

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

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The Story of Jo: Literary Tomboys, Little Women, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire

Karin Quimby

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The Story of Jo

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Few would have imagined that a girl like Jo March, the tomboy heroine of Louisa May Alcott's 1868 novel *Little Women*, who exclaims, "It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boy's games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy," would become one of the most enduringly popular girlhood characters in Anglo-American literature.¹ Fewer would have predicted that what seems to fuel the imaginations and excite the desires of generations of girlhood readers is precisely Jo's refusal of normative girlhood identifications and desires; she wants to be the man of the family, not the little woman; she wants to be a soldier, not a seamstress; and she wants to be like Laurie, not have him. So while *Little Women* offers up a whole family of girls, evidence widely confirms that "most readers love *Little Women* because they love Jo March."²

But what are we to make of Jo's mass appeal when the figure of the tomboy has always presented a particularly queer dilemma? She is, first of all, a figure defined by incoherent oppositions: at once cute and dangerous, understandably boyish and abnormally male-identified, merely passing through a common stage of girlhood development and becoming an avatar of protolesbian girlhood.³ If we understand *queer* to mean what undermines or exceeds the fantasy of stable identity categories of gender and sexuality, then the tomboy may well be seen in this regard as paradigmatic. For by eschewing the feminine and expressing masculine identifications and desires, the tomboy, by definition, points up that such categories as male and female, or masculine and feminine, are indeterminate and unstable. The tomboy, in other words, exemplifies that the notion of gender identity is not anchored to any secure, incontestable foundations but is "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."⁴ By refusing to learn [End Page 1] and enact femininity, the tomboy destabilizes gender as a "natural" construct. Moreover, because some tomboys refuse to perform femininity over a lifetime, preferring a variously male-identified expression both physical and psychic, they expose the assumption that such tomboyism is temporary and safely confined to childhood. That some tomboys do dramatically change their gender expression and enact femininity convincingly (often in response to the disciplining pressures of "concerned" family and friends), finally, further confirms the instability of the supposedly predetermined, or "biological," structure of gender development.

Because the tomboy is unhinged from and in turn unhinges the fiction that gender identity is natural, she in many ways only reveals in the extreme what is true of *all* children: that the possibilities of identification *and* desire are vast, perverse, and ultimately unmanageable. Jacqueline Rose reminds us that "the task of [making coherent] the fragmented, component and perverse sexuality of the child. . . is always on some level an impossible task." Moreover, "the fact that Freud used a myth to describe how ordering is meant to take place (the myth of Oedipus) should alert us to the fictional nature of this process, which is at best precarious, and never complete."⁵ In narrative, the demand that the tomboy exchange her overalls for a dress to signal her availability for heterosexual romance is a clear attempt to "order" her "precarious" gender development into an acceptable heterosexual narrative framework.

It is precisely because the tomboy's plot always threatens to "turn queer" that it arouses so much anxiety at a certain pubescent point, no matter how "normal" the girl is perceived at first to be. As a result, strategies for containing the tomboy's queer energies are not in short supply. For instance, Sharon O'Brien discovers a...

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
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