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PRIVATE THEATRICALS AND FEMINIST ABOLITIONISM: “JO”’S AND “MEG”’S SENSATION PLAYS

1. A long neglected conflict

Louisa May Alcott’s “blood-and-thunder tales”² have long been considered a second-rate production, addressed to an audience greedy with cheap emotions. Instead, they were never remote from her feminist and abolitionist concerns and faced the racial dilemmas aroused by the U.S.-Mexican war. This long neglected conflict historically preceded and, in many respects, paved the way for the Civil War and originated a distinctive dramatic and literary production. As Jesse Alemán and Shelley Streeby point out in their groundbreaking anthology, this early form of American expansionism occurred after Napoleon’s occupation of Spain, and was concurrently aimed to free the Mexican regions from the Spanish influence. Therefore, it can be argued that the pre-bellum period was, in many respects, a wartime in its own right, in which the prospective assimilation of Spaniards from the Mexican border was no less feared than the mass of black fugitives from the Southern plantations before the Secession.

The popular tales and plays written during the annexation of the Southern states appealed to a growing number of genteel readers who anxiously requested news from that Southern front. They were often prejudiced against the interracial encounters and miscegenation suggested by the annexation of the Southern territories, since many Americans held the U.S.-Mexican war responsible for importing slavery in civilized America, and the stories of thrill and terror of the period reflected that social fear.

In many ways, Alcott’s neglected work as a young playwright in Boston in the late 1850s, and the pseudonymous, “Gothic” fiction that she wrote before *Little Women* (1868) assume many sensational themes introduced by the U.S.-Mexican war literature. However, as a transcendentalist daughter, she did not hesitate to replace the fierce resistance to amalgamation typical of those plots with alternative stories dominated by dusky heroines inspired by genuine abolitionist principles.

The “comic tragedies” that, starting from the late 1840s, Louisa staged with her three siblings in Concord’s garrets and empty barns were written in response to the declaration of Texas as an U.S. state and addressed the racial controversies raised by that conflict. They appear no different in style from the interracial romances emerged during the annexation of the Southern regions, but contain substantial differences in their content.

The only available edition of these plays was collected and prefaced in 1893 by Anna Alcott, aka “Meg,” who presented them as a product of the vivid imagination of two “little women,” that she identified with her sister and herself, in the attempt to nurture a domestic literary myth that Louisa shaped on her real family. Their historical masquerades privileged an exotic perspective derivative of the American expansionism in the South, and also dealt with the ‘marriage question’ that inflamed the proto-feminist circles of nineteenth-century Boston. With the only exception of “The Unloved Wife; Or Woman’s Faith,” —a domestic play set in New England about a husband suddenly confronted with the loss of his wife’s inheritance— this innocent form of girl entertainment dramatized the issue of *mésalliance* in a transnational context inclusive of non-Protestant and Mediterranean cultures that had been historically altered by interracial minglings and enslaving influences during the Turks’ invasions and the European revolutions.

The Romantic inspiration of these amateur plays is debated in this article, along with the redeeming function of their dark-skinned protagonists of non-African descent who have been little discussed in relation to the anti-slavery struggles which divided antebellum America. In their amateur plays, the Alcott sisters

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² Thus Louisa May Alcott defined the ‘pot-boilers’ or ‘thrillers’ that she anonymously and pseudonymously published in her youth, in a letter to Alf Whitman, June 22, 1862 (Stern, Myerson and Shealy 79).



significantly featured villainous Spaniards, tyrannical Moors, swarthy beauties, Greeks slaves and other stock characters of mixed race who emerged from the 'racial romances' that circulated during the U.S.-Mexican war.³ That conflict suddenly revived the torments endured by the prisoners of the Spanish Inquisition, poignantly fictionalized by E. A. Poe in "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), as if the annexation of the regions at the Mexican border would spread the horrors of slavery and contaminate the rest of America. Even the most enlightened New England reformers feared the race mixing portrayed in the Mexican-war sensations: Thoreau notably refused to pay the poll tax in 1843 against John Tyler's administration plan to annex Texas as a slave territory, and his gestures were often followed by the Alcott family, proving seminal during the years of Louisa May's literary apprentice. Nevertheless, the "little woman" from Concord reshaped those racial preoccupations in the raw material of pseudonymous thrillers and children's plays whose abolitionist content was later successfully tamed and reorganized in the didactic and domestic patterns of *Little Women* (1868).

Starting from Dion Boucicault's "The Octoroon" (1859), mulatto characters dominated most sensation tales and plays as doomed objects of desire and bodies of conquest, whose mixed blood made substantially ineligible to marry their white suitors. The dusky beauties emerging from the U.S.-Mexican War literature incarnated the fears and temptations produced by the annexation of territories previously occupied by colonists of Catholic descent, and testify to a racial and a religious conflict that, in Louisa May's early literary attempts, inspired a sensational production that Sarah Elbert aptly defines "abolitionist interracial romances" ("Introduction" to *Louisa May Alcott on Race, Sex, and Slavery* x). In stressing the border chaos provoked by that war, these plots often featured sensational forms of gender and ethnic confusion, inclusive of the cross-dressing of female soldiers and intermarriages conceived as Tex-Mex variations on the colonial myth of Pocahontas.

In the Indian novel *Hobomok, A Tale of Early Times* (1824), Lydia Maria Child introduced this interracial theme by reversing the Pocahontas myth and featuring the marriage of a Native with a white American woman. Her novel captured a diffused fascination with racial mixing that, according to Theodore Parker, would make of Africans, Indians, and Anglo-Saxons "a new composite tribe, far better I trust than the old" (qtd. in Fredrickson 120).⁴ The same ethnic syncretism inspired a variety of exotic settings and colored beauties in the Alcott sisters' plays, and their anachronistic evocation of a number of Mediterranean settings—from Spain during the Turkish invasion and modern Greece fighting for its national independence—that they dealt with as historical equivalents of the threatening turbulence at the Mexican border.

As they oscillated, like the Poesque pendulum, between the Mexican territories and the European scenarios of the Romantic revolutions, the private theatricals staged by the Alcott sisters took the allegorical shape of Drydenesque heroic tragedies dominated by rivalries and revenges, also indebted to Shakespeare's 'dark comedies' and to the Italian melodrama. In collecting these rather clumsy but ingenious dramatic works, later evoked in the first chapters of *Little Women*,⁵ Anna Alcott introduced them as the original work of "Jo" and

³ In their introduction to *Empire and the Literature of Sensation*, Jesse Alemán and Shelley Streeby argue that as powerful allegories of "races, classes and nations, sensational literature is more outrageous and less respectable, more connected to a lowly world of popular entertainment than the middle-class home, and more concerned with exotic and foreign spaces than the domestic sphere, making it an excellent archive of popular fantasies and fears about U.S. imperialism" (xviii).

⁴ Along with Parker, another close friend of the Alcotts, Moncure Daniel Conway, thought that the "mixture of the blacks and whites is good" and that "such a combination would evolve a more complete character than the unmitigated Anglo-Saxon" (73-74). Interestingly enough, in her introduction to Alcott's anti-slavery tales, Elbert also refers to the Alcotts as an interracial family, being the girls' mother, Abigail May, of Portuguese Jewish origins. Matteson confirms this theory, which also explains the Alcott sisters' selection of the Turkish invasion of Spain as a historical equivalent of the U.S.-Mexican war: "Perhaps descended from Portuguese Jews who had fled the Inquisition, the Mays were known for their intelligence and fighting spirit, qualities that Samuel often turned to his advantage in support of worthy causes" (29).

⁵ Madeleine Stern observes that, in *Little Women*, before Professor Bhaer lures Jo March away from the poison of sub-literature, she announces the publication of a sensation story titled "The Rival Painter" in the *Spread Eagle* that, in Louisa Alcott's life, appeared in the *Olive Branch* on May, 8, 1852, under the slightly modified title "The Rival Painters: A Tale of Rome." Later on, in Part II of that best-seller, the chapter "Literary Lessons" mentions Jo's sensational authorship of a number of Indian captivity tales appeared in the *Blarneystone Banner*, and presented as the "melodramatic illustration of an Indian in full war costume,



“Meg,” meaning to perpetuate the success of the Marches’ saga after Louisa’s death. Although I found no trace of the specific circumstances of Anna’s editorship to verify her accuracy in reproducing the plays originally rehearsed in their adolescence, it is a fact that most of them were directed by Louisa, and hand-written in home-magazines in their youth as original scenarios available at Orchard House in Concord. Those plays featured Anna as the female counterpart of Louisa, who played a number of histrionic, male impersonations modeled on the cross-dressed masquerades introduced on the Victorian stage by her breeched idol, the actress Charlotte Cushman. A good friend of her abolitionist mother, Abigail May, the Bostonian diva dazzled opera houses at home and abroad with her uncanny interpretations of Hamlet and of disturbing females such as the ragged Meg Merrilies and the despicable Nancy. Her performances *en travesti* were an inspiration in the making of Louisa’s thrillers, and provide precious information about her career as a young sensation writer and playwright who tried her fortune at the Boston theater in the mid-fifties. During that brief but intense experience, she developed a pulp taste for exotic settings, adding to her creation of a “world of fancy and romance [...] full of revenge, jealousy, murder, and sorcery” (“Jo” and “Meg” 7, 12). Louisa’s early plays included detailed stage directions that reveal her talent as a stage-manager, and the amount of energy that she put in these Mexican plots in disguise and in their allegorical representation of Victorian women secluded in loveless marriage. In this compelling interplay of racial and gender captivity, the nonwhite protagonists are, in Louisa’s abolitionist version, as willing to defeat the patriarchal tyranny of their fathers as the New England “Unloved Wife” owned like property by her husband, and the enslaved African Americans in the South. Following the conventional structure of the coeval Mexican war tales, in which public and private conflicts problematically converged, one of the main allegorical strategies adopted in the sisters’ plays was to make the so-called ‘marriage question’ critically overlap with anti-slavery themes. In their gendered representation of racial tensions in America, they were inspired by the dual rhetoric of feminist abolitionism in America that assimilated black slaves to married women financially and legally bound to their husbands. In this respect, “Jo” and “Meg” embraced the radical views of their transcendentalist parents, equally committed to anti-slavery issues (Elbert 1997, ix-ix), and made a clever use of anachronism by chronologically relocating their feminist and abolitionist concerns to the context of Republican Athens, assumed by those Concord’s reformers as a model of democracy and a Romantic legacy in the turbulent years of the European revolutions.

In that allegorical and spatial reconfiguration, the young playwrights followed the literary work of the reformer Lydia Maria Child, who had also authored the first antislavery tract, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833) and the first American novel ever written on interracial couples set in Ancient Greece. In *Philothea: A Romance*, Pericles’ Athens is evoked as the Republican foundation of young America, in a neoclassical style also appropriated, in those years, by the American literary sculptors who were sent to Rome and Florence to create their abolitionist sculptures according to Canova’s and Thorvaldsen’s aesthetic model (Dabakis 2014). Alcott’s early patron, George Ticknor, also claimed that the democratic protocols of Athens ideally inspired the animated debates which took place at the town meetings held at Faneuil Hall in Boston (Ticknor I, 20). In one of those vibrant discussions, on October 21, 1835, a proslavery mob of five thousand nearly lynched the white anti-slavery advocate William Lloyd Garrison and disrupted the lecture of a Scottish abolitionist, George Thompson, organized by the Female Antislavery Society and by the transcendentalist schoolmaster and philosopher Bronson Alcott. The sisters’ father bravely put an end to the turmoil, preventing the European orator from being physically assaulted for his abolitionist ideas. As an activist of that Society in the 1840s, Child later accused the Catholic Irish mob for those riots but, in *Philothea*, she put the blame on Pericles’s wife, Aspasia, for preventing the offspring of non-Athenian parents and fining the Athenian citizens who married foreigners. Child’s focus on

tumbling over a precipice with a wolf at his throat, while two infuriated young gentlemen [...] were stabbing each other close by, and a disheveled female was flying away in the background with her mouth wide open.” These sensation stories, undermined by Jo March as “that class of literature in which the passions have a holiday,” secured her the “hundred-dollar prize” which, in another intra-diegetic “semi-revelation,” was the actual amount obtained by Louisa for “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment,” a thriller anonymously published in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* on January 3 and 10, 1863. *Little Women* also includes a reference to the *Weekly Volcano* actually edited by Dashwood, and leads the autobiographical narrator to admit that “[l]ike most young scribblers, she went abroad for her characters and scenery; and banditti, counts, gypsies, nuns, and duchess appeared upon her stage” (Stern 1995, xi-xiii).



miscegenation countered the social resistance to interracial marriages and the taboo of amalgamation which lurked even within the enlightened Boston circles, and made her conceive the dark-complexioned figure of Eudora, who opposed that old law and could pass for an Athenian, like the many light-skinned slaves portrayed in the American antislavery narratives (Child 61).

In the unpretentious form of an innocent children's game, the Alcott sisters assumed from *Philothea* the exquisite anachronistic cover that they needed to denounce the domestic contradictions of the young American Republic and, like their mother's lifelong correspondent, they reframed their antislavery sentiment in a foreign setting which resonated with all the racial and gender conflicts which divided their country. Compared to the sensation tales written by Louisa in the late 1850s and the early 1860s, the juvenile plays on miscegenation that she originally composed as a collective enterprise in the late 1840s follow the same transnational strategy adopted by Lydia Maria Child when she geographically and chronologically altered her domestic backgrounds.⁶ Beside Ancient Greece, in their dramatization of that racial and religious crisis, the four Alcott girls found one of their alternative settings in the modern Greece besieged by Turks in the 1820s, in another geographical deflection of the racial issues and fears of miscegenation provoked by the U.S.-Mexican conflict and by the American policy of annexation at the Southern border.⁷

As a popular literary genre, the Mexican war tale conventionally focused on the encounter of Puritan Americans with mixed-blood characters not reducible to the stereotype of the tragic mulatto and not identifiable with blacks of African descent. As a matter of fact, in the nineteenth century, a generic notion of blackness derogatively defined a number of "whites of different color" that included Hispanics, Jews, native Indians, Creoles, immigrants from the Italian South, and even the Siberian fugitives who abandoned the European provinces of Russia invaded by Tartars.⁸ Shifting scenario from the neoclassical beauty of Ancient Greece to the lush Mediterranean countries besieged by the Ottoman empire in the 1820s, the plays collected by Anna-"Meg" evoked the ongoing Romantic revolutions in Europe to raise the interracial questions which divided America long before the debate on black slavery in the Southern plantations concomitant with the American Civil War. The first immigration wave from Southern Europe and the annexation of Texas made the Mexican war plays and tales a popular sensation genre that associated the horrors of slavery with the regions previously colonized by Spain and that threatened to question the Puritan foundations of America.

The prospective annexation of Cuba and Santo Domingo, in particular, became a matter of contention within the transcendentalist circle also during the Reconstruction era, with Congressman Charles Sumner firmly opposing the annexation of Santo Domingo advocated instead by his friend Samuel Gridley Howe, who visited the island with his wife Julia Ward Howe in 1873 as a member of the American Freedman's Inquiry Commission. As Karcher recalls, both Child and Sumner, not to mention Thoreau, objected to the annexation of those Southern territories as an act of unjustified national greed for territory. On the contrary, General Grant enthusiastically backed it, along with the Catholic Church, which was perceived as a force traditionally hostile to abolitionism, and indirectly responsible for the Irish immigrants' espousal of the Democratic party's racist demagoguery and the consequent draft riots in New York in 1863.⁹

⁶ She allegorically portrayed Athenians as "ambitious demagogues" who "strive to drown the din of domestic discord in boasts of foreign conquest; and seek to hide corruption in a blaze of glory" (Child 109).

⁷ On this literary strategy of indirect abolitionism in Child's *Philothea* see Mills 56-57.

⁸ Jules Verne significantly compared the oppressed Siberians to Castilians in *Michael Strogoff*, a novel that Louisa May adapted for the stage in 1880: "But very few of the Siberian peasants were to be seen in the fields. These peasants are remarkable for their pale, grave faces, which a celebrated traveller has compared to those of the Castilians, without the haughtiness of the latter" (Verne 138). On racial mixing and "whites of different color" in America see Jacobson. I thank Ausra Paulaskiene for this reference, that contributes to a substantial revision of the racial reductionism which often afflicts African American studies. Sollors also refers to the Creole mosaic of mixed-raced communities in the American South adjusting "all kinds of European-African-Indian mixes" (124). When Mary E. Braddon mentions "the South American" in her 1862 fictionalization of Boucicault's play "The Octoroon," Sollors claims that she referred to U.S. Southerners (150), whose "trace of slavery," given the historical circumstances, might have well marked the differently colored subjectivities emerged from the Haitian Revolution and the conflicts over the annexations of Southern territories here discussed.

⁹ On this neglected religious controversy over race and territory in Victorian America see Karcher 533 and Foner 494.



When the Alcott sisters strategically reconfigured the enslaving South in the ancient times and settings that young America identified with the roots of its Republican values, they also alluded to the Gothic vicissitudes of the interracial couples torn apart during the U.S.-Mexican war. The Alcott sisters syncretically added to their sincere preoccupation with the state of democracy, the drama of mixed couples addressed by the captivity tales which circulated during that conflict. However, when they borrowed the popular theme of the star-crossed lovers segregated in Muslim jails from the sensations of their times, they substantially modified the derogative role conventionally played by dusky seducers and turned that fearful crew of witches into reliable companions for the white heroes. Even when they relocated the setting of the typical Mexican plot to the turbulent context of the European revolutions, they made of the beautiful, dark-hued daughter of the tyrannical Moor, a model of octoroon redemption and of compassionate resistance to racial prejudice. Despite their geographical distance from the Southern territories, the Alcotts contributed to the ongoing controversy on slavery aroused by the military campaigns in the South by redeeming the 'half-blood' stigmatized as an unnatural race. In this way, they hinted to an amalgamationist solution to the racial question, which later Lincoln strategically dismissed by concentrating on the issue of the African American enslavement, choosing to interrupt the annexation process and start a Civil War which eventually closed the Southern fronts and stabilized the WASP cultural hegemony in America. On the contrary, the girls' plays unflinchingly advocated interracial love in a time when intermarriage and intermingling couples were neither feared nor banned yet, despite the theory of the alleged sterility of mulattoes promulgated by Louis Agassiz (Sollors 130-131).

In other words, the sensation plays written by "Jo" and "Meg" long preceded the debate on Secession and on the slave-holding states; they are therefore worth being adequately reconsidered not only as the main source of Alcott's 'Gothic' apprenticeship but also as domestic dramas of miscegenation rehearsed by the four sisters to counter the racial fears and prejudices grown in the aftermath of the Mexican war. In their uncompromising anti-slavery commitment, the young playwrights from Concord reversed the conservative implications of the conventional sensation plots: they maintained unaltered the melodramatic structure that much appealed to the mass audience, while pointing to the interracial reconciliation embodied by the dusky heroines of Turkish and Spanish descent as devoted to their WASP mates, much like the native Pocahontas was to the American John Smith. In a lurid atmosphere which captured all the racial tensions aroused by the ongoing fight at the Southern border, in their private spectacles of race and terror, the Alcott sisters endorsed those mixed-raced heroines as cultural mediators and potential allies during the Southern expeditions. In their dialogical position, they interpreted the uncertain destiny of the new immigrants from those regions and from many impoverished European countries which in antebellum America a highly sentimentalized notion of New England domesticity contributed to ostracize and obscure. The dark-hued beauties who dominate those plays are, indeed, irreducible to the enslaved Africans who became the objects of contention during the Civil War, even though they embodied those 'annexed' Southerners who also sought an adequate place in a nation generally horrified by the prospect of miscegenation.

In this regard, the U.S.-Mexican war plots retroactively complicated the perception of the 'tragic mulatto' of African descent much discussed by African Americanists. What emerged from the Mexican conflict was a Southern variety of colored subjectivities hard to identify with the 'good darkie' Uncle Tom, but dominant on the Victorian stage. That stage featured nonwhite, sensual creatures like the "gypsy" Irish dancer Lola Montez were considered alien and significantly triumphed with Spanish pseudonyms, adding to the mysterious charms of the other non-Protestant figures like the Jewish actress and poet from New Orleans Adah Isaac Menken, who advocated the transformation of California into an independent state. In this respect, being themselves "more quadroon than mulatto, with Saxon features, Spanish complexion darkened by exposure," (Louisa May Alcott, "My Contraband" in Elbert 1997, 70-71), the colored characters conceived by the sisterly playwrights were also no different from the Italian singers who dazzled the American opera houses. From Adelaide Ristori to Tommaso Salvini and Ernesto Rossi, whose acting style out-passed Booth in fashion and subtlety, not to mention the "belle bayadères" who seduced Victorian America with their "leg-shows" and later became the protagonist of a 1870 Louisa Alcott's tales, these dusky talents conquered the stage as irresistible seducers and the sisters' juvenile plays featured them as facilitators of the encounter with the white American heroes before they turned into a social menace. As the Civil War approached, the



Concord circle spared black fugitive slaves from the South the racial prejudices that they overtly expressed against the “nonwhites” of Hispanic, Jewish, Italian and Greek origins.

In this respect, it can be argued that, before the Secession, the Alcott sisters radicalized the pietistic precepts on brotherhood which sustained Boston’s moderate abolitionism, and staged a number of history plays that strongly advocated the position on miscegenation embraced by their ostracized father, and later defeated by the Civil War front. The redemptive role of their Moorish beauties did also justice to the feminist abolitionism of Bronson Alcott, who deserves a long due reassessment for being the first schoolmaster who opened an interracial school in Boston and a Romantic pedagogist whose liberal views on race and Christianity were convincingly fictionalized by Alcott in *Little Men* (1871). Thanks to the initial financial support of his brother-in-law Samuel May, and despite his isolation in the Concord community, this neglected transcendentalist left his daughters the legacy of a radical anti-slavery practice which entered their plays no less than Lydia Maria Child’s stories of *mésalliance*, that also advocated a complete blending of the races before the legal banning of intermarriage in 1863. Child considered mixed couples a solution to the conflicts in the South and an effective alternative to blacks’ repatriation: as early as the mid-1820s, in *Hobomok*, she showed respect for interracial preference, later followed by Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie* (1842). Child’s taboo-breaking story of miscegenation, appeared in the *North American Review* as early as April 1821, was based upon a review of the narrative poem “Yamoyden” by James W. Eastburn. Set in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, it reversed the gender roles of the American myth of Pocahontas, featuring Mary Conant, a genteel heroine of Puritan descent, who defies her Puritan father and marries a non-white man: the Pequod Indian Hobomok. In a time of “sexual exploitation of slave women,” Child polemically dealt with the “subject out of bound of polite literature” (Karcher 335) of mixed couples which was, however, a very frequent choice in the Southern regions, especially in the Texan Hidalgo country. She concurrently condemned unwanted marriages as a form of domestic slavery in the mulatto tales “The Quadroons” (*The Liberty Bell* 1842) and “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes” (1843), pointing to the Puritan hostility against the individual right to choose mates of a different color. Child further developed female characters of Spanish ancestry in *A Romance of the Republic* (1867), the story of the light-colored Rosalie and Xarifa enamored of two white men which law and prejudice prevented them from marrying.

Alcott’s juvenile plays owe much to Child’s domestic abolitionism and react to the Puritan banning of interracial marriages, epitomized by the personal experience of another friend of the Alcotts: the quadroon William G. Allen, a Professor of Greek language and literature at New York Central College, who was fired and finally exiled to England for marrying the daughter of a white reverend. Louisa May Alcott later fictionalized his story in “M. L.”,¹⁰ an early abolitionist tale inspired by this colored friend of her uncle Sam May, who seriously shared her father’s commitment to interracial pedagogy. It is therefore not a case that in the years of the pre-bellum transcendentalist debates on free love and *mésalliance*, Bronson’s daughters turned the conflicted interracial romances circulating during the war in the Southern territories into allegories of intermarriage, combining that racial controversy with their feminist interest in the ‘marriage question.’¹¹

In their abolitionist dramatization of the U.S.-Mexican war romances, the Alcott sisters’ staged the solitary fight of nonwhite, Southern beauties against racial prejudices, to the point of rescuing the white American soldiers held hostage in Mexican jails by their tyrannical fathers. This dramatic output reoriented in an amalgamationist perspective the sensational theme of intermarriage presented in those popular tales as a threat to Puritan America. In their feminist and abolitionist revision, the girls offered a redeeming role to the octoroon type who, only later, after the 1859 homonymous play by Dion Boucicault, assumed the ambivalent and vulnerable features of the ‘tragic mulatto.’ As I clarify in the detailed description of the sisters’ melodramas that here follows, the Alcott sisters objected to the conventional representation of the doom of the mixed race, which prevailed in popular literature only much later as a cultural formation of the Secession, as Louisa’s Civil War narratives “My Contraband” (1863) and “An Hour” (1864) demonstrate. As a compelling

¹⁰ This earliest attempt to represent interracial marriages in Victorian American literature was initially refused by *The Atlantic* in 1860 and later published in the issues 1, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25 of the *Commonwealth*, appearing on January 24, 31, and February 7, 14, 21, 1863.

¹¹ This ‘double slavery’ was later exposed in another volume edited by Lydia Maria Child: the autobiographical narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in 1861, in which Harriet Brent Jacobs stressed her inability as a black woman to marry the white man of her choice.



female response to Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1855), the latter tale shows how the Civil War put an end to a radical debate on free marriage and miscegenation, which was still vital during the Mexican war especially on the stage. In public and private theatricals, light-colored actresses like the Jewish bohemian from New Orleans, Adah Isaac Menken, triumphed with their scandalous and "naked" performances acclaimed by the theater reviewer Henry Clapp Jr., also known for promoting Walt Whitman's poems.

As the historical circumstances that led to Civil War finally closed the Southern front, the circulation of the interracial romances and the other sensations, which had previously cast light on the Romantic encounter with natives from the annexed regions, were discontinued. In this respect, it can be argued that the issues of amalgamation as a strategy of Southern assimilation grew parallel with the campaigns of American expansionism in the South, and emerged in popular literature to point to a racial mixing that was later abruptly arrested, lest the incorporation of slavery. As the Civil War approximated, the abolitionist debate of Bostonian reformers lost its radicalism, and the urgency of the theme of intermarriage faded away along with the project of racial integration of the Mexican territories, which had been so central in the work of the young playwrights from Concord. As a result, the sensation tales written by Alcott a decade later paralleled the Romantic decline and the defeat of the amalgamationist ideals that had long nurtured her family's radical abolitionism. The sisters' initial fascination with dark-hued beauties, who epitomized the American expansionism in the South, was later dismissed in Louisa's fiction, who turned them from dusky heroines and cultural mediators of the annexation process into marginal and mischievous seducers, blinding their WASP lovers with a passion stronger than bondage. The dark femmes fatales, whom in the late 1840s the Alcott sisters modeled on the protagonists of the coeval Mexican sensations, degenerated into the devilish and scheming temptresses who haunted Alcott's thrillers in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Even the domesticating revisions forced upon her by the harsh critical reactions to her first adult novel, *Moods* (1864) testify to a changed cultural climate, which urged the writer to the rapid transformation of the Cuban Otilia in that novel into a dark, sensual beauty rivaled and defeated in love by the fair and innocent New England protagonist. This unfortunate adult novel, which Elbert considers a fictional development of the amalgamationist tale "M. L." (116-17), kept focusing on the 'marriage question,' but excluded the Cuban heiress from traditional definitions of marriage, presenting her as a seducer surrounded by a lush, tropical scenery evocative of Southern sloth, in a romance which confined to that region the range of her obscure charms and twisted manners.

2. The sisters' plays

The play "Captive of Castile: or, The Moorish Maiden's Vow" follows the conventional patterns of the U.S.-Mexican war tales and, in representing the ill-fated love between a Spanish heroine and an English soldier, seems especially indebted to "The Prisoner of La Vintresse"¹² by Mary Andrews Denison, a sensation playwright who later served, like Alcott, as a Civil War nurse in Washington and published her tales in the same journals: Frank Leslie's papers and in *Olive Branch*.

The Creole beauty staged by Alcott and her sisters in the play, like the legendary Pocahontas and Mary Conant in *Hobomok*, determines to free her white beloved from imprisonment, and herself from the unwanted marriage forced upon them by their fathers.

Like John Dryden's heroic drama "The Conquest of Granada" (1672), "Captive of Castile" is set in Spain, during the Turkish invasion, and features an interracial encounter that, interestingly enough, the English Restoration playwright also framed in the ahistorical terms of the Aztec fight against the cruel, Spanish conquerors Cortez and Pizarro in *The Indian Emperour, or the Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards* (1665). In the girls' plays, the intercession of the dark-hued protagonist with her tyrannical father, aimed to save the

¹² Zara, the daughter of a Moor, is led by an English soldier out of the forest as the Spanish army approaches Granada. When the Christian city gets conquered by her father's troops, the man is arrested. Disguised as a slave, the dark beauty offers to release him by interceding with her father, on the condition that they put an end to their love. When a priest reveals that her real father is not the disloyal Moor but an English Lord, the young woman can break her vow and turn an ill-fated encounter into a happy couple, and the invasion of Castile of her disloyal stepfather into an expiating exile. On Denison's influence on Louisa May Alcott, who very probably derived her family nickname of "Moody Minerva" from the heroine of "The Prisoner of La Vintresse," see Denison's play reprinted in Jesse Alemán and Shelley Streeby (229-283).



white soldier she fell for, and implied the violent confrontation of the American hero with a Moorish patriarch. In these plots, the latter was invariably defined “Tartar” and “Moor,” according to a cultural syncretism typical of popular sensations, which attributed to the antagonists only the racial and religious characterization of their dark skin and non-Christian belief, leaving the determination of their geographical connotations to their readers’ paranoid responses.

“Ion” is an unfinished play written and rehearsed by the Alcott sisters in their youth, featuring the Muslim princess Zuleika invariably limited by her father in the choice of her mate. In rescuing the white prisoner she is in love with, she resists the prejudice against *mésalliance* rooted in popular sensations, suggesting a reconciliatory intermarriage with the Prince of Greece. When Ion declines release from Mohammed’s persecution and offers himself as a hostage to his Turkish oppressor in the place of his captive father Cleon, the Moor refuses the exchange. Therefore, with a subterfuge, Ion replaces his father in chains so that, as the introductory note of the editor Anna-“Meg” clarifies, the old Cleon can defeat the sultan and his son safely marry his daughter. The dusky heroine concurrently discovers her Castilian origins, therefore becoming a more compatible spouse to her white suitor than to her Muslim stepfather. This *dénouement* reflects the sisters’ Drydenesque intention to entertain while attempting an allegorical dramatization of their national history. In this exchange of ethic roles, the Turk’s daughter, whose Moorish charms were initially designed to make Cleon’s death more acceptable to the white hero,¹³ eventually comes to his rescue, in the redemptive role of a reliable wife.¹⁴ In this revision of the stock characters typical of the U.S.-Mexican War romance, the Alcott sisters challenged the conformism of their Puritan community, by turning the threatening Moorish beauty into a faithful wife.

Another melodrama listed among the dramatic performances of “Jo” and “Meg” is “Bianca: Operatic Tragedy,” an adaptation from Henry Hart Milman’s “Fazio: A Tragedy” (1815). Once again, the “Spanish lady” (261) who carries a name evocative of “whiteness,” as if to allude to her future integration in a society of non-Spaniards, differs from the stereotypical Moorish temptresses conventionally associated with the Southern *femme fatale*. Her “magic power” (263) has no intoxicating effects on her betrothed, and the only fatal potion concocted in the play is offered by a witch hired by a rejected suitor to kill Bianca. In this juvenile play, the role of the protagonist, brilliantly played by Louisa, had been previously impersonated by Carlotta Grisi and by Adah Isaac Menken in 1857.¹⁵ The latter, who probably served as a model for Otilia in *Moods*, was the scandalous diva who played the “naked” role of Mazeppa in Henry Milner’s 1830 adaptation from Byron’s poem, that Mark Twain commented in these terms: “with the exception of [a] superfluous rag, the Menken dresses like the Greek Slave.”¹⁶

And, indeed, another significant dramatization collected by Anna Alcott was actually named “The Greek Slave,” after the statue of the naked Christian woman sold into slavery and carved in six full-scale versions by Hiram Powers between 1843 and 1866 (figure 1). No matter how wan and acquiescent it looked, the full-scale statue of the small woman in chains exhibited at the Crystal Palace had such an impact that was

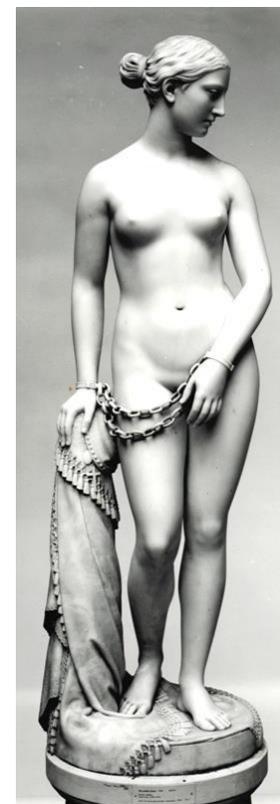


Figure 1

¹³ “Mine errand is to take from that death the bitterness thou doest mourn, to give a parting joy to the life now passing [...] I am but a woman, and tho’ the heart is strong, the arm is very weak. I cannot save thy father, but trust I may still cheer the parting hours with a brief happiness” (“Jo” and “Meg” 238).

¹⁴ Zuleika catches her pray into a spell, “thy words of kindly sympathy fall like sweet music on my troubled heart, and thy magic call hope springth up anew,” but, as Ion adds, “Thou art unknown, and yet there is that within that does whisper I may trust thee” (239).

¹⁵ In her introductory note to “Bianca,” Anna compares Louisa’s acting skills to those of the acclaimed Italian dancer with a great voice, Carlotta Grisi: “Jo was truly superb as the hapless Bianca, while her trills and tragic agonies were considered worthy of the famous Grisi herself” (260).

¹⁶ Mark Twain, “The Menken—Written Especially for Gentlemen,” *Territorial Enterprise* (Virginia City, Nevada), September 17, 1863, rpt. in Menken 197.



reproduced in print as larger than life (Kasson 1992, 188). That sublime representation of female enslavement became an icon of the Greeks' Romantic resistance to the Turks' invasion, and reverberated with all the horrors of the Africans' enslavement in the American South. It also stroked the abolitionist audience as the double allegory of the racial oppression in America and of the trials of Greece during the War of Independence in the 1820s, in a convinced homage of the American literary sculptor to the Romantic revolutions. Powers's masterpiece conveyed the democratic values inherited by the American Republic from Athens and displayed a neoclassical style perfected by the American artist in Rome and Florence. During their long stay in the Peninsula, Hiram Powers, along with Horatio Greenough, Thomas Crawford and the circle of women sculptors sponsored by Charlotte Cushman, were appointed by the abolitionist Congressman Charles Sumner to carve the allegories of independent America into marble. The Greek princess in chains made no exception, becoming the transatlantic symbol of the horrors of slavery which were also disrupting the European nations. Not exempted from the fears of amalgamation and enslavement that haunted the Gothic American mind in the antebellum period, Sumner envisioned in the marble woman in chains the America of the future, jeopardized by its expansionism in the South.¹⁷ However, in the homonymous sisters' play, this Romantic symbol of Greece under siege also appealed to the growing number of abolitionist women in America, much affected by the forced removal of African Americans from their home and affections.¹⁸

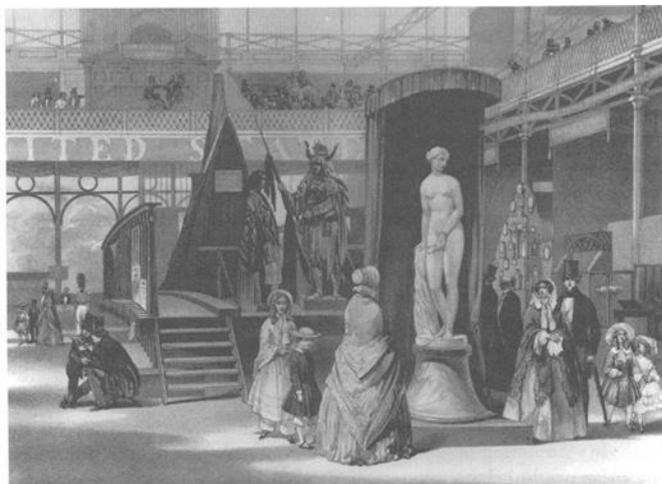


Figure 2

That statue became the theme of many novelizations and poems, and the Alcott sisters contributed to this fashion by arranging a domestic entertainment out of that acclaimed sculptural allegory.¹⁹ The marble image of the naked woman in bondage invited erotic associations and fantasies of dominion, and made a great sensation at the Great Exhibition of 1851 since, quite disturbingly, it elevated enslavement to an unsurpassed model of perfection (figure 2). Despite its sublime beauty, the controversial statue also aroused a massive indignation for placing the viewers in the position of slave-holders about to peruse and purchase a naked beauty on sale, like the mulatto Xarifa auctioned off at a slave market to the man who killed her white lover in Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons."

In response to the uncanny fascination with this artwork in which slavery and beauty oddly overlapped, "Jo" and "Meg" set their dramatization in a modern Greece besieged by Turks at the time of the Romantic revolutions. The girls conceived the play as an ingenuous re-elaboration of "Twelfth Night" and inverted the gender roles of Shakespeare's dark comedy, featuring Irene, a Greek princess betrothed to Constantine, a prince whom she had never met. Like many Victorian women confronted with the strictures of the 'marriage question,' the Greek protagonist decides to test the man's love before marrying him, and humbly disguises herself as his servant Ione, in the attempt "to win him as a poor and nameless slave" (166). The prince is so seduced by her ancillary grace that he neglects his promise to his prospective spouse and, unable to "cast off" Ione's "spell" (200), eventually realizes that his proud betrothed and his devoted slave are one and the same person. The slave's unexpected regality reveals the same aristocratic grace which conventionally

¹⁷ A black parody of the statue with the caption, "The Virginian Slave, Intended as a companion to Powers's 'Greek Slave,'" appeared in *Punch* 20 (1851): 236.

¹⁸ In a revealing letter to Douglass from *The North Star* of September 25, 1850, S. F., a reader from West Bloomfield, respectively compares the Greek slave-girl and her Turkish master to the slaves and slaveholders in the American U.S. South: "And to the feeling heart and discerning eye, *all slave girls are GREEK, and all slave mungers TURKS*, wicked cruel and hateful, be their names HAMAN, SELIM, JAMES, JUDAS or HENRY; their Country Algiers or Alabama, Congo or Carolina, the same."

¹⁹ For a thorough discussion of the main poetic and narrative versions of this acclaimed statue see Kasson 1990, 65-72.



enables the dusky protagonist of the U.S.-Mexican war plots to marry across races. Like the spectators' gaze fully charmed by the marble beauty of the enslaved woman of noble descent, the democratic spirit of the sisters' pre-bellum sensations seemed to make any social encounter possible. Even Constantine's mother has to acknowledge that it is Lone's swarthy beauty that drives her son to a double victory against the Turks and the domestic conspiracy led by Rienzi.²⁰ The abolitionist message which underlies Powers's masterpiece and the amalgamationist interpretation provided by the Alcotts' vivid imagination reversed the conservative narrative which would later underlie the intermarriage tales, and turns the beauty of the Southern princess into an emblem of marble perfection able to defeat all prejudices against the subaltern races, toward a model of *mésalliance* which facilitated rather than hinder the process of national unification. After all, in its colored indeterminacy, the body of Powers's "Greek Slave" appeared as "a most uncanny little specimen,"²¹ indistinguishable, in the marmoreal camouflage of her Mediterranean complexion, from any other white figure carved from the pure Carrara marble which the American literary sculptors sought in Italy. Furthermore, in the sisters' play, the Southern beauty in chains, who masquerades her regal beauty behind the modesty of servant's clothes, carries the Greek name for peace in a turbulent time of mass migration, expansionism and European revolution. In the shifting fluctuations of her color lines, she embodies the forlorn beauty of the numerous quadron and octoroon divas who were publicly acclaimed in Victorian opera houses but did not complete their integration in the 'American family' before the 1930s, a time which blurred class and racial differences in the general destitution of the Great Depression.

The geographical dislocation of the sisters' plays, which oscillated between Romantic Greece, the Spain invaded by Turks and the Mexican regions at war with North America, revealed their intention to radicalize the abolitionist debate in America in a transnational perspective. In their "queer mixture, with entire disregard of such matters as grammar, history, and geography," their private theatricals made their anti-slavery commitment resonate with the Romantic national fights overseas ("A Foreword by Meg," in *Comic Tragedies* 13).²² Before the sisters' Greek plays, Lucy Stone interpreted Powers's celebrated statue as a feminist icon, soon to be followed by Sarah Grimké, to the great dismay of the girls' uncle.²³ In those days, even in Lydia Maria Child's egalitarian agenda, the racial issue of the slaves' emancipation was more a priority than women's sexual freedom, despite her overt critique of loveless marriages as a form of "legalized prostitution" and of the anti-miscegenation laws in her pioneering fiction on interracial marriage (Karcher 329, 325).

Despite the multiple forms of captivity that, according to the proslavery propaganda, seemed to threaten Christian America, the Alcott sisters attributed to the violated beauty of "The Greek Slave" a dignified nobility that, in *An Hour*, —perhaps Louisa's best crafted tale of slave rebellion— she identifies with the natural and undefeated grace of a rebellious slave in a Southern plantation. Even his chains "do not diminish his honor and courage, but merely appear as ominous



Figure 3

²⁰ "Why cannot she who has such power o'er him rouse up with noble words the brave heart slumbering in his breast?" ("Jo" and "Meg," "The Greek Slave" 175-76).

²¹ This insistence on the uncanny presence of dark heroines in the American family returns in "Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power" (Stern 365).

²² "Other abolitionist women, publishing poems in antislavery gift books, used the example of Greece to spur northern women to work harder for the abolition of slavery in America" (Yellin 100).

²³ "Lucy Stone [...] saw the *Greek Slave* as representative of woman's degraded conditions [...] There it stood in the silence, with fettered hands and half-averted face—so emblematic of woman [...] At the evening meeting I poured all my heart out about it. At the close, the reverend Samuel May [...] admonished me that, however true, it was out of place in an antislavery meeting [...] After thinking a little, I said, 'Well, Mr. May, I was a woman before I was an abolitionist. I must speak for the women'" (Blackwell 89-90).



decorations.”²⁴ In Louisa’s Romantic tale “Countess Varazoff” (1868), the Polish wife of a Russian tyrant forced into marriage makes a similar strategic use of the chains of her domestic bondage as ornamental jewelry. Before taking her life in order to humiliate the man who made of her a mere trophy of domination, she provides a grim spectacle of herself “as a slave in golden chains,” displaying the material privileges offered by her oppressive husband and the sinister vision of her arms adorned “with a light silver chain from wrist to wrist” (Stern 642). In this alternative, feminist embodiment of Powers’s icon of captive dignity, the combative Countess is another allegorical embodiment of the ‘marriage question,’ and represents her private oppression as an aspect of the Romantic fights in Europe.²⁵ Her queenly strides challenge her captors, through the ambivalent detail of the golden chain, as a symbol of empowerment that contrast, no less than in “Greek Slave” with her visible condition of captivity.

Beside her firm repudiation of slavery, the Polish patriot in chains evokes another magnificent neoclassical representation of female enslavement sculpted by a celebrated American artist in Italy, Harriet Hosmer. This cross-dressed artist completed the marble work “Zenobia in Chains” in Rome in 1859, catching the regal progress of the third-century Syrian warrior, Palmyra (figure 3). Beside Cleopatra, she was the only African Queen to fight for her country’s independence from the Roman Empire, and was much respected by her enemies for her masculine strength, erudition, and swarthy complexion. Like Varazoff in Alcott’s tale, even after the defeat of her troops, she walked in front of her enemies so heavily adorned with gems that she had to halt for the load of them. The marmoreal iconography dramatized by the Alcott sisters reproduces, on a transnational scale, the unexplored synergy between feminist abolitionism in America and the patriotic fights for national independence in Europe, both meaning to denounce the state of captivity that oppressed the nations no less than those women across the Atlantic unwilling to be “kept prisoner in [their masters’ and husbands’] splendid home” (“Norna; Or The Witch’s Curse,” “Jo” and “Meg” 45). In mastering the art of sensation drama, the Alcott sisters revised the plots originated during the American annexation of Southern territories and adopted the structures of this popular melodrama wrongly considered a mere conservative pulp. In their unpretentious plays, they meant to address, instead, anti-slavery issues that, in their strict observance of the American canon, modern critics have exclusively confined to the literary masters of the American Renaissance, leaving these subversive expressions of feminist abolitionism quite unexplored, as a powerful vehicle of the nineteenth-century demands for political emancipation which spread across the Atlantic.

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²⁴ “A native African, from one of those tribes whose wills are never broken, —who can be subdued by kindness, but who often kill themselves rather than suffer the degradation of the lash. No one had dared to subject him to that chastisement, as was proved by the unmarred smoothness of the muscular body, bare to the waist; but round his neck was riveted an iron collar, with four curved spikes. It was a shameful badge of serfdom; it prevented him from lying down, it galled him with its ceaseless chafing, yet he wore it with an air which would have made the hideous necklace seemed some barbaric ornament, if that had been possible” (“An Hour,” in Elbert 1997, 63).

²⁵ In chapter VII of *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, entitled “Moral Character of Negroes” (1833), Lydia Maria Child clearly defines the interracial encounter between Captain Smith and Pocahontas a legacy of the European Revolutions and represents Pocahontas’s white mate as “a slave in Tartary” who fights for freedom no less than the Poles who shed blood in their insurrections against the Russian domination (qtd. in Holland 54).



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