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The Rhetorical Use and Abuse of Fiction: Eating Books in Late Nineteenth-Century America

Steven Mailloux

Reade not to contradict, nor to belieue,
but to waigh and consider. Some bookes
are to bee tasted, others to bee swallowed,
and some few to bee chewed and digested.
—Francis Bacon, “Of Studies” (1597).

Do not read as a glutton eats. Digest your books, turn them into
nourishment, make them a part of your life that lives always.
—Annie H. Ryder, *Go Right On, Girls! Develop
Your Bodies, Your Minds, Your Characters* (1891).

In December 1884 the Philadelphia *Bulletin* published a letter from
a Texas correspondent. It began: “I am a young woman, twenty-one years

I thank the audiences at Duke University and the University of Toledo who responded to early versions of this paper. I am also grateful to participants in the Rhetoric Colloquium at the University of Toledo, especially Wallace Martin and Don Bialostosky, for their incisive criticisms and helpful suggestions. Above all, I thank my colleague John Crowley for copies of *The Story of a Bad Boy* and *Peck’s Bad Boy*, and Don Pease for his invitation to contribute an essay to this collection.

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old, and am called bright and intelligent. I fear I have seriously impaired my mind by novel reading. Do you think I can restore it to a sound and vigorous condition by eschewing novels and reading only solid works?" The editor responded to this letter first by commenting that the writer "proves herself a less hopeless case than most of her sisters in the east, who are not only saturated with the dilute sentimentality of fiction, but who also are completely satisfied with their condition." He then went on to advise these "young ladies who feed their brains with novels, and their palates with confectionery": Avoid "silly or pernicious trash"; shun "the monstrous volume of wishy-washy, sensational or at best neutral fiction which the reading public demands."¹

A month after this exchange appeared, an early American notice of *Huckleberry Finn* began "'Good wine needs no bush;' and a book by Mark Twain needs no beating about the bush. One takes it as children do sweetmeats, with trusting confidence."²

What I will try to do in this essay is tease out the cultural implications of the tropes used here to describe novel reading in late nineteenth-century America. This seemingly straightforward task will take me rather far afield as I examine two historical moments in the use and abuse of fiction: the late 1860s and, more briefly, the mid-1880s. The former period saw the enormous popularity of such children's fiction as Alcott's *Little Women* and Aldrich's *Story of a Bad Boy*, the development of the reformatory and placing-out movements in the disciplining of juvenile delinquents, and soon the publication of Abbott's influential child-rearing guide, *Gentle Measures for the Management and Training of the Young*. The latter years, the mid-eighties, witnessed the establishment of the Modern Language Association of America, the controversies over such juvenile fictions as *Peck's Bad Boy* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the appearance of advice books such as *Hold Up Your Heads, Girls* and *Home, Health, Happiness*, and the introduction of literary study into the Elmira State Reformatory by the nation's leading reformatory theorist, Zebulon Brockway.

In my analysis, I will sketch out how American cultural rhetoric presented and orchestrated the effects of reading fiction for its audiences, whether white middle-class adult males or working-class female adolescents. This project grows out of a chapter in my book, *Rhetorical Power*, where I present a Foucauldian reading of the cultural reception of *Huckle-*

1. "Young Women and Novels," *Philadelphia Bulletin*, rpt. in *Austin Daily Statesman*, 28 December 1884, p. 2.

2. *Detroit Free Press*, 10 January 1885, p. 8.

berry Finn. There my goal was to explain why race or the “Negro Problem” played no explicit role in the reviews of Mark Twain’s novel. I argue, in effect, that the cultural conversation of the mid-1880s demonstrated less anxiety about race relations than it did about juvenile delinquency and that the cultural censors reviewing *Huckleberry Finn* were preoccupied less with racist segregation practices than with the “Bad-Boy Boom” and the negative effects of reading fiction.³

The present essay takes up where this argument left off, not only by investigating other gendered assumptions about the bad effects of reading fiction but also by extending the analysis of how cultural rhetoric enables and constrains the interpretation and use of fiction at specific historical moments. Cultural rhetoric does this, I will show, by constructing and managing the effects of reading novels at various cultural sites: the home, the reformatory, and perhaps the university.

Taking up Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* at the outset and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* near the end, I will argue that the cultural use of fiction involved, among other things, the circulation and transformation of particular tropes and arguments through various narratives of “evil reading,” “juvenile delinquency,” and “social disorder.” I will focus on two special aspects of this cultural rhetoric: the materiality of its tropes and the disciplinary function of its arguments. In short, I will claim that the cultural talk about reading fiction was focused by an interpretive rhetoric of self-transformation and inner discipline, a late nineteenth-century American version of what Foucault called in his last works “technologies of the self.”⁴

Because the historical argument of this essay gets rather detailed at times, I would like to lay out for you in rather rough form the results so far of this work in progress, my study of the cultural rhetoric of reading fiction. I have been struck most by the materiality, or better, the physicality of the tropes used for reading in the late nineteenth century: reading as eating, critical reading as an exercise in mental discipline, and evaluative reading as “moral gymnastics,” in Twain’s vivid phrase.⁵ Such tropes and their ac-

3. *Rhetorical Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), chap. 4.

4. Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986); and *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

5. Samuel Clemens to Pamela Moffett, 15 April 1885, in *Mark Twain: Business Man*, ed. Samuel Charles Webster (Boston: Little, Brown, 1946), p. 317.

comparing arguments assume the close cultural connection among moral order, mental development, and bodily exercise that I will make more explicit by examining late nineteenth-century rhetoric. These rhetorical interconnections, I claim, enabled not only the development of a new kind of children's literature after the Civil War but also reforms in the cultural management of delinquency and perhaps even the institutionalization of literary study in the university.

To start with, then, let me suggest two ways of interpreting the physicality of the tropes of reading. One way is to interpret the comparisons figuratively, as the nineteenth century sometimes did: reading as eating or gymnastics or discipline all symbolized the widely held social belief in the actual positive or negative effects of reading on the nineteenth-century reader, especially the vulnerable child, the malleable adolescent, and the potential criminal. But there is another way to read these tropes: interpreting the metaphors literally, again as the nineteenth century sometimes did. Literalizing these physical tropes means to institute practices that make reading itself part of the specific disciplinary targeting of the body. The rhetorical logic goes something like this: in the figurative meaning, reading is like eating in that both affect the individual though in very different ways, one mental, the other physical; then in the literalizing of the trope, reading and eating are viewed as only slightly different aspects of the same activity, the physical ingestion of nourishment (for mind and body); and what follows from this is that the regulation of reading and eating becomes part of the same material disciplining of individual subjects.

Because this distinction between figurative and literal interpretation is somewhat slippery in theory and always historically contingent in actual practice, I will present a concrete example of its functioning, an example that will introduce the first cultural sphere in which I want to locate the use of reading fiction: the social theorizing about child-rearing and juvenile delinquency.

1

By the early nineteenth century, the Enlightenment view of childhood exerted strong and steady pressure on the ideology of parenting throughout middle-class American society. An influential Lockean pedagogy advocated a balance between parental love and filial duty, an emphasis that shifted child-rearing toward less authoritarian and more child-centered practices and established a new preoccupation with affectionate

discipline.⁶ The Lockean view of successful childhood fostered a reconception of its opposite, juvenile delinquency. Beginning in the mid-1820s, new institutions emerged to deal with the problem of young law-breakers, separating them from adult criminals and prescribing different forms of discipline and punishment. In 1825 the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents was organized, and it soon established the New York House of Refuge, the first of several such institutions founded before the Civil War.⁷

These houses of refuge built for handling juvenile delinquents were, in a sense, only miniature adult prisons. Though the managers of these institutions sometimes compared them to public schools, they also affirmed, as one historian has put it, that a refuge “was a ‘juvenile penitentiary,’ a prison scaled down to children’s size and abilities. Of necessity, its officers were caretakers forced to regard inmates as potentially dangerous criminals with vicious habits requiring thorough eradication.”⁸ Built as large custodial institutions, refuge corrective practices often appeared to exemplify punishment rather than reform as their goal. But in the 1850s an anti-institutional rhetoric began influencing the theory and practice of delinquent management as preventative agencies and reform schools started replacing some houses of refuge.

One such preventative agency was the New York Children’s Aid Society, founded by Charles Loring Brace in 1853. Brace studied at Yale in the 1840s, where he was inspired by the lectures of Horace Bushnell, author of the highly influential book *Views of Christian Nurture* (1847).

6. Cf. Steven L. Schlossman, *Love and the American Delinquent: The Theory and Practice of ‘Progressive’ Juvenile Justice, 1825–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 50: “As in earlier periods, the ultimate aim of child rearing was to cultivate obedience and instill an unwavering moral sense. But now the motivational techniques were to be different: the stress was on persuasion, kindness, empathy—what I term affectional discipline—rather than on breaking a child’s will through force.” Also see the detailed analysis of advice manuals on child-rearing in Bernard Wishy, *The Child and the Republic: The Dawn of American Child Nurture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), chaps. 1–8; and Richard H. Brodhead’s discussion of “disciplinary intimacy” in “Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America,” *Representations* 21 (Winter 1988): 67–96.

7. See Robert S. Pickett, *House of Refuge: Origins of Juvenile Justice Reform in New York State, 1815–1857* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1969); Robert Mennel, *Thorns and Thistles: Juvenile Delinquents in the United States, 1825–1940* (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 1973), chap. 1; and Schlossman, *Love and the American Delinquent*, chaps. 2–3.

8. Schlossman, p. 28.

Bushnell emphasized the role of parents in using their sensitivity and feelings to shape their children's characters and to extend God's grace to the individual boy or girl. He used organic metaphors to describe the process of child-rearing, calling the parent "God's gardener," and he rhetorically reversed the institutional emphasis in dealing with juvenile delinquents by referring to the family as "God's reformatory."⁹

Brace literalized Bushnell's tropes by advocating that delinquents not be institutionalized in houses of refuge but be "placed out" with farm families whose influence would cultivate morality in the urban children who had gone astray. As he wrote in his 1872 book, *The Dangerous Classes of New York, and Twenty Years' Work Among Them*, "The founders of the Children's Aid Society early saw that the best of all Asylums for the outcast child, is the *farmer's home*. . . . [T]he cultivators of the soil are in America our most solid and intelligent class."¹⁰ In Brace's rhetoric, farmers of the land become the best framers of the children.

The anti-institutional placing-out movement with its ideological rhetoric of the family had its institutional counterpart in the introduction of the "cottage plan" into state reformatories. Also called the "family system," this approach to rehabilitation differed radically from the old custodial model of the adult prisons and juvenile houses of refuge. Rather than one large building for incarceration, the cottage plan called for several smaller buildings each with its own family or group of inmates.¹¹ This new architectural organization of delinquents was coupled with a new style of management that followed from the rhetoric of affectionate discipline already at work in theories of child-rearing.

The first family plan in America was introduced into the first state reformatory for female delinquents, the Massachusetts State Industrial School for Girls in Lancaster. The trustees wrote in their first annual report in 1856 that the reformatory "is to be a *home*. Each house is to be a *family*, under the sole direction and control of the matron, who is to be the *mother* of the family. The government and discipline are strictly parental. It is the design . . . to educate, to teach [the girls] industry, self-reliance, morality and religion, and prepare them to go forth qualified to become useful and respectable members of society. All this is to be done, without stone walls,

9. Bushnell, *Views of Christian Nurture*, quoted in Mennel, p. 36.

10. Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work among Them* (New York: Wynkoop & Hallenbeck, 1872), p. 225.

11. Mennel, pp. 35–42, 52–56.

bars or bolts, but by the more sure and effective restraining power—the *cords of love*.”¹²

Even where the architecture remained custodial and the prison policy more authoritarian, the rhetoric of affectionate discipline—the cords of love—made headway at least in the case of antebellum prisons for women. For example, the first woman’s prison in the United States was the Mt. Pleasant Female Prison at Ossining, New York, where beginning in 1844 the chief matron, Eliza Farnham, experimented with reform practices that emphasized education and sympathy rather than punishment. The techniques she introduced prefigured the post–Civil War reformatory movement and the gentler management techniques in dealing with juvenile delinquency. Among the practices Farnham initiated was the use of fiction for reformatory effect. In 1846 she added novels such as *Oliver Twist* to the prison library against the wishes of the Sing Sing chaplain who viewed all novel reading as irreligious.¹³

After the Civil War, Zebulon Brockway led the movement to replace the large impersonal custodial institutions like the New York House of Refuge with reformatories specializing in more individualized technologies of discipline. As superintendent of the Detroit House of Correction, he developed the educational practices that aimed to reform young male criminals, both adolescent and young adult. He visited the Lancaster Massachusetts Industrial School for Girls and was deeply impressed by its family system, its gentler disciplinary techniques, and its domestic training. Then in 1868 he helped establish the Detroit House of Shelter, affiliated with his House of Correction but restricted to female prisoners, including “wayward girls.”¹⁴ The institution’s inspectors described the shelter’s aims: “It is intended to receive here as into a home, women who . . . seem willing to accept a reform of life. It is intended that they should be received here into a family life, where they shall receive intellectual, moral, domestic, and industrial training, under the influence, example and sympathy of re-

12. Trustees, *First Annual Report*, p. 6, quoted in Schlossman, pp. 40–41. Also see Barbara M. Brenzel, *Daughters of the State: A Social Portrait of the First Reform School for Girls in North America, 1856–1905* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), chap. 4.

13. Estelle B. Freedman, *Their Sisters’ Keepers: Women’s Prison Reform in America, 1830–1930* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), p. 48; and Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Partial Justice: Women in State Prisons, 1800–1935* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985), p. 18.

14. Rafter, p. 26.

fined and virtuous women.”¹⁵ Describing one of the rituals that made up an important part of her reformatory routine, Emma Hall, the second matron, wrote in her annual report:

[T]he most interesting feature of the house, and I am prone to say the most useful, is the Thursday evening exercise and entertainment. On this evening the whole family dress in their neatest and best attire. All assemble in our parlor . . . and enjoy themselves in conversation and needlework, awaiting the friend who week by week on Thursday evening, never failing, comes . . . to read aloud an hour entertaining stories and poetry carefully selected and explained.

The ritual of reading to the inmates was repeated in a more formal setting on Sundays when Brockway as superintendent would himself visit the shelter and would, in Hall’s words, read “to the assembled family from suitably selected literature.”¹⁶

2

Of course, these same rituals using literature for reformatory effect were repeated in other cultural sites outside reform school walls. Similar scenes are represented many times in a piece of fiction published in the same year as the founding of the Women’s House of Shelter. In Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, the intended girl audience could read how the March daughters gathered each evening, talking and sewing together, often listening to their mother read from some suitable fiction or tell them some uplifting story. During a scene very much like that described by Hall, one of the March daughters exclaims: “Tell another story, mother; one with a moral to it. . . . I like to think about them afterwards, if they are real, and not too preachy.”¹⁷

“Real and not too preachy” is an apt description of how Alcott’s contemporary audience evaluated *Little Women* itself. The conservative Presbyterian periodical *Hours at Home* called the book a “capital story for girls” and later declared, “It will delight and improve the class to whom it is espe-

15. Detroit House of Correction *Annual Report* (1868), p. 7; quoted in Rafter, p. 26.

16. Hall’s 1872 report quoted in Zebulon Reed Brockway, *Fifty Years of Public Service: An Autobiography* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1912), pp. 410–11.

17. Louisa M. Alcott, *Little Women, or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy* (Boston: Roberts, 1868), p. 69. All further citations will be by page number in my text.

cially addressed." In a notice of the sequel, a reviewer for the *Commonwealth* wrote, *Little Women* "was one of the most successful ventures to delineate juvenile womanhood ever attempted." The sequel "continues the delight—it is the same fascinating tale, extended without weakening, loading the palate without sickishness."¹⁸ As many literary historians have noted, Alcott's realistic characters represented a departure from the idealized good girls and good boys in the dominant modes of didactic children's fiction.

Little Women, published in October 1868, tells the story of the family life of the four March daughters. Amy, Beth, Jo, and Meg range in age from 12 to 16, all at that stage of development the later nineteenth century came to call the period of adolescence. The popularity of this domestic novel among its youthful readers called forth a sequel almost immediately, and *Little Women, Part Second* appeared in April 1869, picking up the narrative three years later and telling the story of the courtship and marriage of the daughters. The first volume emphasized the perseverance of stable principle and the reading and imitation of books, while the second volume emphasized growth into early adulthood and the production of books and children. In the first, reading books is a synecdoche for adolescents gaining inner stability and self-discipline, while in the second, writing books is a metonymy for change and growth into maturity. Here I will discuss only the first volume and its relation to my essay's thesis.

In trying to decipher what effects reading *Little Women* had on some of its 1868 readers and to what uses they put the fiction, we might turn again to the contemporary reviews. A writer in *Arthur's Home Magazine* summarized both the plot and its "not too preachy" moral: "The father is in the army, and it is to please him that his daughters make an effort of a year to correct certain faults in their dispositions. In this they are quite successful, and the father comes home, after many sad war scenes, to find his little ones greatly improved in many respects, a comfort and joy to both their parents."¹⁹ We might say that, at least for this reviewer, Alcott comes closest to declaring her message when she has the mother read aloud a

18. *Hours at Home* 8 (November 1868): 100, and *Hours at Home* 9 (June 1869): 196—both quoted in Richard L. Darling, *The Rise of Children's Book Reviewing in America, 1865–1881* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1968), p. 242; and *Commonwealth* 7 (24 April 1869): 1—rpt. in Madeleine B. Stern, ed., *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), p. 82.

19. *Arthur's Home Magazine* 32 (December 1868): 375.

letter from the father, who, too old to be drafted, had volunteered as a chaplain during the Civil War. Referring to his four daughters, the father writes to his wife: "I know . . . they will be loving children to you, will do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully, that when I come back to them I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women" (18).

This letter from an absent father both symbolizes and literally names the disciplinary strategy that is so much a part of this novel's rhetorical unfolding. First, in its consequent influence—despite its author's absence—the letter symbolizes the patriarchal power, off-stage though it might be, that continues to control the action of the story and the life of the family. Second, and more important, the letter explains how this power works, literally naming the strategy of familial love that fosters inner self-discipline.

It is this latter thematization that I wish to explore here in some detail. As we have seen, by the 1850s theories of child-rearing, educational practices, and institutional policies for dealing with juvenile delinquency had all been influenced by a rhetoric of affectionate discipline, which emphasized sympathy over severity, internal motivation over external control, shaping character through love rather than breaking will by punishment. By the late sixties, a cultural rhetoric circulated using images of the "family home" to represent this constellation of techniques for gentle management.

Throughout *Little Women*, the comforting, supportive home with its atmosphere of familial love remains a constant presence, a background against which all the individual problems are worked out. The Marches are a "happy family" (321) despite their lack of money. A dissatisfied daughter comes to realize that "home *is* a nice place, though it isn't splendid" (142). The mother warns her daughters about yearning after "splendid houses, which are not homes, because love is wanting" (146). And when the first daughter is about to leave the home, her sister exclaims: "I just wish I could marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family" (295).

But familial love is not represented as an end in itself. Remember the absent father's letter: he predicts and thus requests that his "loving children . . . do their duty faithfully." The mother takes special care to teach her daughters, by example and precept, the lesson of duty towards others. After letting them off their household chores for a week, she remarks on "what happens when every one thinks only of herself. Don't you feel that it is pleasanter to help one another, to have daily duties which make leisure sweet when it comes, and to bear or forbear, that home may be comfortable

and lovely to us all?" (172). With the house in a shambles from neglect of their duties, the daughters learn their lesson.

Understanding one's duty is not, however, the most important lesson to be learned. Again the father's letter: his "loving children" must "fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully that when [he] comes home to them [he] may be fonder and prouder than ever of [his] little women." Being a little woman means gaining self-control—not by obeying external laws but through achieving inner discipline. Being a little woman means constituting oneself as a certain kind of subject, employing a particular technology of the self.

And how is this self-discipline to be achieved? For Jo March, the author's alter-ego, this self mastery must take place by fighting her "bosom enemy" within. In an early chapter, the narrator comments that "Jo had the least self-control" for "anger . . . her bosom enemy was always ready to flame up and defeat her; and it took years of patient effort to subdue it" (111). This patient effort demanded a self-surveillance that had to be constant: her mother, who had the same inner conflict, advised Jo to "keep watch over your 'bosom enemy'" (121). Jo's self-discipline was to earn her, in the narrator's words, "the sweetness of self-denial and self-control" (122).

And it is precisely here that the use of literature is employed just as strategically as it had been in girls' reformatories. Alcott uses Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to organize her narrative, inspire her characters, and figure their growth in self-discipline. Alcott's "Preface" adapts a passage from *Pilgrim's Progress* to express the wish that her own book would make her readers "pilgrims better, by far, than thee or me." It is Bunyan's book that Mrs. March cites to encourage her daughters on the path to reformation: referring to a children's game modeled on *Pilgrim's Progress* that they used to play, she says, "Now, my little pilgrims, suppose you begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far on you can get before father comes home" (20). Meg comments that in "trying to be good . . . the story may help us," while Jo finds that reading her personal challenge as parallel to Christian's "lent a little romance to the very dull task of doing her duty" (20–21). For the rest of the novel, *Pilgrim's Progress* not only supplements the Bible as a "guide-book" (21) for the girls, but it also functions as an explicit gloss on their inner struggles. For example, the chapter describing Jo's battle with anger, her bosom enemy, is entitled "Jo Meets Apollyon." Other chapters have such titles as "Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful," "Meg Goes to Vanity Fair," and "Amy's Valley of Humiliation."

Thus, the reader of *Little Women* can use *Pilgrim's Progress* to interpret the girls' inner lives while they use it as a guide to self-discipline, for writing the selves they wish to be. Jo tells her friend Laurie to change his life, to "turn over a new leaf and begin again," but he responds: "I keep turning over new leaves, and spoiling them, as I used to spoil my copy-books" (314). Such new beginnings are many times more frequent for the daughters than for their young male friend. Their resolutions to try harder directly follow from their repeated examinations of conscience and their frequent confessions of failure to their mother. And this secularization of Christian self-disciplining through confession is aided by the reading of books like *Pilgrim's Progress*. Indeed, reading as self-reform takes place while the daughters read *about* self-reform. Consuming books like *Pilgrim's Progress* helps the girls re-figure the disorderly process of growing up as an orderly progression of moral development.

But such books are not all the daughters read. "Meg found her sister eating apples and crying over the 'Heir of Redcliffe.' This was Jo's favorite refuge; and here she loved to retire with half a dozen russets and a nice book" (42). Reading and eating are joined together in various ways throughout the story. At one point, Jo offers to read to Laurie and then brings food instead (74–75). While reading aloud to her aunt, Jo would nod off over a book she disliked and give "such a gape" that her aunt would ask what she "meant by opening [her] mouth wide enough to take the whole book in at once." "I wish I could and be done with it" was her reply (65). And then there was Scrabble, Jo's pet rat, "who, being likewise of a literary turn, was fond of making a circulating library of such books as were left in his way, by eating the leaves" (217). And, of course, Jo herself is called a "bookworm" (8) constantly feeding on romances and novels of her liking.

The use of fiction for female self-discipline and pleasure can be briefly contrasted to that found in a boy's book first published in the same year, 1869, as *Little Women, Part Second*. Here we will see not only the differences in how gender is rhetorically constructed in two popular children's novels but also the similarities in how reading fiction disciplines as it engenders action. Like Alcott's classic, Thomas Bailey Aldrich's *The Story of a Bad Boy* was viewed by contemporaries as a departure in children's fiction.²⁰ In this semi-autobiographical novel, Aldrich attempts a more realistic representation of boyhood, distinguishing his "bad boy" from "those

20. See, for example, William Dean Howells's review in *Atlantic Monthly* 25 (January 1870): 124.

faultless young gentlemen” usually represented in didactic Sunday School fiction.²¹ Aldrich tells the story of a boy’s pranks and adventures as he is growing up in small-town America, and his series of sketches begins the tradition of bad-boy books that Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* culminate. But it is not my purpose here to compare Aldrich’s book to Twain’s, a job ably done by recent Twain critics, but to use the book selectively to highlight the rhetorical strategies of *Little Women*.²²

Tom Bailey, the author’s alter ego, is, like Jo March, also described as a “bookworm” (45), but his appetite is more limited and his taste in books quite different from the romances Jo reads for entertainment or the books, like *Pilgrim’s Progress*, she studies and tries to imitate. Of his first reading of the *Arabian Nights* and particularly *Robinson Crusoe*, the adult narrator says: “The thrill that ran into my fingers’ ends then has not run out yet. Many a time did I steal up to this nest of a room, and, taking the dog’s-eared volume from its shelf, glide off into an enchanted realm, where there were no lessons to get and no boys to smash my kite” (45). The young Tom later found a trunk full of more “novels and romances,” which he “fed upon like a bookworm” (45).

What Tom learns in reading his books differs a bit from what the March girls learn in reading theirs. From Thomas Hughes’s British boys’ book, *Tom Brown’s School Days at Rugby*, the American Tom takes the lesson “Learn to box . . . there’s no exercise in the world so good for the temper, and for the muscles of the back and legs” (111–12). And the only duty that seems to concern Tom is the duty to be loyal to his secret gang and to have as many adventures and pull off as many pranks as possible with them. Besides standing by each other, the members of his secret society, the Rivermouth Centipedes, “had no purpose, unless it was to accomplish as a body the same amount of mischief which we were sure to do as individuals. To mystify the staid and slow-going Rivermouthians was our frequent pleasure” (103).

Like his more famous namesake, Tom Sawyer, Bailey’s fancy is en-

21. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, *The Story of a Bad Boy* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1870), p. 8. All further citations will be made by page number in my main text.

22. On Aldrich, Twain, and bad-boy fiction, see especially Albert E. Stone, Jr., *The Innocent Eye: Childhood in Mark Twain’s Imagination* (1961; rpt. [Hamden CT]: Archon Books, 1970), pp. 58–90; and Alan Gribben, “‘I Did Wish Tom Sawyer Was There’: Boy-Book Elements in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*,” in *One Hundred Years of Huckleberry Finn: The Boy, His Book, and American Culture*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer and J. Donald Crowley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), pp. 149–70.

flamed by the adventure books he reads. Moreover, he comments on how "hints and flavors of the sea . . . feed the imagination and fill the brain of every healthy boy with dreams of adventure" (147) and notes that "all the male members of [his] family . . . exhibited in early youth a decided talent for running away. It was an hereditary talent. It ran in the blood to run away" (236). Reading and imitating adventure books was as much a part of Tom Bailey's self-fashioning as those reading activities described earlier were a part of Jo March's self-disciplining. The different gender roles constructed by such narratives may be obvious, but it is only Alcott's more perceptive novel that explicitly marks these differences. Indeed, she ironically foregrounds them throughout her narrative by having Jo constantly allude to her preference for the opportunities available to boys but not to girls. To her best male friend, she laments: "If I was a boy we'd run away together, and have a capital time; but as I'm a miserable girl, I must be proper, and stop at home" (309).

Perhaps more important for my purposes here is the difference between the genres to which Alcott's and Aldrich's books belong. Alcott's is a female bildungsroman, with the adolescent girls molding their characters "as carefully as [Amy] moulds her little clay figures" (324), a simile used by Mrs. March to describe the growth of one of her daughters.²³ In contrast, Aldrich's book is finally only a series of sketches, more like a picaresque, taking his younger self through a series of adventures with no change in his character. But less apparent are the underlying similarities in the effects of the fictions, both as represented and performed. As represented in the two books, fiction affects internal motivation through imitation; and reading fiction has actual physical effects, whether in Jo's crying over *Wide, Wide World* or in Tom's thrilled finger tips in reading *Robinson Crusoe*. And as rhetorical performances themselves, both books, described as realistic by their readers, become useful as models for "appropriate" adolescent behavior. I have dwelt on the technologies of the self, the example of self-discipline offered by *Little Women*, but *The Story of a Bad Boy* also made for useful, that is safe, reading according to a new view of male youth then developing in the later nineteenth century.

Aldrich's book dramatized this emerging view that bad boys (at least

23. See Eve Kornfeld and Susan Jackson, "The Female Bildungsroman in Nineteenth-Century America: Parameters of a Vision," *Journal of American Culture* 10 (Winter 1987): 69–75.

middle-class bad boys) weren't doomed to become adult criminals. By telling his story as an adult looking back on his adolescent self, Aldrich makes it clear to his young and old readers that this sample of "delinquency" is only a temporary stage soon to be outgrown. No special intervention seems necessary. Sometime between the story told and its telling, the bad boy develops naturally into the respectable adult narrator. In this implication and the narrator's indulgent attitude toward the bad boy's pranks, we see a literary preview of G. Stanley Hall's later influential theory of adolescence, a scientific theory advocating a more tolerant attitude toward temporary youthful deviance. Hall suggested that "normal children often pass through stages of passionate cruelty, laziness, lying, and thievery" and that perhaps "a period of semicriminality is normal for all healthy boys." He argued that "magnanimity and a large indulgent parental and pedagogical attitude is the proper one toward all, and especially juvenile offenders."²⁴ Or as the town watchman puts it in Aldrich's story, "Boys is boys" (77).

Finally, as others have pointed out, Tom Bailey, like Tom Sawyer after him, is one of the "good bad boys," entertaining to his young male readership and non-threatening to his adult audience.²⁵ Even if there are few of the examinations of conscience and self-disciplining rituals that we find abundantly in *Little Women*, the adventurous spirit supposedly fostered by *The Story of a Bad Boy* certainly has its limits, as Tom refuses to disobey his guardian on more serious matters and, in one of the few self-examinations in the book, we see a boy motivated less by anxiety over a beating than embarrassment inspired by affectionate discipline: "It was n't the fear of any physical punishment that might be inflicted; it was a sense of my own folly that was creeping over me; . . . I had examined my conduct from every stand-point, and there was no view I could take of myself in which I did not look like a very foolish person indeed" (249). Thus, Aldrich himself is most accurate when he concludes: "So ends the Story of a Bad Boy—but not such a very bad boy, as I told you to begin with" (261).

24. G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York: D. Appleton, 1904), 1: 335, 404, and 339. In the first quotation Hall is speaking approvingly of a suggestion by Cesare Lombroso, and in the second he is repeating a claim of his own student, Edgar J. Swift.

25. See Leslie Fiedler, "Good Good Girl and Good Bad Boy," *New Leader* 41 (14 April 1958): 22–25; and Judith Fetterley, "The Sanctioned Rebel," *Studies in the Novel* 3 (Fall 1971): 293–304.

3

We must leave the late 1860s to find a bad bad boy. And in our move to the mid-1880s we will see further cultural permutations in the uses of fiction and the tropes of reading. A comic culmination of the bad boy book appeared in 1883, when George W. Peck published *Peck's Bad Boy and His Pa*. The central character, Hennery, is much more opposed to authority in his attitude and sadistic in his pranks, and readers are encouraged to laugh at the adult victims of the bad boy's cruel practical jokes. Peck's Bad Boy came to symbolize the worst fears of middle-class parents, as newspapers encouraged these fears with comments like the following from the *Baltimore Day*:

When we speak of the pernicious influence of the dime novel or the Jesse James style of border drama we should not forget that there are other and more insidious ways of corrupting youth, and no better illustration of this could be given than the fact that when a number of boys in Milwaukee, of respectable parentage, were recently arrested for barn burning and other wanton outrages, the boast of one of them to the magistrate was: "I am Peck's bad boy, and don't you forget it."²⁶

At stake here is the shaping of youthful identity, and this boy "of respectable parentage" boasts about the fashioning already accomplished. The disciplinary techniques of family and reform school are no match, it seems, for the rhetorical self-fashioning that produced this bad boy imitator.²⁷

At least in this newspaper report, Peck's Bad Boy became a trope used by young law-breakers for self-definition. How widespread such molding of inner lives came to be remains problematic. But if 1880s juvenile voices are hard to hear, adult voices are not. Whatever juvenile subjects made out of Peck's Bad Boy, many adults were convinced that real bad boys were made out of juveniles subjected to bad boy fiction. Indeed, Peck's Bad Boy became a rhetorical figure marking a growing concern within the cultural conversation of the mid-eighties, a concern with the special dangers of adolescence and the perceived rise in juvenile delinquency.

26. *Baltimore Day*, 11 March 1884; rpt. as "Peck's Bad Play," *New York World*, 13 March 1884, p. 4. In this section I adapt and expand material from *Rhetorical Power*, chap. 4, copyright 1989 by Cornell University. Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.

27. Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 86–88, 119–20.

The titles of many 1884–85 newspaper stories testify to the cultural anxiety over what the New York *World* called “The Bad-Boy Boom.”²⁸ Reports came in from all over the country. There was “The Louisville Bad Boy,” who looks like an “angel” but “who respects persons and property least” and “who does all the wickedest and most sneaking things that can occur to a young imagination.”²⁹ In Boston there were “Boys Out Shooting/ Fired by Dime Novel Emulation Two Boys Go a Roving with Rifles.”³⁰ In Lowell there were “gangs of boy burglars” whose conduct and talk made it “evident that they were inspired by sentiment imbibed from yellow-covered literature.”³¹ The Detroit *Free Press* editorialized about “‘The Bad Boy’ of the Period” while the New York *World* reported on “Sad Juvenile Depravity/ The Astounding Record of One Week’s Crimes and Plots/The Bad Boy as a Highwayman—Youthful Lawlessness in Every Quarter of the Land—The Effect of Dime Novel Literature.”³²

These news accounts illustrate the assumptions about the dangers of reading certain kinds of fiction that led to the banning of *Huckleberry Finn* by the Concord Free Public Library, an evaluative act of reading that I have elsewhere attempted to explain at some length.³³ *Huckleberry Finn* combines the bad-boy pranks of Aldrich’s sketches with the examinations of conscience in Alcott’s bildungsroman. And in the process the novel prefigures the negative part of its reception when it satirically thematizes the potent effects of fiction on impressionable young readers. Tom Sawyer’s mind is directly affected by the romantic adventure stories he admires and then self-consciously imitates throughout the story. Though sometimes challenging his friend’s expertise, Huck is often intimidated by Tom’s superior knowledge of book-lore and usually falls in line behind his friend’s outlandish schemes. Imitating the imitator, Huck is affected by books at second hand, as he comes to admire and repeat Tom’s book-learned “style” in his own bad-boy escapades. At the end of the novel, Huck reproduces the fantasy of many an 1840s dime-novel reader when he determines to light out for the Western territories.

Alcott supposedly commented on *Huckleberry Finn*: “If Mr. Clemens cannot think of something better to tell our pure-minded lads and lasses, he

28. “The Bad-Boy Boom,” New York *World*, 26 March 1884, p. 4.

29. New York *World*, 30 March 1884, p. 20.

30. Boston *Daily Globe*, 20 February 1885, p. 2.

31. New York *World*, 21 March 1884, p. 1.

32. Detroit *Free Press*, 30 March 1884, p. 4; New York *World*, 26 March 1884, p. 2.

33. See *Rhetorical Power*, chaps. 3 and 4.

had best stop writing for them.”³⁴ Her hometown public library in Concord banned the novel from its shelves, and the library committee called it “trash of the veriest sort”: “not elevating” in its plot, “coarse” in its humor, and “irreverent” in its style. One member added: “The whole book is of a class that is more profitable for the slums than it is for respectable people.”³⁵

Of course, many other readers disagreed with this verdict. Indeed, if fiction could be abused in this way for the harm it might cause, then it followed for some that fiction could also be used to achieve beneficial effects. Another resident of Concord and a family friend of the Alcotts, Franklin Sanborn, penned one of the most laudatory reviews of *Huckleberry Finn*: “I cannot subscribe,” he wrote, “to the extreme censure passed upon this volume, which is no coarser than Mark Twain’s books usually are, while it has a vein of deep morality beneath its exterior of falsehood and vice, that will redeem it in the eyes of mature persons. It is not adapted to Sunday-school libraries, and should perhaps be left unread by growing boys; but the mature in mind may read it, without distinction of age or sex, and without material harm.”³⁶

Sanborn’s judgments are especially interesting because of the professional positions he held and the personal connections he had. He was the inspector for the Massachusetts State Board of Charities, which supervised the reform schools for juvenile delinquents. He also proposed and taught the nation’s first Applied Social Science course at Cornell University. In April 1885, shortly before he wrote the *Huckleberry Finn* review, Sanborn took his Cornell students to visit the New York State Reformatory at Elmira. The superintendent of the facility was then Zebulon Brockway, who had moved from the Detroit House of Refuge and become the foremost authority on the reformatory techniques of managing older delinquents and first-time offenders.

In 1884 Brockway had established at Elmira an English Literature class as “an experiment in a more intensive use of literature for reformative effect.”³⁷ Besides classic British drama and poetry, the curriculum soon included fiction by Goldsmith and Irving, Hawthorne and Howells, and even Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s School Days*. As the school secretary put it, litera-

34. Louisa May Alcott to Francis Hedges Butler, quoted in Thomas Beer, *The Mauve Decade: American Life at the End of the Nineteenth Century* (1926; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 9.

35. “‘Huckleberry Finn,’” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 17 March 1885, p. 1.

36. “Our Boston Letter,” *Springfield Daily Republican*, 27 April 1885, p. 2.

37. Brockway, *Fifty Years*, p. 273.

ture was studied “over and over and minds heretofore innocent of culture became saturated with the drinkable gold of the classics.”³⁸ But the reformative effect intended by reading such books went beyond simply using good literature to teach love of culture and desirable morality. The results of the first examinations for the course showed signs “of mental confusion, of indifference, of ineffectual groping after an author’s very palpable meaning, signs” which the instructors read as revealing “a likely material for mental discipline of the most valuable kind.” Thus the school secretary concluded, “The only means of removing these difficulties seemed to lie in repeated doses of the same medicine.”³⁹ For Brockway, the use of literature offered an added disciplinary bonus: the required reading for the course made it possible, he claimed, “to tell with considerable certainty at any moment what occupies the mind of any man,” thus conveniently extending the reformatory’s strategy of surveillance.⁴⁰

In its second year, 1885, the course in literary study became mandatory, with examinations being used to determine the prisoner’s grade-standing and progress towards release. Brockway later observed in his autobiography (dedicated, by the way, to Sanborn) that this educational training in literary taste was particularly enhanced by discussions in the practical morality classes. Visiting lecturers added to these classroom attempts to turn cultural enrichment into ethical improvement.⁴¹

One such visitor, as I have said, was Franklin Sanborn. While at the reformatory he noted the librarian’s negative opinion of a certain controversial novel. Subsequently, Sanborn wrote to Brockway: “I have read ‘Huckleberry Finn,’ and I do not see any reason why it should not go into your Reference Library, at least, and form the subject of a debate in your Practical Morality Class.”⁴² Perhaps Sanborn’s letter had something to do with the fact that another of the uplifting lecturers at Elmira was Mark Twain himself, who read from *Huckleberry Finn* during a visit in July 1886.⁴³

38. F. Thornton Macauley, “Report of the Secretary of Schools,” *Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the New York State Reformatory at Elmira, for the Year Ending September 30, 1885* (Elmira: Reformatory Press, 1885), p. 30.

39. Macauley, pp. 28–29.

40. Brockway, “Report of the General Superintendent,” *Annual Report of the State Reformatory at Elmira, 1885*, pp. 12–13.

41. Brockway, *Fifty Years*, pp. 273–76.

42. *The Summary*, a weekly newspaper published by the Elmira Reformatory, quoted in the *Critic*, N. S. 3 (30 May 1885): 264.

43. *Mark Twain’s Notebooks & Journals*, vol. 3, eds. Robert Pack Browning, Michael B. Frank, and Lin Salamo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 244.

4

At the end of Part Second of *Little Women*, Jo March marries Professor Bhaer and exchanges a “wilderness of books” for a “wilderness of boys,” as she and her husband establish a home for male orphans.⁴⁴ It took Alcott seven years of interrupted writing to complete the fourth and final volume of the *Little Women* series, an 1886 book called *Jo’s Boys, and How They Turned Out: A Sequel to “Little Men”*. During that period, she too was invited to local reformatories attempting to use fiction as one of many strategies for instilling self-discipline in adolescent and older inmates. In June 1879 Alcott and her father spoke to 400 young men at the Concord State Reformatory. She told a story from her earlier Civil War nursing experiences, and later described her success in affecting her listeners. First in her journal, using one of the tropes we have come to recognize, she wrote that by “watching the faces of the young men” near her, she could see that they “drank in every word,” and she became so interested in watching these faces that she forgot herself and “talked away ‘like a mother.’”⁴⁵ This maternal disciplining through fiction is typical of how Alcott represented the use of books in her domestic novels for adolescents. And her journals further demonstrate the confidence she shared with her community in the reformatory effectiveness of reading or listening to literature.

A year after Alcott’s story-telling at the Concord State Reformatory, a young former inmate paid her a visit. She wrote in her journal that he “[c]ame to thank me for the good my little story did him, since it kept him straight and reminded him that it is never too late to mend.” She concluded the entry, “Glad to have said a word to help the poor boy.”⁴⁶ The next time Alcott represented the self-disciplining that can follow from hearing the right kind of story was when she reused this incident in one of the central chapters of *Jo’s Boys*.

Dan, a neglected boy taken into the March home at Plumfield in *Little Men*, had become a young man by the time of *Jo’s Boys*, still with “wayward impulses, strong passions, and . . . lawless nature.”⁴⁷ During a

44. The first quoted phrase is from the initial volume of *Little Women*, p. 60, and the second is from Alcott, *Little Women, or Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy: Part Second* (Boston: Roberts, 1869), p. 347.

45. Alcott’s journal, June 1879, quoted in Martha Saxton, *Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott* (New York: Avon Books, 1978), p. 390.

46. Alcott’s journal, December 1880, quoted in Ednah D. Cheney, ed., *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1917), p. 340.

47. Louisa M. Alcott, *Jo’s Boys, and How They Turned Out: A Sequel to “Little Men”*

return visit, he confesses to Jo that his “devilish temper” is more than he can manage, and Jo, who had a similar “bosom enemy” in *Little Women*, responds sympathetically and counsels her ex-ward to “guard your demon well, and don’t let a moment’s fury ruin all your life. . . . Take some books and read; that’s an immense help; and books are always good company if you have the right sort” (127, 130). She gives him the Bible but also some German tales, which she uses to allegorize his search for “peace and self-control” (130).

Jo’s counsel fails, however, for when Dan leaves Plumfield on his trek west he ends up killing a man in self-defense and is thrown into prison. The prison warden was “a rough man who had won the ill-will of all by unnecessary harshness” (213), and Dan, in humiliation and despair, soon resolves to attempt an escape. But before he can bring off his plan, the prisoners are visited during chapel by a “middle-aged woman in black, with a sympathetic face, eyes full of compassion” (216). She tells them a story and gives as its moral the hope that all was not lost if they would be patient, penitent, and submissive and learn to rule themselves. Like the ex-prisoner who visited Alcott, Dan is changed by the story he hears and resolves to wait out his sentence and “like the wiser man in the story, submit, bear the just punishment, [and] try to be better for it” (218).

Alcott also visited another reformatory while writing *Jo’s Boys*. At the Women’s Prison at Sherbourne, she read a story to the inmates and took time to talk with the resident physician about the health of the female prisoners. Perhaps such a juxtaposition of activities suggests a connection made between moral and physical reform in the prison’s gentler methods of affectionate discipline, which Alcott’s journal describes as indicating “patience, love and common sense and the belief in salvation for all.”⁴⁸ Certainly the connection of the physical with the intellectual and moral development of reformatory inmates is clear in Brockway’s Elmira institution. The year after he introduced literature courses into the curriculum, the superintendent proposed an experimental “Class in Physical Culture.” The instructor, Hamilton D. Wey, reported that the object was to discover whether “physical culture as comprised in frequent baths, and massage, and daily calisthenics under the care of a competent instructor, would . . . result in at least a partial awakening and stimulation of dormant mental

(Boston: Roberts, 1886), p. 80. All further citations will be given by page number in my text.

48. Alcott’s journal, October 1879, quoted in Saxton, p. 390.

power.” The first class had some success, according to Wey, though the students’ “advancement in school work was not steadily onward, but rather intermittently progressive. . . . For a time they would learn with comparative ease and appear to assimilate their mental food, when suddenly and without apparent cause . . . their minds would cease to work” and their “mental awakening” would stop for as long as several days.⁴⁹

Wey later remarked that the foundation of his course was the “recognition of physical training as a factor in mental and moral growth,” and he criticized earlier pedagogical theories for ignoring the laws of physiology and overlooking “the physical basis of brain work.”⁵⁰ Institutional practices and scientific assumptions like Wey’s constituted a significant part of the rhetorical context in which the physicality of metaphors for reading became literalized in advice manuals and education guides of the 1870s and 80s. Chapter 17 of *Jo’s Boys* refers to several of these books, including an 1874 collection of essays edited by Anna Brackett, *The Education of American Girls*.⁵¹ In a section of her essay called “Physical Education, or, the Culture of the Body,” Brackett comments on the extreme difficulty in separating the “physical” from the “moral side of education” in considering the effects of a girl’s active imagination (62). She then notes the availability of the “most dissipating, weakening, and insidious books that can possibly be imagined” and complains about “the immense demand which there is for these average novels.” Brackett asks, “How stem this tide of insidious poison that is sapping the strength of body and mind? How, but by educating [girls] taste till they shall not desire such trash.” Such “trashy books” must be kept out of the house; when they are “not actually exciting and immoral in tone and sentiment, they are so vapid, . . . so devoid of any healthy vigor and life, that they are simply dissipating to the power of thought, and hence weakening to the will.” Brackett does not condemn all novels, only “poisonous and weakening literature.” She concludes: “as we are grateful to our parents for the care and simple regimen which preserved our physical health for us, we thank them also for the care which kept out of our way the mental food which they knew to be injurious, and for which they themselves

49. H. D. Wey, M. D., “Report of the Experimental or Class in Physical Culture,” *Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the New York State Reformatory at Elmira, for the Year Ending September 30, 1886* (Elmira: Reformatory Press, 1887), pp. 59, 66–67.

50. Wey, “A Plea for Physical Training of Youthful Criminals,” *Proceedings of the Annual Congress of the National Prison Association of the United States, Held at Boston, July 14–19, 1888* (Chicago: Knight & Leonard, 1888), pp. 185–87.

51. Anna C. Brackett, ed., *The Education of American Girls* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1874). Further citations will be made in the main text.

had been too well educated to have any taste" (64–66). In a later section on "Mental Education, or, the Culture of the Intellect," Brackett advocates "plenty of good reading" for girls (77) but also includes this advice: "Exercise . . . must, in mind as well as body, be regular, and increase steadily in its demand. . . . Our first work must be to give such judicious exercise that the mind shall acquire a habit of exercise and an appetite for it, and not to spoil at the outset the mental digestion" (75).

Brackett's more figurative use of the metaphoric link between reading and the body is echoed later in the collection by Edna D. Cheney (soon to become Alcott's first biographer). In "A Mother's Thought," she employs the trope against arguments that young women are physically incapable of strenuous intellectual activity. She rejects the claim that "an idle brain insures a healthy body" and argues that "the brain, as the ruling organ of the body, requires a healthy, rich development; and this can only be secured by regular exercise and training, fully using but not overstraining its powers" (135). She adds later: "We must remember that the brain craves thought, as the stomach does food; and where it is not properly supplied it will feed on garbage. Where a Latin, geometry, or history lesson would be a healthy tonic, or nourishing food, the trashy, exciting story, the gossiping book of travels, the sentimental poem, or, still worse, the coarse humor or thin-veiled vice of the low romance, fills up the hour—and is at best but tea or slops, if not as dangerous as opium or whisky" (137).

Indeed, throughout Brackett's collection, this rhetoric of reading serves a dual purpose: it continues to figure the physical effects of reading fiction while it gets adapted to new arguments recognizing women's abilities and advocating their rights in higher education. Brackett gives the latter argument its final form when in her concluding essay she proposes the only jury she thinks capable of evaluating the sources of women's mental and physical health: Only when we have all the cases and statistics before us, she writes, "shall we be in a condition to attempt a rational solution of the question, what it is that makes our American girls sick. . . . But . . . we venture to claim that this is a woman's question—that the women themselves are the only persons capable of dealing with it" (388).

Alcott writes this empowering rhetoric into *Jo's Boys* when she gives a different turn to her gustatory metaphors for reading. In "Among the Maids," Jo advises one of her female college students concerned about what the doctors called her "inherited delicacy of constitution":

"Don't worry, my dear; that active brain of yours was starving for good food. . . . It is all nonsense about girls not being able to study

as well as boys. . . . [W]e will prove that wise headwork is a better cure for that sort of delicacy than tonics, and novels on the sofa, where far too many of our girls go to wreck nowadays. They burn the candle at both ends; and when they break down they blame the books, and not the balls." (x)

5

In the 1870s and 80s, many college professors justified the academic study of modern languages and literatures by arguing that a philological approach to this subject matter offered as much exercise in "mental discipline" as the same study of the Greek and Latin classics.⁵² Some argued, in fact, that courses in the modern languages offered more benefits in mental training than those offered by the classical curriculum. As one professor put it: "The sense of discrimination in regard to the meaning and force of words is sharpened. The literary taste is developed by contact with" the best of modern literature. "And above all, the reasoning, judging, and combining faculties are in constant exercise."⁵³ But it was not only advocates of the new university who used physical tropes for reading and study. Even the defenders of the old college did so: Noah Porter, president of Yale, put the negative spin on the metaphors for reading novels:

The spell-bound reader soon discovers . . . that this appetite, like that for confectionary and other sweets is the soonest cloyed, and if pampered too long it enfeebles the appetite for all other food. The reader of novels only, especially if he reads many, becomes very soon an intellectual voluptuary, with feeble judgment, a vague memory, and an incessant craving for some new excitement. . . . It now and then happens that a youth of seventeen becomes almost an intellectual idiot or an effeminate weakling by living exclusively upon the enfeebling swash or the poisoned stimulants that are sold so readily under the title of tales and novels.⁵⁴

52. See Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), chap. 4; and Michael Warner, "Professionalization and the Rewards of Literature, 1875–1900," *Criticism* 27 (Winter 1985): 1–28.

53. F. V. N. Painter, "A Modern Classical Course," *Transactions of the Modern Language Association of America* 1 (1884–85), p. 116.

54. Noah Porter, *Books and Reading: or, What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them*, 4th ed. (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1877), pp. 231–32; quoted in Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "Metaphors of Reading," *Journal of Library History* 22 (Spring 1987): 149. In this extremely useful article, Ross demonstrates how the trope of reading as eat-

This last quotation illustrates the complex way in which assumptions about gender traverse the cultural rhetoric of reading in the late nineteenth century. Here the debilitating effects of novels are themselves figured as feminine: not only are female book readers susceptible to injury but male novel readers are in danger of being feminized. In any case, by the 1880s, the physical tropes for mental activity were constantly employed within the gendered assumptions about the dangers and benefits of reading books.⁵⁵ Cultural arbiters of taste worried most about boys who might become criminals through imbibing too many sensational adventure tales or crime stories and about girls who either weakened their minds by consuming sentimental romances or overtaxed their brains with too much strenuous mental exercise in the study of books. At several cultural sites, feeding on fiction was carefully monitored so the use of books would not be abused. Many agreed with the editor I quoted at the beginning of this essay, who advised his female correspondent: "Patrons of fiction—the large majority of whom are women—waste their time and fritter away their intellectual force upon [worthless] productions. . . . Let them not think that they do themselves no harm by accustoming their brain to insipid food. Like the rest of the moral, intellectual and physical man, if the mind is not exercised it deteriorates, the deterioration becoming more and more apparent after each failure to supply proper aliment."⁵⁶ Thus, the condescending editor figuratively shakes his head in despair over the poor, hopeless women readers "who feed their brains with novels and their palates with confectionary."

ing influenced the policies of librarians as they followed the lead of other groups and began professionalizing their activities in the 1870s and 80s. She writes, "The real content of a book, its ideas or information, is thought of as a *thing* that can be swallowed. The relationship between the librarian who knows which books are healthful and the passive reader who is wheedled into swallowing resembles that existing between a doctor and a patient. As Charles A. Cutter put it [in an 1881 *Library Journal* editorial], the librarian has a new role that is not just a 'book-watchman' but a 'mental doctor for his town'" (p. 157).
 55. I am not claiming that either metaphors of reading as eating or gendered assumptions about the dangers of reading fiction are unique to late nineteenth-century America. I am claiming, though, that these tropes and arguments interact and function differently than they had in the past because they inform and enable new social practices and new institutions using literature for various purposes—practices and institutions that I have been describing throughout this essay. For more on American attitudes toward female fiction reading in other periods, see Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

56. "Young Women and Novels," p. 2.