

Liberated Louisa
UCOT – March 21, 2021
Rev. Gary Kowalski

At the age of thirty-six, already famous as the author of *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott wrote a humorous verse summarizing her life to that point, called “The Lay of the Golden Goose.”

Long ago in a poultry yard
One dull November morn,
Beneath a motherly soft wing
A little goose was born.

Who straightway peeped out of the shell
To view the world beyond,
Longing at once to sally forth
And paddle in the pond.

“Oh be not rash, her father said,
A mild Socratic bird:
Her mother begged her not to stray
With many a warning word.

But little goosey was perverse,
And eagerly did cry,
“I’ve got a lovely pair of wings,
Of course I ought to fly!”

The poem goes on to tell how the other barnyard birds mock her effort, the proud peacock and clucking hens scoffing.

She could not sing, she could not fly,
Nor even walk with grace.
And all the farm-yard had declared
A puddle was her place.

Poor Louisa! She never had the charm of her little sister May, nor Beth's sweet disposition, nor the self-assurance of her big sister Anna. She considered herself an ugly duckling. But the other barnyard fowl quickly change their tune when they discover the little gosling lays golden eggs. Suddenly she's a celebrity.

Great chanticleer was pleased to give
A patronizing crow,
And the contemptuous biddies clucked,
"I wish my chicks did so"

Wise owls awoke and gravely said,,
With proudly swelling breasts,
"Rare birds have always been evoked
From transcendental nests."

The transcendental nest that nurtured this strange bird was the home of Bronson Alcott, a saintly but eccentric and otherworldly figure. A contemporary said that "his flowing white hair, and the calmness and purity of his aspect gave him quite an apostolic look." A small boy visiting the Alcotts once glimpsed Bronson and asked his mother if that was perhaps one of Christ's disciples. From his looks and his manners he might have been. His lifelong vow was to do no harm to man, nor bird, nor beast. He embraced every great reform and good cause of the day from vegetarianism to abolition. Books he had aplenty, but for money and material wealth very little use.

But there was a price being married to such a high-minded sort. Abigail Alcott regarded her husband with a mixture of love and wifely resignation, yet there were times when even her serene temper wore thin. “A woman may live a whole life of sacrifice, and at her death meekly say ‘I die a woman,’” she observed. “A man passes a few years in experiments of self-denial and simple life, and he says ‘Behold a God!’” There were years of hardship. The little school that Bronson opened had to close when he insisted on admitting children of color to the academy. With a utopian friend, he bought a few acres in western Massachusetts named “Fruitlands” where the family nearly starved when the two men refused to use draft animals on the farm, regarding the harness as a form of four-footed slavery. When the Alcotts then moved to Concord it was to a residence grandly styled “Orchard House” but which with mordant humor Louisa called Apple Slump. With no steady income, the tasks of feeding, clothing and comforting the four children fell especially to Mrs. Alcott, who could trace her forebears to the Hancocks and other illustrious Americans, but who found herself living two notches below shabby gentility. Much later, Louisa would reflect that “it requires three women to take care of a philosopher, and when the philosopher is old, the three women are pretty well used up” and it was true. Loving Bronson was easy but caring for him was a chore.

When Louisa’s alter ego Jo, the heroine of *Little Women*, opens the novel by grumbling that “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” and her older sister agrees, “It’s so dreadful to be poor,” she speaks from personal experience. Louisa’s driving ambition in life would be to win financial security and provide a few comforts for her parents and siblings who’d been deprived for so long. In her journals, she carefully recorded every sum of money she ever received, the the first story she sold for five dollars to the royalty checks for tens of thousands at the height of her career. But while her childhood was one of straitened circumstances, it was rich in feeling. There were weekly pillow fights on Saturday nights, part of the family regimen of free-spirited fun. There were homespun theatricals, when young Louisa would don the role of the intrepid Duke Roderigo in the absurd dramas she both wrote and acted out on the barn floor. There was the friendship of neighbors like Mr. Emerson, who discreetly helped the Alcotts with loans he didn’t expect to be repaid. And there was the high moral

seriousness that was part of the New England Unitarian heritage, and which helped Louisa turn every trial of her youth into a test of character. At thirteen, she wrote a poem titled “My Kingdom.”

A little kingdom I possess,
Where thoughts and feelings dwell:
And very hard the task I find
Of governing it well.
I do not ask for any crown
But that which all may win:
Nor try to conquer any world
Except the one within.

But there were other worlds for her to conquer. She was less than twenty when she left home to find her muse as a writer. “I don’t often pray in words,” she told her journal, “but when I set out that day, with all my goods in a little old trunk, my own (very small) earnings in my pocket, and much hope and resolution in my soul, my heart was very full ...” Like many young writers, she had limited success, selling a very few fairy tales and romances.

It was hard and frustrating work, not glamorous at all. She once advised a young author that almost any vocation--even ditch digging--would be preferable to scribbling, but it was also an obsession for Louisa, even when she considered her own output trash. In *Little Women* she described how her counterpart Jo could fall into a trance “when the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it, with entire abandon and led such a blissful life, unconscious of want, care or bad weather while she sat safe and happy in an imaginary world ...”

Despite talent and energy and drive, it was not until her thirties that she met with real success. During the Civil War, Louisa had volunteered as a combat nurse. It broke her health, and she never recovered. She contracted typhoid and the treatments included

tinctures of mercury almost worse than the disease. But if the ordeal depleted her physically, it deepened her in other ways. *Hospital Sketches*, published in 1863, offered honest portrayals of the men who fought and suffered on the front lines and fed a public hunger to know the truth about the terrible conflict. For the first time, Louisa had begun to write, not of long ago times and faraway places or imaginary worlds, but of her own direct perceptions as a woman.

When her publisher suggested she next try a “book for girls,” she wasn’t hopeful. “Never liked girls or knew many,” she journaled, “except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting though I doubt it.” When the handwritten manuscript was finished, her publisher was also dubious. Such a thing had never been done: a coming-of-age novel by, for, and about women, that treated girls lives with sympathy and insight. It wasn’t until Mr. Niles showed the book to his young nieces, who were bowled over, that he finally began to think *Little Women* might find an audience.

Money was never a problem after that. Louisa sent May to Europe to study painting. She opened a private school for Bronson where he could teach and conjecture without the bother of monetary considerations. But there was a measure of disappointment mixed with Louisa’s success. For a private homebody, fame held little allure.

“When I had youth I had no money,” she said. “Now that I have the money I have no time and when I get the time, if I ever do, I shall have no health to enjoy life.”

There was also loneliness, even though she chose a solitary existence. She chafed at the idea of matrimony and besides there was no one she really wanted to marry. As a girl she’d had a crush on Mr. Emerson but he was more father figure than beau. When forced to invent a dream lover for Jo, she’d imagined another older man, the Germanic Professor Baer. In her thirties, she’d been flattered by the attention of a much younger man--a Polish revolutionary twelve years her junior whom she met on tour. But the men who attracted her did not seem to be available and those who were most eligible were

just not that attractive. She may have had difficulty looking on any man of her own age and station as a complete equal; most suitors she seems to have considered slightly ridiculous. But the life of a spinster could also be drab.

In truth she was married to her work. But even at her peak she regarded most of her stuff as second-rate. Her attempts to write serious adult fiction met with mixed reviews and meager sales. So she gave the public what it wanted, juvenile literature, but never thought of herself as a great literary talent.

She had made her own way in a man's world, but part of the problem, as she expressed it, was that she had not been born a man. For a woman in the nineteenth century, life's possibilities remained limited by propriety and tradition.

She was an ardent feminist. In fact, Louisa was the first woman to ever cast a ballot in the town of Concord. But a part of her would never be fully liberated. To the end, she remained a dutiful daughter, gently caring for her aging mother and then father. She never separated herself entirely from the family of her birth, but then it was not separateness but closeness that she wanted. Her dearest wish was to remain always a part of the loving family that had given her such a wealth of childhood memories that came to life again on the pages of her books. When Bronson died in 1888, Louisa followed him into eternity two days later.

What would be an appropriate epitaph for Louisa May Alcott? Her own words from "The Lay of the Golden Goose" might be a fitting tribute.

She knew she was no nightingale
Yet spite of much abuse,
She longed to help and cheer the world,
Although a plain grey goose.

Her books have entranced and delighted generations of youngsters and grown ups alike. And though her own life seemed hard, thousands of girls were destined to grow up wanting to be just like Jo. To help and cheer the world to that degree should be enough for anyone.