

# Playing to be Free – Louisa May Alcott and Anna Bronson Alcott Pratt's *Comic Tragedies*

YAMAMOTO Miki

## 1. Introduction

In *Little Women* (part1, 1868, part 2, 1869), Louisa May Alcott's (1832-88) most famous autobiographical novel, readers might appreciate the March sisters' plays both indoors and outdoors. In reality, the Alcott sisters themselves enjoyed plays, especially drama performances. They created the stages and clothes, allocated the roles, and acted energetically – which was their most interesting entertainment: “[T]he greatest delight of the girls was to transform themselves into queens, knights, and cavaliers of high degree, and ascend into a world of fancy and romance.” (Forward, *Comic Tragedies* 7)

In the first chapter of *Little Women*, the March sisters devote to play the drama, “The Witch’s Curse, an Operatic Tragedy” written by Jo. According to Kawanishi (1), Louisa and her sister Anna had written several dramas in 1847, when Louisa was 15 and they performed with other sisters (43-4). After Louisa’s death, six dramas were strictly selected and published under the name of *Comic Tragedies* with a subtitle “Written by ‘Jo’ and ‘Meg’ and Acted by the ‘Little Women’” (1893). Anna added the preface and explanation.

In the light of a play, *Little Women* indeed has elements of dramas. For example, Halttunen points out that this novel starts with Jo’s drama and its sequel *Jo’s Boys* (1886) ends with dramatic explanation: “[...] let the music stop, the lights die out, and the curtain fall forever on the March family” (1064). As such, this novel consists of stage productions (Halttunen 233).

The Alcott family always faced poverty, so Louisa wanted to support her family financially. She experienced jobs slightly opened to women in those days such as governess, servant, companion, and seamstress. She also wanted to be an actress. Her journal says, “Anna wants to be an actress, and so do I. We could make plenty of money perhaps, and it is a very gay life” (63). In the 1850s, when she was at the end her teen years and into her early twenties, Louisa had been on the stage as an actress (Kawanishi, 1, 43-5). Then she was affected by Shakespear, Dickens, and Goethe, which were reflected in her works. As such, she was ardent about dramas throughout her life.

In spite of the importance of the effect of dramas on Louisa, however, only a few critics point this fact out. Young, for example, finds that the element of dramas is underlying Louisa’s works. She insists that we cannot overlook dramas when we read Louisa’s writings: “In light of clear evidence that the theater and acting played an important role in Alcott’s personal life as well as in her professional writing, [...] an examination of Alcott in terms of theater must be considered” (9). However, Alcott’s dramas themselves have not been discussed thoroughly. In this paper, I would like to treat *Comic Tragedies* as independent works, not plays within a play in *Little Women*. This would enable us to clarify what was the most important topic for Louisa and her sisters in those days.

## 2. The background of *Comic Tragedies*

### 2.1 Historical background and Alcott family

The original version of *Comic Tragedies* was written when Louisa was 15, about 1845, and when America was expanding its territory to the west. It was the antebellum age of America, a period of growing conflict between the abolitionist North and the pro-slavery South. According to Eiselein and Phillips, the Alcott family supported the abolitionist and were active in the antislavery movement (20-1). Louisa also worked as a nurse at a field hospital during the Civil War. Thus the Alcott family was embroiled in the severe conflict. As oppression and emancipation are important keywords for America, so were they also for the Alcott family.

Moreover, from the 1850s to 1890s, when Louisa was in her late teens and twenties, drama performances were growing in America. Plays of Shakespeare were widely performed (Osada 4). Tragedies and comedies were especially popular, as Louisa wrote in her journal: "I like tragic plays, and shall be a Siddons if I can" (63-4). As such, dramas impact heavily on Louisa's life and writings.

### 2.2 The Characteristics of *Comic Tragedies*

As mentioned before, *Comic Tragedies* were written by both Louisa and her sister Anna. In their work, Anna calls herself "Meg," and her sister "Jo," which easily associated with *Little Women*. In *Little Women*, watching her sisters' performances, Beth praises "[...], Jo. You're a regular Shakespeare!" (12) *Comic Tragedies* is affected by Shakespeare: it has an archaic style and mainly written about royalty and titled nobility's war and/or marriage.

The number of characters in *Comic Tragedies* are few and events occur in narrow areas such as one room or one court. The March (Alcott) sisters performed two or three roles differently and quickly changed their clothes (*Comic Tragedies* 37). This may be because of the few numbers of performers and a small stage area (in the sisters' house). However, at the same time, minimizing the areas seems to have had the effect to clarify the themes Louisa focused on.

### 2.3 Outlines of dramas

Each title of the dramas shows the main characters: "Norna; or, the Witch's Course," "The Captive of Castile; or, the Moorish Maiden's Vow," "The Greek Slave," "Ion," "Bianca: an Operatic Tragedy," and "The Unloved Wife; or, Woman's Faith." To discuss these dramas profoundly, each plot of the dramas is summarized below.

#### (1) "Norna; or, the Witch's Course" (hereafter "Norna," Jo's "masterpiece" 11)

Theresa marries Count Rodolpho who turns out to be jealous and unkind and therefore she regrets the marriage. Her brother, Count Louis sometimes visits her room secretly to comfort her. However, Rodolpho finds out that someone visits her room and strongly asks her who the person is. Theresa won't answer the question so furious Rodolpho kills her. After Rodolpho leaves the room, Norna, the witch, comes and finds Theresa dead. She takes Theresa's body. Then rumor that Theresa has gone is spread throughout the town. Count Louis hears this and is told the truth by Norna. He promises revenge for Theresa.

Rodolpho has long been attracted to Leonore, the daughter of a nobleman, and asks for her hand. However, she is in a romantic relationship with Louis, which makes Rodolpho jealous. Louis is stabbed by Hugo, a bandit sent by Rodolpho. Then the witch appears in front of Leonore, telling that

Rodolpho is already married and he killed his wife. Leonore makes up her mind and unequivocally refuses Rodolpho when he comes to propose to her, which makes him angry, but she is helped by Adroian who wears a mask and knows about Louis.

(2) "The Captive of Castile; or, the Moorish Maiden's Vow" (hereafter "The Captive of Castile")

Zara, a Moor, is lost in the woods one day. She is helped by a man, and afterward she finds he is Ernest L'Estrange, the enemy English nobleman. Later she hears he is imprisoned and will receive the death penalty. She implores her father, Bernardo, for Ernest's emancipation. Bernardo accepts her wish under the condition that she will marry the man her father chooses for her. After the promise, Zara then comes to Ernest anonymously. He insists on remaining, but she releases him. She then visits the priest to tell her story. He confesses that Zara and her father have no blood relationship. After a while, Bernardo and Zara receive news that Spanish troops invade. They decide to flee separately, promising to meet after, but Ernest comes to help her. Then she decides to leave with him.

(3) "The Greek Slave"

Irene, a Greek Princess, is supposed to marry Constantine. Even though he has not met her, he dislikes Irene and wants to refuse the marriage. Knowing this, she visits the palace, disguising herself as a Greek slave, Ione. Appreciated by the Queen, Ione tries to captivate Constantine, using instruments and singing, which she is skilled at. At that time Rienzi, Constantine's vassal, is raising a rebellion, but Ione expels him, disguising herself as a spirit. Knowing her achievement, Constantine finds himself attracted her. However, the date of separation and marriage approaches. On the day of Constantine and Irene's marriage and coronation, Ione reveals herself.

(4) "Ion" (unfinished)

Cleon, the Greek prince, is arrested by Mohammed. His son Ion goes to the war front and appeals to the king to release his father instead of being arrested. However, Mohammed disagrees and he also confines Ion. Lamenting her father's cruelty, Zuleika, the daughter of Mohammed, secretly releases Ion and helps Cleon flee.

(5) "Bianca: an Operatic Tragedy" (hereafter "Bianca")

Bianca is in a romantic relationship with Adelbert, but she is being proposed to by Huon. Huon visits a witch's house and asks her to give him a potion. He puts it in Bianca's wine bottle, but it is Adelbert who drinks it. He dies in agony. Seeing him, Bianca moans and refuses Huon's proposal because she discovers his plot. Getting furious, Huon kills Bianca. However, her spirit appears in front of Huon, and he dies in agony.

(6) "The Unloved Wife; or, Woman's Faith" (hereafter "The Unloved Wife")

Adrian, who married with Nina, finds that she has lost her fortune and leaves her. After one year, regretting his action, Adrian returns to Nina in a different appearance as his friend. He knows that Adrian's friend Don Felix aims Nina's fortune, but Adrian is found and arrested by him. Don Felix proposes to Nina but she refuses. Touched by her love, Adrian reveals himself.

As mentioned above, most of all of the main characters are women with two exceptions of "Ion" and "The Captive of Castile." Why are women the main characters? The reason is that the Alcott

sisters are the ones who play in the dramas, but it should not just a matter of convenience on the part of the production. Or rather, Louisa repeatedly insists herself as “woman right’s woman” (*Hospital Sketches* 9). She has such an opinion from the time she was young. Also, she liked to play the role of a male as well as female: “Jo, of course, played the villains, ghosts, bandits, and disdainful queens; for her tragedy-loving soul delighted in the lurid parts.” (Forward, *Comic Tragedies*, 7) In the sense how men are performed by women is notable.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.4 Points

*Comic Tragedies* has several controversial points. Some of the plots have discrepancies. For example, Leonore does not notice that the masked man is Louis. Secondly, “Ion” is unfinished: after releasing his father, Ion is arrested, then the drama stops. Thirdly, some of the plots that are written seem similar. This may be due to the limitation of Louisa’s ability, however, there should be an important theme she focused on. Fourthly, while “Norna” and “Bianca” end tragically, the other four dramas end happily. Although “Ion” is unfinished, Anna explains that this drama has a happy ending (*Comic Tragedies* 208). As such, the title of this book and the dramas’ plots are controversial.

However, as mentioned above, these six dramas are not just “plays in the play,” but the independent ones. Thus, this adds on more facets for the writer Alcott: she composed not only novels, poems, experience, but also dramas—she had a façade of a playwright. Moreover, considering the time when dramas were written, we can explore what Louisa wanted to write most at that time.

## 3. Desire for liberty

In what situation are the people in dramas? Cleon’s wife in “Ion,” for example, prays for his safety but receives a tidying that he is “[d]efeated, imprisoned, condemned” (214). In this scene, Cleon has the physical deprivation of liberty. Imprisonment symbolizes not only custody but also deprivation of authority. To help his father, Ion goes to Mohammed, the Turkish King, and appeals for his father’s liberty in exchange for his own.

Secondly, “Norna” shows Theresa’s mental disablement. After marrying Rodolpho, which is her father’s will, she finds her husband “jealous and unkind.” The following soliloquy clarifies her suffering:

Forced by a father’s will to wed a stranger ere I learned to love, one short year hath taught me what a bitter thing it is to wear a chain that binds me unto one who hath proved himself both jealous and unkind. The fair hopes I once cherished are now gone, and here a captive in my splendid home I dwell forsaken, sorrowing and alone [weeps]. (17, underline added)

“Jealous and unkind,” the husband is associated with Shakespear’s *Othello*. “To wear a chain” implies that the marriage is so uncomfortable and watched vigilantly that she cannot behave freely. She has suppressed desires under her husband’s supervision.

The third example shows that even authority feels discomfort in “The Greek Slave.” In this drama, the queen is supposed to abdicate, while Constantine, her son, to become enthralled and to marry Irene, the Greek princess. However, he feels that he never comes to love her, or rather, dislikes

her. When she hears that news, Irene decides to get into the palace. She calls herself "Ione" disguising herself as a Greek slave.

When she meets Constantine, she realizes that he should be young and powerful, but in fact he is lonely and lifeless. Her friend priest interprets that "The cares of a kingdom are too much for one so young" (167). In other words, he is so young that the responsibility to reign the country is too heavy. This indicates that marriage proves that the prince becomes an adult and he must answer the country's expectations. As such, Constantine refuses Irene not only because he dislikes her, but also his future is decided beforehand. Thus the characters' mental repression is depicted repeatedly. Paradoxically, people in the dramas desire for something.

The following song Ione sings specifies what people desire:

Though the chains they bind be all of flowers,  
Where no hidden thorn may be,  
Still the free heart sighs 'neath its fragrant bonds,  
And pines for its liberty. (160, underline added)

Ione fascinates Constantine by playing instruments, singing songs, talking kindly, and showing her strong will. After the song, he extols her. She knows what moves him: he desires liberty.

In *Comic Tragedies*, "liberty" and related words are uttered considerable times. In "Ion," for example, Ion values liberty even more than his life: "Nay, I [Ion] have knelt for the last time unto Mohammed. I have offered him my liberty, my service, ay, my life itself, and he hath scorned me." (247)

As well as Ion, some characters long for others' liberty instead of their own physical freedom. "The Unloved Wife," for example, Nina is arrested instead of her husband. In spite of the situation, Nina feels "a deeper joy":

Nina. 'T is strange; here in this dark cell, tho' fettered and alone, I feel a deeper joy than when a proud and envied bride I dwelt in my deserted home. For here his foot hath trod; these walls have echoed to the voice I love; these chains so cold and heavy I more gladly wear than e'en the costly gems once clasped upon these arms, for they were his. Here his sad tears fell perchance for his captivity; but I can smile and bless the hour when I could win thy freedom, Adrian, with my poor liberty. (303, underlined added)

Nina finds her joy instead of losing her own liberty when she feels her husband is near and able to save him. What is important is that Don Felix regards her will, which means that her liberty is saved.

In addition, "Ion" and "The Captive of Castile" have similar plots. Ion in "Ion" remains after he persuades his father and helps him escape. Zara in "The Captive of Castile" succeeds in persuading her father to release Ernest. The important thing is that their will overrules the decisions of the authority. At the same time, this implies their surpassing their parents. People in the dramas want liberty from not only power and pressure but also protection as children.

As such, in Alcott's dramas, psychological freedom is placed before physical liberty. This is used in a tragic scene in "Bianca." Bianca is in a romantic relationship with Adelbert, but Huon woos repeatedly. Using his authority, Huon tries to make her obey, but she strongly refuses him. After she leaves, he makes sure of himself saying, "Proud Bianca, now art thou in my power, and shalt ere long

return the love of the once hated and despised Huon.” (265-6) Huon stresses that Bianca is under his hand, but this is only his decision or wish, which is a difference between reality and his thought. He is so opinionated that he hates her because he thinks she is proud.

At last Huon kills Bianca: “Then die, and free me [Huon] from the love and fear that hang like clouds above me [*stabs her*].” (274, underline added). He suffers from her refusal even he repeatedly asks for her love. He believes he gets liberty when Bianca dies. However, he never feels free and suffers from Bianca’s spirit that the witch calls forth. He also dies like *Richard III*. The tragic element is not only human’s death but also never being freed from agony. However, Bianca is free from Rodolpho’s power, stuck to her will.

#### 4. People who play and/or wear masks

As mentioned above, people in *Comic Tragedies* express their desire for freedom. The point is how they act to obtain it. In particular, they sometimes disguise themselves as other people and/or wear masks. When they reveal themselves, the other person feels surprised or joyful, which is the dramatic irony the audience would enjoy. However, this plot is repeatedly acted, so this has important implications not only just for performances.

##### 4.1 What masquerade enables

The best example of the effect of disguise is “The Greek Slave.” As mentioned above, the Greek princess Irene decides to enter the service of her prospective husband Constantine as Ione, a slave. She calls disguised herself “mask” and a slave “nameless girl”: “Oh, that I [Irene] could win his love unknown, and then when truly mine, to cast away the mask, and be myself again. [...] Yes, Constantine, as a nameless girl will Irene win thy heart; and when as a wife she stands beside thee, thou shalt love her for herself alone.” (152-3, underline added)

Wearing a mask means being in disguise. This indicates that Ione (Irene) can reach Constantine, and get in and out of the castle freely. She is adept at singing, playing the instruments and being a companion. Sometimes she goes to the valley to get medicinal herbs and tries to restore the prince’s health, regardless of the dangers. Sometimes she shows her strong will and makes Constantine obey: “Thou [Ione] hast led me [Constantine] to my duty; I will obey thee.” (181) This implies a reversal of the master-slave relationship. Winning the love of an unknown woman and then revealing her true identity as a woman can be an attempt to outwit authority. In other words, this drama could be read as an attempt by a woman to overthrow a powerful society. Irene gradually wins Constantine’s trust. In this case, this is her competence originally she has. As such, masking enables Irene to show her ability, witness, and true nature.

##### 4.2 Credibility of anonymity

Another way of concealing identity is anonymity. In “Ion”, for example, Ion never tells his own name until he finds his father. When he meets Mohammed, he calls himself “Son of Cleon”. In this situation, attribute is more emphasized than his name.

Also, Zuleika, Mohammed’s daughter, hides her name. She visits where Ion is arrested to release him. Ion asks her if she is a vision or spirit because she suddenly appears. She replies that she is just a woman concealing her name, nationality, and status: “I am no vision, but a mortal maiden,

come to bring thee consolation.” (236, underline added) Ion calls her “maiden,” “lady,” and “spirit of mercy” showing his trust.

The effect of anonymity is to protect themselves, free from preoccupation or prejudice. Moreover, it makes people never forget: “Lady, though I [Ion] may never know thee, never look on thee again, the memory of this brief hour will never fade.” (242)

In *Comic Tragedies*, concealing their real name assures credibility. Here, there is an issue of identity. In other words, what is their identity for them? Do they desire to be free from their own identity? In “The Captive of Castile,” for example, Zara appeals for Ernest’s release because he helped her. Her father Bernardo, however, warns her to perform princess-like manners: “Call thy pride to aid thee, Zara, and be worthy of thy noble name.” (103) As a Moorish princess, Zara is demanded to be prudent in how to behave. Although to release Ernest is the deviated behavior, her strong will can be seen. As a result, succeeding in getting his father’s approval, she comes to the English captive disguising herself as Zara’s slave. She tells the truth as if she is the third person, which is persuasive:

She [Zara herself] hath not forgot thee [Ernest], noble stranger. When thou didst lead her from the dim wood, she said a day might come when she, so weak and helpless then, might find some fit reward for one who risked his life for her. That hour hath come, and she hath sent her poor slave hither, and with her thanks and blessing to speed thee on thy way. (110)

Like Zuleika and Zara, people in *Comic Tragedies* can show their real self when they hide their identity. However, when they do so, their real self appears and behaves as they want. These dramas explore the relationship masquerading and/or anonymity, and real self. They become equal and have the same rights even if they have different status or nationality. Louisa was egalitarian, which is reflected in these dramas.

## 5. Witches, gypsy, and priests—The characters who are “free”

Another characteristic we should focus on is that witches, gypsy, and priests appear in *Comic Tragedies*. They are supportive of the main characters and depicted favorably.

Norna in “Norna”, for example, tells Louis about Rodolpho’s misdeed and revenge on him. Asked by Louis, she calls Theresa’s spirit which annoys Rodolpho. Moreover, she tells Leonore that Rodolpho already has a wife and persuades her to refuse him. The witch Hilda in “Bianca”, too, calls Bianca’s spirit and reduces Huon into despair. As such, witches have a role to help and tell people the truth.

As for the gypsy, Hagar, in “The Unloved Wife” receives Nina’s consult and gives her a poison because she longs for. Usually witches and gypsies live isolated, but people know when they fall into a difficult situation, witches and gypsy can help them. Although people keep their distance, they feel awe and respect them. When Nina’s situation seems to change for the better, Hagar decides to leave and go on a quest. Thus, the gypsy can decide what to do next by her own way. This implies that gypsies are depicted as a symbol of liberty in *Comic Tragedies*.

Why do witches and gypsies in *Comic Tragedies* understand and provide their knowledge and ability to people, especially women? Norna gives the hint:

I come not here to harm thee [Leonore], but to save thee from a fate far worse than death.

I am old Norna of the forest, and though they call me witch and sorceress, I am a woman yet, and with a heart to pity and to love. I would save thy youth and beauty from the blight I fear will fall upon thee. (44, underline added)

Although living in the isolated woods, and called a witch by people, Norna is first a woman. In other words, she is pleased, feels sorrow, and becomes angry as humans do—she is a human.

Let us look at examples of priests. Priests appear Hernando in “The Captive of Castile” and Helon in “The Greek Slave.” Considering priests, they play a unique role in Alcott dramas. For example, Hernando tells Zara the truth that she is not the daughter of the Moorish king Bernardo but the daughter of her mother and a man from England. Thus, he tacitly encourages her to resist her father. Also, Helon supports Irene to succeed in her plan. As such, priests in *Comic Tragedies* more favor and support main characters than lead people to the true way as messenger of God.

In summary, witches, gypsies, priests live freely near in nature. They are mystic and have more knowledge and ability than other people. They have a role to tell people the truth. In other words, they are symbolic of the freedom of those who gain knowledge.

## 6. The end of dramas

At the end of the two dramas, Rodolpho and Huon die in agony by suffering from spirit. On the other hand, other dramas end with implying happiness. However, this is not just a happy end. “The Unloved Wife,” for example, this ends not “they got married and lived happily ever after,” but their start as a married couple:

Life is a flower-strewn path henceforth, where I [Nina] will gladly journey if thou [Adorian] wilt be my guide; and here upon thy breast, dear love, now smiles the happy wife, — no longer the lonely and unloved one. (317, underline added)

Nina feels full of joy with her husband, but life is a “journey.” This indicates that they go to the unknown world, and, because of this, she needs his guidance.

In addition, in “The Greek Slave,” when Ione reveals herself to be Irene, Constantine delightedly receives her at the coronation:

For all thou [Irene] hast dared for me; for every fearless deed; for every loving thought, all I [Constantine] can lay before thee is a fond and faithful heart, whose reverence and love can never die, but through the pilgrimage of life shall be as true and tender as when I gave it to the slave Ione [*embraces* Irene]. (206, underline added)

Constantine calls their life “pilgrimage,” which is related to the Alcott sisters’ favorite *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1864). Although their life will be tender, it implies that life also has difficulties and trials. They seek their goal far away from where they are. This is the element of romance, and they still have longing and craving. As such, the end of these dramas are not closed as “they lived happily ever after” but opened. In the end, the freedom they truly seek must be pursued for a long time.



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## Notes

- \* The original version of this paper was orally presented at the annual meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan: Regional Branch of the Kyushu District at Seinan Gakuin University on 23 October 2022.

- 1 In the recent study, some critics sees Louisa as transgender. (Rutkowski 79)

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