

Mask Confessions: Realism in Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* (1863)

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1. Louisa May Alcott and the background of *Hospital Sketches*

Hospital Sketches (1863) is a work of 19th-century writer Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888, hereafter LMA) depicting her experiences as an army nurse in the Civil War when she was 30 years old and physically and mentally strong.

Before discussing the work, an explanation of the relation between LMA and the Civil War is necessary. The Alcott family had showed support for abolition of slavery before the war, an example being when Bronson, Louisa's father, accepted a black student into the school he ran. This however made it difficult for other students to come to study because accepting black students was still unusual and radical at the time. As a result, he ended up having to close his school (Eiselein and Phillips 324). In a separate incident, the Alcotts hid black people in their house for a period (Eiselein and Phillips 21), which again illustrates the progressive attitudes of the Alcotts towards black people.

The Alcotts also agreed with the ideas of human equality espoused by transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who both had direct correspondence and literary communication with the family. Emerson wrote in his journal, "Why do we not say, We

are abolitionists of the most absolute abolition, as every man that is a man must be?” (Emerson 197) Alcott and the transcendentalists had mutual influences on each other.

As Reilly describes, “The Civil War was fought in over 10,000 places and was the bloodiest war in the history of the United States” (138), and as such, it was the concern of not only men but also women as well. The war generated women who were fighters and women who were nurses at war hospitals, meaning that most Americans were involved in this huge dispute over culture and values.

At the time of the Civil War, the Alcotts were so poor that Louisa acted as the main source of income because Bronson was unable to reliably support the family. At the time, the only possible occupations for women were writer, governess, nurse, actress, servant, or seamstress. Louisa had actually done almost all of these jobs before. Although women could do other jobs, the jobs accepted among society and family were only nurse or governess. Under such circumstances, Louisa made up her mind, definitively but half-impulsively, to go into nursing.

In *Hospital Sketches*, LMA journals her experiences on how she decided to become an army nurse, what the job was like, and how she communicated with the wounded. The original sources for the work were at first letters she had written to her family. After returning home, she was able to get them run as a serial in *Commonwealth*, a newspaper in Boston. She later added a postscript and published the collection as a book, which became very popular because people had very little information from the warfront (Laffrado 79). Her experiences as a nurse created the opportunity for LMA to become a famous author. When writing, however, she had already seen herself as an author, with her family as her readers. She must

then have considered how she made the readers feel and how they would enjoy her story.

A notable thing is that LMA made a persona who she named Tribulation Periwinkle as both the writer and protagonist of *Hospital Sketches*. At around the same time, she was also writing thrillers anonymously or using the sexually ambiguous pseudonym “A. M. Barnard.” The nom de plume of Tribulation Periwinkle, however, was used only this one time. LMA’s contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne, also used the pseudonym “Aubépine” when he composed “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844). “Aubépine” is a French word, meaning “hawthorn” in English, which does little to hide the fact that the writer was Hawthorne. On the other hand, Louisa used a cartoonish and self-mocking name, influenced by one of her favorite authors, Charles Dickens. She made a “fictional persona” (MacDonald 73) with a name in line with the content of *Hospital Sketches*. In other words, while Hawthorne made his identity as a writer more central, Louisa gave the character in the story her identity.

The above leads to one question: although *Hospital Sketches* is based on her real experiences, can it be considered reportage? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *reportage* means: “the describing of events (typically by an observer); spec. the reporting of events for the media. Also: a piece of journalistic or factual writing; a literary style or genre that imitates or resembles such writing.” The ambiguity of whether *Hospital Sketches* is reportage or not is due to the following: firstly, the names such as “Tribulation Periwinkle” and “Hurly-burly House” (meaning “noisy house”), the hospital she worked at, are symbolic. Secondly, the first-person narrator sometimes uses the third person, “Trib,” or “Nurse Periwinkle.” Thirdly, the chronological order of the events in the story

is not clear. Fourthly, a fictional character, Tom, Tribulation's younger brother, appears in the story. Thus, real events were embellished with fiction in *Hospital Sketches*, making the work a mix of both fiction and nonfiction.

Two areas that are especially significant in *Hospital Sketches* are metaphors and narration. Shultz points out that the story is filled with "metaphors of militarism and domesticity" (114). The protagonist uses military terms in her daily life as if she were at the warfront as a soldier. When working at the hospital, she also calls herself "mother," soldiers "boys," and the hospital "home," even though she is a nurse and soldiers are patients. The important thing about these metaphors is that they reveal LMA's true desires and ideals.

Regarding narration, LMA sometimes narrates *Hospital Sketches* with the third-person "Trib" or "Nurse Periwinkle" instead of "I," which suggests both subjectivity and objectivity coexist. It is important to note when and how the third person as a narrator appears. It is through this that LMA, as an author, comments on what she observes, which provides insight into what the Civil War was for LMA. By investigating the metaphors and narration, LMA's personality can be inferred. This work verifies what LMA witnessed and what she didn't, what she should have written and what she shouldn't have, and what she wanted to write and what she didn't. Focusing on these areas reveals the real thoughts of LMA herself in this work. After *Hospital Sketches*, LMA broke through with *Little Women* (1868), a novel which is admired for its realism. Signs of realism appear in *Hospital Sketches*, and this paper attempts to validate these realist aspects by focusing on the story of *Hospital Sketches*.

2. Masking and unmasking: realism through authorship

2.1. Masking

In the context of metaphor and narration, the text can be divided into three parts. The first part comprises chapters one and two, where the protagonist decides to be a nurse and arrives at the hospital. The second part is from chapters three to five, where the protagonist is working at the hospital. The third part is the postscript.

The first chapter opens with the military term, “Obtaining Supplies.” The protagonist says she wants to do something, and her mother and sister suggest that she become a teacher or get married, but she is not interested. Tom, her younger brother, suggests being an army nurse at the war hospital, a proposal in which she is very interested. She immediately goes out to be enlisted as a nurse and returns: “I tore home through the December slush as if the rebels were after me, and like many another recruit, burst in upon my family with the announcement— ‘I’ve enlisted!’” (*HS* 4) From then, her tone of speech becomes militaristic as follows:

As boys going to sea immediately become nautical in speech, walk as if they already had their “sea legs” on, and shiver their timbers on all possible occasions, so I turned military at once, called my dinner my rations, saluted all new comers, and ordered a dress parade that very afternoon. (*HS* 4, underline added)

The military metaphors show that she is elated and full of hope. At the same time, the exaggerated and dramatic tone make this text read like fiction.

The existence of Tom in this part is also important. After finishing packing, the protagonist gets a letter ordering her to work at Hurly-burly

House, where at first she does not wish to go. To this, Tom remarks, “of course you won’t go” (*HS* 5). However, his derision inspires her, and she declares, “It is now one; I shall march at six” (*HS* 5). This shows Tom’s influence on Trib’s decision-making.

In reality, Alcott made herself go to the war hospital, writing in her journal: “Thirty years old. Decided to go to Washington as a nurse if I could find a place. Help needed, and I love nursing, and *must* let out my pent-up energy in some new way” (*Journals* 110). From another view point, Tom is LMA’s fictional alter-ego who enables Trib to make an easy decision to be a nurse. As her letters and journal clarify, LMA spent her life acting as more a son than a daughter to her parents Bronson and Abigale, and a brother among sisters. In her letter to Alfred Whitman, an editor, she shows her propensities: “I was born with a boys nature & always had more sympathy for & interest in them in than in girls, & have fought my fight for nearly fifteen [years] with a boys spirit under my ‘bib & tucker’ & a boys wrath when I got ‘floored’” (*Letters* 51-2). She also wrote in her journal: “I’ve often longed to see a war, and now I have my wish. I long to be a man; but as I can’t fight, I will content myself with working for those who can” (*Journals* 105). In this text, Tom himself acts as a manifestation of two of Alcott’s desires. As stated in her journal, “I often wish I had a little brother” (*Journals* 48), she fulfilled her wish to have a brother. Also, as her alter-ego, Tom let her see part of the war.

The second chapter implies the genre this text belongs to. As Shultz suggests, this chapter begins with Trib’s “quest” (107). After receiving a complementary ticket from the governor, she travels thorough Jersey City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, before finally arriving in Washington, which suggests the story would fall into the adventure-romance genre. However,

the beginning of this chapter says as follows:

I add some of the notes made by the way, hoping that they will amuse the reader, and convince the skeptical that such a being as Nurse Periwinkle does exist, that she really did go to Washington, and that these Sketches are not romance. (*HS* 12, underline added)

These two important phrases declare Nurse Periwinkle's existence and reminds readers that "these Sketches are not romance." Although this text is based on LMA's experiences, romance lies beneath it. Miyagawa defines romance in the late 19th century (1880s-90s) as "a fantasy-like story which depicts unusual adventure" (trans. 20). Although the definition is of late 19th century romance, this concept can be applied to *Hospital Sketches*. This work fits this definition in that its story is well removed from ordinary life.

"Desire" is also a term that symbolizes romance. The metaphors in this text depict the protagonist's desires. She turns military-like in describing her daily life and acts as if she were family to the soldiers at the hospital, both of which highlight what she needs and wants to be. Therefore, although the story is not complete fiction, LMA made *Hospital Sketches* into a romance-like story, which stems from her desire as a writer to have her readers enjoy her story.

From chapter three, in spite of the unusual nature of life in the hospital, the titles of the chapters have nondescript titles like "A Day" and "A Night" which readers wouldn't associate with war. In contrast, the chapter three starts with an inundation of wounded soldiers. As a nurse, the protagonist treats her patients equally, exemplified by her description of each by their home-state. She refers to one as "a rough Michigander" (25) and another as

“A six foot New Hampshire man” (27), but their origins were immaterial to her. Madeleine B. Stern, a biographer of LMA, depicts her as follows:

[I]t mattered not what their names were, or whether they suffered from lung wounds or pneumonia, typhoid or diphtheria; it mattered not whether they had been mustered in at New Jersey or Pennsylvania or Rhode Island; it did not even matter that among them was one Wilt, a Rebel. (116)

In Hurly-burly House, she changes all her patients' clothes and serves meals without distinction. LMA would have witnessed painful and miserable scenes, though she does not depict them. Instead, she turns them into humor.

The next excerpt sets the tone for a scene when the protagonist tries to take an Irishman's shoes off. He says that he will do it by himself, revealing feet so dirty that it could not be determined which were dirtier—his feet or his shoes.

This comical tableau produced a general grin, at which propitious beginning I took heart and scrubbed away like any tidy parent on a Saturday night. Some of them [patients] took the performance like sleepy children, leaning their tired heads against me as I worked, others looked grimly scandalized, and several of the roughest colored like bashful girls. (*HS* 23-4 underline added)

“This comical tableau” shows the protagonist's subjectivity. Berman, for example, judges the theme of the text as humor (169)¹. However, the most

important thing here is to note the writer's authority turns tragedy into comedy. As Cappello suggests, LMA wears a mask:

"She has been posing as a voyeur, a looker, a soldier; she has been wearing a mask (of nurse turned sick person, of femininity) and masking the world outside to expose something otherwise naturalized." (Cappello 76)

In addition, she also wears a mask of "mother," and at the same time, she lets the patients wear masks of "sons." This suggests the obedience of the patients and LMA's superiority as a nurse and, as Shultz points out (114), the authority as a writer. The author removes the masks of "soldiers" from the patients, and they spend simple days among life and death. To them, family is the most important, and it symbolizes life and hope.

However, when she describes the patients as her family, she also reveals one of her desires. It is LMA who feels lonely; she longs for her family and wants to mentally escape from this miserable place and hopes for life. LMA actually wrote her thoughts in her journal:

"I never began the year in a stranger place than this; five hundred miles from home, alone among strangers, doing painful duties all day long, & leading a life of constant excitement in this greathouse surrounded by 3 or 4 hundred men in all stages of suffering, disease & death." (*Journals* 113)

Outside of *Hospital Sketches*, LMA articulates her true emotions, but as a writer in these sketches, she must entertain the readers. When the

protagonist is asked to attend a dissection by a doctor, Cappello figures that “this scene gets translated by Alcott into an entertainment and thus empowers Alcott as a spectator” (Cappello 68). It is LMA who decided to turn her hideous surroundings and the struggles of those around her into entertainment. However, this generates a conflict between the author and her real self. She describes in the last chapter how and what she should write: “[Several of my comrades’] approval assures me that I have not let sympathy and fancy run away with me, as that lively team is apt to do when harnessed to a pen” (73). She feels that she succeeded in the way of writing because she received the readers approval, however, in her mind her ‘sympathy and fancy’ were to be ignored. The important thing is the text was written through conflict. Therefore, while her way of writing characterizes the text as fiction-like, LMA’s conflict appears in it.

2.2. Unmasking

Before long the protagonist is assigned to work at night, which she prefers over daytime because she can observe a different side of the patients that they do not show during the day. She especially notices that patients try to be amicable in the daytime but become gloomy at night. Night can be associated with death. An interesting point is that the protagonist is interested in these changes and she tries to accept them:

I would have given much to have possessed the art of sketching, for many of the faces became wonderfully interesting when unconscious. Some grew stern and grim, the men evidently dreaming of war, as they gave orders, groaned over their wounds, or damned the rebels vigorously; some grew

sad and infinitely pathetic, as if the pain borne silently all day, revenged itself by now betraying what the man's pride had concealed so well. Often the roughest grew young and pleasant when sleep smoothed the hard lines away, letting the real nature assert itself; many almost seemed to speak, and I learned to know these men better by night than through any intercourse by day. Sometimes they disappointed me, for faces that looked merry and good in the light, grew bad and sly when the shadows came; and though they made no confidences in words, I read their lives, leaving them to wonder at the change of manner this midnight magic wrought in their nurse. (*HS* 34-5, underline added)

LMA illustrates the eloquence of the patients even though they don't speak, which is an instance of unmasking by LMA. Her attitude here shows that she is aware that humans can be multi-faceted.

What LMA witnessed was not the conditions of the war or who was the best in battle, but human nature when faced with death. All the soldiers were the same race. LMA attempts to find the human nature of her characters and depict it. All humans die, and so she tries to write how soldiers live and die, how she cures them, and how she should be as a nurse and writer. During the Civil War, the main matter at hand was abolishing slavery and acceptance of other races, and for LMA, the Civil War was where she found acceptance for other kinds of human nature. This comment by LMA regarding black people demonstrates this:

But more interesting than officers, ladies, mules, or pigs, were my colored brothers and sisters, because so unlike the respectable members of society I'd known in moral Boston.

Here was the genuine article—no, not the genuine article at all, we must go to Africa for that—but the sort of creatures generations of slavery have made them: obsequious, trickish, lazy and ignorant, yet kind-hearted, merry-tempered, quick to feel and accept the least token of the brotherly love which is slowly teaching the white hand to grasp the black, in this great struggle for the liberty of both the races. (*HS* 57-8)

The sketch of black people above describes both LMA's criticism and praise toward the black people she found in Washington, which shows her ability to accept the multi-faceted nature of humans. She had already noticed that most people are prejudiced: "But the human mind is prone to prejudice" (71). This way of thinking is important when writing. *Hospital Sketches* influenced the other books she wrote in a wide range of genres. Franklin, for example, points out that the thriller, "The Marble Woman" (1865), is affected by her experience in the Civil War (265-6). As such the Civil War led LMA through a process of maturation: through writing, she suffered her own conflict between being a writer, nurse and her real self. To overcome it, she improved her abilities to write, observe and accept human nature.

Interestingly, this chapter has a scene where LMA shows her fondness for relating anecdotes, which starts with a young patient's moan:

The night whose events I have a fancy to record, opened with a little comedy, and closed with a great tragedy; for a virtuous and

useful life untimely ended is always tragical to those who see not as God sees. My headquarters were beside the bed of a New Jersey boy, crazed by the horrors of that dreadful Saturday. A slight wound in the knee brought him there; but his mind had suffered more than his body; some string of that delicate machine was overstrained, and, for days, he had been reliving, in imagination, the scenes he could not forget, till his distress broke out in incoherent ravings, pitiful to hear. (*HS* 35, underline added)

“Pitiful to hear” shows that LMA could not make the scene “a little comedy.” She expresses her emotion depicting the New Jersey boy’s affliction. The protagonist finds that the young man experiences mental distress. Straus suggests that this is realism in the text:

During wartime, Louisa May Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches* (1863) depicts trauma’s realism within a battle between physical and emotional distresses, as well as fantasy-like “sketches,” recorded in the midst of life circumstances. (207)

However, realism lies not only in the wounds of her patients. LMA more and more clearly describes the patients, and in doing so, she more and more reveals herself. For example, in this chapter, she goes on at length about her favorite patient, John. A remark like “A most attractive face he had” (39) reveals her affections. Regarding the interactions between the protagonist and John, Wardrop interprets that “This reveals much about the nurse but also much about the patient” (34). Also, Wardrop analyzes the relationship as a “maternal and erotic connection with a wounded

and dying soldier” (34). For LMA, pretending to be the patient’s mother, wife, or sister is more important than being a nurse: “[...] now I knew that to him [John], as to so many, I was the poor substitute for mother, wife, or sister, and in his eyes no stranger, but a friend who hitherto had seemed neglectful” (41). As Laffardo points out, she is aware of her gender: “The maternal, desexualized figure of Tribulation Periwinkle scripted twenty years earlier in *Hospital Sketches* marks an early stage of Alcott’s considerations of gender construction” (74). This is an instance of realism in *Hospital Sketches* because it depicts something real about LMA.

3. Mask confessions: Tribulation Periwinkle and LMA

The third-person “Nurse Periwinkle” narrative appears in the later chapters more frequently than earlier ones. It is important to focus on what this depicts. Nurse Periwinkle, for example, shows her feelings of disdain when a patient’s mother breaks a rule at Hurly-burly House:

Regarding the admission of friends to nurse their sick, I can only say, it was not allowed at Hurly-burly House; though one indomitable parent took my ward by storm, and held her position, in spite of doctors, matron, and Nurse Periwinkle. (*HS* 65, underline added)

“Doctors, matron, and Nurse Periwinkle” stand in a line, which gives the protagonist authority on par with the doctors and the matron. As such, Showalter describes that the protagonist’s presence becomes greater:

Trib’s voice becomes stronger with each chapter as she enters

ever deeper into her own war, ending with her collapse from typhoid. In this sense, Alcott made the narrative not just a description of nursing, but also the story of Trib's passage from innocence to maturity. (xxvii)

Showalter interprets this text as illustrating the progress of Trib's maturation. However, Trib has a more important task than just gaining a stronger voice. Her voice in the third person suggests objectivity, which adds a sense of truth. Moreover, it is important to note that the author's voice and its content are empowered by the third person narrative, and that it strengthens the relationship between the voices of Tribulation Periwinkle and LMA. Acting as a mask, Nurse Periwinkle confesses LMA's most significant truths. For example, LMA praises Nurse Periwinkle's ability to keep patients "in the jolliest mind":

I usually found my boys in the jolliest state of mind their condition allowed; for it was a known fact that Nurse Periwinkle objected to blue devils and entertained a belief that he who laughed most was surest of recovery. (*HS* 32, underline added)

Nurse Periwinkle here indicates that she has an ability to lighten the mood of her patients, and that she acknowledges her ability with pride. Also, the third person appears when LMA shares her thoughts. An example can be found in the scene in which the Nurse Periwinkle picks up a black child, astonishing a woman from Virginia:

"Gracious, Miss P.! how can you? I've been here six months

and never so much as touched the little toad with a poker.”

“More shame for you, ma’am,” responded Miss P.; and, with the natural perversity of a Yankee, followed up the blow by kissing “the toad,” with ardor. His face was providentially as clean and shiny as if his mamma had just polished it up with a corner of her apron and a drop from the tea-kettle spout, like old Aunt Chloe. (*HS* 59, underline added)

Nurse Periwinkle shows her irritation at the woman’s discriminatory attitude. However, in those days even abolitionists thought they couldn’t touch black people. New England had emancipated slaves and they ended up competing with whites for jobs. Therefore, the black people were something of a threat to white people in the North (Quarles 107). Despite this, the scene above shows not only LMA’s anger but also her thought, radicalness, audacity and impulsivity.

Another example shows LMA’s virtue. When a father sits on his son’s death bed, he offers money to the protagonist. However, “of course” she doesn’t accept it:

The son died; and the father took home the pale relic of the life he gave, offering a little money to the nurse [Nurse Periwinkle], as the only visible return it was in his power to make her; for though very grateful, he was poor. Of course, she did not take it, but found a richer compensation in the old man’s earnest declaration (*HS* 66, underline added).

The compensation is not so much money but his acknowledgement of the

work LMA had done. LMA's sympathy can also be seen.

These are examples of some of the accomplishments of LMA as a nurse that should be told, yet LMA hesitates to directly attribute them to herself. She also states her own thoughts, which she confesses via Nurse Periwinkle. When she has something she really wants to say, she wears the mask of Nurse Periwinkle, which enables her to show her real self, thereby empowering the author.

LMA's mission is suddenly interrupted when she contracts typhoid. When her father comes to take her home, her work finishes. She concludes her mission and the story with a poem on Nurse Periwinkle's death:

Therefore, I close this little chapter of hospital experiences,
with the regret that they were no better worth recording; and
add the poetical gem with which I console myself for the
untimely demise of "Nurse Periwinkle:"

Oh, lay her in a little pit,
With a marble stone to cover it;
And carve thereon a gruel spoon,
To show a "nuss" has died too soon. (*HS* 61)

After all, LMA worked as a nurse for only six weeks (Laffrado 79). The "untimely demise" shows not only LMA's authority, but also her surprise and vexation, because she had to quit her job and stop writing letters much earlier than she had expected. As a writer and person, making Tribulation Periwinkle was essential for LMA. If it had not been for Tribulation Periwinkle, LMA wouldn't have been able to write these sketches.

4. Conclusion

After returning home, LMA's condition never completely returned to normal as a result of typhoid fever and the effects of mercury used to treat it (Eiselein and Phillips 57). In the Civil War, Alcott was exposed to danger and her experiences, in the form of *Hospital Sketches*, needed to be written. As is evident, this work has many layers. At first, Tribulation Periwinkle exists as an alternative version of LMA in the text, creating the romance-like aspects of the work. The characters of *Hospital Sketches*, and the author as well, all wear masks, which reveal LMA's true self. Although she wrote her experiences as a nurse in fictionalized form, she revealed her real personality. This is the realism of this work. If the Civil War caused people to change, it made LMA more mature as human and a writer and gave her the mission to write.

Notes

Thanks very much to Jason Morgan for checking the manuscript.

- 1 However, Berman points out that LMA's jokes in *Hospital Sketches* were eliminated because the publisher demanded (171-4).

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