

Premise

Daniela Daniele and Martha Saxton



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Premise

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- 1 The EAAS Study Group of 19th Century American Literature convened in Rome on October 10, 11 and 12, 2019 for its 13th Seminar, in a Covid-free time still unaware of infections, distancing precautions and winds of war. Daniela Daniele organised the event and a grant of the Cultural Office of the American Embassy—generously requested by Maria Paola Pierini and by the founder of the Study Group, Ralph Poole—secured the participation of Martha Saxton, from Amherst College.
- 2 A distinguished historian of American women and the author of a ground-breaking biography of Louisa May, Saxton chose and introduced the theme of the Seminar, “Louisa May Alcott and Love”: a topic explored here through a number of seldom discussed narratives.¹ In thinking about love in Alcott’s work, contributors have wrestled with her ideas of traditional marriage’s stifling effects on women and girl children and the alterations to the institution and to male attitudes that would bring both greater dignity and equality. Authors compare her ideas with those of a wide range of writers including Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Stuart Mill, and Mary Wilkins Freeman. They explore Alcott’s marked resistance to intimacy in her proud self-reliance and her positive depictions of women’s independence and same sex friendships, including her pessimism about the possibility of women’s art surviving when combined with conventional marriage. Some contributors have also dissected from a queer perspective the mysterious fits, twisted passions, and cross-dressed confusions produced by Alcott’s very modern and gender-troubled vision of eroticism, which she often embedded in complicated Oedipal relations with demanding male tutors and fatherly figures. Her own familial experience of poverty, her consuming love and dependence on her mother, her early distance and criticism from her father, and her critical embrace of the stringent demands of Transcendental idealism helped to create the conditions for her empathic writing and her sensitivity to the gender, racial, and political injustice of her times. These works show new understandings of Alcott’s efforts to find a satisfactory path for women, through the self-sacrificing demands of romantic love, and the self-love and self-respect to sustain their consuming passion for art.

- 3 The initial section devoted to the marriage question and to Alcott's fictionalized family drama is followed by a second one mainly devoted to the discussion of "A Marble Woman" and of other art tales set within the context of the European artworld which brought Louisa May to Rome in winter 1870-71 not only to avoid the impending Franco-Prussia war but also to sustain the international art training of her painterly sister May.² The latter found in via Margutta new inspiration, never hesitating, as she always did in Boston, to leave her sibling at work on her narratives to study landscape painting with Frederic Crowninshield. The marble beauty explored by Andrea Mariani in his essay on Rome and the sculptural imagination in 19th-century American literature illuminates the metaphoric power of the marmorean theme, addressing issues of "passionlessness" (Cott) which emerge in *A Marble Woman* along with unuttered possibilities of genderplay allowed, as Ralph Poole's article also suggests, by the extraordinary freedom and the expatriate condition of several Victorian American creative minds, like the two women artists portrayed in the unfinished art novella, *Diana & Persis*, partly set in the Eternal City and recovered by Sarah Elbert in 1979.
- 4 The varied discussions of "A Marble Woman" are closed by the art itinerary of Daniele Pomilio which inspired the group's city tour of the Alcottian landmarks in town on October 12, 2019, based on his literary, topographic and sculptural reconstruction of the Roman studios of the American literary sculptors, on Giorgio Avallone's deep knowledge of the Roman art district and on the thorough studies devoted by Michèle Rivas, Andrea Mariani and Melissa Dabakis to the subject. Even the choice of the conference venue which framed our talks was not a casual one. Palazzo Antici Mattei—the current temple of the American studies in Italy, masterfully decorated with the mythological scenes of the Domenichino and the imposing Graeco-Roman sculptures and bas-reliefs—displays, in a superb chiaroscuro, the marble creations that Alcott identified as a main attraction in her Roman sketch, "Recent Exciting Scenes in Rome."³ Located in the Sant'Angelo quarter, the Centro Studi Americani is not too far from the six rooms of 2 Barberini square where Louisa May Alcott spent an intense and productive month between 1870 and 1871, walking distance from Canova's and Thorvaldsen's studios and highly representative of the Roman art scene that Alcott had imagined long before her Roman stay, starting from "The Rival Painters," the 1853 art tale which inaugurated her literary career.

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NOTES

1. Our collective reading was based on Alcott's Hawthornean novella *A Marble Woman, Or The Mysterious Model* (1865) and on the tales "The Cross on the Old Church Tower" (1857), "Love and Self-Love" (1873): 298-310; "Anna's Whim" (1873); the fourteenth chapter of the 1873 novel *Work. A Story of Experience*, pp. 309-334. Our critical references were Hartog 93-135 and LaPlante 63-132.
2. The talk of war between France and Prussia and the insistence of her sister May urged the writer to move to Rome, as she wrote in her journals of September 1870: "We decide to go to Rome for the winter, as May pines for the artist's Paradise; and war will not trouble us I hope." Louisa May Alcott's Journal's entry of Sept. 1870 (*Journals* 175).
3. Louisa May Alcott's Roman sketches, originally conceived in epistolary form on Dec. 29, were first published in *The Selected Letters*, edited by Joel Meyerson and Daniel Shealy (153-158), and later rpt. as "Recent Exciting Scenes in Rome" by Gregory Eiselein, in his edition of *The Sketches of Louisa May Alcott* (193-199).

AUTHORS

DANIELA DANIELE

Daniela Daniele teaches Anglo-American Literature at the University of Udine. She edited two Italian versions of Louisa May Alcott's *Moods*; the Italian edition of Alcott's suffragist writings *and of From Jo March's Attic*; the 2006 Einaudi edition of the March saga, and, more recently, the Italian editions of *Enigmas*, of *The Amber Amulet*, and of Martha Saxton's biography of Louisa May Alcott.

MARTHA SAXTON

Martha Saxton's biography of Louisa May Alcott, first published in 1977, explored how historical circumstances and gender conventions shaped her life and work. These themes have been central to her work ever since: in graduate school in history (Ph.D. 1989) and later, in biographies (Mary Ball Washington, 2019 and currently the historian, Edward Gibbon), as well as in essays and in the broad study, *Being Good, Women's Moral Values in Early America* (2003).