

GERALDINE BROOKS'S "MARCH" (Convocation Address, September 4, 2007)

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I am honored to talk with you today about Geraldine Brooks's March, especially because I have a sentimental attachment to Louisa May Alcott's Little Women. As you should know after reading March, the Alcott family is the real-life source for the fictional Little Women, which, in turn, is the inspiration for March.

There is a rumor in my own family that my great-grandmother was a servant to the Alcott family. Since the Alcotts considered themselves "poor as rats," who "nonetheless had not ... sunk to the ignominy of a servantless house," I can only imagine what class that made my great-grandmother (qtd. Bedell 143). I prefer to think of her in relation to the Hawthorne family's nanny, a medium who shared my great-grandmother's name and who channeled the Hawthornes to the spirit world of their dead ancestors.

But this is rumor and imagining. What is more truthful is that Little Women stands as the book that almost every female English professor of a certain age, myself included, credits with influencing her toward this profession. It is an old novel now and I suspect that though some of you have seen one of the film versions, Harry Potter loomed much larger on your elementary school reading list. But I remember it and my responses to it vividly: its opening line, "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents"; its croquet game where someone cheats, an episode that still represents for me one of the greatest breaches of honor. There was Meg, modeled on the oldest Alcott sister Anna, whom I always found rather dull in her marriage to the steady Mr. Brooke, the man who in the novel you read brings Mrs. March to her sick and wounded husband. Amy, the youngest March, was to my mind insufferably stuck-up, though I now admire the real-life Amy, May Alcott, who traveled to Europe as an adult to study art. The second to youngest Little Woman was Beth, whose death plunged me into uncontrollable tears; the death of her counterpart Elizabeth must have been devastating to the Alcott family. And then there was Louisa's counterpart, Jo, the tomboy, the writer, the one who to my great disappointment turned down the cute neighbor boy and married a professor much too old for her. Many say that this disappointing marriage was Alcott's revenge on her readers because she so resented writing what she famously called "moral pap for the young." Alcott never married; rather, she wrote her children's books to help support the family and her potboilers under a pseudonym to indulge her real desires. She remained living with her father until they died within two days of each other.

And what an amazing community the Alcotts lived in before and during the Civil War, whose dates, should you have forgotten, ran from 1861-1865. Here was the generous Ralph Waldo Emerson, who loaned housing or money to the Hawthornes and the Alcotts and, most famously, to Henry David Thoreau, who built his cabin on some Emerson land at Walden Pond. The relationships among these people have been studied and speculated about by many scholars. Did Emerson and Hawthorne find the unconventional Margaret Fuller sexually attractive or were they a bit afraid of her? Fuller became a New York journalist and eventually went to Italy to cover that country's revolution. There she probably married a supporter of the revolution and she definitely bore his child. The three drowned off the coast of New York when they were returning to the United States. Other speculations about this Concord

group ask if Thoreau loved Emerson's wife and if Louisa May Alcott loved Thoreau or Emerson or both. Nobody but his wife, it seems found Louisa's father, Bronson Alcott, particularly loveable.

In the course of Louisa's life, Bronson moved the family twenty times, most but not always to houses in Concord. One notable year, they lived in an experimental community called Fruitlands in Harvard, Massachusetts, which is now a museum dedicated to the study of American Indian cultures and to the Shaker community it eventually became. Here they practiced vegetarianism, took no products from animals, including no milk from cows and no honey from bees. Because they could not wear animal leather or fur and could not wear cotton because it was picked by slaves, they froze in their flax garments. So extreme were their habits that one woman was expelled from the community because she tasted a piece of fish at a neighbor's house. The women, especially Bronson Alcott's wife Abba and his four daughters, did most of the work while he traveled to promote his ideas. So much, I should add for their refusal to keep a servantless house. Often the crops at Fruitlands bore no fruit because they remained untended. Hunger, cold, and the threat of the enforced celibacy practiced by groups like the Shakers finally drove the Alcotts back to Concord.

It was in Concord that the Alcotts eventually moved into Orchard House, which is now an historical site dedicated especially to the work of Louisa. And it is Orchard House that brings us to Little Women and via Little Women to Geraldine Brooks's March. What we have in Geraldine Brooks's novel is a fictional account of a fictional account: Bronson Alcott was the model for Alcott's Mr. March and both are the models for Brooks's Mr. March. But be careful. Brooks takes many liberties with the historical record: Bronson Alcott was not a minister, was, in fact unorthodox in his religious thinking. A line in the novel March echoes his sentiments: Mr. March "gave out some preachment" that "a Christian needn't worship Christ as God" (70). It was actually Emerson who voiced this sentiment so strongly in a speech given to the graduates of Harvard Divinity School that he was banned from the Harvard campus for twenty years. I assure you that here at Rivier even as you learn about the Catholic belief in the divinity of Christ that you will not be banned from campus if you question any orthodoxy. Questioning all kinds of ideas is, after all, what your faculty will encourage you to do.

In this, your faculty have a fine model in Bronson Alcott. His theories on education were forward looking--and controversial. He encouraged outdoor exercise in his short-lived Temple School, enrolled a mulatto student, and advocated a Socratic method of questioning and discussing in the classroom, much like the method you will find in your first year seminar classes. His conversations with his students on theology included topics such as the physical experience of birth and the circumcision of Christ. At first, he disciplined his students by whipping them, as was common in the mid-nineteenth century, but later he discovered that a far more effective punishment was to have his students whip him. His contemporaries began to say that 1/3 of Alcott's teachings were absurd; 1/3 blasphemous; and 1/3 obscene. Whatever the case, we know that parents withdrew their children from his school, so that eventually only five were left, three of those his own daughters. The relevance of this to March is, of course, that Mr. March causes great harm when he tries to teach the young slave Prudence to read because, as the historical record shows us, it was against the law to teach a slave to read. March, like Alcott, is committed to teaching and so he continues with his black pupils on the Oak Landing Plantation even at the height of the Civil War.

Much of the actual history of slavery and the Civil War is embedded into March. Masters did enforce their slaves to have sex with them, slaves marked by the whip were less valuable on the slave market, and slave families were often broken apart by the sale of one or more family member. The Fugitive Slave Law did require that Northerners return escaped slaves to the South and many Concord residents did harbor these escapees despite the law. John Brown did lead a suicidal attack on Harper's

Ferry, hoping that it would cause an uprising of slaves. This did help to precipitate the war and Brown, called "mad John Brown" or "The Angel of Light" by many a Concord resident, was hung for his crime. Pacifist Henry David Thoreau did defend Brown in a rousing speech to his contemporaries. So, too, did Emerson, who called him a man "without any mixture of self-indulgence or compromise, . . . abstemious, refusing luxuries, not sourly and reproachfully, but simply as unfit for his habit; quiet and gentle as a child in the house" (Emerson, "John Brown").

Despite this historical accuracy, Brooks manipulates many facts in this work of fiction. For example, Bronson Alcott met Thoreau long before Geraldine Brooks has Mr. March meet him. Brooks has this happen on the eve of the March's marriage just after Thoreau's brother had died. In fact, by the time Thoreau's brother died, the Alcotts were well-married and the parents of four daughters. And then there is the premarital sex between the Marches, resulting nine months later in the birth of their first daughter. The real-life Alcotts were married on May 23, 1830, their daughter Anna born ten months later on March 16, 1831. Not that premarital sex was unknown--there is good evidence that Nathaniel Hawthorne's older sister was conceived before marriage. Alcott never went to the Civil War, but he did spend five years in the South as a young peddler. However, as far as I know, there is no evidence that he fell in love with a slave woman.

What then are you to make of Geraldine Brooks's fictional account of a fictional account and why have you read it in preparation for your life at Rivier College? We could start with your major for those who have declared a major. If you are gravitating toward one of the liberal arts, you will find here a cautionary tale: novels, like films, can interest us in history, but they are not history. Still, they can engage us in conversations about historical issues that are relevant to our contemporary world. They can help us to see the world through the eyes of others and thus broaden our understanding of those who seem to bear little resemblance to ourselves. If you plan to major in education, you can take the example of Mr. March and of Bronson Alcott to assess what kinds of methods you want to use in the classroom. You may, in fact, receive Alcott's 58 maxims for teaching to evaluate in one of your classes. If you are a nursing major, you might focus on the hospital sections that Brooks develops around Louisa May Alcott's experiences as a Civil War nurse. Louisa captured these in a short book called Hospital Sketches that you might read if you enroll in one of my literature classes. Indeed, it is astonishing to think that mercury was a standard medicine in the nineteenth century, given our recognition now that it is so toxic that we are asked to dispose of mercury thermometers as hazardous waste.

Your majors aside--and I hope many of you have not yet declared a major--March will offer areas for discussion in your first-year seminar classes. Let me entice you--and your first-year seminar faculty who are all here today--with a few ideas. If we start with the medical practices and the squalor of the hospital Marmee finds her husband in, we might think of the scandal about Walter Reed Hospital and the squalid conditions some Iraq War veterans have found themselves in there. We may no longer use mercury to treat illnesses, but we do use morphine--laudanum it was called in the nineteenth century--and we do know that today with a larger survival rate for injured soldiers than in any other war, we must ask, how should we treat those wounded in Iraq? How rehabilitate and retrain? How control what promises to be a life-time of pain? And, even more, how to help with the epidemic of post-traumatic stress disorder, something Mr. March certainly seems to be suffering from?

We also can ask: How can societies offer such hospitality as Mr. Clement does for March as a young man when that hospitality is made possible by the enslavement of his own daughter and when it can turn so quickly into hostility against those who slave for him? And why do the enslaved, like Grace, not leave when they have the opportunity? Not long ago, I heard a series of news reports on slavery today in America, perpetuated by wealthy people like Mr. Clement, who bring household workers from

a third-world country with the promise of opportunity and the reality of forced labor for fifteen or eighteen hours a day and no freedom even to leave the household. When does discipline overreach itself and become unwarranted cruelty? Mr. Canning, remember, has a plantation to run and is embracing policies he mistakenly believes will make his workers the most productive. If putting Zeke into a cellar hole as punishment is excessive, it is still Zeke and his sons who lead the raid on the plantation that is responsible for so many deaths.

The relevance to our current war in Iraq rings loudly throughout March. As with the punishment of Zeke, we have questions raised by torture as well as questions about how to tell an enemy from a friend. In October when James Yee speaks on camps, I hope you will remember Mr. Canning and Zeke. Yee is the Army Chaplain who was arrested after he questioned the treatment of enemy combatants at Guantanamo Bay prison. We know that in war rape is often used as a weapon, and we might remind ourselves that women and children have always been victims in war. When war is over, how can we educate--or re-educate--those who have had no freedom to learn or those who have seen so much brutality? At one point in the novel, March tells his star pupil Jesse that the "Confederate soldier is a hard and desperate fighter, but he is not a savage. There are rules, even in war." Jesse replies in a manner that captures our current "war on terror." "Them men round here what hides out in the woods--they's thicker'n fleas in there--they ain't even rightly in the army, and they sure enough don't follow no rules" (164).

Rules or not, we must always ask what is a just war? In your Religious Studies classes, you may encounter the Catholic theory of a just war, a theory that raises important questions for us all. Was the Civil War a just war? It cost more lives than all the other wars the United States has fought combined. Certainly, we applaud the emancipation of slaves, but could that have happened without war, and with emancipation did we begin to treat African Americans equally?

If a war is just, are we obligated to serve in it? How do so many soldiers reconcile the injunction "Thou shalt not kill" with the necessity to kill in war? Mr. March poses that dilemma perfectly: "to act in a way that every fiber of your soul held was wrong ... *That* is what [is] reprehensible" (258-59). But what if the failure to kill results in many more deaths? Such is the legacy of war that Mr. March must square with his commitment to pacifism. Is he a hero? A brave man? A coward? A fanatic? "Who is the brave man?" he and we ask. "He who feels no fear?" March continues. "If so, then bravery is but a polite term for the mind devoid of rationality and imagination. The brave man, the real hero, quakes with terror, sweats, feels his very bowels betray him, and in spite of this moves forward to do the act he dreads." Or, March adds, should the brave person embrace "inaction," should he or she "sit at home while war rages, if ... doing so ... satisfies the quiet voice of honorable conscience?" (168). Did Grace murder her half-brother by action or inaction, and was her behavior justified? I challenge you to think of these questions in connection to war and also in connection to capital punishment when Sr. Helen Prejean, author of Dead Man Walking, comes to campus.

In these days, in the midst of a war fraught with controversy, I hope that this book, your classes, and, yes, your conversations with your peers outside of the class will help you to wrestle with these questions. For those of you who know men and women who have served in time of war, I hope that it will help you to understand why they, like Mr. March with Marmee, may try to shield you from what they have seen and, perhaps, done.

These are difficult topics to greet you with as you enter your first year here at Rivier College. I hope they will challenge you and that you will embrace this challenge. As you friend your peers on FaceBook, in the dormitories, and in your classes, remember Grace's words at the end of the novel: that Rivier represents the world she hope for, a place where "black and white ... stand as equals" (268).

Remember, too, as you enter this world to have some fun along the way in this very special time in your lives.

Works Cited

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