

“THEY TALKED AS INDUSTRIOUSLY AS THEY WORKED”: REFORMING
THE FAMILY AND ITS LABOR IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT’S *WORK: A STORY
OF EXPERIENCE*

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Abstract

As my title suggests, this project examines Alcott's vision of the family in *Work* (1873). Her characters do indeed "talk as industriously as they work" as a means of creating the circumstances necessary for the achievement of sentimental ideals at the very moment when sentimentalism itself begins to lose cultural dominance. They achieve the goals of voluntary affective relationships and protection from the ills of wage labor not through a "change of heart," as Harriet Beecher Stowe's characters do, but through changing the circumstances in which they live their lives. Using the work of Habermas and Wallerstein to articulate those circumstances, this project explores the significance of Alcott's novel within the context of reform movements and labor history, ultimately concluding that the practicality of Alcott's vision undermines its political potential.

Introduction

Midway through *Work* (1873), to escape the shirt-sewing that has driven her nearly to suicide, the protagonist Christie Devon joins the Wilkins' household. Mrs. Wilkins, a "clear-starcher," cuts quite a figure. She is a "large woman..., with fuzzy red hair, no front teeth, and a plump, clean face" (129). Exceedingly energetic and good-natured, she sets about restoring Christie's mental and physical health by putting her to work. Christie

"chored round," as Mrs. Wilkins called the miscellaneous light work she let her do...Christie clapped laces, sprinkled muslins, and picked out edgings at the great table where Mrs. Wilkins stood ironing, fluting, and crimping till the kitchen bristled all over with immaculate frills and flounces...Being women, of course, they talked as industriously as they worked; fingers flew and tongues clacked with equal profit and pleasure, and, by Saturday, Christie had made up her mind that Mrs. Wilkins was the most sensible woman she ever knew. (153-4)

This passage thematizes work in a way that echoes throughout the novel. On the one hand, both their conversation and their money-making endeavors provide them with psychological profit. Alcott writes that ironing flounces "was pretty delicate work, and Christie liked it," while Mrs. Wilkins was "an adept at her trade and took as much pride and pleasure in it as any French *blanchisseuse*" (153). Alcott formulates here an ethos of work that makes it a necessity at the same time that it is a means for

producing contentment. And, on the other hand, talk is work too. These women work at their conversation “industriously” and it likewise produces goodwill and a shared understanding of “good sense” in its participants.

The above example serves to introduce the reformist impulse that, I will argue, lies at the heart of Alcott’s imaginative project in *Work*. Just as Alcott makes work and conversation central and variously profitable features of the Wilkins household, she likewise offers idealized models of family in the novel that make work, even for money, a healthy part of family life, and that use conversation for the profit of the family as well. This project suggests that Alcott presents a reconceptualization of both family interaction and family economics in order to demonstrate a way in which real families might achieve the sentimental ideals conventionally represented in domestic fiction. Using Jürgen Habermas’ and Immanuel Wallerstein’s theories to articulate Alcott’s formation of the social ideal, this project argues that Alcott rewrites the path to domestic happiness—and that she locates the means to achieving it outside the sentiments of the domestic heroine herself.

Writing as she was at the moment when the domestic ideology from mid-century began to fade, Alcott renews the promise of domestic values, but achieves them through different channels than, say, Susan Warner might have in *The Wide, Wide World*.¹ The promise that Alcott renews—or we might say, the goal of sentimental values that she achieves for her characters through new means—involves a certain type of social relations that nurture human beings and protect them from the

“wide” world itself. Mary Louise Kete refers to such relations as those “based on voluntary mutual consent” and points out that novels like *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth* (1794) and *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), “as is typical of the sentimental novel, [posit] as normative the failure of relationships that are not based on voluntary mutual consent” (550). Sentimentalism promises relationships based on (voluntary) reciprocal sentimental identification and supportive protection. We see Alcott move Christie towards the discovery of such relationships; it seems, indeed, that she must suffer from the lack of such relationships throughout the first half of the novel until she can find people who suit her and can offer this type of interaction. With the Sterling family and then with her “loving league of sisters” in the novel’s last chapter, Christie finds a group of people who share her feelings and attitudes towards the world and who want to care for (and don’t mind being cared for by) Christie herself. Such relationships are exactly what Kete suggests Ellen Montgomery searches for and finds in *The Wide, Wide World* and are precisely what Charlotte Temple in her eponymously-titled novel never finds, and dies for want of.

Though such relationships, in Alcott’s novel as in other sentimental fiction, are based in common feeling, Alcott alters the tenor of the conversations that express that common feeling and that sustain and develop those relationships. In *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen’s conversations with her spiritual caretakers who serve as her surrogate and then, after her marriage, legal family are overtly didactic and more than a little coercive. Ellen must learn, through years of repetition, how to submit fully to the will of her husband and thereby the will of her God, and this transformation

requires, as Jane Tompkins puts it, “a staggering amount of work” (176). Her surrogate mother/sister and brother/husband help her achieve this goal of total self-effacement. Tompkins points out that

[t]hough they are her refuge and her loving saviors, it is they who put the ‘rock’ in Ellen’s soul by refusing to let her give way to her rebellious feelings. Whereas her Aunt Fortune exerts control over Ellen’s life externally, her mentors control her inmost being; they alter her behavior at its source by teaching her how to interpret her feelings...Relentless in their determination that Ellen shall learn to humble herself before God, her mentors make demands of her that are excruciatingly intimate and exacting. (177)

Ellen’s “spiritual mentors” provide her with relationships based on common feeling but, through conversation, teach her to deny every impulse she has. In the numberless, tediously instructive conversations throughout the novel, Alice and David solicit her feelings and reprove them, telling her how to reorder herself over and over again.

The conversations of *The Wide, Wide World* that teach Ellen submission unsurprisingly run contrary to the ideal speech situation as outlined by Jürgen Habermas and practiced by Alcott in *Work*. In Habermas’s ideal speech situation, all participants can “initiate” and “perpetuate” conversations through “asking and answering questions, making and replying to objections, giving arguments and justifications”; all participants can express their feelings (with an expectation of

authenticity); and all participants “have the same chance to give orders, to permit, to forbid, to give and to receive promises, etc.; in short, there must be a reciprocity in behavior expectations which excludes all privileges in the sense of one-sidedly binding norms” (Sensat 27-28). The norms governing sentimentalism demand authentic expression of personal feeling, but the first and third requirements of the ideal speech situation are never guaranteed in the sentimental discourse of popular novels. Indeed, the instructive impulse of sentimental novels necessitates common inequalities in conversation, with one interlocutor inevitably passing instruction on to the other(s) by right of his or her superior faith.² In conversation with Alice or David, Ellen may not give arguments to support her feelings (though she sometimes tries), nor, more importantly, may she make the same sort of behavioral requests that Alice and David make of her. She may ask them to take care of her—and indeed, she barely needs to ask—but she may not tell them how to behave; it is their job to instruct her in the ways of the faithful.

To turn to *Work*, then, Alcott maintains the expectation of common feeling from earlier stages of sentimentalism, and the comforting promise of supportive voluntary relationships, but she dials down the didactic inequality of those relationships. Consequently, though Christie receives spiritual instruction, it is far from the coercion that Ellen receives. Instead, Christie’s conversations with Mrs. Wilkins, and then with the Sterlings, reach for the ideal speech situation. She is free to express herself and make requests of those with whom she speaks, just as they are free to do the same with her. She is left to her own thoughts and feelings when

deciding whether to follow the ideas of those with whom she speaks. Her conversations mimic the ideal situation of public sphere discourse, one of the places Habermas puts his ideal speech situation to use, wherein members are only persuaded by the reasoning of their interlocutors and are never coerced. In fact, the families that Christie joins in the second half of *Work* resemble public spheres in several regards: their membership is fluid, their conversation approaches the ideal speech situation, and their members have egalitarian power relations. These families cannot, of course, *be* public spheres, but I will argue later that Alcott makes a powerful gesture by creating families with a public sphere-like organization. Suffice it to say for now that she maintains the promise of sentimentalism's intimate and gratifying relationships, while at the same time removing from those relationships the hierarchical structures that, potentially, could lead to real abuse. For, though such relationships in fiction are idealized and produce the results for which they aim, readers of sentimental literature were vulnerable to manipulation and mistreatment when they adhered to such relationship norms.³

The other important trope of sentimental ideology that Alcott draws upon and remakes is the protective quality of the domestic sphere. The home, with all its regenerative and nurturing force, is the signal achievement of many protagonists in sentimental literature, and in such works, the spoiled or broken home always acts as a call to arms. Indeed much of the action in domestic fiction is launched by the loss of a home, as in *The Wide, Wide World*, and by the recognition of unsuitable home conditions.⁴ In Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Silent Partner* (1871), the ruined homes

of mill workers cause Perley Kelso, the wealthy protagonist, to learn to sympathize with the workers and initiate charity work on their behalf. One home she visits contains a mother, sick in bed with consumption, seven children, most of whom work in the mills, and a horrible smell caused by the lack of a drainpipe in the basement to allow stagnant water to escape. Not surprisingly, Kelso's father, the mill owner, owns this home as well, which makes him responsible both for the wage slavery in which his workers struggle and the decrepitude of the home in which they sleep (108-10). Perley Kelso's sympathy for the workers because of their home life changes her understanding of labor and causes her to re-order her life completely so that she may work to help people like them. Similarly, as readers we are asked to take Kelso as our model, to sympathize with the family's lack of an adequate home, and take up some sort of advocacy or charity work ourselves.

Because the home, and the relationships that comprise it, should deliver a respite from the ills of the economic world, very often the success of a fictional domestic sphere rests on its ability to distance itself from economic concerns. An example that I will touch on here and expand in the Chapter Two, is the contrast Harriet Beecher Stowe devises between two homes in *Oldtown Folks* (1869). Much like the contrast between Aunt Fortune's and Alice's homes in *The Wide, Wide World*, Miss Asphyxia Smith focuses her home and her time on producing economic gain, while Miss Mehitable concerns herself with the nurturing functions of the domestic sphere. Not surprisingly, Stowe sets up this contrast between Mehitable and Asphyxia to illustrate her principles of mothering (the women argue over who gets to

care for a young orphaned girl). After her altercation with Asphyxia, Mehitable and another woman launch into a didactic conversation on parenting that lasts the rest of the chapter (241-248). Achieving a domestic sphere worthy of the name, then, requires the rejection of and separation from the ills of the market but also, as evinced above in *The Silent Partner*, requires enough capital to rise above abject poverty. A good wife and mother needs to be supported financially to a comfortable degree, though, even in fiction as late as *Oldtown Folks*, she must not sully herself with the greed and competition of the marketplace.

Alcott, not surprisingly given her own relationship to work, finds a way around both the economic needs of families and the domestic ideology that demanded a separation between home and employment. In *Work*, she creates a couple of model families that adhere to the dictates of domestic ideology by creating a nurturing network of home relationships but that also manage to refashion their work for economic gain into an activity that promotes the harmony of their domestic sphere. The Sterling family, which takes Christie in after her near suicide and subsequent rehabilitation by the washerwoman Cynthia Wilkins, sustains itself both through subsistence labor (gardening, housework) and through what world-systems theorist Immanuel Wallerstein calls market labor (growing flowers for the bouquets that they sell to local clients for funerals and other events). All these activities are performed under the auspices of a belief in the healthiness of work, under the canopy of Christian devotion and service, and with a cooperative attitude that strengthens domestic relationships. The work of this family keeps its members out of the

marketplace (where they might become tainted by its atmosphere), but it supports the home financially nonetheless. Alcott's innovations here are a reconceptualization of work and its role in home life and at the same time a recognition of the necessity of economic gain. She manages to retool the ideological valence of labor without changing its ultimate sentimental goal: that of protecting the family members from the unhealthy and vicious marketplace. The Sterlings' way of life saves Christie from the wage labor and the cruel marketplace that had driven her to contemplate suicide. Though Alcott does not attempt to re-imagine the marketplace itself, she does imagine a way for women who must work for their living to reconcile those efforts with domestic ideology.⁵

Ultimately, Alcott's refashioning of the sentimental tradition through different kinds of conversation and a different approach to the economics of the household attempts to affect the nation in a way quite different from the approach of a traditional sentimental novel like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Alcott changes the formula of sentimentalism by placing the locus of change outside the self. She demonstrates that Christie's circumstances help her to be happier and serve others; she does not need a change of heart, as Stowe's formation would suggest. Her near suicide results not from a failure of her spirit or her faith, but from the conditions under which she labored (alone, for long hours, and for too little pay). Providing her with kind company and healthful labor turns her around almost instantly.⁶ In contrast, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* privileged transformation of the self, as Tompkins notes:

The political and economic measures that constitute effective action for us, [Stowe] regards as superficial, mere extensions of the worldly policies that produced the slave system in the first place. Therefore, when Stowe asks the question that is in every reader's mind at the end of the novel—namely, 'what can any individual do?'—she recommends not specific alterations in the current political and economic arrangements, but rather a change of heart... Reality, in Stowe's view, cannot be changed by manipulating the physical environment; it can only be changed by conversion in the spirit. (132-33)

Alcott's Christie "feels right" from the beginning of the novel and demonstrates her sympathy frequently by helping unfortunate characters. The assistance she gives Hepsey to help buy her mother out of slavery, the companionship she gives the invalid Carroll daughter whose family has shut her away, and the sacrifice she makes for Rachel who was dismissed from her job because of her unsavory past all demonstrate Christie's ability to identify with those in need and to act out of sympathy. None of these sympathetic identifications, however, change Christie's own life; she must leave one job after another, and ultimately has to turn to independent seamstress work because she stood up for Rachel. Alcott shows that feeling right is not enough and implicitly critiques this self sacrifice by showing that Christie's sympathy eventually robs her of everything she needs. Alcott demonstrates that the sympathizing woman can give too much and in place of self sacrifice emphasizes the

change in circumstances that enable women to help others without hurting themselves.⁷

Employing Marxist theories, this project will investigate Alcott's identification of circumstances that inhibit the achievement of an ideal home. Though a good number of scholars have addressed her novel in terms of various historical contexts, few have used this theoretical tradition in regards to her novel.⁸ Much like Alcott, Habermas and Wallerstein base their theories around an examination of what makes society, social relations, or economic relations unjust and identifies key factors that can improve those relations. They take the state and the economy as the starting place of the problems that exist for people in their personal lives. Unlike Habermas and Wallerstein, however, Alcott's vision remains small. They use their theories to construct a larger critique of a society or nation as a whole, whereas Alcott's vision suggests ways that her audience members may insulate themselves from the market and harmful social relations. Though she offers Christie's entry into the public sphere as a gesture towards reforming the larger whole, it is essentially an empty gesture. Because she does not believe, as Stowe did, that sentimental identification can change the entire nation, her novel loses its claim to large-scale transformative power. Ultimately, by rewriting the sentimental tradition, Alcott offers something useful to her readers, but politically, her novel could never have the effect *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did. At any rate, the following examination of Habermas and Wallerstein illustrates their connections to the larger Marxist tradition and explains the way in which the two following chapters will utilize their work.

Habermas and Wallerstein fit uneasily in the larger Marxist tradition.

Habermas, a third generation Frankfurt School scholar, criticizes Marx's work for failing to acknowledge the effects of what Marx considers the superstructure (the social, cultural, and political) back on the base and its economic function. For example, he points out the meliorating effect of state-sponsored universities as they train a highly skilled workforce and produce more efficient technologies of production. By doing so, universities prolong (perhaps indefinitely, he suggests) the rate of profit's fall towards the cost of production (Sensat 61-62). Because universities are controlled by the state, and thus by public policy and political debate, Habermas's argument supports his emphasis on the importance of the public sphere and communication as factors central to Marxist thought. His notion of the public sphere centers on his theorization of the ideal speech situation; indeed, because the public sphere is an ideal social formation (and thus one that is difficult to achieve), it always aims at working under ideal speech conditions, even though it may perpetually fail. Later scholars of the public sphere (in particular, Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner) criticize Habermas's exclusionary conception of the public spheres of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and expand his conception of rational-critical discourse to include language and behavior not typical to the white male bourgeois publics Habermas envisions.⁹ Mary P. Ryan likewise expands Habermas's historical vision of nineteenth century public spheres to include rowdy working class political gatherings and women's reform groups.¹⁰ Habermas's work, then, stands in a complex position in relation to Marxism, but his theorization of

social relations and their ideal form still carry a lot of value, especially for use with a genre that reaches so insistently for an idealized vision of society.

Immanuel Wallerstein, as a world-systems theorist, also takes the effects of the political system on the Marxist world economy under consideration in his work. World-systems scholars work to present an integrated understanding of the way in which capitalism fundamentally orders all economic, political, and social relations on the globe. Despite criticisms of oversimplification or a faulty application of Marxist economic principles, world-systems theorists do Marxist scholarship a great service in that they present relatively simple principles that apply to all countries and all economies in their relationships to capitalism and their political relationships to one another.¹¹ Of particular use to the present project is Wallerstein and Joan Smith's definition of the five types of labor that support what they see as the basic economic unit, the household. For them, "[h]ouseholds are defined as those who have de facto entered into long-term income-pooling arrangements" (13). This definition shifts the focus from atomized individuals or the nuclear family as an economic unit and replaces it with a social and economic unit that incorporates any number of arrangements (including those in which Christie is involved, where she joins a household but is neither kin nor a marriage partner). Households, for Wallerstein and Smith, are supported economically by five types of income: wage income, market income (whereby goods produced by a household member are sold), rental income (from investments owned, such as properties or stocks), transfer income (where there is no labor performed, as in welfare or social security), and subsistence income

(produced by any work done in the household to sustain it) (Wallerstein and Smith 7-8). Depending on the household's circumstances, its members may support it using any combination of these types of income, and most, over the long term, earn all five. As Wallerstein and Smith point out, however, certain income arrangements allow greater independence and prosperity for a household than others. Dependence on wage income puts a household at the mercy of an employer who may drive down wages as he or she sees fit. As an economy becomes more industrialized, its members come to rely more on wage income and less on subsistence income or market income. Increasing industrialization then, leads to deterioration in the quality of life for its workers.¹² *Work* takes note of this trend as it shows the contrast between Christie's poverty when she depends on wage income and her relative comfort when she and the Sterlings live together on subsistence and market income.

Altogether, Wallerstein, Smith, and Habermas contribute conceptual tools that this project uses to define both ideal and undesirable living conditions in *Work*. Wallerstein and Smith explain the dynamics of household income and the economic arrangements that best enable a household to live comfortably, while Habermas defines idealized communication based in an assumption of just relationships. Sentimental literature aims to improve society through sentimental identification and "changes of heart," but because Alcott moves the locus of change away from her character's feelings and emphasizes the importance of circumstances to enable change for the better, her work lands upon ideal social and economic formations that Habermas, Wallerstein, and Smith articulated more fully in the twentieth century.

Indeed, Alcott demonstrates the necessity of having both positive relations and positive work arrangements for the household to succeed in attaining an ideal form, because, as Wallerstein and Smith point out about income pooling, “how income comes *into* the household...says nothing necessarily about how it is spent.

Households may be structured in more or less authoritarian fashions. The income may be allocated unequally” (12). Shared income in a household may be distributed unequally if the household itself is arranged hierarchically. The achievement of an ideal household for Alcott necessitates parity of relations alongside ample economic support. The Sterlings and Christie’s “loving league of sisters” can support themselves and maintain positive relations because their homes include ideal Habermasian and Wallersteinian elements.

The two chapters of this project will examine Alcott’s reformulation of the family in terms of its relationships and its economic activities, respectively. The first chapter, “On Families and Reform: Theorizing the Family with the Public Sphere in Louisa May Alcott’s *Work: A Story of Experience*,” will expand on the notion, described above, that Alcott bases the conversation in her idealized families on Habermas’s ideal speech situation, and, thereby, models those families on public spheres. The chapter contextualizes this move with both the early and mid-century concept of Republican Motherhood as well as women’s reform movements from the late nineteenth century. It argues that Alcott’s public-like families performed the service to the nation that Republican Motherhood was supposed to achieve, but more directly and efficiently. Those families contained members who reached out to the

public sphere (through charity and reform work) their entire lives. Republican Motherhood, conversely, postponed the beneficial effects of good mothering indefinitely because of its focus on the long-term, rather than short-term, effects of a mother's efforts.

The second chapter, titled "Wages, Households, and the Sentimental Ideal: *Work* and the Production of Family Income," focuses on the economic arrangements of the Sterling family and the way it serves as a model for overcoming the low standard of living brought on by an industrialized economy and wage labor. It employs Wallerstein and Smith's breakdown of household income to demonstrate the viability of Alcott's model. By comparing Alcott's *Work* to other novels that address issues of labor and family from the same historical moment, namely Stowe's *Oldtown Folks* (1869) and Phelps's *The Silent Partner* (1871), this chapter demonstrates that Alcott proposes a more realistic resolution of the conflicts between the demands of labor and the needs of families than other authors. The domestic ideology of the period that promoted the work-home duality prevented a clear resolution to the situation many families found themselves in, where work was a reality for multiple members of the household and where work for money often intruded in the domestic sphere. This chapter uses the historical context of labor practices in the American northeast from the early nineteenth century until the 1870s to argue that the readers of novels like *Work*, *Oldtown Folks*, and *The Silent Partner* had to reconcile wage labor with family life and that *Work* offers a viable representation of family life with a healthy relationship to labor.

In sum, when Alcott writes that her characters “talked as industriously as they worked,” she means it. They work to support their families economically, and they make sure that their work enhances their families’ cohesion and protects them from the dangerous emotional effects of the marketplace. Likewise, they talk, a lot. Their conversations help them achieve the idylls of home that domestic ideology promises. Though ultimately Alcott’s resuscitation of sentimentalism fails to include the sweeping political gesture of a novel like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, it does demonstrate how families might intervene in the plight of the nation’s poor, how they might conceive of intra-family relations to ensure all family members’ well-being, and how they can protect themselves from both penury and a damaging work life.

Chapter One: On Families and Reform: Theorizing the Family with the Public Sphere
in *Work*

Louisa May Alcott's vexed relationship to domesticity and reform creates one of the central tensions in her novel *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873). As a cynical former member of her father's failed Fruitlands experiment in consociate family living, as a woman who avoided marriage, and as an author who circumvented traditional domestic endings for her female characters, her life exemplifies the nineteenth-century propensity for thinking of social reform in terms of the personal and the domestic.¹³ The connection between reform of the private sphere and the public sphere had been cemented in American minds long before Alcott wrote *Work*, as evidenced by the now commonplace concept of Republican Motherhood—the belief that good mothering had the power to improve the nation by producing virtuous children.¹⁴ What I will argue here is that Alcott turns this conservative notion to progressive ends. Her deft management of domestic ideology masks the implication that her representations of family in the novel suggest taking the notion of Republican Motherhood in a radical direction. Rather than simply encouraging women's inculcation of Christian virtue within the family, Alcott promotes the familial pursuit of democratic virtue as a means of preparing its members for participation in the public sphere.

Alcott's novel focuses on the public sphere and the political participation which takes place within it; the telos of Christie's narrative arc, as it were, is her entry into women's labor activism represented by her spontaneous speech at a labor activist

meeting. All her past experiences prepare her for this “work,” as Carolyn R. Maibor points out.¹⁵ This scene also serves the focal point for scholars who read the novel in terms of the public sphere; Victoria Olwell interprets the scene as an expression of “women’s genius,” which is to say a means by which women can speak in the public sphere while disavowing a premeditated intention to do so, while Glenn Hendler uses it as an example of an author’s overt recognition of the public work of sympathy.¹⁶ However, Alcott’s emphasis on families throughout the novel begs the question of whether she is drawing a comparison between interactions in the family and interactions in the public sphere. After all, if Christie’s work experiences have prepared her to speak knowledgeably about women’s labor rights in that final scene (“[s]he had known so many of the same trials, troubles, and temptations that she could speak understandingly of them” [332]), and her acting training has taught her “self-possession, power of voice, and ease of gesture” (332), might it not also be possible that Christie’s experience within various families has shown her the necessity of having the authority to speak and be heard in one’s home sphere in order to assume the authority to speak elsewhere? Though Alcott was not privy to our current theoretical formulation of the public sphere, the families in the second half of the novel bear a striking resemblance to publics. These families perceive Christie as an important member, and encourage her to voice her own needs and concerns. In other words, they interpellate her as a speaking subject.

I argue here that Alcott structures several families like publics in *Work* and I examine the ramifications of her ability to imaginatively conflate families and

publics. Alcott's concerns over reform have clear historical antecedents, and her restructuring of the family around critical discussion not only responds to contemporary concerns over methods of reform, but also takes older family ideology at face value in order to support a rather progressive family structure. The driving force behind Republican Motherhood for Alcott's parents' generation was the belief that by inculcating virtue in her children at home, a mother would have a reforming effect on the nation itself through her children's future political participation. Alcott, I suggest, plays with this notion. For, if the family environment has the responsibility of creating virtuous future citizens, would not the most logical mode of action be to model the home environment on the arena of public relations? Additionally, Alcott responds almost directly to Catharine Beecher's injunction that Christian families take in needy members of society, rather than leave them to the large reform institutions that bred dissolution. The Wilkins and Sterling families act out this recommendation by taking in Christie and other women. By opening the family to the public in that way, and by centering the family on rational discourse, Alcott radically reshapes the family itself in a way that breaks down the distinctions between the public and private spheres in order to better care for its members. Unfortunately, as Chapter Two points out, though taking the responsibility of Republican Motherhood in this direction offers a model of radical transformation for Alcott's readers, by giving the family the power to ameliorate social injustice, Alcott ironically (and unintentionally) negates the need for public spheres at all.

Alcott's ability to model a family on the public sphere originates in her use of conversation in the novel. Idealized rational discussion lies at the heart of public spheres; Habermas's notion of the ideal speech situation enables the public spheres to alleviate coercion and discursive distortion. Though scholars who have taken up Habermas's theoretical form have opened the possibilities for what may "count" as rational discourse, it still serves as the central operating principle of a public. Ryan describes the messy public discourse of the rambunctious all-male public spheres of the 1830s and 40s by contrasting public meetings that were "rowdy (erupting in shouting matches and fist fights), festive (spiced with drink and riddled with laughter), and fiercely partisan (sometimes culminating in an assault on the polling place of the opposition)" with the "contemplative and sedate" public discourse of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas describes ("Gender" 269). She asserts their legitimacy as public discourse, however, writing that this type of discussion can "be read as an effective means of fulfilling the public promise to openly challenge political domination" (269). Michael Warner makes a similar point when he explains that counterpublics (which are, in one way, simply publics operating in opposition to the hegemonic public) use "protocols of discourse and debate [that] remain open to affective and expressive dimensions of language. And their members make their embodiment and status at least partly relevant in a public way by their very participation" (58). The elements of rational-critical debate that remain relevant, then, to scholars after Habermas may be summed up as the ability of members of a group to collectively instantiate an ideal speech situation (i.e. a minimal amount of coercion or

power differences, and equal abilities on the part of all members to initiate discussion, challenge ideas, and make behavioral requests of others) in order to discuss issues that concern them and then, through discursive exchange, to come to a consensus. The consensus is important because without it, the public sphere cannot serve its function of moving the social collectivity forward; however, this form only describes an ideal, which explains the difficulty (in “real” life) of eliminating coercion from discussion and reaching a workable consensus that all parties can wholeheartedly support. Alcott, though, does not work in “real” life, and, therefore, can idealize her characters’ discussions all she likes.

She is, in fact, working in a genre tradition (admittedly towards the end of its period of popularity) that deals heavily in the ideal. The sentimental novel’s concern for helping its characters reach a highly idealized (and conventionalized) type of happiness and social stability drives a great deal of conversation concerning members’ emotional well-being in such novels. In Susan Warner’s *Wide, Wide, World* (1850), for example, the protagonist Ellen has countless conversations with other characters about their feelings and Christian morality. These conversations often revolve around Christian self-examination and (ostensibly) help Ellen see the error of her ways. In one instance, John, Ellen’s foster brother and future husband, sees her reading on the sofa and tells her that soon it will be time for bed. She forgets to stop reading (for shame!), and they begin to discuss her lack of self will. Ellen says, ““I meant to stop, but I forgot it, and I should have gone on I don’t know how long if you had not stopped me. I very often do so.” [John] paused a minute, and then

said, ‘You must not do so any more, Ellie...Never parley with conscience; it is a dangerous habit’ (477). And though Ellen objects (“But then—it was only—“) he responds that “habit is no trifle. There will not be a just firmness of mind and steadfastness of action, where tampering with duty is permitted even in little things” (477). Ellen then submits—“I will try not to do it.” This conversation, though not involving intimate emotions, operates under the assumption that Ellen’s best chance at living happily lies in her ability to conform to the guidance given her by authority figures. Here, however, and in other conversations like this one, admonishment masquerades as persuasion, and a large difference in power enables one character to discipline the other (John is much older and his spiritual superiority to Ellen is acknowledged throughout the novel). Ellen, having no ability to challenge John’s ideas or to make the same kind of requests (or demands) that he makes of her, does not enter into this conversation as an equal partner.

In quite a different vein, though constituted of similar elements, are Alcott’s characters’ conversations. These characters discuss personal shortcomings, and their Christian faith, but as equals, in hopes of helping one another, and, most importantly, as a means of coming to a mutual understanding of an important belief or idea. Cynthy Wilkins and Christie’s discussion of the preachers at a local church serves as a particularly clear example of a rational discussion in which a belief of importance to both characters is considered under ideal speech conditions and an agreement is reached through the strength of one member’s opinion. Alcott depicts a conversation between Christie and Cynthy Wilkins over the merits of a local church with a wild

reputation.¹⁷ Christie, who has been struggling to make sense of her faith, describes her frustrating previous experience there: “[a guest preacher] belabored everybody and every thing, upset church and state, called names, arranged heaven and earth to suit himself, and evidently meant every word he said...” Cynthy replies, “I ain’t a doubt on’t. We often have such, and they ain’t all empty talk, nuther; some of ‘em are surprisingly bright, and all mean so well I don’t never reluct to hear ‘em” (157). Mrs. Wilkins explains the reason Mr. Power allows young preachers to let off some steam in his pulpit (“they must blow off their steam somewheres, else they’d bust with the big idees a swellin’ in ‘em; Mr. Power knows it and gives ‘em the chance they can’t find nowheres else” [157]) and then goes on to explain her perspective on Mr. Power’s role in his congregation members’ lives and on the process of spiritual improvement more generally. Christie eventually decides to go back to the church, saying “I’ll go tomorrow if it pours!” (158), but, more importantly, the two have openly discussed many aspects of an important issue and come to a consensus on at least one of them: Cynthy convinces Christie that Mr. Power might have something to teach her. The frequency with which Christie engages in conversations of this nature in the Wilkins’s home and the Sterling’s home points to these families’ similarities to a public sphere.

In fact, the frequency of ideal speech or rational-critical conversation within the Wilkins and Sterling families highlights the lack of open conversation in the conventional families represented in the novel. Families such as the Carrols operate under a shroud of secrecy and suppressed discussion. When Christie first interviews

for a domestic position within the family, Mrs. Carrol tells her, “[m]y daughter has been very ill and is still weak and nervous. I must hint to you that the loss of one very dear to her was the cause of the illness and the melancholy which now oppresses her. Therefore we must avoid any thing that can suggest or recall this trouble” (75). Her comments here reflect the tenor of the household: Helen is forbidden to share the cause of her mental illness and her melancholy, and she only confides in Christie much later out of desperate frustration. When she does confide in her, Helen divulges to Christie that her mother is responsible for disregarding her father’s “family curse” and marrying him anyway, subsequently keeping the threat of mental illness secret from her children as long as she could. Helen reveals this secret out of anger that her younger sister has been kept from knowledge of it for too long and will suffer painful consequences. To put it in terms of the ideal speech situation, Mrs. Carrol forbids her family to initiate discussion of an issue of concern to all of them—that of their mental health and their future mental health. This suppression isolates the family members from one another and prevents them from coming together to deal with their problem productively. Ultimately, Helen’s death, as well as her transgression of the family secrecy with Christie, forces the truth to come out; Bella rejects her suitor, and, by the last chapter of the novel, she and her brother Hal have created a home together, slightly out of the ordinary as it is (335). Alcott’s critique of a traditional, middle class family here centers on their unproductive privacy and its negative effect on the family’s ability to form any sort of cohesion or to act in order to prevent crisis.

By contrast, the ideal conversation among the Wilkinsons enables familial cohesion as well as maintenance of healthy individual identities for Cynthy and her husband, Elisha. They manage to maintain those identities even in moments of sympathy, a circumstance that can only negate identity, according to Glenn Hendler. He writes that all the instances of sympathy in the novel “reveal the experience of sympathy to be a potential threat to the sympathizer’s identity” (*Public Sentiments* 123).¹⁸ I argue, however, that sympathy functions ideally as a means of creating solidarity, rather than a loss of boundaries between one person’s identity and another’s, though it only works as such under certain circumstances. My reading suggests that sympathy only threatens the sympathizer’s identity when he or she lacks a family network to support his or her identity. For example, at Christie’s first position “hiring out” as a domestic employee, she befriends the cook, a runaway slave named Hepsey. Christie’s fellow servant serves as an object of sympathetic identification here as well as later in the text; in the first encounter, she serves as the object of self-effacing sympathy. After hearing that Hepsey was working to save up money to help her mother out of slavery,

[w]ith tears of sympathy shining on her cheeks, and both hands stretched out to the poor soul who implored this small boon of her, Christie promised all the help that in her lay, and kept her word religiously. From that time, Hepsey’s cause was hers; she laid by a part of her wages for ‘ole mammy,’ she comforted Hepsey with happy

prophecies of success, and taught [her to read] with an energy and skill she had never known before. (27)

Christie, who had felt little sense of purpose in her position as servant, identifies completely with Hepsey's plight and devotes all her energies towards helping her. This instance illustrates what Hendler sees as sympathy that threatens a loss of self. Christie's intense compassion for Hepsey's plight leads her to forget herself, and the narrator in turn valorizes this identification. Her tears shine with righteousness and virtue on her cheeks.

Christie's self-effacing sympathy for Hepsey in this scene, however, contrasts with other instances of sympathy in the text that reinforce identity. The above moment of identification occurs when Christie lacks a feeling of purpose for her own sake. She and Hepsey work as hired help for a particularly imperious and materialistic family, and, at that time, both women lack any sort of social structure that could help them conceptualize their own identities as stable and distinct. Later in the novel, however, Hepsey serves again as a vehicle for sympathy, but this time the compassion she arouses causes Elisha Wilkins not to lose himself in caring for Hepsey and her mother, but to enlist in the Union army. His sympathy is aroused deliberately by Cynthy who has been arguing with him about whether or not he should enlist. She persistently badgers him through argument and then eventually withholds his favorite foods in order to rouse him to join the Union army. After tempting him with pancakes, she throws open a door (conveniently) revealing Hepsey nursing her aged mother (she had managed to buy her out of slavery). Alcott declares,

“[n]ow it came home to him with sudden force; the thought of his own mother, wife, or babies torn from him stirred him to the heart, and the manliest emotion he had ever known caused him to cast his pipe at his feet...and walk out of the house [to enlist]” (288). Sympathy, represented here in explicitly sentimental terms, operates as a means to come to a consensus (Elisha is persuaded by the sympathy Cynthia stimulates). Additionally, and perhaps more importantly in this instance, rather than effacing Elisha’s sense of identity, his sympathy serves as a source of a cohesive identity for his family. If anything, only the *object* of sympathy here loses identity through identification.

Elisha’s sympathy towards Hepsy and her mother not only motivates him to act valorously, it also strengthens a sense of cohesion in his family network. Rather than causing a loss of self, as Christie’s sympathy did earlier, his sympathy reinforces his sense of self as well as affirming a collective identity for his family. This instance of sympathy, and others like it, contradict Hendler’s assertion about the moments of identification in this novel. He writes, “[g]ranting that sympathy threatens the boundaries of the individual, [sentimental novels] imagine that instead of isolating the heroine this threat can ultimately affirm a collective identity” (“Louisa May Alcott” 693). Within *Work*, however, the social context for sympathy can enable moments of identification to reinforce a sense of self. Because Christie lacked a network that supported her sense of herself, she lost her identity in Hepsy’s plight; she did not have an awareness of herself as a distinct individual. Elisha, though, is moved by sympathy while still maintaining a sense of selfhood because of his family’s reaction.

They reinforce his sense that his sympathy reveals his positive traits. Similarly, Cynthia, Mrs. Sterling, David, and Mr. Power all sympathize with Christie, but their stable social positions allow them to do so without losing themselves in Christie. Christie herself finally achieves a similar state in the last chapter when she speaks at the labor meeting: “Christie had listened intently to all [the speakers]; had admired, regretted, or condemned as each spoke, and felt a steadily increasing sympathy for all, and a strong desire to bring the helpers and the helped into truer relations with each other” (331). This desire inspires her to speak, but rather than losing herself in her speech or in her concern for the other women, her ability to express her identity makes her speech a success. Her moment of sympathetic identification gets applauded later by her “loving league of sisters” when she describes it to them; they then stage a discussion about her future as a public speaker and activist. Sympathy, for Elisha within his family and for Christie within her “league of sisters,” serves as a means for the solidification of a positive individual identity, rather than as a vehicle for self-annihilation, as Hendler would have it.

The balance between individuality and collective identity here should not be overlooked because both play central roles in the function of a public sphere. Just as moments of identification work to reinforce characters’ identities within their families, they support the families’ sense of collective identity as well. For the Wilkinses, Elisha’s sympathy allows them to see themselves as righteous, patriotic, and compassionate. Cynthia Wilkins remarks, “I’m glad I [convinced him to enlist]; for it will make a man of Lisha; and, if I’ve sent him to his death, God knows

he'll be fitter to die than if he stayed here idlin' his life away" (289). She is rooting out any aspects of her husband that do not mesh with her vision of her family—had he stayed without enlisting, their differing visions of their family's responsibility to slaves would have caused disharmony and dissatisfaction. As Michael Warner points out, the members of a public sphere share a sense of identity when they speak to one another. That commonality, in fact, gives their discussions meaning. Feeling that they have common concerns that can be alleviated by putting their minds together, so to speak, justifies their conversations.¹⁹ Sharing a common sense of identity in a public, however, depends on members having a sense of identity *outside* the public sphere. Habermas delineates the family as the place where those identities are formed: "[f]or the experiences about which a public passionately concerned with itself sought agreement and enlightenment through the rational-critical public debate of private persons with one another flowed from the wellspring of a specific subjectivity. The latter had its home, literally, in the sphere of the patriarchal conjugal family" (Habermas 43).

By reformulating families as publics, then, Alcott disrupts the conventional narrative of the origin of those private individual identities. The families in the novel are both the source of stable identities for her characters, as well as the place where characters with similar goals and needs discuss their ideas. In this way, Alcott elides the distinction between public and private life and proposes an alternative to the hierarchical family structures that render women voiceless. Though interpellation into a "family public" as a speaking subject cannot ensure entry into other larger public

spheres, it can serve two important functions: first, it can give members of the family some power, if only within their home sphere, and, second, it can prepare them to speak to their own needs and interests in a public sphere should the opportunity ever arise (as it does with Christie at the labor meeting). The family itself, in *Work*, becomes like a public sphere and in the process the inequities of a hierarchical, bourgeois family are eliminated.²⁰

Alcott's vision of the family-as-public is further demonstrated by the membership of the families in the novel. The Sterling and Wilkins families accept needy women into their homes and allow them to be fully a part of their families' lives, sharing in both the household labor and the emotional connection. This sharing works better with some women than with others, as Kitty's behavior shows, but the Sterlings welcome Kitty and Christie and other unnamed women nonetheless. Christie performs as much domestic labor within the Sterling household as she did as a domestic servant, but she is not treated as a subordinate. Instead, her labor is a sign of her integration into the household and her equal status in the eyes of the family members.²¹ The Sterlings' allowance of women into their home transforms it into a sort of halfway house—a decidedly public institution, as it allows membership for anyone who needs and desires it.²² At the same time, however, it remains small enough to function like a family and to provide the emotional support that only a small personal network can. The Sterling and the Wilkins families, by serving as public institutions, manage to operate like little publics, and thereby transgress the private/public boundary both in form and in the way they function. Families, of

course, cannot *be* public spheres, in no small part because a public is necessarily a relation amongst strangers, but one might argue that by including strangers as possible members of the Sterling and Wilkins families, those families' members understand that they might always be addressing a "stranger" in their discourse at home.²³

By formulating families that mimic public institutions, Alcott responds not only to flaws in the nuclear family, but also to contemporary concerns over public institutions for the needy. These concerns were bound up with beliefs about women's place in the public sphere, partly because, by the 1860s, American women had found a legitimized place in the public sphere through their work in charitable institutions. Ryan describes the way in which women began a process of entering the public sphere as representatives of domesticity at mid-century. They began participating in reform movements and by doing so represented domestic virtues publicly. Ryan writes,

By the 1860s, a certain circularity is evident in the history of women and public ceremonies. On the one hand, both women and feminine symbols were more prominent in and around public ceremonies. Yet the meanings they conveyed to the assembled public evoked incipient doctrines of privacy. Temperance was a private habit of individuals and not...a civic virtue that could only be realized in public. [It] gave public definition to familial loyalties and associations, rather than to a politically and publicly expressed municipal consensus. (36)

Paradoxically then, women were able to enter the public sphere only to confirm and expand the parameters of domesticity and private life. To support this point, Ryan cites the great ceremonies over which women presided in the 1870s and 80s that were spectacles of charitable domesticity, such as great displays of well-washed street children eating a Thanksgiving meal or of poor girls setting table and singing songs that narrated their work (50-51). Just as Alcott depicts a paradoxical interweaving of public and private into the family in *Work*, so were women's experiences with the public sphere at the time she was writing similarly confused.

Though women were entering the public sphere (if only to affirm domesticity), the increasing entrenchment of state-funded reform institutions (asylums, orphanages, poor houses) was creating a backlash. The efforts, largely of women, to create these institutions to care for the growing numbers of needy citizens in their towns and counties were well-intentioned, but the number of charity recipients grew more quickly than the state funding that supported them. As Steven Mintz points out, this lack of funding led to horrific conditions in some places, and, I would argue, led both reformers and public officials to begin looking to the private sphere for solutions.²⁴ Such a move only made sense in an atmosphere of increasing privatization of formerly public events and social interaction, and was fed by the ideology that idealized the private sphere and its capabilities for transformation.²⁵ Catharine Beecher, who in many ways served as the public face of domesticity, includes a section on the "Care of the Homeless, the Helpless, and the Vicious" in her most extensive tome on domestic economy, *The American Housewife* (1869). She

supports the recommendation of the Massachusetts Board of State Charities, who, after an extensive review of the state's charitable institutions:

urges that the present mode of collecting special classes in great establishments, though it may be the best in a choice of evils, is not the best method for the physical, social, and moral improvement of those classes; as it involves many unfortunate influences (which are stated at large:) [sic] and the report suggests that a better way would be to scatter these unfortunates from temporary receiving asylums into families of Christian people all over the State. It is suggested in view of the above, that collecting fallen women into one large community is not the best way to create a pure moral atmosphere; and that gathering one or two hundred children in one establishment is not so good for them as to give each child a home in some loving Christian family. So of the aged and the sick, the blessings of a quiet home, and the tender, patient nursing of true Christian love, must be sought in a Christian family; not in a great asylum. (434-435)

I quote her at length here because she explicitly outlines the problems encountered by state-sponsored charitable institutions and posits a solution which draws on the supposed strengths of the private sphere. She perceives the very structure of the charitable institutions as unable to deliver the improving influences that a "Christian family" can deliver and in doing so looks to the private sphere for a solution to a public problem.

Alcott, it appears, takes this recommendation at face value, but with a conscientious eye towards progressive social formations. The family groupings in the second half of the novel follow precisely the directives of Beecher and the Massachusetts Board of State Charities (not to mention some of the ideals her father and Charles Lane attempted to enact at Fruitlands), and, moreover, these families are successful in helping needy women, just as Beecher predicts. Even Kitty, the most unregenerate needy woman who receives the charitable ministrations of a Christian family in the novel, manages to avoid an abusive home relationship and forced marriage through the Sterling's aid.²⁶ Alcott moves with the times in her privatization of charity; but her focus on rational discourse at the heart of these families moves their significance to another political plane. Paradoxically, as we shall see in the next chapter, Alcott's overt radical politicization of the family drains actual public spheres of their transformative power. For, if the family can both protect its own members and take care of others outside itself in order to alleviate widespread social problems, any real need for collective extra-familial action disappears. Alcott's novel shows how the family may assume the burden that the public sphere formerly bore, and, though Christie enters a public sphere at the end of the novel, she does so out of a sense of charity rather than because of her own need.

Alcott's unusual families in *Work* respond to criticisms of the rigid hierarchies of the bourgeois family by taking public rhetoric about the family's purpose to its logical conclusion—modeling the family on the ideal public realm. By situating rational discourse at the center of that family, she borrows from the best that the

public sphere has to offer in order to improve citizens' private lives. By blurring the boundary between private and public in the organization of her families, she adds a new element to contemporary discussions of women's place and purpose as well. She accepts the belief in the moralizing influence of mothers and families, but instead of focusing that influence on a conventional nuclear family, she turns that influence outward so that it may directly affect the state. Her positive families intervene directly in the problems of women's poverty through activist-like efforts, rather than displacing reform into the future by simply rearing good citizen-children. If a Republican Mother improved the future nation by raising good children, Alcott's restructured families improved the nation immediately by turning their attention towards helping others. She poses a solution, indeed one of the few viable solutions, to the problems facing the women in her audience, and though it engenders a loss of potency for the public sphere at large, it still offers a helpful model for family relationships.

Chapter Two: Wages, Households, and the Sentimental Ideal: *Work* and the
Production of Family Income

By the time Alcott published *Work* in 1873, more women were incorporating wage labor into their family lives than ever before. While the women of the Lowell cotton mills earlier in the century had confined their labor to their few years of adulthood before marriage, even families in rural towns such as Lynn, Massachusetts, found their entire lives devoted to the manufacture of shoes by the second half of the century. Women worked before their marriages and continued to help support their families through wage labor after marriage. This transition registers in the fiction of the era largely through an emphasis on the irreconcilability of family and wage labor for women. Though thousands of women made such arrangements work in their lives, the labor literature of the period uses older notions of domesticity and the wage economy to deplore the effects of industrialization. Works like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Silent Partner* (1871) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Oldtown Folks* (1869) exploit the ideological opposition between the values of the marketplace and the values of the home to show that their characters, suffering under their workloads, cannot manage to secure comforting domestic spheres for themselves. Their work lives prevent it. *Work*, on the other hand, though eschewing the possibility that its protagonist might find wage labor *and* a family, offers a realizable solution for the contradiction between labor and family. The novel's protagonist Christie manages to find a family for herself that incorporates work into the domestic sphere in a way that both enables financial independence and nurtures domestic values. Alcott, then,

resuscitates domestic ideology and marries it to a certain kind of labor in order to reconcile economic need and domestic values for her readers.

Though Alcott scholars have noted the “loving league of sisters” Alcott depicts at the end of *Work*, they have not fully accounted for the statement that arrangement makes about family economics and domestic comfort. Jean Fagin Yellin classifies Christie’s makeshift family in the chapter “At Forty” as a “communitarian” imitation of Amos Bronson Alcott’s Fruitlands experiment (532-33). However, Yellin does not, beyond noting that these women “share everything in common,” analyze the escape from both poverty and unfulfilling wage labor that this arrangement has enabled. Likewise, Tara Fitzpatrick analyzes Alcott’s idealization of work “for love” but misses Alcott’s emphasis on the reality of economic need.²⁷ In fact, living with the Wilkins, then the Sterlings, enables Christie to imagine and enact an economic life for herself and whatever family she chooses that upsets the need for wage labor that many working class families faced. Even though these women have to work for a living, they do not have to sacrifice their health and happiness in underpaid factory labor, sewing, or housekeeping. The Sterling family and Christie’s halfway house demonstrate this achievement best.

This chapter demonstrates that Alcott’s solution to the contradiction between domestic values and marketplace values performs a service for contemporary readers that other similar works did not. It analyzes Alcott’s domestic economics in *Work* within the context of Immanuel Wallerstein and Joan Smith’s current conceptualization of labor as well as the historical context of women’s work in the

American Northeast. After explaining the way in which Alcott demonstrates both the insalubrious effects of underpaid wage labor and the benefits of the ideal home labor she imagines, it compares the cultural work her novel performs to that of Stowe's *Oldtown Folks* and Phelps' *The Silent Partner*. Unfortunately, because *Work* offers concrete suggestions for the way in which women may solve their economic problems through the private sphere (just as it suggests that the family can meet its members' need for equality and the ability to speak, as Chapter One argues), it unwittingly undermines the potency of labor activism and the sentimental novel for its national audience as a whole.

When Christie begins living in the Sterling's home, her new caretakers introduce her to the labor that supports them. They have a garden (including a large strawberry patch) and they have a greenhouse in which they grow flowers for the bouquets they sell. In addition to facilitating quite a few romantically loaded conversations about flowers, the greenhouse provides the Sterlings' main source of income. The gardening and bouquet production, in addition to the housework the family performs for itself, allow the Sterlings to support themselves without resorting to labor for wages. Their efforts fall into the categories of market income and subsistence labor, using the terminology developed by Immanuel Wallerstein and Joan Smith. Smith and Wallerstein break all the labor that supports a household, the basic economic unit, into five categories: wage labor, market income, subsistence labor, rental income (such as rent from properties or dividends paid on capital investments), and transfers (monetary support, such as Social Security, for which

there is no labor given) (7-8). Households may be supported by any arrangement of the five types of income, but, as Wallerstein and Smith point out, as an economy becomes more industrialized, and the income of the households within that economy moves from reliance primarily on subsistence income to reliance on wage income, the overall standard of living of the laboring members of the economy invariably drops.²⁸ Wage income can be controlled and decreased by an employer and removes the degree of independence from the household that subsistence and market income engender. Women's labor in the American northeast throughout the nineteenth century demonstrates precisely this pattern.

Increased industrialization of various processes of production brought about greater opportunities for families to earn income in new ways in the early nineteenth century. Putting out work, that is, the practice whereby producers of other raw materials paid women to produce materials in their own homes, allowed families to earn extra cash income when they had the time to engage in the labor.²⁹ Weaving was common putting-out work among families that could afford and had a place for a large loom in their homes; later, weaving straw hats at home found even more popularity among families who could not afford to invest in a loom. What was remarkable about these arrangements was the freedom and control they gave to laboring women and men. The agents sent out into the countryside by yarn producers to distribute their yarn to weaving women were continually frustrated by families who had no incentive to weave according to a schedule convenient for their employers. Unsurprisingly, by the 1830s the cotton mills replaced the putting out of yarn,

enabling the mill owners to control the production of cloth more satisfactorily. Such a shift, however, signifies an important change in the way households began supporting themselves mid-century. Initially, the infamous mill girls at Lowell and other such places were unmarried young women who spent a few years working in the mills, either to send money home or to save up for their own investments, before they married and resumed labor efforts contained by the home. Their wage labor, though it occupied the majority of their time, usually for about three years, was still simply a supplement to the subsistence labor of the farm of their immediate family or their future family. Eventually, however, especially after 1850, women continued their wage labor after marriage (Dublin 128). Whole families worked outside the home for their entire lives. Such a change mirrors exactly the economic shift Wallerstein and Smith describe as part of the industrialization process. Pre-industrialized households live comfortably, if meagerly, on subsistence labor and perhaps a little market income, and then, as industrialization takes root, their labor efforts become more and more focused around wages. Their dependence on wages entails a loss of the independence and a decrease in the quality of life that subsistence and market labor created.

Alcott, then, depicts such a progression for Christie, except with a significant turn of events that reduces her dependence on wage labor. She begins her life living in a country town with her caretakers, Uncle Enos and Aunt Betsey, working in a home on a farm large enough for him to require the work of farmhands (324). Enos's farm is successful enough that he has money to hoard away, making his position more

akin to that of factory owner than subsistence farmer. His labor is not wage labor, but rather market labor, though his family probably lives off the farm's produce and Betsey and Christie take care of the subsistence labor in the house. At any rate, Christie learns how to do housework from her Aunt Betsey, and this skill is the first she employs when she leaves to, "like the people in fairy tales, travel away into the world and seek [her] fortune" (5). She travels to a city (presumably Boston) and begins to do what was once subsistence labor for wages. She works first as a housekeeper, then branching out and becoming an actress, a governess, and a companion. She depends on the wages they earn for her, but this labor is not part of an industrial economy; she might have found such jobs a century earlier as well. After leaving her job as companion, however, Christie enters into factory work as a seamstress, and her loyalty to a friend (and the prejudices of her employers) forces her to quit working in the factory (which gave better wages) and to begin to take in sewing at home. Christie's experience sewing shirts at home would not have been uncommon among her contemporaries. Despite the advantages of machine production, clothing retailers in Boston still found it cheaper to employ women to sew shirts from their homes in the 1860s and 70s (Dublin 168). Christie, however, finds it nearly impossible to support herself as an independent seamstress. The labor market appears to be flooded, and though she is technically in control of her wage work, the people who employ her to sew shirts and do embroidery for them are able to pay less for her work than they initially promise, or reject her work outright after she finishes it. She speaks to a servant at the door of a buyer's home when she returns with some

completed shirts, and the servant tells her, “I can tell you that missis wouldn’t have paid you if she had a been to home. There’s been three other women here with work, and she’s put ‘em all off. She always does, and beats ‘em down into the bargain, which ain’t genteel to my thinkin’” (121). Christie’s despair over her inability to survive in this trade, and her lack of other options due to her sensibilities, drive her to attempt suicide that evening.³⁰ Christie’s job trajectory, then, demonstrates the difference between self-employed security on a farm, degrading but not impossible domestic servitude, and the impossibility of surviving in a highly organized and saturated labor market.

After demonstrating the straitened circumstances brought about by wage labor, Alcott turns Christie’s fortunes and offers the Sterling family as an example of gentility and economic independence that can foster a more pleasant life than Christie had experienced as a wage worker. If we view the novel’s plot line as an argument, for a moment, Alcott illustrates the types of labor open to women in the second half of the nineteenth century, gradually showing the problems of each, and ending with the worst position for a woman like Christie. After presenting this evidence, she offers a solution, partly through the example of the Wilkins, but mostly through the example of the Sterlings and Christie’s family formation in the novel’s final chapter. The Sterling family, as noted earlier, owns a small cottage and a bit of land surrounding it.

An old-fashioned cottage stood in the midst of a garden just
awakening from its winter sleep...On one side glittered a long green-

house, and on the other stood a barn, with a sleek cow ruminating in the yard, and an inquiring horse poking his head out of his stall to view the world. Many comfortable gray hens were clucking and scratching about the hay-strewn floor, and a flock of doves sat cooing on the roof. (171)

Christie moves to the Sterlings' house because she has recuperated at the Wilkins and needs "something to do," as Mr. Powers puts it. He asks if she would "like to help a Quaker lady with her housework, just outside of town...[n]ot as a servant, exactly, but companion and helper" (164). He offers her a job akin to her previous work as domestic laborer, but this job does not offer wages. Christie is immediately incorporated into the family labor on entering the Sterlings' home; after she arrives, she puts on an apron and begins paring apples for a pie in Mrs. Sterling's kitchen (172). Though Christie is eventually officially incorporated into the family through marriage, she is simply a member of the household from the outset with the same privileges and responsibilities as Mrs. Sterling and her son David.

Such a formation of family economy represents Alcott's understanding of the imperatives of surviving in a capitalist economy as well as her understanding of how to guard against the exploitation of an industrial labor force. Her father's utopian experiment at Fruitlands failed to prepare adequately both for subsistence labor and for needs that might only be supplied by monetary exchange. His beliefs demanded that he situate the proper spirit, among individuals and amongst the group, before attending to the physical needs of his consociate family. Alcott, however, reverses

that order when she sets out to arrange a near-utopian refuge for Christie. *Work*, as the central thematic focus of the novel, always comes first. She arrives at the Sterling home to work, and the lives of the Sterlings are centered on their work as well, both their daily labors and the charitable work they perform for young women in need. By arranging their lives in such a way that their needs are met by realistic labors, Alcott then provides these characters the leisure and stability they need to establish positive social relations with one another. By contrast, lacking a stable home and a healthy balance between work and leisure in her other jobs nearly cost Christie her life.

The economic arrangements of the Sterling family, and then of Christie's household in the novel's last chapter, recall the economic arrangements of the New England households that engaged in putting-out labor in the first half of the nineteenth century. Just as their subsistence labor allowed them to work for manufacturers when they chose (and to thereby prevent employers from squeezing their wages or otherwise exploiting them), essentially turning the putting-out work into market labor, so does Alcott recognize the positive aspects of this arrangement for her characters in *Work*. She makes an argument that deindustrialized labor conditions and household independence will benefit laboring families. Though a contemporary reviewer writes that Alcott "does not theorize about any social problems, she has nothing to say of the relations between labor and capital" (Miss Alcott's 'Work' 184), Alcott does in fact theorize an ideal relationship between work, family, and economic gain.

However, Alcott's solution to the ills of wage labor spurs several objections largely based on her underlying notions of class. Alcott implies, primarily through her depictions of Cynthy Wilkins and Hepsy, that some women are capable of performing grueling manual labor, while others are not. She makes this distinction on the grounds of the class affiliation of these women. Cynthy, for example, works a great deal in her home as a washerwoman. Though her husband works as well, Cynthy performs both laundry labor for wages, essentially a domestic service performed in her own home, while also cooking, cleaning, and taking care of her six young rambunctious children. She is clearly meant to belong to the class of Irish domestic servants that Christie herself impugns later in the novel.³¹ However, Cynthy only seems to grow healthier and stronger for all the work she does; her substantial form, incessant movement, and hearty goodwill are a result of her decision to work for her household, rather than to expect her husband to provide luxuries for her, as she tells Christie she had done in the past (152). The comments Alcott makes about manual labor, however, undermine her positive depiction of Cynthy. During Christie's stint as shirt maker, the narrator remarks that,

There are many Christie's, willing to work, yet unable to bear the contact with coarser natures which makes labor seem degrading...People wonder when such as she say they can find little to do; but to those who know nothing of the pangs of pride, the sacrifices of feeling, the martyrdoms of youth, love, hope, and ambition that go on under the faded cloaks of these poor

gentlewomen, who tell them to go into factories, or scrub in kitchens for there is work enough for all, the most convincing answer would be, "Try it." (117)

Though Alcott has been advocating work for women throughout the novel, her comments here force her readers to acknowledge the categories into which she places different kinds of women and different kinds of work. Women like Christie, with delicate sensibilities and middle-class expectations, cannot be expected to survive in an environment as demanding as Cynthia Wilkins's. A woman like Christie needs the gentle, gratifying surroundings provided by a home like the Sterlings' and to have her economic needs met by employment such as the Sterlings have secured for themselves. It is the "gentlewomen" who suffer pangs of pride and sacrifices of feeling when they enter the ranks of the laboring classes, not the immigrant working class women who do not know a different life.

Significantly, along the same lines, the other objection that Alcott's solution raises is the capital needed to secure a livelihood like the Sterlings'. A family like the Wilkins might never earn enough to purchase a home with a garden and a barn. Here again, Alcott presumes that those already in the middle class will help women who, like Christie, have fallen out of the middle class and need help finding their way back. And though she seems to characterize working class women as devoid of sensibility, she also characterizes middle class women as weak and in need of charity. Their delicate upbringings unsuit them for labor.

Despite the problems raised by Alcott's solution to unhealthy wage labor, her novel performs a service for her readers that much of the contemporary domestic literature does not.

Unlike other novels, *Work* represents an effort to reconcile labor for economic gain with domestic values. Alcott supersedes the ideological separation between the home sphere (the place of sentiment, rest, love, and comfort) and the economic sphere (a place of competition and greed without sympathy). She shows her protagonist incorporating the economic and domestic spheres into one another, to great success. Contemporary authors writing fiction focused on labor issues, however, tended instead to represent the economic sphere as irreconcilable with family life. *The Silent Partner* (1871), often invoked by scholars as a descendent of *Life in the Iron Mills* in the sentimental labor literature tradition, demonstrates this tendency quite clearly.³² Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' novel centers around her protagonist Perley Kelso's discovery of the poor quality of her mill-owning father's employees' lives. She makes this discovery through an unlikely friendship with Sip Garth, a mill worker. By the end of the novel, Perley has made a life for herself in supporting the millhands, though her support does not include helping them agitate for higher wages, while Sip enters the public sphere as a minister. Phelps shows these women finding fulfilling work, but she does not, however, show them integrating that work with family life. Both Sip and Perley receive marriage proposals, each from a worthy man she loves, and both reject their suitors. Kelso, though she admits to herself that "she might have loved the man" and that "out of all the world, she would have named him as the

knightly soul that hers delighted to honor” (261), tells her suitor that she has “no time to think of love and marriage... That is a business trade, by itself to women. I have too much else to do” (260). She believes that her life is full, that she would lose the ability to do her work if she married, and that she does not need the companionship of a husband. Garth refuses a marriage proposal as well, but her refusal costs her much more. She refuses a young man that she likes “well enough to be [his] wife” (286), but the reason she gives is that “I’ll never bring children into this world to be factory children, and to be factory boys and girls, and to be factory men and women, and to see the sights I’ve seen, and to bear the things I’ve borne, and to run the risks I’ve run, and to grow up as I’ve grown up, and to stop where I’ve stopped,—never” (287). Unlike Kelso, Garth refuses to marry because she does not want to subject another new life to the conditions of her own. This refusal costs her a great deal; Phelps writes that “Sip had what Mr. Mill calls a ‘large share of human nature,’ and she loved Dirk, and she led a lonely life... ‘I don’t see why I couldn’t have had *that*, leastways,’ she cried between her hands. ‘I haven’t had much else. I don’t see why *that* should go too.’ But she did see” (290). Perley tells her suitor that she is “not lonely” (261), but Sip was quite lonely and refused marriage anyway. Though each woman has a distinct reason for refusing marriage, and though their reasons for refusing reflect the larger critique Phelps makes of marriage and labor conditions, neither can reconcile their working life with family life. Instead of integrating work and family, the women in Phelps’s novel work to bring the values of the domestic sphere to their work outside the home.

Likewise, other writers avoid reconciling work for women with family life, including Rebecca Harding Davis in *Life in the Iron Mills*, and Herman Melville in “Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1855), but I shall examine just one more example here because it illustrates this contradiction in a way common to mid-century domestic fiction.³³ In *Old Town Folks* (1869), Harriet Beecher Stowe creates a character that illustrates the belief that maternal virtue is irreconcilable with economic gain.³⁴ Miss Asphyxia Smith has her own farm, and, despite her initial disadvantages, she has stored up a significant amount of wealth completely through her own labors. She ends up taking in a young girl, whose mother has died, in order to raise her as a servant. Unfortunately (though predictably), her lack of sympathy causes Asphyxia to terrorize the child. Stowe writes, “Miss Asphyxia did not hate the child, nor did she love her. She regarded her exactly as she did her broom and her rolling-pin and her spinning-wheel,—as an implement or instrument which she was to fashion to her uses” (122). Stowe’s commentary here demonstrates the clear association she wants to make between Asphyxia, her lack of maternal feeling, and her overabundance of economic practicality. After the child runs to a neighboring town, where she is taken in by the endlessly maternal Miss Mehitable, Miss Asphyxia comes over to retrieve her. In defense of the child, Mehitable argues with Asphyxia, telling her that she will not let Miss Asphyxia take her back because she does not provide the love a child needs. Miss Asphyxia replies,

“Why what did she think I was a goin’ to do for her? I didn’t make a lady on her; to be sure I didn’t: I was a fetchin’ on her up to work for

her livin' as I was fetched up. I hadn't nothin' more'n she; an' just look at me now; there ain't many folks that can turn off as much work in a day as I can, though I say it that shouldn't. And I've got as pretty a piece of property, and as well seen to, as most any round; and all I've got—house and lands—is my own arnin's, honest, so there!" (235).

Asphyxia makes quite clear that, in her mind, a proper upbringing is training to enter the workforce. Stowe's characterization of Asphyxia, as too concerned with economic gain to tend to the emotional needs of a child, illustrates the domestic ideology that separated the domestic sphere from the economic. For Stowe those worlds are irreconcilable. The representation of the spinster relative terrorizing an orphaned child finds similar representation in Susan Warner's *Wide Wide World* as well; clearly, the belief was common that these women failed to make families for themselves because their strongly held economic values took the place of their domestic virtues.

The ideological contribution of *Work*, then, is twofold. On one hand it demonstrates a value for certain types of labor that circumvent the problems of wage labor. On the other, it demonstrates a healthy integration of the economic into the familial, and, since such an integration was an unavoidable reality for many women by 1870, Alcott's reincarnation of domestic ideology provided a more realistic resolution for the contradiction these women faced in their own lives. Unfortunately, though Alcott demonstrates a positive way in which her readers can deal with

domestic ideology and economic imperatives, her only solution, and, indeed, one of the few solutions people could enact on their own at that historical moment, invests itself only in the private sphere. Though Christie enters the public sphere at the end of the novel, she does so only out of a feeling of obligation to other women in need. She does not enter labor activism as a woman in need herself. Her solution, much like the work of Perley Kelso in *The Silent Partner*, does not alter the larger problems of underpaid labor and harmful working conditions, nor does it demonstrate that characters' needs may be met by large-scale efforts such as activism. Though Alcott's solution is loyal to the scope of a domestic novel, it does not do justice to the larger problems her readers faced.

NOTES

¹ Tara Fitzpatrick notes this change in relation to *Work*: “[w]ith the end of the war, in the novel’s narrative structure as well as in the national imagination, the transformative energies of the antebellum decades receded and the proposed reforms became increasingly institutional, professional, and meliorative. As social turmoil mounted in the last decades of the century, those disparities of condition became more readily apparent, the tensions and contradictions [between independent women’s work and the nurturing effects of the home] that remain unresolved in Alcott’s *Work* began to unmask the very problems domestic rhetoric had attempted to mask. With the rise of corporate capitalism in the 1880s and 1890s, the domestic home as haven could no longer do the major work of mediating class or gender conflict in American society. New structures of authority—institutional, bureaucratic, claiming social-scientific expertise and designed on the corporate model—increasingly supplanted the authority the home had been accorded in the middle decades of the century” (39). Alcott, then, working as she is to reconcile domestic values and work, writes at the moment when domestic ideology begins to crumble, even though that change is not widely or readily apparent.

² This sort of spiritual chain of command is clear in *The Wide, Wide World*. Ellen receives instruction from Alice and David, but when she spends time with Nancy, she is in the position of superior moral and spiritual guide.

³ Indeed, the only difference between Aunt Fortune’s dictates and Alice’s are that Alice allows Ellen to express her feelings while Aunt Fortune does not. Both authority figures, however, think they are doing what is best for the her. Alice, of course, is motivated by benevolence as well, but both women attempt to control Ellen’s behavior and to teach her to submit.

⁴ Nina Baym famously defines the basic plot outline of mid-century women’s fiction in a similar way. She writes, “[t]he many novels tell, with variations, a single tale. In essence, it is the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world... The happy marriages with which most—though not all—of this fiction concludes are symbols of successful accomplishment of the required task and resolutions of the basic problems raised in the story” (11-12). By 1870, this plot line begins to be challenged more frequently, and so we see Christie’s novel ending long after her marriage and the loss of her husband; likewise, Perley Kelso and Sip Garth both eschew marriage. The breaking of the home, however, still prevails as a means to propel plots and to elicit sympathy.

⁵ Jane Tompkins makes a similar point about Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s domestic manual *The American Woman’s Home* (1869). She writes that “[t]he *American Woman’s Home* is a blueprint for colonizing the world in the name of the ‘family state’ (19) under the leadership of Christian women. ... In speaking for the home, [the Beecher sisters] speak for an economy—a household economy—which had supported New England life since its inception. The home, rather than representing a retreat or a refuge from a crass industrial-commercial world, offers an economic *alternative* to that world, which calls into question the whole structure of American society which was growing up in response to the increase in trade and manufacturing. Stowe’s image of a utopian community as presented in Rachel Halliday’s kitchen is not simply a Christian dream of communitarian cooperation and harmony; it is a reflection of the real communitarian practices of village life, practices which depended upon cooperation, trust, and a spirit of mutual supportiveness which characterize the Quaker community of Stowe’s novel” (144). In a similar vein, I will argue in Chapter Two that Alcott’s economic formula for the Sterling family harkens back to an economic structure represented by the ‘putting-out’ work done by women in the Northeast in the until the 1840s. Those women lived mostly on farms, and maintained looms in their home so that they could make a little extra money to supplement their subsistence labor when they had the time.

⁶ Indeed, the day after she moves in with Mrs. Wilkins, 48 hours after she had nearly committed suicide, Christie springs up the stairs of the Wilkins’ home “wondering if she could be the same forlorn creature who had crept so wearily up only the night before” (152).

⁷ One may look to Alcott’s biography as well for evidence that she rejected the premise that spiritual change could cause real change. Her father’s efforts at Fruitlands focused entirely on setting everyone’s spirit right; Larry Carlson writes that, “[u]nlike Brook Farm, Hopedale, Northampton, and

similar communities, whose rationale was that humans could be regenerated only by first improving external conditions and institutions, Fruitlands by contrast focused on reclaiming the individual first. Alcott strongly opposed the theory that ‘improved outward arrangements alone’ could be redemptive; instead, the ‘one condition needful’ was ‘the surrender of all individual or selfish gratification—a complete willingness to be moulded by the Divinity’ (99). Alcott herself, however, lampoons her father’s efforts in “Transcendental Wild Oats” (1873).

⁸ Jean Fagin Yellin (1980) writes generally about the incorporation of various radical movements into the novel: Transcendentalism, abolitionism, feminism, utopian collectivism (528); Susan K. Harris (1990) analyzes the novel as what she terms a “late didactic novel,” that is it “is structurally regressive but thematically progressive; its often indeterminate form illustrates authors’ struggles to embody emerging new ideas about women” (173); Tara Fitzpatrick (1993) argues that *Work* presents a sort of emotional economy, where work is done for love rather than money, within the context of nineteenth century domesticity and expectations of women (35). Glenn Hendler and Victoria Olwell write about *Work* using the Marxist tradition, and, more specifically, public sphere theory. Hendler (2001) argues that Alcott, among others, induces a certain type of sentimental identification for her readers with characters in *Work* that should be characterized as public. Olwell (2005) suggests that Christie’s woman’s genius, that is her eruption into unpremeditated public speech, “grounds what we might call, following Nancy Fraser, a subaltern counterpublic sphere” (58).

⁹ Fraser and Warner offer the most well-known critiques of and expansions on Habermas’s theory of the public sphere. Fraser (1992) critiques Habermas’s exclusionary presuppositions and defines the publics that spring up in opposition to the hegemonic white male bourgeois public sphere as “subaltern counterpublics.” Subaltern counterpublics often use forms of rational-critical discourse often unrecognizable as such to outsiders. More importantly, they recognize themselves as existing in opposition to the hegemonic public sphere and as working to subvert it. Warner (2002) offers a wide ranging general definition of publics (and, at the same time, counterpublics); he structures his essay titled “Publics and Counterpublics” around an invaluable list of the requisite qualities of a public.

¹⁰ Ryan (1990, 1992) outlines the progression of public spheres in the U.S. throughout the nineteenth century. She takes issue with Habermas’s claim that “true” public spheres began to disappear early in the nineteenth century, and, much like Fraser, expands the notion of a public sphere to include those created by working class men and by women. Her analysis of women’s entry into the public sphere, and the effects the emphasis on the importance of private life in the late nineteenth century had on women’s public participation, contributes significantly to my argument in Chapter One.

¹¹ Andy Blunden (2006) makes precisely these criticisms of Wallerstein. In his review of “The Decline of American Power” and “Utopistics” he remarks that “the social and economic naïveté displayed in this speculation makes it difficult to take seriously his political economic analyses of the past and immediate future” (para. 11).

¹² Wallerstein and Smith write that “[t]he household with the least flexibility, as total income goes down, is the household most dependent on wage income, since the ability to obtain wage income (or a certain level of wage income) is a function of the offer by someone outside the household of that wage employment. A household can most readily affect its total income by investing its labor power in activities it can autonomously launch” (15).

¹³ Alcott’s “Transcendental Wild Oats,” as I mentioned, provides a window into Alcott’s cynical perspective on her father’s utopian project at the Fruitlands; see *Eden’s Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and her Father* (2007) for an incisive biographical portrait of Alcott and her father at Fruitlands (116-164). Additionally, Alcott initially resisted marriage for Jo (of the *Little Women* series), and even when she gave in, she depicted Jo’s life after marriage as a teacher, a move that is unusual because it does not end the depiction of a female character with her marriage and because it shows her work beyond the domestic (and therefore signals the breakdown of the plotline Baym identifies). Though she chose marriage for Christie in *Work*, she also shows Christie’s life after the loss of her husband, and instead of ending the novel with a marriage scene, ends it with Christie finding her vocation as a speaker for women’s labor rights. See Barbara Sicherman’s “Reading *Little Women*: The many Lives of a Text,” (639), on Alcott’s decisions regarding Jo’s fate.

¹⁴ Kerber's *Women of the Republic* defines this term. She writes that "[t]he Republican Mother integrated political values into her domestic life. Dedicated as she was to the nurture of public-spirited male citizens, she guaranteed the steady infusion of virtue into the Republic...[She]...came to be seen as the custodian of civic morality" (11). Alcott's conception of the family in *Work* builds on this "revolutionary" idea.

¹⁵ In *Labor Pains: Emerson, Hawthorne, and Alcott on Work and the Woman Question*, Maibor writes, "[n]ot until after her discovery of the work the sum of her experiences had been 'fitting her for' [as a labor activist], however, does Christie announce in her response to Mrs. Sterling that 'in labor' she has found religion" (121). Maibor examines the novel's focus on the purifying and self-affirming qualities of fulfilling work in accordance with transcendental notions, but the novel also emphasizes the connection between her ability to speak persuasively and her experiences as a laborer. "[A]ll the lessons of her life rose vividly before her to give weight to her arguments, value to her counsel, and the force of truth to every sentence she uttered. She had known so many of the same trials, troubles, and temptations that she could speak understandingly of them" (*Work* 332).

¹⁶ Hendler analyzes instances of sympathy in *Work*, including Christie's ability to evoke sympathy in her audience through her speech, under the question of the paradox of women's readership. "In her novel, *Work: A Story of Experience*, Louisa May Alcott foregrounds the question always latent in popular women's fiction: If women possessed in abundance the affective and psychological capacity to enter the literary public as readers, what was to prevent them from participating in the political public as citizens? Sentimental fiction is a crucial site for such an interrogation because its ostensibly exclusive address to women brings out the conflict between the evidently public task of appealing to a mass readership and the ideological status of this particular readership as the guardian of the private sphere" (117). Olwell, in "It Spoke Itself: Women's Genius and Eccentric Politics" argues for Christie's speech as an instance of women's genius. She writes, "[I]like the artistic genius of the romantics, women's genius assumes its authority insofar as it provides knowledge by spontaneous intuition rather than rational deliberation or calculated effort, even when intuitions turn out to be perfectly in keeping with standards of logic. This mode of knowledge also configures political agency as a paradox. The force and rightness of [women speakers'] words—to both themselves and their audiences—seem to depend on the condition that the women have no intention of writing or speaking, and moreover, don't experience the words they express as their own" (34). Both Olwell and Hendler argue for the centrality of issues of the public sphere to *Work*.

¹⁷ Alcott's contemporary readers would have been amused by the thinly veiled portrait here of real-life stormy preacher, Theodore Parker (1810-1860).

¹⁸ He goes on to say that "[s]entimental sympathy, even in its most conventional manifestations, is predicated on a loss of self; it is in some sense depersonalizing" (*Public Sentiments* 123). In contrast to Hendler, I suggest that only certain instances of sympathy carry with them this negative effect; in fact, the instances on which Hendler bases this assessment of sympathy are quite extreme: David's death and Christie's contemplation of suicide. One might argue that the negative type of sympathy Hendler reads in these scenes is simply an expression of traumatic or dissociative emotional states in the language of sympathy. In my readings of sympathy, I suggest that Alcott distinguishes between self-effacing sympathy and sympathy that reinforces one's feeling of self.

¹⁹ A sense of a shared identity is an important aspect of publics in post-Habermasian public sphere thought. Scholars are sensitive to the nature of the similarities that brings members of a public together in the first place. Michael Warner writes at length about the identity formations within queer and lesbian/gay publics, pointing out that one assumes an identity that fits into a public when acting in it—it is a performative identity, though one that resonates with members' private selves (see *Publics and Counterpublics*). Nancy Fraser, in "Rethinking the Public Sphere," writes that, "public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion; in addition, they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities" (125).

²⁰ At the same time, Alcott's inclusion of both public and private life in the domestic sphere offers a troubling testament to the increasing privatization of life in the nineteenth century (and indeed the twentieth and twenty-first). Though she ends the novel with Christie's entrance into the public sphere

of women's labor activism, she also demonstrates that public life can be rendered nearly unnecessary as families come to serve all their members' needs.

²¹ Early on in Christie's time with the Sterlings, Alcott writes, "[Christie] felt the influences of that friendly place at once; but for a time she wondered at the natural way in which kind things were done, the protective care extended over her, and the confiding air with which these people treated her. They...took her into their life so readily that she marveled, even while she rejoiced, at the good fortune which led her there...her new friends soon felt that she was one of them, and cordially took her into the large circle of workers and believers to which they belonged" (191-192). y emphasizing her inclusion in the circle of "workers and believers," Alcott suggests that working with the Sterlings is as much of a privilege and sign of acceptance as being cared for by them.

²² The narrator actually calls it a halfway house at one point: "She understood this better when she discovered...that the little cottage was a sort of refuge for many women like herself; a halfway house where they could rest and recover themselves after the wrongs, defeats, and weariness that come to such in the battle of life" (191). Charles Strickland also sees Alcott's fictional families as public institutions: "Her response to poverty consisted in suggesting the possibility that proper families might open their homes to the children of the poor, especially if the youngsters are orphans...grounded in the belief that by making proper families into cultural asylums for deprived youngsters, the next generation could be saved from poverty and ignorance" (151). He links this notion to the proper moral training of young people, but I would argue that Alcott's vision was less conservative than that, that she was more concerned with the public life of the nation than Strickland recognizes.

²³ Warner includes "[a] public is a relation among strangers" as one of the definitional elements of a public sphere: "[t]he orientation to strangers [in public discourse] is in one sense implied by a public's self-organization by its own discourse. A public sets its boundaries and its organization by its own discourse rather than by external frameworks only if it openly addresses people who are identified primarily through tier participation in the discourse and who therefore cannot be known in advance" (74).

²⁴ Mintz writes, "[i]ncreasingly aware of their institutions' deficiencies and the limited and damaging effects of incarceration, humanitarian reformers experimented with new methods and novel systems of organization. Many of the new reform schools of the 1850s and 1860s were organized into small 'families' of forty or fewer children, occupying separate cottages. Many state mental hospitals also adopted the 'family' or 'cottage system at mid-century. And yet, despite these efforts at reform, large, bureaucratically organized asylums, orphanages, reform schools, and prisons endured" (116).

²⁵ As a testament to the increasing privatization of American life, Ryan describes the way in which public ceremonies, so popular before 1850, began to lose favor as the middle class withdrew to celebrate its holidays in private. "At the mid-point of the nineteenth century and increasingly after the Civil War...public ceremony lost something of its exuberance, encountered increasing disfavor among select classes, and took more rigid and controlled forms. First, the middle classes withdrew into private and domestic celebration of public holidays while taxpayers complained about public expenditures for holiday entertainment. Only rare and extraordinary occasions...inspired widespread and enthusiastic public ceremony in the 1870s" (22).

²⁶ See *Work* (225).

²⁷ She writes that, for Alcott, "woman's sphere entailed a *quality* of willing self-sacrifice and social concern, manifested in certain types of meaningful work, done for love rather than any more tangible reward" (33).

²⁸ Wallerstein and Smith write, "as the world-economy goes through its cyclical patterns of global expansion and global contraction, which reflect global ability to extract surplus-value and therefore to accumulate capital, there will be pressures of varying intensities on the units of production to reduce costs. Global contraction will lead to squeezes which force units of production to find ways of reducing costs. One such way of course is to reduce the cost of labor. This may in turn lead to changes in the mode of remunerating labor. Now what has all this to do with the structure of the household? A very great deal. A household is a unit that pools income for purposes of reproduction. If the income it receives is reduced, it must either live on less income or find substitute income. Of course, there comes

a point where it cannot survive on less income (or survive very long) and therefore the only alternative is to find substitute income. The household with the least flexibility, as total income goes down, is the household most dependent on wage income, since the ability to obtain wage income (or a certain level of wage income) is a function of the offer by someone outside the household of that wage employment. A household can readily affect its total income by investing in activities it can autonomously launch” (15).

²⁹ See Dublin, 29-38.

³⁰ I shall return to a consideration of her sensibilities later.

³¹ When asked if she likes housework Christie remarks, “Oh, yes! if I need not do it with a shiftless Irish girl to drive me distracted by pretending to help” (172).

³² As Amy Schrager Lang notes, “[l]ike all the social reform fiction to which it alludes—Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851) and Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861)—the mission of *The Silent Partner* is clear: the novel is designed to prompt ‘intelligent manufacturers’ to expend their ‘Christian ingenuity’ to ameliorate the lot of their employees. The origins of Phelps’s fiction in the factual is, as it is in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, crucial to the novel’s purpose...Explicitly the story of an encounter between capital and labor, *The Silent Partner* sets ‘ease and toil...millions and mills’ in sharp contrast. Viewed in this way, the argument of *The Silent Partner* is structured by the public debates of the 1870s over the relationship between capital and labor” (270). Likewise, Lisa A. Long argues that Phelps (along with Rebecca Harding Davis) rewrites reform fiction, providing an important alternative to the sentimentalists of the mid-nineteenth century.

³³ Davis’s female protagonist Deborah gives up work after Hugh dies in prison; a Quaker woman rehabilitates her on a farm in the country. Melville depicts women who work so hard that they have no time, energy, or health left to invest in a home life, while the wealthy bachelors he depicts have their own comfortable domestic sphere without women or children.

³⁴ Very little has been written on *Oldtown Folks* to date. Most prominent is Kathryn R. Kent’s analysis of spinsterhood in the novel. She writes that, “because bourgeois white womanhood was defined in the nineteenth century by its relation to mothering and the private, domestic labor of love, the cultural work of the spinster is often represented as, at best, a ridiculous copy of such endeavors” (41). Most other work considers *Oldtown Folks* in relation to Stowe’s other work or within the context of other woman-authored works from the period.

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