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Women's Studies, Vol. 48, No. 4 (June 2019): 379-392. DOI. This article is © Routledge Taylor & Francis and permission has been granted for this version to appear in e-Publications@Marquette. Routledge Taylor & Francis does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Routledge Taylor & Francis.

"New Friendship Flourished like Grass in Spring": Cross-Gender Friendship in *Moods* and *Little Women*

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> *[I]f men and women would only trust, understand, and help one another as my children do, what a capital place the world would be!*
>
> —Jo March, *Little Men*

"Some men think women unfitted for friendship." So stated William Rounseville Alger in *The Friendships of Women*, a popular compendium published by the same publisher and in the same year as *Little Women* (11). While the events giving rise to the "Me Too" movement suggest that the statement may still be debated, to nineteenth-century readers it could not have been considered anything but true: in a society structured by a strict gender hierarchy and the ideologies of "sexual distinction," "separate spheres," and classically defined masculine affiliation, some men *did* think women unfitted for friendship. Reviewing Alger's book in December 1867, Henry James contextualized

the topic, which Alger broaches with an eighteen-page rejoinder to the question "Have Women No Friendships?" as "a matter whose very existence has always been a subject half of doubt and half of ridicule" (202). Yet, turning to *Little Women*, the same readers would encounter not only a powerful affirmation of female friendship in the relationships between sisters and between mother and daughters but also depictions of cross-gender friendship that are far more complex and fully realized than those described within Alger's well-meaning study.

This article makes a case for Louisa May Alcott as the most innovative, prolific, and influential writer on cross-gender friendship in the United States at least through the nineteenth century. By attending to Alcott's engagement with this facet of a "volatile and impalpable topic" ([10] 198), I aim not only to unpack the significance of such relationships in *Moods* (1864) and *Little Women* but to help fill a gap in our understanding of the way cross-gender friendship was thought about and experienced in the United States in the later nineteenth century. Situating these novels with respect to recent research on friendship and gender, I argue that in *Little Women*, specifically, cross-gender friendship, like other aspects of gender-nonconformity in Alcott's work, is a site of freedom, self-expression, resistance, and possibility that flourishes in the privileged space of adolescence. The precarious position of cross-gender relationships beyond adolescence points both to the failure of such friendships to function within a society in which men and women are valued unequally and to their potential to foster equitable gender relationships in the public and private spheres. In sum, reading *Moods* and *Little Women* through the lens of friendship helps reveal both the possibilities and the limits of nonromantic, nonfamilial cross-gender relationships in the post-Civil War United States.

While cross-gender friendship figures prominently in the early chapters of *Moods*, it lies at the very heart of *Little Women*, which features a friendship that (for many) reads like a romance and a courtship that (for better and for worse) reads like a friendship. Discussions of the friendship between Jo and Laurie, the boy next door, typically take one of three directions. Some consider Alcott's refusal to pair the two in a romantic relationship as a failure to fulfill the text's promise as predetermined by the generic conventions dictating that novels would culminate in satisfying matches. The title *Wedding Marches*, which Alcott's editor proposed for the second volume of *Little Women*, prefigures this outcome. Others regard Jo's marriage to Friedrich Bhaer as a failure to fulfill the promise of a literary spinsterhood, exemplified by Alcott herself. Still others validate the marriage of Jo and Professor Bhaer, with or without criticism of Laurie's character. All three angles demonstrate the sway of the marriage plot, even among readers who laud the novel for defying generic conventions. In doing so, these responses—like the genre itself—deflect attention from the topic of cross-gender friendship.[1]

Until the early 2000s, as Ivy Schweitzer has shown, friendships involving women were marginalized in, if not excluded from, US literary-historical studies, even as generations of scholarship linked male friendship to evolving ideas of nationhood and democracy. Moreover, Schweitzer explains, "the role of women and differences of race, class, and sexuality became issues for philosophers of friendship only in the last quarter of the twentieth century, if at all" (67). In historical scholarship as well, women's friendships have often been overlooked or minimized. Addressing these omissions, twenty-first-century scholarship has emphasized that much like gender, the category of relationship we term "friendship" can and should be theorized and studied in more comprehensive, complex, and critical ways. In *Perfecting Friendships: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature* (2006), Schweitzer

points out that friendship is not "merely a form of or vehicle for sensibility and sympathy" but rather "a crucial and overlooked cultural practice and institution with a complex history not adequately recognized in the emerging field of emotion studies" (9). Schweitzer sees it "not just as a private expression of affection or individual predilection but as a public social structure of affiliation, self-improvement, and gender/racial identification" (5), a stance mirrored in Richard Dellamora's *Friendship's Bonds: Democracy and the Novel in Victorian England* (2004). Schweitzer's research has clear ramifications for thinking about cross-gender friendship in *Little Women*, which, as many critics have argued, challenges gender norms and advocates greater freedom for women while revising assumptions about women's "nature," status, and prescribed social roles.

Approaching the topic through historical research, Cassandra A. Good argues in *Founding Friendships: Friendships between Men and Women in the Early American Republic* (2015) that heterosocial friendship constitutes "an alternative social space" in which individuals "shape their relationships and gender roles." Good demonstrates how such relationships "revealed the flexibility of the rules and expectations for successfully achieving manhood and womanhood, and challenged the societal work then invested in channeling men and women into marriage" (5). She examines how "[f]riendships between men and women broke through many of the limitations on the founding ideals," arguing that "[t]hese relationships were truer to the ideals of freedom, choice, virtue, and equality than any other relationships between men and women in this period, particularly the much idealized republican, companionate marriage" (6).[2]

As Good explains, cultural shifts in the nineteenth century had a negative effect on both the freedom with which men and women could form close friendships and the political impact such friendships could exert. In *Seeing Together: Friendship between the Sexes in English Writing from Mill to Woolf* (1993), Victor Luftig illustrates this point well, perceiving in the cultural response to mixed-sex friendships the kind of volatility to which James alludes in his review of Alger's *The Friendships of Women*. He observes:

"Friendship" between the sexes is, and has been for some time, a fundamental threat to the stability and separateness of the prevalent categories for gender relations; it challenges the boundaries of socially acknowledged interaction between men and women. It suggests that the labels and demarcations that distinguish courtship and ordinary working relations, for instance, are less absolute than the commonplace idioms suggest. Where discourse would validate only a few mutually exclusive categories for relations between the sexes, "friendship" invites the likelihood of exceptions, trespassing across borders that commonly accepted expressive modes would preserve. (3)

According to Luftig, the instability of the categories that defined socially acceptable relationships intensified in the mid-nineteenth century when "[e]ach of [three] ostensibly discrete arenas—the family home, the realm of courtship, and the workplace—was ... under intense pressure" and came "into social, economic, moral, and linguistic conflict" (4). Within this context of social flux, uncertainty, and even danger, "[a]ttempts to represent friendship *outside* marriage and family, and outside the compromising realm of courtship, amounted to challenges to a whole set of dualistic boundaries" (23). In response, many writers "struggle[d] to position 'friendship' in ways that destabilize the terms according to which their educated contemporaries understood heterosexual relations" ([11] 5).

Wrapping up her study of cross-gender friendship in the early national United States, Good points out that although later "examples of friendships" between men and women "abound," "[t]here have been no comprehensive studies of friendship between men and women for the remainder of the nineteenth century" (190). Given the cultural shifts, this gap in coverage is as unsurprising as it is exigent. Introducing Alcott's writing into this transatlantic field can further enrich our understanding by adding the perspective of an American writer who not only wrote prolifically on cross-gender friendship but learned to navigate through a literary field rife with the kinds of "dangers" and "threats" Luftig identifies as pervasive in English literature of the same period.

Dangerous liaisons

In *Founding Friendships*, Good observes that "[m]any novels of the [early national] period ... denied the possibility of friendships between men and women, depicting only two possible outcomes: romance or seduction" (4). Although intensive rather than extensive in its scope, Schweitzer's analysis substantiates Good's claim, even as it enlarges our understanding of the way these texts deploy the tropes of friendship. In the mid-1860s, when Alcott was writing *Moods*, her first literary novel, alongside the gothic thrillers she dubbed "blood and thunder" tales, the horizon of generic expectations had not expanded appreciably (see [5]). Even the publication of such "bestsellers" as *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), by Susan Warner and *The Lamplighter* (1854), by Maria Susanna Cummins, had done little to increase the range of novelistic outcomes available to women writers. Despite this constraint, *Moods* articulates radically new ideas about friendship between men and women.

In structure and, to some extent, in plot, *Moods*, like *Little Women*, is a female bildungsroman. In it Alcott traces the growth of Sylvia Yule from a girl on the brink of adulthood into a young woman in whom "beautifully were the two made one, the winning girl, the deep-hearted woman" (213). Its narrative arc follows Sylvia's coming of age, courtship, brief marriage, emotional and ethical struggle, and (following Alcott's prepublication rewrite) eventual death.[3] Alfred Habegger identifies in the novel's conjunction of "fatherly" older husband and much younger wife an "incest" theme (68–72). Habegger's explication is provocative, but I want to offer an alternate reading of this courtship dynamic. In my reading, in *Moods*, and later in *Little Women*, the relationship between (young) female protagonist and (older) suitor signifies not aberrant sexuality but a deep yearning for cross-gender friendship regardless of stage of life.

In the preface to the revised edition of *Moods* (1882), Alcott maintained that its true theme was not marriage but "the mistakes of a moody nature, guided by impulse, not principle" (225). Yet, intertwined with both the unraveling marriage plot and the delineation of Sylvia's flaws and their consequences, is a less conspicuous preoccupation that securely anchors the first half of the novel: friendship. In *Moods*, Alcott tests the boundaries between friendship and romance while exposing the limitations imposed on a young woman's freedom to form cross-gender friendships once she crosses the threshold from childhood into adulthood.

The second chapter clearly establishes friendship as the novel's initial center of gravity. In this chapter, "Whims," readers meet Sylvia on the verge of eighteen, an active, independent, outdoorsy but pensive and solitary teen. Now that her siblings have grown up, Sylvia feels lonely: she confides to her father, "I

really think I need a friend" (26), an opinion she later expresses to her brother, Mark (38). In chapter 7, Alcott expands on Sylvia's need:

She never had known friendship in its truest sense, for next to love it is the most abused of words. She had called many "friend," but was still ignorant of that sentiment, cooler than passion, warmer than respect, more just and generous than either, which recognizes a kindred spirit in another, and claiming its right, keeps it sacred by the wise reserve that is to friendship what the purple bloom is to the grape, a charm which once destroyed can never be restored. (85)

The title of the chapter, "Dull but Necessary," points not only to the centrality of Sylvia's longing for friendship but to the importance of the definition of ideal friendship Alcott articulates. Three aspects of this definition are salient: the allusion to equilibrium ("cooler than passion" and "warmer than respect"), suggesting the complementarity of opposites or joining of halves; the emphasis on justice, restraint, and rights, hinting at the broader, political ramifications of ethical, egalitarian interpersonal ties; and the discourse of sacredness and kindred spirituality, indicative of transcendence and the hallmark of a "second self" theory of friendship grounded in likeness and mutuality. As Schweitzer delineates in her critical genealogy of friendship theory, all three qualities have roots in classical philosophy. Schweitzer argues that even as "the perfect friendship of second selves formulated in [Aristotle's] *Nicomachean Ethics* exert[ed] the most pervasive hold on our imagination of friendship and democratic politics," representations of friendship also raised "vexed questions of sameness, difference, and equality" in connection with "identity markers" such as "gender, sexuality, racial identity and class status" (28). To this list, I would add another identity category that marks difference: age.

In this context, it is perhaps surprising that the ideal friend Sylvia envisions is not a young woman of her own age, vicinity, and background. In fact, Sylvia is indifferent as to age and feels strongly that the friend she seeks should be a man—a preference she attributes to the greater freedoms available to men—and a newcomer, "simple, wise, and entertaining." She explains, "I should like a friend ..., some one beyond home, because he would be newer; a man (old or young, I don't care which), because men go where they like, see things with their own eyes, and have more to tell if they choose" (25). Conscious of skepticism surrounding friendships between the sexes, she appeals to her father, "a studious, melancholy man" (84): "Don't you believe there may be real and simple friendships between men and women without falling into this everlasting sea of love?" (26). Mr. Yule's reply affirms Sylvia's inclination and validates her desire for a male friend, even as he seems to acknowledge a dearth of such friendships at the present time: "Yes, for some of the most beautiful and famous friendships have been such, and I see no reason why there may not be again" (26). At the end of the chapter, Sylvia believes she has found the friend she longs for in her neighbor Geoffrey Moor (27), to whom she later confides, "I wanted a friend so much; I found all I could ask in you" (89).

Even as this friendship is forming, however, Sylvia's brother, Mark, "laugh[s] at the innocent frankness of [her] speech." He cautions: "Better leave Platonics till you're forty. Though Moor is twelve years older than yourself he is a young man still, and you are grown a very captivating little woman." In response, Sylvia echoes and elaborates on her father's words:

You need have no fears. There *is* such a thing as true and simple friendship between men and women, and if I can find no one of my own sex who can give me the help and happiness I want, why may I not look for it anywhere and accept it in whatever shape it comes? (38)

Sylvia's offhand reference to "whatever shape it comes [in]" suggests an easy dismissal of physicality, including, by implication, sex. And yet, as Mark reminds her, she cannot escape the way others perceive and respond to her embodied self. When Mark warns her that she "must be willing to take the consequences in whatever shape *they* come," Sylvia accepts this warning "loftily." Ominously, the narrator concludes, "fate took her at her word" (38).

As she begins to pursue the friendship, Sylvia is sensitive to a widening gender gap resulting from her transition to adulthood. She regrets, for example, that she and her brother Mark seem to be growing apart. She tells him, "We used to have such happy times together before we were grown up, I don't like to be so separated now" (29). When Mark "threatens" to bring young gentlemen to the house to amuse her, Sylvia asks her father to "forbid [him] to execute [the] plot]," explaining that she "[doesn't] want any lovers yet" (24). As she discovers, however, unilateral "wants" are not conducive to reciprocity. When Mr. Yule "lean[s] a little toward his son's view," Sylvia objects, "no sooner do I mention the word friendship than people nod wisely and look as if they said, 'Oh, yes, every one knows what that sort of thing amounts to'" (25). Readers see this scenario play out much as Sylvia has intimated when she, Mark, Moor, and their mutual friend Warwick shelter on a farm during a rainstorm. When the grandmother at the farm asks Sylvia if she and Warwick are to be married, Sylvia replies, "we are only friends, ma'am." In response, the elder woman exclaims, "Oh!" in an "immensely expressive" manner and "confide[s] a knowing nod to the teapot." Sylvia retreats, "wondering why persons were always thinking and saying such things" (68). In these instances, Sylvia is identified by others as a romantic object, against her will and contrary to her self-perception, based on her age, gender, and the prevailing assumption that a young woman of her age and class must be in search of a husband. Sylvia's rejection of this identification arises not merely from its inaccuracy; she refuses it because she does not wish to be excluded from the fullest possibilities of friendship and thus denied the true friend she craves.

In this connection, two aspects of Sylvia's characterization—age-ambiguity and gender-nonconformity— can be read as subconscious acts of resistance tied to her ambivalence about growing up. When we initially encounter her, we learn that Sylvia, who possesses "a nature in which the woman and the child were curiously blended" (50), still "clings to some of her childish beliefs and pleasures" (23). As Sylvia is surrounded by wild pets, Mark and his friends admire the way her "[f]igure, posture, and employment were so childlike in their innocent unconsciousness" (23). Repeatedly, the text refers to her as a "girl" and a "child," and yet to her sister, she explains: "You tried to make a woman of me at sixteen, but it was impossible until the right time came ... when I seemed most like a child I was learning to be a woman" (75).

Up until this time, Sylvia is something of a tomboy; she "rides like an Amazon" (22) and boasts that she "'can walk, run, and climb like any boy'" (51). When Moor first glimpses her, he mistakes her for a boy, an error the narrator indulges in this episode by referring to her as a "lad" and a "slender boy" and using the pronoun "he" (20). Like her age-ambiguity, Sylvia's tomboyish behavior helps her preserve the relative freedom, sense of identity, and kinds of relationships she was able to enjoy as a young girl.

The attitude proves infectious: charmed by the combined effect of Sylvia's childlike and boyish qualities, Mark and his friends become "boys" again in spirit. This equalizing of age and gender proves to be Sylvia's passport to a two-day camping trip with them immediately following her eighteenth birthday.

In the 1860s, as now, eighteen—Sylvia's chronological age at the time of the camping trip—represents one of the most important symbolic ages: that is, "symbolic milestones, sometimes approached with celebration, but often regarded with dread and foreboding" ([12] and Smith 81). It is also a "boundary age," marking the division between two distinct periods of life ([12] 81–82), as Sylvia is well aware: chapter 3 opens with Sylvia "sewing in the sunshine with an expression on her face half mirthful, half melancholy, as she looked backward to the girlhood just ended, and forward to the womanhood just beginning, for on that midsummer day, she was eighteen." When she sees Mark approaching with two friends, "[h]er first impulse was to throw down her work and run to meet them, her second to remember her new dignity and sit still, awaiting them with well-bred composure, quite unconscious that the white figure among the vines added a picturesque finish to the quiet summer scene" (28).

Although Sylvia renounces her tomboy ways once she turns eighteen—a shift that occurs over the course of the camping trip—age-ambiguity resurfaces later in the novel when Sylvia, now married to Moor, longs for the kind of friendship now denied her. Upon learning that Moor was in love with her, Sylvia had initially resisted, querying, "'[a]ll my life I have wanted a friend, have looked for one, and when he came I welcomed him. May I not keep him, and preserve the friendship dear and sacred still, although I cannot offer love?'" (92). Eventually, Sylvia accepts Moor's proposal, believing that over time she will "learn" to love him (107).[4]

Most relevant to the discussion of what cross-gender friendship meant in the mid-nineteenth century and how it was enabled or denied is the way Alcott probes the intersection of age and gender in Sylvia's failed quest for true friendship. Just as she turns eighteen, Sylvia's identification as a young woman rather than a girl complicates and ultimately eliminates the possibility of the kind of "dear and sacred" friendship (92) she had sought with the man who seemed to her ideally suited to that role. The ways in which romance and friendship become confused in the novel are linked to changing understandings about love and marriage in the nineteenth century. Certainly, the notion of companionate marriage, which was displacing the practice of marriage based on economic factors, admits of some ambiguity, particularly since companionship and friendship are by no means synonymous. Companionate marriage lifted the woman out of a purely servile child-bearing role and made her into a helpmeet; in doing so, it moved in the direction of friendship without fully arriving, since as a helpmeet, the wife remained subordinate, subsumed into the husband's role and identity, a more congenial but still subservient instantiation of Adam's rib. As Luftig cautions, "[m]odern scholarship may wonder how truly companionable was even the best Victorian 'companionate marriage' ... " (22–23).

As it traces the dissolution of Sylvia's marriage and her compromised friendships with Moor and Warwick, the novel raises important questions about the boundaries between friendship and romantic love and the agency of women in the nineteenth century in navigating these boundaries. It also suggests questions about the impact of age or stage of life on the ability to form and maintain cross-gender friendships and the relationship between the generic possibilities of the nineteenth-century

novel and the availability of textual models to aid readers in conducting their own relationships. That the terms of culturally sanctioned heterosocial relationships support a kind of fulcrum on which cross-gender friendships could either balance carefully or dangerously tip suggests that fiction could play a transformative role—not only in providing new ways of thinking and talking about gender and friendship but in establishing more expansive possibilities for cross-gender communication, interaction, and understanding.

"Brotherly" love

Three years after the publication of *Moods*, readers of *Little Women* found a powerful affirmation of the kind of cross-gender friendship Sylvia longs for in the friendship between Jo March and the "the Laurence boy." Introduced in the third chapter of the novel, Theodore Laurence, nicknamed Laurie, quickly emerges as the friend Jo longs for (although without explicitly articulating it) just as Sylvia yearns for a kindred spirit in "whatever shape." While in *Moods* the theme of friendship soon gives way to the dysfunctional marriage plot, cross-gender friendship is sustained thematically and critically problematized throughout *Little Women*. In earlier British and American literature, as Goods observes, "[t]he only lasting, positive [male-female] friendships are those that were on the sidelines of stories, either as relationships that were not central to the plot or as literary devices" (39). In *Little Women*, however, such friendship holds a place of central importance.

Although Alcott refrains from the kind of philosophizing on friendship that we find in *Moods*, in *Little Women*'s first volume the friendship between Jo and Laurie develops in a way that reflects all three of the salient characteristics associated with ideal friendship in the "Dull but Necessary" chapter of *Moods*. Paramount among these qualities is the notion of the second self, conveyed in *Little Women* through tropes of symmetry. When we first see Jo and Laurie together, they are presented as like one another: both are "bashful," both hate their given names, they are the same age, and both are "gentlemanly" (Laurie by implication, Jo explicitly described as such). When the two find one another "face to face" in a curtained alcove (31–32), Alcott introduces a trope of looking or gazing, suggesting likeness and mutuality, that will recur throughout the novel's first volume. In later chapters, we find Jo and Laurie looking at one another through windows in "Being Neighborly"; Laurie looking at Jo through a screen of trees in "Castles in the Air"; and Laurie watching Jo as she enters and exits an office building in "Secrets." Most pointedly, volume one culminates in a vignette in which the two not only mirror one another with their (previously described) curly dark cropped hair, tall, slim builds, and brown faces but are then literally mirrored in a decorative looking glass: "Jo lounged in her favorite low seat, with the grave, quiet look which best became her; and Laurie, leaning on the back of her chair, his chin on a level with her curly head, smiled with his friendliest aspect, and nodded at her in the long glass which reflected them both" (228). These recurring images of watching, looking, gazing, and reflecting emphasize resemblance and reciprocity, punctuating Alcott's portrayal of Jo and Laurie as "like" or kindred spirits.

The trope of halves completing a whole signals the ideal of perfect friendship in the first volume of *Little Women*. Although Alcott makes clear that Jo and Laurie are more alike than different, socially prescribed gender roles differentiate them, while, ironically, individual gender expression brings them closer together. Jo and Laurie are alike even in their difference: as numerous readers have observed, both have a certain "queerness" or, as some critics put it, androgyny—that is, each possesses a name,

demeanor, some physical characteristics, and interests typically attributed to the opposite sex.[5] Jo is a gangly tomboy, while Laurie has little hands and feet; Laurie is "very polite for a boy" (33), while Jo is headstrong; Laurie prefers music to commerce, and Jo longs to sell her stories and venture beyond the domestic sphere.

In the novel's first volume, cross-gender friendship mediates the constraints the two characters experience with respect to gender roles, providing Jo with a male companion with whom to enjoy the boys' games and past-times she prefers. In turn, Jo's deviation from gender norms allows her to be fully in sympathy with and supportive of Laurie's departure from gender expectations. In volume one, this mediating tendency often finds expression through motifs of complementarity, equilibrium, and halves. Thus, both Jo and Laurie find a kind of mutual consolation in their friendship for disappointments and injustices derived from gender stereotyping: Jo's sense of the unfairness of being excluded from the adventures and opportunities available to boys and Laurie's sense of injustice at being channeled into a career in business while being discouraged from the feminized pursuit of music.

In other scenes, a kind of moderating complementarity results from the balancing or tempering of Jo's and Laurie's opposing moods or conditions. In "Being Neighborly," Jo's domestic caregiving helps to mend a convalescent Laurie. Then, in "Jo Meets Apollyon," Laurie, who "is always kind and jolly," is able to "put [Jo] to rights" (77), his "self-possess[ion]" compensating for Jo's "terror-stricken" (79) desperation during the rescue of Amy from the frozen river. Next, in "Lazy Laurence," Jo's self-conscious industriousness corrects Laurie's ill-humored lassitude. Most blatantly, in "Laurie Makes Mischief, and Jo Makes Peace," we see the "give and take" ([8]'s term) of their friendship after Laurie tests the boundaries of his role as honorary "brother" by playing a prank on Meg and John Brooke. Jo forgives Laurie, intercedes on Laurie's behalf with Meg, mediates peace with Mr. Laurence, and in the midst of it all entertains Laurie's fantasy of running away together. Throughout the ruckus, Jo, "who knew how to manage" Laurie (205), maintains the equilibrium.

In addition to presenting Jo and Laurie as kindred spirits, or "second selves," and complementary halves of an ideal duo, Alcott develops in *Little Women* the third aspect of true friendship articulated in *Moods*: the ideals of justice, rights, and wisdom. The political resonance of the possibilities of ideal friendship comes to the foreground in both literary and historical scholarship on friendship. Having acknowledged the importance of "tropes of similarity, equality, and interchangeability" in the discourse of friendship, Schweitzer argues that the "perfect friendship of second selves ... provides women and people of color with a conceptual means to produce rhetorical equality" and raises an important question for writers at the time: "Can we have equality or equity within difference and differences within equality?" (28). From her historical vantage point, Good affirms that "[t]he mutuality and reciprocity male/female friends built ... crafted gender relations closer to equality and with greater freedom than any other relationship between men and women in American society" (13). The friendship between Jo and Laurie situates the two on an even, nonhierarchical field, leveling distinctions in wealth as well as gender divisions, and tending toward a greater experience of equality. This experience of equality is "institutionalized" in chapter 10 ("The P.C. and the P.O."), in which Laurie is initiated into the Pickwick Club, thereby completing the society's membership. As each member of the Pickwick Club has a masculine title and name and each addresses the others as "gentlemen," the gender distinction is lessened, if not erased (despite Amy's comical protest that it is a "ladies' club" and

"[w]e don't wish any boys" [104])—and Laurie is welcomed into the society as peer and equal. Even more than the mitigating of gender difference through Sylvia's "tomboy" characterization in *Moods*, the "queering" of friendship in *Little Women* facilitates nonromantic cross-gender relationships and, by extension, equity in a highly patriarchal society.

Like the yearned-for friendship in *Moods*, however, ideal cross-gender friendship proves to be unsustainable—and for the same reason: once Jo and Laurie grow past the privileged space of adolescence, the social possibilities for cross-gender relationships become constricted in ways that force a redefinition of their roles.[6] Ideal (or near-ideal) cross-gender friendship is only possible in volume one, when Jo and Laurie advance in years from fifteen to sixteen, and even there we see the friendship beginning to strain. Through the lens of friendship theory, we can see in these moments of tension inversions of the familiar friendship tropes. Instead of mirroring between the two friends, we find a kind of displaced, disingenuous doubling, as Laurie falsely assumes the identity of smitten lover, forging impassioned love letters purportedly from John Brooke to Meg; and when he tells her, in volume two, "My eye is on you," the comment carries the disagreeable ring of admonishment rather than reciprocity (321). Instead of two halves completing a perfect circle, we find asymmetry and disequilibrium when Jo, overcome with familial emotion upon Beth's recovery, throws her arms around Laurie's neck only to have him respond with the hopeful affection of an aspiring lover. The trope of halves is further undermined in volume two when Laurie asks, "Don't we always go halves in everything?" and Jo retorts, "Gracious! I hope not!" (296). Instead of equity and reciprocity we find, in this second volume, avoidance, silence, self-exile, as Jo flees to New York, and banishment, as Mr. Laurence sends Laurie to Europe. And instead of the balance of equal parts tending toward justice, an excess of likeness presages disruptive amplification that threatens to tip the scale. As Marmee explains, they "are too much alike, and too fond of freedom, not to mention hot tempers and strong wills" (320)—an opinion with which Jo concurs (351–52). Finally, in place of the interchangeability that Schweitzer points to as a popular figure for the perfection of dyadic friendship, we find a different kind of substitution, as first Meg and then Beth become possible successors to Jo (in Jo's eyes) and Amy actually supersedes her as Laurie's partner. Significantly, Jo is able to maintain the egalitarian quality of the relationship only by rejecting Laurie as a suitor, since, unlike friendship, marriage defined women as the lesser of two partners, with "friendship between husbands and wives" being conceived "within the terms of use-value" ([7] 189).

Ultimately, the redefined relationship between Jo and Laurie, which corresponds, literally and figuratively, to the movement from one stage of life to another, stabilizes not only through the *discourse* of sibling relationships—which, as Luftig demonstrates, is not entirely effectual (61–68)—but through their *actual* brother-sister relationship, legitimized in the marriage of Amy and Laurie. Laurie tells Jo, "I never shall stop loving you; but the love is altered," to which Jo, now his sister-in-law, replies, "we never can be a boy and girl again. ... We can't be little playmates any longer, but we will be brother and sister, to love and help one another all our lives" (430–31). As Schweitzer points out, traditional friendship theory positions ideal friendship above familial relationships in part because friendship is an "elective affiliation," whereas kinship is not a matter of choice. In redefining themselves as brother and sister in a legal sense, no longer "brothers" in a figurative sense, the two forego "elective affiliation" but also reposition their relationship in terms of heteronormative social codes at the expense of queer affinity. Despite pledges that their relationship will continue "a

beautiful, strong friendship to bless them both" (431), the friendship seems to wane once they become siblings-in-law.

Writing of the first two generations of US citizens, Good notes that "[m]uch of what they read and learned would have suggested to these men and women that such [cross-gender] friendships were unwise, and there was no guide—no etiquette manual, no didactic novel, no universally accepted set of norms—to tell them how to be friends with the opposite sex" (36). She concludes that "[t]he difficulties that real men and women faced in figuring out how to maintain cross-sex friendships were due in part to the failure of contemporary literature to provide an adequate model for male/female friendships" (57). As the nearly simultaneous publication of Alger's *The Friendships of Women* and Alcott's *Little Women* indicates, two generations later authors and publishers were beginning to answer readers' continuing need for textual models and guidance. While Alger's text receded into the archive of historical curiosities, Alcott's fiction became a touchstone for stories about cross-gender friendship. Foreshadowed by *Moods*, achieving its greatest expression in the first volume of *Little Women*, revived in *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*, and reprised in several other novels for young people, Alcott's incorporation of cross-gender friendships into her fiction provided generations of readers with narratives capable of changing the way people thought about, felt about, and enacted such relationships in their own lives—at least through the "awkward age" of adolescence.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the editors, anonymous reader, and Sabrina Black for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

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Footnotes

According to Victor Luftig, "Victorian narrative conventions were almost inherently inimical to 'friendship'"; this is particularly true of novels since "as a form" they "almost always end[ed] in death, marriage, or some related alternative" (58).

In surveying the scholarship on friendship, I use the terms "cross-gender," "cross-sex," "mixed-sex," and "heterosocial" interchangeably to reflect the range of terminology I have encountered. In my own analysis, I opt for "cross-gender" because this term best maps onto identity categories as I understand Alcott to be articulating them— that is, as constructed, nonbinary, subject to creative self-expression, and potentially fluid.

On the revision history of Moods, see Deese 447–49.

For a reading of age-ambiguity and this scene's "learning to love" discourse, see Wadsworth.

See, for example, Trites 152–53.

Luftig observes, "in the absence of ... acknowledged sites at which heterosexual friendship could be enacted or represented convincingly, the term ["friendship"] ... was ... conceded to those who posed no bodily threat ... ; extramarital friendship could be practiced convincingly only by children, the elderly, and ghosts" (24).