat business competition, while their wives are robbed of meaningful work, reduced to mere symbols of their husbands' success and valued the more as they have less to do. These pampered ladies filled their hours thinking only of parties and foolish finery, gossiping about their friends and engaging in petty intrigues. Rigid barriers of class separate them from their unfortunate sisters, the working women.... The world inhabited by families of fashion is one devoid of warmth, justice, or charity, and it corrupts all whom it touches – men and women, rich and poor, old and young. (92)

As a servant, Jean Muir must suffer humiliation upon entering such a family. Indeed, the Coventries' attitude toward the newcomer is made clear from the very beginning of the tale: Gerald Coventry, the proud heir of the estate, openly announces that he "[has] an inveterate aversion to the whole tribe [of governesses]" (BM 361), while his cousin Lucia, to whom Gerald is said to be betrothed, lectures young Belle on the Victorian code of behavior when she attempts to dash forward to greet Jean: "Stay here, child. It is her place to come to you, not yours to go to her" (BM 362).

Entangled in the net of artificial conventions, Jean Muir wisely resorts to play by its rules, and thus avenge the wrongs she suffers as a servant of a pompous Victorian family. A skillful actress herself, she manages to attract the admiration first of Edward, Gerald's younger brother, and then of Gerald himself, even though the latter aptly describes

² For a thorough discussion of the role of confidence men in the sentimental American society see Halttunen, esp. chapter one "The Era of the Confidence Man," 1 - 32.

the governess to Lucia as “the most uncanny little specimen” (BM 365). Yet, Jean makes use of different means to captivate the two men. Edward falls in love with her because he is not able to see through the mask of moral sincerity and physical beauty that Jean painstakingly assumes every day, while she is actually “a haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least,” with a face full of “weary, hard, bitter [expression]” (BM 367). To Edward, however, as well as to the rest of the Coventry family, Jean appears as “very earnest and pretty... with the sunshine glinting on her yellow hair, delicate face, and downcast eyes” (BM 368); in short, she seems “meek, modest, faithful, and invariably sweet-tempered” (BM 377). So strong and influential is the effect of Miss Muir’s artful image that Edward soon falls prey to her skill. “She is unlike any girl I ever saw; there’s no sentimentality about her; she is wise, and kind, and sweet. She says what she means, looks you straight in the eye, and is as true as steel” (BM 384), confesses Edward to his brother, and the reader is well aware that his words could not be further from the truth. Yet, because she “isn’t a woman to be fluttered by a man’s shadow” (BM 385) and, more importantly, because she cannot rest satisfied until she has ridiculed the patriarchal family of fashion, Jean ventures to win Gerald’s respect and love. She does it with astonishing ease, and thus derides even more the Victorian values upon which Gerald’s world of manners leans. By forfeiting her descent from a noble Scottish family, she strikes the most vulnerable of Gerald’s “moral” principles. When Gerald, as if by accident, learns about Jean’s birth, he feels “his interest in his sister’s governess much increased by this fact; for, like all wellborn Englishmen, he value[s] rank and gentle blood even more than he care[s] to own” (BM 392). Finally, after Jean craftily makes him feel “the indescribable spell of womanhood” in one of the *tableaux vivants* in which they both participate, Gerald can no longer “quench the unwonted fire of his eyes, or keep all trace of emotion out of his face” (BM 395) – he falls victim to Miss Muir’s deceitful art, and is unable to defy the sway she holds over him until he receives his punishment at the end of the story.

But Jean, true to her vengeful resolution, seeks to disrupt the patriarchal family in a most thorough way, and therefore is not satisfied by merely subordinating the heir of the estate. Sir John Coventry, the patriarch of the Coventry family, challenges the governess with his male superiority and easily-won deference. To subdue him, Jean employs all she has at her disposal: the art of beautiful appearance, the coquetry of speech, the power of sentimental body language, and, last but not least, the omnipotent strength of the fast-spun story of her noble birth. The means she uses occupy a prominent place in the hierarchy of values of the Victorian middle class, and Sir John – the idealization of Victorian patriarch – cannot remain immune to their destructive force. In haste and secrecy he marries the cunning governess, thereby unconsciously completing her victory by endowing her with the most powerful weapon in the Victorian world: a noble name. In result,

when the rest of the family discover the dreaded truth about their servant, Jean hastens to lecture them on her position and authority: “Poor Jean Muir you might harm, but Lady Coventry is beyond your reach” (BM 428). No one in the family can fail to give credit to Jean’s words; trapped in Victorian conventions of behavior and moral conduct, the members of the patriarchal community fall prey to their own credo of social relationship.

It is interesting that the other female characters in the narrative act as foils to their male counterparts (with the exception of Mrs. Coventry, Gerald’s mother, who remains quite out of the picture for the best part of the story). Both Gerald’s supposed fiancée and her maid Dean instinctively distrust the new governess and seem not to be taken in by her sly acting. Lucia even tries to forewarn her infatuated uncle against the deceitful Miss Muir: “Her art is wonderful; I feel yet cannot explain or detect it, except in the working of events which her hand seemed to guide. She has brought sorrow and dissension into this hitherto happy family” (BM 418). Neither her admonition nor Dean’s clever observations, however, can check the restive Jean’s stampede towards her final triumph. The Coventries are a patriarchal family, and female voices seem to be of little, if any, significance in the dialogue of Victorian society.

As a woman, and, more importantly, a woman of lower social rank, Jean Muir would therefore have few chances of success in the Victorian world. That Alcott grants her bellicose female character the final victory over the patriarchs of the convention-bound Coventry estate gains far-reaching implications in view of the position women occupied in the American family of fashion in the mid-19th century. A mere supplement to men’s authority, females symbolically depicted the vices of the age: addiction to deceitful fashion, insincere behavior, and theatrical relationships between people. It is by all means obvious that women would not have found themselves ensnared in the mesh of spurious conventions had it not been for the silent consent and patriarchal attitude of their male counterparts. Jean Muir transcends the sexual division as well as class distinction on which Victorian order insists; by artfully ridiculing both the male authority on which the stability of the patriarchal estate is contingent and the female post-romantic intuitive behavior, she emerges as a matriarchal rebel for whom the artificial, deceptive organization of social and moral rules of her age victimizes true humanity.

Jean Muir is not Alcott’s only revolutionary female character. In “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” (PPP) the title heroine is as tenacious in her pursuit of revenge on her ex-lover as Jean Muir is in carrying out her ambitious plan. Pauline Valary is wronged by her beloved Gilbert Redmont, who leaves her for a wealthy Barbara. By this act Gilbert violates the sentimental ideal of chaste and sincere marriage, accurately and concisely defined by Charles Strickland: “no sexual intercourse without love, no love without marriage, and no marriage without love” (6). Once the sentimental marital law has

been breached, Pauline feels at liberty to disobey the Victorian code of feminine subjection. In the mid-19th century “a woman must be prepared to suffer, and to suffer in silence, for it was not her place to challenge the authority of her husband.... Her only release from suffering and subordination came through death” (Strickland 10). The rancorous Pauline embodies the exact denial of sentimental submissive woman; far from being meek and humble, she is rather “like a wild creature in its cage... with bent head, locked hands, and restless steps.... Passion burn[s] in the deep eyes... pride [sits] on the forehead” (PPP 3). As such, Pauline Valary contrasts sharply with Jean Muir, who resorted to skillful disguise in order to win credence of those she intended to ridicule. More than that, Pauline does not even attempt to camouflage her true feelings when she endeavors to marry the rich Manuel: “I want fortune, rank, splendor, and power; you can give me all these, and a faithful friend beside” (PPP 6). Surprisingly, Manuel does not hesitate long before he agrees to espouse his friend; moreover, when he openly confesses to his beloved, “soul and body, I belong to you; do with me as you will” (PPP 21), he readily submits his masculinity to Pauline’s feminine power, never to regain it.

The vindictive Pauline does not demand more to begin her devilish chase for Gilbert’s punishment. She admits that sentimental conventions condemn such an action, but her awareness does not hinder her pursuit in the least: “yes, it is weak, wicked, and unwomanly,” she declares, “yet I persist as relentlessly as any Indian on a war trail.... I have been wronged, and I long to right myself at once” (PPP 6). This she does by first seducing Gilbert anew and challenging his male pride, and then, with the help of the submissive Manuel, by leaving him without either his money or the love of Barbara. In the end, Gilbert becomes as docile as Manuel, and, labeling his marriage “a disgraceful servitude,” is prone to promise Pauline everything to “retrieve [his] faultful past” (PPP 28). His utter self-humiliation is exactly what Pauline has waited for; and when she makes Gilbert admit that he believes she loves him still, she strikes the final blow by pronouncing Manuel the object of her love. Pauline’s punishment thus becomes complete, her vengeful arrangement turning a jest for her, and “a bitter earnest” for Gilbert (PPP 30).

It might seem peculiar, however, that the story describes the fate of a victim and victimizer, both of whom act against the norms of proper sentimental behavior. Yet, Gilbert turns out to defy the conventions of Victorian society only partially. In his disingenuous marriage to Barbara, Gilbert indubitably mirrors Pauline and her spurn of the sentimental credo; with his unrestricted belief in outward appearances, on the other hand, he surfaces as another blind slave to Victorian moral and societal etiquette. In this he follows the lectures of sentimental magazines on the value of beauty, for, as Karen Halttunen aptly observes,

An attractive woman... sheds an uplifting moral influence over a man simply through the beauty of her appearance.... True womanly beauty was not an accident of form; it was the outward expression of a virtuous mind and heart. (71)

Gilbert therefore falls prey to his mistaken conviction that, because of a woman's assumed transparency, beauty equals true, spotless moral creed. Such is the image Pauline evokes when at a party in a hotel Gilbert sees her for the first time since he abruptly left her:

a woman fair-haired, violet-eyed, blooming and serene, sweeping down the long hall with noiseless grace. An air of sumptuous life pervaded her, the shimmer of bridal snow surrounded her, bridal gifts shone on the neck and arms, and bridal happiness seemed to touch her with its tender charm. (PPP 11)

Taking Pauline's sincerity for granted, Gilbert assumes he can "read the signs" (PPP 29) which Pauline supposedly leaves for him to decipher, such as her innocuous smiles and meaningful glances. In fact, however, Pauline imitates Jean Muir's crafty masking, even though she does not pretend to pardon and befriend the one who wronged her but solely restrains her true emotions by appropriate social conduct. Once more, female power not only artfully subordinates and thwarts male authority, but does so by taking advantage of the very conventions upon which this authority has been built.

On the one hand, Louisa May Alcott's *femmes fatales* may seem quite bestial and vicious, while on the other hand they demonstrate Alcott's own longing for independence from sentimental culture. Pauline Valary and Jean Muir obtain sexual and class autonomy but, by employing such "unwomanly" (in the sentimental meaning of the word) means to satisfy their desires, they might stand vulnerable to the harsh critique of fervid apostles of Victorian lifestyle, both male and female. Yet, in Alcott's literary output there is a place for women who are not driven by the hunger for revenge, but who nonetheless serve as foils for sentimental and patriarchy-centered men. One of them is Natalie Nairne of "La Jeune; or, Actress and Woman" (LJ), a thirty-seven-year-old English lady forced by brutal fate to live her life as a Parisian actress known as La Jeune. A wealthy Florimond had fallen in love with her and taken her to his luxurious home in Normandy, but once he fell victim to mental illness, Natalie's only choice was to don the mask of a twenty-year-old tragedienne, concealing her miserable burden from the attention of the world. La Jeune is therefore a truly tragic heroine who, having devoted her life to the man who used to love her sincerely, cannot drop the disguise she has chosen to wear. In consequence, whenever she is mistreated by men who perceive her exclusively through her disparaged profession, the wrongs she suffers appear doubly painful.

The antagonistic attitude towards La Jeune that Ulster, the narrator of the tale, adopts and fosters, is a similar example of the destructive force of misconception based upon the rules of Victorian order. Ulster is a self-centered person who believes himself to be “ten years older and wiser” (LJ 625) than his friend Arthur Brooke, a theatergoer. When Arthur becomes enchanted with the famous actress, Ulster immediately assumes the position of his custodian, admonishing his friend of the perils of a relationship with a theater performer: “I know her class; they are all alike, mercenary, treacherous, and shallow” (LJ 626). In his biased approach to La Jeune Ulster reiterates the error of sentimental dandies who, in their unrelenting pursuit for definite expressions of truth and sincerity, were overeager to scorn all manifestations of histrionic, double-faced behavior. Simultaneously, however, those men of verity were oblivious to the fact that their own conduct turned into fashion and their transparent figures acquired the status of disguise for moral vices.³ Ulster does not apprehend that his misguided evaluation of the actress stems from his self-granted moral superiority. Unlike Arthur, who is cognizant of the fact that “actress as [Natalie] is, there’s not a purer woman than she in all Paris” (LJ 626), Ulster cannot subordinate the prejudiced image of La Jeune he fosters to his friend’s description of Natalie off stage: “see her at home; the woman is more charming than the actress” (LJ 627). In fact, in a truly sentimental fashion, Natalie-the-actress is not ethically translucent for Ulster because in appearance she is exactly like Pauline Valary: beautiful, assertive, and not liable to submit herself to patriarchal authority:

She looked scarcely twenty, so fresh and brilliant was her face, so beautifully molded her figure, so youthful her charming voice, so elastic her graceful gestures. Petite and piquant, fair hair, dark eyes, a ravishing foot and hand, a dazzling neck and arm, made this rosy, dimpled little creature altogether captivating. (LJ 627)

Moreover, with her alluring figure La Jeune not only challenges Ulster’s masculinity but also spurs his curiosity about her moral standards, even though he takes her assumed dissolute inner life for granted. Here, nevertheless, La Jeune proves to be Pauline’s most unmitigated contradiction, and Ulster falls in the trap of sentimental standards. Expanding in his unfair judgment Natalie’s external theatricality onto her inner sphere, he cruelly maltreats the woman; more importantly, seeking the proofs for La Jeune’s alleged double standards in histrionic disguise, Ulster dons a mask himself, thereby violating sentimental conventions whose advocate he desires to be. Worse still, Ulster does not

³ Describing the changes that took place in the morale of American society in the 1840s and 1850s, Halttunen speaks of “a growing willingness to abandon the sentimental posture of moral earnestness toward matters of self-display and moral ritual” (157).

even allow for the possibility of the actress's virtuous character, even though he is more than once "affected... with a curious sense of guilt for [his] hard judgment of her" (LJ 630) and "half long[s] to drop [his] mask" (LJ 633). In consequence, Ulster becomes the exemplification of an inexorable sentimental arbiter of morality, the egocentrically all-powerful patriarch *par excellence*. Accordingly, when he eventually condescends to confess his love to the actress, who honestly refuses him and tells him her life story, he attempts to shield his wounded masculine pride by transcending sentimental standards and hazarding a most hypocritical assumption: "that was art, this nature; I admired the actress, I adored the woman" (LJ 636). It is understandable that he cannot be spared Alcott's pitiless critique, and indeed he passes out of the tale doubly humiliated by his awareness that Arthur overheard his love avowals. In such a manner Ulster's patriarchal conduct is ridiculed not only by female nature but also by its male counterpart, while La Jeune surfaces as an anti-sentimental woman, wronged by masculine hypocrisy.

Alcott provides one more example of a female combatant in the world of patriarchal sentimentality. La Jeune's mockery of post-romantic conventions, Pauline Valary's revengeful pugnaciousness, and Jean Muir's female craftiness are combined in the figure of Countess Varazoff, the protagonist of the story by the same title (CV). Irma Varazoff is in fact the child of a Polish serf, and exists in the realm of upper-class symbolism only due to her cunning disguise and well-spun life story. By undeservedly assuming what Victorian society values most, namely her title of a Polish countess, Irma, in a La Jeune-like fashion, aims at saving the life of Count Cremlin, her Polish benefactor, who is serving an unjust sentence in an Austrian prison. The person powerful enough to grant him freedom is Alexander Czertski, a Russian prince. In order to win his acquitting word, Irma endeavors to seduce the proud prince, a task which appears extremely difficult to achieve. Prince Czertski is not only a sworn enemy of Poland, but, first and foremost, a patriarch commanding the highest respect of both sexes:

Prince Czertski never forgot or forgave a slight. He was a man of forty, above the usual height, with a martial carriage, a colorless, large-featured face, fierce black eyes, a sensual, yet ruthless mouth... sharp white teeth under a heavy mustache.... Dressed with an elegant simplicity, and wearing one order at his buttonhole, the prince was a striking figure. (CV 639)

More importantly, Alexander emanates masculine superiority, and is more than willing to assert his dominating position over women whenever he encounters them: "I know your fair and fickle sex too well to trust them till they are won" (CV 644). Yet, confronted with Irma Varazoff, Prince Czertski duplicates Ulster's fatal mistake: brought up in

the symbolic world of sentimental standards, he is unable to surpass them in order to gain insight into the true state of affairs. Just as La Jeune's victim, Alexander questions Irma's earnestness and transparency, but, prey to sentimental conventions, he rests mistakenly assured of his omnipotent masculine power. Thus, he smoothly albeit unwittingly subordinates himself to Irma's feminine influence. Firstly, he is dangerously challenged by the countess's provoking beauty at a party:

Never had she looked more beautiful, for through the veil her skin was dazzlingly fair, her eyes shone large and lustrous as stars, her lips were proud and unsmiling, and in her carriage there was a haughty grace which plainly proved that her free spirit was still unsubdued. (CV 640)

Moreover, Prince Czertski is doubly captivated by Irma's dress, that of a Polish slave in golden chains. Unable to silently tolerate the "womanly bravado" (CV 641), as he labels Irma's bold appearance, Alexander meets the challenge and agrees to send a pardon for Count Cremlin on condition that he marries the belligerent Pole with a view to her post-marital humiliation and subordination. In his assumption and determination Alexander acts like a Victorian patriarch *par excellence*, heedlessly relying on the symbolic authority of a husband. His absolute dependence on sentimental hierarchy simultaneously supplies his vengeful wife with the most deadly weapon: when Count Cremlin is eventually set free, Irma reveals her true ascendancy in messages sent to upper-class men of power and in her last letter to her husband, written before her suicide. As her parting words to Alexander clearly accentuate, Prince Czertski ends up a victim of his own patriarchal class standards: "To a Russian noble the disgrace of such an alliance as yours is an indelible stain.... There is no cure for such a wound, and your proud heart will writhe under this blemish on the name and honor you hold dearer than life" (CV 647). Thus, once again female art and devotion triumph over male-governed Victorian principles, and Louisa May Alcott's anti-sentimental message flashes anew.

Thus, in retrospect, Alcott's heroines are seen playing manifold roles: they serve as foils to patriarchal men; they underline the vices of the Victorian age; they ridicule sentimental conventions; and they reveal the hypocrisy of the mid-nineteenth century society. Most significantly, in their dissent from the Victorian order Alcott's *femme fatales* are armed with the age's most treasured (anti-)values: the strength of beauty, the power of wealth, the reverence of class titles, and, above all, the art of two-facedness. Louisa May Alcott, herself familiar with the perils of hypocrisy, makes her female characters use these weapons with effective skill, to the detriment of the patriarchal order founded upon the artificial standards of Victorian age.

In result, Alcott's "pot-boilers" exerted strong influence on their readers, who shaped the double-faced American society. Overtly dubbing sensational stories "trash," as Professor Bhaer from *Little Women* conspicuously indicates (2: 160), the public nonetheless took to them ardently, thereby verifying their strongly-denied moral and behavioral duplicity. In consequence, Alcott ridicules sentimental American society perhaps even more than she would have liked to admit; her literary stratagem is all the more tricky and efficacious as she places her stories in a European setting, supposedly so far away from the New World's "chaste" scenery. Because for Alcott, as for other anti-sentimentalists of her time, "fashionable American forms were the cultural remnants of a corrupt and decadent Old World aristocracy" and "all attempts to ape foreign manners undermined American independence from Europe" (Halttunen 156), Strickland's conclusion might provide a clue for understanding Alcott's literary maneuver: "Alcott strongly implied that... unhappy family style was spawned by a decadent European aristocracy" (93). However, her disparaging emphasis on faulty societal conventions seems to fall primarily on American society rather than that of Europe. Thus, following Washington Irving, who covertly expressed his disapproval of the hidden atrocities of American revolution in his France-centered "The Adventure of the German Student," Louisa May Alcott takes her unsentimental heroines to Europe, from where their voice is not only more audible, but also more effective in exercising its unconscious power over the two-faced American audience.

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