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Verena Laschinger, Annemarie Mönch and Sophia Klefisch

1. Nothing is Set in Stone: Twisting the Marriage Plot

“A Marble Woman, or The Mysterious Model” first appeared in The Flag of Our Union, where it was published in four installments between 20 May to 10 June 1865 under the gender-neutral pen name of A. M. Barnard (Rostenberg 76-77). For the most part it narrates Little Cecil’s coming of age, how the orphan finds shelter and artistic education with her unmarried uncle Yorke. Yet, in the final scene, there is a sensational twist when the heroine comes out as a masterful manipulator. Only then is it revealed that, from the outset, Cecil had far more agency than the narrative seemingly gave her credit for; that Cecil, who has been secretly in love with her guardian-husband for years, schemed to not only win his love but make him express that he reciprocated hers. Upon this revelation, the reader is as stunned as Yorke, who asks in disbelief: “Is it possible that my innocent, artless girl could lay such plots, and wear a mask so long?” (235).

The Victorian woman character who, we learn, is quite the performance artist, manages to make Yorke change his solitary lifestyle and admit his sentiments: “Unconsciously, I loved you long before I knew it” (233). As they together retrace and reveal to the other the actions that created their present situation, the dialogical structure of the final chapter foreshadows the course of their relationship in the
future. Husband and wife, we can assume, will talk without “treachery” from here on (237). Seeing eye to eye as adult partners, even their age difference is nullified.3

Clearly, Cecil is no classical Gothic heroine. She takes no pleasure in being dominated by a father figure but quietly fights for her place in an equal partnership, which contradicts Mary Chapman’s reading of the text as “reinscri[ing] a problematic economy that links erotic pleasure and domination” (186). While the story initially revolves around the theme of a “mismatched partnership of an abusive sculptor who trains his protégée to an absolute devotion to an art whose inert materials ultimately reflect her own immobility,” as Daniela Daniele states, Cecil’s “awe and submission to her watchful guardian” is eventually revealed as a charade (497). The final twist overrules all prior impressions of Cecil as innocent maiden and Yorke as “sadistic tutor” (499). Alcott dismisses the shrill Gothic thrills of incest and sadomasochism in favor of rounded characters who evolve into equal partners. Chapman’s claim that the story’s conclusion condones a “marriage of an orphan to her abusive surrogate father” (191), overlooks the growth of both protagonists as well as their equalized power relations. Similarly, Elizabeth Keyser’s notion of the adolescent heroine as a maiden in distress who is “tormented by her love for two [older] men” (33), downplays Cecil’s emotional strength and agency. And while “A Marble Woman” is at first sight one of “a large number of stories,” in which Alcott “focused on female neglected art vocation” (Daniele 488), we will, however, argue to the contrary.

Read within a new materialist framework, “A Marble Woman” features a radically empowered understanding of female artistic agency.3 It makes apparent that Alcott only seems to let her heroine relinquish both sculpting and acting, since Victorian readers would have expected her to sacrifice Cecil’s artistic ambition on the “altar of domesticity” (Stern, “Cauldron” 123). And when the finale reveals that Cecil designed a model man for herself, her exceptional talent for and immersion in sculpting only appears to have been but a tool to kindle Yorke’s feelings and mend his broken heart, which contradicts a true artist’s passion.

The new materialist approach ties in with a larger critical conversation of performance in the story, whose effect Isabell Klaiber claims is the “performative constitution of the alternative category of a ‘feminine femme fatale’” (215), or the “calculating true woman” (224). Cecil’s role-play of available gender stereotypes proves how “absurd and inhumane” the idea of true womanhood is (224). Yet, by reworking the notion of performativity as “iterative intra-activity” (Barad “Performativity” 823), which “calls into question the givenness of the differential categories of ‘human’ and ‘non-human’” (808), a new materialist reading shifts the focus from the effect of Cecil’s self-empowering performance to the grounds on which her acting functions as critical intervention in the first place.

We argue that Cecil not only imitates the role of woman as marble to showcase and subvert the gender conventions of her time but also that she is entangled with the very material; that consequently, the story’s “emancipating effect” that “literary scholars generally agree on” lies not in Cecil’s “disguises and role-plays” in which she “freely picks certain roles from a repertoire of female stereotypes” (Klaiber 214), but in the ways in which performance renders her simultaneously as woman and marble, artist and an artwork. This simultaneity signifies the agency of the marble woman, which Cecil communicates to others mainly by way of performative acts, which is really “intra-acting,” to use a term by Karen Barad: “Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is
an enactment, not something that someone or something has” (“Performativity” 826-27).

Understanding Cecil’s agency in the new materialist sense offers a performative twist to the reader’s assumptions about material matter just as Alcott surprises the reader with Cecil’s revelation to Yorke. It also deems the story downright feminist, for it provides the most powerless of female stock characters, the orphaned girl, with “possibilities for acting,” which “exist at every moment,” and “entail a responsibility to intervene in the world’s becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering” (827). Cecil thus continually intervenes in her own and her world’s “becoming,” whether or not she explicitly stages her performances as such or simply interacts with others during mundane activities. Hence, we claim, that Cecil does not ever relinquish the arts just like she never stops being a woman. Instead, she ricochets among genders, materials, doing and being, thus changing her husband and marriage in “acts of becoming.” Joanne Cassar paraphrases Barad to this effect: “Rituals of performativity and reconfigurations of personal and social worlds, entangled with each other constitute acts of becoming” (n.p.).

This, then, is what we consider the emancipatory effect of the story, in which Alcott renders her protagonist in terms of a simultaneous “doing/being” (Barad, Quantum 235) of a dynamic, boundless and thus potentially non-inhibitable female artistic agency that is at the core of the protagonist’s vision of marriage. Due to Cecil’s agency, the relationship which the ending suggests ensues, offers the possibility for husband and wife to communicate and negotiate their emotions, thoughts, and actions so that they may be happier both as individuals and as a couple. We concede with Klaiber that Cecil is going to live “an egalitarian marriage” (227), yet consider it not the result of manipulative “calculating” (224), but the result of a “becoming” and hence attesting to any woman artist’s agency (Barad, Quantum 235).

That said, we finally claim that “A Marble Woman” promotes the central idea of literary realism, which “based its hopes of creating a ‘common vision’... on a process of communication” (Fluck “Fiction” 101). The story employs the marriage plot in the vein of American realism, a burgeoning literary movement in 1865, (the year in which the tale was published) as a formula for Americans’ “social apprenticeship,” a maturation process, “in which individuals will have to go through a series of painful experiences in order to free themselves from illusions that still have a hold over their lives” (“Realism” 62). As a narrative frame for the character’s maturation, the marriage plot allows Cecil’s artistry to unfold and push the bounds of said framing as the artist and her husband see fit according to the new vision they have of each other and their marriage.

2. Woman as Marble: The Patriarchal Fantasy

When Miss Cecilia Bazil Stein comes to live with Bazil Yorke, the artist models his ward as if she were material matter. The heroine’s name is symbolical because Stein translates from German as stone. It also signifies unresponsiveness as the reader is led to understand that the story’s eponymous marble woman is revengefully crafted by her master in an attempt to kill all sexual impulses in her and himself: “surely I can mold the child as I will, and make the daughter pay the mother’s debt” (143). Represented as a marble statue, Alcott’s heroine echoes women’s portrayal in art and history, their
being suspended in time (Kasson 240). Just as the stone from which their images are carved, they are perceived as dead matter, and thus lack agency. Again, the use of names is indicative. At their first encounter, Cecilia already suffers a name change which marks the beginning of a long process of de-feminization for the heroine: “You can call me Celia as Mamma did, if you please, sir,” Cecilia tells Yorke who instantly retorts, “No, I shall call you Cecil. I dislike the other name” (137). Yorke overpowers the girl in an act of linguistic violence and, confining her to his house and his exclusive companionship, further inhibits her social and sexual development.

Over the course of the next five years, he controls her: “I see everything that happens on my premises” (143). Furthermore, he abuses the girl-muse as a source of inspiration and model for a new statue: a “Psyche-bending form,” which was “the best” of all his works (144). Cecil, however, the covert, heterodiegetic narrator explains, withers in the process and changes “from a rosy child into a slender, deep-eyed girl. Colorless, like a plant deprived of sunshine” (144). As Yorke drains her sexual energy, it looks as if he literally succeeds in turning her flesh into stone, making Cecil look “more cold and colorless” by the day (152). Hence, the impression that two casual observers have of her: “As a work of art she is exquisite, but as a woman she is a dead failure” (181). At this point in the story, Yorke has performed the quintessential act of misogyny in Western artistic production: “For the masculine artist, incorporating the feminine power of creation, engenders and requires the decorporalisation of the woman who had inspired the artist as model and whose capacities to give birth are what the painting sessions imitate” (Bronfen 112).

As the text’s evocation of the Pygmalion myth as intertext suggests, “A Marble Woman” blurs the line between flesh and stone, variably interchanging the woman with the statue. Yorke is in command of Cecil’s metamorphosis from woman into marble to the point that people tend to refer to her as “Yorke’s statue” (181). His dominance is undisputed, or re-asserted whenever clues suggest that Cecil might be less docile than she seems. When she is confronted about her opium addiction, Cecil is quick to reaffirm her submissiveness: “I find it hard to tame myself to the quiet, lonely life you wish me to lead. I am so young, so full of foolish hopes and fancies, that it will take time to change me entirely” (193). Yorke is reassured, yet the attentive reader cannot help noticing a hint at shifting power relations in the mere fact that Cecil kept a secret from her master. Once this crack in her innocent façade appears, one can image Cecil using opium just as likely to pleasure as “to tame [her]self.”

3. A Crack in the Stone: Countering the Patriarchal Fantasy

Significantly, the statue of Psyche is shattered in chapter IV, hurting Yorke, before it is mended by Cecil. Alcott redirects the reader’s focus onto Yorke’s perspective and by chapter VI, even the narrator who has been adding observations that did not originate in the characters is virtually suspended. Cecil and Yorke, by now a married couple, are invited to a ball, where Cecil’s behavior changes drastically over the course of the evening; from unwillingness to take part in the festivities to uncharacteristic animation so that both Yorke and the reader are “amazed at the rapidity of the change” (184). Since we do not have insight into Cecil’s thoughts, her motives remain a secret for now. Only in the last chapter, when focalisation changes again and Cecil is allowed to speak
more than usual, an explanation for her vivacity at the ball is provided, which makes Yorke realize that the marble woman has been pulling the strings all along.

14 The knowledge that Cecil has not been as passive as she appeared, sheds a different light on the ballroom scene. As John Berger claims, women are always aware of being surveyed and split into two parts, the “surveyed” and the “surveyor” (46), meaning they constantly think about how they are seen from an outside perspective. This duality brings the aspect of performance into the picture: “Thus she turns herself into an object... of vision: a sight” (47). Cecil's artificial appearance at the beginning of the festivities functions like a shield against the male gaze. She knows that her beauty will attract the attention of men, yet she deflects and repels unwanted attention by hiding behind the mask of “expressionless, heartless-looking beauty” (181). Averting his gaze from her, one man remarks: “I’ve looked at the snow image till I’m positively chilled” (181).

15 This brings us to the second part of the ballroom scene. Excelling in the art of performance, Cecil transforms into a loving, charming wife, making Yorke and everybody else wonder “what spirit possessed the girl” (184). From here on it is she who commands: “Come and dance with me” (184). Yorke accepts without question because he is bewildered by Cecil’s change, the narrative voice commenting that it seems “as if they had changed places” (184). However, Cecil does not have the upper hand for long and the evening ends with her performing as Sleeping Beauty in an act that resembles a painting: “Her fan and gloves had fallen from her hands, and she lay with her disordered hair scattered on the pillow, her white arms folded under her head” (185).

16 Cecil’s splendid performance at the ball foreshadows the change in power relations at the end of the story. Upon the realization that her true artistry is not sculpture but performance, which allows her to change her husband’s views and behavior, the scales of marital power relations have conclusively tipped in her favor. Clearly, Yorke was mistaken doubly in thinking, “What an artist I have made of her, if a lump of clay is more interesting that the news of her first lover” (166), for Cecil had neither given up on love nor had she ever been the product of his making. Twisting the roles of Yorke and Cecil in such a way, “A Marble Woman” insinuates “that the artist not only creates an art work but is also its creation. He not only controls and forms art but is in turn controlled and formed by it” (Bronfen 125).

17 Cecil’s act of winning her husband’s love in this “flamboyant narrative” (Stern, “Mask” 94) demands that he respect her as his equal, from whence emerges the possibility of marriage as a union of partners who inspire each other in their collaborative work projects. This fantasy of marital work-life-power balance bears signs of “the highest grade of marriage union,” a concept introduced by Margaret Fuller in Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1843/45) as the ideal type of “religious” union (8). Without suggesting a modern female identity for her character, Alcott still allows Cecil to creatively work on the realization of the ideal marriage, possibly reflecting Alcott's own desire.
4. Crumbling Stone: (Returning) Touches and Gazes

What few options are granted to Cecil under Yorke’s supervision, she uses masterfully. While he aims to contain her as an individual, she asserts herself as a multitude instead. As Cecil, Cecilia or Miss Stein, she continually ricochets among genders. The heroine’s multifaceted condition is indicated early on in terms of a female forename, a male middle, and the surname of a material object which she explains in genealogical terms as if she were the product of more than two parents: “Mamma’s name was Cecilia, yours is Bazil, and Papa’s was Stein” (137). The heroine is more than either one, or the sum of all of them. She is neither flesh nor stone but is all of these at once. Being simultaneously artist, artwork and material, she exceeds the limits of the binary, thus inviting a new materialist reading of the text.

Taking the cue from Jane Bennett’s 2010 study *Vibrant Matter*, we propose to read “A Marble Woman” without “parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” (vii), but acknowledge the text’s visionary employment of marble, which might or might not have been intentional on Alcott’s part, but is there regardless. Tracing the notion of vibrant matter through philosophical history, Bennett locates it among others with Henry David Thoreau, whose influence on Alcott is widely documented. In her biography, historian Martha Saxton states for example that Louisa “felt a sturdy bond with Henry and he occupied the foremost spot in her fantasy life, as her fiction would show” (226). Yet just as Yorke assumes, concurrent with the patriarchal dogmas of his time, that woman is matter, waiting to assume form in the hands of her creator husband, most readers then and now, we believe, assume that matter is “passive stuff” (Bennett vii). And just as Yorke is led to realize otherwise, so is the reader.

Challenging preconceived notions by way of switching focalization, “A Marble Woman” highlights the “vitality of matter” (vii), presenting it as active power that acts in the story. If, as Bennett argues, the line between organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman is blurred, this affects questions of agency. All matter is of import and at any time “there is not so much a doer (an agent)... as a doing and an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage” (28). Further, falling in with geologist Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky, Bennett points out that there is “it” in the “I”—we never have been fully human, but made up of minerals, bacteria and other matter (60). Not just by name, but also in terms of textual production “Cecilia Bazil Stein” (137) marble-/womanness is simultaneous, rendering her body an assemblage of indistinguishable gender and materiality. Often, Cecil is confused with marble statues, while they appear alive: “Five years later, a new statue stood in the studio; we might have said two new statues, though one was a living creature” (144). Furthermore, Cecil expresses the “in-betweenness” of her body in artistic terms. By “smoothing the rounded limbs of a slender Faun” (166), she creates her double—a composite being that is neither entirely human nor nonhuman.

In the passages focalized through Yorke, woman and marble appear both interchangeably available and controllable through his gaze. The statue in “Psyche-bending form” marks a sexualized stand-in, “as if she watched her sleeping lover,” for the “human figure” Cecil (144). The latter appears “colorless, like a plant derived of sunshine... but as beautiful as the Psyche and almost as cold” (144). As seen through Yorke, marble and woman appear as matter, ready to be formed by his hand. When his
eyes move from the “gleaming statue to the pale girl” (151), the contrasting adjectives “gleam” and “pale” indicate that to Yorke, the statue appears more alive than Cecil. His regarding Cecil as “finer material given him to mold well or ill” (151) foregrounds that to Yorke, his ward is a mere commodity: “I would have you beautiful and passionless as Psyche, a creature to admire” (151).

In contrast, in one of the rare passages focalized through Cecil, her gaze appears to be vibrant. Entering Yorke’s studio for the first time, a “smiling woman seemed to beckon to her [Cecil], a winged child to offer flowers, and all about the room pale gods and goddesses looked down upon her from their pedestals” (140). Complementing the scene is “Judas, the great dog,” who “lay like a black statue on a tawny tiger skin” (140). The text here twists a (non-vitalist) reader’s expectation by letting marble statues appear more vibrant than the dog, again blurring the lines between flesh and stone. Yet it is Cecil’s gaze that itself is vibrant and vitalising.

Focalized through Cecil, marble appears as subject, interacting with her, indicated by the statues “beckoning” and “offering” her flowers (140). Cecil’s “beauty-loving eye” (140) obviously resonates with (in) marble, her gaze being an animating force that manages to surpass the state of contemplation of surfaces that is commonly related with the aesthetic pleasure of looking at art. Unlike Yorke, to whom marble and woman only matter in their availability to him, Cecil finds her love requited in marble. Her claim to “know nothing of love except in marble” (145), only seems to speak of the innocent girl, whose sexual experience is restricted to sculpting classical motives such as Amor and Psyche, but actually indicates her simultaneous identity as both woman and marble.

The moments in which the text focuses on Cecil’s eyes are crucial. After Yorke makes her pledge to stay with him without access to the outside world, Cecil “shivered, as if the words fell cold upon her heart, all the glad light and color faded from her face, and she looked about her with longing eyes, as if the sunshine had gone out of her life forever” (150). Cecil seemingly becomes marble in this passage and her eyes seek to vitalise but fail. Later, Cecil reveals that all has been a charade perfected by using laudanum. When she confesses her addiction to Yorke, the text again focuses on her eyes, as “she covered up her face” (190).

With the help of laudanum, Cecil suppresses her vitality/vitalizing gaze and becomes inanimate marble. Her mineralization is seemingly completed. Both occasions are zero focalized, mirroring the lack of her gaze on the narrative level. In contrast, the evocation of her “beauty-loving eye” (140) upon entering Yorke’s studio is focalized through her and, hence, marble becomes vibrant subject matter. While Yorke shapes material to his pleasure, Cecil’s lies in the interaction with the material world. In terms of Bruno Latour, Cecil is presented as an articulate subject “who learns to be affected by others—not by itself” (210). As an articulate subject she ultimately succeeds in affecting even her emotionally fossilized husband who, perplexed by Cecil’s unexpected ways as a woman, starts resonating with her.

Placed within the theoretical frameworks of Bennett and Latour, Cecil’s bodily gaze overcomes gestures of mere looking. Vibrant and resonating, it creates instead a synaesthesia of hearing and touching. Such sensory perception locates Cecil within her environment, rather than situating her as an onlooker from the outside. As marble resonates with (in) Cecil, her body affects the statues, as one “beckons” and another “offers flowers” (Alcott 140), unlike Yorke, who needs his hands to mould marble
statues. While marble and woman form a resonating assemblage, the onlooking (male) spectators at the ballroom scene are excluded. Their gazes only find what they seek, a statue, which makes them feel “chilled” (176, 181). While Cecil, looking at statues, can recognize their vibrancy, the spectators cannot. To them, the text suggests, women, like marble are devoid of agency. Since Cecil resists pleasing their gaze, they turn and walk away.

Only Yorke reacts differently. Seeing Cecil for who/what she really is, he opens his emotional armor and loosens this tongue, which literally suggests he is becoming an articulate subject. He is the only male in the text who accomplishes such transformation, which leads us to the conclusion that Cecil and Yorke’s marriage will change profoundly as a result of it. Their creative work and marriage can remain continually articulate, as each needs mutual affection(s) to shape them. In this sense, to return to our initial question, Cecil’s relationship with the arts does not contradict a true artist’s passion. It does, however, reconfigure notions of artwork and artist, material and marriage. As Cecil’s alignment with marble is more than just role-play, it points towards a deeper entanglement between artist, artwork, and material that cannot be shed as easily as a mask.

Dismissing “the life/matter binary” (Bennett xviii), Alcott issues active power from non-human subjects in “A Marble Woman.” Extra-diegetically, the material work issues power to the female artist who, loving nothing but her art is, in fact, interchangeably “becoming with” her artwork, inspiration and practice. Intra-diegetically, the text implies that no artwork/relationship can ever be finished, while the varied approaches to Alcott’s texts show that the literature is a vibrant conglomerate of propositions. Hence, our reading suggests a letting go of condescending assumptions of human superiority over matter that structurally all too much resemble Yorke’s sexist and ageist misconceptions of men’s dominance over women. In return we propose to fully appreciate how the story renders the idea of vibrant matter, not only so that Alcott “could give vent to the passions and frustrations of thirty difficult years” (Stern, “Mask” 94), but so that we acknowledge her boundless, dynamic agency as a woman writer.

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NOTES

1. Performance plays a central role in Alcott’s sensation stories. Building on the work of Elizabeth Keyser, Elaine Showalter, and Judith Fetterley among others, Isabella Klaiber elaborates how manipulative role-play allows characters such as Jean Muir, La Jeune, or Cecilia Stein to not only expose “the repertoire of Victorian gender roles as a cultural and conventional construction” (216), but also subvert it with alternative, self-defined models of womanhood that exceed established categories.

2. They marry when Cecil is 18 and Yorke 38 years old. While the age gap of twenty years is considerable, nothing indicates that Yorke, who is prone to “jealous fears” (235) and attempts to “fling” Cecil’s much younger friend Alf “into the sea” (236), would be “linked in a form of asexual kinship” with his wife (Daniele 502). Cecil, though younger, ultimately sets the terms for their relationship, making biological age irrelevant. It is, too, in the case of Alf, who does not present “the greatest opportunity for a relationship of equality” (Chapman 192-93). Not only does Alf not share her dedication to the arts, he also falls short as a love match as Cecil asserts: “I never have loved Alfred” (Alcott 234).

3. Such agency may be considered anachronistic. Relating her texts with the socio-cultural and historical context from which the author emerged, Daniele concedes that Alcott’s art stories help to understand her “own frustrated ambitions as a woman writer” (488). Female artistic agency is, however, not a recent literary phenomenon. According to Patricia Pulham, nineteenth-century American women writers “challenge those notions of female passivity implicit in the Pygmalion myth, and represent their ‘Galatea’ figures as active thinkers, speaking subjects, and/or agents in their own lives. In rewriting the Pygmalion story, they appropriate the animated statue for their own ends and give her life in their own words, thus liberating themselves and their own art in the process” (18). Hence we are confident in claiming that the inradiiegetic rendering of female artistic agency in “A Marble Woman,” which starts where Pygmalion ends, imagining the life with the vitalised statue, sustains in a level-crossing performance Alcott’s own agency as an artist.

4. This might well be an autobiographical reference to a similar dynamic that Alcott witnessed as a child between her father and her sister, because “Bronson Alcott called his daughter Elizabeth, Louisa’s sister, ‘Psyche, a name which the author also employs in her 1868 short story ”Psyche’s Art” (Keyser 601).

5. Michaela Keck reads the sleeping nymph in Alcott’s as a pathos formula in Hans Blumenberg’s sense, concluding that “Alcott’s work on the Pygmalion myth thus functions as a critique of reductionist views that appropriate, oppress, and devalue women” and, instead, envisions “women’s bodies and minds in their full potential and beauty, that is, as material spirit and spiritualized matter” (155-56).
ABSTRACTS

At first glance, “A Marble Woman” (1865) seems to offer but a trite marriage plot, assuaging Louisa May Alcott’s contemporary readers while containing the heroine’s scandalous abilities. On a second and read through a new materialist critical lens, it becomes apparent how cunningly the female sculptor Cecil negotiates her creativity with the societal demands on the true woman and the marriage doctrine of her time. The sensational story’s twist reveals the female protagonist’s masterful manipulation of her guardian-husband Yorke who was, just as the reader, under the assumption that he was the one molding her to his needs. The protagonist’s true artistry, we realize, is not static sculpture but vibrant performance which renders her simultaneously as woman and marble, artist and an artwork.

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Keywords: Alcott, new materialism, marble, female artist, agency, marriage

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