BETWEEN MEASURE AND EXCESS: THE ROMAN REPUBLIC IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S *MOODS*

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Once I was almost all intellect; now I am almost all feeling.
Nature vindicates her rights, and I feel all Italy glowing beneath the Saxon crust
(Margaret Fuller in Chevigny 148).

Louisa May Alcott's *Moods* and the sensation tales the author published in the 1860s exceeded narrative, racial, and gender boundaries. References to the Roman Republic came to epitomize the sentimental excess that was beginning to be censored by the literary establishment.

Tra eccesso e misura: la Repubblica Romana in Moods *di Louisa May Alcott*
Il romanzo *Moods* e i racconti a sensazione che Louisa May Alcott pubblicò nel decennio 1860 trasgredivano i confini narrativi, razziali e di genere. I riferimenti alla Repubblica Romana finirono col simboleggiare gli eccessi sentimentalisti censurati dall'*establishment* letterario.

A bridge between Gothic and domestic realism

In 1864, four years before reaching immortal fame with *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott published *Moods*, a novel that deserves special attention within the oeuvre of this prolific and eclectic author. Its tormented writing, the long series of disappointments that preceded and followed its publication, and a controversial critical reception had a strong impact on the author's subsequent literary choices. The novel remains a rare testimony to Alcott's vocation as a writer of romantic fiction for an adult reading public, for the first time not wearing the mask of "A. M. Barnard" (the pseudonym she used to publish her sensational gothic tales) nor that of "children's friend". In its first edition the novel is characterized by the coexistence of different, even conflicting, narrative strands. Thus, *Moods* occupies an eccentric position in the Alcott canon not only because the author tried to merge different genres and confront inflammatory so-

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cial issues, such as divorce, but also because, contrary to her habit, she worked on it for six years without the usual haste to publish due to financial need –and she kept working on and revising it until 1882, when a second "domesticated" edition was published. She wrote spontaneously, following her inspiration and responding to her emotional needs, unconcerned about the outcome. She noted in her journal: «for four weeks I wrote all day and planned nearly all night, being quite possessed by my work. I was perfectly happy and seemed to have no wants. […] Daresay nothing will ever come of it; but it *had* to be done» (in Elbert S. 1995: xi). Such a lack of concern for the result remained quite unique in her career, especially after the publication of *Little Women*, which put her under increasing pressure from both her publishers and readers. In constant financial straits (or assuming herself to be, even after the success of *Little Women*), she gradually gave in to the demands of the market and became a renowned author of children's literature, a genre for which she felt no inclination, as she bluntly stated: «though I do not enjoy writing "moral tales" for the young, I do it because it pays well» (in Myerson-Shealy 232).

In the 1860s Alcott was also composing some of her most successful sensational thrillers and abolitionist stories, her «blood & thunder tales» (in Myerson-Shealy 79) strewn with Gothic horrors ranging from scheming women and confidence men to opium addiction, madness, and murder. These tales reveal «an alternative Alcott», «a sharp-tongued master of a racy and unladylike American vernacular» whose work has been instrumental in detecting the «suppressed radical elements» (Showalter x) in her domestic romances. Many of these Gothic thrillers take place in Europe, in countries such as England, France, and Italy. Besides suggesting the author's willingness to cater to the reading public's taste for the exotic and / or picturesque, or to other widespread notions like the corruption of European countries and prejudices against Catholicism, such a narrative choice is also revealing of Alcott's need to put a safe distance from the rigid Puritan New England milieu in order to be able to tackle unseemly matters more freely. In the framework of the nineteenth-century mythicized image of Italy as the site of passion and excess, but also of the command on said excess – as the place where excess may find some kind of "classical" measuring – I suggest that the novel's reference to the battles of the Roman Republic served as "admissible" context for the author to vent her repressed literary passion for romantic and sensation fiction, while at the same time remaining within the accepted realm of domestic fiction.

As Sarah Elbert writes, the 1864 version of *Moods* presents «the stormy transformation of society, the construction of modern values, and a new relationship between the sexes. And, by endowing a respectable, hearthside heroine, Sylvia Yule, with the passions usually reserved to fallen women, Alcott struck a major

blow for domestic realism» (1995: xv-xvi). Indeed, according to this critic, *Moods* is «an important bridge between Gothic and domestic realism» (xvi), as also attested by the fact that the novel's secondary heroine, Faith Dane, becomes the protagonist and narrative voice of Alcott's abolitionist thriller "The Brothers", written in the same period as *Moods*. In the novel, Faith is depicted as a wise, independent woman who is able to create a refuge, and act like a motherly figure, for Sylvia Yule, the novel's central character, who is forced by social pressures and by her own loneliness to accept suitors before she has had the chance to gain some experience in the world. Counseled by Faith that she should not have married in consideration of her unstable temperament, Sylvia remains at home while the two male protagonists (her husband, Geffrey Moor, and his old-time friend turned rival in love, Adam Warwick) go off to fight for republican Italy.

The influence of Margaret Fuller

Circumscribed to a brief episode toward the end of the novel, the reference to the cause of Italian freedom is the author's tribute to Margaret Fuller, who was the Alcott family's friend and heroine. Fuller, who considered Louisa and her sisters «model children» (Stern 24), had served as a teacher in Bronson Alcott's Temple School, the short-lived experimental school Louisa's father opened in Boston in 1835. Although she soon left to pursue her own work, Fuller defended Bronson's reputation when the school failed because he held radical "Conversations" with his pupils, discussing the relationship between spiritual and physical union between man and woman and human birth – the mystery that intrigued Bronson most profoundly, «because it was the moment of intersection between the spiritual and material worlds» (Saxton 84). Fuller's wide-ranging education, which transcended the parochialism of most of her contemporaries, her romantic disposition, and probing manner appealed to Bronson, who wrote: «She is more given to free and bold speculation, and has more unity of mind than most of her sex […]. Miss Fuller seems more inclined to take large and generous views of subjects than any woman of my acquaintance. I think her more liberal than almost any other mind among us» (in Saxton 86-87). She was indisputably the most brilliant intellectual woman and the most ardent feminist in the transcendentalist circle. Among other relevant literary endeavors, she had translated Johann Peter Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe in the Last Years of His Life*, one of Louisa's favorite works. During the revolutions of 1848, Fuller was a pioneer correspondent in Europe for Horace Greeley's *New-York Tribune*. Her «closet sensualism» (Saxton 86) had led her finally to escape the New World puritanism.

During her travels in England, France, and Italy, Fuller met with a number of republican activists and exiles, including George Sand, the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, and Giuseppe Mazzini, the exiled Italian patriot and leader of the revolutionary republican movement, Young Italy (*La Giovine Italia*). They met in London, at Mazzini's school for poor boys, and Fuller would soon become his confidante. Inspired by him, she went to Italy in April 1847 and took up residence in Rome, where she stayed until January 6, 1850. She soon became involved in the revolutionary movements that were to shake Italy and Europe, joining the liberal cause of Garibaldi and actively participating in the republican uprising in Rome. In the dispatches she sent to the *Tribune*, she was able to chronicle in full the «sad but glorious days» of the Roman Republic, becoming its leading spokesperson in the U.S. and urging American support for the republican cause. With the proclamation of the Roman Republic in February 1849, and the French siege in April, Fuller took over direction of an emergency hospital on the Isola Tiberina and carried supplies to the republicans' posts. Throughout this period, she wrote fervent columns for the *Tribune*, imploring her country to recognize without delay the revolutionary government. As John Matteson writes, «[a] difficult and problematic stylist for much of her authorial career, Fuller found her true voice in Rome» (122). Her writings on the advent of the new democratic order struggling to be born are infused with the tragic beauty of the moment, revealing a poignant lyricism: «Bodies rotten and trembling cannot long contend with swelling life. Tongue and hand cannot be permanently employed to keep down hearts […]. Soon you, all of you, shall believe and tremble» (Fuller 322). When the republic was overthrown in July of the same year, Fuller and her Italian husband, the marquis Giovanni Ossoli, with their son, Angelo, fled to Florence and eventually to England. From there they sailed for the United States in May 1850. On July 19, the ship went down off Fire Island (New York), only a few hundred yards from the shore, and all three were lost.

The reference to Fuller and the Roman Republic forms a small section of chapter XX of *Moods*, in which the setting shifts from Massachusetts to «a small Italian town not far from Rome» (197). The town had «suffered much», during a battle fought nearby, yet had been «forever honored in the eyes of its inhabitants, by having been the headquarters of the Hero of Italy» (197), namely, Giuseppe Garibaldi. As Moor enters a little inn in search of his friend, one of the villagers begins narrating the story of the battle. The small Italian community to which the unnamed character belongs is depicted in heavily stereotyped terms, as he relates the incident «with the dramatic effects of a language composed almost as much of gesture as of words, and an audience as picturesque as could well be conceived» (197). In the battle, Warwick had played a crucial role. When everything seemed to be lost to «a troop of marauding Croats», and

a brutal massacre appeared to be in store for the people who had sought refuge in a convent, «Help did come […] from above. Suddenly a cannon thundered royally, and down the narrow streets rushed a deathful defiance, carrying disorder and dismay to the assailants, joy and wonder to the nearly exhausted defenders» (198). Behind the gun, that had not been working in the past two days, they behold «[a] stalwart figure, bareheaded, stern faced, sinewy armed, fitfully seen through clouds of smoke and flashes of fire, working with a silent energy that seemed almost superhuman to the eyes of the superstitious souls, who believed they saw and heard the convent's patron saint proclaiming their salvation with a mighty voice» (198). The stranger behind the cannon proves of course to be Adam Warwick, who, after fighting so bravely in the battle, receives enthusiastic demonstrations, «vivas, blessings, tears, handkissing, and invocation of all the saints in the calendar» (198), until it is discovered that he has a bullet in his breast. As he lies in his bed, Garibaldi in person comes to visit, as the villager excitedly recalls in his broken English: «Then comes the Chief, – silenzio, till I finish! – he comes, they have told him, he stays at the bed, he looks down, the fine eye shines, he takes the hand, he says low – "I thank you"» (198-199). At this point, Garibaldi lays his celebrated gray cloak over Warwick's wounded breast and goes on. Upon this gesture, Warwick lifts himself up and lays the cloak on a man who is dying in the bed next to him saying: «"Comrade, the honor is for you who gave your life for him, I give but a single hour." Beppo saw, heard, comprehended; thanked him with a glance, and rose up to die crying, "Viva Italia! Viva Garibaldi!"» (199).

The Italian episode ends with the reconciliation of the two friends, who decide to go home after Moor announces that Sylvia has called him back. Warwick, on his part, as a consequence of this experience, affirms that he feels «better and humbler than before». He tells Moor: «In the fierce half hour I lived not long ago, I think a great needful change was wrought to me […] The restless, domineering devil that haunted me was cast out then; and during the quiet time that followed a new spirit entered in and took possession» (202-203). Like Margaret Fuller, Warwick dies in a shipwreck during the Atlantic crossing back to the US, though not before accomplishing one last heroic gesture by saving his friend's life. In the 1864 edition of the book, an ill-fated destiny is also reserved to Sylvia. Like the heroines of Alcott's sensational tales and antislavery stories, who frequently choose a liberating death over earthly bondage, Sylvia Yule prefers death over life. The novel also echoes illustrious predecessors like *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and the *Scarlet Letter* –the latter, in particular, had been Louisa's favorite even against the criticism of her mother, who considered it a "lurid tale". Its author, Nathaniel Hawthorne, became an unforgettable figure for Louisa when he appeared in Concord, on June 28 1860, upon his

return from the years he had spent in Europe. With his wife and three children he moved to the Wayside, the house in which Louisa had grown up and which she saw undergoing «a metamorphosis as a square tower surmounted the dwelling so that Mr. Hawthorne could imagine himself in the via Portughese [sic] in Rome» (Stern 97)[1]. Hence Louisa watched with keen interest «Mr. Hawthorne glide by at twilight […] a dark, quiet figure […] screened in a twilight of his own creating, hatching tragedy in the Concord sunshine, walking back and forth upon the hillside, a man in whom the fires of life were banked» (98). His influence can be detected, for example, in the following depiction of Sylvia:

> As Hester Prynne seemed to see some trace of her own sin in every bosom, by the glare of the Scarlet Letter burning on her own; so Sylvia, living in the shadow of a household grief, found herself detecting various phases of her own experience in others. She had joined that sad sisterhood called disappointed women … gifted creatures kindled into fitful brilliancy by some inward fire that consumes but cannot warm (190).

The abolitionist theme

As in her contemporary thrillers, in the first edition of *Moods* echoes of the Civil War and the incendiary issues of race and slavery can be detected in the Gothic subplot that is framed in the first chapter, in which the character of Ottila, a quite stereotypical oversexualized Creole from Cuba, makes her appearance. Slavery, whose evils are also decried later on in the narrative, clearly underlies the Cuban plot that would disappear in the 1882 edition, in which the author pruned her text of most of its sensational excess. Ottila, whose name recalls Ottilie in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* (another one of *Moods*' intertextual references), is «the handsomest woman in Habana» (99), most likely of Spanish (Catholic) ancestry. In view of her dark complexion («The face was delicate and dark as a fine bronze» 6; «shame burned on her dark cheek», 9), she embodies the "tragic mulatta" type popular in the period –a type that Alcott employed also in her pseudonymous tales. Ambiguously represented as both colonizer and colonized, Ottila introduces the master-slave motif inherent to the Cuban plantation system. With her passion and sultry beauty, she is depicted as a "Circe" (99) the enslaver of Adam Warwick's emotions (8, 10); as a result, Warwick extricates himself from his engagement to Ottila «by condemning the master/slave dynamics of their relationship» (Elbert M. 120). He asserts that he must go «straight to the North.

[1] Via dei Portoghesi in Rome was one of the streets depicted in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860).

This luxurious life enervates me; the pestilence of slavery lurks in the air and infects me; I must build myself anew and find again the man I was» (12).

Warwick's discourse repeatedly refers to issues of slavery and liberty, impulse and principle –excess and measure. As Monika Elbert observes, «[l]ike the Italy of early Gothic novels, the Caribbean appears with all its temptations and corruptions» (120). Warwick is attracted and repelled by «the tropical luxuriance of foliage scarcely stirred by the sultry air heavy with odors that seemed to oppress not refresh» (Alcott 5). Thus, granting Ottila «a year's liberty» (14), during which time she will try to discipline her passions and he will reinforce his capacity for self-denial and self-help, Warwick heads for the North. Yet, behind Alcott's depiction of Warwick's rejection of Ottila as seemingly motivated by the latter's excessive, passionate nature, it is not difficult to detect the Northern fears of miscegenation. When she reappears at the Christmas party in Chapter IX, entitled "Holly"[2], she symbolically carries with her the corruption of the Cuban slavery system to the New England shores. As Sarah Elbert has remarked, «*Moods* moved between the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean, romantically racializing its heroes and heroines and dramatizing the ancient kinship ties between populations, without ever mentioning the words race, amalgamation, or miscegenation» (1997: xxxvi). Indeed, Ottila's characterization as alternately Delilah, Lola Montes, and Circe draws upon «codes of representation so well known that they rendered 'naming the race' superfluous» (1997: xxxvi). In Alcott's fiction, this type of character, with its revolutionary mixed blood[3], evokes the liberation movements sweeping across the world –from the US to Paris, Rome, Warsaw, Haiti. It was an ever-present theme for Louisa, a staunch abolitionist, who had been impressed by Margaret Fuller's ideas since an early age.

Following in Margaret's steps in London, almost two decades later, on her first grand tour in May 1866, Louisa had met Giuseppe Mazzini:

> Louisa watched him intently, noting the black velvet waistcoat buttoned up to his throat and listening to him as he recalled the courage of another American woman, Margaret Fuller … As she observed the perpetual conspirator, she planned one day to incorporate his mysterious figure in a sensational story, where a hero in the Italian revolution would play out a dramatic destiny (Stern 157).

[2] Set at the heart of the novel, this is one of the several chapters omitted by Alcott in the 1882 edition.

[3] See for example Paul Frere, the biracial protagonist of the antislavery story "M.L." (1860), which Alcott wrote at the time of the first draft of *Moods* and which presents striking similarities with the novel.

A new sense of freedom

In 1870, six years after the publication of *Moods* and two after the publication of *Little Women*, Louisa sailed again for Europe on a second Grand Tour. In Rome, with her sister May and her friend Alice Bartlett, she stayed at n. 2 in Piazza Barberini. The city held many promises for the three companions, «the promise of Art to May, of friends to Alice, of rest and the source of stories to Louisa» (Stern 204). At first, Rome appeared as a dismal city to Louisa. The travellers settled in during the rainy season and Louisa was not feeling well. She did not dare to venture far beyond the Via dei Cappuccini or the Barberini Palace. Gradually, however, her narrow Roman world expanded as they «wandered among the shops and palaces of the Corso, or explored narrow, dirty streets that led to broad squares dignified by mighty churches» (Stern 204-205). Like Fuller, Louisa was always more interested in the people rather than in the landscape, monuments, and architecture of the city. She observed the cobbler's stalls and the "osterias", the old women roasting chestnuts over their charcoal ovens, the prelates with snuffbox in one hand and umbrella in the other. «For Louisa these sights were as much part of Rome as the yellow Tiber or the obelisks and domes and towers of the Eternal City» (205). Like Fuller, she was more interested in the present that struggled to emerge from the ruins of the ancient city. Unlike her sister May, in a painter's studio in via Margutta she was more captivated by the living models rather than by the drawings or by the statues of dying gladiators. Besides the pleasures of private theatricals in the Via Frattina and of her own pantomimes and charades at their abode, Louisa also rejoiced at what she read in the newspapers and at the new freedom that seemed to blow over Rome like a refreshing wind, «for her republican beliefs made her prefer a Rome guarded by its own troops to one dominated by a papal purple that covered poverty and ignorance» (206). Indeed, in Rome, Louisa, who had turned thirty-eight, experienced for the first time a deep sense of freedom – a feeling that she was not accustomed to and which she probably failed to experience again to such a degree in the years to come. A feeling also heightened by news from her publisher announcing that her writings, including *Moods*, were never so popular as at this time and that the interest in them increased daily.

Yet, family cares would soon once again shatter Louisa's serenity and cage her hard-won freedom. In February 1871, after apprehending of her brother in law's premature death and after drafting *Little Men* to support her fatherless nephews, Louisa decided to return to London with her sister May and her friend Alice[4]:

[4] At this time, preliminary peace proposals were signed between France and Germany to end the Franco-Prussian War.

> For Louisa the change would be … radical. The châteaux of France would crumble, the fountains of Rome be silenced, and the sense of freedom with which she had looked down upon the Triton from 2 Piazza Barberini irrevocably gone. In place of these the Orchard House waited for her at the end of the grand tour along a road that inevitably led not to Rome, but to a New England village called Concord (211).

The word choice of Louisa's biographer is revealing. Louisa's return to England and then to the United States reflects the parable of her life and writing career. In suggesting the "inevitability" of her return to her family's house, the verbs "crumble" and "silence" effectively allude to the shattering of her dreams and the stifling of her voice as a prelude to an "irrevocable" loss of freedom. Thus, after mentioning the «pleasures» (206) and «delights» (211) that Louisa experimented in Rome and in Italy, this passage seals the author's renunciation to her literary passions and true vocation that were rekindled for the last time during her stay in Rome. The date indeed coincides with the end of Louisa's production of Gothic thrillers (with the notable exception of *A Modern Mephistopheles*, published in 1877). We can assume that, had she stayed in Rome, Louisa may have found, like Margaret Fuller, her true voice, or rather might have given the voice she had already found full vent. One may indeed wonder, as Stephen King did in his *New York Times* review of Alcott's rediscovered thriller, *A Long Fatal Love Chase*, «what kind of writer she might have been had she been able to cast the malignantly conventional spirit of Professor Bhaer[5] from her, and to take her thrillers as seriously as her feminist editors and elucidators do today» (17).

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[5] In *Little Women*, Frederick Bhaer is the character that urges Jo March to give up writing the "blood and thunder tales" that she enjoyed so much.

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