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 **Dismembering the Text: The Horror of Louisa May Alcott's
*Little Women***

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Dismembering the Text:
The Horror of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

Angela M. Estes (bio) and Kathleen Margaret Lant (bio)

Me from Myself—to banish—
Had I Art—
Impregnable my Fortress
Unto All Heart—

But since myself—assault Me—
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness?

And since We're mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication—
Me—of Me?

—Emily Dickinson

On the floor of an attic room slumps a thirty-year-old woman, stripping off her disguise as a submissive seventeen-year-old governess; removing her false teeth, she takes another swig from a flask and plots a scheme to undermine and conquer an entire family. In another room sits a young girl, laboriously—albeit resentfully—stitching together small remnants of fabric as she learns simultaneously the practical art of patchwork and the womanly virtues of patience, perseverance, and restraint. What possible connection could exist between these two women?

These two scenes—the first from Louisa May Alcott's thriller "Behind a Mask" and the second from her children's story "Patty's Patchwork"—exemplify the apparent extremes that characterize the heroines and plots of Alcott's works. Traditionally, Alcott has been considered a writer of inoffensive, sometimes mildly rebellious children's fiction, but the discovery and republication in 1975 and 1976¹ of Alcott's anonymous and pseudonymous adult thrillers (first published between 1863 and 1869) and the emergence of more [End Page 98] thoughtful recent critical approaches to her children's stories have raised significant questions for Alcott scholars: How is the Alcott canon to be reenvisioned to explain the

existence of her hidden fictional efforts? How do we account for Alcott's fascination with the lurid, the wild, the unacceptable and untrammelled heroines of the thrillers when we remember the little girls—at least superficially docile—of the children's short stories and the ultimately tamed Jo of *Little Women*? And, most importantly, how do these thrillers, characterized by violence, deceit, infidelity, and licentiousness of every kind imaginable, reshape or enrich our understanding of Alcott's classic children's novel *Little Women* (1868)?²

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The seemingly contradictory aspects of Alcott's fiction can be better understood when we place her in a personal and historical context. She was intimately involved in the transcendental circle of her father and his friends, the literati of Concord, including, of course, its leader Ralph Waldo Emerson. Alcott embraced the transcendental ideals of self-expression, self-reliance, and self-exploration as espoused by both Emerson and her father, Bronson Alcott. In a journal entry (27 April 1882), Alcott affirms Emerson's pervasive influence on her life and thought: "Mr. Emerson died at 9 P.M. suddenly. Our best and greatest American gone. The nearest and dearest friend Father has ever had, and the man who has helped me most by his life, his books, his society. I can never tell all he has been to me . . . his essays on Self-reliance, Character, Compensation, Love, and Friendship helped me to understand myself and life, and God and Nature" (Cheney 345). Alcott insisted, moreover, that the self-reliance and self-awareness so vaunted by the transcendentalists be extended to women as well as men. In a letter to Maria S. Porter, she asserts woman's right to an identity and a life of her own by calling for an exploration and redefinition of "woman's sphere": "In future let woman do whatever she can do; let men place no more impediments in the way; above all things let's have fair play,—let *simple justice* be done, say I. Let us hear no more of 'woman's sphere' either from our wise (?) legislators beneath the gilded dome, or from our clergymen in their pulpits." Alcott goes on to insist that woman be allowed to "find out her own limitations" (Porter 13-14). [End Page 99]

But Alcott, well educated in the proprieties of her own time, realized the dangers for a woman of nineteenth-century America in advocating such potentially liberating attitudes too openly. In fact, Alcott seemed to sense the ambiguities inherent, at least for women, in Emerson's position, for it is Emerson, the man from...

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