

*TRABAJO. UN RELATO DE VIVENCIAS.*

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT.

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Carme Manuel's edition and Sergio Saiz's first published translation into Spanish in 2009 of Louisa May Alcott's adult novel, *Work* (originally published in North America in 1873) represents an extraordinarily valuable contribution for Spanish academia because it will erase all prejudices and biases about her personality and prolific literary production. This valuable scholarly work marks a new insight, not only for the academic world due to the remarkable research provided in its introduction, but also an opportunity for the Spanish reading community to pay special attention again to this feminist Transcendentalist writer through this less known literary work. This is one of those women authors one might feel mistakenly familiarized with because of stereotyped ideas derived from her more popular literature for young adult readers. In contrast, she is revealed here as an engaged 19<sup>th</sup> century feminist social reformer who certainly remained masked for a long time in many aspects to the general public. Now, thanks to this outstanding translated *première* in Hispanic letters and scrutinizing analysis of her life related to her literary works, readers of all ages, races and genders will be given the opportunity to re-read in Spanish this literary production from multiple different perspectives. This view is far from the overabused trite cliché of a North American white woman artist who just wrote edulcorated literature for adolescents: texts apparently just concerned with the impact of the American civil war in an idealised domestic and family space dominated mainly by women. That sweetish past standard image of the author and her heroines was in urgent need to be restored, so this edition and translation are credited for this unquestionable and original achievement that keeps close to the original in form and content, weakening such a superficial prudish

public perception about this author. Such a trivial portrait, derived from a limited perception of *Little Women*, has wrongly permeated the collective imagination of different generations of North American and European popular culture through film adaptations from the 1930s to 21<sup>st</sup> century biopics, sometimes ignoring her true value as a social, political and spiritual reformer in women's political and social movements (influenced by the so-called "New Woman" movement) at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in North America.

This recent publication in Spanish unveils *Little Women's* apparently sanctimonious author as a real, controversial, fragmented individual whose double-biased personality seemed to be entrapped in a counterparted self in conflict with the demands of the stereotyped gender and social roles of her time. What this edition and translation must be really acknowledged for is that thanks to them, a step further beyond Alcott's conventional image is evinced. She is implicitly shown here as a potential future object of study for other critical schools, such as for example, queer studies, an approach which has been expanded by critics such as Gustavus Stadler's article, "Louisa May Alcott's Queer Genuises" that discusses the concept of "being a genius" or her inclusion in Martin Duberman's edition in *Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures*, in the article by Michael Moon, among others. Consequently, thanks to this Spanish edition, readers become aware indirectly of this possible camouflaged repressed sexual identity in Alcott's life that is somehow suggested in some of her literary works in the double version of *Little Women* subverted into *Little Men*. This "queer" approach is not completely openly displayed in this critical introduction, but somehow, it is obliquely traced back through an account of the history of biographical criticism that looked for parallelisms between the author's life and her literary works in biographies from the 1920s and 1930s, based on the author's friend, Edna D. Choney's first personal account in 1889. The Spanish editor refers to Alcott's diverse biographies to emphasize the controversial nature of her personality, supporting such a view about her "double personality" with allusions to Marion Talbot's work (1938) that focused on the author as a fighter for feminist causes and a humorist, being able to convert the toughness of human existence into Literature. Elizabeth Vincent or Katherine Anthony's biographies in the 1920s and 1930s up to Madeleine B. Stern's seminal biographical works (1950) are also alluded to. These refer to her 1863-67 successful anonymous thrillers, also written under a pseudonym, suggesting thus this more alternative approach to the author for the general public and presenting her as a hard worker in fiction-writing and other jobs to financially support her family. This critical strategy reinforces Manuel's ensuing argumentation to show us the author as "The hidden Louisa May Alcott," an image that the general public still needs to retrieve, previously documented in the 1980s and 1990s critical works that consider her "veiled" popular and past successful potboiler literary production as a major field worthy of being considered in order to vary one's possible preconceptions about her. The editor refers also to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's analysis on Alcott in their landmark feminist critical

work, *The Madwoman in The Attic: The Woman Writer and The Nineteenth Century Imagination* (1979), to validate her conception of Alcott's "concealed personality" shared with the precedent and latest criticism.

Professor Manuel consequently highlights the most relevant publications edited by Madeleine B. Stern, concerned with Alcott's thrillers and successful sensationalist popular suspense stories, to focus on her unseen personality. That was pulp fiction influenced by the gothic tradition and sometimes anonymously published in magazines, such as Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper*, up to the latest editions of her "blood" thrillers in 1998 that might satisfy the present interest in popular fiction in the academic world and audiences yearning for "gore" cult. The author of this edition in Spanish successfully draws our attention to Alcott's more disputable image. But she also warns us of the dangers of seeing her as only the prudish and classical author of *Little Women* or as just an authentic victim of Oedipal Freudian traumas, due to the influence of an authoritative father engaged in experimental innovating and revolutionary methods of education in the conservative Boston of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that wrongly compromised the family's stability. This patriarchal overprotagonism somehow blurred the decisive role of Alcott's mother, Abigail May, in their lives, according to the psychoanalytical criticism offered by Martha Saxton (1997) that is here referred to. The editor's main claim is that, *Work, A Story of Experience (Trabajo. Un Relato de Vivencias)* is, above all, a touching homage to the silenced figure of the Abolitionist and Transcendentalist Abba Alcott: this is a daughter's moving portrait of her over-worked mother who did so much for the family's utopian educational ideals and women's causes, to whom she dedicates this allegorical adult narration. Christie Devon, the female Christ figure of *Work*, inspired by the Shakers' feminist conception of the Second Coming of Christ, and Marmee (Mrs. March) in *Little Women* are characters undoubtedly inspired by her. Accordingly, this is Alcott's most personal and emotional vindication, not only of her mother's relevant contribution to women's causes through her decisive shadowed work backing her husband's utopian ideals that finally failed, but the author's literary acknowledgement to dignify anonymous everyday women's work of all races and professions. This is a tribute to those unseen female figures who also somehow fought for women's rights through their unrewarding tasks, being either servants, governesses or seamstresses, and who were unfairly suppressed throughout History. *Work* is the literary response to all those anonymous women who at the end of the 19th century or, in any century, were and are still in some way erased by patriarchal discourses. Louisa May Alcott illustrates in this fiction, as a kind of utopia written halfway between her father's idealism and her mother's stoicism, how through persistent work, women achieve, in spite of so many difficulties of all kinds, not only personal and economic independence, but social reforms, apart from spiritual fulfilment in sisterly communities (that actually existed in Shaker communities), as this novel shows. As in New Woman writers' fiction, where men were slightly or overtly excluded from an idealized sisterly solidarity, Alcott

also portrays in her fiction the powerful and resourceful capacity of matriarchal societies, such as women's abilities to cope with all the difficulties derived from the American Civil War experience in *Little Women*. All this that was shyly revealed in a literature for adolescents is in contrast openly exemplified in Alcott's adult production in *Work*.

Together with cross-gender themes, race issues are also pointed out in this Spanish edition in the emphasis on Alcott's commitment to Abolitionist struggles (modelled on her mother's principles). We are also informed about her interest in innovating methods of education (influenced by the utopian ideas of her father Amos Alcott and Emerson and Thoreau's Transcendentalist ideas). Professor Manuel presents how traditional parents' roles were also fully questioned in this novel due to Alcott's family experience, together with economic issues (Alcott defended writing as a profession for women to get their economic independence). Another relevant theme related to women's interests was the free choice of spinsterhood vs. marriage (claiming the first as a personal and honourable option for women relegating men who did not follow their ideas about equality, according to Shakers' matriarchal philosophy of the New Era Female Communities that Alcott knew). All these still contemporary gender questions could be of interest for present-day Spanish readers, thanks to this translation, since the search for proper work is still a major concern for women's social and political fights for equality, although it has become such a tough path to follow for all genders and races in our present economical global crisis these days. Therefore, Alcott's *Work* could be as useful and didactic as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was to get women also enrolled to reach the metaphorical "Celestial City," to achieve social gains and also spiritual fulfilment through work. Both narratives follow, according to criticism, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* for their allegorical structure and characterization. Thus, *Work* is also a spiritual guide for women and an idealized religious referent to consider since looking for equality in work in our contemporary society is still in "progress." Professor Manuel's review of the different biographical records and extensive bibliography that support her argumentation that Alcott's literary career is a direct result of her own full experience as a hard worker at all levels in life, is also an attempt to show how *Work* is the author's idealised fictitious response based on her final vision that equality in work for women was, and probably is, very difficult in reality to achieve, as she herself stated.

*Work* represents also the rewritten fictional reinterpretation of the failure her parents somehow lived: those utopian education projects that ironically devastated her mother and sisters from a material and psychological point of view and that indirectly obliged Louisa May Alcott to work in different professions, apart from writing, to support them economically. The editor argues that this personal experience is reflected in *Work* and that is why this perhaps undervalued text was worth being translated into Spanish to supply this void in North American studies. Though such a biographical critical approach as Manuel's might be underestimated

by certain critical trends, she must be credited together with Sergio Saiz for rescuing Alcott's most hidden and shadowed psychological parts. We have all certainly been acquainted with Alcott's juvenile fiction in our initiation to literary experience from an early age, but she now has with *Work*, edited and extraordinarily well translated for the first time into Spanish, a new dimension for most of us.

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