Louisa May Alcott's Wild Indians: Pedagogy of Love, Politics of Empire

Steve Benton
East Central University

Though long dismissed by many literary critics as sentimental juvenile literature, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* series has over the past few decades enjoyed a critical renaissance. The first installment of Alcott's multi-volume account of Jo March and her sisters was published in 1868. It was a best-seller then, and when I checked *Amazon.com*'s list of best-selling 19th century novels during the first week of November 2011, it was in the number one position. In 1978, Nina Auerbach helped *Little Women* gain a stronger hold in college curricula by calling attention to the radical nature of Alcott's suggestion that the "world of the March girls" was "rich enough to complete itself" (55). Thirteen years later, Elaine Showalter, described Jo as "the most influential figure of the independent and creative American woman" (42). Since then, many feminist scholars have ratified the status of Alcott's work in academic journals.

I am happy to see popular novels like those in the *Little Women* series finding their way onto the critical radar because they offer so much insight into the values embraced by their readers. *Little Women* provides a rich, complex terrain for discussion about gender discourse in the 19th century. In this essay, I will discuss the relationship between that discourse and territorial expansion policies of the United States during the years following the Civil War, policies that would eventually push many Native American nations to the brink of extermination.

At first glance, there seems to be little connection at all between the violence of Manifest Destiny and narratives about a home-schooled Massachusetts girl who joins forces with her German husband to open a school—and later a college—near her hometown. But as I will suggest here, there is value in seeing the *Little Women* series as something more than a domestic fantasy for girls. For in the years following the Civil War, *Little Women* and its sequels offered readers a national identity narrative that was well-suited to provide moral cover for the violence of the nation's imperial project.

Readers of *Little Women* saw themselves and their daughters in these tales of the March sisters. But I also think they may have seen something of the March sisters in the settlers and soldiers who were at that time marching into the American west. Alcott's novels helped Americans imagine the United States itself in the person of Jo—a formerly rebellious youth whom maturity transforms into a gentle, patient, mother-like educator "Aunt Jo," as seen in *Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886). To the extent that Americans could see themselves in these nurturing educators, it became easier for them

to think of the nation's own imperial project as benign in motivation and compassionate in its realization: Lady Liberty, bringing enlightenment and democracy to the neglected child-nations in the neighborhood.

Consider the difference between the March family educators and the educators depicted in popular American literature of previous eras. In the early years of the Republic, when U.S. national identity narratives were in their formative phase, educators became strongly linked in the American popular imagination with elitist and authoritarian tendencies. During these years, scorn for teachers was, for the most part, undisguised in popular literature. The pedagogical profession was widely perceived as a poor fit for a national identity narrative that emphasized the rough but virtuous nature of the real American democrat.

Landmark texts like Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1790), Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820), and *Davy Crockett's Own Story* (1834), encouraged readers to identify with school scorners and see patriotism in the resistance to educators—with their presumed love of European culture and of Latin, of secrecy and vice, of grammatical correctness and the whipping birch. To the extent that a love of education implied a love of intellectual culture, and a love of intellectual culture demanded a familiarity with and affection for European standards and precedents, the desire to become an educator suggested an alienation from the American family. Given the appeal of this paradigm, it is not surprising that America's first best-selling novel, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, published in 1791, features a French teacher whose villainy rivals that of Iago and Simon Legree.

In *Little Women*, a continuation of this tradition can be found in the character of Mr. Davis, a cruel, petty man who runs the school attended by Amy March, the youngest of the March sisters. The conflict that emerges between Amy and her instructor is likened to the conflict between a tyrannical monarch and his rebellious subjects. After describing Davis's efforts to banish chewing gum from the schoolhouse as a "long and stormy war," for instance, Alcott reports that Amy's teacher had, like a jealous monarch, "made a bonfire of the confiscated novels and newspapers, had suppressed a private post-office, had forbidden distortions of the face, nicknames, and caricatures, and done all that one man could do to keep half a hundred rebellious girls in order" (68). When Davis declares that he will henceforth consider pickled limes to be "a contraband article" and solemnly vows "to publicly ferule the first person who was found breaking the law," a showdown with the lime-loving American patriot Amy is inevitable (68).

When Davis eventually catches her, Amy submits to Davis's discipline with a stoicism worthy of Patrick Henry and, as Alcott puts it, "set her teeth, threw back her head defiantly, and bore without flinching several tingling blows on her little palm" (69). And just as the Crown had failed to subdue the will of the American colonists, Davis's efforts to exert his will on the young Ms. March end up backfiring; for when her mother Marmee hears that Davis feruled Amy in front of the class, she promptly denounces him and his intellectual arrogance and removes her daughter from the school.

Yet while earlier depictions of educators restricted themselves to caricature and calumny, the teacher-villain in *Little Women* is used as a fulcrum to leverage Alcott's model educators into the reader's view. The first of these is Marmee, and to a lesser extent her husband Mr. March, and later, and more extensively in *Little Women*'s sequels, this role is taken over by Jo and her husband Professor Bhaer. The contrast between Davis's harsh educational practices and the gentler approach taken by the Alcotts is perhaps nowhere more clearly illustrated than the shocking scene in the second book in *Little Men*, in which Professor Bhaer seeks to cure one of his students, Nat, of his habit of telling lies. As Professor Bhaer tells Nat, he once had a problem with telling lies himself, but when he was a child his "dear old grandmother" (56) cured him of the habit. Her preferred pedagogical tool was a pair of scissors. Bhaer's grandmother—the Davis/King George analogue here—told him, "'I shall help you to remember, and put a check on this unruly part,' with that she drew out [his] tongue and snipped the end with her scissors till blood ran." The snipping "did me much good," Bhaer reflects, "because it was sore for days, and every word I said came so slowly that I had time to think" (56). But even though Bhaer's student declares himself ready to submit to a similar snipping, Bhaer opts for a what he sees as a more enlightened instructional method. He hands Nat his ferule and in a demonstration of his Christ-like willingness to suffer for the sins of his students, demands that Nat whip *him*--a technique that Louisa's father Bronson used himself (Trites 88). It works. Nat whips his teacher, dissolves in tears, is fully contrite, and thoroughly reformed. Thus, in the Alcotts' pedagogical imagination, a student's primitive fear of physical punishment is replaced by a more evolved fear of the pain the student's actions may cause to a teacher who loves and supports him: "This is going to hurt me more than it will hurt you," as the saying goes, translated literally.

While earlier education narratives had likened the drama of a student like Amy who rebels against a cruel educator like Mr. Davis to the nation's struggle for independence from England, the image of the model educator championed in Alcott's novels was congenial with a new national identity narrative that sought to justify national expansion. Recalling John Winthrop's famous "City on a Hill" sermon of 1630, this new/old national identity narrative depicted the United States itself as a kind of educator who had a pedagogical responsibility, as a more advanced civilization, to teach the virtues of democracy to less developed nations—now likened to foot-dragging schoolchildren. In the 1870s, when Alcott's novels captured the enthusiasm of the reading public, the "less developed" nations most seriously threatened by these "pedagogical" ambitions of the American empire were Native American.

As Horace Greeley, the influential publisher of the *New York Tribune* (1841-1872) put it in a letter written during his travels in the Western United States in 1859, "the Indians are children, their arts, wars, treaties, alliances, habitations, crafts, properties, commerce, comforts, all belong to the very lowest and rudest ages of human existence—not unlike the handiwork, in fact, of 'any band of schoolboys from ten to fifteen years of age'" (151). By the lights of this narrative, it was the responsibility of the United States to show these Indian schoolboys that the aggression they experienced as a threat to their very existence was more properly understood as a painful, yet necessary step in their collective maturation. Educator-heroes like those described in Alcott's

novels helped popularize the idea that such an educative process—though initially bitter to the resistant learner—could be administered with tolerance and care, and that it would cause as much pain to those charged with teaching as it did those being taught: this is going to hurt me more than it is going to hurt you. In this context, scenes in the *Little Women* series in which misbehaving schoolchildren are compared to "wild Indians" advance a pernicious subtext that is far more troubling than a simple racial stereotype. For if the schoolchildren are likened to wild Indians, then Indians themselves are also likened to schoolchildren—schoolchildren who, presumably, need someone to teach them.

Once Jo grows up and accepts her vocation as a teacher and a mother, the *Little Women* series revolves almost entirely around the children she and her husband try to nurture and bring to maturity. Among them are Demi and Daisy, the twin children of Jo's older sister, Meg, who have grown up in the bosom of the Alcott's love. In a bizarre bout of primitive fantasy, the two small children invent an invisible deity, which they name "Kitty-Mouse." Kitty-Mouse demands sacrifices of them, they say, and so they build a fire and begin to burn first Daisy's paper dolls, then Demi's paper boat, his best scrapbook and his lead soldiers. Eventually, the ritual blazes out of control and becomes an occasion for a simulated mass murder that claims town and church. "[I]n a few minutes," Alcott writes, describing the toy-burning,

> the entire town was burning merrily. The wooden population stood and stared at the destruction like blockheads, as they were, till they also caught and blazed away without a cry. It took some time to reduce the town to ashes, and the lookers-on enjoyed the spectacle immensely, cheering as each house fell, dancing like wild Indians when the steeple flamed aloft … (115)

The sadistic horror of this spectacle is amplified by Alcott's description of the burning of one particular doll named "Annabelle," who, after being planted "on the funeral pyre,"

> expressed her anguish and resentment in a way that terrified her infant destroyer. Being covered with kid, she did not blaze, but did what was worse, she *squirmed*. First one leg curled up, then the other, in a very awful and lifelike manner; next she flung her arms over her head as if in great agony; her head itself turned on her shoulders, her glass eyes fell out, and with one final writhe of her whole body, she sank down a blackened mass on the ruins of the town. (115-116)

The strangeness of this violent episode is even stranger when you realize that it is presented to us by the daughter of the Transcendentalist philosopher Bronson Alcott, who insisted on the innocence of children. Alcott raised his girls to reject the Calvinist suspicion of human drives and instincts, especially those of children, which, as Reverend Jonathan Edwards once famously claimed, God regarded as "young vipers" (200).[1] While Puritan clergymen like Cotton Mather insisted that wicked children were "better whipt,

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[1]As Edwards put it, "As innocent as children seem to be to us . . .they are not so in God's sight, but are young vipers, and are infinitely more hateful than vipers . . . and they are naturally very senseless and stupid, being *born as the wild asses colt*, and need much to awaken them" (200).

than damned," Progressive educators like the Alcotts maintained that children were in many ways closer to God's wisdom than were their adults, who had been contaminated by the world (Perry 1). As such, the Alcotts' teaching methods emphasized encouragement over fear and gentle guidance over punitive bullying.

Aunt Jo's response to the children's bonfire—she "laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks" (they were not tears of sadness)—is consistent with the gentle pedagogy she and her father endorsed (*Little Men* 116). Her view of the gentle innocence of children is not threatened by the violent display. But the burning episode itself challenges the idealistic image of children forwarded by liberal philosophers of the era. The significance of that challenge reveals itself when you connect this encounter between Jo and her sister's children—likened here to wild Indians on a violent rampage, burning the white settlement, its church, and its soldiers—with the much more formidable encounters taking shape on the western edge of the country between the United States and the native tribes of North America. In this context, Alcott's challenge to the idealistic view of children as innocents is analogous to similar challenges to those who viewed Native Americans as "noble savages." As Alcott imagines it here, violence is not evidence of contamination from the world; it is, rather, evidence of emotional and intellectual immaturity. And it is the teacher's job to use gentle means of persuasion to help the young ones understand the error of their ways. Those who resist the lessons provided for them and drop out of school, are ultimately doomed to an unhappy self-extinction.

This interpretation of the relationship between teacher and student ably served the identity narrative that helped many justify the expansion of the American empire in the West. Having broken free of the British Empire, many Americans were understandably queasy about the notion that American empire was simply replacing it, and, consequently, American historians promoted the idea of American exceptionalism. America would be the first democratic empire, an "Empire for Liberty," as Thomas Jefferson put it (4: 238). Because there was no precedent for this, it would, presumably, exempt America from history's script, and the inevitable fate of exploitation and decline. In a democratic empire, the interests of all were intertwined as within a single body. This concept of a "harmony of interests" is evidence in Alcott's descriptions of the relationship between teacher and student—what hurts the student, hurts the teacher.

As WaiChee Dimock notes in *The Empire of Liberty*, in this context the violent struggle between Whites and Native Americans can be seen as less of a conflict than as a painful stage of growth. "Whites and Indians simply occupied two different stages in the story of human progress," Dimock writes. "This explained why Indians were systematically depicted as 'children,' creatures who had never gone beyond the first stage of the developmental chart" (17). As 19th century historian Francis Parkman wrote, "barbarism is to civilization what childhood is to maturity," (1: 229) and "The Indian is a true child of the forest" (1: 1). Like others who bought into this analogy, Parkman felt comfortable predicting the demise of those nations that failed to "mature," without attributing blame to the white aggressors who were helping make that demise a reality. This "the narrativization of conflict," as Dimock refers to it, replaces opposition with sequence, conflict with progress, and, I would add, rebellion with teaching. "It was the

Indians' destiny to die out, this formula went," Dimock writes, for "to obviate the idea of 'conflict'" was also to obviate the idea of "victim" (16). It was also doing away with the idea of the victimizer.

For this reason, it makes sense to read Alcott's *Little Men* alongside another influential text published in 1871: The Indian Appropriation Act, which "nullified all treaties that recognized tribes as autonomous entities and made all Indians wards of the state" (Perry 176). In the wake of the passage of this legislation by the U.S. Congress, many Indian children were targeted for assimilation, removed from tribal environments, and enrolled in special boarding schools of the kind that Aunt Jo and Professor Bhaer might have run. Reformers claimed that these boarding schools would "allow Indian children to skip over the centuries of evolution usually required to reach advanced civilization" (Perry 177). Novels like Alcott's helped American readers imagine that the service provided by these teachers was selfless. Some of the teachers themselves probably believed that, too. And this surely helped them deny their complicity in the attempted extermination of many Native American nations.

In *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys* that "sad end" is dramatized through the life of Jo's favorite reclamation project Dan Keen. A rebellious orphan who came to love his Aunt Jo, but could not bring himself to accept all of her civilizing ways, Dan eventually moves out to the Dakotas and chooses to live with the Native Americans there. "Mrs. Jo often thought that Dan had Indian blood in him," Alcott writes, "not only because of his love of a wild, wandering life, but his appearance" (54). Dan's behavior further confirms the link, for he takes pride in "hiding [his inner self] as an Indian does in concealing pain or fear (130)," and when he was in jail, "he faced the terrible strait he was in with the dumb despair of an Indian at the stake" (210). Eventually, Dan is shot defending "his chosen people" in Montana. Because he has no children, no tribe, this drop-out from the March-school is extinct. Jo mourns his passing, but she can also rest content in the knowledge that she loved him, that he loved her, that she did everything she could to bring him into her civilized circle, but that the choice to extinguish the lifeline of this Native American analogue, was, finally, his choice, not hers. And not that of the United States, which could be imagined as an army of *Little Women*, marching west to teach democracy to the children they found there.

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