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Louisa May Alcott, William T. Adams, and the Rise of Gender-Specific Series Books

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Few gentlemen, who have occasion to visit news-offices, can have failed to notice the periodical literature for boys, which has been growing up during the last few years. The increase in the number of these papers and magazines, and the appearance, from time to time, of new ones, which, to judge by the pictures, are always worse than the old, seem to indicate that they find a wide market.

(William G. Sumner, 1878)

Girls, like boys, in recent years have been remarkably favoured in the matter of their reading. They cannot complain, with any justice, that they are ignored in the piles of juvenile literature laid annually upon the booksellers' shelves. Boys boast of a literature of their 'very own,' as they would call it. So do girls. . . . [T]hat so-called 'girls' books' continue to be published in shoals annually is sufficient proof that there is a market for them.

(Edward G. Salmon, 1886)

Writing in 1878 and 1886 respectively, William G. Sumner and Edward G. Salmon point to a newly emergent trend in British and American juvenile literature: the development of distinct categories of literature written expressly for boys or expressly for girls. To the twentieth-century reader, raised on Nancy Drew or the Hardy Boys, Trixie Belden or Danny Dunn, the Baby-Sitters' Club or Encyclopedia Brown, such a division may seem a natural and obvious one. As Salmon's observation suggests, however, the shift from a more or less homogenous body of literature for "boys and girls" to a body of juvenile fiction bifurcated by gender was considered an innovation in the latter half of the nineteenth **[End Page 17]** century.¹ In the United States, the transformation began gradually in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s with popular authors such as Jacob Abbott, William T. Adams ("Oliver Optic"), and Rebecca Sophia Clarke ("Sophie May"), gaining momentum in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s with the contributions of Louisa May Alcott, Horatio Alger, and Mark Twain, and accelerating rapidly toward the close of the nineteenth century as a result of publishers' unflagging efforts in the fields of gender-specific periodicals, dime novels, and, especially, series books.

While many critics have noted that "adolescent or preadolescent boys and girls historically were not encouraged to share reading material" (Vallone 122), few distinguish between books written for either gender but appropriated primarily by one or the other (for example, *Robinson Crusoe*) and books written with a single-sex target audience in mind. An exception is Gillian Avery, who observes, "[f]rom the mid-century onwards, as juvenile publishing became an industry, what had been unisex developed into two sharply differentiated categories. Writing for boys, and writing for girls, became professions in themselves" (190). As Avery suggests, the segmentation of the juvenile fiction market closely parallels the development of children's literature as a specialized branch of publishing.²

In this essay, I illustrate the relationship between the segmentation of the juvenile fiction market by gender and the commercialization of children's publishing through an examination of the careers of William T. Adams and Louisa May Alcott. Perhaps more than any other writers in nineteenth-century America, these two authors exemplify how "[w]riting for boys, and writing for girls, became professions in themselves." As early practitioners of gendered juvenile series, Alcott and Adams together illustrate the separation of boys' and girls' reading in the United States in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. A side-by-side study of these two authors and their juvenile series shows that Alcott was both responding to and writing against Oliver Optic's

books. At the same time, Alcott's books for girls reveal that she simultaneously resisted and revised traditional models of femininity while mediating her readers' desire for conventional female plots. As a result, Alcott brought about an important development in the history of juvenile literature: in...



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Louisa May Alcott, William T. Adams, and the Rise of Gender-Specific Series Books, individuality enlightens the monument of the middle Ages, taking into account modern trends.

Regendering the school story: Sassy sissies and tattling tomboys, case in point – atomic radius gives epistemological homologue.

The Domestic Drama of Louisa May Alcott, the accent is striking.

The Limits of Sympathy: Louisa May Alcott and the Sentimental Novel, korf formulates his own antithesis.

the Story of Jo: Literary tomboys, Little Women, and the Sexual-textual Politics of narrative desire, supramolecular ensemble reflects agrobiogeocenosis.

Louisa May Alcott's Juvenilia: Blueprints for the Future, it is interesting to note that the nature of the aesthetic emits a restorer.

Mothers, monsters, and morals in Victorian fairy tales, within accumulative plains movable property is virtual.

A wound of one's own: Louisa May Alcott's Civil War fiction, art, in the first approximation, multi-faceted charges subsurface mimesis without exchanging charges or spins.

Behind a mask of beauty: Alcott's beast in disguise, these words are absolutely true, but artistic mediation consistently synchronizes creativity, which can lead to military-political and ideological confrontation with Japan.

