

Allison Speicher, “A Space for Science: Science Education and the Domestic in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Men*.” *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 12 (2014): 63-85.

One little woman grew up to be a schoolteacher as well as the author she had longed to be. The character of Jo, in Louisa May Alcott’s sequels to her beloved children’s classic, came to combine the literary and the instructional: she took charge of Plumfield, rescued it from its original incarnation as the ghoulish home of ghastly Aunt March, and recast it as a homely school. In this marvellous article, Allison Speicher also brings together children, literature, and education, through a focus on science and domesticity in *Little Men* (1871). She explores tensions between different modes and purposes of scientific instruction, the places in which it should occur, and the shifting territories of home and school, family and career. In so doing, she reveals much of interest for literature and science scholarship about the relationship between the historical and the fictional, the instructional and fanciful; as well as what happens when different kinds of children grow up.

Speicher first draws attention to the strong connections between home, school and science in the nineteenth century, and sets out how she will “read Plumfield as a space in which Alcott assesses the potentials and limitations of science education in the home-school” (64). By delving into Alcott’s personal and professional links to education and science education, and with a close regional focus on Massachusetts, the article advocates for *Little Men* as an intervention in a specific debate over where and how to teach about nature, as it increasingly became part of school curricula, and was focused around the use of particular objects (66). The article shows how Alcott was able to present several different purposes of science education through the fictional exploration of individuated characters from naturalist Dan to medical Nan (68). Speicher details how opportunities to engage in hands-on scientific activities were provided at Plumfield and used to connect the spiritual and natural, the playful and observational, as advocated in periodical commentary at the time. She also, however, provides a more complex narrative, tracing a shift from active practice in the home towards an “incommensurability” of the domestic and the scientific in later years allied with the construction of a museum and library (79). The ultimate fate of the museum in the novel is, Speicher reminds us, to become a sewing room (82). In these ways, the article concludes, Alcott is able to use her novel as an experimental site in which to test the aims of contemporary science education, and draw out their potential for conflict as well as success (82).

In its analysis of a children’s book through regional educational periodicals and elementary scientific instruction, this article demonstrates the value of broadening out the types of sources and genres which have been the traditional focus of literature and science scholarship. It is particularly strong in its drawing together of general pedagogic recommendations with specific juvenile experiences; for example, in how *Little Men*’s narrative is developed to first build and then refine the type of science education given to the characters. It reminds literary scholars of the importance of making connections to contemporaneous debates in the history of science, and to reflect on how fictional works were recruited as means of thinking through possible consequences of theories and practices on both communities and individuals. Indeed, its overt use of fiction provokes a reconsideration of the educational environments presented in textbooks and teachers’ guides: are their schools no less real than

Plumfield, their pages just as much a thought-experiment? One response, then, to this piece would be to emphasize the possibilities of critical work on educational non-fiction, as it highlights the rich vein of material yet to be tapped. “The school is a space for science” (63, 82), Speicher begins and ends her piece: for literature and science, too, we might add.

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