Alcott’s Other Little Woman: Erotic Love and Victorian Childhood in “A Marble Woman: or, The Mysterious Model”

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1. Introduction

Cecil, the female protagonist of Louisa May Alcott’s pseudonymous thriller “A Marble Woman” (henceforth: MW), conveys a complex and disconcerting image of a femininity that is both childlike and erotic. Cecil is a helpless, virtuous child in need of love and adult protection. Her mother is dead, and her biological father is a runaway convict. Bazil Yorke, Cecil’s benefactor and adoptive father (and, significantly, also her mother’s former lover), comes to the child’s rescue, is conquered by her innocent charm, and eventually marries her. However, I will argue that this union is characterized by desire rather than love, playing on the Victorian eroticization of childhood to gothic, chilling effect. In particular, the Victorian insistence that children are free of sexuality rings hollow, mainly due to Cecil’s depiction through Yorke’s gaze and the associated scopophilia, the erotic pleasure of looking (Mulvey). I contend that the erotic nature of MW’s plotline, and the equally erotic depiction of its child-woman protagonist, lay bare the prurient implications of the Victorian binary division between child and adult. Charles Crow defines gothic literature as “oppositional literature” that presents “a skeptical, ambiguous view of human nature and of history,” usually in frightening or disturbing ways, and exposes “the repressed, what is hidden, unspoken, [and] deliberately forgotten, in the lives of individuals and cultures” (2). Accordingly, this essay attempts to uncover the repressed erotic child in Alcott’s MW and in so doing expose what lies beneath the conventional Victorian view of children, childhood, and womanhood.
2. What is a Child?

“What a ‘child’ is... changes to fit different situations and different needs” (Kincaid, *Child-Loving* 5). Definitions of children and childhood vary according to different historical contexts and different frameworks spanning the biological, legal, and psychological.

The length of the period called childhood likewise alters depending on cultural, historical, and circumstantial factors as well as on gender, and is contingent on views of “appropriate behavior, future roles and cultural expectations of what the child is capable of in the eyes of the adult society” (Brookshaw 366-67).

In the Victorian era, the two major defining factors of childhood and the child were the biological criteria of age and sex. The Victorians believed that childhood terminated with puberty, which marked the beginning of sexuality (Moll 1). At the same time, however, they also tacitly assumed children to be heterosexual, hence sexual, even prior to the appearance of any biological sign of initiation to adulthood and sexuality. Apparently the Victorians were far more ambivalent, albeit unwittingly, about children and childhood than they would have liked to admit. Indeed, the contradictory concepts children represented in this era are evident in the way Alcott was able to skillfully adapt her portrayal of child characters to accommodate the different tastes and needs of her dramatically diverse genres and readerships. MW, for example, was published in 1865, in the *Flag of Our Union*, a weekly that was known for its “riveting and violent narratives frequently concerned with convicts and opium addicts” (Stern xvi-xxi); the story’s title and contents make it clear that it was intended for the sensational weekly’s adult readers.

3. The Erotic Plot of “A Marble Woman”

Alcott’s entire plotline—of an innocent damsel-child in distress rescued by an adult benefactor who subconsciously covets her and eventually marries her—is quintessentially erotic, at least according to what Karen Sanchez-Eppler and James Kincaid identify as elements of erotic narratives, whether in nineteenth-century temperance fiction (Sanchez-Eppler 61) or in contemporary films (Kincaid, *Erotic* 115, 127). Such erotic narratives usually depict the child as helpless, isolated, irresistibly virtuous, in need of love, and always in danger, hence its need for adult protection and adult control (Kelleher 151). Moreover, parents are often fashioned as “monstrous, indifferent, or dead,” positioning the child in such danger “that the call for help is unmistakable” (Kincaid, *Erotic* 127). Fathers, in particular, are portrayed as demonic, to be discarded and replaced by a superior substitute who is initially detached but ultimately sensitive, misunderstood, and always romantically irresistible: “The child falls in love, initiates the love, and it blossoms, fed eagerly by the child and resisted by the reluctant adult, who is, however, finally overcome as the love takes over, bigger than both of them” (115-28). Mary Chapman identifies incest as “the unspoken theme” (194) of MW. Indeed, romance between a precocious girl (child-woman) and an older man “often a guardian, an uncle or an older friend; in short, a displaced father” (Bedell 241-42) and the incest fantasy that stirred it was a ubiquitous theme already in American gothic literature from the early republic as well as in nineteenth-century novels by women: “*A New-England Tale, The Wide, Wide World, The Curse of Clifton, Beulah,*
Faith Gartney’s Girlhood, Two Men, and probably at least a hundred more narratives... all told the story of the precocious girl and her middle-aged lover” (Habegger 64; Chapman 184).³

Sanchez-Eppler identifies a similar narrative formula in mid nineteenth-century sentimental temperance literature that stems from “the erotic potential of the new stress on disciplining through love” and gives rise to scenes of pederasty and incest that transform into “loving mechanisms of redemption” (61). Sanchez-Eppler observes how the “emphasis on love rather than on punishment works to ally domesticity both with self-control and with the fulfillment of desire” (61). Once we become aware of this formulaic plotline, we may already guess in advance that Cecil will not marry Alfred, the young neighbor next door, because in this genre, “[a]dorable kids are not meant for other adorable kids” but rather are objects of adult desire (Kincaid Erotic 124; Kincaid Child-Loving 4-5). “Unconsciously, I loved you long before I knew it” (Alcott 247) confesses Yorke to Cecil in the closing scene of the novella; a close reading of its expository and brief first chapter, “Little Cecil” (175-83), confirms that Yorke loved Cecil, indeed desired her, already as a child.

4. Eroticizing the Victorian Child

At the onset of the novella, Cecil is “[n]early twelve” (178), the same age that Amy is at the opening of Little Women; at its close, she is still younger than Meg, the eldest March sister, is on Meg’s wedding day. Cecil is therefore no longer a child but also not yet a fully mature woman. And yet, unlike the March sisters, whose sexual maturity is held in permanent abeyance by a persistent and ongoing process of development and coming-of-age, Cecil is eroticized from the very start of the narrative.

Upon her arrival at Bazil Yorke’s house, Cecil is described in terms fitting for a much younger child. Her young countenance is emphasized, as “gruff old Anthony,” the aged servant, finds himself “confronted with a large trunk and a small girl holding a letter in her hand” (175; italics here and in the following quotes are mine); she is “[t]he small personage,” “the little girl” (175) with a “child’s patient trust,” “small hand” (177), “innocent freedom” and “innocent frankness” (178). Cecil can feel Yorke’s yearning heart “with the quick instinct of a child” (182), but her “childish eyes” still lack the ability of “[a] quick witted woman” (181). This description seems to be in line with the biological definition of Victorian childhood and its closely related idea of sexual innocence, according to which childhood is distinct from adulthood (Cunningham 221).

However, Cecil’s erotic appeal lies precisely in these qualities, which are so wistfully projected onto her. Cecil’s exaggerated, cute smallness, her naïve trust, and her well-mannered submissiveness are all evocative of innocence and sexual purity; yet, as Sanchez-Eppler maintains, “an insistence on the sexual innocence of children... is precisely what enables those erotics to function; the suppression gives these scenes their sexual charge” (73). Thus, in portraying Cecil as very young, very little, and vulnerable, Alcott in fact evokes for her readers erotic pleasures, which are further intensified once Cecil becomes the object of York’s gaze:

For many minutes Bazil Yorke watched the unconscious child, as if there was some strong attraction for him in the studious little figure poring over the book with serious eyes, one hand turning the pictured pages, the other pushing back the wavy hair from a blooming check and a forehead possessing delicate brows and the harmonious lines
about the temples which artists so love. *The man’s eyes softened as he looked, for the child’s patient trust made her friendliness more pathetic.* He put out his hand as if to draw her to him, then checked the impulse, and the hard mouth grew grimmer as he swept off the cap, saying coldly, ‘Miss Stein, I am ready now.’ (Alcott 177; emphasis mine)

9 Yorke’s male gaze yields a very sensuous description of Cecil, lingering closely (and thus drawing the reader to linger as well) over the contours of the child’s eyes, hand, delicate brows, and temples. The reader is also able to observe the physical effect of these qualities on Yorke, who can hardly contain an impulse “to draw her near him.”

10 Yorke’s disturbing resolution “to make the daughter pay the mother’s debt” (Alcott 183), a debt which “has to do with female passion and Yorke’s desire to contain and control it” (McCullough 60), is suggestive of his view of her as a substitute for his former lover and hence an object of desire herself. He further objectifies Cecil by viewing her as a gift from the dead mother, though the narrative cloaks this objectification by framing it as a tribute: “‘She [Cecil’s mother] remembered me—and sent me her all. Surely I may keep the gift and put one drop of sweetness into this bitter life of mine’” (Alcott 181).

11 Although Yorke attempts to repress Cecil’s femininity and hold her sexuality at bay by imposing on her the androgynous name Cecil (instead of the feminine Cecilia), he fails in the face of the child’s irresistable femininity. At Cecil’s evocation of her mother, he is overcome by “an unconquerable desire” which Cecil reciprocates, (mis)interpreting it (perhaps along with the reader) as a sign of parental warmth: “Reassured by this sudden thaw in the frosty aspect of her guardian, Cecil leaned confidently against his knee... with her hand on his shoulder” (181). Chapman suggests that this kind of naïve interpretation was made possible because “the semiotic of the separate spheres contains no vocabulary to distinguish between the embraces of a father and the caresses of a lover” (198). However, this explanation is incompatible with descriptions of Yorke’s “strange” emotions of “unconquerable desire” as he takes her into his arms with “an impetuous gesture” (181). Once readers become aware of these sexually laden descriptions, they can no longer ignore the true nature of Yorke’s attention. Thus, though the child is seemingly unaware of it, her arrival inserts elements of desire and sexual tension for both the reader and for Yorke, interrupting the emotional detachment he has tried to establish for himself.

5. The Male Gaze

12 It is hard not to notice that Yorke is preoccupied almost to obsession with looking at Cecil from the commencement of the novella: “For many minutes Bazil Yorke watched the unconscious child, as if there was some strong attraction for him in the studious little figure” (Alcott 177); “[Yorke] eyed the child as if he longed to yet dared not keep her” (178); “[Yorke] drew Cecil toward him, and looked at her with hungry eyes”; “His voice rose, his glance searched her face, his stern mouth grew tremulous, and the whole man seemed to wake and glow with unconquerable desire” (181; all emphases mine). In the latter description, Yorke’s sensual response to Cecil becomes imbued with eroticism as the narrative closes in on his face, moving from his voice to his glance to his mouth to his entire body. Yorke’s look is always “hungry” and searching, always associated with attraction, longing, and desire. 5
In fact, scopophilic eroticism—the pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object, which Laura Mulvey associates “with taking other people as objects, [and] subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (“Visual” 59)—underlies the entire story. It starts with a display of Cecil as an erotic spectacle for Yorke (and the readers); we soon learn that Cecil is also the object of her biological father’s “pertinacious gaze” (Alcott 193): “Mr. Germain was intently watching her” (191), and “Germain... watched her with absorbing intent” (193). Cecil eventually becomes the object of neighbors’ and strangers’ curious gazes as well: “[Y]ou called me silly when I told you that people made me uncomfortable by looking at me as I walked in the day” protests Cecil (187). After their marriage, Yorke asks Cecil to “'[l]ook your loveliest tonight, Cecil, for there will be many strangers at Coventry’s, and I have promised him [Coventry] that my handsome wife would come'” (206). Under such gazes, Cecil grows into the role of the “woman as spectacle” or “woman as icon” (Mulvey, “Visual” 61), the object of Yorke’s gaze and through him the object of the readers’ gaze, admiration, and pleasure. This gaze defines Cecil because, to quote Mulvey:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (60)

Indeed, Cecil not only learns that she is constantly being observed on her first day at Yorke’s home, when he tells her: “‘I see everything that happens in my premises’” (Alcott 182); but also, five years later, Cecil has already internalized this regard: “[A]s few eyes but his beheld her, she dressed for him alone, unconscious that she served as a model for his fairest work” (183). While Birgit Spengler has written extensively about “the objectifying dimension of the male gaze as directed towards women” in Alcott’s *Behind A Mask* (223), the current reading’s novelty lies in exposing the mechanisms of the voyeuristic male gaze on Cecil already as a child (and by implication its operation on children in general).

### 6. The Metaphor of the Marble Statue

Since a statue is by definition an object to be looked at and admired, it is no wonder that the marble woman is the ultimate image that defines Cecil in the story. This metaphor is initiated with York’s consideration of Cecil as a potential model for his artwork, which is already implicit in the description of twelve-year-old Cecil’s “harmonious lines about the temples *which artists so love*” (Alcott 177; emphasis mine). It comes to fruition when, at seventeen, Cecil becomes the model for Yorke’s best statue (of Psyche) and is described as statue-like herself:

> Five years later, a new statue stood in the studio; we might have said two new statues, though one was a living creature. The marble figure was a lovely, Psyche-bending form, and with her graceful hand above her eyes, as if she watched her sleeping lover. Of all of Bazil Yorke’s works this was the best, and he knew it... The human figure was Cecil, changed from a rosy child into a slender, deep-eyed girl. (183)

The statue freezes Cecil’s beauty and plays down her emotional faculties, while simultaneously turning her into an object to be observed and inspected by Yorke and
other male characters, who describe her as an “expressionless, heartless-looking beauty,” a “snow image,” a Galatea (210).

17 But the statue is an apt metaphor not least because, like the child and the woman, it is also fraught with ambivalence and contradictions. On the one hand, although most likely nude, a sculpture is by definition (being inanimate) gender neutral, as well as flawless and beautiful in a manner unlike any human form. To be sure, for many nineteenth-century writers and thinkers, “nude sculptures offer[ed] ideal beauty without the soft pollution of actual flesh” (Bergland 169). Consequently, to describe Cecil as statue-like is to imply that she is the closest personified version of the statue’s visual perfection, the embodiment of a feminine ideal (as shaped by male fantasy). As such, the statue expresses a deep-seated Victorian wish to freeze the child-woman, maintain her beauty, protect her innocence, and preserve her—that is, contain her—in her most idyllic form: “Yes, I would have you beautiful and passionate as Psyche... for I desire to save you from the pain I have known” (Alcott 188) says Yorke to Cecil, referring to his heartache following the aborted love affair with her mother.

18 At the same time, mid-nineteenth-century Americans associated statues with naked bodies and with sex as well (especially after Hiram Powers’ popular statue “Greek Slave” toured the United States in the 1840s): “Looking at sculpture was an occasion for contemplating human anatomy and for thinking about sex and sexuality” (Bergland 160). In view of that, likening Cecil to a marble statue is also suggestive of her sexuality and accentuates the erotic pleasure of looking at her.

19 By evoking contradictory feelings of “passion and passionlessness, power and powerlessness” (Kasson 72), the statue serves both to accentuate and to downplay Cecil’s sexuality, echoing the ambivalent feelings she stirs in her benefactor. This ambivalence was typical of the Victorians, who struggled with the discrepancies between their ideal images of women and children as pure, innocent, and asexual, and the real bodily and erotic manifestations of these figures:

The Victorians, who tackled many big problems successfully, made a fearful hash of the problem of woman. Their moral dualism, their besetting weakness of dreaming of one thing and doing another... involved endless cruelty towards flesh and blood. Woman in the abstract was as radiant as an angel, as dainty as a fairy—she was a picture on the wall, a statue in a temple, a being whose physical processes were an inscrutable mystery. (Cruickshank 87)

20 In MW, this description applies perfectly to Cecil, the child-as-woman. If past and present readers of the novella might have likewise preferred to freeze Cecil’s image (and perhaps the image of all children and women) like “a statue, or a picture, isolated and with the spotlight on it” (Kincaid “Designing” 6)—lonely, innocent, and therefore pure—they, like Bazil Yorke, are likely to fail due to their own fixation on these qualities.

21 Alongside the pleasure of looking, there is also the pleasure of being looked at. Cecil is never entirely impervious to Yorke’s physical attraction to her even as a child: “Bewildered, yet glad, Cecil clung to him, drawn by an attraction that she could not understand” (Alcott 181; emphasis mine). Perhaps the reader, like the Victorians, needs to overcome the illusion of children’s asexuality (or sexual innocence) to notice that
Cecil is not unreceptive to the sensation caused by Yorke’s embrace. Cecil the child craves a good night kiss, just as Cecil the woman later desires physical expressions of love. Both Cecil and Yorke need the warmth and pleasure of physical contact, indeed of sexuality, and both wilt and wither when denied them. Thus, despite the dominant narrative about children’s (sexual) innocence, both child and adult participate in the erotic aspect of their relations.

Furthermore, they both partake in this exchange as a game of power. At the end of the story, we learn that Cecil maneuvered, steered (and stirred) Yorke’s feelings towards her all along, consciously manipulating them, just like her cunning literary sisters Jean Muir or Pauline Valery (the protagonists of Alcott’s Behind A Mask and “Pauline’s Passion and Punishment” respectively). The actions that bring about the desired outcome are thus not the results of unconscious child-like and naïve charm—winning Yorke’s love by nurturing the good in him, the famous feminine ethics—but the outcomes of premeditated actions: “Is it possible that my innocent, artless girl could lay such plots, and wear a mask so long, that she might subdue her guardian’s proud heart?” (249; emphasis mine) asks the surprised husband. Cecil’s response is revealing: “Everything is possible to a woman when she loves, and you were only conquered with your own weapons” (249). Indeed, Yorke is not transformed by the girl’s love but by his desire for her, a desire which Cecil consciously nourishes by performing for her master’s (as well as for her editor and readers’) gaze.

Significantly, however, Cecil’s acceptance of her father-husband ensures that her status remains fixed “as perpetual daughter” (Keyser 43; Chapman 191). As Cecil remains his child, Yorke forever maintains his position as her guardian father. In this respect, Cecil achieves what, according to Bedell, the March sisters struggle vainly to attain—eternal childhood (146). Indeed, Cecil’s portrayal becomes even more intriguing when compared with Alcott’s portrait of girlhood in Little Women. Whether this was done consciously or not, the fact that it was done at all, and by no other than the author of Little Women, makes for a radical result, even though MW is no children’s story, and Cecil, as we conjecture from the very title, offers an entirely different model of a little woman.

8. In Conclusion, or: The Gothic Effect of A Marble Woman

The furtive eroticization of childhood in MW is closely aligned with hierarchical power relations in a manner typical of the gothic mode. The conversion of incestuous fear and lust into love is not sufficient to counter the gothic elements of paternal supremacy and seduction; I find it problematic, in fact, to read the repressed incestuous relationships of fathers with their daughters as love at all. I submit that not even the equally gothic subversive or feminist elements of A Marble Woman—mainly Cecil’s relative agency and Alcott’s exposure of marriage as an unnatural and perverse construct (McCullough 66)—undermine the novella’s preference for the erotic economy of incest and masculine domination over equality (Chapman 199). Rather, they exist within and are contained by its patriarchal structure. Cecil does successfully manipulate her guardian; she eventually achieves Yorke’s domestication and even makes him nurse her (in her sickness) and worry about her (when she disappears in the storm with Alfred and Germain), thereby, in a way, feminizing him. However, her
achievement is ultimately framed within an extant social structure that leaves women in a child-like position and “as vulnerable as ever” (Sanchez-Eppler 62).

Given the patriarchal pecking order, Cecil’s achievement (her marriage) marks her final submission to Yorke, hence her ultimate elision as a subject (which is, according to Susanne Keppeler, a staple of pornographic literature [90]). Consistent with Mulvey’s view of marriage as a conventional trope that serves to sublimate the erotic (“Afterthoughts” 34-35), Cecil remains a “signifier of sexuality” also in her “correct, married ‘femininity’” (35-36). As Keppeler poignantly writes: “The cultural space of women, captured and framed in images, is one big Show World. There remains but one kind of look: looking at. Man gazing at woman, one-way” (81).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Similar to Kelleher, “[t]he child I speak of here refers not to... any one identifiable child, but rather the figure of no child in particular, a figure whose lack of particularity enables a great deal of thinking and speaking—not to mention legislating and policy making—about matters of so called general, national, or universal concern” (151; emphasis in original).

2. This is manifested, to this day, in reading every “[c]ute boy-girl romance” as evidence of their mature heterosexuality, while construing any homoerotic behavior as “harmless play... or as a mistake that can later be corrected by marriage” (Bruhm and Hurley ix). The contemporary narrative about children and childhood is likewise marked by ambivalence and contradictions, as we, too, seem to adhere to the
“collective illusion” of the child as biologically or (non) sexually defined (Kincaid, Child Loving 69), even though by now the idea of the child as a fixed biological category has long been contested and child sexuality is no longer disputed: “Far from being ‘innocent’ and becoming sexual at puberty, as was once the common belief, it is now indisputable that everyone is sexual even before birth.... Babies often react sexually when being held, or in other moments of physical pleasure” (Pollard 108).

3. The motif of incest correlates with and is supported by biographical readings of Alcott’s life and her relationship with her father and his circle of friends, mainly Thoreau and Emerson. Reading from this perspective, Martha Saxton maintains that the novella parallels Alcott’s early conflicts with her father: “Once again she works arduously to regain the affection of a cold, distant, older man, thawing him out to reassure herself after discussing her more adult desires in Moods” (275). Saxton describes Cecil’s marriage to her guardian as aiming “to protect the girl’s reputation” (274) and claims that only as Cecil’s real father dies and “the family is disposed of” can adult love prevail (274). At the same time, Saxton maintains that the feelings stirred by the oedipal relations in MW are childish by comparison to the “adult desires in Moods” (275). Pointing out the incest motif in all of Alcott’s thrillers, Rosemary Franklin’s psychoanalytical reading of MW traces the roots of this narrative in Alcott’s relations with her “seductive father” whose approach to raising his daughters was, according to Franklin, “unconsciously erotic” (260). Franklin maintains that Bronson Alcott wanted to “halt the maturation process” of his daughters, “leaving them little girls instead of women” (262).

4. This description refers to Cecil’s inability to notice Yorke’s lie about the mysterious man who mills about the house and will turn out to be Cecil’s biological father. The man is enigmatically referred to, like Cecil, as Yorke’s model: “The man is my model” (180), thereby complicating the reference in the now ambiguous title, “A Marble Woman: or, the Mysterious Model.” And see McCullough p.64.

5. Following Mulvey’s distinction between voyeuristic and fetishistic scopophilia in “Visual Pleasure,” Yorke’s gaze may be described as changing from voyeuristic in the first chapter (he observes the child as guilty due to her mother’s sins and seeks to punish her, thereby asserting his control over her), to fetishistic (Cecil becomes a satisfying object of admiration for her beauty) in the rest of the novella.

6. Significantly in this context, McCullough’s reading of Germain’s multifaceted identity as Cecil’s “father, lover and mother” (64), leads her to contend that “if Germain psychically occupies the space of the mother and Yorke occupies the position of the father, Cecil stands as the child who must give up the desire for the mother (Germain) and relocate it in the desire for the father (Yorke)” (64; emphasis mine).

ABSTRACTS

The article argues that Cecil, the protagonist of Alcott’s “A Marble Woman,” is eroticized from the very start of the narrative, and that Alcott’s entire plotline—of an innocent damsel-child in
distress rescued by an adult benefactor who subconsciously covets her and eventually marries her—is quintessentially erotic. Thus underlined by desire rather than love, the novella plays on the Victorian eroticization of childhood.

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