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Michaela Keck

1. Louisa May Alcott's "A Marble Woman" and Classical Myth

- ¹ Beginning in the mid-eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century, several generations of educated American women—white and black—"found in classicism's literary and material forms a way to imagine and to articulate new roles for themselves" (Winterer 2-3). With the rise of the popular print culture in the 1830s and 1840s, inexpensive magazines, novels, almanacs, or reference books began to circulate classical literature, myth, and history. Indeed, women writers themselves disseminated classical stories, heroes, and heroines in the increasingly commodified print culture of the nineteenth century. Louisa May Alcott's "A Marble Woman; or, The Mysterious Model," which was published under the pseudonym A. M. Barnard in the *Flag of Our Union* (May-June 1865), exemplifies American women writers' contribution to the circulation of ancient myths in popular literature.
- ² Scholars such as Rosemary F. Franklin, Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, and Kate McCullough have examined the psychoanalytical perspectives of Alcott's use of classical myth, while Daniela Daniele has placed Alcott's manifold Galatea figures in the context of the potential and the thwarted ambitions of nineteenth-century professional women artists. Taking my cue from Hans Blumenberg's notion of "work on myth," according to which myth is always in the process of reception as it is continuously re-narrated, adapted, and interpreted by artists, writers, and storytellers, I explore Alcott's revision of the Psyche and Pygmalion myths to shed light on the more sanguine, feminist aspects of "A Marble Woman" with its emphasis on women's passion and desire.¹ I argue that in her early, sensational story, Alcott reconfigures Love—*Eros*—in that

Psyche's quest and Galatea's animation turn into the female quest for self-possession in marriage, which the story displays both in moments of female agency and empowerment as well as male frustration and powerlessness.

2. Women's "Work on Myth" and the Use of Pathos Formulae

- 3 Blumenberg focuses on the continued function of classical myth. Why, he asks, does myth persist if the ancient gods have long lost their ritual powers and cultural authority? His notion of the "work on myth" refers to the process of diminishing the power gap between humans and an unidentifiable, threatening Other, which Blumenberg calls "the absolutism of reality" (9). Even though humankind anthropologically and historically has attained "dominion over reality through the experience of... history and... knowledge" (9), he argues that human impotence and anxiety persist and "must again and again be rationalized" (5) into familiar stories—myths—by setting up accessible images and metaphors. Hence, myth constitutes the anthropomorphic, apotropaic, and imaginative appropriation of the world in order to lessen—or at least hold at bay—the terrors inherent in "the absolutism of reality."
- 4 In contrast to other myth theorists, Blumenberg underscores the "stylistic technique[s]" (17) of provocation, mockery, and parody. Myth, he asserts, possesses "a measure of unseriousness" and "frivolity" (31), which shapes its reception as much as the other core characteristics of myth, its durability and cultural significance. Where the iconic constancy of myth lends itself to the transmission of traditions and established patterns, myth's frivolity lends itself to endless variations and revisions. To Blumenberg, it is this dynamic between constancy and variation, tradition and its mockery, which marks the persistence and continued relevance of classical myth as well as its potential for the subversive. Furthermore, as a "millenniums-long work" (26) of oral, literary, and visual storytelling and "a miracle of interwoven reception and construction" (351), myth is interpreted by Blumenberg as an achievement that involves intellect and reason (contrary to the understanding of myth as historical precursor to logos in the development of rationality). As he puts it, myth is itself "a piece of high-carat 'work of logos'" (12).
- 5 Blumenberg's incorporation of logos in the "work of myth" opens up useful ways of re-thinking the ideologically fraught relation between women and ancient myth, since, as Vanda Zajko reminds us, the conceptualization of myth "has a direct bearing on what it is perceived to be able to say 'about women'" (287-288). For second-wave feminists such as Adrienne Rich, who famously established the idea of "re-vision" as "the act of... entering an old text from a new critical direction" (35), classical myth signified a tool of male oppression in a phallogocentric Western culture, which women sought to overcome by releasing their suppressed unconscious as well as their spiritual powers.
- 6 In fact, second-wave feminists celebrated the project of women's revisionary mythmaking as subverting male phallogocentrism, while upholding the assumption that myth and logos were mutually exclusive. In doing so, they perpetuated essentializing correlations of gender and literary production, which date back to nineteenth-century discourses about women's "nature" and literature. As Susanne

Opfermann has persuasively demonstrated in *Diskurs, Geschlecht und Literatur*, constructions of women's different "nature" were central to the establishment of the category of "women's literature" in the 1830s and 1840s as second-rate, sentimental writings, and even bodily effusions (100). Male critics and authors commonly assigned women's literature a lack of depth as well as humor. Blumenberg's "work on myth" does away with the reductive notion of women's revisionist mythmaking as the discharging of superficial desires and irrational affects and instead opens up an approach involving pathos and logos, according to which women writers' revisions participate as much in debates about profound, metaphysical concerns as they cater to subversive humor.

- 7 Like Blumenberg, art historian and cultural studies scholar Aby Warburg occupied himself with the ceaseless apotropaic and aesthetic reception of classical myth. In contrast to Blumenberg, his work about the survival, or afterlife, of classical myth—"das Nachleben der Antike"—focused on visual culture, especially on what he called "Pathosformel."² In these mnemonic models, Warburg traced the survival of formalized gestures and expressive figurations of antiquity, an example of which is Psyche with the lamp discovering the sleeping Amor. Never a mere copy of an established iconography, Warburg's pathos formula negotiates the relationship between the formal conventions and affective expressions of different geographical, cultural, and historical periods and contexts, whether as subtle tensions or violent clashes, producing a syncretism which distills traditions yet also accrues novel meanings.
- 8 Alcott's revisionary mythmaking in "A Marble Woman" revives a number of pathos formulae, featuring iconic moments of the Psyche and Pygmalion myths. By placing these pathos formulae in the nineteenth-century context of women's struggle for self-possession in marriage, she renders an innovative amalgamation of these mythological stories. But first, how does the myth of Pygmalion relate to that of Galatea? As Christiane Holm has pointed out, in the early modern period the figure of Psyche frequently amalgamated with that of Pygmalion, since he came to stand for the genial artist and, hence, the human ascent to an ideal art analogous to Psyche's ascent from the human to the celestial sphere (9). Moreover, both myths were used in the embattled realignment of Western gender roles and hierarchies.
- 9 Two pathos formulae of Psyche and Amor in particular have dominated reception history by representing Christian and Neoplatonic moral allegories of the human fall and the apotheosis of the soul (Steigerwald), as well as the re-ordering of gender hierarchies (Holm 13-14). One pathos formula shows Psyche with a lamp in one hand and a knife in the other, bending over the sleeping Amor. It is the moment when Psyche, driven by her curiosity, ignores Amor's command not to look at him "in the light, otherwise he will disappear" (Steigerwald), and she realizes that her husband is the god of love himself with all his ambiguous powers. We know how her discovery ends: oil drips from the lamp and burns Amor, who wakes up and leaves her. Another iconic moment of the myth reverses the positions of the two lovers. Now Amor bends over Psyche, this time to revive her, because once again her curiosity has tempted her to open Proserpine's box against all warnings and brought on a death-like sleep. Amor's reanimating kiss anticipates their celestial wedding and Psyche's acceptance among the gods. In "A Marble Woman," Alcott appropriates both of these pathos formulae in order to, firstly, envision Cecil as an empowered equal in her relationship with Basil and,

secondly, to signal the triumphant fulfilment of her quest for self-possession in marital unity at the end of the novella. I will examine Alcott's revival of these pathos formulae and her revisionary mythmaking of the Psyche and Pygmalion myths in more detail in the two following sections.

3. The Female Quest for Self-Possession in Marriage

- 10 Early in the novella, Alcott arrestingly revises the pathos formula of Psyche with the lamp into Cecil's rescue of her legal guardian and artistic mentor—the sculptor Basil Yorke—from under his own creation of a marble statue of Psyche:

Cecil sprang boldly forward, groped for a match, lighted the lamp with trembling hands, and looked about her. The beautiful Psyche lay headless on the ground... half underneath it lay Yorke, pale and senseless. How she dragged him out she never knew; superhuman strength seemed given her, and self-possession to think and do her best for him.... [Cecil] bathed the white face, fanned the breathless lips, chafed the cold hands, and soon had the joy of seeing Yorke's eyes open with a conscious look.

'It is I. Where are you hurt? What shall I do for you, dear master?'

'Tell them the Psyche fell, nothing more,' he answered, painfully, but with a clear mind and a commanding glance. (162)

- 11 The ancient pathos formula positions Yorke's loss of consciousness and his burial under his own marble creation of Psyche as ironic. In contrast to the unconscious Yorke and his headless Psyche, Cecil masters the situation by showing full control over her body and mind. She even re-attaches the severed head of the broken Psyche statue so perfectly that Yorke, the artist-genius, is duly impressed. In short, Alcott's revision highlights Cecil's imposing moment of threefold self-possession—in body, mind, and artistic brilliance. In this way, Alcott rewrites Psyche's curiosity and disobedience as a demonstration of female agency and physical and intellectual self-possession.
- 12 Self-possession is a term relevant to nineteenth-century American discursive constructs of young women as legally dependent wards and wives, on the one hand, and subjects entitled to rights, on the other. Alcott's contemporary Elizabeth Stoddard, for instance, reported for the *Daily Alta California* that, at the Seventh Woman's Rights Convention at Broadway Tabernacle in New York City in 1856, keynote speaker Mary Davis had "argued the right of *self-possession* on the part of wives" (327; emphasis added), objecting to the legal right of the husband to take possession of his wife. But Cecil's demonstration of self-possession occurs before her marriage to Yorke. Although she shares the status of legal dependence and is under the authority of the *pater familias* (Gaakeer 291), whose power is reinstalled the moment Cecil acknowledges him as her "dear master," Yorke's authority and ownership over Cecil do not yet extend to her sexuality. Or, as Stoddard puts it in her newspaper column, drawing on the rhetoric of women's rights activist Davis, Cecil has not yet become a "victi[m] of legalized prostitution" (327). Cecil's status changes once she marries Yorke so that, for the rest of the novel, and analogously to Psyche's quest for immortal love, Cecil attempts the seemingly impossible, namely to incorporate female self-possession into marriage.
- 13 Using the iconography of Psyche and Amor, Alcott reverses Cecil's moment of threefold self-possession into a pose of dispossession at a moment when Yorke seeks to reanimate her. Notably, however, it is not only Cecil who is divested of her agency; Yorke's marital authority over Cecil fails as well:

Stooping, [Yorke] whispered gently yet urgently, 'Cecil, wake up, it is time.'
 But there was no time of waking, and nothing stirred but the faint flutter of her breath. He raised her, brushed the damp hair from her forehead, and cried in a voice tremulous with fear, 'My darling, speak to me!'
 But she lay mute and motionless. With a desperate sort of energy, he flung up the window, rolled the bed where a fresh wind blew in, laid her high on the pillows, bathed her head and face, held pungent salts to her nostrils, and chafed her hands. Still all in vain; not a sound or motion answered him, and all his appeals, now tender, now commanding, could not break the trance that held her. (186)

- 14 Yorke's attempts to revive Cecil invert her earlier dexterous reanimation of him but remain futile. Not even the attending doctor, who diagnoses her opium addiction, and whose presence underlines Cecil's status as sexual object in marital as well as medical terms, can wake her from her trance. True, the cause for Cecil's addiction originates from patriarchal authority in the first place. After all, Yorke administered Cecil's "bitter draft" (165) right after her moment of self-possession. However, Alcott revises Psyche's unearthly sleep not merely into a moment of female victimization, but also into an instance of male powerlessness on the part of the husband, the doctor, and, moreover, on the part of the opium-eating male artist-genius. The latter claim requires some more context and a closer look at the preceding ballroom episode, which also demonstrates how Psyche's quest for immortal love intersects with Pygmalion's animation of his Galatea.
- 15 The disclosure of Cecil's opium-eating habits inevitably invokes Thomas de Quincey's 1821 *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. De Quincey linked the usage of opium with Romantic concepts of an enhanced consciousness and literary output. As Sharon Ruston explains, for British Romantics, these concepts were directed at extending "one's vision beyond the quotidian" and "transcend[ing] ordinary consciousness" (341). This means that while de Quincey celebrated laudanum as a cognitive stimulant for male minds and Romantic art, Alcott shows Cecil's addiction and dispossession as the result of patriarchal medication intended to restore her female nervous system. Furthermore, during the ballroom episode, which precipitates Cecil's drugged sleep, on Yorke's request and under the influence of the opium, she acts the part of the wife in public. In contrast to de Quincey's self-induced "high," which expands his mental vision and literary creativity, Cecil's drugged state leads to her successful but "low" bodily masquerade as Yorke's wife:

'Imitate Mrs Vivian if you can; I want to try the effect upon these gentlemen.'
 She bowed and held the fan above her eyes a moment, as if to screen them from the light. When it dropped, as the newcomers were presented, they saw a blooming, blushing face, with smiles on the lips, light in the eyes, and happiness in every tone of the youthful voice.... So well did she act her part that [Yorke] soon entered his own [part], and taking young Vivian for his model, played the devoted husband so successfully that Dent and Ascot lingered long, and went away at last to report that Mrs. Yorke was the most charming woman in the room, and the sculptor the happiest man. (184)
- 16 Gone is Cecil's forbidding demeanor, which initially caused the men to compare the couple to Pygmalion and his beautiful, marble Galatea which required male animation (cf. 181). Indeed, Cecil's acting the part of the wife, who is animated by her admiration and love for her husband, is so convincing that, at the end of the day, an aroused yet sexually frustrated Yorke resorts to his "meerscham" (185) pipe for compensation.

- 17 Yet, and to return to Alcott's ironic nod towards the opium-induced imaginative flights of Romantic male writers such as de Quincey, Cecil's theatrical art is an *imitation*. Later, at their seaside residence, she facetiously remarks in Yorke's presence: "I am a better actress than you think; I've had daily practice since I was married, and Basil will testify that I do my part well" (201). Hence, the all-male audience at the ball greets as "nature and not art" (182) the result of Cecil's deliberate yet effortless performance of the quotidian, which the Romantics wanted to transcend, namely her reproduction of the everyday visual demands of Victorian culture in the public role of pretty looking wife and object of marital possession. According to Birgit Spengler, it was a time when women, once they entered the public sphere, which was "largely perceived as a male realm" (214), became "objects of visual display" and, as such, "risk[ed] social censure" (213). Women's strategies and counter-mechanisms to direct, subvert, or even own the male gaze were, therefore, of utmost importance to negotiate their subjecthood, self-possession, and social status. Examining the strategies of Jean Muir, the protagonist of Alcott's perhaps most famous thriller, *Behind a Mask* (1866), Spengler concludes that Jean's "unoriginal and imitative" impersonations are "firmly anchored in the realm of popular culture and stereotype" (227).
- 18 Likewise, Cecil's opium-eating habits highlight her reproduction of cultural expectations. Despite Yorke's superior knowledge of Cecil's playacting, his sexual frustration after the ball testifies to her authentic impersonation of the pretty, loving wife. The reason Cecil is so successful in seducing her male audience at the ball—including Yorke—is that, like Jean Muir's performance, hers is unoriginal as it repeats familiar poses. However, Cecil's playacting during her drugged state also suggests some female agency, in that it shows her potential to skillfully orchestrate and control the public spectacle of herself as Yorke's wife. With Cecil's imitative theatricals, then, Alcott bathetically undercuts not only the desirous male gaze and Yorke's aspirations to "mold" Cecil according to his will, but also the Romantic aspirations to high (male) art.³

4. The Different Guises of *Eros*

- 19 The final point I will address is the figure of Germain. Early on in the novella, he is introduced as an uncanny visitor to Basil's home, whose past life and present attraction to young Cecil remain shrouded in mystery. After some initial apprehensions, Cecil welcomes this other fatherly figure in her life, unaware that he is indeed her biological father. As the story unfolds, it is Germain's rather than Basil's companionship and shared interest in music and the arts, which reanimate Cecil after her opium addiction. There even seems to develop some rivalry between the two men regarding Cecil's affection, and the fact that he is Cecil's father is not revealed until the end of the novella, when he dies on an island where he and Cecil had sought refuge from a storm.
- 20 Scholars including Franklin, Keyser, and McCullough have pointed to the psychoanalytical implications of Germain as Yorke's double. To Franklin, Germain signifies Alcott's ambivalence about her own father's pedagogical "molding" of his daughters, which she sees in Yorke's paternal authority and coercion, on the one hand, and Germain's seduction and intimacy bordering on incest, on the other (257-261). Similarly, Keyser has observed that "Germain mirrors the incestuous nature of Yorke's feelings for his adopted daughter" (37), and that together, they "epitomize the way in

which men simultaneously deny and gratify their sexual feelings and exercise power over those whom they need to treat as equals" (38). McCullough, however, takes the view that Cecil comes to occupy the position of a "potentially disruptive maternal power" in the "psycho-social institution of marriage" (66), which the story's "Oedipal dynamics" (64) cannot contain.

- 21 In contrast, my focus lies on Alcott's reception of *Eros* as a polyvalent mythological figure. Germain represents Love as the polar opposite of sensuous love and the love of beauty and art alongside the polar opposites of female dependence and self-possession. I do not mean to disqualify the important analyses of the novella's psychoanalytical and Gothic elements. Rather, I wish to illuminate the often neglected, more playful aspects of *Eros* in the ambiguous figure of Germain.
- 22 The reception history of *Eros* shows that the ancient god comes to us in a wealth of forms and media: as gay little Cupid in the form of a sculpture, like Cecil's in "A Marble Woman"; as *Eros* figure in a "long royal cloak" (Full) in the illustrations of courtly love allegories—here Germain's cloak comes to mind, which seductively wraps Cecil into its folds; as *Eros* making music in Anacreontic literature and the pastoral tradition, like Germain as Cecil's guitar-playing companion and "connoisseur in music" (Alcott 116-117); or as protagonist and "moving force behind the dramatic narrative" (Full) in the representational culture of courtly pageants or masques, a function which Germain's figure assumes at Yorke and Cecil's masked ball, where feigned identities and misconceived confessions culminate before their denouement. Alcott makes particular use of these manifold conventions in the final part of "A Marble Woman."
- 23 As a force that unites sensuous love with the love of beauty and marriage with self-possession, Germain's figure is central to Cecil's quest. He initiates her into the erotic aspects of life with his "soft" caresses and kisses and his "tender" (Alcott 149) voice, without, however reducing *Eros* to a merely sensuous experience. Indeed, Cecil's attraction to him soon transcends the merely physical as Germain and Cecil converse freely about her art, sing and make music together (156-158). Furthermore, it is thanks to Germain's "gay and gentle, devoted and respectful" (196) company that Yorke, once his sexual desire for Cecil has been aroused at the ball, gradually comes to understand that her well-being depends on a life filled with "all that [she] most love[s]" (197), which includes material and sensual as well as artistic and spiritual beauty.⁴ In short, Cecil's quest for self-possession in marriage requires Yorke to recognize her as a subject beyond the animated spectacle of the pretty wife and beautiful object of marital possession and rather as a woman, whose beauty involves her body, mind, and spirit.
- 24 The idea of a life filled with ideal beauty as rooted in, but not confined to, the earthly, sensuous pleasures is steeped in Neoplatonic thought and mythology and strongly shapes Alcott's nineteenth-century revision of the tale of Psyche as a female quest for self-possession in marriage. One apt example of this revival of Neoplatonism in "A Marble Woman" in the context of the tale of Psyche and Amor is perhaps Germain's love for music, which he and Cecil share. Among American Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alcott's father Amos Bronson Alcott, Lydia Maria Child, or Margaret Fuller, music played a special role. While Amos Bronson Alcott considered music as an important element in the education of children ("Infant Education" 19), Emerson emphasized the role of music, as a medium as well as a symbol, in the human aspiration to and experience of the over-soul (Cavanaugh 25-35). Similarly, Fuller considered music as possessing a particular power to "evoke a higher realm of beauty,

truth, and the imagination transcending ... material existence" (Saloman 93-94). Child, in her 1836 novel *Philothea*, underscores her heroine's special relationship with music alongside her evident re-enactment of Psyche's Platonic ascent to a higher sphere of beauty and divinity. Hence, when Alcott, in "A Marble Woman," repeatedly refers to the importance of music as an aesthetic experience in Cecil's life, she perpetuates the Neoplatonic concepts of earlier Transcendentalists, while also insisting on the significance of women's self-possession, popular culture and, as Daniele has pointed out, "domestic art" (490). Moreover, Alcott's use of Neoplatonism regarding Cecil is significant, in that it challenges Yorke to acknowledge his young wife's beauty of mind, which, according to Neoplatonic thought, includes carnal desire. As Yorke puts it in the end: "you sat there... so gentle, frank, and beautiful" (237).

- 25 Once Yorke recognizes Cecil's sexual *and* intellectual beauty and subjecthood and pleads his rights "as lover" and "not... as husband" (233), Cecil has accomplished her quest for self-possession, at least in her marriage. However, the metaphorical death of the *pater familias* is not complete until her biological father—Germain—also dies. Notably, Yorke's declaration to be Cecil's "servant, not [her] master" (234) coincides with the passing of Germain. In fact, Alcott ends her re-narration of the Psyche myth with another iconic reversal, which displaces Psyche's ecstatic rapture, or *unio mystica*, onto Germain, whose "face" expresses the "reposeful beauty" (237) characteristic of the moment of Psyche's merciful rapture, when the human soul beholds and comes to rest in a higher Love. This ending aims to give closure to Alcott's nineteenth-century revisionary fiction of marital unity; however, it did not bring closure to women's larger project of revisionary mythmaking or their political quest for self-possession in marriage.

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NOTES

1. In my broader study of nineteenth-century American women writers' reception of classical myth, I only briefly juxtapose the novella's comparatively humorous variation of the Pygmalion myth to Alcott's later, much more somber re-narration in *A Modern Mephistopheles* (1877) with its emphasis on women's passion and suffering (Keck 322-326).

2. Warburg used the term for the first time in his 1905 essay "Dürer und die Italienische Antike" (177).

3. Much more could be said about Alcott's revisionary mythmaking in "A Marble Woman," especially about the aesthetic choices, for example, about the color symbolism underlying the different legal relationships of Yorke and Cecil and the moments of re/animation and re/petrification. There is also Alcott's use of pastoral conventions and imagery of court festivals or masques, which constitutes an exhilarating contrapuntal expression to the novella's gothic elements.

4. Cecil's love of the beauty of matter and spirit, body and mind, nature and art is evident in the seaside "home" that Yorke prepares for her recovery: "A long, loft hall, softly lighted by the sunshine that crept in through screens of flowers and vines. A carpet, green and thick as forest moss, lay underfoot; warm-hued pictures leaned from the walls, and all about in graceful alcoves stood Yorke's fairest statues, like fit inhabitants of this artist's home. Before three wide windows airy draperies swayed in the wind, showing glimpses of a balcony that overhung the sea, whose ever-varying loveliness was perpetual joy, and on this balcony a man sat, singing" ("A Marble Woman" 157). Unsurprisingly, the singer is Germain.

ABSTRACTS

Taking my cue from Hans Blumenberg's notion of the "work on myth," according to which myth is always in the process of revision, this article explores Alcott's reconfiguration of the Psyche and Pygmalion myths in her novella "A Marble Woman" in conjunction with the nineteenth-century context of women's quest for self-possession in marriage. Alcott rewrites Psyche's curious gaze at the sleeping Amor as the heroine's, i.e., Cecil's, self-possessed rescue of her legal guardian and later husband and Pygmalion's animation of his Galatea as Cecil's superb imitation of wifely adoration. However, Cecil's quest for self-possession in marriage is not successful until Yorke acknowledges her beauty in body and mind.

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Keywords: Louisa May Alcott; nineteenth-century women's fiction; classical myth; Amor and Psyche; Pygmalion

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