

## The Alcott Sisters in Rome: A Tragicomic Chronicle

Daniela Daniele

---



### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/18858>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.18858

ISSN: 1991-9336

### Publisher

European Association for American Studies

### Electronic reference

Daniela Daniele, "The Alcott Sisters in Rome: A Tragicomic Chronicle", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 17-3 | 2022, Online since 27 October 2022, connection on 15 November 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/18858> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.18858>

---

This text was automatically generated on 15 November 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - CC BY-NC 4.0  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

---

# The Alcott Sisters in Rome: A Tragicomic Chronicle

Daniela Daniele

---

## 1. Studying Art Abroad

- <sup>1</sup> The impending war and her sister May's desire to improve her art skills in the safe, hilly area usually chosen by the American travelers for its distance from the malarial river prompted a long stop in Rome on Louisa May Alcott's second European tour. In winter 1870-71, she settled for a month in the Eternal City with her sibling and their mutual friend Alice Bartlett, not far from the atelier of Thomas Couture's student, the landscape painter Frederic Crowninshield, where, at her mentors' William Rimmer and William Hunt suggestion, May could sketch from life (Stern 205).<sup>1</sup> After Louisa May's departure, she eventually stayed for another year in Europe and in the picturesque countryside of Albano, where they briefly moved till March (*Journals* of March 1871, 178). Louisa's brief but significant account of their stay, based on letters home carefully transcribed by her father Bronson<sup>2</sup> is partly attributable to May,<sup>3</sup> and inevitably incorporated her sister's views on their experiences in town, in the contingency of the Tiber's flood and of the Italian unification which, after the plebiscite in October 1870, had moved the Italian capital from Florence to Rome. The resulting Roman sketch—dated in epistolary form on December 29, 1870 and first appeared in *The Selected Letters* (153-158)—was later reprinted and effectively titled by Gregory Eiselein "Recent Exciting Scenes in Rome." It tragicomically captures, in a tonal counterpoint, the author's compassionate view of the weather emergency and her sister May's enthused perception of the Roman art scene described in the fifth and final chapter of *Studying Art Abroad* (1879), fictionalised by Louisa May in the chapter dedicated to "Italy" of *Shawl-Straps* (1879), and fully documented by Daniel Shealy's illustrated edition of the two sisters' letters from Europe (2008).
- <sup>2</sup> The three American travelers took six rooms at 2 Piazza Barberini (May Alcott Nieriker 84),<sup>4</sup> arriving in Rome, by way of France and Switzerland, on the rainy night of

November 10, 1870. Their rooms had a good view on the square so that, in those unusually cold days in which the Roman hills were white with snow (*The Sketches* 193), Louisa's "first view most of the time was the poor Triton with an icicle in his nose" (*Journals'* entry of Nov. 10, 1870 175),<sup>5</sup> referring to the impressive Bernini sculpture from the eponymous fountain dated 1625. On their decision to live in an apartment, their fellow traveler Alice A. Bartlett wrote the essay, "Our Apartment: A Practical Guide to Those Intending to Spend a Winter in Rome"<sup>6</sup> criticizing the habit of the American travelers to take rooms in the nearby Hotel Costanza for "twelve or fifteen lire per day" (May Alcott Nieriker 85), in the side street of via San Nicola di Tolentino. That road, where the Alcotts' friend and sculptress Anne Whitney initially settled in 1867, was the place where the portrait painter George Peter Alexander Healy based his Roman studio from 1867 to 1873. Well known for his portraits of Pius IX and of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Healy invited the celebrated little woman writer to sit for him during her stay in town (Rivas 1984: 9), producing a remarkable portrait, completed on May 2, 1871, and currently exhibited at Orchard House. The canvas incurred Louisa's father's criticism but it remains to this day one of the best images of the writer.

- 3 In her Roman lodgings, Louisa May started *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys*, the sequel to *Little Women* I and II which first appeared in London in May 1871 and later published by the end of the month by Roberts Brothers in Boston (Showalter, "Chronology." *Little Women; Little Men; Jo's Boys* 1074). Notably set in America, the novel begins with the arrival at the Bhaers' "odd" school (*Little Men* 536) of Nat, a foundling of Italian origins inspired by one of the young street singers Alcott encountered in Roman streets. The very fact of opening the novel with a stray boy seeking a shelter in Jo March's boarding school reflects Alcott's concern with the destitution of the Roman social scene which, in her eyes, brought to life the Eternal City beyond the chilly surface of its sublime but cold sculptures. It is quite significant that in winter 1869, only few months before the arrival of Louisa May, the same sympathy for the lower classes originated *Roma*, Anne Whitney's sculptural allegory of the city in the guise of an elderly female beggar who compassionately spoke for the poverty of modern Romans against the background of so much ancient beauty. The ragamuffin Nat, who knocks at the door of Plumfield in chapter I of *Little Men* and the other orphans rescued by the Bhaers are not too distant from the humble but yearning figures who populated the flooded Roman scene, including the peasant refugees from the swamped Campagna who found a temporary shelter in Alcott's kitchen during the inundation of December 28, 1870. They were invited by the brisk cook and servant Lavinia hired by Louisa for the time of her stay, and alternatively named "Pina" in *Shawl-Straps*, where the semi-autobiographical narrator unpretentiously takes for herself the name of her servant, "Lavinia" (169).<sup>7</sup> In Louisa's typical democratic spirit, her servant's name also corresponded to the birth name of Vinnie Ream, the first woman appointed to create a sculptural artwork for the U. S. Capitol: the statue of Abraham Lincoln.
- 4 During that "gay month in Rome" which in her journals Alcott defined as being very pleasant and active,<sup>8</sup> being surrounded by "[m]uch company, artists & C." ("Notes and Memoranda" for 1870 176), the author did not ignore her sculpting countrywoman's ability to clothe the Great American Emancipator in edifying, ancient forms. In the same Neoclassical spirit of a New World which learned to define itself through the ancient models, just back from the Roman Capitol where she used to stroll, Louisa May noted how "Cicero looked very like W. Phillips" (Journal of January 1871 177). As Brooks points out, the "American revolution had been... largely conceived in the spirit

of the ancient Republics” (43) and, in the same syncretic spirit, the American literary sculptors appropriated the classical aura of the ancient Greek creations to celebrate the American Republic in the style of the days of Pericles. However, this Greek revival did not serve the Puritan sobriety of the New World. Emerson perceived this absence at the Museum in Naples in front of the “so many princely heads and heroes” there displayed, but still urged his fellow Americans to rival and imitate the “sublime old temples” to fully consolidate their growing institutions (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Letter of April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1833, qtd. in Brooks 57).

- 5 By embracing the Emersonian opposition between the lofty splendor of the European art and the natural beauty of America, in her own patriotic approach to the Eternal City Louisa May looked well beyond the archeological subject matter usually appreciated by her fellow countrymen. In the beauty of the Medieval and Graeco-Roman palimpsest of her Roman neighborhood, she felt, as she wrote in her journal of November 10, 1870, “as if I had been there before and knew all about it. Always oppressed with a sense of sin, dirt, and general decay of all things” (175). However, from her lodging and the city streets, Louisa May made of her visit much more than an occasion to muse over the ruins of antiquity. In humorous counterpoint to the hours spent by her sibling in contemplation of the sublime Roman sculptures, Louisa polemically concluded: “It thrills *me* more to see one live man work like a Trojan to save suffering women and babies than to sit hours before a Dying Gladiator who has been gasping for centuries in immoral marble. It’s sad, but I can’t help it” (*The Sketches* 196). This elegiac, marble reference to the Dying Gladiator alludes to the passage of *The Marble Faun* in which Miriam, Hilda, Kenyon, and Donatello “happened to be standing in one of the saloons of the sculpture gallery in the Capitol at Rome. It was that room (the first, after ascending the staircase) in the center of which reclines the noble and most pathetic figure of the Dying Gladiator, just sinking into his death swoon” (13). Likewise, in “child-fashion” (767), in *Little Men*, the children’s games in which “the young folk unconsciously imitated the elders” (685), include playful pantomimes like the solemn “*sackerryfice*” on the Greek altar of Kitty-mouse (614-15), a classical celebration of Nat’s and Dan’s loyal friendship in the name of Damon and Pythias (708), and “battles between the Greeks and the Romans” (767) like the brutal fights which occasionally turn Jo’s boys into “young gladiators” (595), and the “broad-shouldered” Dan into a “gruff” (592) “modern Colossus of Rhodes” (695). Despite all these tributes to antiquity, in the typical satirical realism of her Roman sketches, the author did not peruse, like her sister, the glorious “Transfiguration” which reflects all the visionary splendor of the Italian Renaissance, although she later used it to title her eulogy to the “Raphael” of her family. In alternative, she preferred to study the living models in town, capturing the vital turbulence of the city, in the unrest produced by the Tiber’s flood and by the first, triumphant entrance of King Victor Emmanuel II in what only a month earlier had been a Papal territory. As a Whitmanian student of ordinary types and of the people met in footways, she portrays a country in transition to its political unification, giving a cheerful, democratic picture of the Eternal City which had just become the Italian capital. Accordingly, she did not lament, like Ruskin, the sloth and indolence of the Romans but was very moved by the laborious frugality of the civic guards earnestly caught in their attempt to alleviate the disastrous effects of the flood on the city.

## 2. Weather Emergencies

- 6 The flood scene immediately revived Louisa's taste for the picturesque, whose model was set by the first woman reporter for *The New York Times*, Grace Greenwood, born Sara Jane Lippincott. She arrived in Rome with Charlotte Cushman and Harriet Hosmer in 1852 and rendered a witty depiction of the Roman indolence, opposed to Neapolitan liveliness in *Haps and Mishaps of a Tour in Europe* (1854). Therefore, Alcott's scenes from Rome are a funny, excited account of the calamity which turned the Piazza del Popolo into "a lake," sending "rats and boats... floating about," and "the Corso... underwater" (*The Sketches* 193). Her amused chronicle of the oddities of the moment mimicked the democratic spirit which animated Thackeray's and Dickens's urban sketches, writing from the viewpoint of the lowly, complacently located by Hawthorne, in *The Marble Faun*, "betwixt man and animal... before sin, sorrow, or morality," and defined as "the coarser animal portion" of "the unsophisticated man" (17, 18, 16). Quite ironically, that coarseness was the very feature of the Hellenistic version of Praxiteles's Faun at the Palazzo Nuovo of the Capitoline Museum that in 1858 urged Hawthorne to write his famous Roman novel. If the author of *The Marble Faun* was both seduced and repelled by the naivety of the Faun-like Donatello, unaffected by Puritan concerns and dangerously dominated by his natural instincts, in her own short Roman narrative Alcott knew how to praise the humblest residents with a sincere Christian compassion. More specifically, she was taken aback by their resilience during the inundation, and admiringly depicted her maid Lavinia busy at work to secure victuals during the Tiber's flood.
- 7 Like most sketches authored by Alcott, which initially found an epistolary form, her "Exciting Scenes in Rome" (193-199) provide a caricatural vision of social oddities, in a charming mixture of "[t]ragedy and comedy, side by side" (195). From her window, she watched locals wade the flooded streets and the national guards "out in full force" to rescue civilians in dire straits, among the "trattoria boys" who zigzagged "with the coffeepots across such canals of water" to reach their clients who "stood on their balconies" (194).
- 8 The waters' fury accelerated the visit of Victor Emmanuel, who appeared on January 1 in support of the suffering population, announced with trepidation by the patriotic Lavinia, who did not hesitate to stand along with guards and civilians for the oppressed nation, and took, on the occasion, the rank of a royal messenger.<sup>9</sup> In her American preference for nature over culture, Louisa concludes in her journal of January 1871, "a better sight to me was the crowd of poor people going to get the bread and money sent by the king; and the splendid snow-covered hills were finer than the marble beauty inside. Art tires; Nature never" (177).
- 9 Putting aside any meditative contemplation of perfect marbles, Alcott's account of the King's progress from the railway station to the Quirinal was mostly based upon her sister May's reports for the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*. As Greenwood wrote in her travelogue, in those days, the emancipation of many an American woman artist who refined their art in Rome historically paralleled the wider process of political emancipation of the country where they settled, making of their art training an invaluable occasion to report on the state of oppression which stirred the European revolutions.<sup>10</sup> And since it was May and not Louisa who physically witnessed the festive spectacle of the crowd who acclaimed the King of Italy, "for the sleepy old city is all astir" (*The Sketches* 196), to this day, we cannot be sure who truly authored that specific

fragment of the Roman sketch which came out of Louisa's letters home. Those letters home were carefully transcribed by Bronson who received them and read them to his family and neighbors, conveying all the republican, anticlerical spirit of the two sisters, who largely perceived Rome as a pagan city.

- 10 Like most tourists of Puritan descent (Brooks 24), Alcott stigmatized the defeated local clergy as "Jesuits" and "snuffy priests" who were expected "to pray" for their people in that weather emergency and, instead, stood "looking and smiling maliciously, saying it is a judgement on the people for their treatment of the Pope" (*The Sketches* 194). Sharing the diffused prejudice of most American travelers towards the Church of Rome,<sup>11</sup> Alcott listed herself and her fellow travelers among the "we heretics" (194) and the "audacious Yankees" (Journal of Nov. 19<sup>th</sup>, 1870 175) who witnessed with great satisfaction the Italian changing political scene.
- 11 In this democratic satire, the American Alcott(s) triumphantly stressed the process of secularization accelerated by the national unification.<sup>12</sup> Sympathizing with the lowly, quite distracted, in their laborious simplicity, from the antiquities contemplated by Hawthorne, Louisa and May Alcott broke away from the classical tradition of the expatriate American worshippers of Canova, by reporting on the events of the day with a sincere admiration for the Romantic heroes of the Italian Risorgimento. In this respect, these Roman scenes, which initially marked an aesthetic distance between the pre-impressionist sensibility of the hyperactive, extroverted, and visual May and the love for realism of the pensive and satirical Louisa, instantly dispel the misty halo and the hazy atmospheres which made of May an enthused admirer of Titian, praised by Ruskin for her copies of J. M. W. Turner. In this respect, this urban sketch confirms Louisa's Fulleresque passion for the romantic revolutions, and her support of Mazzini's cause, evoked in the late chapters of *Moods* (1864) in which Warwick exorcises his broken heart by fighting for Garibaldi.<sup>13</sup>
- 12 Like the transcendentalist Margaret Fuller who merged her pioneering hermaphroditic vision with the rebellious spirit proclaiming, "I must die if I do not burst forth in heroism or genius" (Brooks 114), the embattled Louisa finally opposes Raphael's sophistication cherished by her sister with the sanguine and pagan lyricism of Michelangelo (Perkins 1878). Her focus on the city poor and the patriotic crowds (*The Sketches* 197) ultimately casts an edged, satirical look on people with neither power nor protections, shifting the reader's attention from the Roman "ruins, Etruscan, Roman Christian, venerable with a threefold antiquity"<sup>14</sup> to the untamed nature of the Tiber's inundation which instantly disrupted any Turner-esque enchantment and formal perfection. In this respect, it can be argued that her reminiscences of that social unrest recover the American, disenchanted standpoint irreverently embraced by Mark Twain in *The Innocents Abroad* (1869).
- 13 In their partisan endorsement of the new republican institutions, the Alcott sisters praised the restless soldiers "working gallantly to save life and property" (*The Sketches* 194) and proudly inaugurating, under the aegis of King Victor Emmanuel, the first public schools able to emancipate many "long-coated boys" from their doctrinal education, as "a sure sign that young Italy is waking up" (196). The explicit reference to "La Giovine Italia" is an uncompromised homage to Giuseppe Mazzini and to the democratic ideals which sustained the new nation. Alcott's reference to the Italian revolution overtly reveals her plea for the Risorgimento, in a city till then resistant to the insurgents' claims for the country's unification, after the short-lived Roman

Republic to which Margaret Fuller Ossoli contributed from February to July 1849,<sup>15</sup> along with the Genoese musician Goffredo Mameli, the painter Gerolamo Induno and Mazzini himself.

- <sup>14</sup> Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, who supported their claims for national independence and met Mazzini in the month he spent in Rome in 1833, Louisa's father, Bronson Alcott, was also introduced to the Italian patriot in London in July 1842<sup>16</sup> by Thomas and Jane Carlyle. The latter warmly sustained Mazzini's federal project of a United States of Europe in which, as Brooks points out, "Italy's part would be messianic, for Italy was to take the lead in forming a new epoch for the human race, a collective humanity" (Brooks 113).

### 3. The Alcotts and the Italian Unification

- <sup>15</sup> In the era of liberal revolutions, the national fights in Europe were not ideologically remote from the abolitionist fights in America and the transatlantic movements of radical reformers. Fourierism, in particular, greatly inspired the Alcotts and their transcendentalist friends variously exposed to utopian experiments. Bronson's own trip to Europe demonstrates how his philanthropic and pedagogic endeavors were intertwined with Mazzini's republican ideals, sustained in London by the American abolitionist Moncure Daniel Conway and by the British Quakers William and Mary Howitt, who regularly attended the Italian patriot's conversations at the Whittington Club and the Metropolitan Atheneum. In America, other reformers supportive of the Italian revolution were Catharine Maria Sedgwick, John Greenleaf Whittier, William Cullen Bryant, Ednah Cheney (who once reported on the 3<sup>rd</sup> International), Dante's translators Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Charles Eliot Norton,<sup>17</sup> and the enthused Margaret Fuller, who authored the *History of Italian Liberation* that unfortunately disappeared with her in a fatal shipwreck (Arthur Fuller 183, ft. 17). On her own way to Rome, Louisa May Alcott dropped flowers on Rev. Theodore Parker's grave in the English Cemetery in Florence (Stern 104). Her main advisor in Boston died in Florence, not before defining Mazzini and the Hungarian revolutionary Lajos Kossuth, as "the greatest men of Europe" (Rivas 1972 98).
- <sup>16</sup> In this challenging reforming context, Louisa May, who met Mazzini during her first European journey in London in May 1866, joined the liberal circle encountered by her father between May and October 1842. Naturally attuned with his republican reforms, she was well aware of the derision her father inspired among the exiles in London and which still obscures his educational experiments. Carlyle compared Bronson to Don Quixote, in a letter to his mother of July 19, 1842, and even Mazzini ridiculed his meatless diet when he met him in July 1842. The general derision which surrounded Bronson's domestic forms of civil disobedience did not deter his daughter from endorsing his liberal pedagogy, whose utopian excesses she rejected but not without finding in *Little Men's* Plumfield a supportive narrative expression to his innovative model of co-education.<sup>18</sup> His classes run in the open air, also conceived for the delight of his own energetic daughters who grew up unrestrained by physical impediments like corsets, celebrate Bronson's abolitionist schools for boys open to girls and Black children, "for the Bhaers believed in cultivating health bodies by much exercise" (635). Although his Temple school was banned and closed in 1834 for including an African American girl, in Louisa's eyes her father remained the romantic educator whose

ostracized teaching methods reversed “the order of things” (568) like the Bhaers’ “odd school” in *Little Men* (544), ready to carry out new ideas like acknowledging the courage of gritty and “unmaternal” girls like the tomboyish Nan (607) and the “girlish performances” of those unmanly boys who were free to “hug... and cry” (707) and fully express their feelings. Equally determined to conceive such “a small world, to watch the progress of my little men, and, lately, to see how well the influence of my little women works upon them” (798), Bronson’s co-ed experiments were inspired to the divine standards of Christ on earth. His vituperated benevolent reforms are adumbrated in *Little Men* in the wise Grandpa March who lectures “in a great town, hoping to get some money for a home for little orphans” (781) and in the self-taught and charitable James Snow (778-783) eager to give, like other radical reformers during the most violent years of slavery in America, an immediate practical expression to Emerson’s religion of nature.

- 17 If in London Bronson’s humanitarian pedagogy never gained the attention that Emerson expected, it did not fail to advocate, in a transatlantic frame, for the Fourierist principles of equality and gender reversibility bravely embraced by Aunt Jo, who, in the third volume of the March saga originated in Rome, preferred to teach “self-knowledge, self-help, and self-control” (544) rather than Greek and Latin.
- 18 A radical abolitionist who materially sustained John Brown’s anti-slavery attack on Harper’s Ferry in 1859, Bronson met Mazzini in London in 1842, while living in “Alcott House,” specifically designed in his honor by the English utopian reformer James Pierrepont Greaves. His much-ridiculed eccentricities were social stigmas which in those years often served to isolate and boycott many revolutionaries and Italian patriots who lived up to their own utopian and modern values. As for the alcohol-abstaining and vegan practices for which Bronson is infamously remembered, they currently rate among the best measures of sustainability and were largely adopted, in those years of radical reforms, by much respected intellectuals like the director of the *New York Tribune*, Horace Greeley, by James P. Greaves himself and his disciple Charles Lane, who became Bronson’s main partner in the utopian experiment, “Fruitlands,” started in 1843, only few months after his return from England.<sup>19</sup>
- 19 Like other utopian socialists of the period, James P. Greaves founded a community in Surrey which, like “Fruitlands,” was also conceived as a free school. Like Bronson, Greaves was a disciple of the Swiss educational reformer Pestalozzi, who introduced him to his fellow socialist Robert Owen. Greaves died only few months before his expected visit to Alcott’s utopian community, whose model of individual emancipation was also based on Christian values of universal welfare and on the egalitarian plea to give a good education free of charge to all men and women. Likewise, in Plumfield, the Bhaers conceive their utopian community as an enlarged “family” (606) ready “to give” orphans “a home” (799) where they could “work and study as well as play” (589), in a school for boys freely accessed by girls based on industry, freedom, “faith in humanity” (799) and on the dietary and educational protocols which partook of Pestalozzi’s work-study agenda that informed many a coeval proto-socialist experiment.
- 20 Due to his resistance to the Marxist notion of class division, Mazzini rejected this socialist perspective on the grounds of its utilitarian assumptions.<sup>20</sup> But his encounter with utopian reformers like Bronson Alcott demonstrates how, in the 1830s, his republican values were largely debated by utopian socialists (Mazzini 2001 9-10,12).<sup>21</sup> An example of this convergence is Margaret Fuller’s commitment to Alcott’s



educational reforms before entering Mazzini's fight in Rome.<sup>22</sup> What is important in this digression on Bronson's romantic pedagogy and the ways in which his daughter's literary imagination re-elaborated it in Rome, is how, in those days, social and educational reforms contributed to start many an utopian community, like the one depicted in Alcott's 1871 edifying portrait of her parents' philanthropic and educational endeavors in *Little Men*. Like the Bhaers, Abigail May and Bronson Alcott were deeply engaged in giving a viable, utopian expression to their liberal views. Like Bronson's, Mazzini's pragmatic vision of individual and social growth was also based on merits, free-will and on an anticlerical sense of religion. In her ground-breaking, transatlantic comparison of the two reformers, Rivas shows how Louisa's father was a vehicle of progressive ideals to whom, as Margaret Fuller prophetically wrote with Mazzini in her mind, "only the next age can do justice" (Letter XXXIII, July 6, 1849). The very foundation of their benevolent projects of liberal education was devoid of the materialistic concerns wrongly associated with their utopian communities, being inspired, instead, as Fuller clarified in a letter from Paris of December 1846, to a "Christian Commonwealth"—which applies to Bronson Alcott's teaching methods and, in a larger, transatlantic perspective, to Mazzini's political pedagogy. Even their conversational style, which was better heard than read (Rudman 102), popularized a non-hierarchical discursive practice which, in Bronson's Socratic protocol of discussion, gave full voice to his students on controversial issues like sexual reproduction and his personal identification with Christ. That dialogism was appropriated by Margaret Fuller in her Boston talks at the bookstore of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody on West Street, in an anticipation of feminist consciousness-raising which also owed much to Mazzini's discursive style. Rivas aptly makes Bronson's co-ed school accessible to African Americans reverberate in the benevolent subscription launched by Mazzini in London to finance his own free school for young Italian refugees in September 1841 and in New York on October 10, 1842.<sup>23</sup> Louisa May Alcott's troubled adolescence, which coincided with the era of liberal revolutions in Europe and of socialist utopias in America, was profoundly nurtured by her parents' radical reforming spirit and feminist abolitionism. And her insistence, in her Roman sketch, on the "free" schools inaugurated by Victor Emmanuel postulates Mazzini's notion of a free education as a universal vehicle of human emancipation, which found an isolated but significant expression in the pedagogical experiments of Bronson Alcott in Boston and in "Fruitlands."

- 21 In her proud spirit, the enthused Louisa welcomed the first non-doctrinal schools inaugurated by the King of Italy, in a republican tribute to the founder of "Young Italy" but also to her idealist father, whose humanitarian engagement has long been reduced to a form of infantile, nonprofit impracticality. Like Mazzini, Bronson mixed his obstinate dedication as a utopian schoolmaster to the diffused philanthropic spirit which Louisa celebrated in *Little Men*, which, to this day, remains her most explicit tribute to her parents. That novel conceived in 2 Piazza Barberini was significantly written in the patriotic climate of the accomplished Italian unification and constitutes her homage to her father Bronson and materially served, after the untimely death of her brother-in-law—warmly celebrated in chapter XIX as the "example of an upright man" who taught Laurie "much beside his Greek and Latin" (769)—to support her nephews and dedicatees Freddy and Johnny, "to whom," as she concludes, "I must be a father now" (Journal's entry of Jan. 1871 177).

22 If Fuller's and Bronson's interest in Fourierism and proto-socialist utopias is not fully comparable to Mazzini's liberalism, their spiritual pragmatism, their conversational style and the social significance of their educational experiments (Brooks 113), along with their mutual concern with poverty, are all reflected in the combination of liberalism and philanthropy which inspires the Bhaers' utopian Plumfield.<sup>24</sup> Quite interestingly, if the Mazzinian unitarian and republican principles were absolutely unquestioned by both Fuller and the Alcotts, the same ideals, now constitutive of the European order, were not always shared by the many American expatriates settled in Rome (Rivas 1972 27). As Rivas recalls, in the years of the Risorgimento, the American government indirectly sustained the Austrian repression by facilitating the deportation of the Italian insurgents sentenced to death who, if executed, would have acquired an edifying aura of martyrdom. This was the case of Eleuterio Felice Foresti, the Italian liberal who was jailed at the Spielberg like Silvio Pellico and later deported to America where he became Julia Ward Howe's instructor on Dante. Howe, who participated, along with James Edward Freeman, in the Fourierist soirées organized by Charlotte Cushman in the little theater owned by William Wetmore Story in Rome, also attended that open space of discussion and entertainment in which American visitors and local Carbonarists could freely convene. The socialite and literary sculptor Story<sup>25</sup> who hosted those private theatricals, was also the author of *Roba di Roma*, one of his guides to the Roman artworld which Louisa May did not hesitate to quote in the brief but revealing Roman sketch here accounted in all its neglected political and cultural implications,<sup>26</sup> in a city of marbles vitally stirred by art, inundations, and insurgency in which she was able to express her deep sympathy for the patriots and civilians who defeated the flood and the reactionary power of Cardinal Antonelli and Pius IX.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alcott, Louisa May. *Shawl-Straps*. vol. 2 of *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag*. Roberts, 1872.

---. *Diana & Persis*. Edited by Sarah Elbert, Arno, 1978.

---. *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*. Edited by Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern, Georgia UP, 1995.

---. *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*. Edited by Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern, Georgia UP, 1997.

---. *The Sketches of Louisa May Alcott*. Edited by Gregory Eiselein, Ironweed, 2001, pp. 193-199.

---. *Little Men. Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys (1871). Little Women, Little Men, Jo's Boys*, edited by Elaine Showalter, The Library of America, 2005, pp. 519-800.

Alcott, May Nieriker. *Studying Art Abroad and How To Do It Cheaply*. Roberts, 1879.

Bartlett, Alice A. "Our Apartment: A Practical Guide to Those Intending to Spend a Winter in Rome." *Old and New*, no. 3, April 1871, pp. 399-407 and June 1871, pp. 663-671.

- Bartlett, Alice A. "Some Pros and Cons of Travel Abroad." *Old and New*, no. 4, October 1871, pp. 433-442.
- Brooks, Van Wyck. *The Dream of Arcadia. American Artists and Writers in Italy 1760-1915*. Dutton 1958.
- Florentino, Daniele, and Matteo Sanfilippo, eds. *Le relazioni di Stati Uniti e Italia nel periodo di Roma capitale*. Gangemi, 2008.
- Fuller, Arthur. *At Home and Abroad, or Things and Thought in American and Europe by Margaret Fuller Ossoli*. Crosby, Nichols, 1856.
- Gemme, Paola. *Domesticating Foreign Struggles: The Italian Risorgimento and Antebellum American Identity*. Georgia UP, 2012.
- Greenwood, Grace. *Haps and Mishaps of a Tour in Europe*. Ticknor, Reed & Fields, 1854.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Marble Faun, or The Romance of Monte Beni*. 1859. With an afterword by Murry Krieger. Signet-New American Library, 1961.
- Healy, George Peter Alexander. *Reminiscences of A Portrait Painter*. McClurg, 1894.
- Leland, Henry P. *Americans in Rome*. C. T. Evans, 1863.
- Lueck, Beth, Sirpa Salenius, and Nancy Lusignan Schultz. *Transatlantic Conversations: Nineteenth-Century American Women's Encounters with Italy and the Atlantic World*. New Hampshire UP, 2017.
- Marraro, Howard Rosario. *American Opinion on the Unification of Italy. 1846-1861*. Columbia UP, 1932.
- Mazzini, Giuseppe. *Edizione nazionale degli scritti editi ed inediti di Mazzini*. Galeati 1912, vol. 22.
- . *Thoughts on Democracy in Europe (1846-47). Un "Manifesto" in inglese*. Centro Editoriale Toscano - CET, 2001.
- Perkins, Charles C. *Raphael and Michelangelo. Critical and Biographical Essay*. James R. Osgood, 1878.
- Rivas, Michèle. "Mazzini et les Ecrivains anglais et Americains de son temps." *Studi Americani*, vol. 18, 1972, pp. 53-110.
- . "American writers and their everyday life in Papal Rome. *Americans in Rome: 1764-1870*, edited by Paola Ludovici and Biancamaria Pisapia, Centro Studi Americani, 1984, pp. 9-11.
- Roberson, Susan. *Antebellum American Women Writers and the Road: American Mobilities*. Routledge, 2011.
- Rudman, Harry W. *Italian Nationalism and English Letters. Figures of the Risorgimento and Victorian Men of Letters*. Columbia UP, 1940.
- Schreiber, Maria Suzanna. *Writing Home: American Women Abroad 1830-1920*. Virginia UP, 1997.
- Shealy, Daniel. ed. *Little Women Abroad. The Alcott Sisters' Letters from Europe, 1870-1871*. Georgia UP, 2008.
- Stern, Madeleine B. *Louisa May Alcott. A Biography*. 1950. Oklahoma UP, 1996.
- Story, William Wetmore. *Roba di Roma*. 1862. Chapman and Hall, 1871.

## NOTES

1. May Alcott's mentor, William Morris Hunt, painted, in the Barbizon style of Jean-François Millet, somber natural landscapes interspersed with innocent peasants and

shepherds leaning on the ground. The misty peacefulness of his modern pastoral art anticipated the French impressionism that May Alcott absorbed from Mary Cassatt, adumbrated as “Miss Cassal” in Louisa May’s *Diana & Persis* (1978).

2. Louisa May’s Roman sketch, first pointed out to me by the librarian of the Centro Studi Americani Alessandra Pinto Surdi in the late 1980s, is collected among other amusing travelogues by Gregory Eiselein (193-199). Initially addressed in epistolary form on December 29, 1870 to an unknown recipient who might have been the editor of the *Transcript*, Daniel Noyes Haskell, the sketch first appeared in the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* on February 3 1871 (Rpt. in *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* 153-158).

3. Daniel Shealy, interviewed by Jamie Burgess and Jill Fuller in their podcast “Let Genius Burn,” Season 2, Episode 5 <https://www.letgeniusburn.com/listen>.

4. In her zeal, Louisa May wrote in her journal of November 10, 1870: “We pay \$ 60 a month for six good rooms, and \$ 6 a month for a girl, who cooks and takes care of us” (Journal’s entry of November 10, 1870 175).

5. The icicle metaphor was probably borrowed from Henry P. Leland, *Americans in Rome*: “It is, perhaps, the dead of winter; long icicles are hanging from fountains, over which hang frosted oranges, frozen myrtles, and frost-nipped olives. Alas! such things are seen in Rome” (175).

6. In her essay in two parts, Alice Bartlett discussed the advantage of finding an apartment in Rome like the six rooms where she got installed with the Alcott sisters in 2 Barberini Square at 8 francs a day, eating tin box dinner delivered by porters or by their servant on that hill far from the malarial Tiber, which imposed periodic dislocations in seaside resorts, like the popular Bagni di Lucca (April-June 1871). On women’s travelers in Victorian America and on their letters as vehicles of feminist and progressive practices see Schreiber, Roberson, and also Lueck, Salenius, and Schultz.

7. The fictional names of Louisa’s sister May and of their mutual friend Alice Bartlett in *Shawl-Straps* are Amanda (which alludes to the social charms of Louisa’s youngest sister) and Matilda.

8. “A gay month in Rome, with the carnival, artists’ fancy ball, many parties, and much calling. Decided to leave May for another year as L.(oring) sends \$700 on ‘Moods,’ and the new book will provide \$ 1000 for the dear girl; so she may be happy and free to follow her talent.” Louisa May Alcott’s Journal’s entry of February 1871 177.

9. The King arrived on January 1, 1871 in support of the suffering population, long after the defeat of Pius IX’s ally Napoleon III, the consequent Pope’s retreat to the Vatican and the arrival of General Cardona on September 19, 1870.

10. As Grace Greenwood, born Sara Jane Lippincott, wrote in her *Haps and Mishaps of a Tour in Europe*: “However indifferent or hopeless you might be on the question of Italian freedom, I would defy you to resist long the kindling and convincing influence of Mazzini’s eloquent talk. You will, ere you were aware, find yourself roused, strengthened, borne on, by the devotion, the energy, the passionate earnestness, the grandly-uttered aspiration of his great, courageous heart. Mazzini is a man who would seem to stand apart and alone, though surged about by a vast crowd” (436).

11. The great admirer of the Italian Renaissance John Ruskin was convinced “as a boy that even the malaria on the Campagna was one of the natural consequences of the papal system” (Brooks 126).

12. On the Roman scene during the national Revolution see Rivas (1972), Fiorentino and Sanfilippo, and Gemme.

13. Even the 1864 novella “Enigmas”—which revolves around a Mazzinian family exiled in London—illuminates the Italians’ heroic struggle toward the unification of their country which Alcott embraced with no hesitation.

14. In *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne writes of the ruins “experienced oftenest in Rome” with “a vague sense of ponderous remembrance; a perception of such weight and density in a bygone life, of which this spot was the center, that the present moment is pressed down or crowded out, and our individual affairs and interests are but half here as elsewhere.... Side by side with the massiveness of the Roman past, all matters that we handle or dream of nowadays look evanescent and visionary alike” (14, 13-14).

15. The Roman Republic fought the troops sent by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte in support of the Pope, while in the rest of the Peninsula the red jackets of Garibaldi and of the King of Piedmont contrasted Metternich’s Austrians.

16. Here is Mazzini’s caricatural account of their encounter: “V’è qui uno Scrittore Americano venuto a Londra per convincere Carlyle e me che il vero modo di rigenerare il genere umano è quello di prescrivere la carne e non mangiare che vegetabili e beber acqua. È un originale che non paga le tasse imposte dal suo governo perché non riconosce governo alcuno, ma va invece a lavorare egli stesso per un certo tempo alle strade. Gli ho domandato che cosa fa nel suo sistema dei buoi, delle vacche e in generale degli animali i quali, a forza di moltiplicare finirebbero col mangiare noi: disse che tornerebbero alle loro natie foreste. Cose insomma dell’altro mondo, e ve ne scrivo per farvi vedere quante opinioni girano in questo momento” (1912, vol. 22 220-221).

17. In *The Dream of Arcadia*, Brooks stresses Norton’s overt support of the Italian cause: “The only difference between them was in their innate political faiths, for, with whatever socialist learning, Ruskin was a Tory and one who had no interest in the Risorgimento; while, pessimistic as Norton was, he cared for the future of Italy as he defended republican ideas at home” (125).

18. In *Little Men*, Mr. Bhaer thus praises Jo for her experiment in co-education: “I think you were right about the good effect of having girls among the boys. Nan has stirred up Daisy, and Bess is teaching the little bears how to behave better than we can” (685).

19. As a fellow vegetarian living “abstemiously, almost on biscuits and water,” Charles Lane was endorsed by Bronson as the “soul of his movement” in an article appeared in *The Dial* in October 1842.

20. As Michèle Rivas recalls: “Margaret Fuller se sent évidemment en affinité avec Mazzini... regrette qu’il refuse—comme il continuera de le faire jusqu’à la fin de sa vie—de tenir compte de systèmes idéologiques comme le Communisme ou le Fouriérisme, qu’elle même considère déjà à l’époque comme des signes avant-coureurs susceptibles de se concrétiser dans des régimes politiques futurs, mais que Mazzini récusé précisément en raison de leur fondement utilitariste” (1972 82).

21. A social and educational project also inspired the first phalanstery founded in 1824 by the Welsh socialist utopian Robert Owen. He sought in New Harmony, Indiana, a perfect land owned by a religious group to emancipate production from enslavement. His utopian settlement provided free schools nurtured by a diffused religious sentiment compatible with his cooperative vision of material and individual emancipation.

22. Before joining the Roman patriots, in 1836 Fuller gave her learned contribution to the Romantic pedagogy of Bronson Alcott as a teaching assistant at Temple School.

23. “Il est de toute manière décevant que Mazzini et Alcott n’aient apparemment pas abordé le sujet qui était une de leurs préoccupations communes, celui de l’éducation. Qu’il s’agisse peut-être plus pour l’un de soustraire l’humanité à sa servitude politique et pour l’autre de libérer l’individu des entraves à l’épanouissement de sa personnalité, tous deux considèrent l’éducation comme le plus puissant moyen d’émanciper l’homme pour le rapprocher de Dieu, dont il est l’émanation. Tous deux avaient fondé des établissements scolaires. En 1842, l’un des soucis immédiats de Mazzini est précisément la prochaine ouverture de l’école italienne du 10, Duane Street à New York, qui aura lieu le 10 octobre; l’école de Boston existe depuis le mois de mars; et le 10 novembre de la même année dans le discours qu’il prononce pour le premier anniversaire de l’école de Londres, Mazzini se dit heureux de lire sur le visage des élèves “una espressione di umana dignità ridestata, una luce di nuova vita intellettuale e morale” *Anniversario della scuola gratuita XXV*, 147-169, qtd. in Rivas 1972 679, ftn. 29.

24. “De son côté, Alcott est l’auteur d’une brochure intitulée “Observations on the Principles and Methods of Infant Instruction”, publiée en 1830 dans l’*Examiner*, et le fondateur de plusieurs écoles, dont la célèbre “Temple School”, ouverte en 1834. A Londres, il séjourne dans un établissement baptisé “Alcott House” et son honneur et où sont mis en application ses préceptes de respect de l’intelligence et de la personnalité, émanations de l’Esprit divin. Et cependant rien ne transparait de cette communauté de préoccupations entre les deux hommes” (Rivas 1972 67).

25. Story thus commented on Mazzini’s visit to the Triumvir which led the Roman Republic on May 5, 1849: “His practicality, I cannot but think, has been veneered over his mind by his English life. Essentially like almost all Italians, he is visionary. But he sees and understands the virtue of simple, direct action” (cit. in Marraro 75-6).

26. “Feeling that neuralgia would claim me for its own if I went out, I sat over the fire and read *Roba di Roma*, while M. and A. took a carriage and chased the King all over the city till they caught him at the Capitol.” (*The Sketches* 193-99).

## ABSTRACTS

This article recounts the Alcott sisters’ experience in Rome, in the contingency of the Tiber’s flood and of the political transition to the Italian unification. The arrival of the King of Italy is welcomed by Louisa May and originates, along with the inundation, a vivid urban sketch written in the tragicomic style of Dickens. Alcott’s support to the patriots is here discussed as part of the neglected intellectual legacy of Bronson Alcott, whose romantic pedagogy inspired *Little Men*: her novel conceived and written in Rome.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Alcott in Rome; American Literary Sculptors; Urban sketches; Tiber's flood; Italian unification; Fourierism; Bronson Alcott; Mazzini

## AUTHOR

### 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.