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‘Her lovely presence ever near me lives’: A Brief Encounter from the Archives with May Alcott Nieriker

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'Her lovely presence ever near me lives': A Brief Encounter from the Archives with May Alcott Nieriker

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The 'archival turn' in contemporary criticism addresses the inequalities of the canon by unearthing the forgotten lives of writers and artists who have previously been overlooked by scholars.[1] Antoinette Burton has claimed that the archive itself is an artefact, subject to 'specific historical and cultural contexts' and to the embodied experience of the researcher at work.[2] It is therefore imperative that archival scholars scrutinise the narrative that is contained within the archive — considering such questions as how it has been compiled, selected, and examined, and what this can tell us about the material that we access.

Scholars of the Alcott family have, by and large, focused on the public writing of Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women*, and her father, the Transcendentalist philosopher Bronson Alcott. The vast majority of works by both of these figures has been collated and published. Researchers have only recently begun to consider the merit of the life-writing of the wider circle of Alcott women, consisting of family matriarch Abigail May, and her three lesser-known daughters, Anna Alcott Pratt, Elizabeth Sewell Alcott and May Alcott Nieriker. Eve LaPlante's 2012 double biography of Abigail May and Louisa May Alcott argues that, while the volume of surviving life-writing authored by these women pales in comparison to the thousands of pages bequeathed by Bronson Alcott, it nevertheless constitutes a considerable body of work.[3] In the introduction to her selected collection of Abigail May's life-writing, LaPlante invites the reader to consider how the editorial hand of Bronson Alcott — who rewrote, edited, excised and burnt much of his late wife's work — has shaped the interests of archival scholars of the Alcott family for successive generations.[4]

[1] 'Silence in the Archives' conference (Wolfson College, Oxford, November 2015) emphasised the importance of rehabilitating the unpublished life-writing of nineteenth-century women, in order to consider the political connotations of its marginalised status.

[2] Antoinette Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (London: Duke University Press, 2005), p.9.

[3] Eve LaPlante, *Marmee and Louisa* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), pp.5-6.

[4] Eve LaPlante, *My Heart is Boundless: Writings of Abigail May Alcott, Louisa's Mother* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), pp. xi-xii.

LaPlante's landmark work inspired me to visit the Alcott archive at the Houghton Library, Harvard as the UK Fulbright 2016-17 US Embassy American Studies Fellow. The purpose of my fellowship at Harvard was to develop my research on Louisa May Alcott, which rehabilitates the forgotten influence of the Alcott women on her work.

However, perusing the papers of May Alcott Nieriker allowed me to discover that she is a formidable figure in her own right who deserves to be at the centre of a separate research project that is not focused on the merits and achievements of her elder sister. This article will provide a character sketch of May, whose significance as a female artist has thus far been overlooked. I reflect on the influence of her mother; her abolitionist activity within the classroom and the impact this had on Louisa May Alcott's writing, as well as her conjugal relationship with Swiss banker, Ernest Nieriker. Alcott family biographers, who have largely focused on Bronson and Louisa, have made some erroneous assumptions concerning the exact nature of May's terminal illness.[5] The close of this article offers a revised assessment of her cause of death, with reference to the Nieriker family papers and my correspondence with medical doctors, Norbert Hirschorn and Ian A. Greaves.

My time in the archive allowed me to access May's literary voice, unfiltered by the influences of Bronson and Louisa May Alcott. Judy Bullington has noted that biographical accounts of May's life have become 'enmeshed' with the fictional figure of Amy March — the character who was based on May in Louisa May Alcott's seminal novel, *Little Women*. May was a professional painter who, beginning in 1870, undertook a number of European excursions to cities like Paris, London and Rome, to study art — partially funded by her sister, following the success of *Little Women*.[6] She achieved considerable recognition in a short period — being exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1877 and 1879, and publishing a relatively well-received book, *Studying Art Abroad: And How To Do It Cheaply* (1879), shortly before her death.[7] She was well-known for her commercially successful copies of Turner's watercolours and an unreferenced newspaper clipping pasted into Abigail May's journal claims that John Ruskin had acclaimed

[5] See p. 62.

[6] Judy Bullington, 'Inscriptions of Identity: May Alcott as Artist, Woman, and Myth', Prospects 27 (2009) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0361233300001186> [accessed 9 April 2017] 177-200, (p. 1).

[7] May Alcott Nieriker, *Studying Art Abroad: And How To Do It Cheaply* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1879).

May as 'the only artist worthy to copy Turner'.[8] Above this clipping, Louisa May Alcott inserted the annotation, 'Ruskin never said that. Only gossip'.[9] Jeannine Atkins' fictionalised biographical novel on May has explored the possibility of an artistic rivalry between the sisters.[10] In an interview with blogger Margie White, Atkins claims that her portrayal of this rivalry found its source in Louisa May Alcott's damning preface to May's book, *Concord Sketches* (1869).[11] Atkins alleges that this preface negatively impacted on May's professional reputation as an artist.[12]

However, May's artistic vision reveals how her lifestyle and tenor of work challenged many commonly-held assumptions of the period concerning femininity. In *Studying Art Abroad*, she chafed against the unfair double standard that female art students were not permitted to study from the nude alongside their male colleagues — an assertion that was responded to with open satire by at least one scandalised male reviewer:

> One difficulty [standing in the way] of absolutely free art-study by women our author alludes to more than once — apparently with astonishment that it should exist: 'It was found to me an impossibility that women should paint from the living nude models of both sexes, side by side with Frenchmen. This is a sad conclusion to arrive at.' Substitute *young men* for Frenchmen, and *inevitable* for "sad", and we should agree with Mrs. Nieriker. The attempt has not the excuse of necessity to justify partly its indecency.[13]

In enrolling herself in the private *atelier* of Master Krug, May was one of a small circle of women to pay for professional art instruction at a time when the state-supported *École des Beaux-Arts* — the most prestigious art school in the world — denied women entry, while the private schools charged them higher fees for receiving the same instruction as men, simultaneously barring them from painting the male nude.[14]

The subjects of paintings undertaken by May, revealed in her private correspondence, show that

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[8] Harvard University, Houghton Library (AM 1817.2), Series II (15), Abigail Alcott, *Diary*, January 1st, 1877, Alcott Family Additional Papers, 1707-1904.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Jeannine Atkins, *Little Woman in Blue* (Berkeley: She Writes Press, 2015).

[11] May Alcott Nieriker, *Concord Sketches* (Boston: James Redpath, 1869).

[12] Margie White, 'Little Woman in Blue: the Story of May Alcott Nieriker', in *American Girls Art Club in Paris... And Beyond* (blog) <https://americangirlsartclubinparis.com/2015/10/10/little-woman-in-blue-the-story-of-may-alcott-nieriker/> [accessed 10 July 2017].

[13] Harvard University, Houghton Library (AM 2745), Series IV (115), Unreferenced newspaper clipping, AFAP 1724-1927.

[14] Jo Ann Wein, 'The Parisian Training of American Women Artists', *Woman's Art Journal*, 2.1 41-44, (pp.41-42).

she was also willing to push the envelope within the classroom. May boldly undertook the study of a male model who was not only partially clothed, but African. Writing home to her mother, May humorously confessed that she had used the subject of her painting as an opportunity to challenge the racist views of the Southern compatriots who studied alongside her: '[...] I had freely expressed my admiration for [the model], beside fighting the battle of the black versus whites, whenever the question came between the Southerners, of whom there are three in class, and two of us Northerners.'[15] One can only imagine the effect May had on her male colleagues, as a young single American woman in Paris who challenged the racism of her compatriots, while painting a half-naked African model.

May's daring act in undertaking such a study led to her recognition within the classroom, for Master Krug made a point of commending the work publicly: '[...] with what passion and enthusiasm you draw this ensemble, it is very vigorous and shows your interest and not scorn of the race.'[16] May wrote home to her mother that Krug's commendation had proved her 'proposition' of equality between the races 'most true', for his recognition of her study had implicitly shown her assessment of the model as 'gentlemanly, polite, and delicate' to be correct.[17] Abigail May was so taken with her daughter's account of the incident that she saw fit to record it in her journal.[18]

Abigail May wasn't the only individual to be inspired by her daughter's assertion of the humanity of her African model. Louisa May Alcott incorporated this anecdote into a posthumously published novella, *Diana and Persis*, which was inspired by her sister's foreign correspondence.[19] Embellishing the anecdote with imagined detail, Louisa describes her heroine, Percy, as 'firing all of [her] big guns' in a heated debate on abolition, thus 'silenc[ing] the enemy' while hurriedly dashing off a sketch 'without thinking about it' in the moment of her passion. When her master makes the exact same commendation, verbatim, that Krug made of May's study, the model himself astounds the class by smiling at Percy—revealing that he has understood every word of the exchange, despite the fact that English is not his

[15] Harvard University, Houghton Library (AM 2745), Series II (66), Letter to Louisa May Alcott and Anna Alcott Pratt, [Paris, 187?], AFAP 1724-1927.

[16] Ibid., Series II (64), Letter to Abigail Alcott, [Paris, 187?].

[17] Ibid.

[18] Abigail Alcott, *Diary*.

[19] Louisa May Alcott, *Diana and Persis* in *Alternative Alcott*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

mother-tongue. Dramatising her sister's pride at the event, Louisa describes Percy as 'strut[ting] gaily home to recount [her] triumph'.[20]

I had read *Diana and Persis* long before I ventured into the archive, and was vaguely aware that Louisa's account of a female artist's adventures abroad were based on her sister's experiences. However, my pleasure in discovering that this vivid fictional event was actually based on fact is not to be underestimated, for it reveals the inspiration that the very real figure of May provided for her more famous sister. Moreover, it affirms the authenticity of a more independent personality than the character of Amy March in *Little Women*, who gives up her pursuit of a career when she realises that 'talent isn't genius'.[21] It is well established that *Little Women* is an autobiographical text, as acknowledged in Louisa May Alcott's journal entry for May, 1868: 'Mr. N wants a *girls' story,* and I begin 'Little Women"; '[I] never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters, but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting.'[22] Jeannine Atkins speculates that May was angered by her association with Amy March because she felt that *Little Women* had represented her unfairly through implying she would give up her career for marriage.[23] Atkins' fictionalised assessment probably refers to Caroline Ticknor's memoir, which claims that May exhibited visible annoyance when questioned about her similarities with Amy March.[24] The fictionalised portrait of May in *Diana and Persis* is therefore perhaps closer to the historical May than the portrait provided in the *Little Women* trilogy — not in the least because it incorporates May's literary voice into the text.

Moreover, Amy March does not share many of May's more radical qualities, like her open abolitionism. May's pride in her defence of the African model reveals her affiliation with her abolitionist familial heritage, which is indebted to the example of her maternal uncle, Samuel May, as well as to the activism of her father, which frequently dominates scholarly accounts of the family's political outlook. Louisa May Alcott alludes to her sister's affiliation with the matrilineal line by referencing their mother in

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[20] Louisa May Alcott, *Diana and Persis*, p. 403.

[21] Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, in *Little Women, Little Men, Jo's Boys* (New York: The Library of America, 2005), p. 431.

[22] Joel Myerson & Daniel Shealy (eds.), *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1997), pp. 165-166.

[23] Atkins, pp. 143, 154.

[24] Caroline Ticknor, *May Alcott: A Memoir* (Massachusetts: Applewood Books, 1928), p.224.

Diana and Persis. Percy claims that when she gave her 'antislavery lecture' she thought of her grandmother, a character based on Abigail May, who 'longs for the stirring times when she and her stout-hearted contemporaries sat out many a mob...while brick bats and hard words flew about below'.[25]

May's love and admiration for her mother, the most influential person in her life, comes through throughout her correspondence. Upon receiving the news of Abigail May's death in December, 1877, May expressed immediate regret for having travelled to Europe to pursue a career in art, writing that she had realised that '[...] all the art honors Europe can offer me, will never take the place of feeling once more her arms around my neck and her soft cheek against mine'.[26] Although thirty-seven at the time, May experienced her mother's death as a calamitous event. She confided in her family that 'I now find how little I knew my own strength' and begged them to 'think of me kindly though I didn't come to help and comfort as I should have, could I have realised better what it is to lose one's mother and be thousands of miles away'.[27]

For her part, Abigail Alcott dedicated her final journal to May, and the vast majority of its entries concern her youngest daughter. Abigail was a remarkable mother for the period, in that she was determined that all of her daughters should have 'trades' and, despite her declining health, she was fully supportive of May's studies abroad, writing that 'I hope this absence will mature and develop the best traits of her character...and confirm...her conviction that her talent for painting needs these farther instructions to establish her claim as an artist'.[28] The connection between mother and daughter was so great that at the time of Abigail's death, May experienced a psychic intuition of her passing.[29]

However, May's love for her mother could not induce her to remain in the United States — a country that she frequently derided in her correspondence, claiming that it was a particularly restrictive place for a female artist: 'America seems death to all aspirations or hope of work.'[30] She also showed scant appreciation for her home-town of Concord, known for its cultural intelligentsia and literati, personified

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[25] Louisa May Alcott, *Diana and Persis*, p. 403.

[26] Harvard University, Houghton Library (AM 2745) Series II (57), Undated Letter to Alcott Family, AFAP 1724-1927.

[27] Ibid.

[28] LaPlante, *My Heart is Boundless*, p.88; Abigail Alcott, *Diary*, April 14th 1877.

[29] Harvard University, Houghton Library (AM 2745) Series II (58), Letter to Alcott Family, December 11th 1877, AFAP 1724-1927.

[30] Ibid. (AM 1130.17), Letter to Alcott Family, April 1878, in *Extracts from May's letters in Paris, 1878-1879*, MS. in the hand of Anna Alcott Pratt, AFAP 1724-1927.

in figures like her father: 'Nothing w'd ever induce me to live in Concord again burdened with cares after this taste of all life can be. If woman wants a new lease of life, let her come here.'[31] Bronson Alcott's aspirations as a philosopher had, by and large, failed to provide financial support his family, and May's words make it clear that she had no desire to continue to help pick up the slack in the Alcott household. Independent living also brought May considerable fulfilment. She wrote home about her many excursions alone, making a short tour of England, which was later fictionalised in an unpublished novella, *An Artist's Holiday,* co-authored with Louisa.

Yet, despite her pride in her independence, May was regretful that her artistic ambitions had obstructed her opportunities to marry. Nonetheless, she was determined neither to settle for a man she did not care for, nor sacrifice her artistic career. At the age of thirty-seven, she informed her mother that it was probably too late for her to meet someone:

> As to any beaux [...] I see not the slightest prospect of anything but a dead grind at art as I have wasted too much time already in flirting with men who don't marry and it's too late now for me to expect anybody to fall in love with me. But I think I get a better kind of satisfaction from my painting...unless I found just the right companion and there is no hope of that.[32]

May's whirlwind romance with the Swiss Banker, Ernest Nieriker, who was sixteen years her junior, therefore comes as a wonderful surprise to the reader of her correspondence — especially as it occurred during a period of overwhelming grief for her mother. Ernest was living in the same London boarding-house as May, and used his violin as means of comforting her in the midst of her sorrow.[33]

A fictionalised account of Ernest's and May's first acquaintance occurs in *An Artist's Holiday*: the autobiographical novella that May co-authored with Louisa, which remains unpublished. In the chapter 'My Owl', May's narrator describes her delight at finding an affordable stuffed owl for the subject of her painting, while studying in London.[34] She arrives home one day to find her neighbouring lodger 'bare-headed, [running] wildly down the street as if in pursuit of something'.[35] The heroine pursues the

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[31] Letter to Alcott Family, April 1878, AFAP 1724-1927.

[32] Harvard University, Houghton Library (AM 2745) Series II (53), Letter to Alcott Family, July 28th, 1877, AFAP 1724-1927.

[33] Ibid., April, 1878.

[34] Harvard University, Houghton Library (AM 1817), *An Artist's Holiday*, Louisa May Alcott Additional Papers, 1845-1944 (54).

[35] Ibid.

unnamed musician, until, to her horror, she discovers 'the great angora cat of the house' dragging the owl 'through the mud and mire of London streets'.[36] The gentleman in question acts as a knight in shining armour and 'a skilful leap' into the mud, restores the 'much mutilated and bespattered' owl into her arms.[37] The narrator writes that, 'it all ended in my owl giving me...not only a lover, but a husband'.[38] The reader cannot be certain that the event actually happened, but the autobiographical nature of the novella, coupled with the fact that May, who owned a stuffed owl, met Ernest — a Swiss violinist — in a London boarding-house, renders it distinctly possible.[39]

May's letters portray Ernest as a romantic who was hopelessly enamoured of her: 'I never expected to have a man so thoroughly good, loving, sweet [...] care for me, not to add that he has also the attraction of being young and handsome, and [an] [...] adoring lover'.[40] Ernest certainly comes across as the ideal suitor and husband, for there was nothing he would not do for his wife. Following their marriage and removal to France, May wrote home of an incident where she noticed a pink Hollyhock — a flower she had been hoping to paint for weeks — in a cemetery. Knowing that local custom prevented them from picking a flower from hallowed ground, Ernest found the caretaker of the cemetery and offered to pay for it, claiming that 'money could do more good to the living than the blossom could to the dead'.[41] Ernest was also remarkably supportive of May's art with May claiming that he was 'even more ambitious for my artistic success than I am myself'.[42]

However, May found that her love for her husband eclipsed even her desire for artistic recognition, a fact that has led some critics to disregard her as an early feminist figure.[43] She now found the 'artistic life' that had once satisfied her to be 'the most dreary in the world'.[44] Moreover, she confessed to her family that 'a woman does not know what true happiness is till she has a good man to love'.[45] While May's

[36] Louisa May Alcott, *An Artist's Holiday*.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ticknor, p. 207.
[40] EFMLA, March 11th, 1878.
[41] EFMLA, Meudon, 1878.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Bullington, p. 196.
[44] EFMLA, March 24th, 1878.
[45] Ibid., April 20th, 1878.

enjoyment of domestic life might disappoint contemporary scholars, it is important to remember that her decision to marry was not a means of conforming to social pressures, but rather an affirmation of her personal desires. The aforementioned letter to her mother where she claims that she would get 'a better kind of satisfaction from [her] painting' unless she found 'just the right companion', suggests that if she had never found a man who understood her *and* supported her art, she would never have married — and at the age of thirty-eight in the late 1870s, her marital prospects were not good.[46] Indeed, May's death certificate amusingly reveals that she lied about her age to her husband, for it claims that she was thirty-two at the time of her death, while her birth certificate exposes the fact that she was actually thirty-nine. The death certificate indicates that May halved the age-difference between herself and Ernest to eight, rather than sixteen years.[47] Clearly, she looked good for her age.

May's family regarded her euphoria over her whirlwind marriage as somewhat insensitive to their continuing grief for Abigail May, for May wrote home: 'Your letters seem almost to reproach me for being able to forget that dear Marmee has gone from us even during this most happy time of my life'.[48] In reality, however, May did not forgot her enduring love for her mother in her husband. She created a shrine for her mother's picture — not unlike the fictional shrine that Amy March creates for her mother in *Jo's Boys* — and adorned it with flowers, writing that 'No matter how dear the husband, he can never be so precious as Marmee'.[49] Thankfully, May found a second family in her in-laws. Ernest's mother, Sophie Nieriker, acted as a surrogate mother who was 'tender and thoughtful', calling her 'the sweetest German names'.[50] Sophie also insisted that May address her as 'Mama' and, like Abigail Alcott, believed in 'women having a career as well as men', encouraging May to 'stick to [her] art...and let Ernst take care of himself'.[51]

The sudden and unexpected intervention of May's death, only twenty-one months after her marriage to Ernest, occurs as a most dreadful shock to the reader of her private papers, who follows her pursuit of happiness from aspiring young artist to happily married woman with prospects for a

[46] Letter to Alcott Family, December 11th 1877, AFAP 1724-1927.

[47] Copies of French Death Certificates can be requested online through the French Civil Service: <www.service-public.fr>. May's death certificate is housed at City Hall, Montrouge, France 92120.

[48] EFMLA, March 15th, 1878.

[49] Louisa May Alcott (2005), p. 825; EFMLA, Meudon, 1878.

[50] Ibid., June 14th, 1878.

[51] EFMLA, Meudon, June, 1878.

distinguished career. Biographers of the Alcott family are divided over the exact cause of May's death, which occurred just over seven weeks after the birth of her daughter, Lulu. John Matteson identifies the cause of death as complications of delivery; Caroline Ticknor and Harriet Reisen as postpartum fever, while Madeleine B. Stern claims that May contracted cerebrospinal meningitis.[52] In actual fact, May's delivery was remarkably successful for a woman of thirty-nine living in the late nineteenth-century. Ernest wrote home to the Alcott family that the doctor had 'never had an easier case', and at first May was happy and strong — fully able to provide milk for their daughter.[53] However, a few days after May's labour, Sophie Nieriker wrote that she had developed 'brain-disease'.[54] Unable to produce milk, May became pale and began to lose her appetite, until she finally lapsed into a coma, which eventually 'became eternal'.[55] Ernest speculated that May's illness had developed before her labour: 'the terrible disease had been coming on slowly [...] and we now recall that she sometimes complained of a little pain in the back of her neck.'[56]

In reality, May's symptoms *are* consistent with meningitis: the diagnosis provided by Stern. The World Health Organisation defines maternal mortality as occurring up to forty-two days after childbirth, and May's death falls just outside this allotted period at fifty-one days — so it is not inconceivable that Ernest was correct in suspecting a prior medical condition. Nonetheless, while protracted in its onset, the development of meningitis occurs over a period of hours or days, and May's symptoms are consistent with few other medical conditions, with the possible exception of a brain tumour. The diagnosis provided by May's doctor was that of 'brain-disease', an accepted illness of the period that is no longer recognised by modern medicine. At a time when the cause of the spread of disease was unknown, many medics speculated that fevers were passed through the air and attached themselves to one of the bodily organs, such as the brain. It was generally accepted that 'brain fever', also known as 'brain disease', was often triggered by an emotionally traumatic event, and was extremely long in its duration. While it is now

[52] Matteson, p. 393; Ticknor, p. 294; Harriet Reisen, *The Woman Behind Little Women* (New York: Picador, 2009), p. 338; Madeleine B. Stern, *Louisa May Alcott: A Biography* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), p. 278.

[53] Concord Public Library, Folder 4, Letter from Ernest Nieriker, 9th November, 1879, Louisa May Alcott Papers [1847]-1887.

[54] EFMLA, February, 1880.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., January 1st, 1880.

dismissed as a fictitious illness, Audrey C. Peterson has claimed that it was just as much a reality to nineteenth-century doctors as tuberculosis, and that they consistently observed the same symptoms and causes in their patients, which were recorded in medical textbooks.[57] Consequently, Ernest was observing symptoms, whether rightly or wrongly, that were consistent with a widely accepted disease of the period, with which his wife had been diagnosed. It is impossible to know with certainty the exact cause of May's death, but its ambivalent nature reminds us that medical science is sometimes subject to shifting philosophical interpretations of objective facts, such as a person's symptoms.

The Nierikers were absolutely devastated by May's unexpected passing. A perusal of their letters reveals that May was not exaggerating their regard for her. Her mother-in-law wrote that 'Ernest will mourn this ardently-loved wife, Sophie the tenderest sister, and I the best of daughters that I love as my own'.[58] The account of May's final hours is truly gut-wrenching. Writing that their short time together had been 'worth a lifetime', Ernest remembered that in her final hours May had requested that he make her a promise.[59] To his response that he would promise her anything, she asked if he would give her his heart, specifying that she meant 'the whole of it' when he claimed that was 'already [hers] long ago'.[60] The grief-stricken Ernest interpreted her words as a means of 'tak[ing] leave, as if she wished to carry with her into the other world my heart'.[61] May slept for a short time in his arms before waking, and her last words were 'Oh mama!' followed by 'a look of mingled happiness and regret'.[62]

The twenty-four year-old Ernest was immediately plunged into an alarming and inconsolable grief. His mother confided in May's eldest sister, Anna, that he had 'need of the greatest care. With May all joy, all desire for life has left him'.[63] He tried to solace himself in his infant daughter who shared 'her mother's sunny smile, and...graceful hand'.[64] However, before the birth of Lulu, May had requested that, in the event of her death, custody of the child should be given over to Louisa May Alcott. To his credit,

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[57] 'Brain Fever in Nineteenth-Century Literature: Fact and Fiction', *Victorian Studies*, 19.4 (June, 1976), 445-464 (p. 464).

[58] EFMLA, December 20th, 1879.

[59] EFMLA, January 1st, 1880.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

[62] EFMLA, January 1st, 1880.

[63] Ibid., February, 1880.

[64] EFMLA, Moudon, June 1878.

Ernest complied with this request, although it clearly brought considerable pain to both himself and Sophie Nieriker, who wrote: 'the separation from this darling will be very hard and were it not for my promise to May I fear I could not let her go'.[65] Ernest's response to May's request reveals the considerable turmoil that he experienced as a consequence of his wife's death, as well as his deep grief and love for May: 'Had she asked me to kill the child if it should lose its mother I should not hesitate a moment!'.[66]

I had long puzzled over May's decision to give custody of Lulu over to her sister — an unconventional request by present-day standards — especially when she was so happy with Ernest. However, an account of her conversation with Sophie Nieriker illuminated her motivations to me. Sophie wrote that May had said of Louisa, 'She would love the baby as I would myself'.[67] Despite the occasional friction between these two strong-minded sisters, May clearly felt that of all those she left behind, Louisa was the one who was most like herself, and that her daughter — named for this sister — would experience something of the mother in the aunt.

Ernest is portrayed negatively by biographer, Harriet Reisen, for requesting that May's eldest sister, Anna (who loved Lulu dearly), return her to Switzerland following the death of Louisa May Alcott.[68] The child, who was only ten, was unacquainted with her father and did not speak German or French.[69] While the move was clearly a traumatic experience for Lulu, Ernest is nevertheless to be admired for complying with his late wife's wishes at the most difficult time in his life; nor can he blamed for wanting custody of his daughter, once his promise to his late wife had been fulfilled. However, in later life Ernest was to create trouble for Lulu by disputing Louisa May Alcott's will, which divided her estate equally between Lulu and the two children of Anna — all of whom Louisa had legally adopted with her last testament in mind. Ernest's greed in demanding half of the estate for his daughter, as opposed to the third that was bequeathed to her, has led Reisen to regard him with understandable contempt: 'The

[65] EFMLA, Moudon, June 14th 1878.

[66] Concord Public Library, Folder 4, Undated letter from Ernest Nieriker, LMAP [1847]-1887.

[67] Ibid. February, 1880.

[68] Reisen, p. 299.

[69] Ibid., p. 298.

person of no Alcott blood who benefitted most from Louisa's fortune was Ernest Nieriker, who spent his daughter's money to support his entire household'.[70]

Nonetheless, Alcott scholars should not forget the young man who May fell in love with, even if he is sadly eclipsed by the materialistic older version of himself — a man hardened by years of bitter grief, struggling to support a household. Researchers who love May cannot overlook the fact that Ernest fell in love with her in the flesh — just as we fall in love with her in the archives. I was particularly moved by a poem, penned by Ernest, in the year after May's death that is buried in the vaults of the Houghton library:

Constant Love

Alone am I, yet not alone forever,
Only for a little time shall sad fate sever
Those who in Spirit yet united live
How else could I my sorrow bear, and give
Love's choicest tribute to the precious dead,
This constant heart that loves when happiness has fled.
"I will not leave Thee, none shall us divide
Despair not, I am ever at Thy side."
This her farewell, she vanished from my sight,
Yet, still amid my sorrow's heavy night,
Her lovely presence ever near me lives,
And hope, and help, and consolation gives.[71]

May Alcott Nieriker was a fiercely independent and self-sufficient woman who was unafraid of following her dreams at a time when few women had the opportunity to do so. She was a gifted and accomplished artist who loved with passion and intensity; who spoke out against racial prejudice, and who wrote with a compelling wit that displayed her infectious love of life. Through the archives, she is able to live on for posterity, just as she lived on in the memory of her husband. A full-length biography of this remarkable woman is surely long overdue and I hope that this research might prove to be the foundation of such a project.

[70] Reisen, p. 299.

[71] Harvard University, Houghton Library (AM 2745) Series II B (114), 'Constant Love', attributed to 'E.N.', January 1879, AFAP 1724-1927.

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Abbreviations

AFAP Alcott Family Additional Papers

EFMLA Extracts From May's Letters Abroad

LMAP Louisa May Alcott Additional Papers

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