

HOW RADICAL FEMINISTS REVISED *LITTLE WOMEN*

Analysis of Introduction to *Little Women* (1868,69)

(Modern Library College Editions, 1983)



Madelon Bedell

Madelon Bedell is an author of children's books and of a biography of the Alcott family. She is quoted several times, cited nine times by various critics and called a "superb biographer" (47) in *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination* (1999). In that text there is no disagreement with Bedell and it is said that her view of the novel "resonates throughout criticism of *Little Women*" (161).

Bedell sees the novel as a failure, a "distastefully moralistic tale." So she invents a radical Feminist subtext, a moralistic alternative that reduces the complexity to one subject: "*Little Women* is not about 'being good,' nor even about growing up, but about the complexities of female power and the struggle to maintain it in a male-dominated society' (xv). Bedell does not allow for complexity. Her mental set is absolutist: black and white, either/or, with no possibility of a blend. Alcott and Bedell also have different morals, as is evident when Bedell says the girls' faults are "their chief attractions" (xv).

As evident in her Introduction, Bedell is a radical Feminist in that she (1) wants to separate the genders, (2) scorns women who do not choose to pursue careers, (3) disapproves of marriage and (4) views men as "villains." She is typical of radicals in denying that a text is a stable artifact and in being subjective: She describes *Little Women* as "able in some mysterious way to assume a protective coloration that blends with the prevailing ideological winds...a book that stretches or contracts its meanings, depending on the times when it is read and the person who reads it" (x-xi). Generations of readers do not change with society, it is the book that changes. Bedell substitutes the reader for the author as the source of a work's meanings, giving herself license to blow it this way or that with her "ideological wind."

Bedell is also psychoanalytic, a favorite theoretical approach among radicals because its allegations are beyond verification, based on "unconscious" content that may be contrary to the objective evidence in the text: "Alcott's contemptuous dismissal of her work with that damning phrase 'moral pap' represented an attempt to conceal, not only from her public but from herself as well the deeper meanings that lie behind this supposedly simple tale" (xi). Bedell is saying that Alcott attempted to conceal her deeper meanings from herself. If she "attempted" but failed, then she must have been conscious rather than unconscious. Psychoanalytic critics always claim to know more about a work of literature than the "unconscious" author who created all the meanings.

Before *Little Women* Alcott wrote over 20 sensational tales: "Typically, a wronged woman takes a ghastly revenge upon her seducer/abandoner or, sometimes in the more subtle tales, upon the society that is responsible for her plight" (xxxvi). "Alcott's preoccupation with these subjects was to a large extent

unconscious..." (xxxv). Was she comatose? How could she be both "subtle" and "unconscious"? How do you write over 20 tales of ghastly revenge without noticing your plots?

As a partisan, Bedell sees the dominance of Alcott's mother Abby—Louisa's "double, her beloved model"—over her father as a political triumph: "The patriarchal reign of Bronson Alcott began to wane, and the matriarch, Abby, began to take over...turning into a feminist and radical social theorist...He attempted suicide by starving himself." (xxix). Like Alcott in one respect, Bedell identifies with Abby as a "royal empress." Unlike her she adopts a tone of regal condescension. At times she even takes authority away from Abby/Marmee and disagrees with her, arguing for example that Jo is not really virtuous (xxi). She turns her essay into a struggle for dominance among matriarchs.

As radicals do, Bedell reduces all complexity to a power struggle: "The prizes were power and control. Surely this is the reason for the removal of the father from most of the action in Louisa's rendering of her family. With him relegated to the sidelines of the family drama (and further emasculated at those rare moments when he does appear), both the sexual tension and the power struggle are removed, and the circle of intimacy becomes a magic island of safety" (xxxiii). There is no marital power struggle in the book. On the contrary, this is a happy family. Bedell is projecting herself. The Marches have an ideal marriage and the father is off serving in the Civil War, he is not a foolish utopian pacifist like Bronson Alcott. The contrasts between the two fathers are evidence against Bedell. It would make more sense to argue that Alcott idealized Mr. Marsh to compensate for her own father: Marmee and the girls talk about "the happy times they would have when father came home." (end Chapter 15).

The contrast between Alcott and Bedell is most clear when the critic discusses Alcott's short story "The Lady and the Woman" (1856). Kate the *woman* is contrasted to Amelia the *lady* when hiking up a mountain with young Edward, as she runs ahead and stands above him: "'No, this is not my place,' she proclaims, 'I would not be above you as I now am, nor yet below, like poor Amelia in the garden.' She descends a few steps. 'But *here*, where every woman should be, at her husband's side.'" Bedell substitutes her preference for Alcott's, using the imperious regal we: "We don't believe her when she says she is happy in her descent to equality." (xxxviii). "We" are radical Feminists who do not believe in equality, refuse to allow other women the freedom to make choices and even refuse to believe that other women disagree with them. Bedell refuses to believe Alcott several times in the course of her Introduction.

According to Victorian feminism, men and women had complementary roles by nature--head and heart--but women were "above" men morally and spiritually, ideally like angels in the house. As Meg says in *Little Women*, "a woman's happiest kingdom is her home, her highest honor the art of ruling it--not as a queen, but as a wise wife and mother." In her story of Kate, Alcott takes a step toward the 20th century by affirming equality as well as a degree of liberation from Victorian role constraints, by having Kate refuse the role of queen or angel and step down off her Victorian pedestal, refusing to be a "lady." She is agreeing with her neighbors in Concord, Sophia and Nathaniel Hawthorne. This story is evidence that Alcott is a popular feminist, not a radical. Bedell the radical wants the woman to stay on the pedestal as a queen superior to men in every way and to eliminate men from the family. To her, the family would be better off if Mr. March died and never came home from the war.

One of the great appeals of the novel has been the diversity of the girls, who "represent different types of womanhood." Alcott affirms them all, Bedell disapproves of them all. The only one Bedell would have affirmed, had she not married, is Jo. *Jo's Boys* (1886) "is sprinkled with heroines, all of whom are allotted varying fates. Some marry. Some take up careers. Some espouse feminism, some prefer to be old-fashioned ladies. Some are independent artists; some do-good reformers. There is something for everybody in *Jo's Boys*." Alcott is tolerant and egalitarian. "We do not believe it," Bedell says again. She tolerates no lifestyle choice but her own. After the death of Beth, all three sisters in *Little Women* choose marriage. Jo acquires power *through* marriage--the Victorian way. In *Jo's Boys* she has the power to shape little men. Unable to identify with a married woman, Bedell presumes to speak for all modern women in declaring, "We identify in the end not so much with the Jo of the book as with...the independent woman she failed to become" (xxv).

Bedell disregards all the evidence of love in the book as if she does not believe love exists. She accuses Alcott of a “preoccupation with female power,” yet she herself uses the words *power* and *control* 34 times in her essay and reduces marriage to loveless “intimacy, sex, and control” (xxv). She refers to the suitor John Brooke as “the male intruder”: “His successful courtship of Meg signals the eventual demise of the charmed circle of the female family.” On the contrary, according to Victorian conventions, it signals that Meg has fallen in love, is growing up, making her own choices, attaining psychological wholeness in a union of head and heart--enlarging her sphere of influence and empowering herself. Bedell does not want the girls to grow up. Meg’s marriage makes her bitter: “Meg retires into wife-and-motherhood, abdicating completely whatever small pretenses she once had to independence” (xxii).

Then Amy marries Laurie and Jo marries the professor and Bedell feels totally betrayed: “The magic charmed circle has been completely destroyed. All of its members have yielded up their female exclusivity to male intruders.” (xxii). Bedell is so intensely protective of “female exclusivity” she sounds like the most extreme Victorian prude. At times she actually takes the narrative away from Alcott: “All is well--but not perfect, for the Reverend March...arrives home soon after.” Not perfect for Bedell, but the family is “rejoicing.” Bedell tries to “prove” merely by subjective assertion that Alcott secretly agrees with her that “the traditional roles assigned by society to men and women are irrational, illogical, and unnatural” (xxxvii). To her it is “unnatural” for women to bear children and for heterosexual people to love and sacrifice for each other.

On the contrary, it is not illogical for the father to go to the Civil War and for the mother to stay at home with the children. And it is not unnatural for Jo to respond to her father’s sacrifice by making a small one of her own. If their roles are so terrible, why are Marmee and the girls so happy? This critic argues that Jo cuts her hair not out of love to earn money to enable her mother to visit her father in the hospital, but to assert “control over the absent father, since she will be the one to save him by her sacrifice; and control over the family of sisters left behind.” It is unclear how cutting her hair will give her all this power over everybody, since Marmee is still the ruling matriarch. Bedell is making Jo delusional. Her Jo is a projection of herself as critic--an “all-powerful savior...slightly malevolent” (xxxiii).

The last 4 pages of Chapter 15 depict Jo explaining why she cut her hair: “It will be good for my vanity”; “I was wild to do something for father”; “I never snivel over trifles like that”; “It’s only the vain, selfish part of me that goes and cries in this silly way.” And Bedell’s authority figure Marmee says to Jo, “I know how willingly you sacrificed your vanity, as you call it, to your love.” There is not the slightest hint of irony in this scene, nothing to subvert the sympathetic portrayal of Jo, yet Bedell would have us disregard Marmee, taking control herself. The radical Feminist thinks we should ignore all the ways Alcott evokes our admiration and compassion for Jo. She wants us to believe that, contrary to all evidence, Jo is deceitful, selfish, heartless, manipulative and malevolent, with no motive but power. This would make her a radical Feminist like Madelon Bedell.

Bedell concludes by identifying her ideal Jo with wild Dan in *Jo’s Boys*, a murderer who goes off to live among the Indians, saying in his story is “the hidden end of the *Little Women* legend”--the subtext she invented. In Bedell’s romantic imagination, the ideal Jo “has no place in the civilized world into which she was born...Only through wandering, exile, and eventual violent death could she fulfill herself” (xlx). So there is no place for a radical Feminist in society after all. Picture the exile Bedell squatting in a campsite of the Lakota Sioux, reading passages aloud from *Little Women* that inspire the squaws to rebel against their unnatural roles. By contrast, Alcott rewrote her favorite novel *Moods* in order to reconcile Sylvia with her husband to live life in “reality” rather than in a “painted romance.”

Michael Hollister (2015)