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Abstract: Alcott’s sensational stories about actresses and female artists provide the perfect field for experiments with alternative gender roles as women of these professions do not seem to fulfill ordinary female roles in the first place. While literary scholars generally agree on the emancipating use of disguises in Alcott’s sensational fiction, the various purposes gender roles are exploited for have not yet been investigated in any detail. This essay shows that, through their subversive play with established gender categories, some of Alcott’s female characters determine their own social identities as women. Their ‘unfeminine’ deceptions of others explicitly serve their ‘feminine’ virtues and, thus, eventually help to empower these figures as ‘true women.’ In these morally hybrid and sensational female characters, Alcott expands the established repertoire of oppositional female types such as the ‘true woman’ and the femme fatale by introducing the alternative, more complex and individualistic gender category of a ‘feminine femme fatale.’

In nineteenth-century American literature, women were mostly depicted according to the then prevalent female gender stereotypes. Yet, as David S. Reynolds has shown in his groundbreaking study Beneath the American Renaissance, mid-century American literature cannot be reduced to sentimental novels featuring the ‘true woman’ as moral exemplar (cf. 339). On the contrary, sensational fiction offered a great variety of female character types including the adventure woman, the female victim, or the femme fatale; the latter was often depicted in variations of the feminist criminal or the fallen woman (cf. 339-65). This ‘extended’ repertoire of female gender categories was employed, for instance, by Louisa May Alcott in her sensational stories as a means of exploring alternative variations of female behavior.

For Alcott, her sensational fiction,¹ which she published either anonymously or under the pseudonym of A.M. Barnard, had various functions. Her sensational stories and novelettes have generally been interpreted as, on the one hand, a relatively easy source of income for Louisa, when she was the family’s major

¹ Alcott’s sensational and thriller stories were made widely available in Madeleine Stern’s 1976 and 1998b and Elaine Showalter’s 1988 collections.
bread-winner, and, on the other hand, as a personal means of “psychological catharsis” (Stern, 1976, xiv): Alcott considered herself “a wretched victim to the respectable traditions of Concord,” trapped in “a chain armor of propriety” – with which she readily complied in Little Women. In her sensational stories, however, she followed her “natural ambition [...] for the lurid style” (Alcott, cit. in Stern, 1998b, 192). The female protagonists in these texts are predominately “passionate and angry” (Stern, 1976, xvi) and are, therefore, generally considered “lush, exotic [and revengeful] femmes fatales who manipulated the men they beguiled” (Stern, 1998b, 94; cf. MacDonald, 1983, 83; Showalter, 1988, xxx). However, this categorization proves too simplistic and inappropriate, for it reduces some of Alcott’s psychologically and morally complex heroines to one-dimensional demons, while, in fact, they often remain morally ambivalent; take Jean Muir in “Behind a Mask; Or, A Woman’s Power,” for instance. Accordingly, Alcott writes in her diary in 1862, “my sinners always have a good spot somewhere” (cit. in Stern, 1998b, 98). When these protagonists deceive other characters unscrupulously by masking their own identity, they reveal how gender roles shape one’s social persona without being ‘substantial,’ ‘natural,’ or ‘authentic.’ While literary scholars generally agree on the emancipating effect of disguises and role-plays in Alcott’s sensational stories, the various ways the established gender roles are employed and exploited for different purposes have not been investigated in any great detail yet. The following analysis will show that, through their subversive play with established gender categories, characters such as Jean Muir gain the emancipating power to determine their own social identity as women. In “La Jeune; Or, Actress and Woman” and “A Marble Woman; Or, The Mysterious Model” the heroines’ deceptions of others explicitly serve their ‘feminine’ virtues and eventually help to sustain their ‘true womanhood’ – their ‘unfeminine’ deceptions are justified by their purpose to serve ‘feminine’ aims while, at the same time, they empower themselves as ‘true women.’ In these morally hybrid and sensational women characters, Alcott expands the established repertoire of oppositional one-dimensional female types such as the ‘true woman’ and the femme fatale by introducing the alternative, more complex and individualistic gender category of a ‘feminine femme fatale.’

In Alcott’s sensational stories, two different sorts of social performance may be distinguished. On the one hand, the respective heroine performs a deliberate and manipulative role-play in which she acts in her social realm as if she were on stage: She freely picks certain roles from a repertoire of female stereotypes such as the meek, naïve girl clinging to a knightly hero for protection, the accomplished lady, the graceful ‘angel in the house,’ or the romantic belle, while the...

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2 Many literary scholars, especially Leona Rostenberg, 1984, Karen Halttunen, 1984, and Madeleine B. Stern, 1998b, focus on Alcott’s own role-play as the popular author of children’s books and sensational fiction. A remark of Alcott’s to LaSalle Corbell Pickett seems to suggest that she ‘masked’ her own subversive impulses by publicly acknowledging only those of her works that fulfilled the expectations of ‘proper’ society: “I wish that I dared inscribe [my fancies] upon my pages and set them before the public” (Alcott, cit. in Pickett, 1984, 42).
other fictional characters function – without knowing – as both her fellow actors and her audience. On the other hand, Alcott’s alternative female character type of the ‘feminine femme fatale’ can be understood as a category emerging from a tense dialogue between established gender norms and Alcott’s literary experiments in sensational fiction. In this process of cultural interaction, neither Alcott nor her fictional protagonists act in a completely autonomous manner. According to Judith Butler’s concept of the performativity of gender identity, the range of possibilities for constituting an identity is bound by culturally and conventionally established gender roles. Even alternative performances of ‘womanhood’ inevitably depend on established categories inasmuch as they either deviate from them only partially or refer to them at least ex negativo. Alcott’s alternative category of a ‘feminine femme fatale,’ in fact, proves to be a combination of two nineteenth-century female stereotypes: the ‘sanctified,’ self-sacrificing ‘true woman,’ on the one hand, and the cool and ruthlessly calculating femme fatale, on the other. Butler’s concept of performativity does not imply a ‘subject behind the role.’ Instead, the subject is, first of all, paradoxically constituted in, and by, the act of performing a certain identity – while Michel Foucault describes this process as ‘assujettissement,’ Butler calls it ‘subjection’ (cf. Butler, 1997, 1). Thus, in Alcott’s stories, the performative constitution of the alternative category of a ‘feminine femme fatale’ takes place by way of ‘subjection.’

In “Behind a Mask; Or, A Woman’s Power” (1866; Mask), the protagonist Jean Muir deviates only slightly from the stereotype of the egoistical femme fatale. At first sight, “the divorced wife of a disreputable actor” (Mask, 209) seems to be the typical “feminist criminal,” that is, “the abandoned woman who avenges wrongs against her sex by waging war against society, especially against men and against proper women” (Reynolds, 1989, 363). Having been exploited by unscrupulous men and despised by respectable women, Jean takes ‘unfeminine’ revenge by deceiving and manipulating the Coventry family according to her own wishes: She makes the two adult sons fall in love with her – only to drop them eventually for the rich and elderly Sir John, whom she marries for his money; in addition, she humbles proud Mrs. Coventry and her arrogant niece Lucia. On the other hand, however, Jean also displays certain genuine virtues and has an undeniably positive effect on the members of the family when she piques the indolent master of the house, Gerald, into ‘manly’ action and responsibility, when she teaches the aristocratic family a lesson of their own unjustified snobbery and the accomplishments of people of lower social rank, and when she proves a brilliant governess to the family’s daughter Bella. In fact, due to her morally ambivalent character, Jean represents neither the typical femme fatale nor

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3 The social role-play as Alcott depicts it in her fiction provides a vivid example of the constructivist concept much later proposed by the sociologist Erving Goffman. He discusses social interaction in terms of deliberate social role-playing; cf. Goffman, 1959.

4 Butler states clearly that “there can be no pure opposition to power, only a recrafting of its terms from resources invariably impure” (1994, 39).
the ‘true woman,’ but something in between that is indefinable by nineteenth-century female gender standards.

Except for Jeanne F. Bedell (1980, 9) and Christine Doyle (2000, 55-56), however, literary scholarship has so far ignored Jean’s morally ambivalent status and has simply dismissed her as a stock character of the sensational genre. The crucial moral difference between characters such as the imposter Virginie in Alcott’s “VV; Or, Plots and Counterplots” (1865; VV), for instance, and Jean Muir in “Behind a Mask” is often overlooked; unscrupulous Virginie even puts up with her victims’ death to achieve her mercenary goals and she is frequently depicted as “hallow-hearted” (VV, 84) and “selfish” (VV, 87); furthermore, she is explicitly condemned by both the other characters and the narrator; poetical justice has her commit suicide in the face of “the [punishment] prepared for her” by other characters (VV, 143). Jean Muir, however, instead of being punished for her deception of others and her materialistic motives, eventually achieves her goal of securing a husband and comfortable home for herself. In the end, her immoral behavior seems counterbalanced, if not justified, by her genuine feelings, her fidelity to Sir John and her corrective impact on the Coventries. Unlike the typical femme fatale Virginie, Jean Muir remains a morally ambivalent character to the very end.

Apart from Jean’s morally ambivalent status, her manipulative role-play performatively exposes the repertoire of Victorian gender roles as a cultural and conventional construction. Seemingly ‘genuine’ and ‘natural’ womanhood and manhood function only as inessential, arbitrary, and unreliable codes of behavior for both men and women, whose one-dimensional stereotypes are predominantly defined by men. Jean’s autonomous exploitation of the established female gender roles, her continuous switching of roles, as well as her subversive recombination of originally incompatible aspects of various types of womanhood renders her indefinable within the range of established gender categories. Her active and self-constitutive role-play becomes an act of empowering self-definition defying men’s sovereignty to define ‘proper’ womanhood.

What makes it so easy for Jean Muir to manipulate the various members of the Coventry family are their stereotypical ideas of ‘manly’ and ‘womanly’ behavior, their snobbish expectation of lower social classes to be culturally inferior, and their self-assured opinion that they thoroughly understand others, especially women’s character. Jean Muir enters the household as the governess of young Bella. In her meek, virtuous and seemingly innocent conduct, Jean reminds the

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5 Cf. MacDonald, 1983, 83; Showalter, 1988, xxx; Martha Saxton, however, takes a middle position here: On the one hand, she clearly juxtaposes Jean’s roles to the ‘real’ and ‘evil Jean,’ on the other hand, she sees Jean’s negative and positive features integrated in one when she marries Sir John (Saxton, 1984, 257).

6 Jeanne F. Bedell, however, considers “Virginitie Alcott’s most complex character” and emphasizes her victimization by others as the true origin of her murderous manipulations of others (Bedell, 1980, 10). In contrast to other sensational stories by Alcott, however, this aspect remains rather implicit in “VV,” while Virginie’s intrigues are made very prominent.
reader of Charlotte Brontë’s then well-known Jane Eyre, who implicitly sets the standard of the family’s hopes for a governess’ character. The young master’s opinion of governesses, however, is quite set: “I have an inveterate aversion to the whole tribe. […] I am sure, she is a bore” (Mask, 361). While Jane Eyre essentially possesses the characteristics of a morally integer ‘true woman,’ Jean Muir uses this model of ‘femininity’ as a means of shaping and manipulating her own social image. She proves Gerald’s prejudice against governesses in the wrong by even exceeding his and the others’ ideal of ‘feminine’ virtue and accomplishment when she caters to their respective personal vanities:

Nothing could be more unobtrusive and retiring than her manners. She was devoted to Bella, who soon adored her, and was only happy in her society. She ministered in many ways to [invalid] Mrs. Coventry’s comfort, and that lady declared there never was such as nurse. She amused, interested and won [the family’s younger son] Edward with her wit and womanly sympathy. She made Lucia [the eldest son’s, Gerald, designated wife] respect and envy her for her accomplishments, and piqued indolent Gerald by her persistent avoidance of him, while [the elderly uncle] Sir John was charmed with her respectful deference and the graceful little attentions she paid him in a frank and artless way, very winning to the lonely old man. The very servants liked her; and instead of being, what most governesses are, a forlorn creature hovering between superiors and inferiors, Jean Muir was the life of the house. (Mask, 377; my italics; cf. 384)

By fulfilling the Victorian standards of a ‘true woman’s’ virtues, Jean affirms the other characters’ impression of knowing her by the established codes of female behavior. She excels in playing the piano and singing in a superb but ‘femininely’ dilettante way (cf. 363-64); although she delicately faints from physical and emotional exhaustion, she soon afterwards assumes her ‘feminine’ duty of skillfully serving tea to the family and thus exhibits the “modest, domestic graces” of a ‘true woman’ (365); as she seems “well-bred, unassuming, and very entertaining” (372), she is quickly considered a “treasure” (365). Gerald, therefore, expects to be easily able to categorize Miss Muir, once he gets to know her better, as “belong[ing] to the moral, the melancholy, the romantic, or the dashing class” (371).

Both her knowledge of how she herself is perceived and categorized by others according to the established gender stereotypes, and her keen insight in others’ dispositions or interests enable Jean Muir to win everybody’s confidence and to exploit her knowledge for her own purposes. She flatters old Sir John when she praises his estate, she wins Edward’s admiration by gracefully taming his favorite horse, she delights Mrs. Coventry by arranging pretty bouquets of flowers, she praises a portrait of proud Lucia’s mother, she obliges Bella by vividly interesting lessons of French, and she awakens the curiosity of indolent and vain Gerald by ignoring him. Later she strategically fulfills Gerald’s expectations of a virtuous woman’s helplessness when she flees from Edward, who thinks himself desperately in love with her, into his arms “to claim his protection” and to appeal

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7 For a summary of the parallels and intertextual references between Charlotte Brontë’s novel Jane Eyre and Alcott’s “Behind a Mask,” see Christine Doyle, 2000, 4.
to his ‘manly chivalry’ “with a faint cry” (382-83). Her way of speaking to Gerald with “a sweet, submissive intonation which made it expressive of the respect, regard, and confidence which men find pleasantest when women feel and show it” (389) serves the same purpose. Finally she charms skeptical Gerald into acting the caring nurse and “mov[ing] about the room in the quiet way which made it a pleasure to watch her” (386). Jean’s role-play can be described as an iterative ‘citation’ from a range of culturally available female gender roles which define her as ‘feminine’ and ‘attractive’ in the eyes of the other characters. Jean thus manages to make both sons passionately fall in love with her. By Jean’s pretense of being in love with them and by her making various men believe themselves in love with her, love as the traditional safeguard of a happy home (cf. Bedell, 1980, 10) is turned into a dangerous threat to private bliss. Woman’s primary power – love – becomes an unreliable sham.

By freely switching between different female gender roles, Jean enacts and thus exposes the performative constitution and social constructedness of gender identities, as they are described by Judith Butler with respect to travesty (cf. 1990, 137-39; 1993, 312-13). Butler repeatedly refers to parodistic travesty as an example of subversive transgressions of gender lines, here those of hegemonic heterosexuality. In acts of travesty, anatomy and performance of clothes, voice, and gestures on the one hand, and sexual identity or orientation on the other, clearly contradict each other. This difference in transvestite performance reveals the fundamental theatricality of the gender dichotomy (cf. Butler, 1990, 137-39; 1993, 312-13): Subversion, therefore, becomes a matter “of working the weakness in the norms […]”. Hence it is not that drag opposes heterosexuality” (Butler, 1993, 237-38); rather, it exposes the cultural constructedness of the norm, while the established order is claimed to be ‘natural.’

The unconventional performances of characters such as Jean Muir may, therefore, be considered a form of travesty within the range of female gender categories, not one of switching between the different genders. Miss Muir appropriates alternately – sometimes even at the same time – mutually exclusive versions of ‘womanhood.’ Her transgressive performances make it clear that the supposedly ‘natural’ repertoire of types of womanhood cannot account for her behavior, as Lucia’s exclamation, “Impossible! A woman could not do it” (Mask, 425), proves.

Furthermore, in her self-dramatization as the embodiment of virtuous ‘femininity,’ she exposes the fundamental paradox at the core of the concept of ‘true womanhood’ – that the moral exemplar ‘naturally’ pleases everybody within her realm without ever realizing what she is doing: “Sentimentalists […] insisted that true women were constitutionally transparent, incapable of disguising their

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8 Direct opposition to the established order is impossible as all types of sexual behavior and orientation occur, at least ex negativo, only within that order. The fact that even parodistic performances are bound by the range of possible forms of gender identity is also pointed out by Moya Lloyd, 1999, 206.

9 While the regular transvestite hopes to establish his own non-heterosexual identity as a ‘third’ gender, Jean does not aim at an alternative to female gender, but rather at an expansion and pluralization of the repertoire of female identities.
feelings” (Halttunen, 1982, 57). The young master of the house, Gerald, understands that Jean Muir “must be an observing as well as an energetic young person, to discover [everybody’s] chief weakness[es] and attack [them] so soon” (Mask, 371), but he overlooks the fact that this is true for all women who endeavor to please others. Although ‘feminine’ women are supposed to delight everybody in a ‘natural,’ naïve, and spontaneous way, there is hardly any way to fulfill this standard without closely and covertly observing the whims and vanities of the people surrounding them and deliberately catering to their wishes. Society, therefore, plays an important part in constituting the image of a ‘feminine’ woman; Jean involves the Coventries as both fellow actors and audience in her continuous role-play without their ever realizing it. Her role-play becomes valid only when it is witnessed and acknowledged as meaningful by others. Any ‘true woman’ thus depends on, first, the affirmation of her ‘femininity’ by others, and, second, her own strategic calculations and tactic placement of certain ‘feminine’ virtues in her behavior:

Jean must continually act as if she was not acting and pretend that she is not pretending [...]. More difficult still, the character Jean must impersonate is the exact opposite of who she must be to survive. To be a good “little woman,” one must possess acute consciousness, consummate acting ability, psychological strength, self-control and a capacity for hard work. Yet the role of little woman demands that the person playing it appears to be totally un-self-conscious and even unconscious, completely “natural,” weak, timorous, out of control, and passive. (Fetterley, 1983, 7)

Here, the Victorian woman’s supposedly ‘natural’ and ‘spontaneous’ virtuousness appears less a woman’s essential identity than her reputation which primarily depends on male affirmation, on which she has to rely for her social position. Jean’s complaint about Sidney’s slandering of her person might be ill-founded in her special case, but her line of argument holds true for women’s dependence on their social reputation in general (cf. Keyser, 1993, 54):

If he menaced my life, I should not fear; but he menaces that which is dearer than life – my good name. A look, a word can tarnish it; a scornful smile, a significant shrug can do me more harm than any blow; for I am a woman – friendless, poor, and at the mercy of his tongue. (Mask, 399)

A woman’s identity is thus performatively constituted by the person’s own conduct and the affirmation of her social co-actors and audience.

Elizabeth L. Keyser considers only Lucia and Gerald as an audience to Jean’s role-acting, while the other characters function primarily as her fellow actors (cf. 1993, 51). However, Jean puts all characters under her spell of illusion. There are only a few exceptions where single family members function as audience ‘only,’ such as the scene when Sir John watches the governess through a window and interprets her as an innocently misused girl in need of his protection (cf. Mask, 376). Gerald does not trust Jean’s virtuousness at first and seems to look through her role-play when he calls her fainting and her brilliant play on the piano theatrical “move[s]” (371) and comments on them mockingly: “Scene first, very well done” (364). Later, when he falls in love with Jean, however, he becomes just as much involved in her deceptive role-play as the other characters.
It is only the perusal of Jean’s letters that opens the deceived Coventries’ eyes for the active role they played themselves as audience to and fellow-actors in an illusionary drama put on by the retired professional actress Jean Muir. Here men’s behavior proves just as stereotypical and culturally constructed as their expectations of women’s conduct. It is these male stereotypes that allow Jean to manipulate Edward, Gerald, and Sir John and show them “[w]hat fools men are” (427): Typically, both idle Edward and indolent Gerald feel insulted when Jean accuses them of effeminacy. Their indignation follows the cultural standard that women “don’t mind” idleness, while “it frets” men deeply (374). Gerald’s lethargy does not fit in with notions of men’s ‘natural’ activism and exposes the ideal of energetic manhood, at least in his special case, as a cultural construct. When he finally becomes active and accepts his responsibilities as master of the house, he does not, in fact, follow his natural inclinations as a man but rather his romantic notions of ‘manly’ conduct and his snobbish family pride, which he sees threatened by Edward’s ‘imprudence’ to fall in love with a governess. In fact, his core motive is his wish to sustain the ‘honor’ of being considered ‘manly’ (cf. 380).

The subtitle of the story proclaims “a woman’s power,” but it fails to clarify whether this power is a positive or a negative one, and even the ending of the story does not offer a clear answer to this question. While the Coventries vent their indignation of being thus deceived, Jean’s immoral and ‘unfeminine’ role-play remains unpunished, contrary to Edward’s wish that “fate will […] overtake her” (428). On the contrary, Jean achieves all her aims when she not only teaches the family a bitter lesson on snobbery and humbles their pride, but also when she marries the rich uncle in the end, thus winning a comfortable home and a loving husband for herself. Lucia, disgusted with Jean’s crafty deceptions, disguises, her unconcealed egotism, condemns her as utterly ‘unfeminine’: “It is impossible. A woman could not do it” (425). However, Jean only requires the same independence and inconsiderateness that the male Coventries practice every day: Gerald is a vain, irresponsible and snobbish master and keeps insulting the feelings of his de facto fiancée Lucia; jealous Edward even attempts to murder his brother. While such misbehavior is, if reluctantly, tolerated in the male characters, similar misbehavior in women is considered to be scandalous.11

Jean’s power over the other characters proves to be not entirely destructive. She brings new life into the family that readily gathers around her:

Jean Muir kept much in Bella’s study and soon made it a pleasant little nook that Ned and his mother, and often Sir John, came in to enjoy the music, reading, or cheerful chat which made the evenings so gay. (376; cf. 375)

11 Ann Douglas justifies deceptive role-play for 19th-century women as a way to independence: “For Louisa May Alcott, deception can be a means for women to infiltrate a closed world and get some of what they want from it. And if nothing else, deception allows women to manipulate and make excitingly perilous their one culturally sanctioned area of expertise: the creation and display of emotion. […] For Alcott, as for many of her literary contemporaries, deception was most compelling when used in cold pursuit of an object; a kind of literary calisthenics of the will” (Douglas, 1984, 236).
By open criticism and contempt, Jean manages to induce indolent Gerald to arrange for a military commission for his brother Edward, who craves for an active, ‘manly’ life (cf. 380). With her ridiculing Gerald’s lack of ‘manliness’—“[e]nergy is more attractive than beauty in a man” (374)—she calls the young master to his duty. Jean’s contempt for the Coventries’ snobbery gives not only expression to her own social inferiority, but she herself moves freely between the social ranks of lords and servants (cf. 376)—her mobility introduces a democratic alternative into an otherwise rigidly aristocratic society. Finally, she even manages to break through the social barriers by marrying Sir John. After having achieved her goal, she renounces her former dishonest life and promises to honor, respect and love Sir John, “[which] she faithfully performed in after-years” (415). It becomes clear that her various masks do not only hide a bitter and revengeful “witch” (362; 379; 418), but also a sensitive, ‘feminine’ woman who is quite capable of genuine emotions such as “genuine remorse” (414), “real humility” (ibid.), “a tear or two of sincere happiness” (423), as well as a “grateful warmth” (429). Her marriage with Sir John revalorizes her character decidedly, for her love and respect for the elderly man appear real and are, in fact, well-earned by him as he has overcome all his former prejudices and loves his bride uncompromisingly:

I will look at nothing, hear nothing, believe nothing which can in any way lessen my respect and affection for this young lady. […] We all have committed faults and follies. I freely forgive Jean hers, and desire to know nothing of them from your [i.e. his family’s] lips. (428)

Lord Coventry’s refusal to look at the truth may be naïve, but his forgivingness is the only means to offer Jean the opportunity to stand the test of the faithful ‘true woman.’ Sir John’s generosity constitutes Jean’s ‘hybrid womanhood’ as acceptable, if not respectable.

Jean’s appropriation of ‘masculine’ autonomy and calculation does not turn her into “a man herself,” as Judith Fetterley claims (12). In fact, Jean’s double-play is more complex, for, in spite of her unscrupulousness, she still possesses ‘feminine’ features. As a one-dimensional femme fatale she would simply be the stereotypical female villain of sensational literature, as Virginie in “VV.” By integrating ‘feminine’ features into the femme fatale or ‘masculine’ features into her ‘femininity,’ however, she eventually does not belong to either category. Instead, she oscillates between the two opposite roles and occupies a so far undefined position on the spectrum of conceivable forms of ‘womanhood.’ The gender difference is thus softened and pluralized. In “Behind a Mask,” 19th-century gender roles are generally exposed as something non-essential in the respective persons. The reader cannot be sure to find the ‘real Jean’ in the thirty-year-old bitter

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12 “She had been lovely once, happy, innocent, and tender; but nothing of all this remained to the gloomy woman who leaned there brooding over some wrong, or loss or disappointment which had darkened all her life” (Mask, 367).

13 Here the literary conventions of the sensational and gothic novel serve Alcott as intertextual points of reference (cf. MacDonald, 1983, 83; Stern, 1976, xviii).
woman as her personal individuality disappears between and ‘behind’ her ever-changing roles – “[s]o systematic is the confusion between mask and self that the concept of identity becomes meaningless” (Fetterley, 1983, 13). Jean is quite correct when she doubts that “actresses ever are themselves” (Mask, 367). As the Victorian woman who wants to please others cannot help to be a plotting actress, at least to a certain degree, Jean’s doubt holds true for all women. Eventually, it remains impossible to look ‘behind the masks’ of gender categories, even for a woman like Jean, who understands the general social role-play. Even when she has removed her false braids, teeth, and make-up (cf. 367), she embodies female stereotypes such as the embittered woman victim and always remains related to them – at least ex negativo – in her deviations from and modifications of such stock characteristics. She substitutes only one social gender role for another without ever escaping cultural definition. Butler’s concept of a ‘subjectivating’ performativity can explain the dependence of alternative gender categories on a given framework of gender possibilities, which no one can ever entirely leave behind.14 Both in moments when she feels unobserved by other characters and when acting certain roles, Jean constitutes herself differently over and over again, and thus (re)iterates her identity as something unfixed, discontinuous, inessential and constructed; at times she is a man-hating avenger, and at others, the sensible, misused victim who laments her wasted life and the ambitious autonomous ‘self-made’ woman who actively designs her own fate. Jean’s free and flexible choice from a wide-ranging repertoire of ‘feminine’ and ‘unfeminine’ roles prevents her from being clearly definable as a ‘proper woman.’ Instead her flexible changing of roles becomes an effective means of self-definition and self-empowerment.

In other stories by Louisa May Alcott, such as “La Jeune” and “A Marble Woman,” the protagonists manipulate other characters, especially men, and employ an ‘unwomanly’ deceptive role-play in service of their self-empowerment, too, but these women are less selfish and egoistical than Jean Muir. Their self-staging as varying personae is morally justified by their genuine ‘femininity’ and their ‘womanly’ virtues of love and self-sacrifice for their respective husbands. While these highly melodramatic and sensational stories merely seem to be typical examples of a standardized trivial genre, Alcott’s subversive play with character stereotypes propagates a gender politics of emancipation: The supposed femmes fatales are, in fact, ‘true women’ employing the means of a femme fatale for their self-empowerment as ‘feminine’ women. The traditional concept of submissive, dependent ‘true womanhood’ is thus modified and expanded by including women’s autonomous self-definition, sober calculation with the effects

14 Elaine Showalter argues along the same lines when she points out that “the ex-actress Jean Muir […] can never be offstage; she always acts the feminine parts that her society allows her” (1988, xxx). Showalter does not, however, explain Jean’s dependence on established gender categories. She reduces the real complexity of the relation between Jean’s role-plays and established gender norms, when she assumes an autonomous subject ‘behind’ Jean’s supposedly ‘real’ identity and thinks the governess consciously “overact[s]” her roles (1988, xxx).
of one’s behavior, and even manipulation of that of others – these strategies are justified by their morally acceptable purpose.

Alcott’s short story “La Jeune; Or, Actress and Woman” (1868; Jeune) is a case in point. At first glance, the title character seems to affirm the prejudices and clichés about frivolous actresses and an immoral life on stage: She seems to be a typical femme fatale, for as a professional actress she does not only expose herself to the eye of the public, but she also seems to be a prostitute, an opium-eater, and a gambler. However, she turns out to be none of all these but rather a virtuous, loving, caring, and self-sacrificing wife. In fact, it is only the somewhat ‘dishonorable’ profession of an actress that enables her to live up to the ideal of the ‘true woman’ – being an actress and leading a virtuous, ‘feminine’ life appear no longer mutually exclusive. Apart from that, La Jeune’s social role-play in the story serves the purpose of teaching the arrogant narrator a lesson about his own self-deceptions and prejudices against La Jeune’s ‘class.’ The cultural images of women – innocent angel or coquette, even devil – are so much standardized that they may easily be feigned by La Jeune, while they provide the narrator with ready interpretations.

When the narrator first hears about the celebrated actress La Jeune, he has already set his mind as to what to think of her, and gives his young friend, who has desperately fallen in love with her, the following warning:

She will marry you for your money, spend it like water, and when tired of the respectabilities, will elope with the first rich lover that comes along. […] I know her class; they are all alike, mercenary, treacherous, and shallow. (Jeune, 625)

While the narrator believes he is testing La Jeune when he decides to observe her closely for four weeks, it is, in fact, the narrator and his assumption to know people’s characters thoroughly that are tested. He thinks himself to be very well-experienced in human nature: “I never am deceived; I read men and women like books, and no character is too mysterious for me to decipher” (630). He feels sure he easily looks through La Jeune’s social masks, when she, for instance, acts the celebrated, slightly coquettish Parisian actress: “She smiled graciously, received compliments tranquilly, and conversed wittily; but her heart evidently was not there, and she was still playing a part” (629). However, the narrator’s prejudices against La Jeune’s professional ‘class’ so much precondition his deductions from his observations that he finally comes to the false conclusion that she is a prostitute or has an affair, that she gambles regularly, and that she is an opium-addict (cf. 633).

La Jeune never loses control over her image as a ‘woman’ neither in public and society nor with special respect to the narrator. In the end, she has fascinated the narrator to such a degree that he has fallen in love with her and is even ready to graciously overlook all her ‘vices’ and marry her against his own prejudices. La Jeune, however, rejects his proposal of marriage and opens his eyes to his repeated misconceptions about her person and character: “You […] needed humbling. I […] resolved to teach you a lesson. You flatter yourself you know me thoroughly, yet you have not caught even a glimpse of my true nature” (635).
When she tells him her highly melodramatic life story, he has to realize that her supposed lover is, in fact, the physician of her invalid husband and that the opium had been used as medication. She herself is fatally ill from consumption, and has only a few more months to live. Her care and love for her husband had been her utterly ‘feminine’ and virtuous motive for earning enough money, without regard to her own failing health, only to ensure a comfortable life for her husband when she would be dead: “if I live three months and am able to play on, I shall leave [my husband] Florimond secure against want, and that is my only desire” (636-37). Her supposed passion for gambling turns out to be a verbal misunderstanding by the narrator, who had mistaken one of her comments on having played well and earned a considerable sum of money – but not by playing cards, but by her professional acting on stage. Instead of the superficial, vicious, frivolous girl of the theater milieu, La Jeune proves to be a self-sacrificing, loving, faithful and morally integer wife and ‘true woman.’ When the narrator learns her story, he pays her his honest respect: “I admired the actress, I adored the woman” (636).

La Jeune is neither a conventional ‘true woman’ nor a conventional femme fatale, but integrates in herself aspects of both types. This new concept of womanhood is in her case justified as ‘feminine,’ for even her disguise as a young coquette is part of her social role as celebrated actress and serves her over-all project of being a faithful and supportive wife to her husband. The supposedly clear-cut borderlines between the contrary female categories of ‘true woman’ and femme fatale are thus blurred. As with Jean Muir’s, La Jeune’s switching of masks and roles may be considered a ‘gender-internal form of travesty’ which exposes the established female categories as arbitrarily constructed patriarchal norms which are by no means the immediate expression of women’s innermost ‘nature.’ The narrator’s continuous misinterpretations both re-enact and reveal these arbitrary categorizations of women’s behavior as man-centered and man-directed attributions and misperceptions. La Jeune’s performances on stage, in society and in private, however, constitute her as both a brilliant actress and a virtuous ‘true woman.’ The spectrum of conceivable woman types is thus expanded by the addition of the ‘calculating true woman.’

The alternative category of the ‘calculating true woman’ is no exception in Alcott’s sensational fiction. In “A Marble Woman; Or, The Mysterious Model” (1865; MW), the ‘calculating true woman’ Cecilia manages to counteract a man’s attempt to control her and reduce her to an exaggerated version of the ‘true woman.’ She is forced to comply with a very rigid version of ‘feminine’ purity and aloofness of the world. By means of ‘unfeminine’ role-play and deception as well as exaggeration, she proves this form of womanhood to be absurd and inhumane and thus deprives her male counterpart of any power over her. After the seemingly clear-cut domestic hierarchy of male dominance and female dependence has thus got out of balance, it becomes obvious that their relationship can only be stabilized in an egalitarian marriage.
When the sculptor Bazil Yorke accepts the guardianship of his former fiancée's daughter although that woman had left him for another man, he is a misogynist *par excellence*. He is so disappointed with women and hurt in his feelings that he tries to control any emotion both in himself and young Cecilia. He brings her up as a woman who displays only outward beauty without the slightest emotional depth, love, or humanity: “A marble woman […], with no heart to love you [i.e. Bazil], only grace and beauty to please your eye and bring you honor” (MW, 188). By means of these restrictions Bazil not only wants Cecilia to repay for her mother’s faults but also hopes to save the girl from emotional suffering: “I would have you beautiful and passionless […], a creature to admire with no fear of disturbing its quiet heart, no fear of endangering one’s own” (188). When he restricts and reduces Cecilia to the traditionally ‘feminine’ virtues of remoteness, meekness, passivity, beauty, grace, and passionless serenity (cf. also Keyser, 1993, 34), he not only deprives the young woman of her individuality but also of her human vivacity (cf. Bedell, 1980, 13). She becomes a dependent ornament and object of Yorke’s male vanity. Even in calling her ‘Cecil,’ instead of Cecilia, he tries to ignore her ‘femininity.’ Yorke himself leads an almost ‘feminine’ life, passionless, remote and inactive, away from society and publicity and without the slightest economic or artistic ambition, which was generally expected of a ‘masculine,’ virile man in the mid-nineteenth century.

Cecilia, who becomes a sculptor herself, seems to submit entirely to Bazil’s instructions, since she calls him ‘master’ not only in their studio but seems to consider him the master of her whole identity as a woman too. However, beneath her outward coldness, submissiveness, and self-abnegation, she nurses strong emotions, especially for Yorke, whom she loves passionately. In fact, it is less his than her own will that effects her transformation into a ‘marble woman’:

She […] seemed to *cherish some purpose*, that soon showed its influence over her, for her face daily grew more cold and colorless, her manner quieter, her smiles fewer, her words briefer, her life more nunlike than ever. (MW, 189; my italics)

In retrospect it becomes clear that Cecilia fulfills the wishes of her guardian only because she is in love with him and does not dare to confess her feelings. When he proposes to marry her, his professed motivation is not love but his desire to protect her reputation as a respectable woman living under the same roof with a bachelor. In agreement with her role as a ‘marble woman,’ she accepts a fictitious marriage with Yorke excluding any emotional bonding or responsibility. At the same time, however, she decides to beat him with his own weapons: “That night I resolved to show you your mistake, to prove to you that you had a heart” (249), she explains to him retrospectively. After that decision she fulfills Yorke’s peculiar idea of inanimate womanhood in every single way, avoiding even the slightest expression of emotion. She turns into lifeless ‘marble’ whenever he is present:

15 While Elizabeth L. Keyser thinks that Cecilia’s rebellion starts only much later (cf. 1993, 43), there are various indications of her secret independence, such as this, throughout the story.
Something was gone that once made her beauty a delight to heart as well as eye; some nameless but potent charm that gave warmth, grace, and tenderness to her dawning womanhood. [Yorke] felt it, and for the first time found a flaw in what he had thought faultless until now. (202)

When Yorke takes her into society, he and other onlookers are likewise “chilled by her coldness” (206). Others’ criticism of Cecilia cuts him, the ‘creator’ of her female persona, to the quick: “As a work of art she is exquisite, but as a woman she is a dead failure. […] Why in heaven’s name didn’t Yorke marry one of his marble goddesses and be done with it?” (209). Differently from Pygmalion, Bazil Yorke does not possess the power to invest “his best work” (206) with life. In order to make up for her lack of humanity he asks Cecilia to play ‘feminine’ loveliness and vivacity and hopes thus “to animate his statue” (210). In her seemingly absolute obedience, she imitates the delightful liveliness of other women and charms everybody, including her husband. Like this, however, she only acts when in society, not when back at home with Yorke: “In public she was the brilliant, winning wife, in private, the cold, quiet ward” (220). While she appears to obey him with great exactness, she evades him personally and emotionally as the serene, dehumanized ‘marble woman.’

By means of Cecilia’s creative appropriation of Yorke’s idea of femininity as a mask, which she may put on and off as she pleases, Cecilia empowers herself as a sovereign subject and individual. The more Bazil realizes that he needs her as a human, lively and emotionally responding companion, the more she gains power over him: “he called himself a fool for losing his old power [over her …]. She ruled him” (224). In their ‘married’ life, Cecilia becomes a manipulative, powerful stage director: She not only stages her own social persona as the charming wife, but she also eventually gains so much power over Bazil to form his character, to animate and pique his repressed emotions by acting the unreachable, cold lady; in the end, it is Cecilia, and not Yorke, who proves to be the Pygmalion character in this story.16 Finally, Bazil realizes that he loves her and he tries to win her love in return – but he fails to overcome her emotional coldness which he had formerly demanded of her. Paradoxically Cecilia’s love for him expresses itself in her refusal to display love; the typically ‘feminine’ power of love is thus given a new function.

In spite of Cecilia’s seeming power, her relationship with Yorke is, in fact, held in a highly precarious balance that none of them really controls. Although Cecilia has much influence over Yorke, her autonomy is rather questionable, for she can hardly bear her unnatural state of denied emotions: “I find it hard to tame myself to the quiet lonely life” (216). In order to discipline herself and subdue her feelings, she takes opium and becomes addicted – this makes her independent and dependent at the same time. Yorke’s initial patriarchal hegemony

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16 Cecilia’s subtle, but powerful influence on Yorke may be seen as part of the tradition of the “moral, redemptive quality of [a true] woman’s love,” as Martha Saxton suggests (1995, 283). Cecilia’s manipulative role-play, however, goes far beyond the ‘true woman’s’ redeeming power; the moral exemplar would never be capable of deception.
drives her into taking opium, with which she fulfills his wishes; her addiction, however, induces her to leave the house against his explicit orders when she needs to get more of the drug. Furthermore, the opium enables her to manage her manipulative, empowering role-play so that Yorke’s concept of femininity turns against himself. Yet, Cecilia’s power, which she gains from her opium-based self-staging, proves self-destructive when she narrowly escapes death after taking an overdose. The couple actually live neither in a traditional, clearly structured domestic hierarchy, nor does either of them possess absolute autonomy. Only much later, when Yorke admits “the wrong” he has done in claiming superiority over Cecilia and asks her to forgive him (247), she has reached her goal in her masquerade: Her husband gives up his overarching patriarchal hegemony and admits their human dependence on emotions and mutual support. After this triumph, she can give in to her long-repressed love — “her heart fluttered like a caged bird” (248) — and live an egalitarian marriage with her husband.

Yorke, who has over-emphasized the ‘masculine’ feature of emotionless rationality, is convicted of his own inhumanity by Cecilia’s staged coldness. He is finally induced to integrate ‘masculine’ activism and wooing into his over-‘feminine’ passionlessness on the one hand, and ‘feminine’ love and warmth into his ‘manhood’ on the other.17 As ‘marble woman’ with the exaggerated single ‘feminine’ characteristic of serenity, Cecilia exposes the latent imbalance of Victorian gender categories. In a similar way to Jean Muir’s and La Jeune’s, Cecilia’s sovereign play with different modes of ‘femininity,’ such as the cool ladylike beauty or the lively and charming wife, reveals the performative constructedness of these types, especially when isolated instead of being included in an embracing, holistic humanity.18

In Louisa May Alcott’s sensational fiction, deceptions, manipulations, disguises, and role-plays enable the female protagonists to empower themselves in a ‘masculine’ society, where women are primarily defined by men. In texts such as “Behind a Mask,” Jean Muir would fall only little short of the typical femme fatale, did she not gain human and moral stature from her somewhat hidden, but nevertheless genuine virtues. In other cases, the supposedly ‘unfeminine,’ deceptive role-players are justified by their utterly ‘feminine’ motives, be they their self-sacrificing care for their husbands as in “La Jeune” or their self-denying love for and desire to be loved by their husbands as in “A Marble Woman.” When these women freely employ various standardized female gender roles to reach their respective goals, they subvert the supposed ‘naturalness’ of a ‘true woman’s’ behavior. The result of their strategic exploitations is a new combination of sup-

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17 Elizabeth L. Keyser considers the integration of characteristics of the respective ‘counter-gender’ into one’s own gender as “androgynous” (1993, 32). The fundamental gender dichotomy, however, remains intact, as only the two protagonists’ integration of contrary gender features finally enables them to fulfill their traditional gender roles in their marriage.

18 According to Madeleine Stern, Alcott was primarily a humanist; from this moral stance she derived her feminist attitude: “she embraced the cause of woman because she embraced the causes of humanity” (1998a, 144).
posedly incompatible features of the ‘true woman’ and the ‘unfeminine’ avenger leading to the new category of an ‘autonomously calculating true woman’ or a ‘feminine femme fatale.’

Many of Alcott’s sensational woman protagonists who engage in deceptive role-plays are professionally involved in artistic creativity. In “Behind a Mask” Jean Muir is a retired actress picking her different roles from her wide-ranging stage repertoire; in “La Jeune” the protagonist is a celebrated professional actress in Paris; “A Marble Woman” Cecilia is a sculptor, who creatively forms her own social persona as well as her husband’s character. While art in general allows room for creativity, experiments, and autonomy in all three stories, the theater milieu in “Behind a Mask” and “La Jeune” offers a legitimate stage for not being oneself, for role-plays, deception, stereotyping, and free switching between contradictory roles; the borderlines between reality and fiction, between real and assumed identity become blurred. Sensational stories about actresses and artists, therefore, provide the perfect ground for experiments in alternative gender roles.

The author herself acts a similarly autonomous part as her subversive protagonists when she freely employs and combines various female gender roles; as the author of both sensational fiction and sentimental adolescent literature such as *Little Women*, she creates alternative types of female authorship. Both the creative self-fashioning of the characters and the author’s literary creativity expose the fundamental performativity and social constructedness of gender identities in the process of ‘subjection.’ The artistically or theatrically creative characters reflect the author’s self-empowering act of making supposedly ‘unfeminine’ women the heroines of her work and, at the same time, designing and performatively introducing alternative female character types that are neither traditionally ‘feminine’ nor ‘unfeminine’ and that subvert, modify, and pluralize the established repertoire of conceivable types of womanhood.

**Works Cited**


