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**The Agency of Awareness:
Masculine Performance and Authorship in Louisa May Alcott's
"Behind a Mask"¹**

Abstract: Critics of Louisa May Alcott's fiction have tended to discuss performativity as an exclusive attribute of her female characters, mainly in terms of their ability or inability to negotiate between the domestic/public spheres. While readings of "Behind a Mask; Or, A Women's Power" through the context of female performance in the nineteenth-century U.S. have shed ample light on the subversive qualities of the tale, these readings have yet to assess the full subversiveness of the story due to its neglect of the performative qualities of the male characters. It is by assessing its illustration of both female and male characters as having a performative selfhood that we are able to see a more complete view of the ways in which "Behind a Mask" engages critically with the cultural conventions of its time. By giving the female protagonist sole awareness of the innately fictional nature of subjectivity and the resulting agency to rewrite the selfhood of men who believe in the "realness" of their identity, Alcott presents a narrativized critique of the false hierarchy designating the male subject as real and authentic as opposed to that of women being transitory and derivative. At the same time, the story presents a singular theory of authorship that is neither romantic or postmodern in its proposal that the awareness of the fictional dimensions of the subject has the potential for securing a limited but nevertheless powerful measure of authorial agency.

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