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 **Missionary Positions: Taming the Savage Girl in Louisa May  
Alcott's Jack and Jill**

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The Lion and the Unicorn

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

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*Maude Hines (bio)*

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Jill could have screamed with pain as he lifted her; but she set her lips and bore it with the courage of a little Indian; for all the lads were looking on, and Jill was proud to show that a girl could bear as much as a boy. . . . Then the mournful procession set forth, Mr. Grant driving the oxen, the girls clustering about the interesting invalids on the sled, while the boys came behind like a guard of honor.

(Louisa May Alcott, *Jack and Jill*)

In 1880, Louisa May Alcott published *Jack and Jill: A Village Story*, the penultimate book in her *Little Women* series for girls. At forty-seven years of age and in failing health, Alcott was chiefly interested in the novel as a moneymaking enterprise.<sup>1</sup> Like the more famous title novel in the series, *Jack and Jill* centers around the adventures and self-recriminations of its tomboy heroine. In this less polished work, we can see more clearly than in *Little Women* the fantasies and anxieties connected with changing girls into “little women.”

*Jack and Jill* takes place in a single year, a year in which the adolescent population of an entire village goes through puberty, and in so doing, is transformed from a homosocially gendered group of girls and boys to a group of heterosexual couples. The nascent sexuality of the group is metaphorically emphasized through comparison with nature. The wintery beginning of the novel, in which sexuality is dormant, is followed by springtime, when the boys and girls are repeatedly compared to budding plants as they become interested in one another, pairing off as they bloom.

The relationship between Jack and Jill at the beginning of the novel is exceptional for its platonic heterosociality. Jill wants to play with the boys, but Jack is also happy playing with a girl. Jack and Jill are both **[End Page 373]** punished by the sledding accident that inaugurates the narrative; their inappropriate gender roles during winter put them in danger of inappropriate sexual roles in spring. Jack and Jill must both be transformed in order for the marriage plot of the novel to reach fruition.

Jack, for his part, is temporarily prostrated and feminized by his injuries and must lose a same-sex romantic attachment in order to marry Jill. Jill, however, must undergo a more difficult transformation. The work of feminine transformation in *Jack and Jill* is performed through inactivity. The action of the novel takes place in eleven pages: as one would expect, Jack and Jill go up a hill, and then come tumbling down. The remaining pages—over three hundred of them—chronicle Jill's convalescence.

Anne Scott MacLeod points out that *Jack and Jill* is one of many books by nineteenth-century woman writers that make an “analogy between physical crippling and the limitations a girl faced as she approached womanhood” (21). Ruth MacDonald also focuses on Jill's accident and recovery from a familiar feminist perspective: “Jill is not allowed her moment of independence and equality with the boys. Alcott finds that the way to tame such high spirits is to keep the girl flat on her back until she learns better” (68). MacDonald's reading connects the moment of the accident with one of its immediate effects: Jill's “moment of independence” is paid for by three hundred pages of flat-backed punishment. In these readings, Alcott is either “dealing” in “conventional terms,” or, more ambivalently, doing so at the same time as she is subverting those terms with a metaphor of resistance: the broken girl.<sup>2</sup> In this essay I argue that what MacDonald and MacLeod rightly observe to be a connection between Jill's crippling and the strictures of Victorian womanhood is just one part of the story of her transformation.

The common Victorian theme of a tomboy's conversion into a lady is complicated by Jill's ambivalent membership in a constellation of identity categories that connote uncontrolled sexuality in the late nineteenth century. The novel should be understood not only in relation to Victorian ideals of womanhood and the burgeoning...



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